

# IN THE BEAR'S SHADOW

*Russian Intervention in Syria*



Sanu Kainikara



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sanu Kainikara is the Air Power Strategist at the RAAF's Air Power Development Centre. He is an Adjunct Professor at the University of New South Wales and the inaugural Distinguished Fellow at the Institute for Regional Security. He is the author of numerous papers on international politics, national security issues, and security strategy in reputed international journals; and has also presented papers, on invitation, in a number of International Conferences around the world.

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Sanu is the author of 11 books dealing with national security, military strategy and air power. He is a keen student of Indian history and is in the process of writing the history of India in a series of books titled *From Indus to Independence: A Trek through Indian History*. The first five volumes of the series have been published and the sixth volume is being written. In addition, he has also published three collections of political essays.

Professor Kainikara holds two Bachelor degrees, A Master of Arts in Defence and Strategic Studies from the University of Madras and his PhD in International Politics was awarded by the University of Adelaide.

## OTHER BOOKS BY SANU KAINIKARA

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# FOREWORD

The on-going conflicts in the Middle-East are politically and militarily complex and the Syrian Civil War typifies the growing multi-faceted nature of modern combat operations. Multiple warring factions fighting for different goals and employing a range of high and low technology capabilities have created a challenging battlespace and a concomitant humanitarian tragedy. The Western democracies have responded to the deteriorating military and politico-economic situations by initiating coalition air operations against ISIS in Syria and attempting to provide humanitarian relief to the beleaguered civilian population. In September 2015, Russian aircraft began conducting their own air campaign against ISIS and anti-Assad forces in Syria.

In his book, *In the Bear's Shadow...*, Professor Kainikara blends the history, culture, strategy, and operations to provide a unique insight into the background and conduct of Russia's intervention in Syria. In doing so he reinforces the importance of understanding the context of air power employment in planning and executing air operations. The book clearly brings out the strategic and political lessons that can be drawn from the Russian military and political intervention in the Syrian Civil War.

Russia's presence changed the dynamics of the conflict. Coalition planners had to adapt to the evolving situation to ensure operations could continue to be conducted safely and effectively. The success of Coalition air power in contributing to the defeat of ISIS in Syria reflects the adaptability and professionalism of the airmen involved. But there were challenges. Principal among these was deconflicting air power employed towards differing strategic and operational goals. Overcoming this challenge required a clear appreciation of Russian intentions in Syria, which this book brings out unambiguously. It also highlights the need for focusing on our own mission sets and capabilities in the new and evolving geo-political context.

As our strike aircraft wind up their operations in the Middle East Region, and we start to analyse and incorporate the lessons of Operation *Okra* into our professional military education system, Professor Kainikara's work will play a critical role in broadening our understanding of the

strategic aspects of air operations. This holistic analysis of the Russian air campaign in Syria is an important addition to our understanding of the effects that air power creates at the highest level of geo-politics. I commend the book to you.

Air Marshal G.N. Davies, AO, CSC  
Chief of Air Force  
March 2018

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I am convinced that it is impossible to write a book, of any kind, without the active support and encouragement of a number of people. This book is no exception. I would like to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to GPCAPT Andrew Gilbert for gently pushing me forward in the writing of this book; GPCAPT Phil Edwards for consistently providing insightful comments on my analysis; Ms Sandra Finney for the unstinting support she has always provided for my professional writing endeavours; Mr Neal Waddle, our new editor, whose comments and suggestions have improved the book's readability, and perhaps more importantly, made me rethink the viability of some of the more archaic turns of phrase that I habitually use; and as always, Mr Graeme Smith, a designer par excellence, who with a smile weaves his magic around my fanciful ideas regarding the cover and layout, making it seem so easy.

For these people, a deep-felt 'Thank You' from the heart, although the two words seem so inadequate.

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

*It's when the 'international community' expresses 'concern' about your 'situation' that your situation is well and truly f\*\*\*\*d.*

-Michael D. Weiss

Throughout history, civil wars, irrespective of the era and continent, during or in which they have been fought, have been brutal. In the annals of civil wars, however, the currently on-going conflict in Syria that started in 2011 stands out for its large number of participants, long duration, sheer scale and callous brutality. It is also one of the few civil wars in recent times in which civilians have been deliberately targeted by air power in many attacks.

Syria had a population of nearly 22 million at the start of the conflict. The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that after five years of relentless conflict, around 400 000 people have been killed, 4.8 million have become refugees, and 6.1 million Syrians are counted as having been internally displaced. The economic cost has been estimated roughly at \$206 billion but mounts at an alarming rate.

Civil wars, irrespective of their genesis, almost always invite foreign intervention. They normally indicate the waning power of an incumbent regime that comes into conflict with others (a power-in-waiting) who aspire to an alternative regime. At least in the initial stages, the warring sides will be matched and invariably a vacuum will be created at some stage in the conflict. Power abhors a vacuum. Therefore, other power-hungry, would-be influential foreign regimes and other elements will slip into the war-afflicted nation and attempt to influence the final outcome in their favour. A modern nuance to such interventions is that the intervening entity need not always be a sovereign state; it could be an amorphous group with ambitions to create its own 'state'. The Islamic State is a prime example of such an entity.

The Middle-East seems to be in the thick of a sectarian conflict that has manifested itself in both lethal combat as well as diplomatic spats. Terrorism is another aspect of the sectarian conflict in the Middle-East. Since the different denominations and sects of Islam are spread across all the nations of the region, terrorism has become the recourse of minority groups who have been continually brutalised, both physically and emotionally, at times with tacit state support. When the people perceive the brutalisation to have been perpetuated by a foreign entity or brought about by a conniving foreign source, the reactions are much more vociferous and reach the extremes of sectarianism.

Terrorism that emanates from causes rooted in religion and politics, in different combinations, can only be addressed if the causes of the dissatisfaction can be removed at a fundamental level. This is a tall order and needs not only careful analysis but also the willing involvement of the existing regime. The typical terrorist in the Middle-East is normally reacting to the cruelty that s/he has suffered at the hands of the autocratic Arab regimes that proliferate in the region. They are the neglected part of the population, who nurture intense hatred for the ruling elite and become alienated from the society at large. They are also the ones who perpetuate acts of terror in Western nations, since they believe that the challenges that they face in their home-states and how they perceive their religion to be humiliated are caused by 'liberal' Western democracies. The world continues to overlook this growing phenomenon. It is still not too late for the developed world, read Western democracies, to create an inclusive society where the fears and apprehensions of the migrant 'outsiders' can be diffused. That no concerted attempt to create such a society occurs remains unfortunate, especially in the current geo-political environment of extreme suspicion of the 'other'.

Today, very clearly, the world is moving away from the unipolar, USA-led geo-political environment. The so-called middle power nations have started to exert their influence, pulling the international community in different directions. There is a focus on national interests at the cost of caring about the greater good of the world community. On the other hand, the world has not yet reached a definitive multipolar situation with the international order being in a state of flux. The uncertainties that characterise geo-strategic security have also created an environment for non-state entities with narrow, sectarian interests to assume a far more

influential role than they deserve to have. The major nations do not have the capacity or the intent to reject these developments.

In this respect, the Syrian Civil War is a classic example of the inability of the keepers of the world order to deal with a situation that has rapidly blossomed into anarchy.

Civil wars will continue to be fought as long as external support to one or both belligerents continues to pour into Syria. Such support, in turn, will depend on the interests of the intervening nations. Therefore, civil wars normally end when one side, and its support base, believes that it is unlikely to win or runs out of the capacity to bear the cost of lives and finance that is necessary to continue a viable fight. In Syria, the civil war in its sixth year shows no sign of abating. The only visible sign is that the tempo and intensity of the conflict are reducing.

