



## The Fight for the Middle East<sup>12</sup>

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*The Fight for the Middle East* is a powerful study of the prominent Russian historian Alexei Vasiliev, who has devoted his research to the phenomenon of the «Arab Spring» and aspects of the transformation process of the Greater Middle East in modern times. According to the author, the particular topicality of this study is due to the fact that in recent years this region has had the greatest potential for conflict and is characterized by acute socio-political contradictions both in the Middle Eastern societies within national states and between the countries of the region. However, the chronological framework of the book is not limited to the events of the “Arab Spring” itself, which allows the author to consider modern political processes in the region, to assess changes taking into account the current political situation. Vasiliev states that it is extremely difficult to characterize the process of political regime change in the region as a kind of Arab revolution since it has resulted in the rise to power of pro-Western liberal forces rather than of radical Islamic supporters. In Egypt, these forces were able to lead the social movement for a short period but, as the author wrote: “...they could not cope with this power, solve social problems, and collapsed under the pressure of competitors in the face of the armed forces and a number of Gulf states.”<sup>4</sup>

What is more, the author tends to refute the purely economic reasons that gave rise to the “Arab Spring”, noting the need for a comprehensive examination of the political situation and local conditions in each of the countries of the region. Thus, while there was direct foreign intervention in Libya, the confrontation in Yemen was caused by intra-clan conflicts. In the introduction part, the author examines the contradictions underlying regional processes in the Middle East, “...which significantly change not only the political landscape but also the entire socio-political and psychological picture of the Middle East and North Africa.”<sup>5</sup> At the same time, Vasiliev starts from an interpretation of the political processes in the Middle East that focuses on the specificities of each country's development. In this way, he allows us to cover the main actors of the region.

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<sup>2</sup> Vasiliev A.: *The Fight for the Middle East*. Lenand: Moscow, 2019. ISBN 978-5-9710-6798-6. pp. 256.

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<sup>4</sup> Originally: “...не смогли справиться с этой властью, решить социально- политические проблемы, и рухнула под напором конкурентов в лице вооруженных сил и поддерживающих эти силы рядом государств Персидского залива.” p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Originally: “...которые существенно меняют не только политический пейзаж, но и всю социально-политическую и психологическую картину Ближнего и Среднего Востока и Северной Африки.” p. 10.

Vasiliev Alexei completed his studies at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, majoring in the Middle East region. From 1971 to 1975, he was a political observer in Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup> He also covered the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. From 1975 to 1979, he was the newspaper's correspondent in Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Yemen and Ethiopia. The prominent scholar defended his Ph.D. thesis on *Wahhabism and the first Saudi state in Arabia*. Later, he was appointed as Director of the Institute for African studies. During his doctoral studies, Vasiliev gained experience of exchange studies at Cairo University. He devoted the first chapter to Egypt, referring to the political events of 2011 - 2013, which led to two violent changes of power in the country. This power transition process took place with the active support of Saudi Arabia, which, as the author mentions: "...With the help of the Egyptian military and economic elite, succeeded in overthrowing the Ikhwan regime of Morsi."<sup>7</sup>

Much of his work is dedicated to the countries of the Middle East and Africa.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the author's interest was devoted to the Russian Federation's relations with the countries of the Middle East. One of these books written by Alexei is "*From Lenin to Putin, Russia in the Middle East*." In his assessments of the Soviet period, the main idea of the author is that the Soviet foreign policy in the region was based on two foundations: ideological messianism<sup>9</sup> and the national interests of the country. These two trends sometimes coincided, but more often came into conflict. The most striking example, which the author elaborates in detail, is the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Alexei Vasiliev was the first to investigate the phenomenon of «Wahhabism» in Soviet Union and then in Russia, whose ideology became the basis of extremist Islamic doctrines in the 20th and 21st centuries.

"*The Fight for the Middle East*" is a well-structured book. It consists of 7 chapters. As positively mentioned earlier, Vasiliev placed the emphasis of the book on the specificities of the country's development. Each chapter is a series of essays on each of the major players of the region. This book has its advantages and disadvantages. Among the disadvantages, the need for more detailed coverage of Russia's political role in the processes described, should be dealt with more details (for example, in chapter 4 "The Syrian crisis" there is a lack of information about Russia's political interests in the region). Also, the author mainly used Russian/Soviet sources. Based on the above, the book lacks a comparative analysis, it would be useful for the reader to see more international sources. Among the positive aspects of the work is the author's detailed analysis of the factors influencing the nature and causes of the "Arab Spring". It is worth mentioning

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<sup>6</sup> Federal State Budgetary Institution of Science (n. d.) *Vasilev Aleksey Mikhailovich*. Available at: <https://www.inafran.ru/node/120> (Accessed: 1 April 2023)

<sup>7</sup> Originally: "...удалось руками египетских военных и экономически х элит добиться свержения икванского режима М. Мурси" p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> RUDM University (n. d.) Vasiliev A. M.: *List of Records*. Available at: <https://repository.rudn.ru/ru/authors/author/5793/> (Accessed 20 March 2023)

<sup>9</sup> Ideological messianism, i.e., the task was to extend the Soviet structure and ideology to the countries of the region



the non-membership of the author, he doesn't belong to either side of the political bloc. Acknowledging the role of an external factor, namely, Western propaganda, he rejects the "conspiracy theory", well-circulated in the Russian mass media, as if the Arab revolutions were orchestrated in Washington.

The timeliness of the work is undeniable, in which the author consistently analyzes and classifies the phenomenon of the «Arab Spring», supplementing his conclusions with practical material. The book is written at a high academic level, and its structure consistently reflects the logic of the research. It should be noted that the author's research approach focuses on a number of fundamental issues in the modern socio-political history of the Arab countries, as well as the role of religion in political struggle and social shifts in the countries of the Middle East. It is worth mentioning that the book is written in clear language, not overloaded with excessively specialized terminology. The author's conclusions after each chapter are quite reasonable. The reviewed study should be of interest not only to historians but also to a wide readership. The research material may be of interest not only in the history of region but also in political science and international relations.