

## Russia Assertive Return to the Middle East

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### Abstract:

The Middle East has always been a vital strategic region in the foreign policy of external powers. Under the Cold War, many foreign powers were involved in the region's internal affairs. The region had witnessed superpower rivalry and suffered from its consequences. The Soviet Union had a considerable influence in the region. Many regional states were allied with the Soviet bloc. After the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia has sought to establish a footprint in the region and restore its superpower status and prestige as a reliable partner. Therefore, Russia has intervened in the Syrian conflict.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In 2011, a wave of uprisings swept the Arab World. These internal conflicts seek political freedom and resulted in the fall of many regimes. Several internal and external factors have led to the eruption of these Civil Wars. The same case in Syria. Domestic and external factors contributed to the conflict. Many foreign powers were involved in the conflict. Different drivers were behind their involvement. Moreover, their strategic interests in the region governed their interventions and policies to the conflict. This article explores explanations of Russia's interventions in Syrian and the drivers for its support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. It examines the factors that drive Moscow to conduct military operations since 2015 and provide diplomatic and military assistance.

## **2. The Soviet Union in the Middle East: an overview**

Russia relations with the Middle East are long-established. Tsars and Soviet leaders had fought several wars with great powers, such as the Ottoman sultanate, seeking to extend their military and political might in the region. Security concerns and regional interests had formed the basis of the Soviet Middle East policy. The Second World War marked the Soviet first involvement in the region. With the decolonization movement, the U.S. sought to fill the vacuum left by European colonial powers in the region. For its part, Moscow adopted an assertive foreign policy to define its position. Its policy was designed to preserve its southwestern border security, strengthen its stance at the expense of the U.S., and recruit regional allies. The Soviet Union played an active role in the international relations of the Middle East. (Alan R. Taylor. 1991)

The Soviet Union had played a critical role in Middle Eastern affairs since 1953. There had been a heated debate among experts whether the push factor behind the Soviet approach to the region was offensive or defensive. Some analysts argued that the USSR had adopted an offensive approach, seeking to exercise influence on the region and dominate its vast resources and strategic routes at the expense of the U.S. Others perceived the Soviet approach as defensive since the USSR sought to preserve the regions' peace and stability and thus securing its borders from prominent threats. The Soviets had provided political and military support as well as economic aid to regional allies to gain control over their domestic and foreign policies. (Robert O. Freedman. 1975)

In the early years of the Cold War, the Soviet was not concerned with the region and Arab nationalists. After President Nasser of Egypt took power, he adopted social and economic reforms and approached the Soviet Union for arms sales. Russia secured arms for Egypt as the U.S. refused to sell arms to Cairo. This marked the beginning of the Soviet encounter with the Middle East. During the 1970s, many Soviet military advisors visited Egypt. Egypt and Syria provided military bases for the Soviets. Moreover, a treaty of friendship joined the Soviet Union, Egypt, and Syria in 1971.

The USSR started to expand its sphere of influence in the region. However, Moscow opposed the Arab-Israeli War and refused to get involved. The Arabs received little military and political assistance than expected from the Soviets. In 1980, the agreement that joined Syria and the Soviet Union was intended to preserve the security of Damascus. The Soviets were the major source of weapons, military, and diplomatic support. Even after the decline of the Soviet Union's influence in the region by 1972, Moscow maintained its relations with Syria. The Soviets' influence in the region encountered limitations, including Arab nationalism. (Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru. 2018)

### **3. The Roots of the Syrian Crisis**

When Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000, he was a liberaliser politician who enjoyed popularity. He sought political reforms and political stability. Unlike his father who was anti-West, Assad enhanced relations with the West under his reign. In 2010, Syria faced several economic challenges that led to social unrest.

The conflict was also nurtured by ethnic and sectarian differences. The Ba'ath party sought to retain dominance and face any political opposition to it. Bashar was a liberal and advocated relations with the West this created a conflict between his and the Ba'ath party. However, both were united against external interventions. With the eruption of the Arab Spring, Syria has no serious internal problems. However, the West supported the Arab Spring as a part of its policies of regime change. Syria has tense relations with some Arab states, such as the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt. However, Syria has friendly relations with Lebanon, Russia, China, and Iran.

Syria enjoyed a political, economic, cultural and defence partnership with Russia. Moreover, Syria provided Russia with access to the Tartus port. Russia supported Syria with technology, defence equipment and development finance. With the beginning of the wave of the uprising that swept the Arab region in 2011, Syria has stable internal conditions. External endeavours led to unrest and tensions in Syria. The government endeavoured to prevent the spread of protests to its cities but it failed. The Arab world had played a vital role in this spread by accusing security forces with the tense situation and compelling citizens to ask for regime change. (VP Haran. 2016)

### **4. Russia's Intervention in Syria:**

In 2017, President Vladimir Putin went to the Russian airbase in Hmeimim, Syria where he declared the success of the military campaign against Daesh militants. The victory of the regime of Bashar al-Assad further complicated the situation and intensified tensions between major players in the conflict. The Assad government's use of chemical weapons compelled Washington to launch a missile attack against Syrian. Therefore, this provoked a direct military conflict between the Russian military forces and the U.S. in 2018.

