

## **Russia's Military Intervention in the Syrian Crisis**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this descriptive and analytical study is to investigate the reasons for Russia's military intervention in the Syrian crisis. The question is, why did Russia intervene militarily in the Syrian crisis? The findings show that there is a link between Russia's involvement in the crisis and its leaders' understanding of their country's position in the international system. From the Russian leader's point of view, their country is a great power in the structure of the multi-polar international system. Therefore, the country must maintain its presence in geopolitical areas. But the overthrow of the Syrian government, which is Russia's only ally in the region, will reduce the country's position not only in the Middle East, but also in the international system. The geopolitical dynamics before the Arab uprisings in Russia's periphery also jeopardized its position in the structure of the international system. From their point of view, the Arab uprisings are considered to be the continuation of the same declining trend. Therefore, Russia's intervention in the Syrian crisis was a reaction to this limitative process.

**Keywords:** Russia, Syria Crisis, Great Power Rivalries, Middle East, Neoclassical Realism.

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## **Introduction**

Undoubtedly, the most important political event in recent years in the Middle East was the Arab uprising. This process - also known as Islamic Awakening, Arab Awakening, Public Uprising, Arab Spring, Arab Revolution - has greatly affected the political and security situation in the Middle East. The great powers have also intervened in various forms in the crises caused by these uprisings. One of these powers is Russia. Although Russia's political elites in the early months of the crisis in the wake of the Arab uprisings took a position similar to that of the West, they changed their course of action afterwards and put their strategic interests at the forefront of their actions. The culmination of this policy was manifested in Russia's military intervention in the Syrian crisis.

The positions taken by the Russian government in the early days of the crisis in Syria were generally based on exerting pressure on the Assad government. Such a stance was in line with the positions of Turkey, western countries, and the Arab states concerning the Syrian crisis at that time. But Moscow's position soon changed to its determination to support the Assad government in various ways including in providing economic aid, arms sales and extending political support to the Syrian government. The ultimate Moscow's aid to Damascus was its direct military intervention in the crisis by launching air and missile strikes against the positions of the opposition forces and the extremists.

Russia's support for the Syrian government is an exception, compared to Moscow's repeated intervention in the crises in the Middle East since 1991. Generally, Russia did not tend to militarily intervene in the crises emerged in that region. For example, whether there were strategic relations between Russia and Iraq under Saddam Hussein Regime, when Iraq crisis appeared in 2003 Moscow just opposed to occupation by American-led coalition against it. The relations between Russia and Muammar Gaddafi regime was the same when the crisis in Libya came into view. So, the question here is: "why did Russia intervene militarily in the Syrian crisis?" The research hypothesis is that "the concern of Russian leaders about the decline of their country's role and position in the Middle East and the international system led them to intervene militarily in the Syrian

crisis". Before addressing this question, it is necessary to briefly describe the theory of Neoclassical Realism, which is the basis of the analysis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Neoclassical realism is a combination of classical realism and Neorealism theories. This theory was put forward in response to the reductionism that Neoliberalism was suffering from. Realism (in other words, structural realism) is in fact a framework for explaining/analyzing international politics and basically had no claim to an analysis of the behaviors (foreign policy) of actors (Kitchen, 2010: 118). However, some researchers and policymakers have also used this theory to analyze the foreign policy of countries and sometimes highlight its weaknesses. From this point of view, the measures taken by the commentators of the neoclassical realism theory have been to strengthen the capabilities of the paradigm of realism in foreign policy analysis by combining the variables of the internal level and the system level.

What was meant by the System-level variables was what Waltz explained; that is, the structure of the international system resulted from the distribution of relative power in the system. They also refer to the domestic-level variables other than human nature that were previously seen in classic works (such as Morgenthau). Strategic culture, the perception of leaders, weapons and military technology, the intentions of governments, the structure of the political system, etc. are among the issues that were considered by those who are known as neoclassical realists.