What started as a non-violent protest against an authoritarian regime became an uprising by a pro-democracy movement with a tenuous connection to the Arab Spring movement that had spread across the region earlier. With surprising rapidity, it mushroomed into one of the bloodiest and complex multi-cornered conflicts to have engulfed the region. It now involves, in some way or other, all Syria's neighbours: Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and also the USA, its allies and Russia. From its beginnings as an anti-regime protest, the Syrian Civil War today has become sectarian. The Assad regime is supported by the Shia-majority countries, Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah that form part of the Lebanese Shias. On the other side of the conflict are the Sunni-majority nations of the region, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Qatar. Into this fray both the US and Russia have become involved. While both these external powers are ambiguous about the sectarian aspects of the conflict, their actions tend to indicate which of the two sides they support.

The Syrian Civil War is complex in the alignments that fluctuate almost on a daily basis. This situation makes it difficult to unravel the actions of any one entity since each action is supported or opposed by another action, which in turn spawns more multi-directional actions. An example is the convoluted manner in which the anti-Assad forces are being armed. While the CIA coordinates procurement and delivery of arms through the Turkish intelligence agency, payments are made by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Similarly, the rebels are being trained in camps set up in Jordan by the CIA, once again with funds supplied by a third party. It is not the

complexity of these deals that is mind-boggling, but that responsibility and accountability for the actions being initiated have been removed in favour of expeditious policies of dubious long-term veracity.

In Syria, the wheels within wheels are clearly visible, even though all the external elements involved pretend to not see them. Each individual nation participating in Syria, directly or indirectly, sets its own objectives. Unfortunately for the Syrian people, none of them is mutually compatible nor aligns with the Syrian peoples' interests.

This monograph is a modest attempt at piecing together the actions initiated by Russia when it intervened in the Syrian Civil War at the invitation of President Bashar al-Assad. Since the events being analysed are on-going, it has been difficult to predict what the future holds for Syria. However, based on the trajectory of the Russian military actions so far, I discuss the future in very general terms. Information has been drawn from open sources, mostly Web-based, since no authoritative work has yet been published. While this monograph does not claim to analyse the events that have taken place completely, it seeks the first step in understanding the complexities of the actions that Russia initiated. The clear indication is that extraneous political factors have been significantly important in conducting the war in Syria.

The only other clear factor is that Syria is not yet done with the tribulations that are being heaped on its people. The nation has joined a long list of countries that have been ravaged by civil wars and foreign military interventions. I make this statement with the implicit belief that Syria continues to be counted as a nation-state. That no intervening nation, almost all of them Western democracies, has been held to account for the death, destruction and misery that has been caused afflicts the international community.

Sanu Kainikara  
APDC, Canberra  
March 2018



# INTRODUCTION

*Syria is geographically and politically in the middle of the Middle-East.*

-President Basher al-Assad

The Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War in September 2015 at the official invitation of the Syrian government,<sup>1</sup> surprised many political analysts. Russia regarded it as an overdue forceful return to global politics to the extent that it rejuvenated dormant Russian geo-political ambitions that could be traced back to the time of the Czars. The message that was being transmitted to the nations of the Middle-East was that Russia was more serious about settling the disputes in the region than the USA. However, Russia's Syrian campaign is limited in design and only a modest attempt by a modest power to make a mark on the world stage. Therefore, there is no assurance that the success of this campaign will automatically lead to fulfilling even minor global ambitions. Considering Russia's domestic socio-economic situation, regaining global status is, at least for the time being, an untenable ambition.

Russia has been in contact and interacting with the Muslim world for more than a millennium. In the 7th century, the Arab armies brought Islam to Derbent, the oldest city in the Russian Federation; in the 10th century, Ibn Fadlan an Arab diplomat, visited and wrote about the Muslim villages along the banks of the River Volga; and Ibn Battuta, the 14th century Arab traveller and avid chronicler reports that the Prince of Muscovy was a vassal of the Muslim Khan and that the Russian coinage bore Arabic

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1 Quinn, Ben, 'Russia's military action in Syria—timeline', *The Guardian*, 14 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/14/russias-military-action-in-syria-timeline> accessed on 19 May 2017.

## *In the Bear's Shadow*

script.<sup>2</sup> It was only in 1480 that Moscow became truly independent and stopped paying tribute to the Muslim overlords.

In the following centuries, Russia fought a number of wars against a receding Ottoman Empire. Gradually, Moscow also assumed the mantle of protector of the Middle-Eastern Christians most of whom were orthodox. During World War I, Britain and France promised to hand over Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul, to Russia at the end of the conflict. However, the outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 meant that the promise went unfulfilled.

At the early stages of the Cold War, by the 1960s, Soviet weapons and military instructors were pouring into the Arab states that had become clients of one or the other of the Super Powers. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was the harbinger of the rise of political Islam in the region following which the Soviet influence started to wane. At the same time, the Soviet Union was attempting what could be termed a classic case on imperial over-reach in Afghanistan, a fiasco that hastened the Soviet Union's collapse. In the 1991 Gulf War, fought to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, Moscow under Gorbachev sided with the USA-led coalition, despite Iraq having been a client state of the Soviet Union for decades.<sup>3</sup> This point was the nadir of Soviet influence in the region. From this juncture onwards, the USA started to influence the Middle-East more by playing the role of external arbitrator for the political issues of the region.

For nearly two decades after the break-up of the Soviet Union, Russia was preoccupied with internal challenges and was thus unable to effectively influence the international politico-economic sphere. The new rulers of Russia were also involved in a bloody civil war in Chechnya and some other Muslim majority areas within the nation. A combination of these two factors made Russia, the flag bearer of the former Soviet Union, permit the Middle-East to be taken under the umbrella of 'Pax Americana'.

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2 Khaleed, Adeb, 'Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus to 1917', in Robinson Francis (ed), *The New Cambridge History of Islam: Volume V, The Islamic World in the Age of Western Dominance*, Chapter 6, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

3 Fuller, Graham E., 'Moscow and the Gulf War', *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1991, *Council on Foreign Relations*, New York, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/1991-06-01/moscow-and-gulf-war> accessed on 19 May 2017.

When the so-called Arab Spring started in the Middle-East, Russia stood aside. In 2011, when the USA-led Western alliance brought a resolution to the UN Security Council to intervene militarily in Libya, Russia did not veto the proposal, even though Libya had been a Soviet client state for more than three decades.

In the few years after the Libyan intervention, Russia realised that it was being hemmed in by the USA in the Middle-East. Nations that were friendly with Russia were being subjected to regime change and were thus starting to be ruled by new USA-installed regimes. Russia came to realise that it could not afford to lose any more friends in the region. The Syrian Civil War pointed towards yet another Russia-friendly country going the same way as others: a friend that was about to become a US satellite, which could not be permitted. This concern was further reinforced by the NATO expansion into Eastern Europe, enveloping what Russia regards as its near-abroad.<sup>4</sup>

When civil war broke out in Syria, Russia was ready to assist the Assad regime, repeatedly using its veto power to negate any UN resolution that would affect President Bashar al-Assad. At a conservative estimate, the Syrian Civil War has already caused the death of about 400,000 people and displaced more than half the population. Although peace negotiations have been on-going for some time, no tangible end is in sight. Throughout this chaotic six years of bloody conflict, Russia has steadfastly supported the Assad regime.

Regarding its subsequent actions, Russia is clearly not involved in Syria for any altruistic purpose but rather protecting and furthering its national interests. The assertion that Russia has shown in intervening leads to three clear, fundamental national interests of Russia; preserving the current political regime and ensuring that the West does not intervene in its domestic affairs; relentlessly pursuing respect from the international

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4 Itzkowitz Shifrinson, Joshua R., 'Russia's got a point: The U.S. broke a NATO promise', *The Los Angeles Times*, 30 May 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-shifrinson-russia-us-nato-deal--20160530-snap-story.html> accessed on 20 May 2017.

community; and matching the status of other major global nations.<sup>5</sup> Moscow urgently feels the need to remedy the humiliation that it suffered at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup>

Russia has already fulfilled its historic dream of possessing warm-water ports in the region and establishing a firm foothold in the Middle-East. This is the first step towards Russia's regaining the global power status that was enjoyed by the former Soviet Union. However, Russia's quest for global power suffers from two major drawbacks. First is its shrinking economy that has been significantly affected by Western sanctions and continuing low oil prices. The situation is further exacerbated by a changing demography and declining population growth. Second is the lack of soft power that Russia could use to influence external populations, which is an essential ingredient to achieve global status. To middle-eastern nations, Russia can only offer weapons and military assistance, that too in a limited manner. Russia has nothing else to offer to create soft power influence.

