

Global and Local Challenges Facing Syria and Russia in the Light of the Resolution of the Syrian Crisis

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Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March, 2013, the United States of America and the European Union have exerted various pressures on the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad's regime to step him down from power, but all their efforts were in vain due to the supporting stance of both Russia and China to al-Assad through the use of veto power to block several international resolutions. The significance of the current paper lies in the fact it tackles those challenges facing Arab region, particularly Syria, in addition to the Russian position supporting Syria. The aim of the present paper is to adopt an analytical background of the Russian position regarding the Syrian crisis and the political as well as the strategic dimensions for such a move on the regional and international levels. The research comprises three sections in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. Section one investigates the reasons behind the Syrian crisis and the Russian interests in the region; Section two tackles is devoted to the Russian position towards the crisis, while the third section studies the Russian military intervention in Syria. From this perspective, we find that Russia seeks to ensure its influence over Syrian politics after a peaceful settlement. It aims to safeguard its strategic interests, restore its position, and end its international isolation, presenting itself as a major power on the global stage.

Keywords: conflicts in the Middle East, the Syrian crisis, Bashar al-Assad, Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East.

Introduction

The Syrian crisis has constituted a battle ground of conflict between regional and international powers since 2011, and it was a reflection of the situation in the international system. The significance of the Syrian case is evident as it is an internal crisis that has turned into an international crisis, and this long-running crisis has placed the international community in front of a serious challenge: will it be able to stabilize the explosive hotbeds of conflict through joint efforts, or will strong competition prevail in promoting the geopolitical interests and ambitions of the regional centers of power? In this sense, the final outcome of the confrontation in Syria will have consequences that go beyond the regional framework, so the Russian position on Syria is determined by its understanding of the world order.

Importance of the research lies in understanding the Russian position towards the Syrian crisis and the nature of Russia's foreign policy towards this crisis. Russia has played the role of a mediator in the Middle East and intervened in Syria, positioning its involvement as both humanitarian and in pursuit of its own interests.

One of these interests includes the necessity of keeping President Bashar al-Assad in power. Additionally, Russia's strategic objectives relate to the geopolitical significance of Syria in the Middle East, where various world powers have vested interests. Therefore, Russia is keen not to lose sight of this goal.

Hence, the current research is divided into three sections: the first section has included the causes of the Syrian crisis and the Russian interests embodied in the Russian grants in the region, while the second has been about the Russian position on the crisis, and the last section has been devoted to the Russian military intervention in Syria.

Reasons for the Syrian crisis and the Russian interests in the region

Since he assumed power in 2000, the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad has tried to carry out reforms aimed at democratizing society and creating a market economy, which contributed to reviving private business, but at the same time caused a number of negative effects, such as high prices, unemployment rates, and increased class partition in society. As a consequence, to the emergence of the Arab Spring revolutions in both Tunisia and Egypt, the influence of these revolutions spread to Syria, so the uprising in Syria, which began in March 2011, escalated into a violent civil war with strong sectarian political, economic and social overtones. In spite of Al-Assad's declaration of new reforms and elections for local self-government bodies in 2012, these measures could not stop the demonstrations that started, and the confrontation between the opposition and the authorities took on the nature of a civil war. The opposition army was mobilized with militants of various terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda* and Fatah Al-Islam and Junuud Al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam) and others [1].

The Syrian conflict can be analyzed through two main levels: internal and external actors. Internally, the conflict involves different parties, including the Assad regime and its military, aiming to maintain stability and control. The opposition comprises various groups, such as the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change and the Free Syrian Army, which receive support from the United States and Europe. Additionally, jihadist organizations like al-Qaeda and local armed groups, and the extremist ISIS*, have been active within Syria. Externally, foreign involvement has been significant. The United States and Western countries formed an international coalition against ISIS*, while Russia intervened in the conflict. Regional powers like Iran have provided financial and military support, while Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey supported the Syrian opposition [2, pp. 144–150].