However, as Washington decided to pull back from the Iranian nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, many European countries changed their perception of the Russian policies to the conflict. After the victory in the military campaign, armed opposition and its Arab and Western supporters sought to thwart Moscow's peace process. Therefore, the Kremlin boosted its effort to support Bashar al-Assad's regime to regain strategically critical regions controlled by the opposition.

As Russia succeeded to establish a peace process, it sought to assist Bashar al-Assad to increase his dominance over a great portion of Syrian lands. The use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians brought Moscow and Washington to a military escalation. However, the strikes launched by the U.S. were restrained and only three Syrian chemical weapons facilities were targeted. Meanwhile, Russia and the U.S. reached a de facto agreement that stipulates refraining from taking action against each other.

The Russian engagement in the Middle East military and diplomatically demonstrated Russia's superpower status and its ability to manage the Syrian crisis. Moreover, Moscow has secured its interests. Nevertheless, Moscow encountered several limitations, including the diverging interests of its allies. To serve its commercial and political objectives, Russia has sought to cultivate a close and strong relationship with regional oil producers. Russia seeks energy resources and new markets. (Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru. 2018)



proves-moscow-is-an-unreliable-partner/

## 5. The Russian military footprint in Syria

The Soviet Union had had a considerable military presence in the Middle East. The 1984 annual assessment of the US Department of Defense demonstrated the increased Soviet Military forces. Washington deemed Moscow's influence in the Middle East a security challenge to its interests. The document showed that: *“The USSR has greatly increased its offensive military capability and has significantly enhanced its ability to conduct military operations worldwide [...] Since invading Afghanistan 4 years ago, the USSR has established bases within striking distance of the Persian Gulf oil fields. The Soviets continue to deliver a growing arsenal of weapons to Syria, Libya, Cuba and Nicaragua. The number of Soviet personnel in Syria has grown from 2,000 to 7,000 [...] The USSR has increased its influence in the Third World through the presence of over 21,000 military advisers and technicians in nearly 30 countries. An additional 120,000 Soviet troops are stationed in Afghanistan, Cuba and Syria. The result is that the Soviets are able to cultivate pro-Soviet sentiments and influence local military policies.”* (Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru. 2018. P 9)

## 6. Russian material interests and Syria

Since the beginning of the Civil War in Syria, Russia had provided diplomatic support for the Assad regime. Moscow has sought to prevent any actions or UNSC resolution against Syria. The Russian support has strengthened after the re-election of President Putin in 2012. Arms trade and Russia's regional influence have dominated the Russian-Syrian partnership and contributed to its strength. Moscow is an international arms supplier that relies on arms sales. Putin stated that *‘the advancement of civilized and mutually beneficial military–technical partnership is an important instrument of promotion of foreign political interests’*. ROY ALLISON. 2021. P 805)

The Syrian civil war was beneficial to Russia's arms export strategy in the region. Moscow demonstrated its military capabilities and tested 200 new types of weapons. Moreover, Russia's engagement in the conflict reveals Moscow's strategic weight as a superpower on the international stage. Russia achieved its intended goal through arms sales with regional powers and extended its cooperation with these countries in many fields, such as oil and gas, nuclear energy, and trade. Moscow has increased its influence and established a foothold in the region. However, given a fierce competition in the international arms market, Moscow is deemed a challenge to the U.S.

The Russian military intervention in Syria was driven by the aim to eradicate the groups of Daesh since many Russians joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Although the main aim of Russian strikes was suppressing Daesh, its strikes targeted anti-Assad rebel groups since they controlled more lands. From the Russian perspective, ensuring the Assad's regime survival would enable Russia to eradicate the terrorist threat.

Vladimir Putin declared in a TV interview before Moscow's military actions that:

*“we are trying to prevent the creation of a power vacuum in Syria in general because as soon as the government agencies in a state, in a country are destroyed, a power vacuum sets in, and that vacuum is quickly filled with terrorists. This was the case in Libya and Iraq; this was the case in some other countries.”* (Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru. 2018. P 40)

Furthermore, intervention in the Syrian conflict enabled Moscow to distract Western politicians from the Ukraine crisis. In the context of the Ukrainian issue, the U.S. has sought to contain Russia. Moscow's war against Daesh depicted Russia valuable partnership with the West and its ability to manage international issues.

Moscow relied on its increased military presence in Syria to defeat the opposition and restore the Syrian government in a short period. (Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru. 2018). Therefore, Russia intensified its deployed military forces as well as its operations against the opposition. There were many losses among the Russian soldiers and military hardware. The Russian military presence in Syria continues since the civil war has not ended. However, it is unclear what would Moscow do after the end of the war. Reconstruction of Syria would be costly for Moscow.

