

## CHAPTER 8

# RUSSIA’S POLICY OF PROXY WAR IN SYRIA: WILL IT BE A GAME CHANGER OR WILL NAVAL POWER STAY IN MEDITERRANEAN WATERS

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### ABSTRACT

The development of the Syrian Crisis and seeking for the most suitable solution for it have become complicated and generated different solution problems. The consolidation of political issues in the framework of Iranian, Turkish and Russian cooperation for its Astana process shows just one side of that solution seeking. At the same time, the situation in this region stimulates the participants to reevaluate their policy in Mediterranean Waters as an aim of strategical presence in this sense, Russia decided to cooperate with Turkey, a NATO member since 1952, in its Middle Eastern policy against the United States that controls most of armed opposition troops within Syrian Democratic Forces. Concurrently, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units were also supported by the USA, and that is the reason for the new political challenges in Turkish-American cooperation, both in the framework of NATO and in interstate relations as well. This paper discusses modern Russian-Turkish cooperation regarding the Middle Eastern agenda of the parties, including issues related to the field of study.

**Keywords:** Proxy’s War, Syrian Crisis, Mediterranean waters, Kurdish People’s Protection Units, Turkey’s policy view

## Introduction

*“This remilitarization of the Russian security policy is evident by the construction of an arc of steel from the Arctic to the Mediterranean”* Navy Admiral Mark Ferguson

Putin suddenly deployed a high-profile military intervention in Syria in September 2015, with the aim of retaliating against ISIS terrorism. Russia's military intervention and its support for the Assad Regime in the Syrian Proxy War has received great attention and this bears a critical impact in the war as a “game changer” factor by presenting Russia as having a potential sphere of influence in the Middle East or in the wider world. The beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011 should be studied within a background of international politics, as Russia's willingness to support the Syrian regime, and the reason for this willingness, appears highly significant.

From our perspective, the Kremlin has sought to reverse the growing trend of the Great Powers interfering in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, since before the Arab Spring. In analyzing the factors that shaped the Russian foreign objectives and directions during the Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War, the need to review the recent Russian perspective on the Middle East and how the situation has changed from the Kremlin's point of view becomes apparent. What are the Russian foreign policy priorities shaping Syria?

This paper aims to provide a brief academic analysis regarding international relations by putting major and complex reasons of Russia's presence in Syria under the microscope. Thus, I aim to present answers to the following questions: what are the interests of Russia, why Syria remains Russia's crucial partner in the Middle East, and why Russia supports Bashar al-Assad. I suggest that answers to these questions can be considered as a situation in which the sphere of western-inspired regime changes is finally repulsed.

### **1. Russia's Theoretical Foreign Policy Framework and Objectives on Syria**

If the last century of Russian traditional foreign policy is studied, it becomes apparent that the driving motivations differed radically from the 1917 October Revolution until the disintegration of the former Soviet Union under Gorbachev's administration. Indeed, to understand how the Kremlin's foreign policy structures were shaped by the ideological basis of formal doctrines of Communist Party dominance until 1999, it is necessary to study the last century of Russian traditional foreign policy.

In the doctrinal side, Hans Morgenthau describes prestige as a means of demonstrating power along with other goals. In this context, we can define Russia's Syrian efforts as a

show of force directed to ensure that it receives the respect it deserves so that others do not interfere in its internal affairs. In order to protect its national interests, Putin decided to pursue a series of rational and pragmatic foreign policy objectives which are ruling out costly confrontation, including the modernization of armed forces and even a meticulous harmonization with economic development, raising living standards, and the consolidation of the Kremlin's prestige status as a leading world power again.

Even more serious in Moscow's eyes was the solid infringement eastwards of NATO from the early 1990s onwards, and the initiatives developed by Washington for the establishment of defensive missile systems in Europe. Yeltsin was too busy picking up the pieces in the 1990s, and the people have always obliged to take self-sufficiency and daily subsistence into consideration. Throughout this period, the Russians were evaluating the Americans as lacking in the keeping of their promises, and discourteous of Russia's authentic interests. They became resolute to precise a price for that (Greenstock, 2017).

The following critical step in forming the transformation followed the shock of the collapse of the Soviet Union, changing Moscow's foreign policy dramatically, and restructuring the world affairs to what the Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin now faces in the international system. The reversal of this status loss has caused Putin to push the button to turn Russia's attention back to the Middle East. Putin has directed Russia's interests and policies toward several goals, aiming to increase its global influence and to allow its recently growing economy to keep on flourishing. Why maintaining influence in the region is so significant to Kremlin? One of the reasons Russia has sought to increase influence was that they were forced to accept the United States' status as a hegemonic power that has been inciting global tension in order to assert its shadow, which in turn, caused the formation of a "*Syria-Iran-China Troika*" in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Recently, the US Army controls %30 of the Syrian territory, which hosts the country's largest oil field, as well as most of its water resources and agricultural lands<sup>1</sup>, and uses it to support and fund the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces), and formed the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been engaged in terrorist movements against Turkey. As Russia is a close ally of Assad, Syria is strongly converted into a growing strategic partnership by expanding spheres of influence in the Middle East with Iran, that is an important orbit of pivotal actor against the growing tensions with the Trump administration which terminated the 2015 nuclear deal. In April

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1 Kabalan, Marwan. Russia's New Game in Syria. (2018, 29 October). *Aljazeera*. Retrieved From <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/istanbul-summit-failed-181029102112796.html>.

2018, the Trump administration implemented additional sanctions against Russia. In terms of international law, even if Trump ordered two times Tomahawk missile strikes on Syrian bases, Russia and China have vetoed a UN resolution to impose sanctions on Syria over the alleged use of chemical weapons. China has also aligned itself with Russia in recent clashes that threatened to open an entirely new and deadly front for the region. China is looking to expand its support for Russia in Syria's prolonged civil war as regional powers Israel and Iran escalate a long-running feud that threatens to further destabilize the war-ravaged country and to invest heavily in the reconstruction of Syria.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Russia has used its veto power for the 12<sup>th</sup> time at the UN Security Council to block action directed at its Syrian ally. By looking at the strategic pattern laid by Russia, the political-military-economic decision makers have been concerned about the new world order becoming dangerously unpredictable since some actors are aiming to interfere in Moscow's sovereign and domestic politics, unipolar world in world affairs with the use of force, and it's threat about using military power as an instrument of foreign policy. In this context, Putin warned the US at Munich Security Conference 2007 that it should not attempt to create a world "of one boss, one sovereign," and that it should stop interfering with Russian domestic politics.<sup>3</sup> Observing the growing number of conflict points around the Russian periphery, Kremlin elites consider that the only way to fill the gap in international security is to reinforce multi-polarity. Meanwhile, for Russian perspective, emerging new geopolitical macroblocks' will be formed. The United States, with its global capabilities and influence through the emerging Trans-Pacific Partnership and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, will be a pillar of one. China, Russia, India, Kazakhstan, Iran, and many other states will embody another geopolitical grouping – a Community of Greater Eurasia. Europe, against this background, will find itself economically and politically weakened and semi-ruptured (Karaganov, Cherniavskaia and Novikov, 2016).

