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ARTICLE**The American-Russian Rivalry in the Middle East: An Analysis of Dimensions and Implications****Badreddine Laifaoui**

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**Abstract**

The Middle East is considered one of the most strategically important regions in the world due to its vast natural resources and geographic location connecting three continents. This has made it a focal point of conflict and rivalry among major powers, primarily the United States and Russia. This study aims to analyze the dimensions of the U.S.-Russia rivalry in the Middle East by focusing on each side's strategic objectives and the impact of this competition on regional stability. The study finds that the United States seeks to ensure energy security, support Israel, and contain Iranian influence, while Russia aims to restore its former Soviet-era influence, secure a permanent presence in warm waters, and counterbalance Western power. The study concludes that this rivalry is not merely a struggle for influence but represents a reconfiguration of regional alliances and directly affects the course of regional crises, particularly in Syria and Iran. As a result, the future of stability in the Middle East remains contingent upon the persistence of this geopolitical conflict.

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**Introduction**

The Middle East is one of the most sensitive and complex regions on the international stage due to its strategic geographic location, vast natural resources, and the political and religious tensions that pervade it. With the intensification of rivalry between major powers—particularly the United States and Russia—the challenges to security and stability in the region have grown, raising important questions about the nature of this competition and its impact on the future of the Middle East.

The central problem addressed in this study is: How does the U.S.-Russia rivalry affect regional security and stability in the Middle East? Does this competition enhance geopolitical influence, or does it exacerbate instability?

Based on this problem, the study proposes two main hypotheses: First, that the rivalry between the United States and Russia strengthens the geopolitical influence of both

powers in the Middle East through various tools such as political and military support for regional allies. Second that this rivalry contributes to the intensification of local conflicts and disputes thereby threatening regional stability and hindering efforts toward development and peace.

**1. The Strategic Objectives of Both Parties**

**1.1 The United States:** The geostrategic importance of the Middle East in American calculations—both historically and in the present—has been linked to several vital factors that render the region central to U.S. policies. Historically, the Middle East has been a crossroads of civilizations and a zone of competition among great powers due to its location connecting the three continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa. It also serves as a key trade route and a major source of energy—particularly oil and gas—for global markets. (Afnoqh)

During the Cold War, the Middle East was a stage for rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, with each power seeking to expand its influence through

various regional alliances and alignments. The United States focused on traditional powers such as Iran under the Shah and Israel, given their geostrategic locations and regional influence. Countries like Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon witnessed proxy wars and power struggles between the two superpowers. This rivalry formed part of the balance-of-power equation that shaped U.S. policy toward the region. A notable milestone was the realignment of regional alliances—such as the restructuring of Iran’s foreign policy in the 1970s from alignment with the Soviet Union to alignment with the United States (Goodarzi, 2002).

- **Ensuring Energy Security:** For decades, the United States has sought to protect oil resources in the Middle East due to their vital role in the global economy.

The Middle East is a major source of global energy, and the United States plays a central role in the region to ensure the stable flow of oil to global markets, particularly European ones. Since World War II, the region has held special strategic significance.

Although U.S. dependence on imported oil from the Middle East has declined due to increased domestic production, the region continues to play a critical role in global energy markets, influencing global prices and the economic stability of the United States. The Middle East holds approximately 48% of the world’s oil reserves and 40% of its natural gas reserves. These resources make the region vital to the global economy, directly affecting both American and global energy security. Additionally, the region is a hub for global maritime transport, with around 20% of oil trade passing through the Strait of Hormuz—making any disruption there a serious threat to international economic stability (Raimi & Newell, 2024).

- **Security of Israel:** The United States was the first country to recognize Israel as an independent state on May 14, 1948, when President Harry Truman issued a statement of recognition shortly after Israel declared its statehood on the same day. Diplomatic relations were officially established when U.S. Ambassador James Grover McDonald presented his credentials on March 28, 1949. (Morris, 2008) Since then, Israel has become—and remains—the United States’ most important partner in the Middle East.

The two countries are closely linked by historical and cultural ties, as well as shared interests. Ensuring Israel’s military and political superiority in the region is a strategic priority for Washington.