The term neoclassical realism was first coined by Gideon Rose for this group of researchers. As known, other neoclassical realists included Jeffrey Taliaferro, William Wohlforth, Randall *Schweller*, Steve Labelle, Barry Posen, Robert Jarvis, Alistair Murray and Thomas Christensen. By presenting an analytical framework or presenting new concepts, each of them sought to cover the weaknesses of structural realist theory in foreign policy analysis. Therefore, the number of variables and analytical frameworks presented in this theory is multiple.

As mentioned above, neoclassical realism does not reject the assumptions of structural realism, but seeks to recover it in order to be more capable of analyzing foreign policy. It seems that the main goal of the commentators of neoclassical realism has been to advance the realist approach. "There is a lot of paradigmatic realism with dependent variables," says Wohlforth. Thus, the inclusion of a new theory in the set of realistic theories is not prohibited and does not necessarily negate previous theories (Wohlforth, 2011: 445). *Schweller* also believes that realism has a core and a support belt, and that is why neoclassical realism, as a new theory can further enrich the realism paradigm through the support belt, which is said to be ignored by neorealism (see: Feaver, 2000: 174).

Since neoclassical realism seeks to answer "why" (not how), as a result, this theory has an explanatory approach. In fact, this approach has been developed with the aim of explaining foreign policy. The reason why this paper uses neoclassical realism as an approach is due to the multiplicity of variables that these theorists have used to explain foreign policy. Interestingly, even variables such as perception and mindset are considered for this purpose. These are the basis of the explanatory framework provided by Jervis and Rose. However, the selection of domestic variables depends on the subject (*Schweller*, 1997: 927).

Neoclassical realists see themselves within the paradigm of realism and therefore accept the main assumptions of this paradigm. For example, their emphasis is more on power than anything else, and similar to realists, they define power on the basis of material and military power. Classical realists are trying to bridge the gap between micro and macro analyses. Not only do they pay attention to systemic factors, including regional and international structures and dynamics, but also to the perceptions and domestic structure. With these two levels of analysis, neoclassical realists seek to explain the behavior of states.

From Rose's point of view, neoclassical realism includes domestic and external variables. Supporters of this theory believe that the scope and purpose of foreign policy in a country come primarily from its place in the international system, and especially its material capability. That's why they are realistic, but they go even further and see the

impact of capabilities on foreign policy as indirect and complex. Because systemic pressures must be translated through the variables involved at the unit level, they are therefore called neoclassical (Rose, 1998: 146).

Rose believes that systemic pressures and constraints, through intermediate-level variables such as perceptions and understanding of leaders and decision-makers as well as the structure of government have an impact on foreign policy. Therefore, understanding the relationship between the distribution of relative power on the one hand and foreign policy on the other, requires an examination of domestic and international levels and contexts in which foreign policy is formulated and implemented. Thus, it is necessary to examine how the distribution of power at the system level, together with the motivations and perceptions of domestic actors in the interconnected environment in which they live, make foreign policy (see: Rose, 1998).

Thus, in foreign policy analysis, based on the theory of neoclassical realism according to what Rose has said, we are faced with three categories of variables, which includes the independent variable of the structure of the international system and the relative position of the state in it, the dependent variable of foreign policy and the intermediate variable of the perception of leaders and the structure of the political system. The main goal of neoclassical realism theory is to add domestic-level variables between the motivators and drivers of the system (on the one hand) and foreign policies (on the other). The structure of the system as the quality of distribution of power and the level of foreign threats alone cannot explain foreign policy behavior of countries, and in fact a combination of international restrictions and opportunities, the level and extent of foreign threats and domestic opportunities and restrictions must be taken into account in the analysis of foreign policy behaviors. This is done in such a way that the meaning and definition of stabilization and changing the distribution of power and threats and external conditions has a decisive role in determining the reaction of other countries (as Taliaferro et al. quoted by Dehghani, 2011: 80-279).

