

4. Redistribution of Power in the Middle East: Moscow's Return to Syria

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In the last few years, the world has witnessed a gradual disintegration of the post-Cold War international order, exemplified by the so-called “Pax Americana”. Such a trend seems to be turning into a global redistribution of power, with a waning US role on one side, and a growing assertiveness of other powers (primarily Russia and China) on the other. Nowhere is this redistribution more visible than in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). As the 2011 Arab uprisings have largely demonstrated, the US policy of disengagement from the region has challenged Washington’s supremacy as the external provider of security, allowing other regional and international actors to aspire to this role.

Against this background, the Syrian Civil War is arguably the most eloquent case to analyze. As the humanitarian crisis was escalating in the early 2010s, President Barack Obama’s choice to scale down US engagement in the region and not to get involved in another troubled Middle East conflict has allowed a plethora of countries whose strategic interests were already converging on Damascus more room to maneuver. The interferences of Iran and Turkey, and to a lesser extent the Gulf monarchies and Israel, have proved to be increasingly determinant for the country’s fate. Most importantly, although a direct causal link between the different policies enacted by the United States and Russia in Syria cannot be established, it is difficult

to argue against the fact that Washington's decision not to intervene in 2013 created an opportunity for Moscow that the Kremlin did not hesitate to seize.

Since September 2015, the strenuous battle that Moscow engaged in in defense of President Bashar al-Assad has reverted the destiny of the country in Assad's favor; without Russia's military and political support to Damascus, the situation in Syria today would probably be very different. In some respects, we could even argue that the Syrian case depicts a paradox: while the United States' weight and influence in the country has historically been limited compared to that of Russia, Syria is probably the country where Washington's decision to not intervene has had the greatest impact, both on the domestic evolution of the conflict and in terms of fruits that other actors, and particularly Moscow, have been able to reap. In other words, the Syrian context seems to perfectly reflect the redistribution of power ongoing in the MENA region, where other powers, often perceived as "anti-Western", can interfere more easily.

However, questions remain over the future of Syria in such a scenario. Will Russia and the other regional actors be able to obtain the results they expected from their Syrian adventures? Can Moscow really hope for a "Russian Pax" in Syria? The first part of this chapter will deal with the origins of US-Russian "confrontation" over Syria and the redistribution of power that led to Russia's intervention in 2015; the second part will assess the feasibility and sustainability of a "Russian Pax" in the Arab country. While answering these questions might be tricky, it can be easily argued that the decline of the United States in the Middle East and the rise of old and new external players are tied up together.

At the Core of US-Russia Confrontation in Syria

While competition between the United States and Russia (whether in its Soviet or post-Soviet dress) over the MENA region has dominated much of the debate of international

political studies since the end of World War II, in Syria this is a more recent phenomenon. A de facto colonial country under the French Mandate of 1920 after the partition and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, upon gaining independence in 1946 Syria was soon caught in between the Cold War rivalries and gradually aligned with the Eastern camp of the bipolar world order. On the one hand, post-colonial Syria was seeking international support and recognition, and it soon identified in the Soviet Union (USSR) the right “patron state” to develop close ties with, in order to avoid isolation and marginalization at the regional level. On the other hand, the USSR identified in Syria its closest ally among the Middle Eastern “confrontational states”: important commercial ties, sustained military collaboration and the possibility to establish naval military facilities on Syria’s Mediterranean coast were all crucial features in the development of this relationship. Most importantly though, post-colonial Syrian elites seemed to espouse the anti-imperialist, anti-Western cause that the Soviets promoted in countries of the so-called third world, thus creating a political affinity between Damascus and Moscow that could serve as a basis for the Kremlin to increase political influence in the entire “Near East” (*Blizhnyi Vostok*)¹. With Damascus so closely tied to Moscow, US-Syria relations did not have much room to flourish.

