



## THE RUSSIAN STRATEGIC VISION IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

ELAF KHADER ABBAS,  
Faculty of Political Science,  
Al-Nahrain University  
eilafalani23@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*This analytical study focuses on the importance of the Eastern Mediterranean region in Russia's strategic perception and the Russian policies in the region in terms of securing its energy security. Russia is aware that the Mediterranean Sea is its main gateway to openness outside the Eurasian sphere, which includes Europe and its security. The Mediterranean also provides access to other oceans and seas, including the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, which represent Russia's strategic step towards land and sea areas that constitute important geopolitical nodes for it. The Mediterranean region is considered a vital area as it has not previously been subject to any kind of control or domination.*

**Keywords:** Eastern Mediterranean region, Russian, strategic vision.

### INTRODUCTION

With no doubt, the eastern Mediterranean region has an irreplaceable importance in terms of controlling regional developments in the Middle East region. These importance range from military policies to economic relations. Russia works within this importance to maintain its presence in the region as a major player. Whatever site Russia can take in the Eastern Mediterranean gains significant interest from regional powers. It can be said that energy sources, especially oil and natural gas, have become greatly associated with the perceptions and interests of major powers. Securing oil and natural gas supplies has always been present in the decision-maker's mind in major countries. The major powers use force to ensure energy security against external and even regional interference, as this would hinder the growth of major industries. The discovery of natural gas has doubled the strategic importance of the Eastern Mediterranean region. It has been assigned as the global natural gas island in the world. This made major powers in the world to compete over controlling the region. Yet, the region has become directly linked to the global economies and cannot be dispensed with in any way.

#### **Energy security in Russia's strategy**

Energy has become a defining factor in shaping the strategy of exporting or importing of countries. Given that the energy sector is one of the sensitive sectors within the state. The national energy capabilities of a country affect its position and status in the international system. The Russian Federation is one of the major energy countries in the world in terms of reserves and production. It is necessary to first define the concept of energy security, and then explore energy security in Russia's strategy.

#### **Energy security**

Energy security has become one of the manifestations of security concepts, within many changes and concepts that began to take their global position after the post-Cold War era. Energy security has become a matter similar to other traditional determinants such as maintaining the state's position, expansion, and securing borders that form the foreign policy of countries, especially industrial powers (Hashem, 2010).

Energy security is traditionally defined as the availability of sufficient supplies of different energy sources at acceptable prices. It should be emphasized that the issue of energy security is not limited to oil only. The concept of energy security has expanded to include all energy supply infrastructure that supports the global economy. Due to the transformations that have taken place



in global energy centers and the birth of new energy centers, especially in East Asia, a new concept of energy security has emerged.

The prevailing concept of energy security as the ability to provide sufficient quantities of energy at prices that meet consumer demand no longer applies to Asian countries such as China and India, which are promising from the perspective of energy capacity to reach populations that work to achieve sustainable economic development and political stability. For the Asian industrialized countries, such as Japan and South Korea, that rely on imports to meet their energy needs, energy security means securing sufficient quantities of oil and natural gas at prices that enable them to maintain their industrial competitiveness. On the other hand, energy security for producing countries in the Middle East is treated from the perspective of energy demand security (Abdel-Wahhab, 2017). Building on what was previously mentioned, energy security is defined variously depending on the country's position in the global energy market, whether it is a producer or consumer of energy. For exporting countries, it involves security of energy sources and demand, as it focuses on the security of revenues from the energy market. Mostly, it results in economic gains that lead to financial surplus as a basic condition for economic security. Thus, energy security is achieved for these countries. On the other hand, importing countries that rely on foreign sources to meet their energy needs place importance on the risk of supply disruption.

Importing countries seek to diversify their sources of supply to ensure secure access to energy in the face of fierce competition among major energy-consuming countries. Meanwhile, energy-exporting countries have adopted the idea of "energy nationalism". They began to adopt this concept by focusing on the security of reserves, which is an essential part of their national security and a source of strength both domestically and internationally.