Thus, neoclassical realism explains the mediating role of governments and governors in foreign policy making by explaining

the various ways and mechanisms through which the state, as a central body of government, assesses opportunities arising from the anarchic system in order to formulate and implement a specific foreign policy. To analyze Russia's military intervention in the Syrian crisis, first of all, it is necessary to see how the Russian leaders understand the structure of the international system and the relative position of their country in this structure.

### **Russian Elite Perception of their Country's Position in International System**

Russia's elites believe that the international system is in a state of transition, as the weight and position of the United States has been steadily declining and, in verse, the role of new centers of power is increasing. The result of such a situation is the emergence of a multipolar structure, in which Russia is one of the great centers of power and will manifest itself as a "great power." The Russians' attitude towards the structure of the system is revealed in a document submitted by the Russian Foreign Ministry in March 2007. The document states that the US-led unipolar system is in decline due to the Iraq crisis, and is gradually being replaced by a multipolar structure (Ischer, 2007: 5). This approach is also seen in other Russian foreign policy documents. For example, in the section on general provisions of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept Document presented by Vladimir Putin in 2016, the structure of the international system is introduced in a multipolar situation (Russian Foreign Policy Concept Document, 2016). Such an attitude can be seen in the statements of other senior Russian policymakers.

There is a relative consensus among the Russian elite and society about the status of their country as a great power. In addition, the nostalgia of the Tsarist and Soviet eras and the grief of losing their former status in those days were the common denominator of all these tendencies, including Atlanticists, Eurasianists, Nationalists, Slavists, and others (Weitz, 2006: 15).

Putin played a key role in stabilizing Russia's perception as a great power. After taking power, he criticized the ideological approaches to foreign policy, and tried to establish the idea of Russia as a "great modern power," and worked hard to make it happen. Meanwhile,

while the West stressed the need for Russian loyalty and commitment as (what they said) a normative power, Putin preferred a "normative great power" with a more far-reaching maneuvering space. He made it clear at the outset that Russia had been a great power in the past because of its cultural, economic, and geopolitical characteristics, and would continue to do so in the future (see: Oldberg, 2007: 13).

Putin's most important statement in this regard, expressing his nostalgic interest in Russia's former "great power" status, was revealed in April 2005 by describing the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest "geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (Weits, 2006: 15). Legal approval for the use of the figure of the eagle (which symbolized the tsarist era) in governmental insignia and the adaptation of parts of the Soviet national anthem for inclusion in the Russian national anthem are other manifestations of this nostalgia. Another example of Putin's nostalgia is his famous statement: "He who is not upset by the collapse of the Soviet Union has no heart, and he who thinks of reviving it does not have wisdom (as quoted in Nouri, 2010:144-145).

By emphasizing in the "normative modern great power" strategy, Putin quickly moved Russia's foreign policy toward engagement with the west and new global arrangements, and sought to pursue national interests and achieve a better understanding of global issues and find a mechanism for the search for a common solution through achieving a common understanding with the West (Koolae and Nouri, 2010: 218). Nevertheless, developments in the international system have taken place against Russia's policy positions, and as a result, Putin has changed his country's foreign policy. Given the president's position in Russia's political structure, Putin has been able to make a significant impact on the elites and the Russian society with regard to their country's international position.

Basically, the Russian president has more executive power than any other individual in the Russian government's structure, which is why it can be argued that the political system in Russia is both federal and presidential. The President's powers are described in Chapter Four of the Constitution. Paragraph 1 of Article 80 of the Constitution states that: The President of the Russian Federation is the head of a state. Paragraph 3 of the same principle also states that: The President of the

Federation shall determine the general principles of domestic and foreign policies of the State in accordance with the Constitution of the Russian Federation. Clause 4 also stipulates that the President shall be the head of the Representation of the Russian Federation at home and abroad.