While the Russian leadership is pragmatic enough to acknowledge that such major disadvantages will hinder its aspirational ambitions, why did President Putin sanction the intervention and approve the use of military forces in Syria? The answer comes with realising that around 12–13 per cent of Russia's population follow the Islamic faith and have been restless during the past few decades.<sup>7</sup> The religious and sectarian chaos that has enveloped the Middle-East was too close to Russia for it to remain a passive observer. Russia had to take an active part to ensure that the conflict did not spill over into its own territory. Even so, Moscow was realistic enough to limit its active role in the conflict to employing air power, a relatively safe option that was unlikely to create insurmountable issues on the

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5 Gigitashvili, Givi, "Russian's National Interests and Foreign Policy Preferences," *Latvian Institute of International Affairs*, Riga, 10 November 2016, <http://www.lai.lv/viedokli/russias-national-interests-and-foreign-policy-preferences-554> accessed on 20 May 2017.

6 For a detailed analysis of Russia's security imperatives and foreign policy initiatives read, Freire, Maria Raquel & Kanet, Roger, E. (eds), *Russia and its Near Neighbours*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2012.

7 'Muslim population by country: how big will each Muslim population be by 2030?' *The Guardian, Data Blog*, 28 January 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2011/jan/28/muslim-population-country-projection-2030> accessed on 20 May 2017.

domestic front. Even so, Russia knows clearly that withdrawing without achieving its objectives is not an option.

The intervention therefore, is a tenuous balancing act for Russia; it has to achieve strategic objectives while also ensuring that it does not get stuck in the Middle-Eastern quagmire. Since the primary source of the chaos and the conflict is the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims, Russia has so far been balancing its actions cleverly. President Putin and his team have proven to be master diplomats. To maintain this balance, Russia has ensured that its Middle-East approach avoids any ideology, thus making it relatively easy to be flexible in the actions it initiates. President Putin is in direct diplomatic contact with all major regional powers, the finesse of which can be clearly seen in how Russia has managed its strategic relations with Israel, while continuing to improve relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>8</sup> That these three nations remain at odds with each other should not be lost in this evaluation and demonstrate their pragmatic approach to diplomacy. .

The Syrian Civil War is complex and has a large number of participants whose final objectives are mostly amorphous and individual. It has increased in complexity because it links two separate conflicts being fought simultaneously, one against the Assad regime and one against the Islamic State. Of the two, the fight against the current regime is less complex and, at least for the moment, seems to have settled into a status quo. The outcome of the Russian intervention is that President Assad is not going to be replaced in the near future. However, the anti-regime forces will continue to fight a holding pattern to ensure that their claims for the need to overthrow the regime are hidden within political expediency.

The conflict that involves the Islamic State is different. It is involved in a broader war, which is not particularly against Syria or its incumbent regime.<sup>9</sup> The IS objective is to establish a Caliphate that was declared in 2014, in territories that span both Iraq and Syria, which will then be used

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8 Narbone, Luigi, 'A Pax Russica in the Middle East? Putin will have to do more to make it stick', *The Conversation*, 24 February 2017, <http://theconversation.com/a-pax-russica-in-the-middle-east-putin-will-have-to-do-more-to-make-it-stick-73244> accessed on 20 May 2017.

9 'What is Islamic State?' *BBC News Middle East*, 2 December 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144> accessed on 20 May 2017.

as a base for the Caliphate to spread outwards. The IS is currently facing a military defeat that cannot be described as a 'victory' for the coalition forces. The growth and spread of the IS is one of the most intriguing developments in the recent past. It started as a small group of jihadists, cobbled together from other splintered groups. How it came to create a 'state' and sustain it, notwithstanding the large coalition of Western armies and the world's intelligence agencies, continues to be a fascinating episode in the long saga of Islamic militancy. This dichotomy can lead only to the belief that the group received support from at least some of the nations of the region who covertly also pursue a sectarian agenda to further their narrow national interests.<sup>10</sup>

The rapid growth of IS and the particularly harsh manner in which it treats its opponents makes it difficult for any of the nations that support it to acknowledge that they ignored its development. However, a number of nations individually and collectively must accept the moral responsibility for its rise to the dominant influence and stature it held at the zenith of its power. Even today, when it is being militarily defeated and forced to flee, no attempt is being made to understand the reasons for its rapid rise to power. No alternative ideology is being provided to the broader population to relate to as a narrative that disproves the fundamentalist ideology of IS.<sup>11</sup> The military defeat that IS is suffering at the time of writing will neither lead to the elusive victory over the group nor its disintegration as an entity. It will rise from the ashes, perhaps with a new name, but with an equally warped vision of the future world and may even combine a more violent ideology with extreme sectarian intolerance. Russia understands these factors and would have considered them before deciding on military intervention.

IS is both a religious and political organisation, subscribing to the theory that religion and the state cannot be separated. It has so far

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10 For a detailed account of the rise and spread of the Islamic State read, 'The Islamic State' in *Mapping Militant Organisations*, *Stanford University*, updated on 14 April 2017, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/1> accessed on 20 May 2017.

11 Dandachli, Rabih, 'Fighting Ideology with Ideology: Islamism and the Challenge of ISIS', *Brookings Institution*, Washington D.C., 5 January 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/fighting-ideology-with-ideology-islamism-and-the-challenge-of-isis/> accessed on 20 May 2017.

been thriving in the regions of the Middle-East with weak and corrupt governments, characterised by foreign interventions, sectarian violence, high unemployment, and a rapidly growing youth population. These factors have combined with ruthless autocratic rule to create deep-seated disenchantment with the modern world and the freedoms that it promises. Since these fundamental issues are not being addressed, the military defeat of the IS, is likely to be short-lived. The Islamic State is bound to mutate, develop another strategy and reappear in a new but equally virulent form. As a political analyst, I would have to ask the fundamental question whether or not any effort is being made to understand what non-military efforts must be undertaken to build on the military defeat of this hydra and keep it defeated on a permanent basis?<sup>12</sup> The sad truth is that the answer will be in the negative.

Violence begets violence, to the extent that the humiliation of an individual, a people, or a nation always encourages extremist propagandists. This is unavoidable and has characterised life in the Middle-East for many decades.

## THE BEAR HAS COME TO STAY...

The core of this monograph is aimed at analysing the achievements of Russia during its forceful military intervention in the Syrian Civil War. These achievements are both geo-strategic and military-operational, providing Russia with an equal measure of increased influence on the regional and global stage. The prominent achievement is that Russia has resurrected its Soviet era great power status in the Middle-East. Ever since it was ignominiously expelled from Egypt in 1972, it has not been influential in the region. Russia is now back more powerfully and

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12 Byman, Daniel, L., 'What's beyond the defeat of ISIS?' *Brookings Institution*, Washington D.C., 27 September 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/09/27/whats-beyond-the-defeat-of-isis/> accessed on 20 May 2017.

intractably advancing into areas that it has coveted for centuries.<sup>13</sup> Second, the success of the Russian intervention represents a semi-permanent shift, in Russia's favour, in the geo-political and geo-strategic environment in the Middle-East and the Mediterranean region. Russia now has a permanent military base in Latakia in Syria, which greatly increases its Russian military's access to the region.<sup>14</sup> In turn, its military presence irrevocably alters the regional power balance. The countries of the region will now have to account for one more factor in their decisions about all national security matters. The primacy of considering US support for national security, prevalent in the region since the end of World War II, has become non-existent.