Based on the Russian leadership's awareness of the importance of energy in gaining strength domestically and reclaiming its international and regional status, President Putin, during his first term, developed a precise energy strategy to achieve what he called "greatpowerness". Putin believes that *greatpowerness* can only be achieved whenever Russia chooses to become a strong and confident country. This can be done not by challenging the international community or by being against other strong nations, but by cooperating with them. In 2003, Putin stated his goals, which he seeks to achieve, including returning Russia to the ranks of great nations by saying:

Now, we must take the next step and focus all our decisions and all our resources to ensure that Russia will truly take its rightful place among the world's strong nations in the not-too-distant future, being economically advanced and internationally influential. (Smith, 2014, p. 67).

Energy security for the Russian Federation which is one of the major energy producers, was not clearly defined, but it can be inferred from Russian actions, especially after Vladimir Putin came to power, which revolved according to Arafa (2014), around the following pillars:

- Attempting to regain what the state has lost of oil and natural gas sources;
- Ensuring control over energy pipelines in the region and preventing the creation of new pipelines that do not pass through Russia or that Russia is not partners in them;
- Increasing the political employment of energy sources in foreign policy to achieve some strategic and tactical goals, in addition to cooperating with major oil and natural gas exporting countries and promising countries in the field of energy.

Undoubtedly, Russian energy security relies on the necessity of extracting sufficient amounts of energy from Russian sources located in harsh and difficult geographic regions. This includes the need for secure access to global energy markets, especially in Europe. It also requires safely exporting Russian energy supplies without being hindered by transit countries and at imposing high prices that generate them large profits. Additionally, it's necessary for Russia to possess the appropriate technologies for extracting energy and to control the network of pipelines towards foreign markets. Creating a healthy balance in Russian energy markets is a must for not making Russia to depend on a single energy market. In fact, this concept makes Russia an important key player in the global energy balance as a major energy producer (Al-Sheikh, 2009).



The Russian Federation has become the world's leading country in terms of gas reserves, estimated at 48 trillion cubic meters, and it also possesses a large oil reserve of 72 billion barrels, with other sources estimated at 137 billion barrels.

Russia is the world's second-largest producer after Saudi Arabia (Zaidan, 2003). Putin published an article in the Institute magazine in 1999 on, *Natural Mineral Resources*. He stated that the Russian oil and gas resources are the key to its economic growth and entry into the global economy, which will make Russia a great economic power and a leader in the economic field (Yergin, 2012). Russia relies on the economic factor to restore its previous prestigious position and exert pressure on other world powers has strengthened its return to the international arena through its large reserves of oil and gas. This allows Russia to use energy and supply means to maintain its influence and presence in important regions, including the Mediterranean (Zaidan, 2003).

Therefore, Russia sought to develop its partnership through access to sea ports. It also revived the golden age of Russia's political geography, which it was known for in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In order to obtain a sea outlet on the Atlantic Ocean, Russia ignited the Baltic wars to establish a window on Europe represented by St. Petersburg. It also headed towards the Mediterranean through its struggle with Turkey to control the Black Sea (Abdel-Hamid, 2009).

The Russian strategy in the Mediterranean region is mainly based on energy sources. It namely controls the gas and oil transportation pipelines. This is the most effective tool in global politics. Vladimir Putin stated that "if the energy sector is healthy, then the Russian economy is healthy too." (Zaidan, 2003, p. 246). The Syrian crisis was one of the strongest indicators of Russia's strong return to the international stage. Russia seeks to maintain its status as an energy giant. It prevents major competitors from economically crowding it out. It also prevents international and regional competition over natural gas and oil pipelines from countries bordering the Arabian Gulf. This is one of the important determinants of the Russian attitude toward the Syrian crisis. Russia fears that the fall of the Syrian regime could undermine its dominant position in the European gas market as a result of the possibility of extending the Qatari gas pipeline through Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey to Europe (Kabalan, 2014).

The conflict in Syria is a struggle for energy, which has reflected on regional and international interactions. This can be seen in Russia's insistence on supporting Syria and its continued rejection of external intervention, for several reasons including thwarting the South Gas Corridor project previously known as, *Nabucco*, which is supplied by natural gas sources in the Arabian Gulf. Russia also seeks to prevent Qatari natural gas from reaching European countries. It also opposes any attempts by European countries to diversify their natural gas supplies from sources in Central Asia or North Africa (Luzyanin, 2007). Russian exports its oil and gas through a huge network of pipelines to the countries of Central Eastern Europe and through railways to China and through sea carriers to all of the European south. It is estimated that the value of Russian exports to Europe is at 60% by sea and 40% through the Drushba oil pipeline to transport oil to Europe (Abdel-Hamid, 2009).