However, with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the policy pursued by Moscow in the broader MENA region was substantially based on non-engagement, thus benefitting the United States, which remained the only external power able to determine the course of events in this area for a long time. With only one super power remaining on the global chess-board, between 1990 and 2001 Syria

¹ For analysis on Moscow’s projection in the Middle East during the Cold War, see for instance A. McInerney, “Prospect Theory and Soviet Policy Towards Syria, 1966-1967”, *Political Psychology*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1992, pp. 265-282; E. Moshe, “The Soviet Union and the Syrian military-economic dimension: a realpolitik perspective”, in E. Moshe and B. Jacob (eds.), *Superpowers and Client States in the Middle East: The Imbalance of Influence*, London, Routledge Press, 1991.

and the United States cooperated to a certain degree on some regional issues (i.e. the Gulf War, Syrian-Israeli peace deal); however, a true friendship was never born. Several events in the 2000s – the escalation of international terrorism following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the subsequent US invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was opposed by Damascus, and the reinforcement of the Damascus-Tehran axis – once again highlighted how distant the two countries were in regarding the developments that were unfolding in the region. Simultaneously, the “new Russia” took distance from Syria and appeared to lose interest in the fate of its former Arab ally. This was, however, an illusion that did not last long, as the Russian response to the Syrian crisis in the 2010s has unequivocally shown.

To some extent, the Syrian Civil War brought the country’s international history back to the surface, highlighting the contradiction of its relations with the United States on one side and Russia on the other. Since the spring of 2011, the conflict in Syria has posed a serious threat to both the Assad regime and to regional stability. As the crisis began to escalate irreversibly, both the United States and NATO made it quite clear that they did not wish to intervene militarily. Former US President Barack Obama’s reluctance to get involved most likely originated in the desire to keep his campaign promise to end the United States’ war in the Middle East, which was still being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite the brutal violence and violation of human rights perpetrated by the Assad regime in the battle of Aleppo in 2013,² Obama remained firmly convinced that a military operation would be a costly failure for the United States, which risked being unable to bring peace to the country anyway: too many armed groups were involved in Syria, supported by different and competing regional powers (Iran and Russia backing Assad and pro-regime forces; Turkey, Saudi

² I. Black, “[Syria deaths near 100,000, says UN – and 6,000 are children](#)”, *The Guardian*, 13 June 2013.

Arabia, and Qatar backing different opposition forces). Instead, the President choose to focus US efforts on the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which in his eyes represented a greater threat to the homeland than the Syrian regime did. As two of Obama's former national security officials have stated, "Disastrous forays in Iraq and Libya have undermined any American willingness to put values before interests"³. Also, given Russia's and Iran's stakes in Syria, combined with the involvement of Turkey and the Gulf countries, he feared that any US intervention would only risk escalating the conflict.

Negotiations under the UN then proceeded without bringing about tangible results. At that time, the Russian voice in the UN Security Council (UNSC) was barely heard, and Moscow was limited to holding the UNSC hostage through its veto power. However, Russia's repeated vetoes to block resolutions condemning Assad's brutalities (including the alleged use of chemical weapons on the population) and threatening him with sanctions provided valid signals of Moscow's view for the future of Syria. Russia's interests and objectives were clear enough already: avoid any externally promoted regime change and keep shielding the Assad government from internal opposition as much as from accusations from Western powers. As the UNSC and the international community began to call upon Assad to step down, Russia was nervously observing the US-led NATO operations in Libya to overthrow Muammar al-Qaddafi's government, which the Kremlin's leadership considered to be an avoidable disaster. As argued by some Russian observers, "what Libya did was compelling a group of people in Russia, the elites and the general public, to say 'never again'"⁴. Moreover, while Libya was less of a reliable ally to Moscow, a regime change in Syria would mean losing a key strategic client and partner in

³ B.P. Usher, "Obama's Syria Legacy: Measured Diplomacy, Strategic Explosion", *BBC News*, 13 January 2017.

⁴ F. Lukyanov, comment in "Talking point: the logic of Russian foreign policy. Marie Mendras and Fyodor Lukyanov join oDRussia editor Oliver Carroll for a debate in Paris", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 13 December 2012.

the Middle East, one that the Kremlin had long been establishing through ties to the Baathist elites and the Assad family in particular⁵. For Russia, this would have been unacceptable. As some scholars have argued, “the relationship between Syria and Russia is the last remnant of Soviet politics in the Middle East, [...] the final point of the post-Soviet presence in the region”⁶. Though at the time Russia’s official position still firmly excluded external military interventions, this position changed with the rise of the ISIS in June 2014.