## **2. Syrian Civil War**

The dilemma in Syria is a very serious problem, and Syria started to become involved in the tumultuous aspects of Arab Spring, which could be regarded as a peaceful protest demanding the resignation of Bashar al-Assad broke out in Daraa, a town in South Syria. The situation rapidly deteriorated with armed rebels, insurgents and terrorists with dangerous

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2 O'Conno. Tom. China Looks for New Ways to Help Russia in Syria as U.S. Backs Israel against Iran.(2018, 14 May). *Newsweek*, Retrieved From <https://www.newsweek.com/china-looks-new-ways-help-russia-syria-us-backs-israel-iran-924712>.

3 Putin. Vladimir. Speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy. (2007, 10 February). Munich.

regressive and sectarian agendas hijacking the protest. Syria fell into a conflict of both dramatic loss and tragedy. With the loss of more than half million civilians and almost 6 million refugees leaving their countries in mass waves suddenly triggered a potential threat to European security.

This tragic crisis gains more prominence in the international discourse due to gross human rights violations. Therefore, such violations demand the responsibility of the international community to protect fundamental human rights as terrorist violence often fueled by external actors<sup>4</sup> has become increasingly common.

We aim to find out the reasons why Russian decision-makers chose to re-focus on Syria in 2015. In order to properly understand why Russia is involved in the Syrian Civil War, we should examine what foreign policy compliments Moscow's global positioning motivations and influencing other states through their relative positioning with the United States by concerns regarding the Arab Spring. Russia's involvement in the Middle East was reduced following the dissolution of the USSR. After the collapse of its Soviet patron, Syria further tightened its relations with Iran. Since the 1980s, Syria has been an important supporter of Iranian protégé, the Shia-Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah ("The Party of God"), supplying it with arms, money and training (Stern & Ross, 2013).

Russian leaders and policymakers have been recurrently observing that some states might interfere in matters concerning Russia's sovereign rights. Therefore, the only possible way to protect the critical national interests of Russia in the post-Soviet space led to the formula of defense against external sabotage. The first fear is a "conflict spillover": Russia's long, porous southern borders increase the risk of any nearby violence permeating into Russia or demanding Moscow's involvement. The second fear is instability, and subversion short of armed violence. The dangers inherent to some forms of political change—such as a succession, crisis, radicalism, or the failure of governments to maintain power—are perceived in Russia as dangerous in multiple ways (Oliker et al., 2009).

The Georgia-Russia War of 2008 has clearly demonstrated that Russia is ready to use military force when its strategic and geopolitical interests are concerned. The events in Ukraine are in many ways a repeat of the Georgian scenario, with the key difference being the fact that Ukraine occupies a geopolitical space that is far more valuable to Russia. Beyond these arguments, Putin has decided that the West has crossed a red line regarding Ukraine,

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4 The Syria Observatory for Human Rights puts the numbers at 282,283–402,819 people killed in the Syria crisis as of 25 May 2016. See, Eraméh. Nicholas Idris.(2017).Humanitarian Intervention, Syria and the Politics of Human Rights Protection.*International Journal of Human Rights* 21. N.5. 517-530.

infringing the unwritten consensus between Russia, the USA and the EU: to not use tools of political pressure and forced regime change in competition for influence in the post-Soviet space (Alexeev, 2014). Accordingly, Russian security strategy holds that the United States and the European Union are responsible for the 'anti-constitutional coup d'état' and the ensuing armed conflict in Ukraine. Ukraine is portrayed as a chronic seat of instability in Europe, and in the immediate vicinity of Russia's borders' (Pynnöniemi, 2017).

It is widely thought that the turning point in the Russian attitude to the Arab Spring was Libya. Moscow's reactions have rapidly turned critical because of the United States and its allies' military intervention into Libya, and the threat of the spreading of radical religious extremism. Similarly, in Egypt, the economic and political crises which led to the election of the Muslim Brotherhood and then its brutal repression and the reassertion of military rule highlighted the potential for anarchy and disorder in periods of radical change. All of these conflicts, made Russia deeply concerned about "dangerous waters" of the Middle East to turn possibly towards Central Europe and the Caucasus into a struggle against the United States and the EU. So, when President Barack Obama proclaimed on 18 August 2011 that 'the time has come for President Assad to step aside', thus making regime change an official US priority, the window for common ground with Russia at the UN was closed completely (Charap, 2013).

Preventing a similar development of events in Syria became an important task for Russian foreign policy. Both in Libya, and later in Syria, Russia see that she might find itself in a really dangerous situation which was not dictated by the sole desire to prevent foreign military intervention. Russia's most recent version of its Foreign Policy Concept, dated 18 February 2013, contains no mention of "color revolutions" or "Arab spring" either in the list of threats or in the section on regional priorities. The Secretary of the Security Council of Russia Mikhail Popov stated that "the new version was needed due to the emergence of new challenges and threats to Russia's security", which, in addition, "were manifested in the events of the "Arab spring," in the armed conflict in Syria, and in the situation in and around Ukraine." (Nikita, 2014). The Arab Spring added greater uncertainty to international security; the wave of democracy in the Islamic world crashed to produce expanding circles of extremism and radicalism in Syria and Iraq. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, "the Arab Spring was the harvest of seeds shown by Bush Jr. with the concept of the Greater Middle East and democratization of that entire area."<sup>5</sup> It's more likely that Moscow's

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5 Alexander Vyotsky, "Russia and the Arab Spring", *Connections* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 41-64. Lavrov said "The slogans of change and democratization [promoted by the USA] were not agreed by the countries of the region. We have seen a lifetime of revolutions and firmly insist that any changes take place by evolution, resting

policy was influenced by a range of diverse factors. Furthermore, the head of the Russian General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, argued in 2016 that the “The West is conducting hybrid warfare against Russia to weaken its resolve to safeguard its national interests in the former Soviet region.” (Gerasimov, 2016).

### 3. Sea Power at the Coasts of Syria

Why is the Russian military mission’s influence in Syrian coastal bases essential? Considering the Black Sea and NATO roles, will the Russian Naval Fleet and active air bases stay for a long time in the Mediterranean Waters? It is important to note that Russian’s maritime policy has historically been vehemently focused on obtaining free access to the oceans to the North and South of the Baltic, and to the Black Sea, via the Turkish Straits. During the Cold War, the Soviet Black Sea fleet deployed in the Mediterranean Sea was unable to compete with the US Navy 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet. In the context of the worsening situation in the Middle East, the Soviet authorities decided to set up an operational squadron in the Mediterranean. With the Memorandum of 1995, Russian authorities declared their interests in the Mediterranean (Melchionni, 2015). Russia’s naval strategy is based on the concept of “the Greater Mediterranean, a partnership with coastal states”. Russian leaders have been declaring their intention to have a permanent fleet in the Mediterranean. In January 2012, Moscow sent its only aircraft carrier to the Syrian coast. In the first week of April, the Smetlivy, a Russian guided-missile destroyer, arrived at the Syrian port of Tartus to carry out unspecified tasks. In 2013, the largest exercises of the Russian Navy took place. Warships of the Black Sea, Baltic and Northern fleets, as well as the long-range aviation joined them. In May 2015, Russia and China held combined exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean dubbed “Joint Sea 2015”. On the other hand, Putin also has been well aware of the possible threats of head-on confrontation with the US and its allies in Syria and the Mediterranean Sea. Moscow is increasingly making its maritime presence flags operating from the “Baltic-Black Sea-Mediterranean” axes, which have changed the security environment after the Cold War. Meanwhile, the China-Russia partnership is paying more attention to the Mediterranean, including the establishment of military bases in the Horn of Africa against NATO naval power. This “Great Power” competition brings to provide one another echoes of naval cooperation. China-Russia naval exercises took place as Mediterranean 2015, Black Sea 2015, and Baltic