Russian leadership adopted new policy which is based on pragmatism and realism. Russia, away from any ideological or historical considerations, has decided to gradually return to the international arena by strengthening its relations with its neighbors, especially China and Iran. Additionally, Russia has intensified its economic relations with European Union (EU) countries, considering its position as a major source of oil and gas. France and Germany played active roles in rebuilding trust between the EU countries and Russia.

EU countries, led by France and Germany, seek to make the Russian Federation economically and politically close to the EU, serving the strategy of each country. Germany, due to its geopolitical location and positioning in the heart of Europe, wants to give Russia strategic depth in Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, France, known for its cautious approach towards American policy in Europe and the world, always advocates for the necessity of building a strong relationship with Russia as a regional power that can become a global power. This is aimed at reducing American dominance and creating a strategic balance in Europe (Bin Khalif, 2014).

Energy became the main source of European imports from Russia between 1999 and 2005. It represents two-thirds of these imports. Russia is the EU's primary supplier of petroleum, accounting



for 19.8%, and natural gas, accounting for 41%. It is expected that the EU's total energy dependence on Russia will reach 70% by 2030 (Abdel-Hamid, 2009). Some EU member states have almost complete dependence on Russian energy resources, especially natural gas from Gazprom. For example, Germany imports 44.9%, Poland 50.2%, Hungary 63.4%, the Czech Republic 63.4%, and Greece 86.8%. Finland and Slovakia import 100% of their natural gas needs. Trade exchanges between Russia and the EU reached 75 billion Euros, while trade exchanges with the United States amounted to only 10 billion Euros. This means that Russian-EU trade is seven times greater than its trade with the United States (Bin Khalif, 2014).

Russia plays an important role in its relations with the EU countries. These countries have been importing natural gas from Russia for over 30 years, since the mid-1970s and at the height of the Cold War between the former Soviet Union and the United States. Russia is the first country in terms of supplying the European Union with this vital resource, followed by Norway in second place and Algeria in third place. The geostrategic importance of Russian energy resources increases when we realize that Norwegian fuel reserves are in continuous decline, while Russian reserves remain and continue for centuries. The data indicate that the oil and gas reserves on which the EU depends on will continue in the long term, between 50 to 100 years from now, while steel reserves will continue for more than two centuries (Bin Khalif, 2014).

Like to nuclear deterrence, President Putin has created what can be called "energy deterrence". Unlike nuclear weapons, there can be executive policies for this deterrence without destruction. The vital energy needs in the global economy are used in a way that is compatible and adaptable to the concerned countries. Russia's arsenal in this regard is its reserves, production volume, and export systems. Russia has huge reserves of oil and natural gas. Furthermore, Russia controls over the export for the Commonwealth of Independent States at the regional level. This has enabled it to be a major player in the global energy market. Since becoming Prime Minister in 1997 until he became President of the country, Putin has repeatedly emphasized that primary energy resources must be exploited. They are a fundamental factor in economic development, so that Russia can be among the major countries (Gomart, 2006).

From this perspective, the official Russian energy strategy indicates that energy security is an important element of Russian national security. The government emphasizes its distinctive role in the energy sector to protect Russia from internal and external threats. Russia has sought to use its huge energy exports to Europe as a way to be an active player on the international stage. Putin's era has witnessed remarkable activity by gas and oil companies to gain increasing dominance in the energy markets in the European Union. This was facilitated by the energy liberalization agenda that the EU pursued (Pinder & Usherwood, 2007).

Europe's reliance on Russia as a source of oil and gas has increased since the end of the Cold War, mainly due to the decline in local production from Norway, the Netherlands, and the North Sea. It is expected that the import rate will increase to 60% by 2030. The natural gas sector is complex. There is unequal reliance among EU member states on Russia, and there is a lack of integrated market mechanisms that allow gas to move commercially between different member states. For example, Central and Eastern European countries rely entirely on Russia for their natural gas supplies (Jeffrey, 2010).

Russia exports oil through the Black Sea and the Baltic Sea. It also transport oil via maritime transport of oil extracted from the Arctic region. It is known that Russia has a fleet of oil tankers and a network of pipelines for transporting gas, including the Maerts Blue pipeline, which began operating in 2005.

