The Swiss Cheese Policy: 
The Russian Foreign Policy towards the Middle East, 
Revival or Downfall?

By

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Dedication Page

To my loving family
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The Swiss Cheese Policy:
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a Revival or Downfall?

Carel Claude El-Hayek

ABSTRACT

The Middle East is currently witnessing the return of the Russian Federation as a major power after years of decline. Russia today has done a great comeback regionally and internationally. It has played a great role in the Syrian and Iranian Crisis, with a firm position opposing the international community in the two. Russia has achieved its major goal of regaining a strong position as a powerful player in the Middle East making use of its best tools Syria and Iran. This thesis will try to answer the following research questions: What factors allowed the Russian influence revival in the Middle East? Why does it want to support Iran and Syria in opposition to the international community?

The first argument proposed will highlight the aim behind the Russian-Iranian and Russian-Syrian support, not only for the sake of economic benefits, but also for two major reasons. The first is to regain its powerful role on the international level, and second, to restore its influence in the Middle East, which constitutes a major strategic interest for Russia. The second argument proposed will identify the three main factors Russia made use of in order to comeback as a strong power and firmly stand against the international community. First, the improved domestic factors within the Russian federation, second, the declined influence of the United States in the international world order, and third, is the change in the political orders of the Middle East. Those factors gave way for Russia to revive its influence in the Middle Eastern and international arena.

Keywords: Russia, Iran, Syria, Middle East, Revival, Influence,
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>I- Introduction to Revolutions</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Research Question and Topic importance</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Importance and objective</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Thesis Argument</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4 Theory application of the Neo-Realist Approach to the Russian Middle Eastern Foreign Policy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 Methodology and Research Design</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.6 Literature Review</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.7 Preview on the Chapters</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>II- Importance of the Middle East to Russia</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Proximity Importance</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Historical Review of Russia’s Influence in the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle East – Iran and Syria in Focus</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.1 Before the Cold War Era</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.2 During the Cold War Era – Until 1991</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.3 From 1990 Reaching the Putin Era</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2.4 Putin in Power</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>III- Factors of Russian Comeback</strong></td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Local- Stronger Domestic Russia</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 Changed Middle Eastern Order</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 International - Weakened U.S. and International Order</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 The Ukrainian Factor</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IV- Particularities of Russian- Iranian Interest</strong></td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Nuclear Iran a Threat to Russia</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1.1 Russian Stance vs. the International Position</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Why this Support?</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.1Bordering Conflict Concern - Chechen Conflict</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.2 A Stitched Economy- Arms Sales and Oil</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2.3 Iran as a Pressure Tool Against the U.S. and its Actions</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>V- Particularities of the Russian- Syrian Interest</strong></td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 The On-going Syrian Uprising</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.1 Russian Stance vs. the International Position</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1.2 Decisive Russian Diplomacy- Syrian Chemical Weapons</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2 Why this Support? ........................................................................................................58
5.2.1 Arms Sales, Military and Economic Cooperation ..............................................58
5.2.2 Syria a Business Partner Today ........................................................................64
5.2.3 Energy .....................................................................................................................65
5.2.4 Fear of Islamic Regimes ......................................................................................66
5.2.5 The Israeli Factor ...............................................................................................68
5.3 Promoting a Strong Russia ......................................................................................71

VI- Conclusion .................................................................................................................73

References .........................................................................................................................78
Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Research Question and Topic Importance

Throughout the 21st century and more specifically during the writing of this thesis, the Middle East faces various significant strategic challenges, which would undoubtedly affect the future of several countries throughout the world. Heavily influenced by economic, political, and geopolitical factors, the general security and global welfare are shaken by extensive challenges. Some of the last include regime toppling, nuclear proliferation and expansion, humanitarian violations, and questionable international authority. One of these challenging events was the ability of Russia, the former Soviet Union, to return as a major player in the Middle East.

1.2 Importance and objective

The intriguing question this study will attempt to tackle will focus on the factors that allowed Russia to return as a major international actor, through its position from what was happening in Iran and Syria. Furthermore, it will argue that Russia’s ability to do so was made possible by the changes that had taken place in Russia, the Middle East, and the world. The thesis will allow the reader to have an over-all insight about how a former major power like Russia managed to revive its influence and position in the Middle East and the world after around two decades of a setback.
The Russian-Iranian and Russian-Syrian relationships inflicts outcomes on international political, economic, and security levels. The cooperation or opposition in both fronts greatly influences the international system. Taking into account the historical relationship between Russia and both states, as well as the “dynamic interests” they constitute to international community, the Russian foreign policy requires calculations. Mindful that this region was a major arena during the Cold War events, it remains a challenging ground of interests for both powers; United States and Russia. Given the fact of this multi-polarity of the international system today, and the reality that the U.S.’s hegemonic times may be receding, discussions of emerging strong states are becoming prominent.

1.3 Thesis Argument

The Soviet Union, prior to its disintegration, was a super power with the ability to project its influence throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the world at large. After the end of the Cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s influence in the world has faced a setback. It was unable to influence the course of events in the world. This remained so until the coming of President Vladimir Putin to power (Former KGB officer, Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin previously served as Russian Prime Minister from 1999 till 2000, elected served as President from 2000 to 2008, and again from 2008 to 2012. Putin was re-elected last on 4 March 2012). The thesis will investigate the factors that allowed Russia to regain its influence internationally and it will also argue that its support to Iran and Syria were very detrimental in its ability to do so. This was not the case between 1990 and early 2000s. Russia, after the Cold War until recent events, rarely opposed the international community regarding Middle Eastern affairs because it was unable to do so. However, with the Russian feeling that its distinct role is being belittled and unable to reenact the Soviet Union
model, Russia felt it was crucial and absolutely necessary to make use of the current events in the Middle East to regain its role as a major power. Russia’s best vehicle to achieve its current strategy was through the support of Iran and Syria against the international community’s wishes.

This research considers the cooperation between Iran, Syria, and Russia as a strategic alliance, where the three countries were in need of each other. As Russia needed Iran and Syria, they were, as well, in need of the Russian support in their struggle of the international community. As Mark Katz describes the Russian-Iranian relation as a “strategic cooperation” in the Putin era, this thesis supports and also argues that Russian view towards Syria is the same. Consequently, any threat for Damascus and Tehran is considered to be a direct threat to Russia’s vital interests (Katz, 2002).

To pressure the international community, precisely the US, to accept Moscow’s new revived role in the region and the world-wide, Putin’s decision to strengthen Russia’s cooperation with countries such as Iran and Syria, reflects a foreign policy driven by economic and security reasons. The Russian aim to face the U.S. presence in the region has been the historical Russian ambition to have a dominant role in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, the two most important questions the thesis trying to answer are: why Russia is supporting Iran and Syria, and objecting the position of the international community towards them? What factors allowed Russia to be able to do so? The neorealist approach will provide a valid explanation for the Russian ability.

1.4 Theory application of the Neo-Realist approach to the Russian-Middle Eastern foreign policy
This Russian policy is strongly anchored in the neo-realist paradigm, where it focuses on its national interest, portraying a tough relationship with resources expansion, political targets, and strong fondness to international development of its own transnational companies such as Gazprom (Whitmore, 2009). The evolution of the Russian foreign policy initiated during the presidency of Vladimir Putin targeted to enhance economic measures, increased exports of oil and gas and European dependence on Russian supplies; this was aimed to reach a renewed hegemonic status, reflecting the state’s power and influence in the international arena. Power is understood here as the “motive force of the statecraft, the capacity to act in foreign affairs” (Puchala, 1971, p.176).

According to Hopf (1999), markedly, Moscow is consciously attempting to ‘fine-tune’ its contemporary foreign policy tools. Notably, from the neorealist perspective, actors that do not perceive relations as competitive are severely punished for their idealism. Hence, Russia’s choice of its present policy fully transformed it into a hard-hitting assertive actor, which triggered a positive outcome; it allowed it to face the structural pressures in the international arena (Hopf, 1999).

This paper believes that neorealism applies and suits the actions of Russia that has always had a tough central state power impaired sub-agencies and parties from uttering their views. This fact eventually restricts free liberal formations. Consequently, the neo-realist thought is equal to that of the state with its recognized welfares. It underlies that Moscow’s national interest, specifically reviving its influence in the Middle East, legitimizes its policy, amalgamates the citizens’ opinions, and gains the backing of the ruling powers. In other words, it overrides the national interest in order to counter the rivalry of the western sphere.
The Russian competition in the Middle East is viewed as a U.S. counterbalance. So naturally, with the pressures resulted and impelled by the international system, tougher and deeper Russian ties are clearly displayed on the Iranian-Syrian axis. This sheds light on the neorealist perception of win-lose competition: irrespective if it is harsh competition, it is primarily aiming to ensure their survival and guaranteed interests. According to Hopf, (1999), under this umbrella theory, Russia faces a security dilemma with the role of a "great defensive power (as opposed to the role of a global superpower)” (p. 62), and the structure or the distribution of power in our world, are determinants governing the Russian-Iranian-Syrian interactions. These include the arms industry buildup, the increasingly assertive political and military ties, and the support of nuclear power acquiring (Hopf, 1999).

The Russian foreign policy in the Middle East is complex in nature and its position in the Middle East, more specifically towards Iran and Syria, will be viewed through the contemporary form of realism, presented by the neorealist Kenneth Waltz. This is based on an anarchic international system, where central authority is totally absent (Wieclawski, 2011). In this sense, this paper considers today’s system as imperfectly unipolar, with a weakened U.S. as a mere power, and not a central enforcer. Neorealism, the Waltzian reframed Realism, concentrates on the “nature of the system-level structure and avoided the need to make assumptions about human nature, morality, power and interest” (Waltz, 1959). In this sense, pressures of this anarchic system in this globalized world order, according to Waltz, are the basic agents that outline results, regardless of the nature of the regime or ruling personnel (Waltz, 1959). Applying the neorealist theory of Waltz and Robert Giplin in our world today highlights the significance of the hegemonic rivalry in the international arena. From a system
structure lens, dynamic changes since the cold war till today are greatly evident (Feng & Ruizhuang, 2006).

In addition to that, Waltz’s theory tackles an important general principle governing the relations and behaviors of states in today’s international system; the balance of power in parallel with the security dilemma principle. Waltz (1979) states that “Rational countries living in the state of anarchy and the security dilemma would be suspicious and hostile to one other because of their tense relations although that was not their original idea” (p.231). In other words, states “seek, at a minimum, their own preservation and, at a maximum, universal domination, aiming to achieve their goals either through internal balancing (increasing economic and military strength) or external balancing (creating alliances)” (Waltz, 1979, pp. 116-128). This operates best in the self-help system or anarchic world order where central power seizes to exist.

This paper strongly supports the stream of thought that states are viewed as rational actors, who see the world in a neutral eye, and who evaluate objectively the material power of other states, upon which their foreign policy is conducted (Mearsheimer, 1990, p. 5-56). This school lies in between structural theorists and constructivists (Wintour, 2010). Thus, states, actors looking after their various interests and security, will most certainly be the main innermost foreign policy determinants.

According to Morgenthau (1978), in reference to the anarchic world, this thesis supports the Hans Morgenthau’s assertion that states “act in terms of interest defined as power,” (p. 5) yet from a neorealist approach, they have no choice but to seek power to maintain survival (Deibel, 2007). It is interesting to examine the constructivist realm, contending the anarchic state of the international system, does not imply its self-help nature.
“Constructivists thus maintain that the construction of national interests depends largely on how the identities… relate to one another” (Hopf, 1999).

1.5 Methodology and Research Design

The thesis will use the case-study design. The cases to be investigated are the Russian-Iranian and Russian-Syrian relations. These two cases will be looked at from an analytical framework, providing background information and general history analysis. These two case-studies have been chosen because they do not only best investigate the revival of Russia as a major power, but also will confirm the neo-realist approach to the study of international relations.

This study will as well apply a comparative approach to understand the comparison between the position and the affecting variables of Russia in different historical periods to determine the factors allowed it lately to reassert itself as a major power. The research will use secondary data references such as books, academic journals, newspapers, and articles reflecting numerous observations. Figures and tables will be added as quantitative data resources as indicators to support the thesis argument presented. Recent up to date analysis will also be used to document, with a fresh insight, the positions of Russia, Iran and Syria.

1.6 Literature Review

Many have been baffled by this subject as a result of the extensive literature and ongoing discussions amongst experts. However, the topic itself remains subject to stereotyped affiliations and biased point of views. After reviewing a wide literature on the topic, a number of studies could be of great assistance to this thesis. According to one group of academics, many of the literature they produced was skeptical and looked critically to Russia’s position towards Iran and Syria claiming that Russia might be gambling and putting its interest at risk
by supporting Syria and Iran. However, studies conducted by scholars as Freedman (2002) and Katz (2006) analyzed the takeover of the current president Vladimir Putin of old Russian Iranian relations from the former Yeltsin, and the early rise of the Russian Iranian relationship in the Putin Era. Thus, they shed light on historical aspects and influences mobilizing this relationship. Kreutz (2002), Ginat (2001), and Omestad (2007) provide important approaches on the basic features highlighting the main explicit reasons as to the reasons Russia is interested in Iran. They stress on the economic gains (oil, arms sales, ...), and its geographical importance whereby Russia finds it a great loyal client to oppose the US expansionist policy and prevent the scenario of a new American Middle East. In the same sense, scholars like Aras and Özbay (2008) argue that Russian-Iranian relations are a strategic cooperation whereby

> a strategic alliance is a kind of broad security relationship that may involve, among other things, cooperation for the attainment of common goals on matters of military assistance, defense [sic] industries, joint military maneuvers, intelligence sharing, deployment of military divisions in partner countries, and military training. For the establishment of a strategic alliance between any two states, there must be consensus and cooperation with respect to their worldviews, political regimes, long-term interests and universal values. (p. 56)

Kreutz, Ginat and Omestad (2002, 2001, 2007) share the same view as Mark Katz, since they all explore two main conflicts Russia is facing today; the Chechnya regional conflict and the Caspian Sea Oil problem, reflecting on the disagreements an cooperation between Russia and Iran- whether pragmatic or strategic- having shared aims. Moreover, scholars such as Milhollin and Lincy (2004), Katz (2006), and Khrestin and Elliott (2007), have discussed the issue of the Iranian nuclear crisis, and its effect on US-Russian relations. On the other hand, Gvosdev and Simes (2005) explore the position of the US towards the double sided foreign policy of Russia towards Iran. In an extensively consuming research over the topic, Aras and
Ozbay (2006) and Simpson (2010) walk around the implications of this nuclear prospect and the way Russia is formulating its policy to suit all sides; US, Iran, and the UN.