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on the desires of the peoples themselves. The fact that the peoples of the Middle East and North Africa, just like the peoples in any other part of the world, want a better life, want to be respected as citizens in their own states – this is absolutely natural, and we actively support these ambitions. When the “Arab Spring” started to happen, this is what we stated. At the same time, we strongly urge external actors to obey the principle of “do no harm.” Interview with Sergey Lavrov, *Rossisyskaya gazeta*, October 24, 2012, <http://www.rg.ru/2012/10/23/lavrov-poln.html> (in Russian)

2018 as part of their wider strategic cooperation. China also aims to send military troops to Syria.<sup>6</sup> All these partnerships reflect China's interest turning to the Mediterranean, as a catalyst instrument in Syria, which aims to send military power to the Idlib region. Indeed, the Chinese military attaché in Syria, Wong Roy Chang, said that "cooperation between the Syrian and Chinese military was "ongoing," adding, "We –China and its military– wish to develop our relations with the Syrian army. As for participating in the Idlib operation, it requires a political decision."<sup>7</sup> Since early 2017, there have been occasional reports claiming that China had dispatched military forces to stamp out possible terrorism flows emanating from the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP)'s influence on China's Uyghur population. Syria is most conspicuously an economic interest for Beijing. Chinese military presence would garner more influence in the economic and geopolitical reconstruction of post-war Syria also, or actively engaged in suppressing radicalized Uyghur terrorist movements.<sup>8</sup> Beijing plans to send special operations units as military power to Syria in order to fight with Uyghur terrorists in ISIS or Chinese al Qaeda in this country. As it is analyzed in this paper, the Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Syrian Crisis is the shadow of an alliance which aims not only to change the power equation of the USA and NATO strategically under UN auspices.<sup>9</sup>

Since the collapse of the former USSR, Russia has launched a project of naval deployment in the eastern Mediterranean off the Syrian coast. Russia has also marked U.S. and Western powers as possible counter-influences in Syria. Russia is a most convenient partner for Syria, motivated by its own expectations for global balance of power positioning, a combination of arms export activity and a more strategic role belief in returning back Moscow's international presence as a dominant player with particular attention on the Middle East. In other words, Russia perceives the possibility of losing Syria as a strategic partner in the region a scenario which would reduce both of their respective weight on the global level. Russian political elites have sought to maintain the Kremlin's global diplomatic significance and ensure its place as a legitimate international influence and as a stabilizing force. Meanwhile, the new format of political priorities and values of Russia motivates it to play the role of Damascus's sponsor

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- 6 Scott, David. Russia-China Naval Cooperation in An Era of Great Power Competition. (2018, 12 June). *Center for International Maritime Security*. Retrieved From <http://cimsec.org/russia-china-naval-cooperation-in-an-era-of-great-power-competition/36773>.
  - 7 Ebrahimian, Bethany Allen. China: We Might Help Assad With the War in Syria. (2018, 10 August). *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved From <https://www.thedailybeast.com/china-we-might-help-assad-with-the-war-in-syria>.
  - 8 Pauley, Logan and Marks, Jesse. (2018, 20 August). Is China Increasing Its Military Presence in Syria?. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved From <https://thediplomat.com/2018/08/is-china-increasing-its-military-presence-in-syria/>.
  - 9 Korolev, Alexander. Beyond the Nominal and the Ad Hoc: The Substance and Drivers of China-Russia Military Cooperation. (2018). *Insight Turkey*. Retrieved From <https://www.insightturkey.com/author/alexander-korolev/beyond-the-nominal-and-the-ad-hoc-the-substance-and-drivers-of-china-russia-military-cooperation>.

on the international stage, thereby becoming Bashar Assad's indispensable friend. This has led Moscow and Damascus to agree on developing a mutually beneficial cooperation on the fields of economy, research, technology and trade. Energy, irrigation, oil and gas extraction, delivery, rail transport, fertilizer production, and the metal industry are among the priority areas for cooperation between the two countries (Crosston, 2014).

Protests against the Assad and the Syrian Civil War regime began in March 2011. Syria has also become a stage for a proxy war, with "regional and international players arming one side or the other". The deeper problem for Syria was likely to remain an arena of strategic competition between the Big Powers without peaceful solution.

Here it should be asked that "What are the real mission agendas of the Russian Federation in Syria: fighting terrorism, eliminating chemical weapons, controlling Mediterranean energy resources or shifting US power balance?"

Russian strategists have evaluated the ongoing Arab Spring as more of a return to the traditional values of Middle Eastern societies of incorporating a more Islamic identity, than a shift to Western-style democracy. The Kremlin has had its own experience with Islamist extremists in Chechnya and Dagestan, and obviously does not want them bolstered by extremists from the Arab world. For Putin, it was precisely this loss of power of the central state, and the devolution of power to the periphery, which resulted in a vacuum in the North Caucasus, leading to chaos, civil war and the rise of a radical anti-Russian Islamist extremist challenge. There was, therefore, a deeply held conviction, drawn from Putin's direct experience, which viewed the Western export of liberal democracy as a recipe for internal conflict, state disintegration and chaos (Dannreuther, 2015). From the Russian perspective, the Syrian conflict has offered Russian Islamists a sanctuary and a new cause. According to the Russian security service, FSB, as many as 2,400 Russians have fought –or are fighting– for IS or other militant Islamist groups, but Russian experts put the figure at a full 7,000. The war in Syria has brought forward a new generation of Caucasian Jihadists with extensive training and battle experience (Hansen, 2017). These developments have accelerated the contribution tendencies of Russian elites to the immediate military and political assistance for the Assad regime not just because it is a long-standing ally in the Mediterranean, but also because it is seen to defend the interests of the minorities in Syria.

We have to underline that the UNSC has proved itself to be unable to uphold its universal responsibility under humanitarian law to protect the Syrian civilians and hold perpetrators of mass atrocities accountable for their war crimes, and this has been perhaps the greatest