Chapter 4 of Russia federation constitution (including articles 80 to 93) specifies the position and authorities of the president. For instance, Article 83 of the Russian Constitution introduces other dimensions of the President's authorities. According to this principle, the President of the country has the authority to appoint the President of the Russian Federation (Prime Minister) with the consent of the latter and to decide on its resignation, to chair the meetings of the Government of the Russian Federation, to form and lead the Federal Security Council and to appoint Russia's top commanders of the armed forces and high-ranking diplomatic representatives of the country in foreign countries and international organizations (after consulting with the relevant committees or commissions in the Federal Assembly).

Article 86 of the Russian Constitution also states that the President of the Russian Federation has the authority to direct and oversee the Federation's foreign policy, to lead negotiations and sign international treaties and agreements, and accept credentials of the diplomatic representatives. According to Article 87, the President is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces. According to this principle, declaring of martial law and the state of emergency are also the authorities of the president. Article 89 also states that the President has the authority of conflict resolution of Russian citizens and grant asylum, government badges and honorary titles, high military ranks, special titles, as well as the right of granting pardon. In addition to the above-mentioned authorities, the president is given the authority to issue executive orders (Online Judgment, 2017). These cases reflect the president's substantial position in Russia's political structure, and thus his influence in Russia's foreign policymaking is expected.

In addition to the leaders' signals, the Russian people's understanding of great power position stems from their contemporary history as well as geographical and industrial advantages. The Russians are a nation whose contemporary history is full of conquest and victory. Tsarist Russia extended its territory from Eastern Europe



to North America in the 18th and 19th centuries and even advanced to the heart of Europe at some point. They fought and defeated the Finns, Germans, Poles, Ukrainians and Muslims. The Russians thwarted two major attacks by the then-dominant powers (France under Napoleon and Germany under Hitler). For a period of time, the Russians even played the role of leadership of the Conservative faction and the European monarchies against the Democratic faction of this continent (Naqibzadeh, 1993: 3-41).

With the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Russians, in the context of the Soviet Union, claimed to have saved the proletariat (the working class) from the exploitation of the bourgeoisie, and thus introduced themselves as the leader of the anti-imperialist global movement. They stood against the Western bloc for half a century as the Eastern superpower. The Russians were also the first country to explore the space during this period. They even rose to the occasion of the arrival of a new civilization in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and emphasized their role in defending the Georgians against the Turks, as well as the Ukrainians against the Poles in the 17th century (Cohen, 2005: 1-2).

Despite the collapse of the empire, the idea of Russia's status as a great power has never been forgotten. It is as if this is a lasting and prominent feature of Russian culture. Accordingly, politicians and the people of this country went through difficult times during the 1990s. It was annoying for them to find themselves in a position inferior to their self-perception from a historical stand-point. When Russian politicians went to Western leaders to ask for loans, or when the financial crisis of the mid-1990s pushed the country to the brink of internal collapse, or at a time when Western powers, especially the US, were spreading their influence to East Europe and Soviet arena, the Russians felt frustrated, and dissatisfied. Therefore, the reaction to such an unpleasant situation was natural. However, the Russians have always taken pride in their prominent international standing. Despite all odds, Russia has overcome many difficulties with the help of rising oil prices since the early 2000s.

The Russian people now live in the largest country in the world. They take advantage of their country's unique geostrategic position. Russia dominates the Heartland (nominated by Halford Mackinder)

and is adjacent to strategic regions of Europe, Asia and the Middle East. In addition, Russia has an extensive hydroelectric facility in the Dnieper, one of the two main centers of military power, and ranks first in the use of oil and gas energy reserves (jointly), etc. All these give a sense of self-importance to the Russians as a great power. However, there have been developments at home and abroad that have downgraded their country's relative position in the international system.

### **Russia's response to the decline of its position in the international system**

The first feeling of decline was felt in the 1990s. Separatism in Chechnya, economic decline, corruption in the field of elites were among the most important internal problems in Russia. In addition, the US and its allies have taken steps to reduce its international weight. These cases provoked a Russian reaction. So their relationship fell out of cooperation and entered onto the path of competition.