Then again, literature on Russian-Syrian foreign policy describes the strong historical friendship between both states, regarding the arms export significance between Russia and Syria. Magen (Ambassador), and Shapir (2012) discuss Russia’s policy, presenting figures and its implications on the Russian reputation. Lipman (2006), Seale (2012), and Widlanski (2005) heavily portray the way Putin is directing Russia to strengthen its engagement in the Middle East; especially in order to enhance security and reflect the challenges posed on its US relations, due to its strong relation with Syria as Nichol (2012) discussed. Also, Seale (2012), Friedman (2012), Dergham (2012) and Kramer (2012) shed light on the current events in Syria, with Russia’s strong position in backing the Assad’s regime, and opposing any kind of intervention.

This thesis will try to rectify few gaps found in the literature, by shedding light on few aspects that were disregarded by writers on this topic; major reasons allowing the Russian powerful stand, and the primary goal of the Russian actions to revive it influence.

1.7 Preview on the Chapters

Highlighting the Waltzian theory applied to the Russian foreign policy in the Middle East, and touching upon the fact that states directed by their self-interest, this thesis will discuss the below subtitles of foreign policy objectives. It is important to note that the determinants guiding Russia’s Middle Eastern foreign policy will be argued from a diplo-spoken flexible Russian strategic opportunism. In other words, Russian balancing role will be demonstrated from a strategic aim; the Syrian turmoil and Iranian nuclear issue, the protection
of strategically vital interests, and the reshuffling of all possible cards. All this targets the resuscitation of the Soviet supremacy in the Middle East.

Following the thesis introduction, chapter two starts by a historical overview of three main phases in the Russian-Middle Eastern relation; before, during, and after the cold war era. The main aim is to portray that Russia has always been trying to be influential in the Middle East, but not always was it able to do so. Then, the chapter will analytically examine an ongoing dilemma; why has Russia decided to act now? Different answers could be offered; yet, the thesis expounds how Russia is making use of changed domestic status, changing Middle Eastern political orders, and declining U.S. role. Taking into account the last three factors, Russian revival is viewed in the Middle East. Chapter two demonstrates the importance of the Middle East to Russia and how to prove its revived power. Moreover, the chapter focuses on Syria and Iran as primary alliances for Russia before, during, and after the Cold war; especially during the Putin era. Chapter three discusses the factors that allowed the Russian fierce return. The factors will be divided into three sections: locally, regionally, and internationally. Chapter four highlights the Russian-Iranian relations starting with the Iranian nuclear threat and ending with a detailed interpretation of the Russian-Iranian considerations. Light will be shed on the use of Iran as a US pressuring card and a counterbalancing tool. Chapter five follows an identical sequence as the previous. In this chapter, the Russian-Syrian axis is addressed. The opening part picks up on the historical analysis of the relation between Russia and Syria, and the long-lasting rapport and support of the Assad’s regime. Next, the chapter looks at the Russian-Syrian considerations, analyzing how both sides are engaged in this rapport, with all their internal, regional and international facets of costs and benefits.
As the introductory chapter and the conclusion in chapter 6 have demonstrated, the focus of this thesis in analyzing Russia’s foreign policy towards the Middle East cannot be confined to the objective of gaining important economic or geopolitical rewards. Primacy to regaining a hegemonic role in this region is the utmost strive. After reviewing the various subtitles of cooperation on both the Iranian and Syrian axes, the final chapter concludes with a linking theme for Russia’s support of both. Keeping in mind the implied perspective of a change in the balance of power, along with the explored wide difference in the outlook of US/Israel towards Russia, all these played an important art in allowing Russia to stand fiercely, now, against the U.S. This rendered the Middle East, for Russia, as the route to regain its influence over the international community as a whole.
Chapter Two

Importance of the Middle East to Russia

The aim of this chapter is to provide a historical background of the Russian relations in the Middle East with a focus on Syria and Iran. This essential historical background material will highlight the importance of the Middle East to Russia. Also, it will demonstrate that this importance was the reason behind the Russian/Soviet Union’s constant attempts to establish relationships or alliances in the region to face other major powers presence and actions. It will demonstrate as well that Russia had always challenged other powers in the Middle East through alliances with states and had always considered the Middle East as an arena to prove its major power status.

2.1 Proximity importance
The proximity areas of Russia include its major strategically, geopolitically, and economically zones of influence; from Central Asia and Transcaucasia, located between the Red Sea and the Arabian “or Persian” Gulf, and between Africa and Eurasia on the other side named the “Arabian Peninsula”. This area has an important and direct weight on the international and domestic Russian state of affairs, affecting its vital interests in three ways:

1- This proximity has an effect on the geostrategic, political or military, Russian access to the warm waters and world oceans, mainly the Indian Ocean.

2- The close touch with the major oil and gas producing nations, mainly located in the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula, opens wide energy rich opportunities for Russia.

3- The crucial significance of the Muslim factor; a neighboring the Muslim Arabian peninsula and a Russian fast growing Muslim community, estimated more than 16% of the Russian population (Kreutz, 2004).

From a geopolitical perspective, Moscow has always thrived to form a power coalition, whereby it acts as the principle actor. Regional partners and allies in the Middle East were of potential importance for Russia to achieve its goal of spreading influence and protecting its interests against growing opponents.

2.2 Historical Review of Russia’s influence in the Middle East - Iran and Syria in focus

As we have seen, Russia’s vital interests lie in its proximity area. As we have also previously noted that one of the basic point of the neorealist approach upon which this topic stands, is the balance of power aspect. This historical review towards the relationship of Russia with several Middle Eastern states, most focused on Syria and Iran, is based on a Russian quest
for power, to balance American ambitions. Balance of power in this sense, throughout all the historical phases highlighted, is a balance against superiority, threats and capabilities. In other the throughout the historical phases, the act of seeking alliances is under the aim of power balance and proof of revived capability.

2.2.1 Before the Cold War Era

Russia is no stranger to the Middle East. Historically, before the beginning of the 20th century, the Russian empire was as involved politically with the Arab world as much as today. It was mostly known for its major attempts to build a railway to link the Mediterranean to the Gulf and a coaling naval station in Kuwait to compete with the British navy supremacy in the region.

During the Tsarist Empire era (1547-1917), Russia had a major power force. Russian leaders contested with the European powers to fill the power vacuum of the failing Ottoman Empire and to extend its influence from the Black sea until the Mediterranean (Zürcher, 2002). Russia signed two treaties with the Ottoman Empire that aimed at mutual assistance to the Sultan. One was in 1805 against Napoleon and the other in 1833 after sending a Russian naval unit to Istanbul supporting the sultan in calling for the cession of the whole of Syria. The July 1833 Treaty of Hunkar-Iskelsi marked the zenith of Russian influence in the Ottoman Empire, in a secret article, the Porte promised to assist Russia when necessary by closing the Dardanelles against the ships of any other Power, thus securing for Russia a pre-eminent position at Istanbul (Salibi, 1976, p.33).

This shows that it is not new for Russia to attempt the establishment of protectorates and supporting certain actors in such region, whereby also challenging other powers. In addition, to reinforce its interests and to control its alliances and proxies, Russia played a major role in protecting the Greek Orthodox communities in the Ottoman Empire, such as
condemning the abuse of Balkan Christians and Slavs. This was another dimension of the Russian support of certain actors in its quest for dominance.

In addition to that, Russia also had a great desire in the Persian Gulf. This resulted in the First Russo-Persian War (1804-1883), which according to Daniel (2012)

War was in many respects a continuation of a struggle for supremacy in Transcaucasia dating back to the time of Peter the Great and Nāder Shah, it differed from earlier conflicts between Persia and Russia in that its course came to be affected as much by the diplomatic maneuvering of European powers during the Napoleonic era as by developments on the battlefield. As a result of its weakness, Persia could not deter Russian threat of interference in its own affairs. With the Russian pressure on local communities, two of the important tribes of middle Caucasus, the Ossetes and the Lezgians, accepted submission to Russia in 1802 and 1803, while Mingrelia accepted the dominance of Russians in 1804 and Imereti in 1810.

This was followed by the Second Russo-Persian War in the late 1920s, which led to a continuing power decline in Persia.

After the outburst of World War I, Russia, an ally to Great Britain, established the Constantinople Agreement of 1915, which instructed that after the war ended, Russia would take over the Turkish straits. This policy aimed at reserving Russia in the alliance formed. However, the Russian Tsarist Empire did not last to ripe the fruit of success (Karami, 2011).

After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, and the establishment of the Soviet Union, Moscow started to look for allies in the Middle East by assisting the “revolutionary movements in the dependent and subject nations and in the colonies” (Kreutz, 2004, p.4).

The years between 1921 and 1926 witnessed new treaties of non-aggression were concluded between the communist regime in power and Turkey, and Afghanistan along with friendship treaties with Iran (Karami, 2011). Nevertheless, despite the rapprochement between the Soviets and the King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud till 1932, and the Soviet interest in preserving his growing power in the Arabian Peninsula, the Soviet-Arab relationship; however, were
unstable and lacking any profound strategic and ideological content. This tensed relationship was to remain until the Cold War. They were simply limited. However, having similar intentions of extending their friendships and allies, support was drawn-out to Yemen (Karami, 2011).

After the 1941 German invasion of the Soviet Union during the Second World War, the Soviets had to ensure a secure path for their war material. Hence, the Soviet Union occupied Iran, and both concluded the 1942 agreement, along with Great Britain under the condition that they left with a maximum of six months period after the war ended. Despite U.S pressures on Moscow to pull out from Iran, just as the British did in 1946, the Soviets refused. This was an obvious implication of the Soviet Union’s expansionist aims in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Far East (Yesiltas & Inat, 2005). The USSR further renounced the former treaties with Turkey, renewing their assertion over the Straits. In addition to that, it was overtly known that the Soviet Union was the hand behind the 1945-1946 uprising of the Azeri, which resulted in the Iranian recognition of Azerbaijan, and 1946 withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iran (Yesiltas & Inat, 2005).

2.2.2 During the Cold War Era – Until 1991

The Cold War period was characterized by the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the U.S., the policy of both powers was to rely on proxy states; Israel and Iran were client states for Washington while Syria fell under Russian influence (Cold War, 1947-1991). The Soviets had the ability to challenge the U.S. through its alliances and support of actors.

The Soviet Union, with a belief that the new founded State of Israel would diminish the British influence in the Middle Eastern region, was the first country to recognize Israel on 17 May 1948, adopting a pro-Zionist policy. It aimed at supporting the actor that would boost its
influence; however, the USSR soon switched sides in the Arab-Israeli conflict in support of Arab states. It chose its clients and entered a war by proxies, which provided it with the ability to face the West. It was not the actor itself which was important for the Soviets, instead it was the aim behind its support. The massive buildup of U.S. power in the region was perceived as a security threat by the Soviets; thus, the post-Stalin era was a period where the U.S.S.R. strived to counterbalance U.S presence along its Southern vicinity through its choice of clients.

The Syrian relationship with Moscow developed mostly between the Baath Party and the Socialist Ruling elite in Moscow.

Moscow seemed to hope the then-powerful Syrian Communist Party might at least share power with the virulently anti-Israeli and anti-Western Baath Party. But the Syria Baathists feared the communists and agreed to the 1958 merge of their country with Egypt and even accepted the leadership of the latter’s ruler Nasser, partly in order to get his help in suppressing the communists (Katz, 2012, p.1)

In 1955, namely after the founding of the Baghdad Pact as the fruit of President Eisenhower’s administration, in its efforts to build an anti-Soviet alliance (Milestones, 1953-1960), the USSR impressively revived its active role in the Middle East. During that era, the Saudi non-participation and the Iraqi withdrawal from this ‘American initiative’ were praised by the Soviets who were also showing increasing support towards the Palestinians as well as with the “progressive” Arab states.

Counterbalancing U.S. influence in the Middle East was a mere part of the larger superpower competition, whereby the Soviets had an expansionist aim in the Middle East securing a viable presence in the region; increasing what could be described as the “belt of Soviet satellites and military bases” (Kreutz, 2007, p.126). From 1955 till 1960, Syria received
a great deal of military aid by the Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, to strengthen the alliance between the two states (more than $200 million)(Kreutz, 2007).

Denselow (2010) says,

Since the 1950s, tens of thousands of Syrians have been educated in Russia, while Russian expertise has created much of Syria's infrastructure, with the Syrian ministry of economy estimating that the Russians are responsible for 90 industrial facilities and pieces of infrastructure, one-third of Syria's electrical power capability, one-third of its oil-producing facilities and a threefold expansion of land under irrigation – aided in part by assistance with building the massive Euphrates dam. (p.1)

On the other hand, the ideological differences between the Saudi Islamism and the Russian communism grew dramatically after the creation of a Soviet satellites belt around the kingdom composed by the new South Yemen Marxist regime in 1967, Ethiopia and Somalia following the Horn of Africa revolutionary changes in the following years, to reach its apogee during the Soviet invasion to Afghanistan in 1979 (Wheeler, 1959). In parallel, 1967 and 1973 marked a full Soviet engagement in the Middle East through the political and military support of the Arabs, in their two main wars against Israel. The USSR was the sole arms provider for both countries’ armed forces, in addition to maintaining high levels of political and trade relations with both Syria and Egypt. The Soviet support for those two allies proves the constant challenge with the United States.

In 1971, with the coup that brought Hafez al Assad to presidency, strengthened relations with the USSR continued, reaching the climax with the 1971 Soviet naval base construction in Tartus. A second war against Israel was surprisingly embarked by Egypt and Syria yet ended with a victorious Israel, a frightened Moscow compensating her allies, and a recognized role for the American ability to end the Israeli- Syrian confrontation and leading to an Egyptian- Israeli peace process (Derek, 1988). Nevertheless, this last move re-endorsed the
enmity view towards the U.S. with the Syrian belief of an American aim to dominate the Middle East instead of positively brokering for peace (Derek, 1988). Arriving to the Mid 1970s, the Lebanese civil war erupted in April 1975, and the Syrian intervention and support to factions displeased Moscow, increasing the fractures in their alliance. “The Soviets, who supported the PLO and other leftist Muslim groups, openly criticized Syria's intervention. The Soviet newspaper Pravda stated that Syria harmed the Palestinian and Lebanese ‘national patriotic forces’ and demanded that Syria withdraw its troops from Lebanon” (Sharnoff, 2009, p.2).