The third achievement: the unrestrained forthright display of Russia's military power and its effectiveness has greatly constrained the US freedom of action in the Middle-East, which was unparalleled till the Russian intervention. The US could not impose a no-fly zone within Syria, as it had wanted at one stage, for fear of antagonising Moscow.<sup>15</sup> The Russian willingness to employ its forces in this unrestrained manner within the Laws of Armed Conflict has improved its political status in the region, even among traditional US allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. Fourth, by ensuring that the Assad regime continued in power, Russia completely negated the US call for regime change, one of the fundamental objectives of the US intervention. Russia demonstrated the importance of decisive military action in shaping the political environment.

Fifth, the military collaboration between Iran and Russia has completely decimated the US's ability to influence Iran. The collaboration led to a brief use of Iranian bases by the Russian military forces. Deploying Russian forces to Iran was also acclaimed by the Iranian

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13 Stepanova, Ekaterina, 'Russia in the Middle East: Back to a Grand Strategy—or Enforcing Multilateralism?' *Politique Etrangere*, Summer 2016, Cairn.Info, International Edition, [http://www.cairn-int.info/article-E\\_PE\\_162\\_0023--russia-in-the-middle-east.htm](http://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_PE_162_0023--russia-in-the-middle-east.htm) accessed on 20 May 2017.

14 Mercouris, Alexander, 'Russia's military bases in Syria', *The Duran*, 9 February 2017, <http://theduran.com/russias-bases-syria/> accessed on 20 May 2017.

15 Engel, Pamela, 'Trump's plan for safe zones in Syria risks dragging the US into war', *Business Insider Australia*, 30 January 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com.au/trumps-safe-zones-syria-refugees-world-war-2017-1?r=US&IR=T> accessed on 20 May 2017.



Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Sharif, who stated that it was likely to continue ‘whenever necessary’ and will be on a ‘case by case basis.’ This development indicates that any direct confrontation with Iran risks a high probability of a clash with Moscow.<sup>16</sup> The traditional US-dominated lines of communications in the region also cannot be taken for granted by the US and its allies any more. Russian now has the capacity to disrupt or challenge the guaranteed access to all theatres in the Middle-East that Western coalition forces had previously enjoyed. The issue could be the centuries-old Persia-Russia rivalry and mistrust. However, so far both nations have demonstrated a mature understanding of the emerging geo-strategic environment and their ability to pursue a pragmatic and mutually beneficial way forward.

It is difficult to predict how far the Russian resurgence in the Middle-East will go. A strategic relationship with Iran, bolstered by military diplomacy is merely the beginning of what seems to be a long-term relationship. The one absolute certainty is that Russia wants to spread its influence across the Middle-East. It is also certain that US has well and truly sacrificed its primacy in the region to ‘accommodating’ and pursuing a hands-off policy in the Syrian Civil War.

## THIS MONOGRAPH

This monograph analyses the Syrian Civil War, with particular reference to the Russian military intervention up to the declared withdrawal of the major Russian forces in August 2017. In doing so, it begins with a brief history of Syria from ancient times, describes its colonial history and provides the modern political developments in the country in more detail. Chapter 2 describes the beginning and escalation of the Civil War that continues. This chapter also traces the rise of IS in Syria, the formation of the Free Syrian Army and the Western support that the US and its allies started to provide.

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Iran says Russia can use its military bases ‘on case by case basis’, *Reuters World News*, 29 March 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-iran-rouhani-base/iran-says-russia-can-use-its-military-bases-on-case-by-case-basis-idUSKBN16Z0NU> accessed on 20 May 2017.

While no two civil wars are identical in their conduct, the Syrian Civil War is unique in the large number of belligerents participating, each with individual agendas and objectives. Chapter 3 enumerates these 'belligerents,' as at December 2016, and describes the constitution of each. The chapter also points out their ultimate objectives that, because they differ clearly among these groups, inhibit their cooperation. Battles within the multi-cornered civil war have occurred commonly in the past five years. Chapter 4 looks at the relationship between Syrian and Russia from the early days of Syrian independence. (Here the term Russia is used to represent the former Soviet Union and after its collapse, the Russian Federation that took on the Soviet mantle.) The modern history of the two nations have a direct bearing on the Russian intervention.

Chapter 5 strategically analyses the impact of Russian military intervention and explains the altering geo-strategic environment. These changes to the Middle-Eastern geo-political landscape have long-term implications on a global scale. The chapter also describes Russia's objectives in the intervention and considers the impact of Russian action on the region's nations, the USA, and European countries. Chapter 6 timetables what occurred after Russian forces started to participate actively in the Civil War. Russian military operations are divided into different time-lined sections to ease understanding. The Battle for Aleppo, considered as the turning point of the war is detailed, as is the Russian adoption of a whole-of-nation approach to conduct its campaign.

Chapter 7 examines the reasons for the Russian intervention by analysing its strategy and Middle-East policy. The chapter thus elaborates on the Russian attitude focused on Syria, which is considered a strategic ally in the Middle-East. Chapter 8 appraises the effectiveness of the Russian intervention vis-à-vis the objectives that it set to achieve, while enumerating the general lessons that could be derived from the intervention. The chapter goes on to explain the importance of this particular intervention in returning Russia back to the world stage as a more powerful nation than it had been since the end of the Cold War. There is a singular lesson for the Western world from this: Russia cannot be 'written off' as a has-been power. Russia demands attention and has to be treated with relevant respect. Chapter 9 speculates on the possibility of arriving at a political settlement in Syria as the first step in stabilising the nation. At least for the moment, this looks unattainable, a bridge too far, so that the future for the people of this hapless country looks bleak.

# Syria and its Neighbours





# CHAPTER 1

## SYRIA: A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

*This is a story, not history. So the characters and incidents are not real. It is a story about different types of rulers who rule, protect, patronize, intimidate, terrorize, or kill their subjects and others. We call them presidents, sultans, ministers, and intelligence agencies. And many people end up as pawns to further their interests.*

-Raj Nellooli

The discovery of fossilised human remains in the Dederiya Cave about 400 kilometres north of Damascus confirmed that Neanderthals, who lived in the Middle Palaeolithic era (200 000 to 40 000 years ago) had inhabited the nation is known today as Syria. Further archaeology clearly demonstrates that the civilisation that existed in the lands of Syria is one of the oldest on earth. It was also one of the centres of the Neolithic culture (c. 10 000 BC) where agriculture and cattle breeding seems to have appeared for the first time in the world.

## ANCIENT AND CLASSICAL HISTORY

The first indication of a city-state appeared when the ruins of Ebla, near Idlib, were discovered in 1975.<sup>1</sup> At the zenith of its power, around 2500–2400 BCE, Ebla may have controlled an empire spreading from Anatolia in the north, to Mesopotamia in the east and Damascus in the south. Essentially, the city-state was a trading entity and is believed to have made contact with Egypt, evidenced by the discovery of gifts from the Pharaohs in excavation sites. From about the third millennium BCE, Syria was occupied and fought over by a succession of warlike people: Sumerians, Eblaites, Akkadians, Assyrians, Egyptians, Hittites, Hurrians, Mitanni, Amorites and Babylonians. After having changed hands a number of times and being conquered by the more powerful of the kingdoms, around the 10th century BC, Syria came under the rule of the Assyrians. It lasted for three centuries and, at its end, the name Syria appeared for the first time. This name does not reflect the modern Syria, but rather an Indo-European corruption of Assyria.

In 539 BCE, the Persians annexed Syria to their empire till they were defeated by Alexander of Macedonia in 333–332 BCE so that Syria became part of the Seleucid Empire. The capital of this empire was in Antioch, then part of Syria (just inside the Turkish border today). When the Roman General, Pompey, captured Antioch in 64 BCE, Syria became a Roman province.<sup>2</sup> Antioch became one of the major centres of trade and industry in the ancient world and was the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. At its peak, Antioch had an estimated population of 500,000 and its prosperity made Syria one of the most important provinces during the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE. Three Roman Emperors came from Syria: Elagabalus (ruled 218–222), Alexander Severus (ruled 222–235) and Marcus Julius Philippus, also called Philip

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1 *Syria: A Country Study — Ancient Syria*, Library of Congress, [https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sy/syriacountrystud00coll\\_0/syriacountrystud00coll\\_0.pdf](https://cdn.loc.gov/master/frd/frdcstdy/sy/syriacountrystud00coll_0/syriacountrystud00coll_0.pdf) accessed on 24 October 2016.