Historically, Israel has enjoyed strong support from the United States—to the extent that Arabs in the Middle East have generally perceived Israel as a proxy state of the West in their midst. Conversely, Israel is seen as exerting undue influence over U.S. foreign policy in the region. Although Bernard Reich and Shannon Powers do not deny the existence of a “special relationship” between the United States and Israel—particularly with regard to America’s ongoing commitment to Israel’s security—they point out that the two countries do not always agree on specific issues. While

broadly aligned, the United States and Israel often clash over particular details and methods for achieving shared goals. This dynamic is shaped by the differences between the global interests of the United States, as the world’s sole superpower, and Israel’s narrower, more regionally focused concerns.(Cleveland & Bunton, 2024)

Tensions between the two governments have flared and subsided over efforts to make progress in peace talks with the Palestinians, especially when such progress has been tied to changes in Israel’s settlement policies in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. As administrations have changed in both countries, their perspectives have often differed on the status of the occupied territories, the construction of new Israeli settlements, and the creation of a Palestinian state. Nevertheless, support for Israel remains.(Bernard & Shannon, 2013)

The United States affirms its unwavering commitment to maintaining and strengthening Israel’s ability to deter and defend against its enemies. This stance aligns with the long-standing security relationship between the two countries and reflects America’s steadfast commitment to Israel’s security—especially in terms of preserving its qualitative military edge and its capacity to defend itself against any threat or combination of threats. The United States reiterates that these commitments are supported by both major political parties and are not merely moral obligations, but also strategic imperatives of vital importance to U.S. national security.(Drezner 2013)

- **Containing Iranian Influence:** The United States works to limit Iran’s regional influence through military and diplomatic alliances with the Gulf states.

After the fall of the Shah, the U.S. viewed Iran as a country that had deviated from the political trajectory it had once supported. American policies contributed to the expansion of Iran’s role in Iraq, and following Iran’s political defiance, its influence extended to Lebanon, including support for Hezbollah. The Iranian nuclear file remains one of the most contentious regional and international issues, particularly between Iran and Israel. It is perceived as a nuclear threat to the United States and Western nations. The U.S. has sought to apply pressure on Iran through the United Nations Security Council to halt its nuclear program.(Al-Housni, 2023, p. 72)

**2- Russia:** Russia’s ties with the Middle East date back centuries and provide a valuable foundation to build upon. From its 18th-century quest for warm-water ports and access to the Mediterranean Sea, to its 19th-century policy of protecting fellow Orthodox Christians living under Ottoman rule, Russia has historically played a role in Middle Eastern politics and geopolitics.

Following the collapse of colonial powers after World War II, Russia established good relations with newly emerging Arab states. For a long time, it has been a major supplier of arms to several countries in the region.

Today, Moscow is attempting to rebuild longstanding relationships with various Middle Eastern countries after its presence was significantly reduced in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Both Russia and the Gulf states are major exporters of oil and gas, holding significant shares in global energy markets. Oil and gas are vital to the Russian economy, domestic political stability, and its capacity to fund ongoing foreign policy and military projects. (Eugene et al., 2019a)

Moscow's approach to the Middle East since the early 2000s has been largely driven by strategic and economic concerns. Similarly, regional powers have their own reasons for engaging with Russia. In 2005, President Vladimir Putin described the dissolution of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century," and he has never concealed his ambition to "restore" Russia to its status as a global power.

Gone are the days when Moscow attracted allies through ideology. Instead of persuasion and appeal, Russia has pursued hard diplomacy, economic incentives, military power, and other coercive measures. Through this approach, Russia has demonstrated to the United States and the European Union that it plays a critical role in ongoing international conflicts. It has established itself as a key player in Syria, Libya, and negotiations with Iran, while also maintaining broad relations with both Turkey and Israel. Since the so-called "Arab Spring" began in 2011, Russia has faced both major security risks and geopolitical opportunities. The Kremlin views the uprisings in several Arab countries as a repetition of the so-called "color revolutions" – the overthrow of Moscow-friendly governments in Eastern Europe. Russian leaders have sought to prevent a repeat of this bitter experience and to block what they perceive as a "Western conspiracy" against Russia's national interests. A closer look at Russia's role in regional conflicts suggests that while Moscow may not be able to dictate specific outcomes, it is likely capable of raising the cost for the West to pursue political options that diverge from Russian preferences.