failure of the UN so far in this century. Syria has proven to be one of the most conflictual and problematic countries ever since the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. During the Cold War period, the Baas regime in Syria would collaborate with the Soviet Union, with Russia supplying financial and military sponsorship to the Assad regime against American hegemony. Syria would experience three military coups, 21 cabinet changes and two military dictatorships in the country. After the collapse of the Cicekli government, that had been wiped out by a military coup on February 25th, 1954, the Baas regime would become prominent in Syrian political life, therefore, it would occur that the Soviet Union (USSR) would have a significant place for Syria with the Baas regime ruling the country. The geo-strategic position of Syria and its proximity to Turkey and Iraq remained a noteworthy factor for the security of the balance between the Eastern and Western periphery. This characteristic of Syria would also be effective to prevent an “encirclement policy” against the Soviet Union. Unquestionably, one of the foremost reasons shaping Soviet ambitions in establishing authority on the Middle East remained different from the Western powers, particularly the regional aims of America. In relation to the Western standpoint, The Middle East meant “oil”, but the USSR was not concerned about the future of “oil” in Syria. The regional policies of the Soviet Union remained reactionary in order to hamper the American hegemony on the region. As it is acknowledged, the USSR favored ally with Syria and Egypt, two countries which do not possess any oil resources of consideration, and this stands as a key example of the USSR strategy in the Middle East. The first essential development that triggered the Syria entente with the Soviets was the Suez Crisis. The crisis that held in 1956 would increase the Soviet reputation in the region though the USA professed the Eisenhower Doctrine in 1957 in order to conflict the prestige the Soviets have amassed radically. President Eisenhower anticipated the Soviets would become an exceptional political power and would not put up with the Middle Eastern countries’ rapprochement to the Soviets in this geography. Since the beginning of 1957, Syria began altering its political axis towards leftist ideologies and a communist impression in basic cities of Syria. An effective Syrian cabinet member, Halit el-Azm, who had been a strict communism sympathizer, visited Moscow for signing political and economic agreements with the Soviets in 1956. Consistent with these comprehensive settlements, the Soviets assured to deliver 500 million dollars financial and military aids which were used for the construction of a new port in Latakia, roads, railways and new energy projects of the Syrian government. It must be underlined that the Soviets would have a noteworthy place in providing national security to Syria (Kısacık & Kaya, 2016).

Since the start of the Arab Spring or Arab Awakening, analysts have been unable to reach consensus on its influences on the Middle East. On the other hand, the Arab Spring has remained one of the most noteworthy occurrences in the region, almost altering its social and political structure and redesigning a new regional order. In this conjuncture, it was an unavoidable necessity for Russia to pursue new political attitudes towards the region. Specifically, the outbreak of revolt in Syria has endangered Russia's Mediterranean policies and has triggered the undertaking of necessary precautions to ascertain national interest on Tartus and Latakia. Moscow holds that the breakdown of the Assad regime would lead to the strengthening of jihadist powers and trigger insecurity in the Caucasus and Southern Russia.

Moscow plays a significant role in the Syrian policy and economy. Russian investors have been fundamental actors, having investments up to 20 billion dollars in the Syrian economy, that is why; Russian companies have been concerned about losing their investments in Syria caused by the exclusion of Assad from the government. Additionally, arms sales hold a vital place in Russian and Syrian affairs in that it empowers Moscow's position and authority in the Syrian foreign policy viewpoint. Moscow still plans to benefit from the Syrian military infrastructure, that is termed as *Tartus*, as a part of its policy of Russian Naval Forces' continuance in the Mediterranean. (Kısacık & Kaya, 2016).

The economic ties between Russia and Syria are strong. Moscow has accepted to restore the Syrian government's debt to the former Soviet Union. Russian President Putin has maintained controlling Russian foreign policy on Syria, but he ought to consider Washington's national interests as well. In addition, President Putin's involvement in the Syrian case has quite an impact on Russia-Syrian relations. It is clearly seen that Putin does not utterly trust the Assad regime. During the 2000s, Assad started trying to repair affairs with Europe, but when he realized that the initiative had failed, the foreign direction of Syria was turned to Russia again. President Putin has been a very rational leader in Russian foreign policy. This characteristic of the Russian leader helps him refrain from a serious confrontation with the West regarding Syria. Moscow has been trying to hold a dialogue with all related parties in Syria. Until now, Russia has come into contact with all the different opposition groups in Syria. The Kremlin points out that they spent 500 million dollars on their military operation in Syria, which was initiated on September 30. Moscow has probably been trying to demonstrate that it is going to be ready to agree to certain conditions and ready to talk to the new Syrian authorities right after the collapse of the Assad regime. The fallen regimes that have formed post-Mubarak Egypt and post-Qaddafi Libya are main examples of the states supported by Russia. Moscow was one of the first countries to initiate dialogue

with the Egyptian government, making a contact right after the collapse of the Mubarak regime. The Arab Uprising was a serious threat to the relations between Russian authorities and religious leaders in the Middle East. Moscow evaluates the positive improvements of these relations as one of the main factors directly affecting the political stability of the region (Kısacık & Kaya, 2016).

Russia evaluates the USA and NATO's steady withdrawal from the region throughout the past years as an opportunity to pursue the solidification of its political, economic and military presence. Russia and Syria have deep-rooted relations. It displays steadiness for both parties' mutual interests (Kısacık, 2017). Until the downfall of the Soviet Union, Syria had been loyal to Kremlin. After Moscow's revitalization in the Putin Administration, Syria has held the status of being the first country where Moscow heavily demonstrated its presence in the Middle East. Within this framework, the reason why Moscow toughens its stance on Syria is understandable. The bilateral relationships have been very virtuous during the rule of the former president of Syria, Hafez al-Assad, the father of Bashar al-Assad, the current president of Syria. The Middle East has maintained its significance for the Kremlin, and Syria has held a central role in Moscow's regional strategy. With Russia losing interest in the Middle East for a while, Syria has also been negatively affected. Yet with Putin's term, the Kremlin has become a more dominant actor in terms of global politics, and has turned out to be more dominant in the Middle East as well. Russia holds the view that the United States is close to collapse, and thus, Moscow may well return to the Middle East and Europe as a superpower.

Following the end of the Cold War, due to the Kremlin's lack of holding an ideological context towards the region, the practicality which has frequently well-preserved its place in Russian foreign policy has become more popular. In this framework, the Kremlin does not tolerate losing Syria, owing to its importantly declining influence in the Middle East. During Putin's term, numerous mutual visits between the Russian and Syrian officials have been occurring. Thanks to this, as Syria holds the support of a great power, Russia has again professed its role in the Middle East politics. Although Syria does not have a significant amount of oil resources, the Kremlin is aware of the significance of Damascus in the Arab World. The Kremlin also perceives Syria's stance as vital for the Palestine-Israel confrontation. Besides, Moscow has noted Damascus' willingness to further ally with Russia, given the latter's confrontation with Washington. Another factor leading to the Kremlin being sensitive on Damascus is the underlying similarities which Russia underlines that the Arab Spring carries with the Soros-funded colored revolutions. Such concerns began with Serbia

in the 2000s and carried on with the Rose Revolution in Georgia, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, and retained their seriousness for Kremlin (Kısacık, 2017).

