



KADİR HAS UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS DISCIPLINE AREA

**THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY
(1945 – 2010):
RUSSIA’S POWER PLAY IN SYRIA**

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MASTER’S THESIS

ISTANBUL, SEPTEMBER, 2017

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Submitted to the Graduate School of Social Sciences of Kadir Has University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's in the Discipline Area of International Relations under the Program of International Relations

ISTANBUL, SEPTEMBER, 2017

I, HATİCE BİNER;

Hereby declare that this Master's Thesis is my own original work and that due references have been appropriately provided on all supporting literature and resources.

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05/09/2017



ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL

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ABBREVIATIONS LIST

CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CP	Communist Party
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EU	European Union
EurAsEC	Eurasian Economic Community
ISIS	Islamic State
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NPT	New Political Thinking
OPT	Old Political Thinking
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
PNA	Palestine National Authority
UAR	United Arab Republic
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

ABSTRACT

BİNER, HATİCE. *THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY (1945 – 2010): RUSSIA'S POWER PLAY IN SYRIA*, MASTER'S THESIS, Istanbul, 2017

This thesis describes Russia's foreign policy evolution throughout the period of 1945 to 2010, and shows Syria's role in Russia's power seeking policy in the Middle East, showing the historical connections of Soviet-Syrian relations within the Cold War rhetoric. This research describes the relations between Russia and Syria from the end of World War II to 2010, in order to understand and analyze this relationship. The aim was to show the relations in three periods: 'the Cold War period', 'the transition period' and 'the Putin era'. The characteristics of these periods are explained, along with the relations of Russia and Syria regarding the conditions of these periods. This research has ascertained that in these three periods, Syria was a very strategic asset of Russia in its Middle Eastern affairs. It has also found out that in the last period, Russia considered Syria as its only remaining traditional ally of in the Middle East, and Russia in this period gradually upgraded its role in the Middle East thanks to Syria.

Keywords: Russian Foreign Policy, Soviet Union, Russia, Syria, The Middle East, Cold War.

ÖZET

BİNER, HATİCE. *RUS DIŞ POLİTİKASINDAKİ DEĞİŞİMLER (1945 – 2010): RUSYA’NIN GÜÇ POLİTİKASINDA SURİYE’NİN YERİ*, YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZİ, İstanbul, 2017

Bu tez Rusya-Suriye ilişkilerini Soğuk Savaş’ın başlangıcından 2010 yılına kadarki bir zaman diliminde göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu zaman dilimi, ‘Soğuk Savaş dönemi’, ‘Geçiş dönemi’ ve ‘Putin dönemi’ olmak üzere üç bölüme ayrılmıştır. Her bir dönemin karakteristik özellikleri anlatılmış ve Rusya-Suriye ilişkilerinin nasıl gelişmiş olduğu her bir dönem içerisinde ayrıca incelenmiştir. Bu üç dönemde de Suriye, Rusya’nın Orta Doğu politikalarının uygulanması anlamında önemli bir aktör olmuştur. ‘Geçiş dönemi’ haricindeki ‘Soğuk Savaş’ ve ‘Putin’ dönemlerinde Rusya’nın Orta Doğu’daki güç ve üstünlük mücadelesi anlamında Suriye’nin önemli bir yere sahip olduğu söylenebilir. Son olarak da, Putin döneminde Suriye’nin Orta Doğu ilişkilerindeki rolü açıklanmıştır. Suriye’nin, Rusya’nın Orta Doğu’daki tek geleneksel stratejik ortağı olmasından dolayı ilişkilerin Rusya’nın Orta Doğu politikası açısından çok önemli olduğu gösterilmektedir. Son dönemde, Rusya’nın yeniden önemli bir güç ve Orta Doğu’da önemli bir aktör olma hedefi çerçevesinde, Rusya-Suriye ilişkilerinde bir gelişme görüldüğü söylenebilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Rus Dış Politikası, Sovyetler Birliği, Rusya, Suriye, Orta Doğu, Soğuk Savaş.

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet Union's relations with the Middle Eastern countries during the Cold War period was a reflection of the Soviet desire to influence the region. The Soviet-American competition during this era made the Middle East a very strategic place, in other words, the Middle East became the racetrack of the superpowers in this era. The Soviets, in order to be more powerful and influential in the Middle East, aimed to build alliances within the region. This was a tool for the Soviets to counter the US. Syria was a crucial ally for the Soviet Union from the end of World War II. During this period, it is observed how the Syrian-Soviet cooperation and alliance reflected on the Soviets' power-seeking policies in the region.

Gorbachev was a reformist leader in the history of the Soviet Union. He primarily aimed to solve the problems of the USSR, rather than competing with the United States. Thus, he employed economic, social and political reforms and he brought a new concept to Soviet foreign policy called 'New Thinking'. All these have affected the attitude and relationships of the Soviet Union in Middle Eastern affairs. However, apart from Soviet-Syrian relations, this 'new thinking' and its framework affected much of its foreign policy during his legacy. The effects of the 'New Thinking' requires further analysis and a deeper understanding in relations between the USSR and Syria.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia emerged as a successor country and took over the USSR's position in the international system. However, the Soviet Union had lost the war with the US throughout the Cold War era, and the US emerged as the only global superpower. After the Cold War, Russia had lost its power, but she also had to deal with a variety of economic, social and political issues. These put limitations on Russian foreign policy, for it to employ active foreign policy implementations, as it had in the glorious days of the Soviet Union. During the first few years of the Yeltsin era, Russia adopted a pro-Western foreign policy, therefore had very little interest in the Middle East. These economic and social problems also led Russia to move its foreign policy focus away from the Middle East. Yevgeny Primakov's foreign ministry (1996-1999), contributed by fixing relations with the Middle Eastern countries and it emphasized the importance of Middle Eastern affairs for the Russian Federation. The Russian Federation under

Vladimir Putin (1999-2010) was more active in terms of foreign policy than the period of the Yeltsin. Putin believed that the Middle East had always had strategic importance for the success and welfare of the Soviet Union. As a result, he aimed to be active in Middle Eastern affairs. Moreover, Syria had always been a crucial ally of Russia since the end of the Second World War. Putin aimed to strengthen these historical ties with Syria. The common interests of Russia and Syria and the strategic interests of the international powers in the Middle East became important determinants of the improving relationship.

Russian foreign policy had some turning points throughout its history, such as the changes of leadership, and conflicts with other international powers. The Middle East region has been a very crucial determinant of these turning points. International relations increasingly focused on Middle Eastern affairs after 9/11. More importantly, the increasing American influence in the Middle East following the Gulf War of 2003, resulted in a shift in Russian foreign policy. Since then, the Middle East has regained its strategic importance in the Russian foreign policy agenda. The American presence in Iraq and the resulting pressure on the Middle East was perceived as a signal of threat by the Russians. In such an environment, Syria reemerged as a strategic ally and important asset for Russia, in order to keep its influence and interests in the region. Therefore, Syria's importance from the Russian perspective can also be observed in this period.

Russian foreign policy has adopted a more assertive characteristic since the 2000s. One of their most important foreign policy purposes was to keep the 'near abroad' under control. Putin strategically aimed to create a connection with the former Soviet Union countries in economic, strategic and political spheres. Moreover, the security of these countries was perceived as the security of Russia. Therefore, the enlargement policies of NATO and the EU towards Russia's 'near abroad' were considered as a threat to Russian security. Even though not a former Soviet Union country, Syria had been a crucial ally of the USSR during the Cold War. The binding relations with Syria would benefit both parties and would strengthen Russian interests in the Middle East due to the conditions in the region. The more international players interfered in Middle East politics, the more valuable relations with Syria became. Syria was now a great asset and interest for Russian security.

This particular thesis focuses on and analyzes the changing Russian foreign policies towards Syria during the Putin administration, throughout his term of 1999-2010.

This research also shows how the effects of the US-USSR competition affected Soviet-Syrian relations during the Cold War. Secondly, it examines how the Soviets influenced Middle Eastern affairs and dealt with Syrian relations. Moreover, the research outlines the conditions of the USSR and Russia in the transition period and how these conditions affected their foreign policy implementations concerning Syria. Furthermore, an evaluation of Russian-Syrian relations under the Putin legacy is provided.

In the first chapter, the relations between Syria and the Soviet Union from the end of the World War II to the Gorbachev era are explained. The following section describes the various phases of Syria-Soviet relations. A description of the Soviet attitude to the Arab-Israeli conflict regarding Syria's position, including conflicts, disputes and negotiations with regional and global actors is provided. Moreover, I have analyzed what the USSR has gained from Syria in return for its support in all the conflicts of the region. Finally, I have analyzed Syria's contribution to the USSR's increasing influence in the Middle East.

The second chapter shows the general framework of the USSR and Russia (after the dissolution of the USSR) under the rule of Gorbachev (1985-1991) and Yeltsin (1991-1999). Firstly, I have explained the foreign policy characteristics of this period. During this period, the USSR and Russia had to deal with a variety of economic, social and political problems. All of these precluded Russia from competing with the United States and caused a decline in Russia-Middle East relations. In the Gorbachev era, foreign policy shifted from the Cold War rhetoric and adopted a defensive stance. Gorbachev employed political, economic and social reforms, to save the USSR from the problems it had long suffered. He adopted his 'new thinking' framework as a new form of foreign policy. In the Yeltsin era, Russian foreign policy shifted and adopted a pro-Western stance. However, during this period, its foreign policy was influenced by the idea of 'Eurasianism', led by Primakov during his foreign ministry. Russia in the Yeltsin era had to deal with its domestic economic problems and security problems, due to the two Chechen Wars (1994, 1999) waged in this period. Russia also had significant transformations in order to regenerate its economy, and adopted a new political and economic system. Maintaining relations with Syria during these times of turmoil and war reflected the strategic importance of Syria for Russian politics.

The last chapter of this research explains Russian foreign policy under the Putin (2000-2010) administration. This chapter shows the general framework of Russian foreign policy in this period, and developing relations between Russia and Syria. After Putin came to power (2000) in Russia, there was also a leadership change in Syria. Bashar al-Assad, succeeding his father, became the new president of Syria (2000). The two new governments of both countries started to reconstruct their strategic ties. After 2005, a boost and development in relations is observed. This chapter also aims to explain the reasons behind the rebuilding of the strategic relations between Syria and Russia.

Research Question

In the mid-2010s there was growing discussion about Russia's return to the Middle East. The Arab Uprisings became a significant determinant of Russia's growing role in the region. The Arab Spring revived an atmosphere similar to that of the 1960s and 1970s when Russia used the Arab-Israeli conflict as a great opportunity for an active role in the Middle East. During the Cold War, Russia was one of the major political actors in Middle Eastern political affairs. Chronic political lockdowns in the Middle East did not vanish with the end of the Cold War era. Quite to the contrary, the bipolar order of the Cold War era provided a basis for today's problems in this region. Lastly, authoritarianism across the region caused the Arab Spring to erupt, which in turn was used by Russia as another opportunity to regain its influence in the Middle East once again, since the culmination of Arab-Israeli conflicts during the Cold War years.

All of these made me question what the Middle East means to Russia, and specifically why the Assad regime had to be saved despite all the risks. All these questions required very extensive historical research. Moreover, I try to answer the question as to whether there are similarities in the Russian strategy towards the Middle East in general, and Syria particularly, during the Cold War and nowadays. The duration of the devastating and long-lasting civil war in Syria was certainly extended because of Russia's direct military involvement. Thanks to Russia, the Assad regime has survived this long. While there has been plenty of research into Russia-Syria relations after the Arab Uprisings and since the eruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011, I have tried to give the historical background of these relations and put together more detailed research.

Indeed, this research shows Russian-Syrian relations from their early stages and how this developed throughout the Cold War. Then, I have tried to measure the importance of Syria from Russian perspective, during and after the Cold War, when Russia was weak compared to previous decades, but was still important for Syria. Lastly, I have analyzed Russo-Syrian relations during Putin's era and the Arab Spring. I have divided my research into these three periods to facilitate the division of the answers I was looking for. The first question was, why was Syria of such importance to the Soviets/Russians? This question made me eager to find out and analyze how the Kremlin experienced the whole Syria issue. That is why I have researched and analyzed every important case that chronologically occurred in Russia's Middle-East policy. After that, I tried to discover what the factors were that brought together Russians and Syrians in this solid alliance. I also questioned what the reasons and specific characteristics of Syria were that made this country attractive to the Soviets among other Middle Eastern countries. Most importantly, I examined what Russia/ the USSR gained from this relationship. Then, I examined Soviet politics in the Middle East during the transition period. In this period, I found that even despite the many political and economic problems the Soviet Union faced, the Kremlin followed an exceptional foreign policy towards Syria. This has made me ask why Soviet-Syrian relations continued during the Gorbachev era despite the changes in Soviet state-philosophy. Finally, I researched Russian foreign policy under Putin and what was Putin's approach to Russia's Syria policy. I asked what the value of Syria was in his general Middle Eastern strategy.