Among the most important Western activities that have degraded Russia's position include international unilateralism, ignoring Russia's considerations and benefits in the Balkan crisis, the expansion of NATO and the European Union to the east, the expansion of the US presence in the Soviet sphere, the US and Europe joint efforts to free itself from European dependence on Russian gas, western support for Turkey to expand its influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, the deployment of a missile defense shield in Eastern Europe, criticism of the human rights situation in Russia, support for color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and some other countries, the overthrow of Saddam's regime (as Russia's most important ally in the Middle East) outside international norms in Russian leaders' view, the imposition of democratic reforms on Middle Eastern governments, the inclusion of NATO in the region's security equations, and so on.

From the Russian leader's point of view, the above-mentioned factors reduced the position of their country in the structure of the international system (as quoted by Nouri, 2010: 145). However, as discussed above, the Russians see themselves not only as one of the centers of power in the international system, but also as one of the

influential powers in the Middle East. Obviously, Russia will react to these actions.

The efforts of Russian Atlanticists such as Boris Yeltsin, Victor Chernomyrdin and Andre Kozyrev (president, prime minister and foreign minister, respectively) failed to realize the aspirations of the Russian people. But as Putin came to power, Russia gradually regained its identity and made good progress toward becoming a major power in line of international norms. This trend continued during the Dmitry Medvedev era with brief changes in tactics. Russia's policy of restoring power and position was first implemented in the Soviet Union, where Russia had the appropriate tools and access. Subsequently, by consolidating its position in this region, multidimensional initiatives to develop influence in other strategic areas were also designed and implemented (Bishara, 2015: 2).

After Russia's economic recovery, which was largely driven by rising oil and gas prices, Putin took significant steps to improve the country's domestic and foreign situation. Among his most important domestic actions was the suppression of separatism in Chechnya (Nouri, 2008: 101; Pipes, 1997: 75-76). Activities were also taken to rebuild military capabilities, the most important of which were the production of new strategic missiles such as the Topol. M and Satan, the development of missile defense systems (including the S400 and S500), the deployment of long-range Voronezh early-warning radars, and the development of advanced military equipment. They also realized their weakness in the military structure during South Ossetia and Abkhazia crisis (2008) and therefore sought to improve them.

But Russian leaders have been aware of the limitations of military power. In fact, some threats are not controlled by the military, and in some cases, the use of military force has adverse consequences. In this regard, finding new tools of power in the modern world has become a strategic priority for the Russians. Thus, trying to acquire other tools of power made Putin aware of the role and importance of oil and gas resources and encouraged him to use them as strategic weapons. The Kremlin repeatedly used energy tools to prevent the expansion of West's sphere of influence into the Soviet Union (Nouri, 2008: 114). Another part of his quest for great power was to promote Russia's soft power. In addition, Russia has repeatedly used its cyber capabilities in

recent years to achieve its goals. These include manipulation of the US and French presidential elections as claimed. It is as if Russia has understood the globalization of communications and information, and in this new field it is also seeking to acquire elements of power.

In addition to improving domestic power, Russia has also considered increasing its sphere of influence in the external environment. One of the most important measures was to strengthen the United Nations and the Security Council (Covington, 2015: 19). In addition, in 1993, Sergei Karaganov referred to the Soviet Union as Russia's "Near Abroad." This act was a clear signal that Russia has identified its vital and hegemonic geostrategic interests (Rumer, 1995: 53). The Kremlin has also taken steps to maintain and develop foreign military bases. Although it closed the "Lourdes" base in Cuba and "Cam Ranh" in Vietnam due to political reasons, but the military facilities of the 201<sup>st</sup> Division in Tajikistan were expanded to the level of an air base, and increased its equipment at the Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan. It maintained its military base in Moldova with 1,500 troops, kept its forces in Georgia despite pressure, and revived the Tartus naval base in Syria (Nouri, 2008, 104). The use of Cam Ranh air-sea base has resumed since 2013 (Brunnstrom, 2015).