- **Restoring Former Soviet Influence:** Russia's long-term goal regarding Turkey has been to weaken Ankara's ties with the United States, NATO, and the West, and to incorporate Turkey as a junior partner in a new regional order composed of multiple powers. As part of this policy, Russia has attempted to build asymmetrical economic relations with Turkey that could serve as leverage to pressure Ankara. However, Turkey's vulnerability to Russian economic pressure proved insufficient to force it to abandon its strategic priorities—priorities that Russia has, to some extent, been compelled to respect. (Yatsyk, 2019)

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has worked to re-expand its influence in the Middle East to reinforce its position as a global power.

- **Access to Warm Waters:** As a major power, the Kremlin seeks to have a say in the world's most strategically significant region, where the interests of multiple global

actors intersect: the United States, the European Union, and even China. Russia is not merely a "regional power" (as described by former U.S. President Barack Obama). Its military presence in Syria—especially the naval base in Tartus—is part of Russia's strategy for permanent access to the Mediterranean Sea.

- **Balancing Power with the West:** Russia's policy in the Middle East is part of a broader strategy aimed at shaping an international order that protects Russia from Western interference in its internal affairs and guarantees its equality with the United States. In practice, this means that Russia's approach to the Middle East is subordinate to the Kremlin's global strategy toward Washington. In the region, Moscow seeks to create a localized version of what it sees as the ideal model for the international system: a concert of powers that would include Russia, regional actors like Turkey and Iran, and the United States—on the condition that the latter is willing to cooperate with Russia on equal footing and abandon its "hegemonic habits." Additionally, the Kremlin's efforts to restore Russia's status as a great power in the Middle East have helped legitimize Putin's regime in the eyes of both the Russian elite and the wider public. (Rodkiewicz, 2017, p. 5)

To some in the United States, Russia may appear to be a declining power. However, to many other countries, it remains a major diplomatic player and a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. It is unlikely that Russia will emerge as a military power on a scale comparable to that of the United States. Rather than positioning itself as a dominant actor, Russia presents itself as a power capable of challenging those countries that aspire to dominate the region. It resembles a smart denial strategy—one that can achieve much with relatively limited upfront investment. (Eugene et al., 2019b)

Russia seeks to use the Middle East as a bargaining chip against the West on issues such as Ukraine and economic sanctions.

## 2- Tools of Competition

**2.1 Military Intervention:** Syria stands out as a prominent example of how great powers use military intervention as a tool to achieve their objectives. While Russia supported the Assad regime both militarily and diplomatically, the United States backed certain opposition factions, fueling and prolonging the conflict.

From Moscow's perspective, the main objective of the Russian intervention in Syria was to halt Western—more specifically, American—policies of so-called humanitarian intervention. Russia viewed these policies as being driven by geopolitical motives and feared that it could eventually become their target. The intervention aimed to demonstrate to Washington the limits of its ability to shape the situation in the Middle East and to show that the United States would have to take Russian views and interests into account as those of an indispensable player in the region.

Russia's success in saving the Assad regime and shifting the relative balance of power in the Syrian civil war in his favor clearly bolstered Moscow's ambitions in the Middle East. If Russia's policy in the region was initially reactive and defensive during the early years of its involvement in Syria (from 2011 to September 2015), the success of its use of force—at least in the short term—encouraged Moscow to attempt to build a new regional order in which it would play a leading role. (Witold, 2017, p. 5)

## 2-2 Regional Alliances:

- **Russia:** Russia has strengthened its ties with Iran and Syria, alongside attempts to build economic and military relations with Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia.

Iran stands out as Russia's most strategically important partner in the Middle East. Although Iranian-Russian relations are burdened by a long historical record of mutual distrust and characterized by competition—and despite failed attempts to develop broader economic cooperation—undermining the U.S. position in the region remains a shared priority for both countries. For this reason, Moscow and Tehran view each other as strategically indispensable partners. (Witold, 2017)

Russia and Syria have a long-standing history of relations. Since 1971, Russia has maintained a naval base in Tartus, a coastal city on the Mediterranean Sea in Syria. In addition to maintaining and expanding this base, Russia has also been the main arms supplier to the Assad regime since 1956. For example, in 2009, Russia received nearly 162 million USD from its arms sales to Syria. According to Jeffrey Mankoff of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Syrian contracts with the Russian defense industry are worth approximately 4 billion USD. Moreover, Russia holds large-scale commercial investments in Syria, including in oil and gas infrastructure. (Michelle, 2015)

- **United States:** The U.S. relies on its traditional alliances with the Gulf states and Israel. Regarding the strategic situation in the Middle East and the Gulf region, the United States views the greatest threats to its interests—and to the regional order it largely dominates and controls—as stemming from the policies of Iran and its allies in the region. This is not only due to Iran's growing military and technological capabilities, which have significantly advanced since the end of the Iran-Iraq war more than three decades ago, but also because of its political ability to make inroads in multiple areas—especially in its confrontation with the Zionist entity in Palestine and Lebanon, as well as its increasing influence in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and its reconciliatory policies with the Gulf states.