These are the questions I was looking for an answer to. So, this thesis beyond giving historical information tracks the complete analysis of Russian-Syrian relations. I personally hope that in order to understand the roots and causes of the Russian-Syrian alliance during the Syrian civil war, this research will be of great help to facilitate a better understanding.

Methodology

In this research, both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used in order to show the Russian-Syrian relations. The quantitative method developed this research while evaluating the level of Russian-Syrian relations by demonstrating the quantitative dimension of arms sales from Russia to Syria. It gave me a solid insight into understanding the theme more accurately. One of the foremost international

arms transfers data-bases, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) was used as a source for Russia's arms sales practices in the Middle Eastern countries and doing that I gained a deeper understanding of Russian-Syrian relations by seeing the uniqueness of Syria among the other countries in the region. However, in the data, some information is missing. For instance, there were no data available for certain years, namely 1988, 1989, 1990 and 1991. Also, some data was inaccessible. All these factors have limited my methodological scope.

Moreover, books, academic articles, book chapters, newspaper articles, news, reports and official documents from the Russian state institutions have been used while conducting this research. So, it can be said that this analysis is primarily based on documentary analysis.

Literature Review

Since this study consists of the long chronological framework that goes from the end of the Second World War until the 2010s, there are a large number of studies on Soviet and Russian policy in the Middle East in this period. Efraim Karsh made a great contribution to academic research into the Soviet Union's Middle Eastern policies. His several books which examine different periods of time such as the Stalin, Khrushchev and Gorbachev eras, were used in the thesis. Other scholars like Bobo Lo, Robert Freedman, and Robert Jervis made a great contribution to the research into Soviet and Russian foreign policy in different time periods. Thanks to these works, I found the opportunity to compare the foreign policy strategies of the Soviet Union and Russia from different scholars' perspectives. For the Soviets, the Arab-Israeli conflict was the focal point of Middle-Eastern policy; therefore, I examined the works of Mitchell G. Bard and Michael Scott-Baumann regarding the subject. There were also a large number of books and articles which give an insight of Russian foreign policy after the Cold War. Robert Freedman's, Andrej Kreutz's and Angela Stent's articles contributed to the academic debate on Russian Middle-East policy under Putin. I also used many open course notes from different organizations such as NATO. To keep a writer's neutrality, I also read books and articles by Russian scholars, such as Anna Borshchevskaya, Dimitri Trenin and Alexey Pushkov. Additionally, articles and policy notes from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace were also used in the research. Finally, I used newspapers such as *Pravda*, *Izvestia*, *the BBC*, *CNN* and the official website of the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. These sources served me as support and provided me with very useful information about the most recent situations.



CHAPTER 1

1 COLD WAR PERIOD RUSSIA-SYRIA RELATIONS: (1945-1985)

1.1 THE USSR AND THE MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS

After the Second World War, the United States (US) and Soviet Union (USSR) emerged as the bipolar great powers of the international system. Following that, the world was divided into two groups: the US-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Bloc and the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact Bloc. Power competition emerged between these two groups after World War II. In this period, between the years of 1945-1989, named the Cold War era, the US and the USSR developed their relationship based on political and military tensions stemming from their rivalry.

The US and the USSR competed with each other for influence and both wanted to be superior by expanding their influence over the world which was observed in power struggles in the political and military spheres. This competition never turned into direct armed conflict, but appeared as proxy wars in the different parts of the world. Although they came so close to doing so, the superpowers did not directly fight each other. The allies rather fought on their behalf with the supply of arms, the loaning of funds and provision of training to allies' wars against the proxies on the other side. In a deeper look into the roots of the rivalry between the US and USSR, there were political, economic and ideological factors.

As a result of this insecure environment due to the US-USSR rivalry, the US appointed American diplomat George Kennan to carry out a briefing about the Soviet Union (Mayers 1986). Kennan (1947) posits in the notes which are known as the Long Telegram, 1946, that the Soviet Union's ideology was based on security and power. Kennan (1947) suggested that US policy should be based on controlling the Soviet Union for the sake of the security of the US. From the establishment of the USSR, in 1917, the main principle of Moscow was to fight with enemies and threats, and ultimately, to be the most powerful actor in the world (Kennan 1947). Kennan (1947) affirmed the USSR's hostile attitude towards the US by referring to the words of Stalin in 1924, "as long as there is a capitalist encirclement there will

be a danger of intervention with all the consequences that flow from that danger”. Kennan (1947) also indicated that the Soviet Union became much more eager to expand the Soviet sphere of influence as well as that of Communism by the end of the Second World War.

1.2 SOVIET POLICIES TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE COLD WAR

During the Cold War, The Middle East became one of the competition regions of the US and the Soviet Union. The Middle East is seen as a very significant region by the US and the USSR regarding the ultimate purposes they pursue to seek more influence and alliance due to several factors. First, this region has vast energy resources. Second, it has a great strategic importance considering the region’s land, air and water routes and communications. Moreover, the Middle Eastern states were suffering from bad governance and corruption, and this was perceived as another convenient factor for the region in order to build links easier due to the weakness of these states by both superpowers. All of these made the Middle East an attractive region to connect with in the eyes of the superpowers, in order to become more powerful than their rival.

Walt (1987, p. 3) briefly explained the main points of the competition in the Middle East saying that “The Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union has been a competition for allies”. Building an alliance with any Middle Eastern country was a reason for tension between them. On the other hand, there were newly independent states in the Middle East and most of them had been suffering coups, conflicts and terror since the First World War (Halliday 2005, p. 82-83). Thus, they tended to have alliances to protect themselves from threats. As Mearsheimer (2001, p. 56) points out, alliances have been built due to the survival instinct. Each state has to protect its own survival in the system. States are vulnerable and alone and this stimulates states to have alliances in order to protect themselves from potential threats (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 56). Similarly, according to Walt (1987, p. 3), states mostly build alliances to protect themselves from threatening powers. This gave opportunities to both superpowers to wield influence in the Middle East, and due to the vulnerable conditions in the region, the Middle East became a very important spot for superpower competition.

Soviet Foreign Policy towards the Middle East after World War II can also be explained within the concept of self-defense. In addition to the importance of the region's geopolitics, self-defense regarding the USSR's competition with the US well explains the desire of Soviet interests in the Middle East, according to the theory which argues that the Soviet Union had an expansionist policy because of the motive of national defense (Walt 1987, p. 3). For example, the creation of buffer zones provided the Soviets with a more secure feeling in the international area. John Fischer (1946) assumes that what was behind the expansionist and aggressive attitude of the Soviets was their feeling of insecurity.

Actually, Soviet foreign policy towards the Middle East differed during the Cold War according to several factors such as leadership change and domestic factors. For example, under Stalin, the leader of the USSR during 1922-1953, the Middle East policies could not be successfully employed during the 1945-1953 period due to Stalin's hesitation and caution about the region (Dragnich, 1974).

After Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev (1953-1964) became the president of the USSR. Khrushchev pursued a much more active foreign policy in the Middle East compared to Stalin's policies. He thought that the Middle East could provide a good opportunity to counter the US. As Rubinstein posits, "Moscow's policy in the Middle East came of age under Khrushchev. The approach he developed and the forms of involvement he pioneered have remained integral to Soviet foreign policy from Brezhnev to Gorbachev." (Rubinstein 1990, p. 214; Engel and Martin 2015, p. 114). Khrushchev's aim was that the Third World should adopt Socialism to become closer to these countries. This also made the USSR more powerful in the US-USSR competition. While Khrushchev saw Socialism as a tool to influence the Middle East, this was not a good tool, as several Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan saw Socialism and Communism as a threat to their security (Golan 1990, p. 9-10). Then Khrushchev tried to connect with countries like Syria and Egypt (Golan 1990, p. 9) which seemed friendly to the USSR.

1.3 RUSSIAN OUTLOOK ON THE MAJOR CRISIS OF THE COLD WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East during the Cold War era was a place of conflicts -especially Arab-Israeli conflict. This can be perceived as a result of the Cold War; however, as Halliday asserts, "most of what occurred in the Middle East during this period could

have taken place without the Cold War at all: the Arab–Israeli dispute, the rise of Arab nationalism, the emergence of the oil-producing states; none of these was centrally reliant on the Cold War for its emergence and development” (Ashton 2007, p. 2).

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War is the starting point of the tensions, crisis and proxy wars in the Middle East region. The Arab - Israeli War started after Israel attacked Palestine territory in 1948. Palestine’s neighboring countries, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon responded to this with a collective attack (Evera 2009). In the end, the Arab armies had a severe defeat. Israel conquered a large portion of Palestinian territories by the end of the 1948 War (Evera 2009).

Israel declared its independence in 1948 and after that the United States, the Soviet Union and other states recognized Israel’s presence (Bard 2012, p. 33; Brown 1948). Some argued that the USSR’s recognition of Israel was a result of Stalin’s desire (Nizameddin 1998, p. 18). This came from the idea that Stalin thought that Israel would become a Socialist state (Nizameddin 1998, p. 18). Efraim Karsh (1985) argues this within the concept of Russian strategy, due to the aim of creating a buffer zone after the Second World War against the US. The Soviets aimed to have friendly countries in the Middle East to be stronger in their competition with the US. Although the USSR supported the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, radical Arab nations became her closest allies in the Middle East later, particularly Egypt and Syria (Kreutz 2007, p. 13-14).

Building alliances has always been a very important issue of the Soviets in terms of security. According to Karsh (1985): “Russia has attributed much importance to the existence of friendly regimes or at least non-hostile regimes in the countries immediately adjoining its borders” and “Soviet interest in the domestic affairs of its neighbors has not been solely motivated by strategic calculations but by ideological considerations as well.” At the same time, as Karsh points out (1985), to the USSR, ideological factors were not only a reason for the conflict with the US but also a tool in their competition to make new friends who were close to or at least non-hostile to the USSR, in particular, from the USSR’s neighboring countries such as the Middle Eastern states. Karsh (1985) also highlights the attitudes of both superpowers towards their relations with countries with regimes hostile to themselves, saying that “in the ideologically polarized international system that emerged from the ruins of the Second World War both superpowers have been less inclined to tolerate

ideologically hostile countries, however small, at their frontiers. American policy towards the communist regimes of Central America as well as the Soviet interventions both testify to this.”

1.3.1 Czech Arms Deal

The Soviets firstly started to build relations with the Egyptians among the Arab nations, by making an arms deal in September 1955. Actually, Egypt was closer to the US, and had already been funded by the US up to that time. However, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser decided to make an arms deal with the Soviets because of the increasing threat of Israel. At the time, Israel intensified the pressure on the Arab nations, and the Arab nations had an increasing hatred of Israel. In February 1955, Israel attacked the Gaza Strip and 34 Egyptian officers were killed. Nasser felt that these attacks would continue as a threat to the national security of Egypt and in such a case the Egyptian army needed to increase its supply of arms. Finally, the “Czech arms deal” was signed between Nasser and the USSR in September 1955. This deal was a starting point for further arms deals between the other Arab nations and the Eastern bloc. After the negotiations on the arms deal, Nasser helped Jordan with a mediator role to establish relations between the USSR and Jordan (Laron 2007, p. 39). In the same year, 1955, the first arms deal was also signed between the USSR and Syria. As a result of this deal, Syria had its first arms shipment (MIG-15) with technical and training support (Mangold 1977).

1.3.2 The Suez Crisis

In October 1956, Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser took control of the Suez Canal moving towards his great wish - to nationalize the Suez Canal. The Suez Canal, at the time, was under the control of the Western states. Then Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula which was Egyptian territory, with the help of British and French forces (Mangold 1977). Israel aimed to remove Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser from power and put the Suez Canal under Western influence again. When the Suez Crisis emerged, the cooperation between Moscow and the Arab nations deepened. The Soviet Union supported Egypt after Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula. The Soviets were aware of the aim of Nasser which was nationalizing the Suez Canal which was under Western influence at the time. According to the

Kremlin, it was very important to get rid of American influence in the Middle East, in which aspect Nasser and Soviets took the same line (Baumann 2009, p. 66). In addition, to fund Nasser would bring Moscow the opportunity to have access to warm-water ports in the Arab region, so it would be a chance to spread Soviet naval influence, in order to become a great power in this region against the US (Govrin 1998; Dragnich 1974).