Nevertheless, they decided to overcome their differences. After the signature of the Camp David Accord in 1978, Egypt left the Soviet orbit, leaving Syria alone as the only Arab state facing Israel and orbiting within the Soviet Satellite in the Middle East, and later on signing the 1980 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Moscow (Freedman, 1991).

On the other hand, the relationship with Iran went through different phases. Since the 19th century, Iran (Persia) was struggling to counter the Russian empire dominance against it. Two major wars and a series of military campaigns forced Persia to cede many of its major cities to the growing Russian armies. It was not until the Russian Revolution that the Russian dominance started to shake inside Iran. However, Russia continued its efforts to establish socialist and communist republics in Iran inside 1920. But those last ceased to exist during WWII after the common Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941. At the end of WWII, the American dominance was clear in the Iranian political arena leading to converting Iran into anti-communist block; especially during Pahlavi era, which seceded to the Islamic Revolution. This also led to the creation of the Islamic republic of Iran whose incompatibility against
communism left Saddam Hussein of Iraq benefit from the full Soviet military support in its war against Iran.

In parallel, with the Islamic revolution of 1979, and the Soviet change of view towards Iran being an ally of the U.S., aspirations towards having a communist supportive government were high. However, the Iranian Islamic ruling body instigated threatening sentiments of Islamic nationalism within the Soviet territories which encompassed a huge Muslim populace (Barylski, 1994). With an antipathy reflected towards both, U.S. and the Soviet Union, those two actors were forced to find a balance for the international order. Even with the replacement of the Shah’s regime in Iran and the ruling of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the relation between Moscow and Tehran remained unfriendly. This revolution proved to be an overwhelming ideological impediment to the maintenance of good relations between the two countries. “The Soviets backed Iran’s Tudeh Communist Party and other leftists against the radical Islamists. Iran also paid a heavy price during the decade-long Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, when it absorbed some 2 million refugees who fled the conflict” (Katz, 2010). Thus, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 was viewed as exceedingly menacing to Iran, and worsened the relationship. Notably, the downfall of the Shah of Iran and its replacement by the Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution was partly due to a deliberate and calculated US plan devised by Brezinsky and backed by a few European powers to curb the expansion of Communism into the Middle east and Asia by creating “an Islamic Crescent” around the Soviet Union.

Throughout the 1980s, Iran and Iraq were major points of reference when discussing the historical relation of the Soviets and the Middle East. After Iraq attacked Iran in 1980, the war lasted for eight years with neither country gaining apparent gains. The opening of the
invasion returned a fair deal of accomplishment for Iraq. The Soviet supply of weapons to Iraq’s campaign was also threatening to Iran. However, this did not last for long. It was partly due to the Kremlin’s renunciation of support; the last was not consulted prior to the launching of the invasion (Balfour-Paul, 1984). Mikhail Gorbachev’s efforts to sustain “strict neutrality” with both sides during the war, whilst unsuccessfully trying to negotiate for peace, merely resulted in the stained relation with both parties (Mesbahi, 1993). However, Moscow allowed Syria to carry on its support to Iran and facilitating Lybian arms shipment (Sajjadpour, 1997).

According to Barylski (1994),

The West cultivated Iraq with a view towards moving Saddam Hussein's regime into the Western foreign policy orbit. When Iraq attacked Iran in September 1980, it created unpleasant policy dilemmas for the Soviet Union. Moscow halted arms shipments to Iran and Iraq and urged both sides to return to the status quo ante bellum. The Soviet Union initially welcomed Khomeini's revolution as an anti-western revolution and Iran's communists supported it. However, in the winter of 1981-82, when Iran's revolutionary forces began scoring victories against Iraq and the West began replacing Moscow in Baghdad's arms purchasing, Moscow resumed arms shipments to Iraq. Iran responded by repressing the Iranian communist party and restricting Soviet activities in Iran. The Iran-Iraq war ended in a stalemate in July 1988 (p.394).

In 1982, the war shifted toward Iran whereby the Iranians constantly rejected Soviet friendly support offers. The last were mindful of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the overthrow of the Shah, thus wanted to win this ideal opportunity to befriend the new anti-American Iranian stance. With the failure of Soviet friendly offers, the last feared repercussions of an Iranian triumph; hence an export of an extremist Islamic revolution. Therefore, this period marked a heavy military Soviet support to Iraq, with arms sales deals worth billions of dollars (Sajjadpour, 1997).

Taking the above events into consideration, it is important to highlight the ideological side of the Russian-Iranian interactivity: Iran has been an Islamic theocracy since the Shah
Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, and a quasi-theocracy with his ousting and the 1979 Islamic revolution. It in turn, as feared by Moscow, affects and stimulates the feelings of many Shia communities within Russia especially when the administration continues to be considered by those as either unethical (Mafiosi) or Orthodox.

It would be interesting to note here the significance of the Nigorny Karabach conflict (1988-1994), and the Iranian security concerns. This clash has had a tremendous effect on the relations between Russia and Iran. Russia and Iran were not on good terms. Russian-Iranian cooperation affected by overlapping interests on areas of which most important comes the Nagaorn Karabakh conflict. According to Djalili (2004),

Armenians and Azerbaijanis were the two major national groups in the borderland between the Russian, Ottoman and Persian empires and as such were intermingled over territory stretching hundreds of miles…With the rise of nationalism and heightened Russian-Ottoman conflict at the end of the nineteenth century, the Armenians became the most vulnerable community in Ottoman Anatolia. And, while a few generations before mainly Shiite Azerbaijanis and mainly Sunni Turks might have found little in common, they increasingly found common cause – and were identified as one and the same by Armenians. This has fed through into the Armenian generalization that Azerbaijanis are also ‘Turks’ – and therefore share complicity for the 1915 genocide. (p.54)

Looking at Iran, an Islamic republic stimulating the religious feelings of the Azarbajanis and promising to correct the injustice felt by the Shias at the hands of the Orthodox, this dynamism is very real and actual in the minds of the new Russian administration. This problem actually granted Iran the means to become more politically active in the area trying to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Djalili, 2004).

In addition to the religious factor,

The precipitate breakdown in security and trust in Nagorny Karabakh could be attributed to the rigidities of the Soviet state, which had failed to manage the political contradictions inherent in Nagorny Karabakh. The heavily centralized
system had enforced security through fear but it had almost no mechanisms of resolving a dispute between two communities by consensus.... (Waal, 2005. p.15)

Neither Russia nor Iran played the role of an efficient intermediary. The confrontations that were occurring throughout the region included Russian-Iranian mutual interests, including a common Russian-Iranian support for the Armenians (Freedman, 2000). With the 1985 arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party, it marked a radical change in Soviet foreign policy. To what concerns us most, he sought conciliatory policies towards the west, and improved relations with Israel. Gorbachev frustrated the relations with Syria disapproving Syria’s intervention in the Lebanese and Palestinian affairs.

This historical overview highlights so far that the Soviet Union had the ability back then to challenge the United States through support of allies. An important supportive fact was during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Israel’s plan was to bring Lebanon under the direct U.S. intervention by placing a puppet government and the presence of U.S. marines that were not really neutral peacekeepers but to serve the Israelis. It also aimed at bringing down the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) backed by Syria. A signing of the peace accord between Lebanon and Israel took place which aim to limit the Syrian policy in Lebanon.

However, Syria, which was backed by the Soviets and had the support of local allies such as Amal and the back then emerging Hezbollah group, forced the multinational forces and mainly the marines to leave Lebanon by blasting several headquarters. According to Katz (2010),

The phase between 1989 and 1999 was a “relatively friendly period” as Presidents Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin pursued rapprochement with Tehran. Tensions eased after several turning points in the late 1980s; the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988, the border security problem in the Caspian region—the Azeri problem started, Khomeini died in mid-1989, the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan in early 1989, and communism collapsed in Eastern Europe later that year. (pp. 186-187)
2.2.3 From 1990 reaching the Putin Era

In the beginning of this era, the Soviet Union then Russia marked an explicit support to the U.S. on several important international events. Russia perceived backing the United States as a sign of its great power status. Starting with the U.S war against Iraq in 1990, condemning the last’s invasion of Kuwait, the Soviet Union and its successor Russia did not oppose U.S. intervention.

As a result of the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, a weakened Russian Federation was its successor, and it was not concerned with ‘anti-imperialist’ policy. Russia continued carrying its commitments to the United States on strategic arms control, START I and START II (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty 1991 and 1993).

However, to what concerns us the most in this thesis, during the era of President Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), although the Soviet Union maintained good relation with Syria; however, this was a transition period. Syria began to improve its relation with the U.S., and the Soviets had no means and ability to stop this rapprochement. The Syrians got into the peace process sponsored by the U.S. The Russian’s had no power not to oppose; Russia was out. U.S and Syria were dominant actors.

The federation’s relations with America deteriorated; however, Russia did follow an economic progress, whilst safeguarding its “soft-underbelly in Transcaucasia” (southern border), where Iran was the closest Middle Eastern ally (Freedman, 2001). Under the weak Yeltsin Freedman (2001) says,

Moscow focused its Middle East efforts on Turkey and Iran, both of which had a considerable amount of influence in the two regions. Moscow sold nuclear reactors and sophisticated military equipment to Iran, as the two countries developed a tactical alliance. Russia’s relationship with Turkey was more complex, alternating between confrontation and cooperation. (p.1)
With the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the withdrawal of the Soviets from Afghanistan, the collapse of Communism, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the relationship between Russia and Iran witnessed an improved new threat-reduced era. This eventually led to new openings. Again with common geostrategic interests; such as limiting U.S. influence, countering radical Islamic extremism, along with economic cooperation; the collaboration between the two gradually expanded (Karami, 2011). Nevertheless, Russia did not reveal a concrete regional or international step opposing the United States. The focus was shed on economic policies, improving trade relations, and on striving for “balancing attempts of the Russian foreign policy among Iran, Iraq and the GCC states” (Freedman, 1998, p.147). The strategic cooperation between Russia and Iran during the 1995 was a requirement facing the NATO expansion and Chechnya conflict at the time.

In brief, the major area of cooperation in the Russian-Iranian relation was the Bushehr nuclear Reactor, which Russia was constructing in Iran, and which have been witnessing, a fierce U.S. opposition. However, the centerpiece of discord was the delineation of the Caspian Sea.

Moscow began selling weapons to Tehran and promised to complete the unfinished Bushehr nuclear reactor. After years of trying to export its Islamic ideology, Tehran opted not to side with fellow Muslims during Moscow’s first war with Chechen rebels between 1994 and 1996. Iran pointedly expressed support for Russia’s territorial integrity in the face of secessionist movements—a problem the theocracy also faced. In the mid-1990s, Russia and Iran also worked together to end the 1992-1997 civil war in Tajikistan between Moscow’s former communist allies and a democratic-Islamist alliance. (Katz, 2010, p. 187)

The Russian period during Yeltsin rule witnessed a close cooperation with Iran, benefiting greatly its proper self-interest despite cancellation of arms deals in order to satisfy the U.S. for maintaining good relations. In the mid 90’s, Russian-Iranian relations were
becoming more solid and strong as a result of the policies of Yergeni Primakov (Blank, 2011). Being elected as Head of Ministry of Foreign affairs, in January 1996, Primakov pursued a more operational foreign policy. This was marked in his considerate position towards Iran and keener connections with Tehran for a favorable impact on policies in South Caucasus and Central Asia. Just as the case of Armenia, a great economic partner to Tehran and a strategic partner to Moscow. Such links empower the Russian concept of a “Southern Garden” (Gafarli, 2012). This is similar to what Galia Golan noted in her famous book- ‘Russia and Iran: A Strategic Partnership’, stating how Primakov had a forceful effect on Russian viewpoints regarding the Middle Eastern Region.

2.2.4 Putin in Power

The first premiership and presidential era of Vladimir Putin started in 2000, and ended in 2008. At first, the inaptitude of Russia continued to be evident. With the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, followed by the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, the Russians revealed to be more incapable. It was a revived Baghdad pact scenario. Russia was only going with the U.S. plan, unable to do otherwise. In the beginning of Putin era, the Russian influence was weakened. Its international role no longer existed. Since the 2000s, several events took place in the Middle East noted that Russia should take a more active role in this region.

According to Ruehle (2009),

The official visit of Iranian President Mohamad Khatami to Moscow between 12-15 March 2001 can be considered as turning point in terms of the revival of Russian Iranian relations asserting mutual cooperation in various sectors- economy, politics, social- and comprising interest for both parties, including the region as a whole, to promote and reestablish security. Evidently, deals worth around 7 billion dollars were made for the delivery of Modern Russian weaponry to Iran.
From that time onwards, Russian-Iranian relations are evolving along an analogous line, with a Russian foreign policy laid down based on geopolitical interest, economic interests, and Anti-US pressure aims.

As discussed in the following chapters, during President Vladimir Putin’s era up until this very day, Freedman (2001) says,

> There was a more centralized control over Russian foreign policy as the new Russian leader sought to have a more assertive foreign policy for his country, and became much more active than Yeltsin had been in promoting Russian interests in the Middle East.

Despite all the above, it is essential to note that standing with Tehran and Damascus, whether in support against the West or for different purposes, entails deep calculations. However, the “flexibility” that Russia has often unveiled towards the West when it comes to the Iranian nuclear crisis, is unlikely used in the Syrian case (Fayyad, 2012), despite diplomatic approach regarding the use of chemical weapons.

By the mid-2000s, although many writers thought that Russia was no longer interested in the Middle East; however, it was. But Russia was in capable of acting.

Moscow has re-established political ties with its former allies, such as Syria; engaged in a lively dialogue with Israel; saw Turkey as a key partner in the region; currently maintains a thriving, albeit most complex relationship with Iran; and promotes trade with energy-rich countries, from Algeria and Libya to the Gulf States.(Trenin, 2010, p. 3)

As we have previously said, Moscow thrives to develop powerful alliances where it plays a pivotal leading role as an outside player amongst the above mentioned regional delineating borders: “South Caucasus, the Caspian, and Central Asia north of the Middle East.”(Trenin, 2010, p.4) For Russia, this shed light over the major important actors such as Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Thus, from a geopolitical, economic and diplomatic
perspective, Russia has become strikingly more dynamic during the Putin Era as the coming chapters will demonstrate.