The pipeline extends from Tovorsiyk, southern Russia through the Black Sea to the Turkish port of Samsun, then to Europe. There is also the Yamal-Europe pipeline, which connects Western Siberia to Germany via Belarus and Poland, as well as the Northern Stream pipeline, which began supplying gas since November 2011 and passes through the Baltic Sea area. It links the Russian coast to the German coast to transport the Russian gas to Western European countries such as Germany, Denmark, Britain, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, and the Czech Republic. There is also the



Western pipeline for transporting Russian gas through Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria, as well as the South Stream project to transport Russian gas to Europe via Turkey.

#### **Russia's security motivations towards the Eastern Mediterranean region**

The Mediterranean Sea represents the main gateway for Russia's openness outside the Eurasian space that includes Europe and its security. It also provides proximity to Africa and West Asia, as well as access to other oceans and seas, including the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. Therefore, Russia's strategic approach is to focus on land and sea areas that represent important geopolitical hubs for it. The Mediterranean region is vital because it is an arena where no type of control or domination has been exercised before.

Russia has dominated the Arab world during the revolutions that formed a strategic turning point in Arab countries. Russia saw this as an opportunity to reassess its status and regain its position as a great power. It took advantage of the Syrian crisis, which represents a significant importance in Russia's strategic thinking. Russia made use of the opportunity to rearrange and change the balance of power, not to repeat the same mistake that occurred in Libya represented by the Security Council resolution that authorized intervention in Libya. This intervention jeopardized the Russia's oil and gas projects. The intervention in Libya opened the door wide for American penetration and European allies in the Mediterranean region. This region is vital for Russia due to its economic and strategic importance, especially in Syria, which plays a central role in Russia's strategic vision. This can be analyzed in the followings:

1. Syria is one of Russia's most important trading partners. The Russian-Syrian trade accounts for 20% and witnesses a significant increase in 2011 to \$1.92 billion. Russian energy companies operating in Syria, such as Gazprom and Soyuzneftegaz, are among the most prominent companies operating in Syria.
2. Syria is an important market for Russian weapons, with Syria's share of Russia's military trade accounting for about 7% in 2011 and reaching about 550 millions in 2012 and estimated 8 billion in 2013, according to the Center for Strategic Analysis and Technology in Moscow.
3. In terms of mutual diplomatic relations, Russia supported Syria's political system, while Syria supported Russia in declaring its support for the Russian military operation in Georgia in 2008. The naval base in Tartus, Syria, is Russia's only base on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It practically exists based on an old agreement between the two countries dating back to 1971. Its continuation cost Russia exempting Syria from debts of \$9.8 billion in 2006. In return, Russia got some facilities in Latakia. It is worth noting that it is in Russia's interest to maintain its military presence in Tartus and the airbase at Hmeimim airport, which is about 22 kilometers south of Latakia. These are the only two main bases to ensure Russia's presence in the Mediterranean. Therefore, Russia has set two main goals primarily for its direct military intervention in Syria to ensure its interests by supporting Syrian forces affiliated with the regime (Mabrouk, 2015):
  - **The first goal** is to prevent American and European presence from forming any alliance that could define liberated areas and impose a no-fly zone on them. This would also prevent the armed Syrian opposition from gathering in those areas and launching ground attacks under the cover of coalition air forces. This is being prepared for either directly through Turkey and Saudi Arabia or indirectly by France.
  - **The second goal** is the Kremlin's desire to support the legitimate government in combating terrorism, which allows Russia to maintain its interests unlike what happened in Libya.

Thus, Syria has become a battlefield for showcasing the capabilities of superpowers, ensuring military presence, and competing for strategic objectives, especially between Russia and the United States. Map 1 illustrates Syria as a battleground for Russian-American competition.



Map 1. Syria an arena of Russian-American competition

Russia views the Syrian revolution from a purely geopolitical perspective. No any other area provides arrangements that maximize the Russian interests and national security more than what it sees in Syria. Russia sees the Syrian geopolitical location as a foothold on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. It provides Russia with an outlet for its naval fleet in the Black Sea at the Sevastopol base to the waters of the Mediterranean. Therefore, Russia refused to turn this crisis into another expansion process for NATO (Sao, 2013). Russia therefore opposes any external intervention against the regime in Syria because it sees that changing the regime from outside would destabilize the region. Any military intervention in Syria should be through the approval of the United Nations Security Council, i.e., the Russian agreement on such military intervention (Youssef, 2015). The overall objectives of direct military intervention in Syria can be classified into tactical and strategic objectives, according to Russian President Putin's speech at the United Nations in 2015 (Al-Hawas, 2015).