The United States, the European Union, Turkey and the Gulf states, especially Qatar and Saudi Arabia, openly supported the armed opposition. On the other hand, Russia and China opposed any pressure on Damascus, while Iran began to provide material support to President (Bashar al-Assad). There is no doubt that Moscow's attitude towards the events in Syria has been affected by the nature of the long-term relations between the two countries since the sixties to the early nineties, Moscow maintained close and allied relations with Damascus in order to preserve its interests and goals in the region. These interests are as follows:

1. Geostrategic objectives, as Syria's strategic location is of particular importance according to the Russian perspective; its location resembles a space for Russia to reach the

* A terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

Mediterranean Sea, in addition to the issue of dominating energy exports, specifically liquefied natural gas, and crossing energy pipelines to transport Qatari natural gas. This natural gas ranks third in the world after Russia and Iran, as Russia seeks not to allow the European Union access to Qatari gas.

2. Economic goals represented in the economic relations between the two countries, specifically in the sales of Russian arms, as arms purchases from Russia amounted to approximately (one billion and one hundred million) dollars according to the statistics of 2010, as well as the contracts concluded between the two parties in the field of arms import, since Syria occupies the fourth place in importing Russian weapon.

3. Military and security targets and bases represented in the Russian military base in the port of Tartous, and Hmeimim Airport is a Russian military base [3, p. 68].

From this perspective, we find that Russia has multiple motives to secure its influence and interests in Syria. One of these motives is political, aiming to solidify its international position and restore its prominence on the global stage. The Syrian crisis provided an opportunity for Russia to reaffirm its role and assert its presence alongside the United States.

Moreover, Russia has utilized the Syrian issue to advance its international interests. It presented itself as a strong defender of protecting minorities and a party involved in managing and attempting to resolve the crisis. This religious dimension towards Syria is reflected in the connections within the Kremlin that are linked to Orthodox Christianity and the incorporation of religious values into Russian foreign policy, particularly in safeguarding Christian minorities within Syria [4].

Russia's intervention in Syria aims to safeguard its strategic interests, restore its position, and end its international isolation. It also seeks to gain access to the Middle East, revive Russia's role in the region, and reject the containment policy imposed by the United States while attempting to reduce American influence in the area [5, p. 15–17].

On the other hand, the fall of the Syrian regime would mean losing a strong ally for Russia in the Arab world. It would also result in an expansion of American influence in the region.

Russian stance towards the Syrian crisis

Russia closely followed the developments of the situation in Syria. Obviously there were two forms of intervention, the first being political intervention, and the second being military intervention.

Firstly, Moscow took a cautious stance, as it did not want to interfere in the conflict. Simultaneously, the focus was on achieving a peaceful solution to the crisis through an agreement between the government and the country's population. Russia rejected any international intervention in Syria, as the permanent mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations stressed. However, external interference in protecting any of the parties to the conflict could destabilize the situation in the Republic and lead to a civil war which would threaten the security of the entire Middle East. Here, Russia and China used the right of veto against Security Council resolutions, which were the possibility of the coalition forces to invade and overthrow the Syrian regime under the pretext of protecting civilians, as was the case in Libya. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expressed the opinion that "the goal of Western countries is not to resolve this conflict, but rather to divert attention from armed groups that have played a destabilizing role in the Middle

East". The Russian President Dmitry Medvedev also indicated that the actions of Western powers regarding resolutions (1970/1973), which was adopted on the situation in Libya indicated that the provisions of the decision can be manipulated, so it is necessary to enable the Syrian people to decide for themselves the question of their future and the national consensus must be achieved through reforms and not external pressure [6].

The Chinese attitude in support of the Russian stance of refusing to overthrow the Syrian regime comes as a calculated response to the US policies aimed at the geostrategic shift of the United States towards the Asian Pacific front, which China believed was an American attempt to curb the growing Chinese role in the region [7, p. 483].

Despite the differences in approaches to resolving the crisis, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton confirmed that she hopes to work on a draft resolution with Russia to resolve the crisis peacefully. At the same time, Clinton pointed to the positive fact that Moscow recognizes the need for the Security Council to participate in solving the problem of violence in Syria [8, pp. 115–134].