Russia, like many other states, sought means to balance U.S. unipolar hegemony through having a strong foothold in the Middle East. As Karaganov (2012) (Honorary Chairman of the Presidium of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and Dean of the School of World Economics and World Politics at the National Research University–Higher School of Economics) explains, countries depend on four kinds of power instruments to cooperate with other actors and pursue a foreign policy of a global power; economic, political, ideological, and purely diplomatic. Russia has been relying on diplomatic skills manipulated in a skillful way. The economic factor has long been the most overriding on the international agenda being a source of influence on global and regional foreign policies. However, today’s Russian reality is that its foreign policy and actions depend, for the most part, on the endeavor to maintain a great power status and a revived hegemonic position in the Middle East (Karaganov, 2012). Yet, the high demand for energy, the nuclear struggle, raw material, and military are taken into account.
Chapter Three

Factors of Russian Comeback

It is true that geography has not changed, but politics definitely did; whether inside Russia or in the Middle Eastern countries in concern. The main Russian goal, to come back to the influential stage whereby capable of shaping the international decision, has far existed as a deep will. Nevertheless, it was not until recently that Russia was capable of returning as a major player in the Middle East. Russia made use of four major factors as opportunities to reach its goal.

3.1 Local- Stronger domestic Russia

In April 2005, President Vladimir Putin notably said: “Above all, we should acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster of the century.” Just as in 2004 he famously stated that the “dissolution of the Soviet Union was a national tragedy on a massive scale” (Putin, 2004). Putin, former KGB colonel elite, sought to restore Russia’s standing. His aim throughout his ruling period is to stir up nationalism triggering old feeling of Soviet glory. Putin’s rule included a spirit targeted to wipe out the horrors of the old system’s dissolution.

Vladimir Putin managed to be reelected as president again in 2012 and had the ability to consolidate his power domestically. With thrive of national sentiments, he controlled most of the government with the biggest political party ‘United Russia’. Through his skillful leadership, President Putin worked on convincing the Russian population of his vision for Russia holding on to nostalgic ambitions.
Refusing the disintegration of power, Putin has resorted to some authoritative ways and repressive measures to tighten his grip over the state; restricting the independent monitoring of government agencies, strengthening the court system, and tightening control over the Russian media reflect authoritarian leadership. Nevertheless, ruling with an iron fist under the ideology and ambitions of a ‘Strong Russian Statehood’ along with the campaign of ‘Great Russia’, Putin was able to amend the law to his benefit of another 6 years of rule.

The ability to convince most of the Russian citizens to believe in him reflects a charismatic approach too. Putin also faced minor opposition to his positioning as a global leader, whether in the Syrian current Turmoil or regarding the Iranian nuclear program development. He justified all his actions by the desire to restore Russian former position on the world stage.

President Putin’s strong domestic hold, reflecting his power to take full charge, enabled him to strengthen his bilateral relations with China, India, Vietnam, and South Korea. This in turn reveals a powerful grip over Russian policies and relations. He is demonstrating to his nation and to the world that he is able to live up to the KGB image he has cultivated, reaffirming Russia’s role in the international arena.

As to what concerns the economic empowerment of Russia, when Putin outlined his goals for “Russia 2020,” the average 6.5 percent annual economic growth that his economic planners formulated did not seem outlandish. It was well within the margins of the growth rates that Russia has achieved during Putin’s years in power… there had been great economic changes since the ruble collapse of 1998 thanks to the economic reforms of the early Putin years and subsequent high prices on world oil and gas markets. A tremendous amount of new money has coursed through the economy, and a lot of people—even ordinary one- were a lot better off than before.” (Parker, 2011).

“The economy of Russia is the eighth largest economy in the world by nominal value and the sixth/ fifth largest by purchasing power parity (PPP)” (CIA World Factbook, 2014). “There has been years of economic growth; Real GDP grew by 6% in
2005, 7.1% in 2004 …. The 2005 federal budget surplus was expected to reach 7 percent.

In August 2006 Russia paid off early all its Soviet-ers debts to Western Countries, worth $22 billion.” (CIA World Factbook, 2014) Despite the global financial crisis that hit Russia in 2008-2009, in 2010 a struggled rebound was evident.

In addition to that, given the world’s increased demand for energy today, Russian fossil fuel assets are certainly rising sharply in value. Along this comes the arms procurement which is rapidly increasing in parallel with Russian technological improvements. The economic and financial power of Russia, with the latest discoveries of gas field and energy trades permits Moscow to compete for strategic objectives, primarily its comeback as a major power without posing threats over its internal resources or exhausting its own economy.

3.2 Changed Middle Eastern order

Under Putin’s strategy that attempts to enhance Russia’s revived powerful position, the changes in the Middle East political order has opened doors for Moscow to shore up its influence in the region. The revolutions across the Middle East have allowed Russia to emphasize its position by trying to act as a mediator. This window of opportunity was seized
by Putin to intervene in the ongoing unrest and revive its role as a major actor, more precisely in states that are of strategic interest to Russia. The mediating attempts by the Russians are focused on countries where it has direct interest in and boost its influence, and strengthen its position.

Russia’s strategy of acting as a “bridge” between the western power and the Middle Eastern countries, Syria and Iran, is viewed as an opportunity to bolster its position regionally. With this new reality in the Middle East, Russian desire to revive its status has encouraged it to promote itself through political initiatives by playing a role in shaping the region’s status quo.

Nevertheless, Russia is not much comfortable regarding the collapse of the current regimes and the radical emergence in its countries of interest. The long-ruling regimes that were in place reflected a kind of stability, and Russia has already established partnerships with them. Hence, today, this involvement reflects a Russian fear from a changed regime, whereby it might not have control of. Russia has always had a preference to support old regimes and their trends that are not Western-oriented and moderately authoritarian.

From a neorealist perspective, the emergence of those new actors, in an anarchic world order, constituted an invitation for countries such as Russia to rapidly rally to intervene where instability is evident. The multi-polarity has always triggered Russian foreign policy to react and this is the case in the Middle Eastern area. Russia found its way to make use of the multipolar yet unstable anarchy to react to American attempts of dominance and support its proxies to counterbalance this hegemony.

Keeping in mind the preference of Russia to old regimes, Russia is in parallel seizing the occasion to formulate other options in case their previous allied regimes collapse. This is a part of the Russian plan to reacquire its international position as a major actor.
3.3 International - Weakened U.S. and international order

The twentieth century has witnessed several new realities. The Western world that was known for an ultimate prominence faces a decline in the face of a new international system and emerging entities; whether the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China are the main actors) or other evolving powerful states. This shift in power in an obvious changing world inevitably reveals a great decline in the United States role allowing other states to take advantage.

The current scenario is totally different than the 1970s and 80s. This paper believes that most likely the U.S. today will fail in its attempt to overpower the Russian power. Three main reasons to this allegation could be contested. Primarily, the American economy has shown a great decline and recession since the shift in power rests at large on the economic capacities of the country. In other words, economic decline has massive consequences on the foreign policy of a country; in this case it affects the hegemonic stability of the U.S. “America’s share of world gross domestic product (GDP) is much less today than it was, say, 25 years ago, let alone at the end of the World War II when it was the only serious player in the world capitalist system” (White, 1987, p.185).

Second, the U.S. technological proficiency is weakened, and a great example would be the disappointment in the F-22 and F-35. Next, the Chinese emergence and support to Russia shifts the power equation; especially in the changed Middle East. The rise of the Chinese power factor is undoubtedly threatening to the American domination because its growing influence is witnessed on both economic and political levels.

On the other hand, when it comes to the Chinese political maneuvering, the following chapters show that the United States was not able to count on the international system to support it with sanctions on states, an enforce them. Whereas on the contrary, the diplomatic cards of Russia,
supported by China, came to yield tangible results. Nevertheless, despite the limitations in the Russian-Chinese relation, and the Russian fear of the East, Russia is trying its best to keep China close to it diplomatically. As in any power transition phase, the descent of the West and the rise of other influential powers, in this case Russia and China, will likely start to create security threats and tension. As to what concerns us most in this paper, the decline in American strong hold on the international arena and the Chinese backing enhanced an opportunity for Russia to promote its influence.

3.4 The Ukrainian Factor

The Crimean Penninsula is a multi-ethnic populated region with Russian majority. The Crimean crisis was unfolded as the Ukranian President Viktor Yanukovych, amidst the severe Ukrainian economic crisis, announced suspending further agreements with the European union and turned instead to closer Russian deals. The protests that erupted soon became more violent, and the President flew the country. In end of February 2014, Russian forces began to take control of Crimea. After a referendum was held on the question of joining the Russian Federation, the polls resulted in 93% votes in support to join Russia (BBC News Europe, 2014). Yet this has been denounced by the U.S., EU and the Ukranian officials (BBC News Europe, 2014).

Ukraine is considered by Russia as its own backyard. Any threat by the U.S or international community to interfere in this Russian claimed territory would result in fierce Russian defense. With the west trying to exert a pressure in Ukraine, Russia thus invaded Crimea. After seizing Crimea on the 18th of March 2014, Putin has demonstrated no intent of further going into Ukraine. By this, he has strengthened Russia’s position as a major power. This well-calculated and limited use of force to seize power over its geopolitical interest zones
reveal a revived Russian ability, which it was not able to do so before. Through this crisis, Russia, in the face of threats by the U.S, the EU, and actors of the international community to impose sanctions or involve in a military conflict against her, proved its revived power. This is similar to its eagerness to support the Assad’s regime and maintain its fierce position in the Syrian crisis. The western threats to exert pressure on Putin resulted in a failure. “We are not going to be getting into a military excursion in Ukraine…what we are going to do is mobilize all of our diplomatic resources to make sure that we’ve got a strong international coalition,” as President Obama told San Diego’s NBC affiliate KNSD.” (Nicks, 2014, p.1)
Chapter Four

Particularities of Russian- Iranian Interest

Bilateral relations between Moscow and Tehran have existed for centuries. Neighboring one another, mutual interaction, clashes, and cooperation have always been inevitable. Taking into account and knowing the history and the geopolitics of the Middle East and vice versa, Russia’s relationship with Tehran has changed between them with the alteration of both states’ ruling bodies, political balance, and economic calculations. There is no doubt that geopolitics have been playing an important role in defining the nature of the relation and its implications between Russia and Iran. This is because the expansion towards the warm water and ports having open access to the oceans, always constituted a main pillar of the Russian geopolitical imperatives.

Nevertheless, this chapter will argue that although Russia is benefiting economically on various levels, precisely on its nuclear development plan, from its rapprochement with Iran, this is not the main aim. The main reason behind Russia’s support to Iran is Russia’s interest to use Iran as a tool to regain its political influence not only in the Middle East but internationally. This chapter will discuss the increased benefits of Russia supporting Iran, and show that Iran has become a strategic partner to Russia despite of the threat that the Iranian nuclear might constitute to Russia, along with the consequences of this support on the Russian western relations.

In return to the waning interference of Iran in Chechnya as we will later discuss, Russia will offer Iran support, good economic aids, and a strong agreement of nuclear trade. What the
chapter attempts to demonstrate is how the issue of the Russian support of the Iranian nuclear program has awarded Russia a perfect gamble to recover its prestige as a dynamic actor in the international arena and the Middle East.

The rapprochement between Iran and Russia after the cold war started in 1995 even when Russia abrogated of the Gore-Chemomyrdin Accord, the secret Russian-US protocol, where Moscow was supposed to restrict arms and military aid to Iran. The relationship strengthened with the continued attempts to finish the Bushehr Nuclear Reactor in Iran, which was stagnant under the Yeltsin administration (Katz, 2006). This is in addition to the accord signed between the two states to supply Iran with the most sophisticated Russian missiles named S300. Before going into details in the various pillars of the economic aspect, it is important to note that it’s true, what best describes Iran to Russia would be a “strategic partner” as it was described in 2009 by the Russian Minister of Agriculture. Interestingly enough, Russia strives to endure support and cooperation on Iran’s ‘peaceful’ nuclear program. Recalling a sequence of actions few years backward, as a follow up on the Iranian nuclear development as a central part in shaping Russian-Iranian relations, it should be noted that “in August 2002, with the agreement on launching a long-term program for the development of trade, economic, industrial, and scientific-technological cooperation between Iran and Russia up until 2012” (Gafarli, 2012, p.145), Russia opened its cards on its plan to back Iran in completing six nuclear reactors on Iranian grounds.

4.1 Nuclear Iran a threat to Russia

Many had argued, including Russian decision makers, that Iranian nuclear program is not only a threat to Russia itself, but also to the world. Such a powerful country as Iran could be considered a serious threat to Russia in Central Asia, Caucasus, and the Caspian Sea critical
regions. President Putin himself who is currently supporting Iran’s nuclear program has once said- the weapons in the Iranian hands are a strategic threat for our national security, more than other European countries. This is because the missiles that Iran possesses and can launch are able to easily reach Russia.

Although Russia, as the U.S. does not trust the Iranian regime in its claims that their nuclear power will be used only for peaceful goals, it is willing to overcome its worries and support this program (Bridge, 2012). The fact shows the insistence of the previous President Ahmadinejad to proceed with Iran’s nuclear ambitioning enriching uranium. Russia is willing to accept Iran’s ambition due to the various benefits that Russia could get from this support; whether economic or a strong support opposing the Missile Defense Shield the U.S. is attempting to deploy in Eastern Europe.

Russia being the major support to the Iranian nuclear program, the Iranian regime understands well the price to pay in return for this support. Upsetting Russia will merely result in negative consequences concerning their nuclear cooperation. This is because it will be difficult for Iran to develop its nuclear capacity without Russian backing. From the Russian point of view, this support is not only limited to material and expertise assistance, but as well and most importantly, it is one of the factors that deterred any direct action from the international community against Iranian nuclear program. However, just as Pakistan and North Korea forcibly had the international community accedes to their nuclear possession, Russia anticipates that they should just have to consent to a nuclear Iran as well (Katz, 2012).

4.1.1 Russian Stance vs. the International position

While the US and its EU allies are convinced that Iran is pursuing a nuclear
development to get hold of the A-bomb, Tehran consecutively assures that a peaceful aim is entailed behind its nuclear program, mainly to keep the oil supply intact.