In 1957, the Eisenhower Doctrine was declared, which aimed to preserve the Eastern Mediterranean from the Soviet threat and to decrease Soviet influence in this region (Kreutz 2007, p. 13-14). After that, Khrushchev accused the US of planning an attack against Syria, and he stated that his country would always back Syria (Kreutz 2007, p. 14).

In 1958, Syria and Egypt joined together in a union named the United Arab Republic (UAR), as a result of the ideas of Nasser's Pan-Arabism. Nasser aimed to unify the Arab nations within the region. This would also help the Palestinian nation which, according to Nasser, was under pressure from Israel and ultimately get rid of American influence in the Middle East (Baumann 2009, p. 70). Soviet reaction to this newly founded unity was very friendly. However, when the UAR ended in 1961 with Syria's decision to leave, the USSR immediately recognized the reestablishment of the new Syrian state (Kreutz 2007, p. 14).

In 1963, the right-wing *Ba'ath* regime seized power in Syria (Kreutz 2007, p. 14). The Soviets also built friendly ties with the new government although they did not like the *Baathists* (Smolansky as cited in Kreutz 2007, p. 14). In 1966, another *coup* occurred in Syria, this time by the left-wing *Ba'ath* regime; these more radical *Baathists* gained power and this was very favorable for Moscow because these radical *Baathists* adopted Socialism and declared that they were against the Western powers and Israel (Kreutz 2007, p. 14). This really deepened USSR-Syria ties. After this, Moscow gave Damascus new credits in 1966 (Kreutz 2007, p. 14). In 1967, the Soviet Communist Party and the Syrian *Ba'ath* Party established relations and cooperation (Kreutz 2007, p. 15). While there was political evolution in Syria, Leonid Brezhnev became the President of the USSR in 1964 (until 1982).

In 1966, Syria needed financial support for its infrastructure projects such as roads, electricity and to build the Euphrates Dam (Galvani 1974). The USSR took this as a chance to be more influential in Syria. Then, Moscow provided Syria with a \$132 million loan for the Euphrates Dam and the other infrastructure projects

(Lenczowski 1971 as cited in Karsh 1991, p. 52). Moreover, the USSR provided a loan worth \$200 for military expenses to Syria (Mangold 1977). Furthermore, Soviet economic aid to Syria reached \$234 million until the 1967 June War (Mangold 1977).

1.3.3 The June War

In June of 1967, Israel preemptively attacked the air bases of Egypt and aimed to destroy all of Egypt's air force capacity. Israel took the control of the whole Sinai Peninsula in a very short time. Nasser blockaded the Suez Canal to restrain Israeli forces. However, Israel broke the blockade and found an opportunity to occupy more Arab territory. In addition, before the June War, Egypt and Jordan had agreed on arms cooperation due to Jordan's plan to attack to Jerusalem and the West Bank. Israel repulsed Jordanian forces and occupied some parts of Jordanian territory. Then, Israel reached the borders of Syria, thus Syria went to war. The 1967 War increased Damascus's dependence on Moscow, as they needed economic and military assistance more than before (Mangold 1977).

The 1967 War concluded with the defeat of the Arabs and Israel expanding its territory with the Sinai taken from Egypt and the Golan Heights from Syria. The Israeli forces were much better than the Arabs in terms of quality (Goldschmidt and Davidson 2010, p. 336) and also the Soviets had mostly sold defensive weapons to Egypt and Syria to attempt to keep them from using force to take revenge against Israel. Moscow tried to persuade these Arab allies to stop their attacks against the Israelis before the 1967 War. Despite this, Moscow continued to provide the Egyptians and Syrians with weapons (Spechler 1986). The USSR provided Egypt and Syria 'with about \$1 billion in economic and \$1.7 billion in military assistance' during the 1967 War (Kreutz 2007, p. 15). Egypt and Syria made it clear to Moscow that they needed more arms and more support to become successful against Israel. However, Moscow refused to send more weapons and funds to the Syrian forces due to economic reasons (Morozov and Ro'i 2008, p. 2-33).

After the June War, there was a relatively quiet period in the relations between Israel and the Arab nations. It should also be taken into account that the US and the USSR had a *détente* period in 1971. On the other hand, the Soviets were not satisfied with the defeat of the Arabs in the 1967 War. Nevertheless, Moscow helped Egyptian and

Syrian allies to repair the military equipment which had been damaged in the 1967 War and continued to support them with military assistance (Spechler 1986).

In 1970, Hafez al-Assad became the president of Syria (McLaurin et al. 1982, p. 242-243). Hafez al-Assad's opinion of Israel underlined the attitude of Syria towards the Israeli problem. He said that "the decisive factor in the conflict will be the armed battle itself... The battle is the basic and most likely course to be taken for the liberation of our land." According to Kreutz (2007), Syria was the closest ally of the Soviet Union among the non-communist countries. Assad visited Moscow in 1971 to show the good relations between these two countries, and they signed a \$700 million arms deal. In 1970, Egyptian president Nasser died and Anwar Sadat became the new president. Moscow and Egypt tightened their relations with a fifteen-year alliance treaty, in 1971 (Baumann 2009). However, there were still disagreement between Sadat and Moscow about the military issue. Moscow did not provide Egypt with offensive weapons for use against Israel (Goldschmidt and Davidson 2010, p. 341). Moreover, Moscow and Washington were in the midst of a period of *détente* in 1971. Sadat feared that if there was a threat from Israel, the Soviets would not help him due to the *détente* period. After that, Sadat ended the Soviet naval presence and deported the Soviet troops from Egypt (Freedman 1990, p. 125). After a while, Soviet-Egyptian relations turned negative and Sadat sent the Soviet advisers and technicians out of Egypt (Goldschmidt and Davidson 2010, p. 341). The Soviets were aware that they were losing a very strategic ally in the region, Egypt. This also cost the loss of the Soviet naval presence in Egypt. This change in Egyptian-Soviet relations made Syria strategically more important for the Soviets in the Arab East (Goldschmidt and Davidson 2010, p. 341).

1.3.4 The 1973 War

In the 1973 War, the Soviets were again a help for their allies – Egypt and Syria - by providing them with arms and a spy satellite over the Middle East region to control their moves (Goldschmidt and Davidson 2010; Spechler 1986). Then Syria sent tanks and air missiles to help Egypt to take back the Golan Heights. However, the result was not the way that Arabs foresaw, as Washington sent a great deal of weaponry to Israel, and the war ended up with the defeat of Egypt and Syria. The October War concluded with much worse results than the June War for the Arabs.

At the end of the war, Israel had a victory with huge amounts of territorial gain. Washington persuaded Israel to withdraw from the lands she had captured to appease the Arabs and bring Middle East peace. This move helped Washington to rebuild its sphere of influence among the Arabs which it had lost in the 1950s (Baumann 2009, p. 57).

According to Dina Rome Spechler (1986), Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Indiana University, the USSR supported peace negotiations on the Arab-Israeli confrontation instead of the war option and Moscow was very cautious in supporting Egypt and Syria with offensive weapons until the 1973 War. The *détente* period between the US and the USSR made the Soviets more cautious on supplying offensive weapons to the Arabs. The Kremlin placed a number of restrictions on Egypt and Syria, such as not giving them offensive weapons and tried to convince them not to go to war before the June War. However, after their defeat in the Six-Day War, the Kremlin was disappointed that with the weapons they had provided, the Arabs were not capable of achieving success in their attack on Israel with the aim of getting back the territory occupied by the latter (Spechler 1986).

After the June War defeat, Moscow started to support Egypt and Syria in relation to a possible war with Israel, and supplied the offensive weapons they had wanted before. Soviet hesitation about giving these weapons to its Arab allies was a measure to prevent Israel from possible damage, but this was suspended following its allies' defeats (Spechler 1986). Moscow wanted to be perceived as a major power in the Middle East. During the 1973 War, Moscow sent offensive arms including SCUD (tactical ballistic missiles), MIG-3 (fighter aircraft) and SAM-6 (anti-aircraft missiles) to Syria (Golan 1990), to put them in a more advantageous position against Israel. After the 1973 War, Egypt was no longer close to the USSR, and instead it started to strengthen its ties with the US. Correspondingly, Moscow was aware of this, and Syria became the USSR's best ally in the Middle East (Rubinstein 1990).

After the end of the 1973 War, American influence rose in the Middle East among the USSR's Arab allies, and this made a large contribution to decreasing Soviet influence in the region. Even though Soviet influence in the Middle East was damaged, Moscow succeeded in increasing their naval presence in the Mediterranean (Dawisha 1980). In May 1971, Syria agreed to give the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron access to offshore facilities at the port of Tartus (Harmer

2012). This happened during the political struggle in Syria in 1970. There was a political struggle in Syria and Hafez al-Assad was involved in it. They helped him without hesitation (McLaurin et al. 1982, p. 265). The Soviets at every turn identified their need of a military base in the Mediterranean to protect Syria from external threats, particularly from Israel (McLaurin et al. 1982, p. 265). The civil war was an opportunity for the Soviets because in return for their help, Moscow achieved a naval presence in the Mediterranean. In addition, until 1971, Moscow had been giving support with advice and training in Tartus during the 1950s and 1960s (McLaurin et al. 1982, p. 265).

1.3.5 Camp David Agreement

In 1978, Israel and Egypt signed the Camp David Agreement, with the efforts of the US (Nizameddin, 1996). According to this agreement, Israel took its forces back from the Sinai and Egypt would take the whole Sinai Peninsula back in three years (Baumann 2009, p. 58). The US was the mediator of the agreement and requirements of this agreement satisfied the protagonists of the conflict, in particular the Arabs. As a result, the US gained an appreciation from the Middle Eastern states, in particular from Egypt. After the agreement, bilateral relations between the US and Egypt strengthened (Eilts 1988, p. 142). The relations between the US and Egypt started to improve after the 1973 War. In 1974, Egypt started to receive military assistance from the US. These things happened after disagreement between the Soviets and Egyptians about military assistance, and this led to Sadat building closer relations with the US.

The Camp David Agreement concluded that Syria had become the strategically more important ally to Moscow (Kreutz 2009, 15). In the late 1970s, Moscow supplied military assistance to Syria worth about \$3.67 billion; also in this period Soviet economic and technical assistance to Syria dramatically increased (Kreutz 2009, 15-16). After a year, Syria and the USSR signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1980, while most Islamic states reacted against the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan (Kreutz 2009, 16).

1.3.6 The Gulf War

The Soviet intervened in Afghanistan in December 1979 (Reuveny and Prakash 1999). Moscow had difficulties during this war. Moreover, the UN passed a resolution on Soviet action in Afghanistan. Syria abstained on this resolution and this resulted in disappointment in the USSR towards Syria. After a year, in 1980, the Iran-Iraq War started. Syria supported Iran, while Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan supported Iraq. Moscow took no side in this war. However, after the war, Assad suffered from a variety of problems. First, Syria was isolated in the Arab world (Dawisha 1980).

Syria's isolation led to Assad signing a "Friendship and Cooperation Treaty" with the USSR in October 1980 (Bennett 1985). This treaty for Assad was an obligation to save itself from the threats. However, the Soviets gained lots of benefits from the treaty. As a result of the treaty, "the Soviets have been granted access to the port of Tartous a maintenance facility for Soviet submarines operating in the Mediterranean, and, periodically, to Tiyas airfield, where antisubmarine aircraft are occasionally deployed" (Bennett 1985). Brezhnev stresses the importance of the treaty, in his words: "The task of the Soviet-Syrian treaty is to help improve the situation in the Near East and establish there a real and just peace. This treaty has no other objectives and it is not directed against third countries. This is a treaty in the name of peace, not in the name of war." (Karsh 1991, p. 11) Moreover, during the period from 1973 to 1982, Syria became the largest importer of Soviet arms in the Middle East (Bennett 1985).

1.4 DEEPENING OF SOVIET-SYRIAN RELATIONS

The relations between the USSR and Syria, according to Efraim Karsh (1991), were based on 'the patron-client relationship'. According to Karsh (1991), international politics explains the relations between great powers and small states based on the principle of reciprocity. As Mearsheimer (2001) points out, alliances are built due to the desire for survival. Each state should protect its own survival in the system. States are vulnerable and alone and this makes states protect themselves from potential threats. Weak states are not able to protect themselves from more powerful states (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 56). According to Walt (1987), states mostly build alliances to protect themselves from threatening powers.

The commonalities of these two countries helped them to build their alliance to a very high level (Caro 2016; Galvani 1974). After Hafez al-Assad came to power in Syria, he was strongly backed and protected by Moscow from internal and external threats (Allison 2013, p. 801; Katz 2012). Assad personally and the *Baath* Party conceptually affected positively on Syria and Soviet relations and those emphasized Syria's being the best ally of the USSR among the other Middle Eastern allies (Allison 2013, p. 801).