The watershed in Syria took place in 2015, which turned out to be Moscow’s lucky year. Barack Obama’s hesitation gave his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin an opening that fit his agenda: restoring Russia’s privileged partnership with Syria and rebuilding Russia’s influence in the region (at the same time trying to relaunch Russia’s image *vis-à-vis* the West in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis). Over the course of a few months, Russia expanded its old military facilities in Latakia, and the first airstrikes launched by the Hmeimim base were symbolically made to signal Russia’s comeback in the Middle East. Justified by the fight against terrorism, the Kremlin boldly projected itself into the Syrian conflict, opposing the stance of the United States and many Arab and/or Muslim countries as well. Compared to most other external actors, Russia’s well-defined objectives and lack of hesitation in pursuing them greatly favored Moscow. However, as the conflict overall winds down (with the exception of the Idlib area, which has experienced a resurgence of violence in summer 2019, and the northeastern part of the country), can Russia’s military intervention be

⁵ Moscow and Damascus established increasingly close relations with the rise to power of the left wing of the Baath party, and especially Hafez al-Assad, in 1970. From then, Syria clung to Soviet support, while the Soviets did everything they could to ensure the survival of the Baathist regime. For deeper analysis on this, see K. Efrain, *The Soviet Union and Syria. The Assad Years*, New York, Routledge Press, 1988.

⁶ R. Allison, “Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis”, *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 4, 2013, pp. 795-823.

deemed successful? Did the Russians obtain the expected results? The question is very complex, and it demands a detailed, multi-layered answer.

On the security level, in respect to Russia's primary goal of keeping Assad at the helm of the regime and shifting the internal balance of power back in favor of Damascus, the answer is yes. Four years since the start of the Russian operations, Assad has regained almost all of Syria's territories that had been lost to the rebels. The striking success of Russia's military was clearly not a favored solution for the United States, as it de facto nullified Washington's efforts to support the political opposition to Assad, rule out his role in Syria's future government, and push for a political transition⁷. With respect to the micro security level, however, Russia's campaign results are less triumphant. Several areas in the country are yet to be reclaimed by the regime, including the crucial area of Idlib, and continue to pose a challenge to internal stability. Moreover, at the time of writing in September 2019, as the situation in the northeastern part of the country is rapidly escalating with Turkey and the United States ready to cooperate on the possible establishment of a "safe zone" to protect the Turkish-Syrian border, an appeasement of tensions still seems a distant goal.

Sticking to the military realm, another success that Moscow has achieved relates to a growing interest in Russian military power by US allies in the region. The Syrian campaign in fact allowed Moscow to project its military power to a broad range of spectators. While the Russians do not enjoy the same advanced military technology of the United States, given the perception of waning US leadership in the MENA region in the wake of Donald Trump's election to President many US allies have begun to look to Moscow for security provision,

⁷ Then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told reporters: "The US wants a whole and unified Syria with no role for Bashar Assad in the government. The only issue is how that should be brought about". See "[Rex Tillerson reaffirms US commitment to Syrian peace, rules out Assad in future government](#)", *DW*, 26 October 2017.

including Iraq, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey⁸. While the US State Department has repeatedly warned its allies in the region against acquiring Russian technologies, threatening potential penalties through the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) of 2017⁹, many of these countries seem to have indulged in buying Russian weaponry. However, the agreement signed in July 2019 by Russia and Turkey, a NATO member, on the purchase of Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system is yet another signal of Moscow's ability to exploit international tensions and fill power vacuums.

Beyond military successes, Moscow's gains in the field of international diplomacy represent Russia's greatest achievement, and yet potentially another challenge to the United States. Since the escalation of the war in 2015, the Russians have demonstrated their ability to move quite easily from the military to the political table. The so-called Astana process, which reached its thirteenth meeting with the last round of negotiations in August 2019, has been the ace in the hole of Russia's Middle East strategy. Russia, a country that only fifteen years before was laying at the margin of global politics, was able to orchestrate peace talks over one of the most severe crises in the world. Although the points of discussion remain closely linked to those of the UN-led peace process held in Geneva (cease-fire, political transition, refugee issues), a parallel mechanism was settled in Astana, where Russia served as the protagonist alongside its partners Turkey and Iran. The Kremlin's great diplomatic effort in establishing relations with as many sides as possible in Syria's crisis, including traditional US allies in the Middle East, has fostered the perception in Washington that Russia was exploiting the Syrian crisis to reestablish its Soviet great power status and compete with the United States. However, Russian behavior today seems to have little to do with Moscow's posture

⁸ See quote from Alexander Mikheyev, CEO of Rosoboronexport, in "Russia encroaches on US war industry in Middle East", *DW*, 31 August 2018.