It should be noted, in this regard that despite the refusal to vote on the resolutions, Russia does not stand in the position of absolute support for the Syrian president, al-Assad's regime. Moscow has repeatedly condemned the actions of the Syrian government aimed at taking unreasonably harsh measures against the opposition, just as Russia did not vote against the resolution condemning the suppression of protests. Moscow's fears of international isolation seem to have contributed to the rejection of unconditional support for the Syrian government, and Putin stressed his attitude on the Syrian issue at the Russian summit in Brussels in 2012. He said that the goal of Russian policy towards Syria is to facilitate negotiations between the Syrian government and its opponents, and that economic interests are not of great importance at the present time [9, p. 23].

Early in 2012, the United Nations Security Council, in conjunction with the League of Arab States, developed a plan for a peaceful settlement of the conflict, called it Kofi Annan's plan, and it consisted of 6 items and stipulated the cessation of hostilities, the opening of ways to provide humanitarian aid, and freedom the movement of journalists, the release of detainees, and the right to peaceful demonstration. Russia not only supported the peace settlement plan, but also provided possible assistance in its implementation. In April 2012, it was agreed on the text of Security Council Resolution No. 2042, which was adopted unanimously, and the guarantee of humanitarian access to Syria. Moscow did not limit itself to statements. It worked not only with the Assad's government, but also with various representatives of the opposition in order to achieve a truce as soon as possible [10].

For this reason, talks were held in Moscow between the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and representatives of part of the Syrian opposition "The Popular Front for Change and Liberation" in attempt to normalize the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic. However, not all the opposition involved in the fighting in Syria were ready to follow the path of a peaceful settlement of the conflict. After the ceasefire was announced, several terrorist attacks took place in the country, for which extremist groups took responsibility. The Russian Foreign Ministry has expressed the opinion that outside forces are behind these terrorist attacks, which are not beneficial to the cease-fire in Syria [11, p. 100].

When it became obvious that difficulties arose with the implementation of Kofi Annan's plan, Russia took the initiative with the Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States to hold a conference to solve the Syrian issue. The conference was

attended by the heads of the United Nations and the League of Arab States, the foreign ministers of Russia, the United States, Britain, China, France, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar, and the head of the European Union representative office. A document was adopted that became a road map for the settlement of the Syrian crisis, that Moscow's position in the first phase of the crisis was balanced and aimed at achieving peace through dialogue between the opposition and the Syrian authorities, and Russia's opinion was based primarily on the basic principles of international law. Since the beginning of the conflict, Moscow called to start negotiations without preconditions in order to achieve a national agreement, despite the fact that Russia has condemned some of the government's actions, it has supported al-Assad's regime. However, Russia's efforts were primarily aimed at ending the violence and starting the peace negotiation process [12, pp. 116–134].

The issue of the use of chemical weapons in Syria was raised in August 2012. The Russian Foreign Ministry expressed concern about the weapons falling into the hands of the armed opposition, saying that "it makes the situation more difficult in Syria". Russia is working with the Syrian government on the issue of controlling chemical weapons stockpiles. At the same time, US President Barack Obama declared that Damascus' use of chemical weapons was a "red line" that would lead to retaliation by the United States. Concerns were expressed that the use of weapons of mass destruction might necessitate a military intervention by the United States in Syria. In September 2013 Russia made proposals to remove the Syrian chemical arsenal, in the wake of a sarin gas attack in a suburb of Damascus, and at the request of the Syrian government, the United Nations announced on launching an independent investigation into the accident to clarify all the circumstances. Russia welcomed this initiative and offered to add specialists to the Committee. The Russian Foreign Ministry also drew attention to the fact that it was Damascus that submitted a request to the United Nations to conduct an independent investigation, and the Syrian government confirmed that it does not use chemical weapons against its population [13, p. 15].

Throughout the consultations, Russia reached an agreement with the Syrian government regarding its accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention, i. e. imposing international control over Syria's stockpile of chemical weapons [14].

The Russian military intervention in Syria

Terrorist groups with the so-called ISIS (Islamic State Organization)* took control of part of the territory of Syria in 2014, and the Syrian situation became threatened by the danger of control by these terrorist groups in cooperation with armed opposition groups. In the summer of 2015, Russian President, Vladimir Putin presented a proposal to form a broad coalition to combat terrorism, including those forces already fighting in Syria, because of which was the presence of terrorists on the territory of Syria, and it is noteworthy that this initiative was aimed at legitimizing al-Assad's regime in the eyes of the international community and calling the Syrian government for the anti-ISIS* coalition to make it an ally of the Western powers in the fight against terrorism. A coordination center was established which included, in addition to Russia, Iraq, Syria, Lavrov stressed that its establishment has no political goals. Rather, Russia provides these countries with data on the status of the terrorist threat [15].