Moreover, the Soviets derived a lot of benefits from their close relations with Damascus. First of all, the Soviets gained the support of Syria when necessary regarding the competition with the US in the Middle East. Thanks to Syria, the Soviets were able to access the Mediterranean via Syrian bases. Additionally, Moscow needed to expand its presence to increase its influence in the region, in exchange for supplying Syria with necessary aid (Karsh 1991, p. 11).

CHAPTER 2

2 TRANSITION PERIOD (1985-1991)

In this chapter, Russian foreign policy is examined in two parts. In the first part, the period 1985-1991 is analyzed, when the Soviet Union was under Mikhail Gorbachev. Due to the characteristics of those years, I describe not only Soviet-Syria relations but also the general framework of Soviet foreign policy. In the second part, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, I have researched the changes in the successor country, the Russian Federation, and the effects of these changes on the general foreign policy of Russia. Finally, this research shows what practices were applied accordingly due to the changed situation of Russia on its Middle East policies, and last but not the least what the Russian approach was towards Syria in this period.

2.1 NEW RUSSIA: CHANGED FOREIGN POLICY (1985-1991)

Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed as the general secretary of the Communist Party in 1985 (Hough 1985). He was different from other Communist Party members. First, he was academically more qualified than other Communist Party (CP) members, with a law degree from Moscow University (Stein 1994). When Gorbachev was 21 years old, he became a CP member and since then he had always been very active in politics. Moreover, Gorbachev was also very open to hearing all opinions. Furthermore, he was fully aware of what obstacles his country faced and ready to deal with all these challenges (Hough 1985). All of these made him different from other members of the Party. Furthermore, Gorbachev had long been working on the economic affairs of the Central Committee before he became the general secretary (Hough 1985).

2.1.1 Economic Reforms

Gorbachev, as a first step, identified and listed what the economic, social and political problems of the Soviet Union were one by one. According to Gorbachev, due to the economic problems the Soviet Union suffered heavily from, economic

reforms should be imposed on the Soviet economy. The reforms he intended to make on the economy can be described in his own words; “a deep reconstruction of the whole economic mechanism” and “a decisive revolution in the economy” (Hough 1985).

David Holloway (1989), in order to describe the USSR’s overwhelming problems in social, economic and political issues during this period, posits that “the foreign policy crisis that Gorbachev faced in March 1985 was only part of a broader economic and social crisis affecting the country”. Moreover, the outrageous situation of Soviet military stock and economic decline brought the USSR to a devastating position, while Soviet society suffered social problems such as alcoholism (Holloway 1989). However, according to Jerry F. Hough (1985), if the Soviet Union was still economically powerful in this period (1985-1991), it would continue to be a favorable country, especially in the Middle East. The Soviet Union could be in a more advantageous position in the Middle East due to its proximity to the region and the cultural connections which they had built up throughout Soviet history.

2.1.2 Social and Political Reforms

The Soviet political system was demolished as well as the Soviet economy. Gorbachev was planning to fix almost all the issues in the Soviet Union. In other words, he aimed to build more efficient and more open systems in the USSR (Hough 1985; Goldman 1990). There were a lot of problems which needed to be overcome, and he came up with solutions. In Gorbachev’s own words, “We began looking for an answer, for a new way to live. A concept came into being for the country and the world. Speaking of internal affairs, we called it ‘perestroika’, and we put forward a simple formula: more democracy, more ‘glasnost’, more humanity. Everything must be developed so that the individual in this society feels like a human being. That is a simple formula. We used exactly the sort of language that people would understand” (Kaiser 1991).

Ideology was another issue in the Soviet Union which had to be coped with. Ideology was a part of the “old political thinking” in the Soviet Union (Watson as cited in Miller 1991, p. 2). Hugh Seton-Watson (as cited in Miller 1991, p. 3) simply explains the “old political thinking” in the words: “the most widespread is the controversy between those who see ‘ideology’ as the main force behind Soviet

policy, and those who give this place to 'security'. It is our case that the two are inseparable, and there is no need to repeat the argument. Arising from this misleading 'either-or-ism' is the dispute, perhaps even more widespread, as to whether Soviet policy is 'expansionist' or 'defensive'. It is both. Obsession with protection of frontiers and of strategic position leads to expansion, and each successful expansion creates new positions to defend" (Watson as cited in Miller 1991). Robert F. Miller (1991) assumes that "What Gorbachev professes to be attempting to achieve under the rubric of the NPT [New Political Thinking] is to discard the dogmatic, doctrinal incrustations which had accumulated around the ideology (at least) since the beginning of the Stalin era and to restore its utility as a tool and method of analysis". This explanation of Gorbachev and his reforms indicates a deep change and recovery in the Soviet political system.

2.1.3 The New Security Understanding and 'New Thinking'

Gorbachev put forward a "New Thinking" as a new Soviet foreign policy approach. "New Thinking" is a general framework which aims to combine a new approach with the new patterns of world affairs and traditional Soviet interests (Holloway 1989). When Gorbachev came to power, The USSR was not strong enough to pursue its old political thinking in the competition with the US. This concluded with a security problem for the Soviets, and according to Janice Gross Stein, the idea of "New Thinking" came to Gorbachev's mind in order to eliminate the problems of the Soviet country (Stein 1994). Gorbachev, with the concept of "New Thinking", expelled "the 'zero-sum game' approach" from Soviet foreign policy (Gorbachev 1987 as cited in Freedman 1998). As a result, the Soviet Union was no longer perceived as a threat in the international arena with these reforms (Holloway 1989). Therefore, it is observed that the effects of the Cold War rhetoric started to decline during the Gorbachev era.

"New Thinking" gave flexibility to Soviet foreign policy. The USSR began to intend to communicate with other actors in the system with the diminishing effects of the Cold War. More importantly, this policy also eliminated the Soviet-American rivalry and could be an opportunity to improve Soviet-American relations. The new environment with the "New Thinking" can be considered as another opportunity for the USSR to have a collaborative role with the West in dealing with regional conflicts, in particular in the Middle East (Holloway 1989).

2.2 THE REFLECTION OF NEW SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY

Gorbachev's domestic reforms and the "New Thinking" made significant differences to Soviet foreign policy; for example, a limitation of Soviet weaponry diminished the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the Western countries. Moreover, the improvement in human rights helped the USSR to change its bad reputation. This also a good signal for the Western countries to cooperate with the Soviet Union without hesitation (Holloway 1989). Furthermore, Gorbachev's policies also made for a less tense environment in the competition between the USSR and the US (Bundy 1990). Gorbachev's adaptation to Western values and his friendlier approach to the Western countries, indeed, proved valuable when the Berlin Wall fell. Following that, the Soviet Union helped the European countries with the integration of Europe (Wallender 2002).

Firstly, "New Thinking" was the key for the new national interest in the Soviet Union. This new approach was based on 'mutual responsibility' and 'balance of powers'. The Soviet Union, with "New Thinking", no longer threatened other nations and was respectful to other ideas, in particular Capitalism. Gorbachev offered a new perspective in which to see Capitalism. Normally, from the beginning of the Soviet Union, Capitalism had been seen as a threat which should be contained. To make this real, multilateral compromises and a decline in military power were seen as ways of putting into practice a new foreign policy. Then, he agreed to withdrawal from the Third World and the elimination of nuclear missiles (Wallender 2002). Indeed, in 1989, the Soviet Union withdrew its military mission from Afghanistan.

First of all, the Soviet Union had always wanted to be the actor which solved the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, due to the previous Soviet foreign policy before "New Thinking", the Soviets had supported its Arab allies against Israel during the Arab-Israeli conflicts. This precluded the employment of a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict by the USSR (Karsh 1985). Moreover, the Soviets had to supply a large amount of money and weaponry to its client states for their wars while aspiring to bring peace to the region. Gorbachev was aware of the old mistakes and he began to learn (Neack 2008, p. 55); as a result, he came up with "New Thinking". According to Janice Gross Stein, Gorbachev brought a new approach, "New Thinking", because of the failed foreign policy implementation in

Afghanistan (Neack 2008, p. 55). It is possible to observe this shift not only in Afghanistan but also in its relations with Middle Eastern countries. As Janice Gross Stein calls them: “unanticipated failures that challenge old ways of representing problems” (Stein 1994).

2.3 SOVIET-SYRIAN RELATIONS WITHIN THE NEW FRAMEWORK OF ‘NEW THINKING’

The new Soviet foreign policy implementations reflected also on Soviet Union and Syria relations. The Syrians noticed the defensive characteristics of the new Soviet policy under the Gorbachev presidency (Karsh 1991, p. 163). Syria had been suffering with a severe economic crisis during the 1980s and the effects of the crisis intensified in the period between 1985 and 1987 (Karsh 1991, p. 164). Moreover, Syria was in a very difficult position in relation to its foreign affairs as well (Karsh 1991, p. 164). Syria had to deal with its political problems and in addition, there was a coup attempt in 1986 (Karsh 1998, p. 87). Syria faced difficulties both in its internal and external affairs.

In 1985, Syria had to withdraw from its intervention in Lebanon, due to a lack of money and military supplies. A year later, Syria also came to the verge of another war with Israel in 1986 (Karsh 1998, p. 86-87). Syria sent an aggressive signal to Israel. Moreover, the US declared that they would rigorously react to the Syrians if they caused terrorist activity in Libya. So, Syria was surrounded by very serious problems both regionally and internationally. When it came to the Soviet reaction, it was not in line with Syria’s desires. Contrary to past attitudes of the Soviets, this time the USSR prioritized the pursuit of its regional policy without showing tolerance towards its best client in the Middle East (Karsh 1998, p. 88). After this, the meeting between Gorbachev and Assad concluded with the aspect of Assad which led to unintended consequences; Gorbachev refused to give the military equipment which Syria demanded. Moreover, Syria offered to sign a bilateral security agreement with Moscow, but the USSR rejected this offer. This attitude of the Soviets was another example of Gorbachev’s “New Thinking”. Nevertheless, for the USSR, Syria was still a very important asset for the Kremlin’s position in the Middle East.

After Gorbachev’s “New Thinking”, the Soviets applied a strict limitation to Syria’s financial and material funds. This changed the framework of the Soviet-Syrian

relationship because this aid comprised a big part of this alignment. According to this new paradigm, “New Thinking”, keeping relations with Syria at a level of a mutually beneficial strategic interdependence, was very important to Moscow, because the USSR was cooperating with Syria for pragmatic reasons, mostly for strategic gains. Although the USSR was in a weaker position, they wanted to keep the Soviet influence in the Middle East (Karsh 1998, p. 96). This was evidence of a multifaceted characteristic of Gorbachev’s new political thinking, while Syria needed Russia as a powerful ally against regional and international threats.

2.4 THE USSR-ISRAELI RELATIONS AND SYRIA

Gorbachev, within the framework of the “New Thinking”, started a normalization process with Israel in the late 1980s. In 1986, Israel and the USSR agreed to have diplomatic relations between both countries (Karsh 1991, p. 178; Karsh 1998, p. 86). In 1988, during the talks between the Soviets and the PLO leader, Yasser Arafat, the USSR noted that Moscow supported the peace settlement between Israel and Palestine, considering both sides’ national interests (Freedman 1991, p. 44). This was the most significant signal of the USSR about the peace settlement with Israel. The policy change of the USSR towards Israel was interpreted as the Soviet Union wanting to be the one which settled the PLO-Israel peace dispute in the region. This helped the improvement of Israel and Soviet Union relations. Building an Arab-Israeli dialogue well suited the new Soviet foreign policy. Moreover, Soviet national interests and Palestinian interests had in common the aim of decreasing US influence in the region. Furthermore, the Soviets could gain influence in the region by providing peace reconciliation by that means (Polsky 2002).

Gorbachev not only developed diplomatic relations with Israel, but he also improved mutual cultural relations. For example, Gorbachev adopted a more liberal attitude towards the Soviet Jews permitting their immigration to Israel (Polsky 2002). However, the shift in Soviet foreign policy under Gorbachev created discontent in Syria towards the USSR about increasing Soviet-Israeli dialogue. Syria, in the event of the emergence of a Syrian-Israeli conflict, would need help from the USSR and the newly established Soviet Union and Israel dialogue could prevent this.

2.5 RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY DURING 1991-1999

The Russian Federation emerged in the international system as the successor state to the Soviet Union in December 1991. Russia declared itself as “the continuator state of the USSR”, while the other countries in the USSR described themselves as “the newly independent states” (Dumberry 2007, p. 152). The Russian Federation, as a successor, took the USSR's place in the international system, and Boris Yeltsin became the first president of the Russian Federation. Following the emergence of a new state, the world system changed. The bipolar system ended, and the United States emerged as the only global superpower; in other words, the Soviet Union lost the war which was held with the US throughout the Cold War era (Hogan 1992, p. 257).