The regional system that the U.S. sought to establish in the Middle East was fundamentally based on an alliance between the Israeli entity—its strategic ally and major partner in safeguarding American strategic interests—and the Arab regimes allied with the U.S., particularly Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and other states. (Eugene et al., 2019b)

Moreover, the American political and military elite in power understood the difficulty of establishing an alliance between the Zionist entity and the pro-American Arab regimes without reaching a resolution to the Palestinian issue through the so-called two-state solution. However, Israeli intransigence, arrogance, and the dominance of the extreme right—not only over Israeli politics but also within the ruling American elite—undermined all U.S. efforts to achieve a political settlement to the Palestinian issue. This eventually led to a tacit acceptance of bypassing the issue and aligning with the Israeli approach of managing the crisis rather than resolving it.

## 2-3 Implications for the Region

- **Escalation of Regional Conflicts:** The competition between the United States and Russia has contributed to the worsening of existing regional conflicts, turning the Middle East into a stage for multilateral interventions supporting opposing factions and sides. For example, the conflict in Syria has evolved into a proxy war between the major powers, with the U.S. supporting certain opposition groups while Russia backs the Syrian government. The same applies to Yemen, where regional and international interventions have prolonged the war and deepened the humanitarian crisis, pushing the region into a state of ongoing political and military instability.

- **Alliance Polarization:** The U.S.-Russia rivalry has led to a division of Middle Eastern countries into competing blocs, with some nations aligning with Washington while others have gravitated toward Moscow or its allies. This polarization has deepened political and economic divisions, negatively affecting opportunities for dialogue and cooperation between states. As a result, diplomatic crises and recurrent tensions have become more common, with regional alliances increasingly dictated by major power interests. This has further complicated the regional landscape and obstructed efforts to achieve peaceful resolutions to ongoing conflicts.

- **Undermining Economic Stability:** The consequences have not been limited to the political sphere but have also extended to the region's economic infrastructure. Escalating conflicts and political tensions have led to a decline in foreign investment and the deterioration of infrastructure in many countries. Persistent instability has slowed economic growth and increased rates of unemployment and poverty, adversely affecting people's lives and hindering sustainable development efforts. These fragile economic conditions heighten social instability and create fertile ground for further internal tensions.

## Conclusion

The U.S.-Russia rivalry in the Middle East remains one of the most influential factors directly shaping the trajectory and future of the region. This rivalry is not merely a confrontation between two great powers, but a competition whose effects permeate every dimension of political, securi-



ty, and economic life in the Middle East. Despite shifts in the balance of power and changing global dynamics, the persistence of this rivalry continues to be a major source of instability, hindering any genuine efforts toward sustainable peace and development.

Within this complex environment, regional states find themselves in a difficult position, caught between opposing blocs, which increases the pressure exerted by major powers and limits their strategic choices. This situation fosters political uncertainty and undermines national sovereignty, constraining their ability to make independent decisions that serve the interests of their populations. As such, balancing between conflicting alliances remains a significant challenge to achieving lasting peace and stability in the region.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to intensify efforts to reduce foreign interventions that exacerbate conflicts and prolong their duration. Repeated interventions weaken national institutions and deepen social divisions, perpetuating a vicious cycle of crisis and conflict. Diplomatic efforts and political dialogue must be prioritized as essential tools for resolving existing disputes and building the foundation for regional cooperation capable of addressing shared challenges.

In conclusion, achieving stability in the Middle East requires a collective will from both regional and global powers to build partnerships based on mutual respect and non-interference in domestic affairs. Without such an understanding, the U.S.-Russia rivalry will continue to obstruct the aspirations of the region's people for security and peace, leaving the Middle East plagued by ongoing tensions and developmental stagnation.

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