⁹ US Department of the Treasury, *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act* (last retrieved on 26 September 2019).

in the Soviet era: rather than attracting Syria towards its Soviet-communist, anti-Western sphere of influence, Moscow seems to be more interested in cementing its status as the only possible mediator of Syria's crisis, the valuable and trusted actor that everyone should refer to.

Since its military intervention, the Kremlin has been able to acquire a level of diplomatic weight that, in light of perceived American disengagement, appears to have few rivals for now. From this position, Moscow can effectively hope to pursue a "Russian Pax" for Syria. Nonetheless, doubts remain over its feasibility and potential for success.

A "Russian Pax" for Syria?

While redistribution of power in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab uprisings has brought Moscow to be actively involved again in Syria, Moscow's apparent dream of becoming the real powerbroker of the Syrian peace may remain just that: a dream. Is a "Russian Pax" really desired by Moscow and, if so, is it sustainable? Will Russia be able to reap the fruits of its military adventure in Syria? Being impossible to give a net answer to these questions, it may be useful to instead outline some of the most critical fields where Russia's strategy is most at risk: the internal security/political level, the economic level, and the diplomatic level.

On the internal security/political level, concerns remain over the final success of the Russian-led peace. Opposition to Assad has weakened but not disappeared, as the escalation of violence in Idlib in the summer of 2019 has demonstrated. Moreover, the Russian-Turkish-Iranian agreement so far has had rather modest objectives, focusing on ceasefires, de-escalations and tactical military deals instead of opening an inclusive debate on a future political solution for Syria. On the thirteenth round of negotiations, a constitutional committee was declared to be established to convene in Geneva, although there was no indication on who should sit around this table. To this end, the

continuation of Assad's grip on power will be a divisive element not only within Syria, but also between Russia and the US, given their opposite positions on the future role of the Syrian President. Despite limits, Astana however remains vital to Moscow's Syrian projection; even more so today, as the contribution of European and Western powers to the reconstruction of the country might be subordinated to progresses in the peace talks.

In regard to the economic level, the argument over reconstruction in Syria is in fact growing increasingly urgent. Russia's future engagement in this dossier, however, is unknown, as it is difficult to imagine that Moscow's fragile economy will be able to provide for a sustained assistance to its Arab ally. Although Russia and Syria have a long history of economic relations, which were reinforced in the 2000s in the frame of Putin's policy of rapprochement with the region and the establishment of bilateral organizations aimed at developing business and trade ties between the two countries¹⁰, reconstruction in Syria demands ways and means that Moscow can hardly afford. Despite this, Moscow (alongside China) seems to be determined to seize fruitful opportunities as Western powers hesitate, conditioning their engagement in rebuilding Syria on the departure of Assad. The United States in particular prefers to provide assistance for humanitarian efforts rather than reconstruction. Moreover, in response to regime brutality since 2011, the United States has tightened already existing sanctions on Syria, blocking US firms from engaging in transactional dealings involving Syria. Despite limited means and the fact that economics represents a mere adjunct to politics in Russia's strategy¹¹, reconstruction is yet another arena Moscow will try to enter.

¹⁰ See Syrian-Russian Business Council, <http://srbc-sy.com> (last retrieved on 26 September 2019).

¹¹ C. Hartwell, "Russian Economic Policy in the MENA Region: A Means to Political Ends", in V. Talbot and C. Lovotti (eds.), *The Role of Russia in the Middle East and North Africa: Strategy or Opportunism?*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, Euromesco Joint Policy Study 12, 2018.

At the international diplomatic level, Russia undoubtedly enjoys a net advantage due to its ability and will to talk to opposing sides of the conflict, while Washington refuses to engage with the Iranians and the Assad regime. At the same time, however, Russia's policy of supporting opposing sides might lead some to believe that Moscow is an actor to be wary of¹². While this might be a necessary (albeit not sufficient) guarantee that Russia will have a spot at the winner's table, the complex relationships that Moscow has established with different regional powers (Turkey, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and North African countries) may at some point overstretch the Kremlin's reach, and threaten the sustainability of the "Russian Pax".