Russia itself saw other significant transformations equal to the recovery of its economy. Firstly, Russia was not a Communist country anymore. In 1993, the new constitution declared that Russia was a democratic, federative, law-based state with a republican form of government (‘Constitution and Government Structure’ 2017). According to this constitution, Russia could not adopt any state ideology. All of these changes have brought great differences to Russia’s political system, compared to the system of the USSR. The ideological change reflected the attitude of other actors in the international scene towards Russia as well. Before, the Communist ideology was a threat to the other countries in the system. During the Cold War, some scholars argued that the reason for the rivalry between the superpowers was ideology: between Socialism and Capitalism (Gaddis 1994). Ideological factors firstly changed Russia’s relations with the other actors on the globe, as seen by its US relations, which was the most obvious instance. Moreover, Russia without the Communist ideology became more at liberty to build relations and make better ties with other actors such as oil-rich conservative Arab states. These countries had never communicated before with the USSR due to the ideology factor (Gaddis 1994, p. 124).

Boris Yeltsin brought a new type of system to the new Russia called “Yeltsin type democracy” in the first years of his administration. His system was approved by the Western countries, however Russians showed a very low level of support for it (Pushkov 2005). During the presidential election in 1996, it was revealed that the election was controlled by oligarchs and other financial groups, and as a result Yeltsin was reelected (Shuster 2012). On the other hand, for most Russians, living in

a country with a powerful economy is much more desirable than living in a democratic country, and they believe that Yeltsin's democracy brought their country chaos and corruption (Pushkov 2005).

The changed factors were reflected in Russian foreign policy in several areas however, most importantly, the Cold War environment could not be seen any longer. Rather, a major focus of the Russian foreign policy shifted to cooperation with the West (Hollis 1992, p. 120), which was a deep change, in total opposition to the main motives of Soviet foreign policy.

In addition to all of these, Moscow adopted a pro-American foreign policy, especially in the first two years under Yeltsin (Freedman 1997a). Russia's negotiator role in the Arab-Israeli peace process can be seen as a result of its pro-American policy. Russia also pursued an anti-Iraq stance during 1992-1993 regarding that policy (Freedman 1997b). However, after 1993, Russian foreign policy shifted into a more anti-Western direction (Hollis 1992, p. 121). Russian criticism of the US bombing of Iraq (Freedman 1997b) in 1993 was a reflection of the change in Russian foreign policy from a pro-American direction to an anti-American direction (Freedman 1997a).

The Russian foreign policy approach also changed towards regional conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, during these years. Andrei Kozyrev, the foreign minister of Russia (1991-1996), posited that Russia still had great importance in conflict resolution (Freedman 1997a), but this time with a more peaceful attitude, as a mediator. In addition to Kozyrev's explanation of Russia's new position in the international system, Yeltsin highlighted Russia's increasing role in the United Nations as a mediator in conflict resolution and peace reconciliation. Moreover, he stated that Russia's military forces could be used for peacekeeping operations (Freedman 1997a).

Within the calculations of Russia's economic and political situation, building relations with Israel might seem a good option while maintaining its new political stance in the system. According to Russia's new foreign policy, Russia was to make ties with whoever helped her gain economic or political benefits. Actually, it was Gorbachev who brought this pragmatic approach to Russian foreign policy, considering the development in Soviet-Israeli relations started in the Gorbachev era. Moreover, Russia was maintaining its ties with the Middle East, while trying to adjust its system to the new patterns of the new world order after the Cold War. This

was a real struggle for Russia, for as Robert Jervis posits “developing new patterns is usually much more difficult than maintaining established ones” (Jervis and Bialer 1991, p. 14).

During the Yeltsin era, there were foreign policy shifts in terms of general Middle East relations. The focus was on keeping relations in Middle Eastern affairs in the context of supporting peace negotiations in the first years of the Yeltsin term. Then, the focus shifted to seeking its interests in the region. To illustrate this, Yeltsin’s special envoy to the region, Viktor Posuvalyuk outlined the Russian approach in an interview in these words; “Russia, as a great power, has two key roles with regard to the Middle East. Firstly, it is a close neighbour, a major power with very broad interests, economic, political, spiritual, religious and of course military. Second, is co-sponsorship of the peace talks” (Nizameddin 2016). And then, Andrei Kozyrev points out that “Russia has serious and long term interest in the Near East” (Nizameddin 2016). It can be said that along with this shift, which started in 1993, the idea of ‘great power’ became important to Russian foreign policy.

2.6 PRIMAKOV ERA

Yevgeny Primakov’s foreign ministry brought some new concepts to Russian foreign policy (1996-1998). Firstly, he brought a pragmatic approach to Russian foreign policy (Nizameddin 2016). Primakov’s pragmatism was based on two simple principles: “what Russia really wanted”, and “what it was forced to do” (Sakwa 2008). His ideas on new Russian foreign policy, with the new pragmatic concept, came from the idea of great power ideology (Sakwa 2008; Lo 2002, p. 58). Due to his pragmatic approach, he rejected the pro-Western policies. Instead, he emphasized a ‘near abroad’ policy. As the term Eurasianism suggests, Primakov assumed that pro-American policies did not bring any beneficial outcomes for the Russian Federation (Shlapentokh 2007). Eurasianism is an influential idea in Russian foreign policy in this period, as Aleksandr Dugin, one prominent Eurasianist, posited, Russia’s key objective should be integrated with that of the former Soviet countries on economic, political, energy and strategic issues, and on creating buffer zones between Russia and the powerful Western and Asian states (Moga and Alexeev 2013).

Primakov proposed that the “Near Abroad” policy should have a major role in foreign policy instead of a pro-Western policy (Neack2008, p. 108). Primakov

believed that Russia should have close cooperation with the former Soviet countries, an aspect of its historical ties and geographical convenience. Primakov believed that Russia had a strategic advantage through its geopolitical situation. Conversely, he regarded NATO as a threat. These words of Primakov: “The expansion of NATO is created for the weakening of our geopolitical situation”, stated in one of his interviews for Russian national newspaper *Izvestiia*, showed that he believed that Russia should keep the ‘near abroad’ policy (Nizameddin 2016).

Primakov thought that pro-Western foreign policy would not bring fruitful outcomes to Russian foreign policy. He personally believed that the current international system was based on US hegemony, and he thought that Russia did not have the international standing which it should have had (Tsygankov2016, p. 226). He wished that Russia could be a great power in the international system as in the glorious days when the Soviet Union was very powerful (Freedman 1998). He pointed out that there could be several threats to the Russian Federation due to the unipolar great power status of the US (Tsygankov2016, p. 223).

Primakov personally adopted Eurasianism into Russian foreign policy, believing that, as Shlapentokh (2007) posits: “Russia should ally with a variety of powers in the East and in the West”. Russia should use the advantages of its geopolitical situation and should use the opportunities. Shlapentokh (2007) also assumes that Russia has a huge capacity to influence the globe and she argues that the US was not accepted as a hegemon by most countries, and this could be regarded as an opportunity for Russia. Following that, Primakov adopted a “Great Power Balancing” (Mearsheimer 2001) strategy that could help Russia change its status gradually towards being one of the great powers in a multipolar international system. For the sake of this, first, he supported cooperation with developing powers such as China and India. Second, he advocated Russia’s integrating with the former Soviet countries on economic, political, energy and strategic issues (Tsygankov 2016, p. 223). Finally, Russia should move its focus on Middle Eastern affairs.

2.7 A NEW TURNING POINT IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY: TOWARDS BEING A GREAT POWER

In Russia’s Middle East policy, it had several advantages, such as its proximity to the region and a large number of Arabic-speaking experts inherited from the Soviet

Union. According to Russia's renewed Middle Eastern foreign policy, Arab-Israeli negotiations had a great importance for Moscow. On the other hand, bilateral relations with Syria were limited due to Syria's huge amount of unpaid debt (\$11 billion) to Moscow (Gresh 1998). According to Russia's pragmatic foreign policy, this was handled by the improvement in the Russia-Syria relationship, in particular, signing new arms deals which were demanded by the Syrian government (Gresh 1998). Despite these unfavorable conditions concerning Syria, Primakov cared about improved relations with Syria (Borshchevskaya 2016). After he came to the foreign ministry, Moscow dealt with selling weapons to Syria in 1996 (Borshchevskaya2016). This decision was interpreted by Syrian president Hafez al-Assad as Russia's countering the US and Israel in the region. Moreover, the two countries signed a ten-year agreement for "peaceful cooperation on nuclear power" in 1999. In this year, Assad visited the Kremlin to strengthen ties, and he emphasized Syria's support for Moscow "to build a multipolar world without foreign diktat" (Borshchevskaya2016).

Russia, in this period, concentrated on increasing its trading volume and arms exports, and rebuilding its relations with the CIS and the Middle Eastern countries (Borshchevskaya 2016). Moreover, the arms industry was one of the sectors that gave Russia a chance to compete with the powerful Western economies (Adomeit 1995). Then Russia started to export military equipment to the various countries. For example, missile guidance systems, S-300 surface-to-air missiles and SU-27 fighters to China; submarines, SU-24 and MIG-29 aircraft to Iran and T-72 tanks to Syria (Adomeit1995). Russian arms exports reached a very high level during the period (Malcolm and Pravda 1996).

CHAPTER 3

3 PUTIN PERIOD

“Russia needs strong state power and must have it.”

-Vladimir Putin, December 1999

“Moscow was once a great power and aspires to be one again.”

-Robert O. Freedman 2003

“A strong state for a Russian is not an anomaly, not something to fight against, but on the contrary is the source and guarantor of order, the initiator and driving force of any change”.

-Vladimir Putin, December 1999

3.1 RUSSIA’S NEW LEADER VLADIMIR PUTIN AND HIS POLICIES

Russia had a defensive foreign policy due to its economic and military weaknesses during the transition period (1985-1991) (Freedman 2001). This comparatively less powerful position of Russia stemmed from problems in its internal affairs. Under Vladimir Putin’s presidency, Russia’s domestic politics strengthened and this helped Russia to improve its position in the international arena. Russia under Putin became more confident in terms of foreign policy, and this resulted in a policy shift in an aggressive direction in Putin’s first term. Putin has highlighted the geopolitical importance of Russia. The ‘near abroad’ policy has become the primarily necessary item on the Russian foreign policy agenda. Secondly, it can be seen that Putin aimed to revive and reinforce relations with the Middle East. Russian-Syrian relations in particular had taken a critical place for Russian foreign policy in terms of its status. Therefore, Russia under Putin appeared as a more powerful country in foreign policy.

3.1.1 His Personality and Background

Vladimir Putin is distinguished by his strong background. From his school years onwards, he was a very hard-working student. Due to his family’s misfortune, Putin had to work all the way through school. He studied Law at Saint Petersburg State University and he wanted to be in the KGB, the Soviet Union’s secret police force,

during his university years (Putin et al. 2000). He achieved this goal and worked as a KGB agent for 16 years. Then he entered politics in 1991, and he started to work in the Yeltsin administration in 1999. In the same year, Putin was appointed Prime Minister by Boris Yeltsin (Cassiday and Johnson 2010; Bigg 2007). After Yeltsin's resignation, he announced Putin's name as the new president of Russia on December 31st, 1999 (McFaul 2000). Putin won the elections in 2000 with a huge majority (McFaul 2000). At the time, Russia was frail, unstable and ambivalent in its domestic affairs, policies and political stance (Stengel 2007). Most Russians hoped that Putin would deal with all these problems and this made him a much favored politician (Dolgov 2000). In fact, Putin's approval rates have never been lower than 70% throughout his presidency (White and McAllister 2003). He was also chosen as "man of the year" for the 15th time in Russia and in 2007 (Marszal 2014). As Alex Pravda summarized; "[Putin] appeared as the guardian of state order and stability. This is a role to which he also has a personal predisposition." (Pravda 2005, p. 27). Alex Pravda claims that considering that Putin cares about traditional values, his background in the secret police agency led him to employ a zero-sum game in foreign policy (Pravda 2005, p. 28). Pravda states that "Putin's actions testify to an understanding of politics as ultimately a zero-sum game in which determination and power decide conflicts. This kind of thinking was of course central to the Bolshevik tradition and the Soviet security culture in which Putin spent his formative professional years" (Pravda 2005, p. 28).

To illustrate Putin's view about the need to be a powerful country, Russian journalist Oleg Blotsky's anecdote on Putin's personality elucidates his traits: Putin told him that he had been educated in the streets and that he had learnt one important lesson: "I had to go to the end in any fight and strike out as if in the last" (White and McAllister 2003). Also, Putin states "If a fight is inevitable, go and fight first" (Dyson 2015).