Another way for Russia to return to the status of great power is to participate in resolving international crises. This is also stated in the Russian Foreign Policy Document in paragraph "C" of the General and Section 34 and 92- in the field of mediation in the Middle East crisis in the form of the Quartet Group (Russian Foreign Policy Concept Document, 2016). Basically, the great powers want to intervene in international crises. In fact, involvement in international crises is a measure of an actor's importance.

Another move by Russia to restore the position of the great power is to expand relations with the countries of the world. Putin and his Eurasianist team, learning from the dilemmas of Western foreign policy, tried to develop their relations with non-Western countries as they had in the first half of the 1990s (Larouel, 2009: 1-20). Therefore, not only European countries, but also Middle Eastern, Asian and even Latin American countries have been considered by Moscow. The basis of this policy is the development of relations around economic issues. In this regard, after the tension in Russia's

relations with the West over the deployment of missile defense shields and, more importantly, the criticism of Russia's relations with this group during the Ukraine crisis (2014), Moscow has given a more significant position to non-Western countries in foreign policy.

In parallel with the above-mentioned measures, Russia tried to play a role in the management of world affairs by forming political and diplomatic arrangements on a regional and thematic scale. For example, participation in the BRICS group and the role of the leader in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (with China) can be mentioned. Interestingly, the United States had previously requested to be a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an observer state, but Russia refused. However, Russia has activated its policy not only in Eurasia but also in the Middle East.

Russia is aware of the importance of the Middle East and the United States' efforts to dominate it. Developments in the Middle East could spread to Eurasia, so the strengthening of American power and influence in the Middle East paves the way for its further presence and influence in Eurasia. In addition, some Middle Eastern countries have called for Russia's presence in the region, calling it necessary to balance the West. The region is also a hotbed of extremism, and Russia needs to expand its ties with the Middle East to contain the threat. In addition, resolving issues facing the United States in the Middle East will force it to accept Russia's role and participation, and in this way Russia can create opportunities for dialogue, cooperation and concessions from the West.

Ultimately, the Middle East has shown serious resistance to American hegemony and so there is room for US control in the region and to disrupt its policies elsewhere, including in Eastern Europe. Russia-US relations in the Middle East affairs show that the region has become one of the most important centers of competition for the two sides, with Russia seeking to be present and maintain its influence in the region, but the US policy is to reduce its position and push it back to the level of a marginal and ineffective actor.

Therefore, the policy of reviving the status of Russia's great power, forces it to engage in the Middle East. In this regard, the country has developed trade and economic relations with all countries in the region, especially Iran, Turkey, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Syria

and Libya. Putin traveled to the Middle East in 2005 and 2007 to sign several commercial, economic and arms deals. One of the most important of these measures was the renewal of the Qarna.2 oil field contract with Saddam regime. Also, contracts for the completion of Bushehr nuclear power plant and contracts for the construction of nuclear power plants in Jordan, Egypt, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates were signed (see: Deilami and Shoja, 2010: 52-93). It goes without saying that the development of relations with the independent countries of the Middle East was systematically proposed by Alexander Dugin, known as main Russian Eurasianism thinker (Bishara, 2015: 3). However, the Arab revolutions took place at a time when Russia was developing its relations with the Middle East and maintaining its influence in the region.

### **Russia's Response to the Arab Uprisings**

The Russians have a pessimistic view of the Arab uprisings in the Middle East. According to them, what happened in the form of the Arab uprising is a continuation of the same trends and processes that have led to the decline of Russia's position in the Middle East and the international system, and therefore Moscow has taken a stand against these events. From the Russian point of view, the Arab revolutions are the West's tool for overthrowing independent governments and replacing them with Western governments, although some extremists have also been able to seize the opportunity to take control of some areas.