In this regard, one of the most problematic points in Russia's strategy is represented by Iran, for a variety of reasons. The first and most significant has to do with Syria's future political outlook. On the one hand, the Russians seem to know that a withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria would hardly be feasible: Iranian boots on the ground may prove necessary to protect Assad from any possible resurgence against his regime. On the other hand, Iran's growing influence on the ground makes it difficult to manage a political transition that can satisfy the Syrian opposition, which remains firm on the refusal of any Iranian involvement in defining the future structure of the country. Furthermore, despite having succeeded in the shared goal of defending Assad's regime from its internal opponents, Russia and Iran have different visions for the future of Syria and its reconstruction. This friction could prove a challenge to Russia's strategy in Syria in the long run.

Secondly, Tehran's projection in Syria has worried the enemies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, most notably Saudi Arabia and Israel. If the Kremlin's strategy at this stage is aimed at maintaining a neutral position, talking to and forming partnerships with everyone (the recent Russian-Saudi agreement on oil

¹² M. Katz, *When the Friend of My Friends Is Not My Friend: The United States, US Allies, and Russia in the Middle East*, Atlantic Council, May 2019.

production could be considered an example), Moscow might be put to the test if it is to collaborate with partners whose vision for the future of Syria is not perfectly aligned with that of the Kremlin.

Nonetheless, current tensions between the United States and Iran in the Gulf might end up strengthening the Moscow-Tehran axis. In fact, President Donald Trump's firm stance on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) toward Iran's nuclear activities could weaken Tehran economically, potentially empowering Russia's role in Syria even more: with a weaker Tehran, the strongest, most reliable partner of Damascus would remain Moscow. Despite the other challenges facing a "Russian Pax", such an evolution might end up increasing opportunities for Moscow to increase its influence in the region.

The complex relationship with Ankara is yet another point that risks overstressing the Kremlin's strategy in Syria. Despite their opposing views towards the Assad regime, Russia and Turkey have proved capable of putting their differences aside and have established solid cooperation on talks to find a political solution to the conflict. While Moscow's uncomfortable position as a mediator between Ankara and Damascus has so far managed to avoid an escalation between the two, the US-Turkey entente reached in summer 2019 to join forces and establish a "safe zone" along the Turkish-Syrian border – which would serve as a buffer to Turkey against the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), labelled a terrorist organization by Ankara – risks deteriorating the situation and increasing tensions between Ankara and Damascus. Finding itself stuck in between its two partners, Moscow might be forced to choose, with Damascus most likely prevailing. In addition, the US support of the Turkish cause might push the Kurds to seek Russia's protection, and perhaps even become for flexible in reaching an agreement with Damascus, of course under the mediation of Moscow¹³. All these factors may deepen the rift between

¹³ R. Mamedov, *Intel: Why a military confrontation between Turkey and the Kurds in Syria*

Moscow and Ankara, and potentially push the latter to look for support from the United States, its NATO ally. While trying to predict the future in Syria is a hazard, one could easily argue that mediating between Damascus and the regional stakeholders of the crisis will become increasingly complex for Moscow in the long run.

Conclusion

In light of what has been discussed, a few conclusions can be drawn. First of all, while the United States has never fully engaged in Syria and has enjoyed a limited degree of influence over the country compared to other powers – primarily Russia and the USSR before it – its policy of non-intervention in the Syrian conflict has had a deep resonance. Secondly, among the actors that have stepped into the Syrian quagmire, Russia so far seems to be emerging as a winner, but, in many respects, a weak one. On the one hand, Moscow has undoubtedly achieved its primary goals and changed the fate of the Syrian conflict in favor of Damascus. On the other, however, Russia is weakened by its inability to singlehandedly affect the outcome of the crisis in Syria, the country in which it has invested the most. Mediation efforts remain difficult among the different stakeholders of the Syrian crisis. Even if Moscow was set to mediate between the United States and Iran over Syria's destiny, it is doubtful that the United States or Iran would accept that.

Overall however, and most importantly, Syria has demonstrated Russia's ability to seize opportunities spontaneously emerging from the contexts like the Syrian one, and exploit them by fitting them into its broader strategy of projecting power overseas. For now, this strategy appears to be paying off: one could hardly argue against the fact that Moscow has become one of the main international actors with a stake in the

region, and is likely to remain active in the Middle East and North Africa for the years to come. This is true even outside Syria, as opportunities emerge all over the region and Moscow grasps for them. Fostering a dialogue with Moscow should be made a priority of Western powers' Middle East policies – particularly the United States and European countries – in order to find a shared security approach for the region based on cooperation rather than confrontation.