2 *ibid.*

the Arab (ruled 244-249).<sup>3</sup> With the decline of the Roman Empire in the west, Syria became part of the East Roman or Byzantine Empire in 395 A.D.

## MEDIEVAL ERA

In 634-640, Syria was conquered by the Muslim Arab armies and annexed to the burgeoning Islamic empire. A few years later, the Umayyad dynasty, then ruling the Islamic Empire, made Damascus their capital and divided Syria into four districts: Damascus, Homs, Palestine and Jordan. With the unprecedented spread of the Islamic empire, Syria prospered economically, being the centre of the empire. The Umayyad rulers constructed many opulent palaces in Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, in keeping with their exalted status. This era notably was characterised by complete tolerance of people of the Christian faith, who were mostly ethnic Arameans and Assyrians, several of whom also held high government positions. In the mid-8th century, the Caliphate collapsed amidst dynastic struggles and was replaced by the Abbasid dynasty who moved the capital to Baghdad.

Syria came under the control of a number of rulers for brief periods of time who managed to keep the state outside the Byzantine Empire through shrewd defensive tactics. However, by 996, the whole of Syria had been captured by the Byzantines, although a state of chaos and turmoil continued till almost the end of the 11th century. This resulted from the struggle for supremacy between the Byzantines, Fatimids and the Buyids of Baghdad.<sup>4</sup> During the 12th and 13th centuries, parts of Syria were controlled by the crusading Christian armies for brief periods who created 'counties' of Antioch, Tripoli etc. Immediately after the Mongols swept through the region around 1260, the Mamluks of Egypt invaded and conquered Syria. Damascus was made a provincial capital and the last of the Crusader-controlled areas were recaptured. In 1400, Tamerlane

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3 Alizadeh, Abbas and others, *World and Its Peoples: Middle East, Western Asia and Northern Africa*, (in 11 Volumes), Vol 4, Marshal Cavendish Corporation, Tarrutoen, New York, 2006, p. 183.

4 *Syria: History*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Syria>, accessed on 25 October 2016.

defeated the Mamluks and captured Damascus, while also massacring a large part of the city's population. The Christian population was singled out for ferocious prosecution. In 1516, the Ottoman Empire conquered Syria.

## THE OTTOMAN RULE

Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire from 1516 to 1918, although the Iranian Safavids captured the region for two brief periods. Syria did not suffer under the Ottoman rule and Damascus became the entrepot for Mecca, thereby acquiring a high status as a holy town.<sup>5</sup> The Ottoman Turks reorganised Syria, making it one single province of the empire, sub-divided into several smaller administrative districts. The Ottoman administration fostered the peaceful coexistence of different sections of Syrian society for over four centuries with each religious minority being given sufficient independence. The minorities in Syria were an eclectic mix of Shia Muslim, Greek Orthodox, Maronite, Armenian and Jewish.

In 1864, the Ottoman Sultan passed the Tanzimat Reforms under which the provinces were divided into smaller Vilayets governed by a Wali or governor appointed by the Sultan and assisted by provincial assemblies in administration. During the final periods of the Ottoman Empire, the territory of Great Syria comprised modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, the Palestine Authority, the Gaza Strip and parts of Turkey and Iraq.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement, signed in 1916 was secretly reached between two diplomats, Francois Georges-Picot representing France and Mark Sykes of Great Britain, on the post-war division of the Ottoman Empire into zones of influence. In October 1918, British and Arab forces advanced into Syria and captured Damascus and Aleppo. In line with the Sykes-Picot agreement, Syria became a League of Nations mandate under French control in 1920.

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5 *Syria: A Country Study — Ottoman Empire*, Library of Congress, *op cit.*



## THE FRENCH MANDATE

The time that Syria spent under the French mandate following World War I, and the enforced break-up of the Ottoman Empire was traumatic for Syria and its people. In 1919, the Kingdom of Syria was established under Emir Faisal I of the Hashemite dynasty (who later became the King of Iraq). In March 1920, the Syrian National Congress proclaimed Faisal as the King of Syria 'in its natural boundaries' that stretched from the Taurus Mountains in Turkey to the Sinai Desert in Egypt. A few months later, he was ousted by French forces after they defeated the Arab Syrian Army at the Battle of Maysalun.<sup>6</sup> France took control of Syria and later that year split the large kingdom into Syria-Lebanon under French mandate and Palestine under British mandate. The French divided Syria into three autonomous regions, including separate regions for the Alawis near the coast and the Druze in the south.

Nationalist agitation against French rule broke out in the Druze Mountains in 1925 and spread rapidly across the entire country till it was suppressed in 1926 after pitched battles in Damascus, Homs and Hama between the rebels and the French forces. Syria and France negotiated a treaty of independence in September 1936. Although agreeing to it in principle, the French maintained a heavy military presence and economic dominance. A new constitution was accepted and led to the inauguration of the modern republic of Syria. However, the French Legislature refused to ratify the treaty and it was never enforced. Events overtook the independence process with France being overrun in 1940 and Syria coming under the Vichy Government for a short time.

The British and the Free-French forces occupied the country in July 1941 and Syria proclaimed independence although not being recognised as an independent nation till 1 January 1944. Even so, France was reluctant to cede Syria to its people and, before being forced out in April 1946, it resorted to military action and other coercion, such as cutting electricity to Damascus. During this time, more than 400 Syrians were killed and

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6 World Heritage Encyclopaedia, *Battle of Maysalun*, Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing Press, [http://www.gutenberg.us/articles/battle\\_of\\_maysalun](http://www.gutenberg.us/articles/battle_of_maysalun), accessed on 25 October 2016.

hundreds of homes destroyed.<sup>7</sup> The French left the country in the hands of a republican government that had been formed during the mandate.

## DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFT IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

The early part of the 20 century, especially the World War I years, saw the Syrian region undergoing a significant demographic shift. The Ottoman authorities recruited the services of some Kurdish, Chechen and Circassian tribes to massacre Armenian and Assyrian Christians in upper Mesopotamia between 1914 and 1920. It is also reported that unarmed civilians fleeing the carnage were also attacked and killed.<sup>8</sup> Many Assyrians fled to Syria during this genocide and settled largely in the Jazira Area.<sup>9</sup> In 1921, the predominantly Christian population of an important Christian city, Nusaybin, left after it was ceded to Turkey through the Franco-Turkish Agreement of Ankara in October 1921. They settled in Qamishli in Syria while Nusaybin was occupied by Kurds. However, the Kurds themselves were subject to persecution after failing in their rebellion against Turkish authorities in 1926; they were given refuge by the French mandate authorities in north-eastern Syria. In 1941, the Assyrian community in al-Malikiyah suffered from vicious attacks and fled to Syria, paving the way for the Kurds to occupy the region. Over a little longer than four decades, the demographics of the region of Greater Syria had changed dramatically.

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- 7 Rogan, Eugene, *The Arabs: A History*, Reprint Edition, Basic Books, New York, 2011, pp. 244-247.
  - 8 Travis, Hannibal, *Genocide in the Middle East: The Ottoman Empire, Iraq, and Sudan*, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, NC, 2010, pp. 230-279, 291-295.
  - 9 The genocide is even today denied by the Turkish Government. Whether or not the genocide took place is a debate extraneous to this narrative and the author is not making any claims either way. However, there are a number of published works that can be referred in order to obtain more details of the episode. For more information read: *The Armenian Genocide: Cultural and Ethical Legacies* (2007) by Richard D. Hovannisian; *The Tragedy of the Assyrians* (2006) by R. S. Stafford.