It is only that on the surface, Russia has approved four international resolutions condemning Iran, yet it has not taken action to convince that last to halt its nuclear project. Russia has been doing its best to ensure the continuation and sustainability of the crisis. It has been doing so to weaken US supremacy in the region, and in the process has disregarded its pending issues with Iran in the Caspian Sea… chosen to ignore the possibility that Iran may turn into a regional superpower in a way that might conflict with its own interests in the region. (Fayyad, 2012)

Nevertheless, Russia always had a great fear that supporting the UN and the US in imposing sanctions against Iran, might be a risk to lose an immeasurable treasure of stakes in Iran (Katz, 2006). Therefore, Putin’s goal was convincing Iran to enrich Uranium in Russia and sending it to Tehran, which is a solution accepted by the US (Reuters, 2007). This would be a way to ensure that Tehran has no military nuclear program, and has no need for the Uranium enrichment facilities. On the other hand, since the year 2004, Russia has been manipulating Iran by threatening it to support the United States and the voting of the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) council meeting to refer Iran to the Security Council for sanctions.

For this reason, on February 4th, 2006, Russia joined the IAEA board, but it always assured its refusal of the use of force in any measure taken (Omestad, 2007). However, at the 2006 annual meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Putin and Ahmadinejad reached a settlement and made a leaping improvement in their negotiations. It was evident with the dynamic development of the relation between both as a repercussion of the Shanghai meeting. Russia, at least markedly, set aside its fear of the conservative ruling with Ahmadinejad’s rise to power and the ensuing of radical policies looking back at the 1980s.
This maneuvering policy of Russia cannot be hidden. An astounding event took place in October 2007 when the visit of the Russian President Vladimir Putin to the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, to discuss the enrichment program, coincided with the U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney’s pointing out that the world cannot stand a third world war; especially with Iran’s continuous disregard to threat of severe sanctions and continuous activity of uranium enrichment facility.

In this ‘war of nerves’ played, Lukyanov reflects upon a psychological warfare, whereby both, Iran and the U.S. are involved in a ‘game of brinkmanship’, both reluctant on taking actions against each other. U.S always puts an effort to frustrate the Iranian nuclear program, formulates steps to amputate Iran from the ‘international financial system’, and targets sanctions towards its central and commercial banks, on any company engaged in the nuclear development of Iran, and on ‘petrochemical and oil’ industries. Moreover, U.S. aims to drag Iran backwards hindering it to pursue its capacity to refine fuel and enlarges its investment in this market (Iran’s Nuclear Program, 2012). As a counter reply, Iran warned, “in response to the western countries’ intention, to ban the purchase of Iranian oil, Tehran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, the transit route for a fifth of the world’s oil (Lukyanov, 2012, p.3).”

The Russian policy, maintained from fully siding with the Security Council on one hand and Iran on the other, ensures the continuity of the Russian – Iranian economic cooperation. The deals between both are worth billions of dollars. Worth mentioning that these deals are much more valuable to Russia. Therefore, the more active the Russia – Iranian relations are, and the more diplomatic and mediating Russia is, the more it would hinder the
U.S. administration from imposing sanctions on Tehran until it decides to negotiate (Omestad, 2007).

However, one should keep in mind, that no matter what, “the United States may be the world’s sole remaining superpower, but challenges like Iran and North Korea cannot be met by narrow, cosmetic ‘coalitions of the willing’” (Gvosdev & Simes, 2005).

After receiving the third and fourth nuclear fuel shipments in 2008, Iran showed the whole international community its determination to completing the Bushehr reactor revival, supported by a full Russian commitment to back the Iranian project (Iran Receives, 2008). Even though the efforts of putting to end the Bushehr nuclear reactor has been interrupted by endless postponement, it gave the feeling that Russia was pulling brakes while it was fully bound to the job.

In November 2011, the contention between the U.S. and Iran boiled up, “with new findings by international inspectors, tougher sanctions by the United states and Europe against Iran’s oil exports, threats by Iran to shut the Strait of Hormuz and threats from Israel signaling increasing readiness to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities” (Iran’s nuclear, 2012). Throughout the year 2012, the IAEA issued several reports in February, May, and August describing the progress of the Iranian nuclear program and fuel enrichment. The first respectively revealed that: there is a “tripling of the number of cascades enriching uranium to nearby 20% and testing of fuel elements for the Tehran Research Reactor and still incomplete IR-40 heavy water research reactor” (Quevenco, 2013). An increase in the production rate of low-enriched uranium expanding the stockpile from 3.5% to 19.75% with discovery of 27% at Fordu enrichment facility (Albright, Walrond, Stricker, & Avagyan, 2013). In late August 2012, the report indicated a greater development in the enrichment activities with Iran reaching 2,140
centrifuges, 3/4 the amount required to fulfill a nuclear fuel production site. Warrick (2012) says,

Iran had converted some of the 20%-enriched uranium to an oxide form and fabricated into fuel for use in research reactors, and that once this conversion and fabrication have taken place, the fuel cannot be readily enriched to weapon grade purity. (p.1)

IAEA also conspicuously showed great concern regarding Parchin, where suspicion of explosive experimentation has taken place revealing evidence of nuclear weapons production(Heinrich, 2012). And so again, on September 13th, another resolution was passed by IAEA expressing grave concerns and reprimanding Iran for disregarding the UNSC resolutions.

Russia is eventually playing a double card to secure its national self-interest; Bayyenat (2011) says,

First, to be cooperative to the Western powers at the UNSC in order to have a say in formulating international policies shaping political outcomes around the world and also use its cooperation with the NATO and economic cooperation with the Western counties. Second, Russia at the same time also had to appear supportive for Iran by watering down the tone of the sanctions resolutions in order to preserve its strategic relations to it. (p.1)

Thus, Russia will achieve reviving its position in the Middle Eastern arena. Russia might sometimes seem spaced out on one side to the benefit of the other.

4.2 Why this support?

The Russian support for Iran yields several benefits for the Russian side on various different levels. However, the below gains are not the ultimate reasons that motivate Russia to back the Iranians and oppose the whole international community. The perseverance of Russia’s full backing of Iran is for its use as a tool to pressure the U.S. and face the international world
order. This brings us back to the central objective of Russia which is to return as a major actor regionally and internationally.

**4.2.1 Bordering conflict concern - Chechen Conflict**

The geographical proximity plays a pivotal role in the relationship between Russia and its neighbor Iran, located on the southern border. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, geopolitics became more of a concern to Russia. “Any threat (in this case instability) in the nearby region, from any military, economic, or social kind, might spill over and cause fluctuations and unrest in the life of the economically incapable Russia” (Kreutz, 2002). Hence, what may be considered to jeopardize the nation’s power, security and integrity is a nearby shakiness (Khrestin & Elliott, 2007). This may be a reason why Putin, remarkably, adopted the policy of cooperation with Iran on regional conflicts; specifically, recalled the Chechen experience.

The Chechen conflict was always a source of unrest to Russia, and an intrinsic concern for Moscow that couldn’t afford to lose its major access to the Caspian Sea oil, as will further be discussed. In addition, the ongoing Chechen conflict could not be discussed without noting that it was a major occurrence affecting Putin’s policy and a change of approach in fighting
terrorism with the US president Bush and now Obama. Abandoning Washington on war against terrorism, Putin joined the OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference) using it as a pressure tool against the U.S. and gaining its unwillingness to meddle in personal affairs of Russia and its relations approach to the Chechen problems (Khrestin & Elliot, 2007).

“Putin came to power largely due his skillful manipulation of popular reaction to the alleged Muslim Chechen terrorist attacks in Russia, and the second Chechen war” (Kreutz, 2007, p.67). Although the victims of the Chechen war are Muslims, Iran has always adopted an inactive policy towards the conflict considering it a domestic issue to Russia (Kreutz, 2002). On the other hand, this sensitive stance of Tehran with respect to the conflict in northern Caucasus contains many underlying details that are in Iran’s favor. It may be either that Iran is behaving cautiously to keep good terms with Moscow, its anti-U.S. ally, or just simply because the Shiites of Iran have always opposed and resisted the Sunnis in general, and especially the Chechen Sunnis.

4.2.2 A Sewed Economy- Arms Sales and Oil

It essential to understand the importance of Iran to Russia from the economic perspective emphasizing on two aspects: the arms sales’ vitality and the Caspian Sea oil as a key factor.

Russia’s economy was greatly affected by the financial crisis that hit most countries real hard, “and the stabilization pursuit is now drained” (Closson, 2011, p.1). “The price of oil has recovered for now, but Russia needs an infusion of capital into the system in order to diversify its economy” (Closson, 2011, p.1). Notably, Iran is one of the best customers Russia has in the region, to which it offers great investing deals of armament sales, oil, and gas.
The past few years have reflected both Russia and Iran’s efforts towards expanding their diplomatic and military cooperation and developing a firmer friendship based on common-trade goals and political agendas. Notably, Russia supported Iran with its conventional military by providing training and defensive weapons that aided in granting Iran further protection against air strikes (Borzou & Mostaghim, 2008). As a start, Khrestin and Elliott (2007) say,

The Russian government has secured lucrative contracts with several states that Washington considers pariahs (In this case Iran). In December 2005, the Iranian government signed a billion dollar arms deal that included twenty-nine Tor M1 missile defense systems to protect the Bushehr nuclear facility, (p.23) and provided training for Iranian on the use of the systems (Russia starts s300, 2008). Clearly this shows that Iran has always been an indispensable customer in the Russian–Iranian arms industry. In December 2008, Alexander Foumin, Deputy Director of the Russian Federal Organization for Military and Technical Cooperation, announced that his country looked forward to enhance joint military coactions with Iran. This change would introduce greater stability to the region (Xueguan, 2009). Following in February 2009, Brigadier General Mostafa Mohammad Najjar, the Iranian Defense Minister, stated that Russia and Iran hoped to establish means to expand their military and technical endeavors, thus enriching their defense join efforts (Xueguan, 2009).

In addition, Russia, Iran, and Qatar are ranked respectively as first, second, and third worldwide for having the largest natural gas reserves. Together, the three countries account for over 40 percent of global natural gas reserves (Pizzey, 2008). Following the progress of the “gas troika” in 2008 with Qatar, Moscow, and Tehran has increased this combined force and exploited the Caspian Sea reserves (Pizzey, 2008), along with developing some of Iran’s immense oil and natural gas reserves (Kashfi, 2008). In 2009, Tehran and Moscow agreed to
start with the natural gas trade, which would increase their export productivity and in turn surge profits returns.

On the other hand, it is worth to mention the widely known policy of Russia and the United States, named the Reset Policy, inflicting pressure on the Russian-Iranian relation. This notably resulted in the delivery cancellation of the S-300 surface-to-air missile systems to Iran in February 2010 (Sweeney, 2010). The S-300 is perceived as a substantial enhancement to the warfare capacity of any air defense potency, yet the deal was allegedly signed in 2005, and supply was anticipated to be in 2008 (Blagov, 2009). In this regard, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that “there are fundamental principles linked to the sale that we never, in accordance with our legislation, and according to our international obligations, take any actions that will lead to the destabilization of certain regions” (Sweeney, 2010, p.1). Nevertheless, such incidents in the Russian-Iranian course of actions were short-lived complications that were inept of destroying this bond. This action took place in parallel to the ongoing, as Garfarli (2012) says,

American military exports to its major regional ally- Saudi Arabia- the total worth of the cooperation reached 60 billion dollars- with the complete deal on U.S F-15 fighters’ export to KSA amounted to 30 billion dollars being just a part of the whole picture. A U.S military export to the Saudis in this framework also includes helicopters, missiles, bombs, night vision and radar systems. (p.145)

This could imply that the S-300 might not remain halted after all.

Another important reason for the supportive foreign policy towards Iran is the Caspian Sea Oil dilemma. As noted before, Iran possesses a large amount of black gold oil, and any country longing for more power and influence would seek to have good relations with the latter, which unfortunately included in the “Axis of Evil “categorization of Georges Bush. Russia and Iran have also worked in collaboration at multilateral forums; remarkably, at the
Caspian Sea states summits, the two called for keeping Western influence out of the region (Kashfi, 2008). According to Central Asia and Caucasus Business Weekly (2007),

In 2007, the five Caspian states, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan, agreed in a joint declaration that they under no circumstances will allow the use of their territories by other states for an aggression or other military actions against any of the parties.

On the other hand, the issue of the Caspian Sea oil is a matter of jurisdiction over the sea itself. Iran considered that the Caspian Lake should be shared equally among the five bordering states. Unfortunately for Tehran, Freedman (2002) says,

Putin wanted to improve relations with Azerbaijan so as to expedite oil production, and the profits from it, from the Caspian Sea where Russia had found sizeable oil reserves in its sector of the sea. While Iran has been demanding a 20 percent share of the seabed, Moscow had signed an agreement with Kazakhstan in 1998, splitting the sea into national sectors, and followed this up in January 2001, in a Putin visit to Baku, by signing a similar agreement with Azerbaijan, thus apparently siding with the two major oil producers in the Caspian, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, against Iran. (p.513)

This was a step that angered Iran because it received 11% as her own share instead of the 20% it was initially entitled to (Halliday, 2001).

Russia made important oil unearthing in the Caspian Sea, and its only interest was to make sure not to allocate them with other involved countries. Russians were convinced that having their seabed divided along “national territorial lines” would be more advantageous, and that no opposition in the US would be held because Tehran would not be a related participant (Katz, 2002). Despite this major turndown for Iran, and the unequal division of the sea between the five concerned states; Kazakhstan from the North and the North East, Turkmenistan from the Southern half of the Eastern shore, Iran from the South, Azerbaijan from the West, and the Russian federation form the North Shore, the Russian-Iranian relationship still survived.
It is important to note that the growing of North Korean and Chinese economy produce extreme importance on Russian interests in the Middle Eastern. As we have examined, Russia is a major energy sector player throughout the international arena. It has a great aim to uphold the high pricing, in parallel to thwarting any key energy generator, from threatening its European market. This also projects an important point that Moscow is and will always be a main benefiter from the ongoing friction between Tehran and America (Khorrami, 2011). It is fair to say that this discord, in a way, causes Tehran to remain vulnerable to Russia’s wishes and uncertainties granting it a powerful stand in the international arena. This definitely goes in parallel with the fact that Iran tends to be hindered by the sanctions imposed, limiting it from acquiring a greater legacy in the field of gas. This definitely supports the Russian’s ultimatum in regaining its influence in ‘Central Asia and the middle East’, and endorsing a stronger hold over the gas market sector in Europe.

4.2.3 Iran as a pressure tool against the US and its actions

Whether economic or political, the benefits discussed from the Russian support to Iran allow Russia to regain its influence in the Middle East and internationally. They pave the way for Russia to revive its status as a decision maker that can never be disregarded; especially in the Middle Eastern region, and amidst the strong U.S. presence. It can reassert a powerful position, whereby no decision could be taken without its consent.