The Kremlin is seeking closer affiliations with the Syrian government through the possession of a naval base in Tartus, mirroring the Soviet stance on Sevastopol. Currently, the Russian sponsorship of the Assad government against Arab Spring revolutions clearly shows Moscow's ongoing commitment to the traditional Russian naval strategy. On account of Damascus's approach of seeing Moscow as its most important and dependable partner, Syria's military has mostly chosen to purchase Russian-made weapons (Çaşın, 2015). Moreover, the Kremlin has assessed Damascus as a significant market and has invested within that milieu. Throughout this collaboration, the Russian military investments towards Syria have surpassed 26 billion dollars. Even though 90 percent of Syrian military capacity has been equipped with Soviet/Russian weaponry, 80 percent of this capacity needs to be modernized. After the embargoes against Iran and Libya, Syria has turned out to be much more significant for Russian arms exports. The Syrian Army possesses five thousand tanks of Russian origin, more than 500 aircraft, and 41 ships. Furthermore, Moscow supplies Yakhont cruise missile systems used against warships. The total cost of long-term arms agreements of the Kremlin holds with Damascus including missile technologies, weapons of mass destruction and war planes. In addition, Russia, as a creditor, is concerned about the Middle East and Northern Africa countries for more than 12 billion dollars. The sale of S300 missiles and MIG 31 military planes by Moscow to Damascus has deeply concerned Israel and the USA. But the Kremlin has highlighted the fact that this is in compliance with international law, and these exportations will endure. The missiles provided to Damascus hold 200 kilograms of warhead and a 300-kilometer range. These missiles can protect all the shores of the country. They can be fired from land, air and sea. How many missiles Russia has supplied to Syria hasn't been clarified (Örmeci & Kısacık, 2018).

The culmination of the loaning of the Sevastopol Harbor in 2017 and the stipulation of the extension of this port by Kyiv's consent have forced Moscow to search for new options. Sevastopol, being the second biggest naval base of Russia, is critically important for the maintenance of a navy operating on the open seas through passing the Black Sea, the Dardanelles and the Mediterranean. If they lost this base, the Russian Federation would become a landlocked country. The experts on this issue claim that it is difficult to transform Kaliningrad into a navy asset. The Siberian coastline, positioned at the far east of Russia, does not offer a geopolitical advantage given its inappropriateness within the context of munitions

and refueling. Therefore, Moscow has been in search for alternatives to Sevastopol, and finally, the Russian strategists have identified such an alternative at Syria's Mediterranean shores.

The Tartus Port is Syria's second greatest port after Latakia, positioned 220 kilometers away in Syria's northwest, has been hosting the Soviet/Russian naval base since 1971. During Soviet times, this port was more benefited for physical/technical equipping, replenishment and for ship repairing. Even though, the investment on this base has been constrained, Russia increased its naval presence in the Mediterranean after the 2008 Russian-Georgian War and Tartus rose to further relevance as the only Russian naval base in the Mediterranean. In 2002, Moscow and Damascus discussed this issue. In the beginning, Russia considered transforming the Tartus Port into an air and naval base to benefit both Russia and Syria. Although the lending period of the Sevastopol base has been prolonged to 2042, Moscow has not abandoned its plans on Tartus (Çaşın, 2015). As of September 2008, Moscow would have the most advanced naval base away from its territories thanks to a deal signed between Vladimir Vyotsky, the commander of Russian Navy, and his Syrian counterpart, Admiral Talib Al Berri. A resolution taken in 2009 called for almost 10 ships to be stationed in this base and for the Russian Black Sea Fleet Commandership to be renamed as the "Black Sea and Mediterranean Commandership". Moscow has declared that that it will use this base as the main commanding center for its maneuvers in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans besides the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

The importance of the Syrian energy reserves for the Russian Federation should be mentioned here. Syria remains not a fundamental hydrocarbon producer, even though it holds natural gas resources (240 bcm). Nonetheless, its plans for developing these fields, either self-reliantly or in collaboration with foreign investors, were obstructed by the internal war. For now, Syria stays more significant as a potential energy transit country. Both Russia and Iran have attached special attention to Syria's transit capacity before the civil war did erupt. Gazprom stays engaged in numerous infrastructure and refining projects in Syria through its subsidiary Sroytransgaz.<sup>10</sup> In 2008, this company, under the control by Gennadiy Timchenko, began negotiations with the Ministry of Oil of Iraq and Iraq's North Oil Company on the overhaul of the key oil pipeline linking Kirkuk to the Syrian port of Baniyas. Sroytransgaz would also finish a branch of The Arab Pipeline from the Jordanian border to Homs in Syria. When we come to 2009, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad vetoed the offer of Qatar

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10 Mammadov.Rauf. Russia in the Middle East: Energy Forever?.(2018,8March).*The Jamestown Foundation*. Retrieved From <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-middle-east-energy-forever/>

for constructing a natural gas pipeline from its North Field to Turkey and to the EU by mentioning its established approachable relations with Russia and Gazprom. As of 2010, Gazprom would reiterate its close attention to participate in the expansion of the Syrian oil and gas industry. Sergei Prikhodko, then an assistant to the president of the Russian Federation, highlighted the support of Gazprom's initiatives for the involvement of a natural gas pipeline project linking Syria to Lebanon. Following this, in July 2011, Teheran, Baghdad and Damascus would ink a pipeline deal to bring South Pars's natural gas to Damascus through Baghdad. The governments of Iran, Iraq and Syria signed a pipeline deal to bring natural gas from South Pars. But the current civil war would prevent the realization of these projects. Russian upstream firm Soyuzneftegas, under the control of Yuri Shafrannik, the former energy minister of Russia, would ink the first ever offshore oil deal in the Mediterranean basin in the Syrian sector, in December 2013, however, then cancelled the plans for the development of this project.

In February 2015, Gazprom CEO Alexander Miller would come together with the Syrian ambassador to Moscow for negotiating the collaboration in the hydrocarbons sectors. Moreover, the CEO of Gazprom's subsidiary Stroytransgaz would visit Damascus in September to meet with Prime Minister of Syria Wael Nader al-Halki to recall his company's initiatives in Syria. Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem would mention in November 2015 that Syria still anticipates to welcome not only Russian military vessels but also offshore drilling platforms. Soyuzneftegas would recall the construction of the North Gas Processing Plant, neighboring Raqqa, in December 2017, after the freedom of the city from the Islamic State. It remains still far from clear how the political map of war-torn Syria will eventually be designed. The country's significance as a transit route linking the energy-rich Gulf region with Mediterranean ports and Turkey will remain a fundamental factor in this process. With the political and military assistance to al-Assad, Russia not only targets to regenerate Syrian markets to Russian energy firms, but also tries to turn out to be an essential actor in terms of pipeline geopolitics within the region.<sup>11</sup> On the other side of the coin, Syria's offshore latent stays still covered as unidentified, even with some drilling activities seismic survey in the late 2000s, most of the times one only perceives references that it is as high-volume as that of Israel, Egypt or Cyprus. A former USGS estimation has set forth Syria's probable offshore natural gas reserves around 24 trillion Cubic Feet (700 billion Cubic Meters), which means more than double of its onshore gas, whereas its oil reserves are situated at a "mere" 50 million tons, a sixth of its onshore oil reserves. Syria's confirmed oil reserves remain 2.5

11 Mammadov.Rauf. Russia in the Middle East: Energy Forever?.(2018,8March).*The Jamestown Foundation*. Retrieved From <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-middle-east-energy-forever/>

billion barrels (341 million tons) and its 10.1 trillion Cubic Feet (285 billion Cubic Meters) natural gas reserves possibly will appear inadequate when compared with the reserves of Iraq and Iran. When the fact is taken into account that one-third of its reserves stay very weighty, and it is sticky crudes, Damascus will be obliged to soften the agreement to bring the great Russian energy companies that can frankly be effective and not only risk it. However, in geopolitical terms, it possibly will be a rational movement. Moscow has been intent on augmenting its sphere of influence within Iraqi Kurdistan (Rosneft, Gazprom Neft) also to tap into Lebanon's offshore gas (NOVATEK) and hold a stronger voice in Eastern Mediterranean politics in general. In order to reach that goal, the attainment of Damascus's oil and gas sector may well remain a very strong, non-military, instrument.<sup>12</sup>

The continuing civil war in Syria, the doubts on Assad's future, a close ally of the Russian Federation, have deeply augmented the strategic importance of Cyprus Island for the Kremlin. After long diplomatic negotiations, Russia and the Greek Cypriot Administration agreed on a military deal on permitting the benefit of Nicosia's ports by the former in February 2015. In return for this permission, Russia promised to restructure 2.5 billion Euros of financial aid supplied to the Greek Cypriot Administration in 2011. The Greek Cypriot leader Anastasiadis opposed the sanctions implemented by Brussels in his Moscow visit in which the aforementioned deal was inked and committed to the augmentation of military collaboration between Moscow and Nicosia (Kısacık, 2017).