## INDEPENDENCE AND INSTABILITY

Syria became independent on 17 April 1946, 'the date the last French soldier left Syrian soil',<sup>10</sup> and almost immediately lapsed into turmoil. In its first decade, Syria had 20 different cabinets and drafted no fewer than four separate constitutions with the early years being plagued by extreme political instability. In 1948, Syria joined other Arab in the war against Israel. Although the Syrian army entered Palestine, it was driven back to the Golan Heights before a demilitarised zone was established after the armistice in July 1949.<sup>11</sup> The uncertain status of these territories has proven to be the primary stumbling block to the progress of any subsequent Syrian-Israeli negotiations. It was also during this period of conflict that a majority of Syrian Jews fled Syria as part of the greater regional Jewish exodus because of growing persecution.<sup>12</sup>

The dismal performance by the Palestinians during the 1948-49 war resulted, in March 1949, in a coup with the dubious distinction of being the first military coup d'état in the Arab world after World War II. This was followed by three more coups in fairly quick succession. In 1954, the third military ruler was forced to resign and leave the country in the face of public discontent. The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, founded in 1947, assisted to form a national government. Even so, power was increasingly concentrated in military and security authority while the parliamentary institutions remained weak.

In 1956, the world witnessed the Suez crisis to which Syria reacted by signing a pact with the Soviet Union, thus providing a foothold for the Communist regime in the Middle East in exchange for military hardware and some strategic advice. The improvement in the Syrian military capabilities concerned Turkey, which massed troops on the Syrian border leading to a standoff. Heated debate on the floor of the United Nations (UN) diffused the issue, but not before the Soviet Union had managed to significantly control the Syrian military forces. This was the beginning of the Soviet/Russian influence in Syrian politics.

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10 Zisser, Eyal, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition*, New York University Press, New York, 2001, p.1.

11 *Syria: World War II and Independence*, Encyclopaedia Britannica, *op cit*.

12 *ibid*.

At this juncture, the growing stature of Nasser, then ruling Egypt, pan-Arabism and anti-imperial ideologies combined to create the necessary impetus for Syria and Egypt to forge closer ties. This informal alliance was sufficient to merge Egypt and Syria into the United Arab Republic, announced by the Presidents of both the countries on 1 February 1958. All Syrian political parties, including its Communist Party, ceased to be overtly active following this merger. Discontent with Egypt dominating the merged entity led to yet another coup in Syria, when elements opposed to the union seized power on 28 September 1961. Two days later Syria established itself as the Syrian Arab Republic. The 1960s were unsettled years for Syria. They brought a general atmosphere of disorder characterised by frequent coups, military revolts, civil riots that often turned extremely violent.<sup>13</sup> During this time, from the coup of 8 March 1963, the Ba'ath Party had become powerful enough to figure significantly in forming the government. In 1966, left-wing military dissidents under General Salah Jadid took control of the country and decidedly aligned Syria with the Soviet Bloc.

Jadid pursued a hard-line policy against Israel, at the same time moving away from the inter-Arab alliance.<sup>14</sup> Domestically, he attempted to transform Syria into a socialist society forcing a pace of change that created economic difficulties and accompanying unrest. The Ba'ath Party replaced the Parliament as the law-making body while other political parties were banned and opposition suppressed. The visible defeat of the Syrian military forces in the 1967 Six-Day War,<sup>15</sup> when much of the Syrian

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13 *Background Note: Syria*, United States Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, May 2007. <http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/syria/85051.htm> accessed on 26 October 2016.

14 *United Nations Year Book 1966*, <http://www.unmultimedia.org/searchers/yearbook/page.jsp?q=1966&start=0&total=3556&srstart=0&searchType=advanced&outline=false>, accessed on 26 October 2016.

15 There are a large number of books and articles available to get information regarding the 1967 Six Day Arab–Israeli War. For example read: Oren, Michael B., *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002; Ferris, Jesse, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2013; Parker, Richard B., *The Six-Day War: A Retrospective*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL, 1996.

Air Force was destroyed and the Golan Heights were captured by Israel, led to a loss of public support for the government. The ruling hierarchy within the Syrian polity became divided after the defeat and because skirmishes continued in the demilitarised zone. On 13 November 1970, the Minister for Defence, Hafez al-Assad seized power in a bloodless coup that was termed 'The Corrective Movement'.<sup>16</sup>

### HAFEZ AL-ASSAD: THE DICTATOR (1970–2000)

Assad moved quickly to consolidate power and, by March 1971, his Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party had elected a new 21-member Regional Command headed by Assad. In the same month, a national referendum was held that confirmed Assad as President for a seven-year term. He moved further to broaden the base of the government and, in March 1972, formed the National Progressive Front, which was dominated by the Ba'ath Party. This formation was followed the following year by elections to establish local councils and thereafter by parliamentary elections, the first since 1962.<sup>17</sup> A new Constitution was enacted in 1973 that defined Syria as a secular socialist state with Islam recognised as the majority religion.

On 6 October 1973, Syria and Egypt initiated the Yom Kippur War by launching a surprise attack on Israel. While the fighting was intense, the Syrians were again repulsed from the Golan Heights and the Israelis pushed further into Syria, beyond the *de facto* line of control established after the 1967 conflict. Israel continues to occupy these territories today.<sup>18</sup> In 1976, Syria intervened in the Lebanese civil war to support the Maronite Christians, which subsequently led to a 30-year Syrian military occupation of Lebanon. Syria has been accused of several human rights violations during this period. Although Israel intervened in Lebanon for its own perceived security reasons, Syria has been part of the conflict in Lebanon since its first intervention. In April 2005, Syria was forced to withdraw

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16 Seale, Patrick, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1990.

17 *Background Note: Syria, op cit.*

18 Rabinovich, Abraham, *The Yom Kippur War: The Epic Encounter that Transformed the Middle East*, Schocken Books, New York, pp. 301–305.

the majority of its forces from Lebanon,<sup>19</sup> although some intelligence operatives remained in place.

Although dissent was repressed, the Assad regime's Ba'ath program was openly supportive of secular values, which was questioned by the Sunni Muslims. Following the Islamic Revolution in Iran came religious riots in Aleppo, Homs and Hama and also an assassination attempt on Hafez al-Assad in 1980. In response, Assad started to stress the Muslim identity of the nation, gradually parting ways with secular thinking. Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, the avowedly anti-Alawi and conservative Muslim Brotherhood had been gathering strength around the city of Hama. Assad acted decisively in February 1982 after part of the city was shelled by artillery, leaving about 25 000 people (estimates vary between 10 000 and 25 000), mostly civilians, dead or wounded.<sup>20</sup> This action curtailed further manifestations of anti-government protest.

Syria consciously joined the US-led coalition against Iraq, when the latter invaded Kuwait in 1990, which led to improved relations with the US and other Arab nations. Assad also initiated direct negotiations with Israel in the 1990s, although it failed to achieve any results. The Golan Heights issue was the obvious stumbling block and no further progress has been made in the Syria-Israel peace process. Hafez al-Assad died on 10 June 2000 after being in power for 30 years and his second son, Basher al-Assad was chosen as his successor.

## THE RULE OF BASHER AL-ASSAD (2000 TO THE PRESENT)

Immediately after Hafez al-Assad's death, the Syrian Parliament amended the constitution and reduced the mandatory qualifying age of the President from 40 to 34, permitting Basher al-Assad to be elected by referendum, unopposed. The period immediately following Basher al-Assad's election was one of optimism for the people who believed that he would usher in much-wanted reform to the government. Accordingly, the

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19 *Security Council Press Release SC/8372* dated 29 April 2005, 'Syria's Withdrawal from Lebanon "Historic Day" for Middle East', <http://www.un.org/press/en/2005/sc8372.doc.htm>, accessed 27 October 2016.

20 Wright, Robin, *Dreams and Shadows: The Future of the Middle East*, Penguin Press HC, London, 2008, pp. 242–45.

# Syria - Geographical Regions

TURKEY

Mediterranean  
Sea

Al Jaboul  
Lake

Lake Assad

A l - J a z i r a

Euphates R.

Khabur R.