We arrive to the main aim of Russian support to Iran. Russian intentions are based on the countering of American influence in the Middle East and internationally. Putin’s intention is so clear; he and his administration have a basic role of restoring the Russian power as the former Soviet Union. The American supremacy is an increasing fright to the Russians who seek to maintain a strong regional power in the Middle East. “The Russian leaders are
constantly genuinely anxious and suspicious about U.S. domination over the Middle East especially that Washington encroached in the post-Soviet space in the South and the Southeast, particularly in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan” (Kreutz, 2002).

Here again, Russia’s foreign policy in Iran plays a major role in shaping the U.S. foreign policy, but this time, there is a different formula. What concerns Russia’s foreign policy is that all emanates from the thrive of the Russian President Vladimir Putin to emerge Russia as a Great Power after many lean decades. This pursuit has extended to reach Europe, whereby the Putin administration seeks to widen its scope of power and hangs on firmly to what influence it has left. Russia’s constant support to the anti-American regime in Belarus, Abkhazia, and others, is similar to its regular repressing of minorities as its consecutive attempts with the Chechen community.

In addition, it is evident that Putin, the Russian President, always sought to show the whole international community that by holding the key of the Iranian nuclear program, he is the only world chief who could coddle with the Iranian, and avoid the Middle East from sliding into a war. For Putin, this fact should be well-known by the Americans, and especially by their allies, the Israelis, with whom he has kept good and healthy relationships. But for Iran, as a Tehran – based analyst, Asghar once said: “Moscow’s position is like a Swiss cheese of contradictions. Moscow’s peculiar attitude, which contains both a comparative tone and “other” signals, can create mistrust in the long run. Moscow is expected to understand that its standpoints should be transparent and realistic” (Katz, 2010, p.186,187). Although this was the underlying view of Iran to Russian Actions, they both remained on good will.

Nowadays, what concerns Russia the most is the amount of concessions it could receive form the United States by using Iran and the Russian - Iranian nuclear program as a strain
means to put pressure on the U.S. and its actions in Europe. For many years, the U.S. have been negotiating the issue of deployment of missile shields and radar tracking systems in both countries: Poland and the Czech Republic. Although the two concerned countries agreed and despite the NATO’s European associates encouraging missile defense system, which would complement the American National Missile Defense system, Russia decisively opposed.

Russia believes that the Iranian missiles are not the main reason for the American deployment of the defense missile shield in Eastern Europe. It is mainly the Russian missile capability itself considered by far the most globally powerful nuclear capability. The implementation of the ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missiles) is; therefore, considered as a major threat for its own peace and security, and in whole Europe’s security.

The use of the manipulation capability of the Iranian nuclear program has always been skillfully used by Putin to pressure the Americans and their politics in the Middle East. It is a key on Putin’s hands to apply this strategy of expanding towards the warm waters and support the Anti-American countries, including Syria as we will later on discuss.

Hence, a more hidden factor would be that Russia is seeking to make use of the non-confrontational U.S. approach and take special considerations on the side of Iran. Therefore, perhaps the American regime will disregard imposing sanctions on Iran, or at least gain some time in lowering its tone, reducing the arms race, and maybe halting the nuclear program with Iran. As the U.S. Secretary of States, Condoleezza Rice, implied on the 1st of June 2007 that the U.S. is not seeking an offensive approach to deal with this issue with the Russian Federation; instead dialogue is favored.

As demonstrated by the thesis, Russia is testing its power of influence with the Islamic Republic through an on-off treatment- nuclear energy, and weaponry agreements. Whether
freezing or launching any step. Russia, by adopting this Iranian pressure strategy, outwardly attempts to induce the U.S. consecutive administrations not to go along its forerunner’s policies and target to position missile defense amenities in Eastern Europe.
Chapter Five

Particularities of the Russian-Syrian Interest

As was the case with Iran, Russia is currently defying the international community in support for the Syrian regime. From economic interests to military and geopolitical ones, many dynamics are undeniably important as factors to explain Moscow’s behavior towards Damascus during the Putin era, and especially throughout the Syrian crisis. However, despite all those benefits, what appears to play an extended decisive role in the Russian foreign policy towards Syria is the particular aim of promoting a strong Russia and restoring the influence in the Middle East and the international world. The Syrian regime represents for Russia the only foothold it has in the Middle East to be able to come back on the international scene as a major influential actor.

To understand how this aim is restored and how this Russian-Syrian partnership is developing, this chapter will target major elements that are influencing the flourishing of this relation allowing the emergence of Russia as a revived great power in the Middle East. This chapter will focus on how Russia revived its decisive diplomacy through the Syrian uprising.

5.1 The on-going Syrian uprising

Since March 2011, a three-year ongoing conflict has been escalating in Syria, claiming over more than 230,000 lives, witnessing bloodsheds and massacres causing destruction to the country. What effectively took place in Syria, governed by President Bashar Al Assad with an iron fist, was the rise of a series of protests among the Sunni faction of the population. The
protests amounted to the level of a quasi-sunni majority uprising. In fact, some international implicit intervention, in the local politics of the country, lead to the inflammation of the uprising. The uprising started to be incited by the American Ambassador in Syria, Mr. Robert Ford; then by the neighboring states like Israel, Turkey, and to a minor degree Jordan; in addition to a full financing and armament efforts led mainly by KSA and Qatar. The Syrian Armed Forces were divided into two main factions: the loyal forces to the regime mainly composed by Alawites and Christians, and the Free Syrian Army mainly composed by rebel officers who stood with the Muslim Brotherhood movement leading the popular movement against the regime.

The first stage of the internal war marked some victories for the rebels, who seized important grounds, supported by the West and the Arab countries favoring the fall of the regime. The second stage of the war could be summarized by the ability of the regime forces. Those last were politically supported by the Russians who kept supplying the regime with various kinds of arms and ammunition. Also, they were militarily supported by many Hezbollah fighters striving to secure the Lebanese part of the Syrian border, contain the rebels, and move to the third stage. In this stage, the regime started regaining lost grounds; especially after succeeding in thwarting the rebels against each other, turning them into radical groups, same as those fought by the international community, and turning the fight into a war against terrorism.

During this internal clash, millions of Syrians fled to the neighboring countries spilling the Syrian internal problem over to the host nations. Syria was subject to many sanctions imposed by the international community against the regime, but the firm Russian position kept the regime alive and stopped the west from intervening militarily against Syria. Two peace
conferences for Syria took place in Geneva, but no results were able to be materialized on ground. Therefore, they failed to foster the national reconciliation leaving place for a complete deadlock, in which Russia has found a golden opportunity to rebalance its strategic position facing the U.S.

5.1.1 Russian Position vs. the International Arena

The international community got divided upon the Syrian crisis; the West and its Arab and regional allies represented by KSA, Qatar, and Turkey who are seeking a regime change, politically supporting the rebels, and waiting for the Assad’s fall. However, this support is mostly financial; in addition to an insignificant armed part that was no more able to resist against the crushing power of the regime. That last was supported by a well-organized mechanism of Russian logistic support, and an Iranian unconditional military one.

For Assad, Syria’s suspension from the Arab league was insignificant, even the sanctions imposed by the UN or the US against the Syrian regime were inefficient and incapable of changing the President’s will or his supportive population. On the contrary, the regime is still defying all the international warnings by using heavy air force strikes against rebel strongholds in the cities and various fronts. On the opposite side, Russia stands firmly in supporting Assad’s regime vetoing two UN resolutions against Syria as will be further discussed, and it also stood against a western military intervention in Syria even in the form if limited air strikes. Therefore, in order to send warning signals to the West, it moved some of its naval destroyers to the Mediterranean, and increased momentarily its military presence in its naval base in Tartous. In addition to the continuous support in arms and ammunition, and to providing the Syrian Armed forces with sophisticated surface to sea missiles, Moscow
threatened to fulfill the S-300 surface to air missile system contract with Syria, which alarmed Israel, Turkey, the U.S. and the whole international community.

With the continuing Syrian crisis, seen by the west as an extension to the Arab Spring, Russia’s main reason to stand in full power with the Assad regime against the international community is its fear of seeing another Libyan or Iraqi scenario in Syria. The Veto taken by Moscow, defied the international community and put its stakes at risk. With this, the Russian opinion could no longer be ignored, and any decision on the Syrian matter forcefully required Russian support to have it legitimized. With the backing of China, Moscow has vetoed the adoption of two UN Security Council resolutions encouraged by western attempts to allow them to intervene, in a way or the other, in the Syrian events. The adoption of these resolutions would have paved the way in evicting the Syrian dictator, as referred to by the West and other nations including Turkey. Russia fears that if the resolution had passed, its aspirations would then be desecrated in a similarly hypocrite cynical way to what has taken place in Libya. In fact, Russia felt cheated in Libya, as Professor Vitaly Naumkin, the head of Oriental Studies Center in Russia, said: “Russia feels that it was cheated by its international partners. The no-fly zone mandate in Libya was transformed into direct military intervention. This should not be repeated in Syria” (Seale, 2012). From this perspective, it is expected that Russia will stubbornly adhere to its principles, remain in a position of control, and never allow the repetition of the same act with Syria.

According to the Russian News Agency Interfax, Gennady Gatilov, the Deputy Foreign Minister said on May 30, 2012 that “Moscow remains categorically opposed to military intervention in Syria” (Hawley, 2012, p.1). This stance was followed by another supportive declaration from the Chinese foreign ministry, opposing the military intervention and
denouncing any forced regime change in Syria (Hawley, 2012). In an attempt to analyze the reasons for resisting the foreign intervention in Syria, Handa (2012), from the British American Security Council asserted that “Russia’s resistance to intervention lies in part in its strategic defense of sovereignty and its claim that long-term solutions there can only be achieved through confines of international law and the principles of the UN Charter” (p.1). This is part of the multipolar policy previously mentioned aiming at guaranteeing that the West does not solely set the world’s priorities (Barry, 2012). It seems that until now, the Russians are still succeeding in prohibiting the west and international community from any military intervention in Syria.

5.1.2 Decisive Russian diplomacy- Syrian chemical weapons

The Russian diplomacy has proved itself to be very influential, not only during the Syrian crisis as a whole, but mainly during the conference held in June 30th, 2012 by an “action group” for Syria, known later as the Geneva I Conference on Syria. This conference was attended by representatives of the USA (Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton), of Russia (Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov), of the UK (Foreign Secretary, Hague), and a representative of China; in addition to the first UN peace envoy to Syria, Mr. Kofi Annan. The last issued a communique within which the Russian influence was apparent in the refusal of the American suggestion consisting of immediately depriving President Assad the power in Syria. Instead, it was agreed that “any political settlement must deliver a transition:

- Offers a perspective for the future that can be shared by all in Syria
- Establishes clear steps according to a firm timetable towards the realization of that perspective
- Can be implemented in a climate of safety for all, stability and calm
- Is reached rapidly without further bloodshed and violence, and is credible
- The key steps in the transition should include:
- Establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers that could include members of the government and opposition, and should be formed on the basis of mutual consent
- Participation of all groups and segments of society in Syria in a meaningful national dialogue process
- Review of the constitutional order and the legal system
- Free and fair multi-party elections for the new institutions and offices that have been established
- Full representation of women in all aspects of the transition (BBC News, 2014)

Since the UN peace envoy to Syria, Mr. Annan was not able to find or impose any mechanism to implement the transition or pave the way to an acceptable political settlement to bring an end to the bloody Syrian war. He was replaced by Lakhdar Brahimi in August 2012, who started to prepare for the second conference in which he planned to bring both conflicting Syrian sides to the table in coordination with Russia and the U.S. foreign ministers. The process was accelerated after the chemical attack killed hundreds of people in Ghouta in August 2013. The Geneva II conference aimed at finding a way to implement the results of Geneva I communique to bring an end to the Syrian war, and to pave the way to a new Syrian Republic. The first round was held in Montreux, on the 22nd of January 2014,

The peak of the Syria crisis was reached in 2013 on August 21st when the use of chemical weapons was witnessed in the Syrian Ghouta region, an outskirt of Damascus. Several investigations were held by the international community with no fixed claims on whom the attackers were. When it comes to the U.S. accusations, they fiercely incriminated the Syrian regime, filed reports, and escalated threats to use the military force if Syrian chemical weapons arsenal would not be destroyed. However, President Barack Obama revealed a hesitancy and lack of decisiveness to order a military strike.

Chemical weapons talks in Geneva, including key negotiators, dragged for three days to reach the agreement avoiding to the use of force and following a United Nations proposal. Although many questions are left unresolved; especially the huge technical feasibility of
disarmament in the midst a civil war, nevertheless the Russian proposal (supported by the UNSC Chapter 7) was favored. This implies that the power of diplomacy proved to be stronger than the use of force. Both sides; however, have attained achievements in one way or another. The major achievement of the West in the Syrian Chemical issue is simply ‘neutralizing’ the Syrian chemical stockpile. This stockpile was creating what used to be called a terror balance with Israel, whose own NBC (Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical) arsenal remained uncontested. While the Russian achievement consisted on thwarting the possibility of a western attack against Syria, and avoiding an American or European military presence on the Syrian soil, this aimed at; therefore, marginalizing once again the Russian role and existence in the Middle East.

Once again, the Russian alliance with Iran and Syria placed Russia as a crucial regional player, able to oppose the international community, who was at a point submissive to the attacking decision of the U.S.

5.2 Why this support?

Similarly to its support for Iran, the Russian defiance of the international community in support for Syria provides Russia with various revenues, whether economic or military. However, the vital Russian aim behind Syrian fierce backing, having Syria as its only foothold in the region, is to regain its presence in the Middle East and internationally; in addition to being able to play a decisive role in several other regional issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. This way Russia would be reviving its powerful Soviet role.

5.2.1 Arms sales, military and economic cooperation

The Soviet foreign policy towards Syria, before the end of the cold war, was mainly based on military support and oil trade. This indebted Syria with $13.4 billion. As a result after
the cold war era, Russia was compelled to virtually freeze cooperation with Damascus, pending a resolution for this issue. This long awaited resolution came to effect during the visit paid by President Hafiz Assad to the Kremlin headed by President Boris Yeltsin and his last Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in July 1999, followed by another visit paid by President Bashar Assad to Moscow in 2005, after which 73% of the Syrian debts were written off.