The relations, which had then been very well between Ankara and Moscow, were affected negatively by the Syrian Crisis which is ongoing since 2011. As set forth by Aktürk, the Syrian Civil War appears to be called a "proxy war" between Ankara and Moscow. In that sense, Moscow stands as the central power and one of the five permanent members of UN Security Council, strongly supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime since the beginning of the war, and on the other hand, Ankara remains the main regional player sponsoring the Syrian opposition forces. But this support has not occurred at rhetoric or diplomatic levels, Moscow and Ankara both logistically and militarily have been assisting both parties of the war. Nonetheless, the Arab Revolts have been one of most important events to have arisen within the region, effectively forming a new social and political structure, and forging them into new regional order. Within that context, the Russian Federation has inevitably set forth brand-new political doctrines towards the region. The beginning of cataclysms in Syria has predominantly threatened Russia's Mediterranean policies, and it has prompted the establishment of required

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12 Katona. Viktor. Russia Is Taking Over Syria's Oil and Gas. (2018, 14 February). *Oil Price*. Retrieved From <https://oilprice.com/Energy/General/Russia-Is-Taking-Over-Syrias-Oil-And-Gas.html>.

precautions to defend its national interests on Tartus and Latakia. Moscow evaluates that the collapse of the Assad Regime would possibly lead up to the consolidation of jihadist forces and result in a destabilized Caucasus and Southern Russia. One should take into account the fact that Moscow does have an important position in the Syrian political and economic life. The 20 billion dollar-investment controlled by the Russian businessmen have designated the country as a central actor. Due to this, these investors have been anxious about losing these investments if the Assad Regime was to collapse. Furthermore, arms deals carry further significance in Moscow-Damascus relations, as this situation consolidates the authoritarian position of the Russia Damascus's foreign policy. When its motivations are militarily evaluated, the Kremlin seeks to use the Tartus Port as a part of its central strategy for displaying the flagship of the Russian naval power stationed in the Mediterranean geography. President Putin's involvement in the Syrian case has discreetly affected the relations between the two parties. It is noted that Putin does not completely confide in the Assad regime. For the entirety of the 2000s, Assad attempted to restore its relations with Europe, only steering the foreign policy orientation of Syria towards being pro-Russian again when he realized that initiative had failed. President Putin seems to have been a very rational leader in Russian foreign policy. This feat of the Russian leader averts grave hostility with the West concerning Syria and discards the possibility of any close affiliations with Damascus (Kısacık, 2017).

In the beginning of October 2015, Turkish airspace was disrupted by Russian air forces executing aerial operations over Syria, which was condemned intensely by Turkey and NATO, and perceived as an infringement of international law. Russia was notified by Turkey and demanded to be more cautious with the national borders. Russia defended itself claiming that the violation happened because of bad weather conditions, and that the navigation systems failed, but NATO would not take the Russian statements into account. In the beginning, Moscow considered American and Turkish political and military sponsorships to defeat the Islamic State as a necessity. Subsequently, Putin chose to develop Moscow's policies in parallel with the constitution of international coalitions in order to prevent international crises, making joint decisions as well. Russian foreign minister Lavrov laid down the idea that territorial integrity of Syria should not be disrupted. After a short period of time, Russia started to send its aerial, naval and army forces to Syrian territories and performed wide-ranging, effective military operations against the Islamic State. On the flip side, Putin maintained that his country has constantly delivered military assistance and logistics to Damascus, highlighting the official recognition of Moscow's patronage to the Assad Regime. Moscow has asserted that the reason why it has avoided stationing army troops to fight against Islamic

State's terrorist activities is that Damascus and the Kurds were better equipped for such a fight. The fact Baghdadi intelligence and coordination has eased the enablement of Moscow's posture in Iraq needs to be underlined. Additionally, the Kremlin has also worked together with PYD, giving out arms supplies. On November 24, 2015, a Russian SU-24 war plane flying over the Turkish-Syrian border violated the Turkish airspace for 17 seconds. Though notified by Turkish jets 10 times in a span of five minutes, the Russian plane continued to violate the airspace, and had to be subsequently put down by Turkish warplanes. This caused great tensions between Ankara and Moscow. Ankara alleged that the Russian aircraft was violating the Turkish airspace and was shot by Turkish war planes in compliance with the engagement rules (Albayrak, 2016). The Kremlin blamed Turkey for this event, setting and carrying out punitive policies against Turkey, including embargoes in numerous fields and the postponement of energy projects such as Turk Stream and the Akkuyu Power Plant (Caşın & Derman, 2016).

After this crisis, the then-U.S. President Obama came together with the Turkish President at the UN Climate Summit held in Paris. Speaking of the incident, Obama reflected, "Turkey has a legitimate defense right. NATO is an alliance. Washington supports Turkey's right to protect itself and its airspace." In his meeting with President Erdoğan, Obama similarly discussed possible ways of decreasing the tensions between Turkey and Russia. Obama stressed the significance of the diplomatic resolution of the problem, pointing out the fact that the main enemy was the Islamic State and the focus point ought to be fighting against the enemy. Similarly, President Erdoğan stated, "Turkey is willing to use diplomatic language. We would like to calm down the tension". When Sergei Markov, one of the closest advisors to Putin and a member of "Putin's Deputies", similarly assessed the aircraft crisis occurring between Turkey and the Russian Federation, Markov would point out the following as the Kremlin's prerequisites for the re-establishment of relations.

The recognition of downing the jet in Syrian airspace,

An excuse from Turkey due to this incident and

The sentencing of the people in charge (Caşın & Derman, 2016).

Markov also stated:

"The implementation of these three conditions lowers the tension. In case of implementing these three conditions by Turkey, for Markov, the relations between Ankara and Moscow will not return to its old days. These three conditions are

necessary to prevent an economic and diplomatic war between Turkey and Russian Federation. If these requests are met, we will avoid a diplomatic and economic war” (Caşın & Derman, 2016).