# Syria

Nusayriyah Mts

Bishri Mts

Jabal Abu Rujmayn

LEBANON

Anti-Lebanon Mts

Ⓞ Damascus

Jabal ar Ruwaq

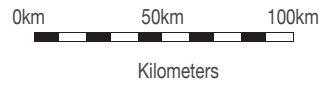
S y r i a n D e s e r t

ISRAEL

Jabal al-Druze

IRAQ

JORDAN







period was termed the 'Damascus Spring', with people forming various political groupings to discuss and debate political and social matters. Assad ordered the release of about 600 political prisoners as a gesture of goodwill and the Muslim Brotherhood, so far outlawed, started its political activity.

By September 2001, Assad started to suppress the pro-reform movements, putting an end to the 'honeymoon' and crushing the hopes of the people who believed that the authoritarian past was being replaced. The next decade saw the arrest of prominent intellectuals interspersed with sporadic amnesties.<sup>21</sup> After the al Qaeda attacks on the twin towers in September 2001, the Syria-US relationship started to sour. The US claimed that Syria was acquiring weapons of mass destruction and included it in a list of states that comprised an 'axis of evil'. Thereafter, Syria's international standing diminished. The USA criticised Syria for its strong relationship with Hamas, the Islamic Jihad Movement in Palestine, and with Hezbollah, which were considered terrorist groups by the USA, Israel and the European Union. In May 2004, the US imposed economic sanctions on Syria for its 'support for terrorism.'<sup>22</sup> Tensions with the US and its allies continued to increase in the following years.

From early 2004, opposition activity in Syria had started to gather pace culminating in the 'Damascus Declaration' that criticised the government as 'authoritarian, totalitarian and cliquish' and demanded democratic reform.<sup>23</sup> This resulted in the arrest of the leading dissenters and their subsequent sentencing to long prison terms. Basher al-Assad's flirtation with governmental reform was extremely short-lived. On the diplomatic front, Syria started to improve its international relations by restoring contact with Iraq in 2006 after a hiatus of nearly 25 years. In 2007, dialogue began with the European Union and there was also a thaw in the tense relations with the USA. In July 2008, President Basher al-Assad was

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21 George, Alan, *Syria: Neither Bread nor Freedom*, Zed Books, London, 2003, pp. 55–59.

22 *Fact Sheet*, The White House, 11 May 2004, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/fact-sheet-syria>, accessed 27 October 2016.

23 The Damascus Declaration, *Diwan — Middle East Insights*, Carnegie Middle East Centre, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48514?lang=en>, accessed 27 October 2016.

received in Paris by then French President Nicolas Sarkozy, signalling the end of Syrian isolation by the West.

During 2008 and 2009, there was progress in Syria-Israel peace talks with Turkey acting as mediator. Syria also carried out a number of high level diplomatic meetings with the USA. In 2010, the USA re-posted its Ambassador to Syria after a gap of five years.<sup>24</sup> However, even this progress was short-lived when the UN International Atomic Energy Agency, its nuclear watchdog, reported Syria to the UN Security Council over its alleged covert nuclear program.

Encouraged by the 'Arab Spring' that had only moderate success in other nations, pro-reform protests broke out in Damascus and the southern city of Deraa in March 2011. The initial demand was only for democratic reform and the release of political prisoners. However, the protests were met by a government crackdown and the Syrian army was deployed to suppress any further unrest. Security forces shot and killed a number of people in Deraa, which triggered further protests. Gradually Syria descended into an irretrievable civil war.

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24 'Robert Ford is first US ambassador to Syria since 2005', *BBC News*, 16 January 2011, [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12202821](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12202821), accessed 27 October 2016.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE STORY OF THE CIVIL WAR

*Life was not perfect but nobody wanted war, they wanted reform. Even the most outspoken enemies of the government did not want war, and certainly not this war. They wanted reforms and they wanted democracy but nobody wanted to kill Syria to improve Syria.*

-Dr Nabil Antaki, Aleppo

### INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that, in 2010–11, Syria's population was 21 million, although this count is not based on any official Syrian source.<sup>1</sup> Of the total population, Sunni Muslims represent about 74 per cent; other Muslim groups including the Alawites, about 13 per cent; Druze, 3 per cent; and various Christian denominations and ethnicities make up the remaining 10 per cent. The majority of the Christians belong to the Eastern Orthodox churches.<sup>2</sup> The Assad family that has ruled Syria since 1970 belongs to the minority Alawite sect, who comprise 11–12 per cent of the population. The current President, Bashar al-Assad, is married to a Sunni Muslim with whom he has several children. Into this mix comes the Syrian Kurds who are an ethnic minority of about 9–10 per cent of

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1 *Statistics and Facts on Syria*, <https://www.statista.com/topics/2378/syria/>, accessed 27 October 2016.

2 *The World Fact Book*, Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>, accessed 27 October 2016.

the population.<sup>3</sup> They allege long term ethnic discrimination and denial of their right to their own culture and language.

Prior to the turmoil that erupted in early 2011, Basher al-Assad had begun liberalising economic policies to continue the progress towards a free market that his father had initiated during his last few years in power. The government encouraged the establishment of private banks, and raised the prices of certain subsidised items, while also setting up a Damascus Stock exchange. Since the emphasis of the reforms was on the service sector, these policy changes benefited only a minority of the population, mainly those with connections to the government and the Sunni traders in Damascus and Aleppo.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the country was facing a very high rate of youth unemployment. The economic reform agenda also coincided with one of the most intense droughts recorded in the country, lasting from 2007 to 2010. The result was widespread crop failure, increases in food prices and mass migration of families to the urban centres.

Syria has a long history of harassing and imprisoning political critics of the government and strictly controlling the rights of free speech and assembly. The country was under 'emergency' rule from 1963 till 2011 until the current President repealed it.<sup>5</sup> The state of human rights in Syria has been criticised, harshly at times, by global organisations. The nation has an entrenched culture, which has festered for a long time, of discriminating against women and ethnic minorities, especially in the public sector. Further, thousands of Syrian Kurds were denied citizenship in 1962 and their descendants labelled as 'foreigners'. This denial led to a number of riots in the Kurdish areas and occasional violent clashes

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3 *ibid.*

4 *ibid.*

5 *World Report 2010: Annual Review of Human Rights around the Globe*, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2010/country-chapters/syria>, accessed 27 October 2016. Also read World Reports of subsequent years for further details of human rights violations (all available on line)

between the Kurds and the security forces.<sup>6</sup> Since the hoped-for reforms did not eventuate, Bashar al-Assad was widely regarded as having failed the people. This was the situation at the ground level at the beginning of the 2011 uprising.

## THE BEGINNING

The trouble began on 15 March 2011 when protesters marched in the capital Damascus demanding democratic reforms causing the security forces to retaliate by opening fire on them. From this minor episode, the protests snowballed into on-going confrontations between pro-democracy activists and the security forces to the extent that, on 20 March, the clashes led to the death of seven police officers and 15 protesters.<sup>7</sup> Within just three weeks, the protests went from demanding democratic reforms to the overthrow of the Assad regime. The die was cast and there would be no going back. On 25 April, the Syrian army initiated large scale attacks on protesting towns using tanks, artillery and infantry. By end-May, more than 1000 civilians and 150 soldiers and policemen had been killed and 1000s more detained.<sup>8</sup>

The turning point of the violence was the attack by security forces on a funeral procession on 4 June in the city of Idlib. The mourners set fire to the post office whose roof was being used by the security forces, killing eight of them. The local police station was overrun and weapons seized. Unverified reports claim that a part of the security forces defected after secret police and intelligence officers executed soldiers, who had refused to fire on the mourners.<sup>9</sup> In July, seven defecting army officers formed the

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6 'Stateless Kurds in Syria Granted Citizenship', *CNN Wire Staff*, 8 April 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/04/07/syria.kurdish.citizenship/> accessed 27 October 2016.

7 Holliday, Joseph, *The Struggle for Syria in 2011*, Middle East Security Report 2, Institute for the Study of War, Washington D.C., December 2011, pp. 15–16.