In 2018, Russia succeeded to prevent regime change in Syria and maintained the Assad government although many territories were still under the control of the rebels. Russia was committed to maintaining regime survival while Syria provided Moscow with air and naval bases in the country for 49 years. Moreover, as an endeavour to extend its sphere of influence, Moscow has to preserve the Assad government.

The Russian military has improved at cooperative, operational, and tactical levels after the operations in Syria. The Russians have acquired combat experience in the Syrian conflict. The Russian armed forces benefited from the civil war and gained knowledge about military actions, tactics and weapons, and the performance and effectiveness of the US and NATO forces. Indeed, Russia was not fighting Daesh in Syria but it was supporting the Syrian regime to regain control over the state.

Iraqi militia forces along with Hizbullah supported by Iran and Russia cooperated during the Civil War. This strategic alliance sought to ensure the survival of Al Assad regime. Moreover, Russia disapproved the UNSC resolutions against Assad. Both Iran and Russia have mutual interests in keeping Assad in power and opposing the hegemonic US. Syria is strategically vital for Moscow that seeks to restore its diplomatic and military presence in the Middle East. Maintaining its influence in the region and its strategic position are the push factors for Iran's policies to the Syrian conflict.

The Syrian civil war provides Russia with the opportunity to emerge as a reliable partner and peace breaker at the international theatre and prove its credibility by resolving the crisis. Moscow sought to establish a strong central government under the control of Bashar Assad. (Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secrieru. 2018).

Ensuring Bashar al-Assad's regime survival, opposing the U.S. interventions in world affairs, and eradicating Islamist radicals were Russia's major drivers for its interference in the Syrian conflict. Since the Cold War, Syria has always been Syria's arms client and a vital geopolitical position in the region. Russia thwarted any attempts at regime change that could have serious implications on its regional and strategic ambitions. Intervention in the Civil War and served Russia to achieve its stated aim that was emerging as a critical player in conflict resolution. Russia had sought several times to cooperate with the U.S. on the Syrian conflict but its attempts yielded no positive results. (Dmitri Trenin. 2014).

One of the major reasons for Russia's involvement and support for Syria is securing its commercial and investments there. Moscow and Syria signed many contracts in the energy sector.

During a meeting between Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid Muallem and Russian Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitry Rogozin in November 2015, Mr. Muallem said that “We have data that oil and gas deposits on a shelf off the coast of Syria have enormous potential. And we hope to see not only Russian warships in Syria, but also platforms for extracting oil.” He stated that “the Syrian authorities are hoping that Russian companies will develop the country's offshore oil deposits.” During the meeting he declared that “one Russian firm has already signed a contract and Damascus is waiting for other companies to follow suit. Syria is ready to offer Russian companies all possible incentives.” (Dr. Indrani Talukdar. 2016).

This paves the way for Russia to intensify its influence and deepen its presence in this strategically significant region. Moreover, the regime requested Russia assistance to make reforms in gas and oil fields that were ceased by the rebels. Russia aspires to be treated as a global power, particularly after its involvement in Ukraine that was followed by the international exclusion of Russia from world affairs. (Dr. Indrani Talukdar. 2016).

## **7. Russia Political and Economic Achievements and Drawbacks in Syria:**

The Russian engagement in the Syrian Civil War culminated in keeping the Assad's regime in power and abstracted opposition to al-Assad's legitimacy. Moreover, Moscow enhanced its relations with Turkey after the crisis of the Russian fighter jet in 2015. Moscow's participation in the conflict extended its influence within the Arab States. Although Russia achieved its ambitions by emerging as a superpower and a critical player in global affairs, its influence remains inferior to that of the U.S. Furthermore, Moscow failed to dominate Damascus completely. In addition, Washington and Turkey have contributed to the peace process.

Before the Syrian conflict, Russia suffered from economic issues to the fall of oil prices. This had exacerbated domestic concerns. However, the war permitted Moscow to test several new weapons and signed many contracts of arms trade. Moreover, two Russian companies have invested in Syria. (Mariya Petkova. 2020).

## **9. Conclusion**

The geopolitical significance of the Middle East has compelled many foreign players to establish a foothold in the region and intensify their sphere of influence to preserve their strategic interests. The Cold War witnessed the Cold War rivalry and was the top priority in superpowers' agenda. However, even after the end of the Cold War, this region remains strategically important. The U.S. has been the dominant power in the region and enjoyed an undisputed leadership. However, with the decline of the U.S. influence and the rise of other powers, such as China and Russia, competition has increased. Russia seeks to establish a footprint in the region and restore its influence.

Russia has seized the opportunity to get involved in the Syrian conflict to achieve its stated objectives. Moscow seeks to emerge as a superpower and a reliable partner by playing a constructive role in international issues. Engagement in Syria was politically, economically, and military beneficial to Russia. By reaching a settlement on the Syrian Civil War, Moscow would emerge as a peace broker at the international theatre. Moreover, Moscow would regain its superpower status and prestige. Moscow recruited regional clients and friendly states. At the economic level, Moscow developed many cooperative partnerships.



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