However, many incidents revealed a floundering relation between Syria and Russia. After Putin’s election as president in 2000, Syria and Lebanon boycotted in February, 2000 the Multilateral Steering Group for the Middle East held in Moscow (Suponina, 2000). Further, Syria (a non-permanent member of the UNSC) voted against the UNSC resolution 1397 calling for the coexistence of the two Israeli and Palestinian states, a resolution not vetoed by Russia; this showed amounted tension on the Syrian-Russian axis. Moreover, despite the Russian-Syrian accord on opposing the American attempts in the UNSC to support a military intervention in Iraq in 2002-03, Russia didn’t show any suggestion or will to protect Syria against the same scenario back then. This was noted although Moscow and the Russian press were quite convinced that Syria might follow Iraq on the American list of the countries to invade in the Middle East (Suponina, 2000).

In addition, Russia, fearing the weapons to go to Hezbollah, revealed a delinquency in approving the Syrian request to purchase the 200 Km-range S-300 and the short range, man-portable “Iglâ” Ground to Air missiles. This, along with the growing ties with Israel and the Russian-Israeli trade and security cooperation, grew concerns on the Syrian side with the absence of any agreement between Moscow and Damascus concerning the debt issue. During this period, Russia had no major opposing role against the U.S. It was mostly incapable of doing so.
A shift in the Syrian-Russian relation started to be noticed. Three reasons behind softening Moscow’s position and reestablishing ties with Syria according to Dunayov (1999) were listed in Izvestia, one of the highest circulating Russian newspapers:

“1- Moscow in particular is capable of persuading Syria to make peace with Israel
2- The fact that Tartus on the Syrian coast was Russia's only naval base in the Mediterranean
3- Damascus was prepared to pay "cold cash" (a figure of $2billion was mentioned) for Moscow to upgrade its old Soviet weapons as well as to sell it new Russian ones including anti-aircraft systems” (p.1).

That cold-cash deal greatly helped in improving the Russian-Syrian ties; in exchange for Russian flexibility on repaying the debts, Syria would ensure a sufficient flow of cash to meet the desperate needs of the Russian arms industry. However, the leadership change in both countries delayed putting the deal into effect until 2005 because of President Hafiz Assad’s death in 2000 and President Yeltsin’s resignation. Assad was succeeded by his son Bashar, and Putin took office as acting president in December 1999, and then held presidency after the March 2000 elections. This power succession was followed by several mutual official visits done by ministers from both countries to improve relations and eliminate some differences that have appeared in the political perception of some key issues.

Since December 2004, Moscow started by writing off 90% of the Iraqi debt to Russia (Udalov, 2004). This move approved by Putin convinced that the post-Saddam Iraq would never repay Saddam’s debts, was followed by a similar move towards Syria by canceling a large percentage of its debts too. Since January 2005, the Russian-Syrian relations has undergone a positive momentum with President Bashar’s visit to Moscow. This visit produced a multipath improvement started with writing off 73% of the $13.4 Billion debt as noted earlier
and followed by the Russian acceptance to sell newer air defense systems to Syria. This fact led to many contracts allowed Russian firms to extract gas and oil and build a gas processing plant and a pipeline in Syria (Katz, 2006). Moreover, Moscow allowed Damascus to repay the remaining amount of the debt in favorable terms as *Vremya novostei* has noted:

> The remaining $3.618 billion will be paid off in installments, with Syria paying $170 million on the debt in 2005. Actually, only $1.5 billion of the remaining sum will be repaid in ‘cold cash’ over the next ten years. The Syrian side will invest the rest in joint projects within Syria (Samokhotkin & Suponina, 2005, p.2).

On the other hand, Moscow agreed to sell Damascus in a $100 million deal, a vehicle-mounted short-range air defense system called the Strelets. Furthermore, by signing exploration, extraction, and development agreements, Tafnet, the Russian oil company, was the first to extract oil in Syria in the recent years, as the Syrian oil minister Ibrahim Haddad declared (Katz, 2006). Stroytrans gas followed Tafnet in concluding a contract with Syria to build a gas pipeline and a gas processing plant worth $360 million. The major deal was worth $2.7 billion, and it was signed to build a Russian petrochemical and oil refining complex in Syria (Katz, 2006).

Furthermore, many other Russian firms showed interests in all aspects of Syrian telecommunication fields. Other companies started running agricultural and irrigation projects, and many other Russian universities started developing elaborate cultural ties with their Syrian peers by receiving large numbers of Syrian young students on a yearly basis.

In an attempt to explain the reasons of the Russian-Syrian rapprochement in 2005, two main political events aided in increasing both sides’ inclination to cooperate. According to Katz (2006), “Russia enjoyed much greater access to Syria than post-Saddam Iraq, so it agreed to write off most of Syria’s debt to benefit Russian business interests, as has already proven to
be the case for the Russian arms and petroleum industries” (p.5) The second was the Syrian feeling of isolation due to the approval of the resolution 1559 in the UNSC, called the Syrian forces to withdraw from the Lebanese territories; in addition to the American threatening statements accusing Syria of supporting the anti-American insurgents in Iraq. Within this frame, as cited in Katz 2006:

Relations between Moscow and Damascus have [recently] grown stronger as Syria’s position in the world arena has become ever more tenuous…. To somehow shield itself from possible attacks from Washington, Damascus launched an urgent search for a strategic partner, and it ultimately settled on Russia (p.6).

This was a favorable situation for Russia; although it abstained from voting in favor of the 1559 UNSC resolution, it did not veto it keeping Syria under a constant western pressure and forcing it to remain in the Russian laps. Had Syria better ties with the west, in addition to peace with Israel, the western world would invest more in Syria jeopardizing the Russian interests and forcing its companies to compete with much stronger western ones and to lose key economic benefits which Putin was not ready to compromise. In fact, the Syrian sense of insecurity without any will or ability from the Russian part to defend Syria against western threats eased Russian access to Syria.

Since 2007, 72% of the arms imports into Syria come from Russia (The Week Staff, 2012). With this, Syria is considered as the largest importer of Russian arms in the Middle East; and since 2006, Syria has been placing orders on fighter jets (MiG 29), Jet trainers (Yak-130), air-defense systems (Pantsir and Buk), anti-ship missiles (P-800 Yakhont) in addition to various kinds of small arms in a $4 billion arms deal (Matthews, 2011). Deals also were made for munitions; since 2006 Syria signed contracts totaling $6 billion of which only munitions for $1 billion have been shipped, according to CAST, the Center of Analysis of Strategies and
Technologies, a Russian nonprofit organization tracking arms sales (Slovieva, 2012). The delivery of arms has been taking place despite the internal conflict in Syria;

Russia has its obligations to Syria under contracts that have been previously signed” the deputy chief, head of the military technical cooperation agency, Vyacheslav Dzirkaln said last July, “We are supplying arms and hardware of a purely defensive nature; it cannot be said we have introduced an embargo on military supplies to Syria. (Slovieva, 2012, p.1)

With writing off the majority of Syrian debt to Russia, the Syrian decision to pay the remaining amount of debt in cash fueled the flow of contracts with the Russian arms industries, comprising the delivery of the Mi-25 Helicopter gunships after being overhauled by the manufacturer, said Paul Holtom, director of the arms Transfers Programs at SIPRI, the Stockholm-based arms and military research center (Slovieva, 2012). In addition, “A major ongoing deal is for 24 MiG-29SMT combat aircraft, although those are more likely to be delivered from 2013” added Pieter Wezeman, a senior researcher at SIPRI focusing on Syria (as cited in Slovieva, 2012). On the other hand, other important arms deals have been halted or even cancelled for political reasons; a contract for four MiG-31E fighter planes was annulled altogether. However, it recently became known that Russia did not actually halt the planned delivery of S-300 mobile antiaircraft missile systems to Syria, which would object the implementation of a ‘potential no-fly zone’ in Syria (Associated Press, 2013). It has threatened the west of resuming the delivery in case the Patriot missile shield will be deployed on the Turkish-Syrian border (Pukhov, 2012).

Today, at this level, Russian military-related firms recruit more than two million workers. This faction of the Russian population represents an electorate power that politicians can never mess with. The Syrian cold cash helps the future modernization plans of the military-industrial complex requiring about $100 million through 2020, despite the Syrian checkered
history of military payments and the only 5% of the total amount of the Russian arms sales to Syria (Pukhov, 2012).

Recently, the Russians lost billions in arms deals because of the change of power in Libya, according to Mr. Vyacheslav N. Davidenko (Cited in Pukhov, 2012), Russia’s weapons company’s spokesman. Similarly, on the Iranian side, the value of the arms deals fell from $2.1 billion to $300 million. For these reasons, Russia found compensation for its losses in the Syrian market during the current crisis, and increased the weapons sales to include a $550 million deal for yak-130 training jets that can be used as light attack airplanes. In addition, as Richard F. Grimmett, the international security specialist at the congressional Research Service in D.C. noted, in his annual report: “from 2007 to 2010, the value of Russian arms deals with Syria more than doubled – to $4.7 billion from $2.1 billion – compared with 2003 to 2006” (Cited in Pukhov, 2012).

5.2.2 Syria a business partner today

The economic rapprochement between Russia and Syria continued in the last couple of years. Russia has invested billions of dollars in the infrastructure, sea ports, and tourism sectors. Very important Russian financial firms and institutions, such as Gazprombank, VTB, and Vneshecon bank, are still working normally in Syria (Peel & Clover, 2012). This revealed an increased defiance of the Western imposed sanctions over the country. Also, the suspension of the Arab government funds and the freeze of the governmental assets have severely affected the financial sector, paralyzed some banks, and deprived Syria from vital export markets. This deprivation has prompted Minister of Finance in Syria to say in May 2012, that Russia “had given us a hand, especially in the financial sphere” (Peel & Clover, 2012, p.2). Similarly, in a statement issued in August 2012, the Russian foreign ministry
declared that the “Unilateral sanctions against Syria, imposed by a number of countries, of which Russia is widely known to be critical, are no reason for folding up joint economic programs and other plans” (Archive, 2013).

In addition, Russia is an important buyer of Syrian agricultural products; especially vegetables and fruits. Besides, Russia assisted in building important irrigation and industrial power facilities all along Syria. Moreover, Syria is greatly dominant in the Russian textile and equipment (Odiogor, 2011). The Russian government is also funding the education of thousands of Syrian officers, intellects, and educated people.

5.2.3 Energy

The size of Syria’s reserves of natural gas has been lately estimated by the International Energy Statistics as 8.5 trillion cubic feet (tcf); a very limited quantity compared to Qatar which holds 890 tcf and Saudi Arabia which holds 283.5 tcf (Solovieva, 2012). In addition, the oil production in the country is declining progressively. However, the newly discovered gas and oil fields in the Israeli, Lebanese, and, of course, the Syrian international waters, attracted the Russian energy companies to sign various long-term natural gas and oil exploration and extraction contracts with Damascus.

Russian companies have already invested almost $20 billion in the energy sectors in Syria, as Oxford Analytica, a New York-based consulting firm estimated (Solovieva, 2012); Russian engineering institutions such as Tafnet and Stroytransgaz are constructing a natural gas processing plant about 130 miles east of Homs; in addition to petrochemical complexes and refineries all along the Syrian territory. Moreover, the deals include the construction works of a gas pipeline linking Egypt to Turkey and highlighting the strategic importance of Syria, as an energy transit hub on a crossroad in the Middle East, where Russia insists on keeping its
foot next to the fast growing Turkey’s economy and the EU, the big gas consumer (Solovieva, 2012).

Before the attainment of these deals, the Syrian sense of isolation from the west created an internal feeling of insecurity. Amidst the current Syrian uprising, this feeling of insecurity offered Russian industries, an important access to the Syrian polity. To counter western sanctions, Russian government continued strengthening commercial ties with Assad’s regime and purchasing Syrian oil, along with China, Iran, and India. With this policy, Russia is showing confidence in the Syrian regime and in its own foreign policy as well, defying of the west, and undermining the Arab League economic sanctions approved on the 27th of November 2012 (Russia’s Syrian Power, 2012).

5.2.4 Fear of Islamic regimes

Many observers view the Arab uprising as a destabilizing factor for the Arab world, and will only lead to empowering the extremist Islamist groups. Prospects of Islamic extremist regimes in the Middle East constitute a great part why Russia is supportive of the Assad regime. This is truly felt in Moscow due to the previous Russian experience in Chechnya and fear of an ignited strife again. More precisely, Russia feels that more than 20 million Muslims living in the Caucasus and in central Asia may be inflamed by the Islamic upheaval taking place in the Arab world, threatening its domestic stability. It only needs powerful secular governments to counter this malign trend (Flanagan, J. S., Kissinger, A. H., Cipoletti, T.J., & Zikibayeva, A., 2012).

Within this context, Ruslan Pukhov, the director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies in Moscow, asserted in the New York Times:
To people in Moscow, Mr. Assad appears not so much as “a bad dictator” but as a secular leader struggling with an uprising of Islamist barbarians. The active support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey’s Islamist government for rebels in Syria only heightens suspicions in Russia about the Islamist nature of the current opposition in Syria and rebels throughout the Middle East. (Pukhov, 2012).

However, Syria itself suffers from a deep sectarian divide that posed the risk of an internal civil unrest; the majority of the Syrian population is Sunni Muslim, It is dominated by a minority of Alawites, an off-shoot of the Ismaeli Shias, who were accused to be closer to Christians than to Shias. This majority is actually backed by the Sunni regional powers, like the Gulf kingdoms and Turkey, and internationally by the west. The supporting Islamic Arab world to the Sunni Syrians considers the situation unfair and should be corrected from a religious perspective, obliging the transfer of power to the Sunnis. The west, on the other hand, is supporting this idea in the name of promoting democracy. Thus, opening the Pandora box of the internal civil war, a continuation of the Arab spring – the Syrian episode – is an attempt to oust the Alawite dictator.