Following the civil war in Libya, Russia lost Muammar Gaddafi, one of its most important allies in North Africa. In this war, NATO's naval and air force supported the opposition. Libya then disintegrated, paving the way for extremist influence. Libya's new government has refused to accept previous agreements with Russia. In Egypt, the secular government of Hosni Mubarak was overthrown and replaced by Muhammad Morsi (one of the leading members of Muslim Brotherhood). Earlier, the Muslim Brotherhood was included in the Russian terrorist group's list in support of the Chechens' separatists. Of course, by Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's coup against the Morsi Brotherhood government greatly alleviated Moscow's concerns (Mc Cants and Wittes, 2017).

Thus, the insurgency and inflammation in the Middle East that erupted following the Arab uprisings was in some cases against Russia's strategic interests and therefore degraded its position. Under such circumstances, only Syria remained an ally of Russia in the region, which was embroiled in internal strife. According to Allison, Syria is the final point of Russia's presence in the region (Allison, 2013: 803). The Russians observed that their regional and trans-regional rivals in the Middle East (such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, the United States and some European countries) openly and covertly assist the opponents and even extremists in Syria politically, economically and militarily. Thus, if the Syrian government were overthrown, Russia's role would decline and the role of pro-opponents and extremist countries would be strengthened. In this way, Russia became a marginal actor in the Middle East that lessened its international position. It, consequently, degrades its position in the structure of the international system.

Russian politicians have Libya's experience in mind. During that crisis, NATO went beyond the Security Council resolution and prepared a large-scale offensive to change the Libyan government. Under the 1973 resolution, NATO only had to support Libyan civilians in the civil war. However, shortly after the start of military operations in the country, the organization joined forces with opponents of Gaddafi's regime and launched attacks on the country's army. NATO's navy had already closed the country's sea routes so that Gaddafi's regime could not meet its needs by sea. In this way, the air and sea umbrella created by NATO gave opponents a chance to overthrow Gaddafi.

This was met with a backlash from the Russians. Because they did not think that NATO would go beyond the terms set by the 1973 resolution and change the regime. Moscow saw itself as an absolute loser in this campaign (Karami, 2012: 7). These developments have had a positive effect on Russia's policy toward the Syrian civil war. Before defeating of Gaddafi by NATO's mission, Russia's position was mainly to take side with the West in putting pressure on the Assad government. But after that, that policy had not been continued and Kremlin supported the Syrian government.

The backing of the Syrian government had politically, economically and militarily aspects. Preventing the adoption of resolutions against the Syrian government (McKirby, 2017: 82), participation in the political settlement of the crisis (Mansourov, 2017: 17) and the media's support for the Assad government (Casula, 2013: 4-7) were Russia's political aid to the Assad government. Also, providing some of the goods and items needed by the Syrian people, printing the banknotes needed by the Syrian government (as quoted by Stott and Nakhil, 2013: 69) and helping the Syrian government to deactivate European and US oil embargoes are the most important dimensions of Russia's economic assistance to the Syrian government. In addition, the Russians provided the Syrian army with weapons on several occasions to help it in its practical confrontation with the opposition and extremists, as well as its possible war with regional and international enemies-especially the United States and NATO forces (Trenin, 2012).

Russia's actions in support of the Syrian government have intensified following the escalation of tensions in Russia's relations with the West over the Ukraine crisis (2014). The Kremlin's actions in Ukraine crisis (such as secession of Crimea's from the Ukraine and annexation it to Russia's mainland, supports for the separatists in eastern Ukraine, threats of the new government of Ukraine, and so on) have strained Russia's relations with the West. The West also reacted to Russia's actions, the most important of which was the boycott of some Russian individuals and companies. Barack Obama also urged Arabs to increase their oil production so that the Russians would be in economic trouble as oil prices fell (Critchlow, 2014). These activities positively affected Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis. Moscow intended to reduce the pressure caused by the crisis in Ukraine (which occurred on the country's eastern border) by intervening militarily in the Syrian crisis.