3.1.2 His Policies

The Russian political system and economy became stabilized in Putin's second year in presidency (Treisman 2002). Putin considers economic strength as a fundamental factor to become a powerful country. Putin published an article (1999) regarding Russia's rich energy sources, in which he argued that these sources should be used

as a tool to make Russia a 'great economic power', in 1999 (Evans Jr. 2008). Indeed after Putin came to power, the economy witnessed a significant uptick thanks to improvements in the energy sector of Russia (Freedman 2001a) and also benefited from oil and gas price increases in 1999 and 2000 with these policies (Treisman 2002; Freedman 2001a). Apart from the energy resources, Putin personally made an effort to expand Russian business abroad. Moreover, the arms trade played a significant role in improving the Russian economy as well (Freedman 2001a). According to Robert O. Freedman "Putin's foreign policy has been aimed at strengthening the Russian economy in the hope that, in the not too distant future, Russia might regain its status as a great power. In the interim he has sought to create an arc of stability on Russia's frontiers, so that economic development can proceed as rapidly as possible" (Freedman 2003).

Putin also prioritized national security. In this regard, he tended to employ centralization policies, even though these policies moved Russia away from democracy and made it a more autocratic country than in the Yeltsin term. In the ambit of his centralization policy, Putin firstly aimed to take Chechnya under control. He came up with a promise to the Russians to solve the Chechen problem before the 2000 elections. Indeed, after the end of the Chechen problem, Putin found a convenient environment in which to employ his foreign policy agenda (White and McAllister 2003). Putin's centralization policies can also be seen in the wake of the hostage crisis in Beslan, North Ossetia, in September 2004 (Sussex 2004).

Putin's foreign policy implementations in the Middle East and his wish for his country to be treated as a great power concluded with a shift in Russian foreign policy in this era. It can be said that the shift in Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East also connected with Russia's relations with the West.

Russia also wanted the Western countries to treat them as a peer. Olena Bagno assumes that "Russia's policy in the Middle East, which unfolds in line with Moscow's global agenda, is simply a quest to be treated as an equal partner in the conflict resolution club as opposed to an alternative player" (Bagno 2009).

3.2 RUSSIAN RELATIONS WITH THE WEST AND THE MIDDLE EAST UNDER PUTIN

In the first years of the Putin administration, Russia was involved in the resettlement of the Israel-Palestine conflict with the EU, the US and the United Nations (UN).

During the negotiations, Russia threatened the other sides that it would use its veto, and wanted to show that it was still an important actor that should be taken as an equal power to the US (Freedman 2003). On the other hand, it has been observed that Russian-American cooperation increased, especially on the subject of terrorism after 9/11. The Chechnya problem was an area of cooperation between Russia and the United States (Freedman 2001a).

Putin wanted to be an active actor in the Middle East. However, in the first years of the Putin term, Russian-Middle Eastern relations were not regarded as actively (Freedman 2001a) as he wished, because Putin's primary purposes were to bring stability to Russia and improve the Russian economy during these years. Putin intended to regain a leading role in the Eastern Mediterranean, and this became one of the most important aspects of Russian foreign policy in the early 2000s (Litsas and Tziampiris 2015, p. 33-34), since Russia had long desired to keep its access to the Eastern Mediterranean according to its strategic goals. This also gained Russia more room in the Middle East for the sake of its interests in the region. All of these factors concluded with the reemergence of competition between Russia and the Western countries (Litsas and Tziampiris 2015, p. 33-34).

3.3 TURNING POINTS IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY

Russia under Yeltsin and the first years of the Putin administration was in a political predicament in terms of foreign policy. Apart from the Chechen issue, Russia was also worried about the enlargement policies of the Western institutions. As Bobo Lo framed "attempts to diminish Russia's global influence, usurpation of the UN's role in international decision-making, 'bloc politics' and NATO expansion, conflicts near Russia's borders, terrorism" can be considered as the main threats against the Russian Federation (Lo 2002, p. 136).

The Western institutions' policies on integration and securitization towards Eastern Europe, the Black Sea and the Caucasus conflicted with Russian interests due to the 'near abroad' policy¹. In fact, Russia perceived the enlargement policies of NATO and the European Union (EU) as threats that would jeopardize the hegemony of Russia in the near abroad region. These policies meant that the Russian foreign policy chiefs intended to act aggressively towards the 'near abroad'. Second, from

¹ See Chapter 3.

Moscow's perspective, the Western countries did not treat Russia as a peer, which continued with Russia's new agenda towards the 'near abroad'. Another reason is that, according to Giles, Russia's growing confidence led her to employ more aggressive policies towards its neighborhood (Giles 2016). Apart from Russia's foreign policy shift, the relations between Russia and the West worsened. Stephen F. Cohen puts forward that "[after the enlargement policies] the US-Russian relations had deteriorated so badly they should now be understood as a new cold war—or possibly as a continuation of the old one"(Cohen 2006).

NATO enlargement was reminiscent of the old patterns of the Cold War to the Russians (Sakwa 2008). However, in the rhetoric, Putin posits that "We do not consider NATO an enemy organization or view its existence as a tragedy, although we see no need for it. It was born as the antipode to the Warsaw Pact, as the antipode to the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. Now there is no Warsaw Pact, no Soviet Union, but NATO exists and is growing." This NATO policy reminded Russia of containment. In fact, following approval of the first NATO enlargement, the US diplomat George Kennan affirmed that "I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies," (Mearsheimer 2014) and "I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anyone else" (Mearsheimer 2014) in 1998. As Kennan assumes, Russian foreign policy turned into an aggressive approach in its 'near abroad'.

3.4 RUSSIA'S ASSERTIVE POLICIES IN ITS 'NEAR ABROAD'

In August 2008, after the Georgian invasion of South Ossetia and Abkhazia which were separate and unrecognized provinces but officially part of Georgia, Russia supported these two breakaway provinces and performed peacekeeping operations in these regions. This was not only an opportunity for Russia to restore its influence in the region, but also a response to NATO's enlargement plan in Georgia (*Stratfor, The Russo-Georgian War and the Balance of Power 2008*). Moreover, it concluded with the NATO decision to review Georgia's membership of NATO (Donovan, Jr. 2009). Kornely K. Kakachia (2011) asserts that Russia has always been interested in reintegrating the post-Soviet space, and the Russo-Georgian War was an opportunity for Russia to regain its role in the region. Putin does not want to have anybody but itself in Russia's sphere of interest. Indeed, as a summary of Russian foreign policy in Georgia, in Putin's words during the Russo-Georgian War, "The Cold War has

long ended but the mentality of the Cold War has stayed firmly in the minds of some” (Gedmin 2014). The renewed Cold War rhetoric can be regarded as the results of the Russo-Georgian War, and this reflected the consequences of Russia’s growing aggressive attitude (Dannreuther 2009).

Putin clearly demonstrated that Russia once again wanted to be accepted and treated as a global actor, and therefore act in every major international decision. Putin puts forward that “all countries always have and will have divergent interests” (Sudakov 2015); however, he proved that he would pursue more aggressive policies in order to preserve his country’s interests.

3.5 RUSSIA’S POWER SEEKING POLICY AND SYRIA

Russian-Syrian relations could not be developed in the first five years of the Putin term, because the priority of Russian foreign policy was based on reestablishing Russian control over Transcaucasia and Central Asia. The Chechen problem in the North Caucasus precluded Russia’s pursuit of more active policies in Syria. Rather, Russian emphasis in the Middle East was on Turkey and Iran, regarding their proximity to the Northern Caucasus during these years (Freedman 2001a).

In the first five-year period, only bilateral diplomatic visits between Russia and Syria could be observed. Soon after Putin ascended to the presidency in 1999, Bashar al-Assad became Syrian president following his father Hafez al-Assad’s death (Lo 2003, p. 54). Then, Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov visited his counterpart in Damascus in October 2000 (Lo 2003, p. 54). This was followed by the Syrian foreign minister’s visit to Moscow the next year (Lo 2003, p. 54). However, although since early 2001, the Russian press had made claims about a Putin visit to Damascus, it did not actualize until April 2005” (Lo 2003, p. 54). In early 2003, the Syrian Vice President visited Moscow in order to bring Assad’s message to the Russian authority, saying that Syria wanted to connect with Russia (Kreutz 2010). As a result of this visit, Russia declared that “the time has come for the Russian-Syrian relations to resume the right course” (Kreutz 2010). Russia declared that it was time to restore relations with Syria, however the timing should be taken into an account.

Given the fact that Syria in the early 2000s had a lot of problems, both in its internal and external affairs, Russia did not want to be involved in these problems. After 9/11, the international community distanced itself from Syria, with the suspicion that

it could also be a possible exporter of terrorism (Trenin 2010). After the US occupation of Iraq, Syria's fear increased, because it was also known to be among the sponsors of terrorism (Katzman 2002). Iraq's position also affected Syria's economic conditions. Iraq and Syria made an economic deal, and according to this deal Syria could benefit from cheaper Iraqi oil. Due to the sanctions against Iraq, Syria no longer used this opportunity, and it resulted in a deterioration of the Syrian economy ('Syria and Iraq to boost trade' 2001). After the UN resolution on Iraq in 2001, the Western powers accused Syria of continuing oil imports from Iraq despite the UN sanctions (Blanford 2002). The US also threatened Syria due to the Iraqi-Syrian rapprochement (Blanford 2002). After the 2003 War, Syria faced more pressure from the US. Syria had a regime crisis in the same year, the US threatened the Syrian regime and imposed economic and political sanctions. Syria's position was facing increasing external threats, and following the 2005 assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Syria's position got worse (Trenin 2010). In such an environment, Syria needed a powerful ally such as Russia to protect itself from the Western countries' pressure and other threats in the international area.

In rebuilding communications, the historical ties of these two countries helped to build such a rapid development in Russian-Syrian relations. It was the only remaining ally of the Soviet Union in the Middle East. Moreover, for the sake of Russia's presence in the Mediterranean, there was no access apart from Syria into the region. Therefore, Russia did not want to lose Syria. Furthermore, the Iraq War in 2003 could have spread through the region, including Syria. Russia started to keep closer relations with Syria as a check against possible American influence in Syria.

As a result of the meeting between Putin and Assad, Russia announced that it had wiped out 73% of Syria's debts to the Soviet Union. Moreover, Syria would pay the rest of the amount in installments. Syria paid the first installment in 2005, showing its enthusiasm for further relations with Russia. Since Syria was the only ally of Russia in the Middle East, Russia needs it to achieve its economic and strategic goals. Writing off Syrian debts would bring great benefits to the Russian economy (Trenin 2010). The unpaid debts of Syria to the Soviet Union had caused a decline in Moscow-Damascus relations. This was one of the difficulties behind Russian trade with Syria. Russia wanted to sell its arms and needed money in cash at the time. Furthermore, Russia agreed to sell the *Strelets* air defense missile system to Syria. The arms deal they made was worth approximately \$100,000 million. In addition,

Moscow needed new markets to sell Russian arms and improve its energy sector (Freedman 2001a). Throughout the 1990s, Russia stopped selling arms to Moscow's traditional Middle Eastern allies. Instead, China and India became the major customers for Russian arms (Denisentsev and Makienko n.d.). However, Russia was aware that China and India might not stay as buyers of Russian arms because these regions were very competitive areas for Western arms companies (Denisentsev and Makienko n.d.). Also, Russia knew that China had long been working on developing its own arms production. These factors motivated Russia to find new buyers. After the renewal of a Middle East focus in Russian foreign policy, the Middle East appeared as the best destination for such a new market (Freedman 2001a). Following this arms agreement, Russian oil and gas firms signed contracts to explore new oil and gas fields and build a gas processing plant and a gas pipeline in Syria, and for nuclear energy projects (Trenin 2010; Katz 2006). Additionally, Putin personally led the increase in Russian business to Syria to strengthen the two countries' relations in a variety of sectors.

From the time of the 2005 agreement, trade levels between Syria and Russia increased gradually. In 2008, the trade level between the two reached almost \$2 billion which was their highest level of bilateral trade relations. In 2009, Russian gas firm, Stroytransgaz agreed to start a natural gas processing plant project in Syria. Russian companies invested \$20 billion in Syria from 2009 to 2013. The arms trade has always been crucial in relations between Syria and Russia. In 2006, Syria became the largest recipient of Russian arms. Syria bought 78 percent of its weapons over the period of 2007 to 2012, and the Russian arms trade to Syria cost almost \$4.7 billion between 2007 and 2010. In 2008 Russia agreed to sell the Pantsir S1 gun missile air defence system to Syria (worth \$700 million). Russia and Syria signed a new arms agreement for two batteries of the K300P Bastion-P mobile coastal defence anti-ship missile systems, with 36 K310 Yakhont supersonic anti-ship missiles (worth \$250 million) in 2009.