### CONCLUSION

Russian has two tactical goals in Syria. The first objective is to eliminate terrorist groups, which are all armed groups operating outside the law. Russia intends to achieve several strategic objectives through this goal, one of which is internal, which is to reduce the growth of armed rebellion within the Muslim minority in Russia, which represents a challenge because its size is increasing rapidly compared to the Orthodox majority. This minority may possibly demand its right to exercise power, and make its values part of the Russian identity, which is limited to the Christian and Orthodox language, nostalgia for imperial greatness, and Slavic identity that emphasizes the preservation of the Russian identity. The other strategic objective is to play the role of protector against the danger of the Islamic State for a number of European and Middle Eastern countries, in exchange for their recognition of Russia as a global power. The second tactical objective is to protect the Assad regime for strategic objectives that aim to prevent any signs of revolutionary change, so as not to repeat what happened in the early 1990s near Russia, in what is known as colored revolutions, which allowed the West to expand its influence under slogans of promoting democracy and market economy. Russia emphasizes its role as a reliable ally by standing with the Syrian regime politically and using its veto power to protect it. Ensuring the presence of the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean achieves two goals: first, ensuring the movement of Russian forces towards different regions of the world and gaining credibility from allies, which is a condition for any power seeking to play a new international role. Second, distributing its capabilities according to its interests.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Abdel-Hamid, A. M. (2009). *Russia's restoration of the position of the international pole, crisis of the transitional period*. Beirut: Arab House of Science Publishers.
- [2] Abdel-Wahhab, A. L. (2017). *Petroleum papers*. The Arab Institute for Studies and Publishing.
- [3] Al-Hawas, T. (2015). *Putin's plan in Syria: strategic contradictions and political blockages*. Al Jazeera Center for Studies
- [4] Al-Sheikh, N. (2009). *Russian energy policy and its impact on the global strategic balance*. Cairo: International Center for Future and Strategic Studies.
- [5] Arafa, K. M. (2014). *Energy security and its strategic implications*. Riyadh: King Fahd National Library for Publishing.
- [6] Bin Khalif, A. (2014). *European-Russian relations and mutual strategic depth*. *Academy of Social and Human Studies*, 11, 92-97.
- [7] Gomart, T. (2006). *Russian foreign policy: the strange inconstancy*. *Foreign Policy*, 1, 25-36.
- [8] Hashem, N. J. (2010). *Waterways and Global Energy Security (a study in political geography)*. Baghdad: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Alami for Printing, Publishing and Distribution.
- [9] Jeffrey, M. (2010). *Eurasian energy security: international studies*, (Vol. 89). Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Research and Strategic Studies.
- [10] Kaban, M. (2014). *Russia and strategic changes in the Arab world, research in the book geostrategic repercussions of the Arab revolutions*. *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies* 8, 19-27.
- [11] Luzyanin, S. G. (2007). *Vladimir Putin's Eastern policy: Russia's return to the "Greater East" (2004-2008)*. Moscow: Vostok-Zapad.
- [12] Mabrouk, S. S. (2015). *Russia in the Arab region: strategic ambitions and geopolitical interests*. *Arab Affairs*, 164, 212-228.
- [13] Pinder, J., & Usherwood, S. (2007). *The European Union: A very short introduction*. OUP Oxford.
- [14] Sao, W. (201). *Arab revolutions between geostrategic balances and interactions and variables in the Arab region*. University of Biskra.
- [15] Smith, H. (2014). *Russian greatpowerness: foreign policy, the two Chechen wars and international organisations*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.
- [16] Yergin, D. (2012). *The quest: energy, security, and the remaking of the modern world*. London: Penguin Books.
- [17] Youssef, E. (2015). *Russia and Turkey developed relations and competing ambitions in the Arab Region*. *Studies and Analytical Papers*, 15, 37-46
- [18] Zaidan, N. (2003). *Russia's role in the Middle East and North Africa from Peter the Great to Vladimir Putin*. Lebanon: Arab Science Publishers House.