* A terrorist organization banned in the Russian Federation.

On September 30, 2015, Moscow declared the start of a military operation on Syrian territory at the request of the Syrian government. The decision to start a military operation on Syrian territory came for several reasons, the most important of which was the danger of spreading the influence of extremist groups' terrorism, and the possibility for other terrorist groups to join ISIS*, including the Caucasus Emirate*, as the activities of ISIS* extended to Central Asia, and from there to the southern borders of Russia. Hence, there will be a threat to Russian national security. Additionally, Russia claims to be a global power capable of solving global problems, restoring its international standing, and overcoming the diplomatic isolation in which Russia found itself after the Ukrainian events. Actually, after Moscow entered the war against terrorism in Syria, the West began to look at Russia again as a world-class player, Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict was also due to the desire to show the change in the structure of international relations [16].

Hence, the Russian military intervention in Syria has confused Turkish foreign policy represented a warning of the change in the balance of power in the region. There were no good relations between Turkey and the Syrian and Russian regimes because of the former's support for the Syrian armed opposition. In response to an act of punishment to Turkey, Russia and Syria resorted to evacuating areas in Northern Syria and leaving the arena to the Kurdish groups, as well as providing them with assistance in the Afrin region on the front that seems to have been opened in the face of the opposition supported by Turkey. The incident of Turkey shooting down the Russian plane in October 2015 came counter to expectations. Russia dealt with strength and intelligence, although some considered that the incident had a kind of prejudice to Russia's international standing. Russia succeeded in managing this crisis when it employed the Turks' sense of the magnitude of the incident, and worked Turkey, which is a member of NATO, to appease the Russians. Turkey considered Russia a partner and ally in Syria, and the two countries worked to reach a political solution to the Syrian crisis [17].

The concept of crisis management in relation to Russian foreign policy is to work to transform any crisis into a strategic gain for countries that seek to protect their strategic interests, where wisdom, intelligence and far-sighted policy in crisis management achieve the desired goals, which outweighs the importance of action victories and quick reaction, therefore, Russia worked to deepen the dispute between Turkey and NATO, by pressuring the Turks to move from NATO membership to the Eurasia project, which is a project that challenges the West and America. In an attempt to put pressure on Turkey, Russia has strengthened its presence in Syria, standing against any Turkish military plans, and thwarting the establishment of a Turkish buffer zone on the border with Syria [18].

On March 14, 2016, President Vladimir Putin issued a decree to withdraw most of the Russian Air Force after Moscow achieved its objectives of the military operation, whether at the level of the Syrian arena or at the international level, which was confirmed by Putin in his meeting with his defense and foreign ministers when he said that the next phase has placed additional responsibilities on the shoulders of Russian diplomats [19, p. 164].

The peace initiatives and solutions offered by Russia to Syria continued, especially the visit by the Russian delegation to Damascus, on September 7, 2020, headed by Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov and the meetings he held with officials of the Syrian regime. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated about the change in the Russian posi-

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tion and its limits, which is still linked to the Russian vision for a solution in Syria and its interests in this country, through the program presented by the delegation in the light of the forthcoming presidential elections in Syria in 2021 [20].

On May 26, 2021, the Syrian elections were held, and the President Bashar al-Assad won with 95.1 % of the voters, but this did not gain him legitimacy in the West, even before the results were announced. These elections were described as unfree and unfair, refusing to recognize their results. The United States, Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy refused on May 25, that is, the day before the elections, to consider them free and fair, and in a joint statement by the foreign ministers of the five countries, an appeal was made to the international community not to recognize its results. Simultaneously, the Russian observing delegation from the State Duma does not agree with that position, and as its president Dmitriy Sablin said, that the elections in Syria are conducted freely and in accordance with all international standards, describing the elections in Syria as “a work and a right for the Syrian people” and “that only the Syrian people decide their fate” [21].