Keir Giles (2016) posits that Russian foreign policy highlighted its role to confront the West, not only in the former Soviet space but also in the Middle East, by 'using the new tools and opportunities'. Syria seemed an opportunity for Russia regarding its status in the Middle East (Klein 2012), considering Putin's aim which is a rekindling of the Soviet era sphere of influence in order to bolster Russian prestige (Dyson 2001). As Mearsheimer posits (2014), "he [Putin] is a first-class strategist

who should be feared and respected by anyone challenging him on foreign policy.” In this respect, Syria was a historic ally of the Soviet Union. So, the relations between these two countries in economic and political aspects were quite strong. Moreover, the Russian foreign policy shift to the Middle East reinforced Russian-Syrian relations. As Bobo Lo asserts, Putin is good at using opportunities to achieve its interests in the Middle East, considering that the Russian focus towards Syria was related to guaranteeing Russia’s long-term future in the Middle East (Lo 2003, p. 127-129).

Jeffrey Gedmin (2014) underlines that Vladimir Putin has the capability of using the gaps in the system, to describe its aggressive role in international affairs. He remarks that when the US was busy with the Iraq War, Russia used all its opportunities to become a ‘great power’ (Stent 2008). In parallel with that, American Senator Henry Jackson said the “Russians are like a burglar going down a hotel corridor, trying all the doors. When they find one unlocked, they go in” (Gedmin 2014).

CHAPTER 4

4 CHANGE AND CONTINUTIY IN RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY ON SYRIA

This particular research into Russia's foreign policy towards Syria is examined in three different eras: the Cold War period, the Transition period and the Putin era. These eras were examined according to Russia's foreign policy objectives and conjuncture for each specific period. In this part, I aimed to find the changes and continuities between the mentioned periods. As a result, I found out that similar circumstances created similar reactions both in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Another important fact was that being a 'great power' has always been in the mentality of both the Soviet Union and Russia. The Middle East region has always been an important tool for Russia to gain 'great power' status. Last but not the least, Russia wanted to be treated as a peer of the Western countries. On the other hand, their pragmatism brought a significant change to Russian foreign policy. This not only provided an economic boost but also brought political maneuvering to Moscow.

Firstly, it may seem that system change in Russia made the major impact on all the changes in Russian foreign policy towards Syria between the mentioned periods. Russian foreign policy was shaped according to circumstances, other actors' strategies and so on in each period. In the Cold War era, the Soviet strategy was based on supporting its allies no matter whether it would bring some substantial benefits for the sake of the Soviet Union. When it came to the Transition Period, the Soviet Union brought a large number of limitations to Soviet aid to their allies and friends, though Syria was the only exception in Soviet foreign policy. Nevertheless, this brought limitation to Soviet-Syria relations. When it came to the Putin era, it seemed that American foreign policy after 9/11 stimulated Russia to initiate counter policies to the US. At the time, Syria was isolated from international issues due to economic and political embargos, and was under Western pressure due to the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. While Syria was seeking a

powerful ally like Russia, Russia tactically turned to Syria to help it to be a major power which could determine Middle Eastern policies. In order to understand Cold War era Soviet strategy in the Middle East, I believe that the Russian position should be taken into account within the Cold War framework. The power competition with the US was the main motivating force in Soviet foreign policy. Russia's prominent foreign policy strategy was to expand its sphere of influence all over the world and to be superior and more powerful than the US. At that time, the Middle East seemed a convenient arena for the power play between them, because of the weaker positions of the Middle Eastern countries. Then, the USSR focused on communicating with the Middle Eastern countries. After this move toward the Middle East, Moscow firstly started to build a friendship with Egypt and Syria. These two countries were intentionally chosen considering their position towards the US. The good relations between the US and Israel made the Arab enemies of Israel (Egypt and Syria) friends of Moscow at the time. To Moscow, if the Soviet-led Arabs had won the Arab – Israeli conflict, it could have brought about Soviet supremacy in the Middle East region.

In the transition period, the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years, the Soviet Union and its successor, Russia struggled for survival for more than a decade. The Gorbachev years can be summarized as a reconstruction period of the Soviet system, regarding economic, political and social aspects. Gorbachev simply aimed to rebuild the country due to the damaged and weakened position of the country at the time. Therefore, the foreign policy of Moscow totally changed with Gorbachev's reforms. Even despite the political and economic problems the Soviet Union faced, Moscow followed an exceptional foreign policy towards Syria.

In the Putin years, the initial goals of Russia were having a powerful economy and then being a powerful country. Therefore, Putin, in the first term of his presidency, aimed to restore the economy of the country by using Russia's natural resources and increasing its industry. In his second term, it may be said that Putin's economic policies paid off and Russia restored its economic power and rebuilt its confidence compared to the previous era. Since then, Russia has wanted to engage with the international issues, particularly on matters occurring around the former Soviet Union countries, and to be treated as an equal power with the United States. Alongside the initial strategy of Russia, boosting its economy, Russian foreign policy has been shaped as a result of this pragmatic view. Russian Middle East

policies intended to build profitable partners such as Iran and Turkey. Considering Syria's political and economic problems in the early 2000s, Putin avoided rebuilding relations with Syria.

However, in 2005, Putin and Assad came together and signed an agreement. This agreement was very comprehensive: according to it, 73% of Syria's debts from the Soviet era were cancelled, and the rest of the debt would be paid off in installments. A very important arms deal was also made and trade between the two countries started. According to the agreement, Russia agreed to sell the *Strelts* defense system to Syria costing \$100,000 million. This sudden turning point was a result of Russia's pragmatic foreign policy considering the new vision. After 9/11, the US started to reveal itself in a more recognizable way. The US foreign policies in the region put pressure on the Middle Eastern states. On the other hand, NATO enlargement towards the former Soviet countries was not favorable for Russia. Therefore, after 9/11, Russia evolved its foreign policy, as can be summarized in Bobo Lo's words, "11 September provided an extraordinary and entirely unexpected opportunity to accelerate the process of repackaging Russian identity in the contemporary world" (2003, p. 127).

Syria's strategic position has always been more important than its economic relations to Russia. Throughout the history of USSR-Syria relations, Russia backed Syria for the sake of its own strategic good. Similarly, in 2005, Putin and Assad made an agreement which covered the economic, military and political areas. Even though this agreement had a positive impact on the Russian economy, it was simply a political turning point for Russia to become more active in the Middle East. Just before this turning point, Russia got very nervous due to the US's effectiveness and domination in the region. Putin believes that the US considers herself the only world power and tries to impose on all nations the idea of their exclusiveness. Putin also thinks that "the US felt they were at the forefront of the so-called civilized world, and when the Soviet Union collapsed, they were under the illusion that the US was capable of anything, and they could do that with impunity" (2017). These words of Putin's simply summarize Russian foreign policy under Putin. His policies and political actions led to him being described as a tsar. Similarly, Putin's Russian foreign policy started to be called Putinism and the era to be called the *Second Cold War*. All these arose due to the similarity of Russian foreign policy under Putin with Cold War era Soviet foreign policy. Therefore, it can be said there is a continuity

between the Cold War era and the Putin era. In both periods, Russia builds a friendship with Syria to follow active policies in the Middle East.

In addition to the effects of 9/11, the Putin era Russian foreign policy should be evaluated according to its own characteristics. Under Putin, Russian foreign policy has adopted a more assertive character since the 2000s. One of the most important foreign policy purposes was to keep its 'near abroad' under control. On the other hand, there is Putin's assessment of the enlargement policies of the EU and NATO towards the former Soviet countries as a threat to Russia. Putin has repeatedly highlighted his animosity towards the presence of Western institutions in these regions. As he stated in one interview, "after the Second World War, a bipolar world order emerged, I think it was a strategic mistake of the USSR, and the Soviet Union at that time was behaving primitively and they gave the US the excuse to create NATO and to launch the Cold War. However, Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union no longer exist, but NATO still exists and continues to expand over the former Soviet countries. Russia does not perceive the US as a threat and the US confirmed the same; however, why does NATO continue to expand?" (The Putin Interviews, 2017).

After the second wave of the enlargement of NATO including Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the Baltic States, and the EU's expansion in East Europe and the Baltic countries in 2004, Russia began a transformation of its foreign policy. The ongoing enlargement policies of NATO towards the former Soviet countries since 2004 counted as an aggressive act to Moscow. The membership talks between the EU and Ukraine were perceived as a direct threat by Russia. The 2008 War was the realization of Russia's attitude. More importantly, Russia has never allowed the US or any other power to be more active in the former Soviet space. As Stephen F. Cohen (2006) puts forward, "the US-Russian relations had deteriorated so badly they should now be understood as a new cold war—or possibly as a continuation of the old one." I think it is a continuation; Russia was disturbed that the US felt as if it was the only global power and controlled all the international problems. When those issues spread as far as the Russian red line, like the former Soviet territory, we have observed that the conflict was just revived. Even in the Cold War era, there were two *détente* periods. Likewise, the Transition period and the first few years of Russia under Putin can be taken as a *détente* period. Nevertheless, the Gorbachev era foreign policy should be defined as a 'change', because he applied a different

foreign policy from his predecessors and those who followed him, which was peaceful and defensive.

The US foreign policies in the Middle East after 9/11, plus the enlargement policies of NATO and the EU, gradually made an impact on the transformation of Russian foreign policy. These developments made Moscow focus on following more active foreign policies in international issues, particularly the core issues like the Middle East. This can explain the sudden turning point in Russia-Syria relations in 2005. Even though not a former Soviet Union country, Syria had always been one of the crucial allies of the USSR during the Cold War. Moreover, at the end of the Cold War period, Syria remained the only ally of the Kremlin. During that era, the binding relations with Syria benefited both parties and strengthened Russian interests in the Middle East, due to the conditions in the region. In the transition period, due to the new Soviet foreign policy, Moscow limited its relations with countries with weak economies, especially those whose economy depended on the USSR. However, Syria's situation was different from other friends of the Soviets; the Kremlin treated Syria as in the framework of their traditional alliance, but with some radical changes and limitations. It can be said that Moscow reconstructed the relationship with Syria to damage the US's presence in the Middle East, as the Soviet Union had done.

I personally believe that in order to understand Russian politics, and the changes and continuities which occurred from 1945 to 2010, one should know Russian history. As Alexei Pushkov, Russian politician, states: "To understand Russian foreign policy, we have to go back to 1991. At that time, our goal was to be integrated into the West, and we adopted a pro-Western foreign policy. That may never have been a realistic option. But realistic or not, the West decided it did not want us and made this clear when it expanded NATO to include three former Warsaw Pact countries" (Gresh 1998). Pushkov also pointed out that even though enlargement of NATO was not a threat to Russia's security or stability, integrating with the West only gave Russia a minor role (Gresh 1998).

In addition, it's important to understand what drives Russian President Vladimir Putin to make Russia a great power again. His main motive, according to Carolyn Kissane, political scientist, is revenge ('To understand Russia's Vladimir Putin' 2017). When Putin became president, Russia was considerably weaker and in an ineffective position, suffering from the long-lasting effects of the Soviet era

economic stagnation. He was also working on regaining prestige and great power status, while restoring the economic power of the country. During those years, NATO expanded its territory through the former Soviet countries and this damaged Russia's prestige.

In the Putin era, Russian foreign policy in Syria is very similar to the Cold War era. As in the Cold War framework, Russia did not want to lose Syria to the US. Syria can be seen as a means for Russia to be a greater power in the Middle East. When it is came to the Putin years, after the 2003 Iraq War, Russia focused on its Syrian relations. Following the war, the US's increasing influence in the Middle East made Russia worried in case she may lose her only remaining traditional ally. It can be interpreted as similarity or continuity for Russia, since the Russian foreign policy in the Cold War era looked at how the Americans held influence in the Middle East, and this stimulated Russia into their Syria policy.

I think this study is also beneficial, because it describes the nature of Russian policy. As Fyodor Tyutchev, Russian poet, posits: "Russia cannot be understood with the mind alone. No ordinary yardstick can span her greatness. She stands alone, unique – In Russia, one can only believe." To understand the Russian position in the Arab Spring and then in the Syrian civil war, one should know the relations from the very early days, and this study can be used as an auxiliary source.

The 'great power' issue can be counted as a continuity for Russia for each of the mentioned periods. To be a great power has always been important for the Russian Federation throughout its history. During the Transition Period, Russia, while solving the problems inherited from the USSR and rebuilding the economy of the country, aimed to regain 'great power' status. As Adomeit posits, "Nations and governments engaging in 'great power advertising' typically embody more irrational, unpredictable and contradictory traits than the more self-assured and self-confident states" (Adomeit 1995) so due to this fact, Russia in these years although in transition, aimed to keep Syria as an ally. It was a strategic act for the future, because they knew that they would need influence in the Middle East.