In fact, Islamophobia is also felt by the Syrian Christian community and by the Russian Orthodox community as well; Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolams declined Putin’s offer of millions of dollars in support of the church, but he only asked for the protection of the Syrian Orthodox community (Barry, 2012). Similarly, during his visit to Syria in 2011, Patriarch Kiril I stood in public with President Assad and praised the Syrian government’s protection of the Christians. Lebanese Maronite Patriarch took the same stance and, during his visit to France, right after his election; he warned against the Christian minorities’ destiny in case Assad was toppled (Barry, 2012). Levant Church leaders, alarmed by some ethnic cleansing activities done by the under-sieged rebels in Homs and Aleppo, sided with Assad and described the western efforts to expel Assad as Naïve and dangerous (Barry, 2012).
As a whole, Russian policymakers envision the Middle Eastern developments with a greater agitation than the west. The internal Russian conflict with its Muslim population causes much of the Russian unease. The discussion with the co-chair of the Carnegie Moscow Center’s religion, Society, and Security Program, Alexey Malashenko, reveals major realities in Russia regarding religious concerns. The approximate 21 million Muslims in Russia (which is 10% of the whole population) are frustrated by the failed policies of the Kremlin, which do not take solid measures to enhance their living conditions (Salem & Malashenko, 2013). Clearly, this puts the Russian Federation in a vulnerable position, whereby it would be threatened by the radical Islam in the Middle East and tremendously affects its large Muslim population and its neighboring Caucasus and Central Asia; just as in view of the recent Volgograd bombings.

5.2.5 The Israeli factor

“Now, Russia I believe can play a very important role, particularly in promoting a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict... So I believe that Russia, in cooperation with a number of European states, should take the lead in taking the place of the United States as peace-broker. The Russian government should take initiatives themselves in outlining a resolution of this conflict, and especially in providing the Security Council’s backing for it in a binding resolution.” – Patrick Seale

Since the cold war era, the Russian federation used to play a major political, economic, and military role in the Middle East. Russia aligned itself with the Arabs, supported them in their wars against Israel, provided them with the majority of their military supplies, and offered some political assistance in the international organizations. During and after the Cold War, the United States proxied Israel and made a great regional power out of it. In return, the USSR proxied many Arab nations, mainly Egypt and Syria. Actually, the contemporary Russia did
not change the rules and is still playing a greater role in the Middle East by seeking strategic partners by holding strongly to Syria as the last Arab State confronting Israel other than Lebanon that is not orbiting around it; in addition to its strategic support to Iran without compromising its relationship with Israel. As we have seen, Moscow’s influence in the Middle East is greatly dependent on Syrian ties.

On the Israeli side, it is true when analysts describe the Russian-Israeli relations as schizophrenic (Freedman, 2013); On the one hand, Israel was selling arms and assisted the Georgian army during the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 it also spent decades fighting the Arab-Russian allies and succeeded to convince Russia to not deliver the S-300, the Iskander, and the MiGs (Baruch, 2013). It also managed to appease the Russian anger throughout Georgia’s campaign (Baruch, 2013).

However, in an analysis concerning the Russian-Israeli relations, Robert Freedman, the Professor of political Science in Baltimore Hebrew University listed three Russian goals vis-à-vis Israel affecting these relations:

First, Israel is the homeland of more than a million Russian-speaking citizens of the Former Soviet Union (FSU), whom Israel sees as a source of its global influence. Hence the emphasis on the cultural ties, in which Israelis of Russian origin plays the dominant role. Second, Putin is determined to develop the Russian economy; and high-tech trade with Israel, especially in the area of nanotechnology is a part of his plan. Third, the Arab-Israeli conflict is a major issue in world politics, and Putin would very much like to play a role in its diplomacy, if not in resolving it. For this reason he continued to call for an international peace conference in Moscow and wanted Israel to attend, so as to demonstrate the ability of Russia to be a world mediator (Freedman, 2013).

Russia considers Syria, with its long shared borders with Israel and Iraq, and its vicinity to Iran, in very similar strategic position of Georgia, Ukraine, and Crimea; a part of its own backyard. Thus, it is seriously feared that the Russian bear wakes up again and retaliates if Syria gets attacked by a western army or coalition, similarly to what happened in Georgia. On
the Syrian part and in its own favor, Damascus desperately tried to exploit the Israeli interference against Russia in Georgia; Because Israel supplied the Georgian army with military training and equipment, President Asaad, in a statement to the Russian Kommersant newspaper said: “I think that in Russia and in the world, everyone is now aware of Israel’s role and its military consultants in the Georgia crisis. And if before Russia there were people who thought these [Israeli] forces can be friendly, now I think no one thinks that way” (Freedman, 2008, p.184). By this statement, President Asaad was trying to court the reluctant Russians in an attempt to convince them to sell Syria the S-300 surface-to-air, the Iskander-E Surface-to-Surface, missiles and a few MiG-31 combat aircrafts. But all what Asaad has received from the Russians was the Russian Foreign Minister’s promise to consider the deal that hasn’t been fulfilled yet.

It is also largely believed that Russian Support to Syria and Iran, and the ties joining those countries strengthen Russia’s position and influence in the Middle East; for this reason, Russia kept supplying Iran and Syria with non-strategic arms, adding some more weight to their military capabilities. Similarly, Russia considers Damascus as a complementary and an alternative foothold to Tehran; it was even ready to supply it with nuclear technology. Barrister Harun ur Rachid, a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN asserted that: “As pressure on Assad grows, Tehran feels the pinch because the Syria-Iran axis provides access to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza strip and opposes the US presence in the region” (Haroun ur Rachid, 2012, p.3). In fact, the great cashes of Russian arms and munitions delivered to Hezbollah by Iran through Syria extended the Russian arm to reach the Lebanese-Israeli borders. This strategic importance was proved during Hezbollah’s battle against Israel in June 2006, in which Israel was incapable of scoring a decisive victory over a non-state player,
considered a terrorist organization by the west. On the other hand, due to the tight bonds joined Syria and Hamas before the latter’s leadership abandoned their political headquarters in Damascus due to the Syrian influence and control over many other Palestinian factions, Moscow considered Syria, a main Palestinian control factor and influential in the Middle East – a staunch ally to Iran and the Lebanon’s Hezbollah group (Mabardi, 2010).

Furthermore, in an attempt to show a real expertise in dealing with the Middle East matters, Putin was the only Russian leader to visit the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and since the beginnings of the Middle East peace process, Russia became a member of the Quartet although it did not play a prominent role.

5.3 Promoting a strong Russia

The Russian role in the Syrian crisis for almost three years now gave way for the Russia diplomacy to be very active in the world community. Most importantly, its diplomatic endeavors allowed it to be one of the main sponsors for every peace conference and deals to be set. Russia recently emerged as a major player in the UN, diplomatically imposing its will on the U.S. and other actors. However, unfortunately,

One of the most obvious structural flaws with the Geneva II meetings on peace in Syria … is that the opposition delegation does not truly represent Syria’s armed uprising. It is hard enough to make peace between enemies, but it is harder still if one side of the war is not represented at the peace talks.

Moreover, Russia frustration for the exclusion of Iran from the talks are counted as diplomatic achievement for it emerging more and more as a powerbroker after it had excelled in diplomacy by influencing President Assad to surrender his chemical weapons.

Despite the fact that neither Lavrov nor Kerry appear to have set a definite solution for the Syrian crisis, both have a common target trying to find resolutions. Russia and the U.S. aim
at combating all Al-Qaeda Islamic militants linked factions. This will constitute a common ground for both players to continue pursuing their efforts. However, as France noted,

The diplomatic solution is very much in the Russian hands and it will depend on the quality of cooperation between the U.S, the EU and Russia. Russia has made important moves in the last month and I believe that chemical disarmament is a very important step (Success at Geneva 2 in ‘Russian hands’ – former French PM de Villepin, 2014).

It is clear that the diplomatic effort of Russia have a supreme goal to restore the Soviet-era power. Nevertheless, Russia is like all other international community players. It strives to achieve foreign interests while watching closely its national interests. Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy towards Syria is based on main key strands. Russian Syrian relations date back to the cold war era, and entails a rooted friendship developed strategic ambitions for both actors. In addition to that, Putin seeks to promote the image of a powerful Russia, regaining a prestigious outlook; this is the driver behind the current stance of opposing any use of force pushed for by the United States or UN against the Syrian Regime and rejecting the concept of state sovereignty violation and intervention in domestic affairs of countries.
Chapter Six

Conclusion

This thesis began with a general introduction that has examined the particularities of the Russian foreign policy in the Middle East during the Putin era, particularly towards Iran and Syria, which aims at reviving its great power status. This goal also involves Moscow achieving several other objectives in different areas. Although this study was not quantitative, and did not consider variables to measure Moscow’s success of this instrumental policy; however, several factual details in both case studies revealed the strategic influence Russia is being able to achieve. The neo-realist approach to the subject highlighted the anarchical world order, whereby there is no central authority enforcer.

The start was with a historical overview of the Russian foreign policy shifts since the pre-cold war era to reach the pursued one in the present date, aiming at intensifying its bilateral relations with proxy states that were Soviet-era allies; Iran and Syria. The historical delineation of the Russian policy revealed to be incremental to pursue its interests outside the region and establishing a political leverage to limit U.S. hegemony. It highlighted the main traits in its historical relation towards the Middle East, revealing its intention of using anti-American countries, Iran and Syria, as a bargaining chip to expand its operational space.

After the historical analysis of the Russian foreign policy shifts in three major Russian eras, the thesis moved to highlight the local, regional, and international main factors that Russia is making use of to act now. It has waited to make use of its stronger internal dynamics, along with a weak international system and United States to take action in returning fiercely in
opposition to the international community. Chinese support for Russia was a booster to encourage the last to take a stand in support of its Middle Eastern proxies. Nevertheless, this would not have increased Russian thrive if the Middle East was not facing a changed political order that might pose a threat to Moscow if it does not support allied regimes. This change might not be beneficial for Russia after all.

The next chapters entered into the deep analysis of two case studies; Russian foreign policy towards Iran and Syria. In the third chapter, the Russian-Iranian relationship is tackled, underlining the Russian consideration in their support to Iran. The chapter demonstrated how Iran reveals to be a valuable asset for Moscow; despite its existence as a potential threat, but still the economic, religious, and geographical dimensions require Russia to follow a lenient supportive stand. In parallel, knowing that the economic gains and security concerns are not the main reason behind Russia’s fierce backing of Tehran, Putin is making use of this card to exert pressure on the U.S. (weakened international committee and regain its supreme status).

Similarly, the fourth chapter analyzed the Russian-Syrian foreign policy contending on the close links they enjoy. Another link was the strongly preserved relation whereby arms sales and energy have played a pivotal role in strengthening the cooperation between them and opened new market doors for Moscow. With regard to the geopolitical pillars, the Muslim populations and the influx of radical Islamism constitutes a major concern for the Kremlin. The current revolutionary state in the Arab region is a potential threat to Russia, which required it to meticulously join forces with counter Arab states and also Israel, which necessitated a political advocacy. This is where the Palestinian issue falls into context being an element that improved Russia’s image in the eyes of the Muslim population. Russia’s policy in
the region, whether on the Arab-Israeli conflict or in the Syrian drama reflected an image of being an arbitrator in solving crises without the use of force.

Finally, it is inevitable to wonder why Russia has waited until the current rise of event to act overtly against the international community in support of both actors, Iran and Syria. Today, it is evidently impossible to address the current Syrian crisis without tackling the Iranian nuclear standoff that has become more contentious. Both issue are interrelated; “attacking Iran will require consideration of the reactions of Syria and Hizbullah. Likewise, intervention in Syria will have to take into consideration what Iran will do” (Francona, 2012, p.4).

Through comeback to the Middle East, after the long lasting retreat, Russia sought an instrumental policy, achieving particular objectives that strengthen and revive its position. Political and Economic ambitions have evidently grown. With the above mentioned reenacted bilateral relations of the former Soviet allies, whether Arab or non-Arab, Russia was able to demonstrate its commitment on the regional dimension. In a successful attempt to establish a political leverage in the region, Putin was able to limit American influence in the Middle East, and get hold of bargaining cards to expand its manoeuver power. Arms sales and energy have both played a major role in acquiring a stronger influence and sales promotion of Moscow’s arms. In this context, the region constitutes a vital resource for Russian energy supply, as well as a dynamic nuclear energy market. On the other hand, Russian policy has been attempting to ensure a regularization of its strategy towards the dynamically growing Muslim population; North Caucasus in particular. Moscow is attempting to avert the condition of having the Russian Federation’s Muslims turn into a radical pan-Islamic concern. Also, as noted in the notion of soft power, the regional dedication to the Palestinian issue and the Arab- Israeli peace
process supported the improved Russian image in the eyes of the Arabs in general and the Muslim populace in particular. As an intermediary player seeking to find solutions, the Kremlin’s purpose is to construct an image of a global power. Moscow’s return to the region as a ‘balancer’, with positive relations leaving no enemies played a vital role in its success to advance sustainable influence. It proved that the Middle East features a primary role as a leading instrument to attain its revival objective.

However, despite Moscow’s acting in the Middle East aiming to demonstrate its status as a Great Power has not produced any solid product, Russia currently is complicating the United States’ goals in the region. Reminiscent of the Soviet Union, and pursuing a pragmatic policy that prioritizes stability, Russia is making use of what could be described as a weakened international community and US.

All in all,

Russia’s attachment is to the benefits reaped by having allies, not to the allies themselves… Russia’s capacities for further exploitation of the region in order to attain the supra-regional objectives of its foreign policy will to a great extent depend on the nature of the regimes which replace the current dictatorships. (Kaczmarcki, 2011)

No matter the result, Russia will not intensely despise changes to submissive regimes, as long as its interests within the target countries continue to be unharmed.

Through comeback to the Middle East, after the long lasting retreat, Russia sought an instrumental policy, achieving particular objectives that strengthen and revive its position. Political and Economic ambitions have evidently grown. With the above mentioned reenacted bilateral relations of the former Soviet allies, whether Arab or non-Arab, Russia was able to demonstrate its commitment on the regional dimension. In a successful attempt to establish a political leverage in the region, Putin was able to limit American influence in the Middle East,
and get hold of bargaining cards to expand its manoeuver power. Arms sales and energy have both played a major role in acquiring a stronger influence and sales promotion of Moscow’s arms. In this context, the region constitutes a vital resource for Russian energy supply, as well as a dynamic nuclear energy market. On the other hand, Russian policy has been attempting to ensure a regularization of its strategy towards the dynamically growing Muslim population; particularly in North Caucasus. Moscow is attempting to avert the condition of having the Russian Federation’s Muslims turn into a radical pan-Islamic concern. Also, as noted in the notion of soft power, the regional dedication to the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli peace process supported the improved Russian image in the eyes of the Arabs in general and the Muslim populace in particular. As an intermediary player seeking to find solutions, the Kremlin’s purpose is to construct an image of a global power.

Moscow’s return to the region as a ‘balancer’ with positive relations leaving no enemies played a vital role in its success to advance sustainable influence. It proved that the Middle East features a primary role as a leading instrument to attain its revival objective.
References