The Russian military operation in Ukraine, which was launched on February 24, 2022, has a significant impact on the crisis in Syrian. It has many repercussions including the decreasing efforts aimed at the reintegration of the Syrian regime into the international community. It is clear that the resolution process in Syria is no longer among the central interests of Moscow for the foreseeable future, since at the moment Russia is completely concentrated on the Ukrainian crisis, which led to the withdrawal of not only some of its forces, but also air defense systems from Syria. Besides, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and its repercussions caused the diminishing interest of the international community in the Syrian crisis, and especially in its political settlement. Syria, like many other countries in the Middle East, is suffering from a severe economic crisis that has become even worse due to the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Its consequences led to the deteriorating level of food and energy supplies and a plunge in the value of the lira. It also resulted in a decreasing the amount of Russian investment in the Syrian economy and the high rates of inflation and unemployment in late 2022. The quantity of Russian wheat supplies to Syria lowered as well, which just worsened the economic situation being faced by the Syrian regime. Thus, the repercussions of the crisis in Ukraine seem to influence the situation in Syria as the international and regional actors involved in the Syrian crisis are the same ones connected to the Russian-Ukrainian conflict [22].

Here, it can be said that Russian policy in dealing with the Syrian crisis utilized both soft and hard power, building a new system for multipolarism in the Middle East. The objective was to achieve its interests in Syria and the Middle Eastern region.

Conclusion

Russia has an opportunity to reassert itself as a regional superpower by focusing its efforts on resolving the Syrian conflict and eliminating terrorism. Russia wants to ensure its influence on Syrian politics after a peaceful settlement, and it has been found that it has linked battling terrorism with supporting al-Assad's administration in Syria. In this light, it may be said that Russia's handling of the Syrian issue is indicative of the country's view of itself as a great power ready to make its presence known on the global stage. The Syrian crisis resulted in several outcomes, including:

1. Russia sought to strengthen its position in Syria in line with its ambitions to regain its status in the international system.

2. Through its military operations in Syria, Russia managed to establish and reinforce its military bases and expand its presence in the Mediterranean Sea.

3. Russia demonstrated its capability as the only actor capable of stabilizing the Syrian regime and pressuring it to engage in serious negotiations. Russia's declared stance on the Syrian crisis viewed the Syrian government as the legitimate representative of the state. Additionally, Russia balanced the American role in the region and limited the United States' excesses within the United Nations Security Council.

4. The Syrian crisis revealed the weaknesses of the Arab regimes and the limitations of the Arab League in managing and containing the crisis, transforming it into an international crisis.

5. Sectarian factors played a role in the Syrian crisis, leading some foreign powers to support the Syrian government, while others backed the opposition.

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Глобальные и локальные вызовы, стоящие перед Сирией и Россией в свете разрешения сирийского кризиса

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С начала сирийского кризиса в марте 2013 г. Соединенные Штаты Америки и Европейский Союз оказывали постоянное давление на сирийского президента Башара Асада с целью заставить его сложить свои полномочия. Однако в силу поддерживающих усилий как со стороны России, воспользовавшейся правом вето постоянного члена Совета безопасности ООН, так и со стороны Китая попытки свержения режима сирийского президента западной коалицией не увенчались быстрым успехом. Тем не менее арабский регион и в частности Сирия по-прежнему сталкиваются с рядом геополитических вызовов. Таким образом, актуальность настоящего исследования заключается в том, чтобы дать комплексное аналитическое обоснование позиции России в отношении сирийского кризиса, а также изучить политические и стратегические аспекты такого шага на региональном и международном уровнях. Исследование состоит из трех разделов. В первом разделе исследуются причины сирийского кризиса и интересы России в регионе. Второй раздел посвящен позиции России по отношению к кризису в Сирии, в то время как третий раздел посвящен российскому военному вмешательству в Си-

рию. С этой точки зрения мы видим, что Россия стремится обеспечить свое влияние на сирийскую политику в перспективе и после мирного урегулирования в стране. Она стремится защитить свои стратегические интересы в ближневосточном регионе, укрепляя свое влияние в нем и сохраняя позиции крупной державы на мировой арене.

Ключевые слова: конфликты на Ближнем Востоке, сирийский кризис, Башар Асад, внешняя политика России на Ближнем Востоке.

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