Likewise, after the 2001 Iraq War, there was an American dominance in the Middle East region. The US put economic and political pressure on Iraq and after a while on Syria. This changed Russian foreign policy in the Middle East. Before that, Russia refrained from rebuilding relations with Syria. In general, Russia did not make a connection with weak economies in the Putin era, while Soviet thinking and

Communist ideology had shaped the characteristics of the Soviet alignment to Middle Eastern countries. Socialist countries always came first for the USSR, such as Egypt and Syria. The alignment was also based on the countries' attitude towards the US, such as if it has no relations with them, then it may become an ally of the USSR. In Syria's case, avoiding maintaining relations with the former Soviet allies in the Middle East can be considered as a change, while keeping up relations with countries which were isolated due to the US's efforts can be considered as continuity in Russian foreign policy.

During the aforementioned period, Russian foreign policy experienced turning points, changes and continuities in Syrian policy. However, there were some changes and continuities within each of these eras due to leadership change. Stalin was the first leader of the USSR examined in this research. Stalin did not tend to be an active actor in the Middle East, even though he believed that the Middle East region was important for the USSR in its competition with the US. Under Khrushchev, the Soviets started to build close links with some of the Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt and Syria, to compete with the US which had close relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia at the time. Then, connecting with a Soviet-friendly country seemed to be a priority to the USSR, one which at least was not an enemy of the USSR or a good friend of the US could be considered as the basic requirements of links with the Soviet Union. From that time on, the Soviets acted as a supporter of Egypt and Syria in their wars with Israel. Deterioration in relations with Egypt resulted in a decline in Soviet and Syria relations. Then Syria became the only ally of the USSR in the Middle East region. This lasted until Gorbachev became president of the USSR. After his New Thinking, the Soviet Union had to limit its relations if it would not bring economic benefit. Despite that, Syria became an exception, because it was the only remaining ally of the USSR in the Middle East in the Yeltsin era.

In the Putin era, the rebuilding of ties with Syria started after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. However, Russian Middle Eastern strategy in the Putin era from 1999 to the early 2000s was simply based on strengthening the Russian economy. So, if a country would not bring any economic benefit to the Russian economy, it was not a good friend for Russia. That's why Russia repeatedly refused the Syrian government's attempts at cooperation during the early 2000s. After the War, the growing American impact in the region concluded with growing concern for Russia.

Moscow, firstly, did not want to lose Syria to the US, because it had been their only remaining ally since the Cold War era. Second, Russia did not want Washington to gain advantage in the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, the growing pressure of Washington on Syria caused Russia worries, and Russia dramatically increased the rebuilding of relations with Syria on social, economic, military and diplomatic levels.

The Middle East region was very convenient for their competition, considering the relatively weak status of the Middle Eastern countries and the ongoing conflicts among the countries of this region. Thus, both superpowers started to act as if superior to one another. From this time on, the Soviet Union began to interact with the Middle Eastern countries in different domains. Firstly, during the Stalin era, the Soviets' Middle Eastern policies could not be counted as active policies due to the leader's own priorities and ideas.

During the Putin era many radical changes have happened in a set of different areas. With him, pragmatism came to Russian foreign policy. He prioritized economic growth and supported relations with powerful economies. This indeed helped Russia's wounded economy after the long-lasting effects of the Soviet era economic stagnation. Under Putin, economic revival gained priority in the Kremlin's diplomatic relations, while in the Cold War era, due to socialist ideas, the Soviet Union had carried out aid programmes, funding, economic and military assistance to its allies, Socialist countries and Soviet-friendly countries. However, this did not bring returns on their expenditure, and this caused big damage to the Soviet economy. After Putin came to power, he refrained from making this mistake and thanks to that the Russian economy made good progress. The Putin era's pragmatic characteristic could be counted as a change compared to the Cold War era, however it counted as continuity with the Transition period, because Gorbachev's economic reforms and pragmatic foreign policy understanding were along the same lines as those of the Putin era in one respect. Gorbachev's reforms were based on rebuilding the Soviet country and Putin's were based on strengthening Russia.

The Cold War era and the Putin era had a lot in common but there was one major change which is pragmatism. Pragmatism came to Russian foreign policy under Putin's leadership. He initially aimed to reconstruct his country politically and economically. Therefore, he selected his allies while measuring costs and benefits. His acts were realistic and strategic. Moreover, he knew Russian political history

very well. Putin learned from the mistakes made by his predecessors. Socialist countries and Soviet-friendly countries were considered as allies no matter what benefit a relationship with a country bring to the Soviet Union. Then, Putin made his decisions as a result of cost and benefit calculation. Furthermore, according to Putin, his predecessors made other mistakes too. For example, Stalin caused the establishment of NATO with his aggressive acts. Gorbachev was too naïve, letting the European countries integrate East Germany. According to Putin, Gorbachev should have taken precautions for the EU not to expand towards Russia's near abroad. So, Putin has always been skeptical, especially towards the Western countries, and his realistic foreign policy has been shaped by his ideas and old lessons.

Another change in Putin era foreign policy is that it is a multi-dimensional foreign policy. In the Cold War era, Moscow communicated with only Syria and the other Soviet-friendly countries, not with Israel and other US-friendly countries. However, after 2005, Russia sold weapons both to Syria and Israel. Russia under Putin kept supplying military equipment to Syria in order to keep military balance in the Middle East. When it came to Israel, this has been a good buyer, and it is important for the Russian economy. On the other hand, Russia's supply of arms to Syria worried the Israelis. Israel wanted Russia not to make arms sales to Syria. Moreover, during the Russo-Georgian War, Israel supported the Georgian army with the support of arms and training. However, this did not make any difference to the Russians. On the other hand, Assad supported Russia during the Russo-Georgian War. This can be counted as another continuity of Syrian foreign policy. Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad supported Moscow during the Afghanistan invasion of the Soviet Union. These two were very similar issues. Both of these issues were not supported by the Western countries, and Syria became one of the few countries which supported Moscow.

The Arab-Israeli conflict was one of the crucial points where Soviet foreign policy made it an active player in Middle East policy during the Cold War era. The Soviet Union supported the peace process and tried to take the mediator role during this process. Indeed, this was like a tool for the Soviet Union to be more related to Middle Eastern issues. When Putin called for a Middle East peace conference in Moscow with Israel and Palestine, he showed his interest to be in Middle Eastern

issues as in Soviet times. It seems that Putin followed the same path in the Middle East as his predecessors and this can be counted as another continuity.

Moscow's relations with Israel in the Putin era have been one of the most radical changes in the new Russian foreign policy. Russia and Israel have built and developed economic ties, especially in the high technology sector. Moreover, they have had bilateral arms sales. Furthermore, these two have supported each other on political issues. In addition, they have had cultural ties due to the Russian population in Israel. However, Russia has also kept ties with Syria and Iran in political, economic and military areas. Syria was one of its most important allies in the deployment of *Iskander* missile systems. It is easy to say that Russian-Israeli relations have more cooperation areas in common than Russian-Syrian relations.

The main reason for Moscow's arms sales to Syria after 2005 was not because Syria was a Russian ally. Moscow supported Syria and Iran by selling them arms to bring balance to the Middle East. Another reason was it was not likely to make Syria powerful enough to beat Israel in their probable war. It was to threaten Israel if they did not behave in the way Russia wanted. So, it can be said that Putin used the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to become the most important power in the Middle East. This was another continuity but this time with a different strategy.

CONCLUSION

Russian-Syrian relations have been maintained since the Cold War period. After changes in Soviet leadership in 1953, the Soviet Union was drawn into the Middle East under Khrushchev. Soviet-Syrian relations started with the Czech Arms Deal which was the first arms deal between the Eastern Bloc and Egypt. When the Suez Crisis broke out in 1956, the USSR supported Egypt against Israel and its allies. The tension between Israel and Egypt strengthened Arab nationalism, and then Egypt and Syria became closer, with the idea of Pan-Arabism. The alliance of the USSR and Egypt resulted in closer ties between Syria and Moscow. The Soviets supported the Syrians in financial and material terms. Then the relations turned into a strategic alliance between Syria and the USSR. As a result, the USSR gained influence in the Middle East, and this helped in its competition with the US. Syria was a crucial asset of the USSR in its Middle Eastern affairs.

Soviet-Syrian relations deepened due to the *Baathist* regime's seizure of power in Syria in 1963. Moreover, more radical groups in the *Baath* Party which were closer to the Soviets gained power in Syria in 1966, and this contributed to the improvement in relations between Syria and Moscow. It is possible to observe the strengthening ties in infrastructure investments, especially during the construction of the Euphrates Dam.

During the 1967 War and 1973 War, it has been observed that the USSR supported Egypt and Syria in economic and military terms, to wage the war with Israel, which was backed by the US. After the leadership change in Syria, Moscow and Damascus strengthened their connections. Moreover, Soviet-Egypt relations started to deteriorate, and then Anwar Sadat ended the Soviet naval presence in Egypt. This resulted in a boost in Syria- USSR relations, considering that Syria remained Russia's only access to the Mediterranean.

In the Gorbachev era, Moscow had to deal with its economic and political problems. Gorbachev initiated reforms to reshape the Soviet Union. Due to the reforms in the Soviets, its foreign policy entirely changed. Russia gained a defensive characteristic in terms of foreign policy. In this era, improving the economic and political systems became a priority rather than competing with the US. Gorbachev believed that his reforms could only be successful when new principles in the foreign policy of the

USSR were employed. This concluded with a limitation in the Middle Eastern affairs of the USSR. Considering that the Middle East was a racetrack of the competition between the US and USSR, the Cold War rhetoric drastically diminished in this period. However, Syria remained an exception in Soviet foreign policy towards the Middle East. This proves Syria had great significance for the Soviet Union. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation employed a pro-American foreign policy agenda. In spite of this attitude, Russian foreign policy kept its basic defensive mode at the heart of its strategy.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the successor state emerged in the new world system. Russia as a continuator state of the USSR adopted new political and economic systems and declared that Russia was a democratic and law-based state without a dominant ideology. All of these changes made Russia more flexible to build relations and make better ties with other actors. During the first few years of the Yeltsin administration, Russia employed a pro-American foreign policy agenda, and this caused very limited relations with the Middle Eastern countries including Syria. However, in the following years Russian foreign policy shifted its position back to an anti-Western perspective. In 1996, with Yevgeny Primakov in charge of the foreign ministry, Soviet foreign policy adopted a pragmatic approach. The concept of 'near abroad' became the primary objective of foreign policy. Moreover, due to Primakov's objection to the pro-Western policies, foreign policy shifted in an independent multi-vectored direction. Furthermore, Primakov believed Middle Eastern affairs would bring benefits to the USSR. Moscow started to sell weapons to Syria in 1996. In 1999, we see that the two signed a peaceful cooperation agreement on nuclear power.

From the 2000s, Russia had the momentum to reinvigorate its economy and to stabilize the political environment. Putin built up the new Russian foreign policy agenda and got away from the pro-Western direction to a more independent direction. This new and anti-Western Russian foreign policy created competition between the West and Russia, which was also reminiscent of a revival of the Cold War. However, in the first few years under Putin, Russian-Syrian relations could not be developed because the priority of Russian foreign policy was based on reestablishing Russian control over Transcaucasia and Central Asia. This resulted in limited relations between the two.

In this period, the Second Gulf War was a turning point for the new Russian foreign policy agenda in the Middle East. Putin rapidly focused on Middle Eastern affairs so as not to lose influence in the region. While the international community put pressure on Syria due to its terror related situation, Russia appeared to be a supporter of Syria. Russia did not want to miss the chance to bolster its strategic interests by losing its traditional ally either to the US or any other Western power. After the meeting between Putin and Assad, Russia-Syria relations strengthened with several agreements on economic and strategic issues. Russia in this period upgraded its role in the Middle East by accruing strategic benefits based on their relations with Syria. One can see the evolution in Russian-Syrian relations over the period of 2005 to 2010. It is seen that Syria became one of the largest customers for Russian arms as in the Cold War era, and large-scale energy agreements were agreed on and signed in this period. However, Syria's strategic importance to Russia has always been more important than their economic relations. Russia considered Syria as its only remaining traditional ally in the Middle East. Due to that, Syria had a strategic significance to help the Russians maintain a presence in the Eastern Mediterranean so as to be more effective in Middle Eastern affairs. Russia in this period gradually upgraded its role in the Middle East up until the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War.

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