The reason of the crisis between Turkey and the Russian Federation still being left unsolved at the time should be examined in terms of the former’s energy security. Ankara still imports almost all its natural gas demand. 85 percent of this import is supplied by Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan through long term contracts and pipelines. 55 percent of the total of 49.2 bcm gas imports, costing 27 billion dollars, is met by the Russian Federation. Turkey is obliged to safeguard its import level roughly for at least ten years in harmony with the long-term deals signed with Russia. There are four pipelines transporting gas to Turkey, namely the Western Line and Blue Stream controlled by the Kremlin, and the lines supplied by Azerbaijan and Iran. While the capacity of the Azerbaijani pipeline remains at 6.6 bcm per annum, 10 bcm of the gas is supplied by Iran. The 14 bcm Western Line and 16 bcm Blue Stream remain under the control of Moscow. These pipelines remain being in standard operation, working at high capacities. It must be highlighted that 64 percent of the pipelines transporting gas to Turkey, holding a capacity of 46.6 bcm, is under the control of the Kremlin. Therefore, Turkey not only remains reliant on Russia for imports, but also regarding the import of infrastructure. An augmentation on a pipeline capacity remains only probable with TANAP, however it is far from being an option for the next 3 years. (Caşın & Kısacık 2018).

While the crisis between Ankara and Moscow remained on the table, with severe statements coming from both sides and Russia laying down restrictions towards Turkey, a significant initiative for the resolution of this crisis was undertaken by Turkey on June 24, 2016. Turkish President Erdoğan sent a letter to his Russian counterpart, including an apology for the downing of the jet on November 24, 2015, and expressing Turkey’s readiness for strengthening relations, and the intent was recognized by Kremlin. Erdogan’s remarks concerning the issue were as follows:

*“As the President of Republic of Turkey, I would like to inform the family of the deceased Russian pilot that I share their pain and offer my condolences to them. May they excuse us. We had no wish or intention to down a plane of the Russian Federation. I share their pain with my whole heart. Russia and Turkey have agreed to take necessary steps without delay to improve bilateral relations, specifically noting regional crises and the fight against terrorism.”*(Caşın & Kısacık 2018).

As the relationship between Turkey and the Russian Federation improved positively in the aftermath of Ankara's apology from Moscow, the Presidents of Turkey and the Russian Federation have met on several occasions. The main goal of the Russian Federation for Syria is not exactly the protection of the Baas regime. Fundamentally, Russia has been trying to construct a new political system in Syria, an order that is suitable for the Russian national interests in Syria. Therefore, the prior Syrian strategy of Russia has been shaping on its advantages in Syrian territories, Moscow uses the Assad regime for frontage against coalition powers. Western coalition powers understand that collaboration with Russia on Syria will provide privileges against ISIS, but they are aware of the fact that some concessions have to be shown mutually in order to reach a permanent agreement. Turkish-Russian relations must be evaluated with a number of serious conflicts which have the potential to threaten ties between two states. They have converging and incompatible interests in neighboring territories, thus Turkey and Russia have become the two powerful countries in Eurasian and Middle Eastern politics. Turkey and Russia should restore developing multidimensional affairs and this rapprochement will pave the way for positive consequences for the Middle East and Eurasian region. For instance, on October 27, 2018, a mini quartet summit was organized in which Turkish President Erdoğan with Russian President Putin, German Chancellor Merkel and French President Macron assembled for a resolution of the Syrian Crisis. At that point, some important statements were delivered by Erdoğan and Putin shedding light on the current and probable developments in Syria. Mr. Erdoğan stated that;

*“Let me first of all underline that the main reason why the Syrian conflict has turned into a global problem is because the international community has not responded to the matter adequately. For a long time, Syrian civilians and neighboring countries have unfortunately had to shoulder the burden of the problems caused by the Syrian crisis. Many countries grasped the gravity of the situation only after the effects of the crisis had reached their borders. This indifference should be brought to an end. The tragedy in Syria will only get worse unless humanitarian, political and diplomatic initiatives are taken. That is the main reason why we have come together today here in Istanbul. We underlined that it is necessary to take concrete steps in the political process by making use of the hope raised by the tranquility secured in Idlib. Within this framework, we called for establishing an early convening, considering the circumstances, by the end of the year, of the Constitutional Committee. The terror threat emanating from Syria is another important topic we addressed during the meeting. On this issue, we reached an agreement to enhance cooperation among the four countries and at the international level. 7,500 members of the terrorist organizations DAESH and PYD*

*have been neutralized and a 4,000-sq-km area has been cleared of terror as a result of operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch, conducted with the aim of eliminating both of the terrorist organizations at the source, President Erdoğan stated that peace, tranquility and security prevail now in such Syrian cities as Afrin, Jarabulus and Al-Bab, which Turkey has rendered safe, and that more than 260,000 Syrians have returned to these regions, with more expected to do so. Turkey will not allow terrorist groups to get consolidated along its borders or anywhere in Syria. We will never accept new faits accomplis to be imposed on the ground under the guise of combatting terrorism. We will continue to eliminate threats against our national security at the source east of the Euphrates as is the case west of the Euphrates.”<sup>13</sup>*

In parallel with Erdoğan’s statements, Russian President underscored the following issues:

*“We discussed the situation in Syria and did substantial work on agreeing approaches to the key questions of the Syrian settlement. The Joint Statement we adopted reflects the commitment of Russia, Turkey, the Federal Republic of Germany and France to further expansion of cooperation in the interest of normalizing the situation in the Syrian Arab Republic, launching an effective intra-Syrian dialogue and conducting necessary government reforms and transformations. Favourable conditions for that were created thanks to the work in the Astana format with the active involvement of Russia, Turkey and Iran. The larger part of Syria’s territory has been liberated from terrorists, and the country is gradually moving towards peaceful development. All the meeting participants agree on the key point: long-term stability in Syria can be achieved exclusively by political and diplomatic means in total compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and with strict observance of the principles of the Syrian Arab Republic’s unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity. Importantly, it is the Syrian people themselves who must determine their country’s future. It is in this context that we discussed the prospects for joining efforts within the Astana format and the so-called small group. In our view it would contribute to the launch of a real political process in Syria and attract an increasing number of interested and constructive minded representatives of Syrian society. Above all, it is essential to launch the work of the Constitutional Committee in Geneva, which is designed to consider the fundamental questions of Syria’s future state structure. The decisions taken at the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi must be taken into account in this process. Even though the*

13 “The reason why the Syrian conflict has turned into a global problem is because the international community has not responded to the matter adequately,” *The Presidency of Republic of Turkey*, October 27, 2018. <https://www.tcgb.gov.tr/en/news/542/99419/-the-reason-why-the-syrian-conflict-has-turned-into-a-global-problem-is-because-the-international-community-has-not-responded-to-the-matter-adequately->.

*level of violence in Syria has decreased considerably, the elimination of the remaining radical elements remains a crucial task. We must not let the militants with combat experience continue their criminal activity, establishing sleeper cells in our countries, recruiting supporters and spreading extremist ideology and terror.”<sup>14</sup>*

On September 17, 2018, a Russian Il-20 plane was shot by a Syrian S-200 air defense missile after it was returning from an airstrike in western Syria by Israeli F-16 planes. Moscow blamed the responsive fire occurrence on Israeli pilots expending the larger Russian plane as “cover”. Following the event, the Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov put forward his country’s current and forthcoming stance in Syria Case as follows.