But another factor that especially prompted Moscow to intervene militarily in the Syrian crisis was the subsequent defeat of the Syrian army in the civil war. In the summer of 2015, the Syrian army was defeated on several fronts by the oppositions and extremists and was forced to retreat. ISIS forces dominated on Tadmor and northern Aleppo. Opposition forces also pushed the Syrian army to retreat to



the important city of Aleppo and part of Idlib province. By the end of the summer 2015, the government's forces controlled only 17 percent of Syria territory (IHS Jane's Intelligence Review, 2015). The continuation of this process would have led to the overthrow of the Assad government. So the Russians are convinced that in order to maintain this government, they must intervene in the Syrian crisis.

To justify this, the Assad government sent an official request to the Russian state, and so Russia deployed a series of offensive aircraft at the Hamimim base in Latakia. Russian military attacks on oppositions and extremists began on September 30, 2015. In addition to airstrikes, the Russian military has repeatedly fired missiles at opposition and extremists positions. There have also been repeated reports of Russian forces on the battlefield from Western news agencies, but Russian officials have claimed that they are military advisers and have no role in the field (Tsvetkova and Zverev, 2016). Following the Russian military's intervention in the Syrian crisis, the balance of power on the battlefield shifted in favor of the Russian military, and even they were able to regain control of much of the lost territories.

The military operation in Syria is an opportunity for Moscow to enter into the world politics. Entering into the Syrian conflict will increase Russia's maneuverability on the Ukraine issue and other dispute fields in strategic rivalry with the West. With this policy, Russia has been able to negotiate with the United States on an equal footing on Syrian issues, and has also been able to turn Ukraine and Crimea into a not-so-priority crisis from the Western perspective. As a result of Russia's influence in the crisis, Moscow was able to establish a ceasefire on the battlefields between the government and the opposition in a situation similar to that of Washington. Thus, although Russia failed to use its air and missile strikes in Syria as bargaining tools against the West and gain its desired concessions, but it was able to convince its Western rivals that without Russia, there would be no solution to fundamental security issues in the interests of that country (Koolae and Soltaninejad, 2016: 126).

Overall, Russia views and assesses the transition processes in the Middle East against its own interests. During this process, Moscow has lost its sphere of influence in the region. From this point of view, if Syria, Russia's last base and sphere of influence in the Middle East,

controlled by Western-backed groups or extremists, Russia would be reduced to the level of a marginal actor in the Middle East. This would have a negative effect on Russia's position in the international system, and so intervention in the crisis was necessary to prevent the decline of its power.

### **Conclusion**

Some macro and micro variables affected on Russia intervention in Syria crisis, both decrease Russia position in regional and international area. Before the Arab revolutions, some Western actions led to the decline of Russia's status in the international system and the Middle East. Moscow believed that the continuation of this process would greatly limit its sphere of influence. In the view of the Russian leaders, the success of the Arab uprisings would lead to the decline of its regional position. Because the Arab uprisings, in some cases, led to the overthrow of pro-Russian and authoritarian governments, its continuation will turn Russia's position in the Middle East into a marginal power. Thus, Putin's decision to intervene in the Syrian crisis was made in order to preserve the status quo and prevent its further decline.

Although at the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the Russian government's position was based on pressure on Damascus. But a series of regional and domestic changes (in Syria) led Moscow to vary its policy and support the Assad government. The culmination of this action is Russia's military intervention in the crisis. NATO's involvement in overthrowing Gaddafi's government has played a major role in changing Russia's approach to the Syrian crisis. Following the incident, Russia provided political support to Syria and gradually provided it with economic assistance and weapons. But tensions between Russia and the West over the Ukraine crisis, as well as a shift in the balance of power to the detriment of the Syrian army in the civil war prompted the Kremlin to intervene militarily in the crisis. Russia's policy has kept the Assad government as its last ally in the Middle East, preventing further decline in its position not only in the region, but also in the international arena.

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