*“According to information of our military experts, the reason [behind the downing] were premeditated actions by Israeli pilots which certainly cannot but harm our relations. The new measures were decided on to boost the security of its troops in Syria. Russia, in this case, is acting in its interests only; these actions are not directed against third countries, but towards defending our own military.”<sup>15</sup>*

Regardless of Russia-US rivalry, the parties reached a consensus in the aftermath of the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki that will guarantee the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights border with Syria. Russia has endeavored for balancing Tel-Aviv’s doubts on Iran which is forming a position within Syria in terms of its strategic interests. In that manner, Putin highlighted the fact that:

*“This will allow us to return calm to the Golan, restore the cease-fire between Syria and Israel and fully guarantee the security of the State of Israel”.<sup>16</sup> Trump does state that, “Creating safety for Israel is something both Putin and I would like to see very much.”<sup>17</sup> Trump does too underscore that “We both spoke with Bibi and they would like to do certain things with Syria having to do with the safety of Israel. Russia and the United States will work jointly (in this regard).”<sup>18</sup>*

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- 14 “News conference following the meeting of the leaders of Russia, Turkey, Germany and France: Following the talks, Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron held a joint news conference,” *President of Russia*, October 27, 2018. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58935>.
  - 15 “Russia says Israeli role in Syria plane downing was premeditated”, *Al Jazeera*, September 24, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/russia-israeli-role-syria-plane-downing-premeditated-180924112220025.html>.
  - 16 Henry Meyer, “Putin Says He Agreed With Trump to Secure Syria Border With Israel,” *Bloomberg*, July 16, 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-07-16/putin-says-agreed-with-trump-to-secure-syria-border-with-israel>.
  - 17 “Helsinki Summit: What Did Trump and Putin Agree?,” *The Guardian*, July 17, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/17/helsinki-summit-what-did-trump-and-putin-agree>.
  - 18 “Trump, Putin Vow to Cooperate on Syria, Ensure Israel's Security,” *Haaretz*, July 16, 2018. <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/trump-and-putin-hold-joint-press-conference-in-helsinki-1.6273846>.

## Conclusion

Surely the regime in Damascus will seek to regain control over all of Syria but doing so will be a difficult and costly effort. A surfeit of worrisome implications faces Assad, if he were to stay in power.

- What is the U.S. military doing in Syria, why, and on what basis?
- What is its mission, rules of engagement, and red lines?
- How will Russia maintain its influence in Syria while avoiding a prolonged military investment?

As the general thesis, this work argues that the novel foreign policy Russia has employed after the Cold War in a challenge against the NATO-EU alliance and the hegemonic superiority of the USA, is constructivist in terms of the realist paradigm, and that as with “Georgian-Ukrainian-Syrian” crises, the possibility of employing conventional power may remain as an option in the future. In analyzing Russia’s policy on Syria, I analyze that it has prioritized its own military security in this game of chess, and aspired to balance out the military, economic and hegemonic superiority in the Middle East, where the USA has enjoyed after the Gulf War of 1991. The Kremlin has turned Syria into a regional constant for the modernization of the Russian military force. Even if the Syrian Civil War were to end, the Russian Army now has a shared border with Turkey. Russia has also risen to be the most important “Playmaker” actor in the Syrian Crisis, despite the USA and the Coalition Forces. By the grace of providing military and aerial support to the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war, Russia has obtained naval and aerial bases in Latakia and Tartus, solidifying its security in the Mediterranean. As it was repositioning itself in the Mediterranean in accordance with the Syrian “Proxy Wars,” it has employed Syria in the board of chess against the US 6th Fleet and set out to balance it in the Iraqi-Yemeni-Egyptian-Iranian Gulf Line, and signed a 49-year deal in 2017 on military bases with the Assad regime, including nuclear warships. In this context, Lavrov said, “the USA has been trying to use this land to forge a would-be State over its Syrian allies, and Kurds, over all else. The USA is trying to find would-be states in a manner that is absolutely illegal and is doing everything within its power to ascertain a normal standard of life for those under its protection.”

Russia has also been able to secure some facilities which would allow aerial forces to be stationed in Southern Cyprus and would undertake maintenance on and fulfill the needs of ships. Russian Admiral Viktor Chirkov stated that the Tartus Port, carrying importance as the

last fortress, “possesses vital significance” for Russia. Moscow has formed an Anti-Access / Area Denial: A2 /AD Region over a portion of the Eastern Mediterranean from Syria to Crete. In a geopolitical sense, Dugin has claimed that the main designating factor of the era we live in now is “war.” The Russian Federation, being a model for the “Continental Civilization” and the USA, being a model for the “Naval Civilization,” are also engaged in a conflict, or perhaps, even a war, between a commerce-based system (the USA) and a civilization of valor (Russia). Dugin claims that the Kremlin has been waging a Proxy War against Washington in Western Europe and the Middle East.

Since Russia is a nuclear power, its active involvement in the Syrian Civil War has completely changed the conflict at hand, evolving the civil war from being a regional dispute to a global one. When the subject of natural gas is analyzed in specific relevance to Syria, it must be pointed out that the Russian Soyuzneftegaz firm has signed a contract, scoring research, exploration, development and manufacture deals. Moscow seeks to forge a Shiite alliance over Damascus in order to connect its power to energy routes. Additionally, Russia has made it a goal to protect its economic interests in energy markets through the sharing of hydrocarbon resources in the Eastern Mediterranean. Overall, Russia’s main goal is not the protection of the Assad regime but the holding of the balance against the US, and the preservation of the ports of Tartus and Latakia as the local outpost and logistic center alongside the Crimean military bases in the Black Sea. The Kremlin has, for the first time in history after the Cold War, obtained the support of China and ran a military drill with the Chinese navy in the Mediterranean back in January 2014, projecting a new power from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, against the USA and NATO. It has employed the most modern weapon systems during the Syrian Proxy Wars, and has reconstituted its image as a “Great Power.” Russia has coincidentally built on its arms market, gaining significant advantages over the US market through supplying S-400 missiles to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Northern Africa countries and Egypt. The Russian political elite deems it that the “Great Powers” have interfered with its domestic affairs after the Cold War, and they seek to carry the instability, chaos and radical terrorist threats emerging after the “Colored Revolutions” and the “Arab Spring” within its own borders as a leverage.

Russia, strongly opposing the “unipolar” power balance as put forwards by the US, has returned to the Middle East with the Syrian Civil War, assuming the role of “Playmaker”. Russia is trying to balance its economic and political alliance with China through military drills. Russia has been attempting to thwart the alliance bloc the USA has founded with “Israel-UN and the Gulf States” through the Syrian Proxy War, and to block the US from

using the “Kurdish Card” in Syria. For this purpose, Russia has been formatting the “Astana Process” with Iran and Turkey and made possible for the Assad regime to stay in power. Russia has interfered in the Syrian Civil War, making it a considerably unlikely scenario for the ISIS terror wave to take root within its borders. The Russian Army has legally grounded its military presence in Syria based on the facts that the ISIS terror threat is still present, chemical weapons are being used, and that such realities make the battle legitimate. All in all, Russia has obtained the status of a permanent player in the Mediterranean. Russia has limited the USA’s and NATO’s military projection with the Tartus and Latakia ports. The energy policies of the USA-Israel-Gulf States have risen to the status of a decisive actor in the Syrian conflict. The possibility of the insurgency in Syria spreading in its own land has been avoided with the new military intervention doctrine adopted by the Russian army, and its conventional modern military might.

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