8 'Armed residents put up resistance to Syrian Army', *Khaleej Times*, Dubai, 31 May 2011, <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/article/20120422/ARTICLE/304229873/1002> accessed 31 October 2016.

9 Holliday, Joseph, *op cit*, p. 21.

Free Syrian Army (FSA) with the stated aim of bringing down the Assad regime. This was followed by the creation of a coalition of anti-government groups called the Syrian National Council in August. However, the opposition to the government continued to comprise fractured and disparate groups.

The Syrian army continued to attack suspected rebel strongholds throughout August and September with the Syrian Navy also getting involved in shelling coastal areas. By end-September, organised groups of Syrian rebels were engaged in an active insurgency campaign, while the Syrian army had started undertaking major offensives against rebel strongholds. Around the same time, the FSA started to receive direct support from Turkey, which allowed them to set up and operate command headquarters in Turkish territory in Hatay Province near the border with Syria.<sup>10</sup> By end of October 2011, it was being widely reported that a civil war was brewing within Syria.

## ESCALATION

By November-December 2011, the FSA were launching daily attacks on multiple fronts and targeting the Syrian armed forces facilities across the major cities. It also started to receive assistance from the USA and its allies, mainly NATO countries, as confirmed by the CIA.<sup>11</sup> The reaction of the Assad regime was to broaden the scope of the military action which, in turn, resulted in the destruction of civilian homes and infrastructure in an indiscriminate manner. The daily protests of earlier days ended by January 2012, eclipsed completely by the raging armed conflict. Between January and March, the fighting intensified with both sides gaining and then losing

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10 Yezdani, Ipek, *Syrian rebels: Too fragmented, unruly*, Hurriyat Daily News, 1 September 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrian-rebels-too-fragmented-unruly.aspx?pageID=238&nID=29158&NewsCatID=352> accessed 31 October 2016.

11 Giraldi, Philip, NATO vs Syria, 19 December 2011, *The American Conservative*, Washington D.C., <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/nato-vs-syria/> accessed 31 October 2016.

control of cities and towns and the casualty toll mounting. By early April 2012, the death toll was estimated to have exceeded 10 000.<sup>12</sup>

In April, both sides entered a UN-backed ceasefire period, mediated by ex-Secretary-General Kofi Annan. The initiative failed because neither the Syrian army nor the FSA adhered to the ceasefire. Kofi Annan accepted the failure and, by June, when the peace plan had completely collapsed, the UN mission was withdrawn from Syria. The FSA then began a nationwide offensive against the government with the President vowing to crush them. There were claims of government troops massacring civilians and blocking UN observers from investigating the alleged crimes. On 12 June 2012, the UN for the first time officially declared Syria to be in a state of civil war. The conflict started to move into the larger cities, particularly Damascus and Aleppo. It was also reported that the long-standing alliance between the government and the business establishment had also reached a breaking point.<sup>13</sup>

By mid-July 2012, the fighting had engulfed the entire nation and the reported number of people killed had risen to 16 000. All through the second half of 2012, the battles achieved no definitive results and the physical control of territories varied from week to week. In September, the Kurdish neighbourhoods in Aleppo, which had so far remained free of either governmental or FSA interference, were shelled by government forces. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) retaliated almost immediately and also expelled the government forces from the territories that they controlled. Confrontation between government-armed Arab tribesmen and the YPG became common.

The early months of 2013 saw the rebel forces on the offensive and gaining ground. The government resorted to firing Scud ballistic missiles at rebel fighters inside Syria. This was perhaps the first time that a government had used such weaponry against their own population. There

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12 There are a large number of newspaper reports and extensive TV coverage from across the world that provide information and statistics of the Civil War, almost on a daily basis. These are available on the internet and as YouTube commentaries. This narrative will only provide references of detailed articles and other publications that have been used in this research.

13 These developments were reported in detail as both 'Live' coverage and also in analytical discussions held by both BBC and CNN on their TV channels.

were reports in the Western press (*The Daily Telegraph*, *The New York Times*, *The News International*) that the FSA had been able to penetrate into the coastal Latakia region through Turkey. During the extended fighting, the character of the rebel forces had also been evolving. While the FSA remained a secular force, Islamist groups had increasingly entered the fray and, by January 2013, were in control of large swaths of territories. The al-Nusra Front overran the Taftanaz airbase in the Idlib province and claimed to have captured helicopters, tanks and rocket launchers. Although they were subsequently evicted by a government counter-attack, it is highly likely that they managed to escape with a large cache of sophisticated weapons.

## THE LOSS OF UNITY IN REBEL FORCES

The opposition to the Assad regime started with the formation of the FSA. However, it was only a matter of time before Islamist forces joined the fray. The Kurds who had been waiting for a chance to enhance their own position and status as an autonomous entity, were only too pleased to be drawn into the fight. However, almost no coordination existed between these major groups fighting the government forces. Since their ultimate objectives were not shared, it was not long before these groups started to oppose each other while continuing to oppose the Assad regime. The other side of the coin was that the government controlled territories were gradually reducing in size although the territorial control over the rebel-held areas was not unified.<sup>14</sup>

By mid-2013, Hezbollah had decisively thrown its weight behind the Assad regime and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), operating out of Iraq, had started to gradually infiltrate the Syrian Civil War. [ISIS is also referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL.] The entry of ISIS into the conflict could be considered a milestone in the flow of events. In September 2013, ISIS overran the FSA held town of Azaz in northern Syria. Foreign nationals started to joining the rebel groups in small

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14 The details of each battle and the taking and re-taming of individual towns and cities are not being given in this narrative since they are only of peripheral interest and implication to the central narrative of this monograph, which is the implications of the Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War.



numbers, arriving in Syria through a corridor from Turkey. Although the Turkish government denied keeping an open border, it was well-known and reported in the media that border control between Syria and Turkey in certain vital areas was lax and that the authorities looked the other way when crossings were taking place.

## THE RISE OF THE ISIS

From the time that ISIS entered the war, tensions between moderate and largely secular rebels and the ISIS army had remained high. However, ISIS forces continued to capture other townships from the FSA and increase their 'rule'. While in early 2014, the FSA and the Islamic Front has limited success in driving the ISIS out of some areas that had been captured, this was a short-lived victory. By end-January, ISIS had captured the entire city of Raqqah although they had to withdraw from some areas around Aleppo. The conflict then became three cornered and obviously confused in that the ISIS army was fighting everyone else and government forces were fighting all others. As well, the rebel forces, FSA and the al-Nusra Front, were fighting ISIS and the government.

The arrival of ISIS forces to the battlefield changed the dynamics of the conflict. What had started off as an offshoot of a demand for democracy became embroiled as a sectarian conflict with overtly religious tones. The demand for greater individual freedoms and political reform fell by the wayside as groups with fundamentalist religious views started to occupy territory and enforce a medieval set of rules to live by in those areas.

Syria held a presidential election in government-held areas on 3 June 2014 and, for the first time in its 'democratic' history, more than one person was allowed to stand. According to the Supreme Constitutional Court of Syria, 11.63 million citizens voted and President Bashar al-Assad was elected, winning 88.7 per cent of the votes.<sup>15</sup> Allies of Assad were invited to witness the election and the Iranian representative declared that the election was 'free, fair and transparent'. However, the Gulf Cooperation

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15 BBC, Transmission on 3 June 2014 and Black, Ian, 'Syria Presidential Election: Assad's stage-managed show of democracy', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/02/syria-election-bashar-al-assad-president> accessed on 1 November 2016.

Council, the European Union and the USA dismissed the election as illegitimate and a farce.<sup>16</sup> The implication of course is that the election was stage-managed and, despite some nations endorsing the Assad regime, dissenting nations regarded it as a travesty of democracy.

Meanwhile, ISIS was strengthening to the extent of seizing large areas in Iraq and capturing heavy weapons from a demoralised Iraqi army from June 2014 onwards. They captured the Shaar oil fields and then the army and airbases around Raqqah. The FSA were also making limited inroads into government-controlled areas, although the gains were negligible when compared to the conspicuous successes of the raging ISIS onslaught. In August 2014, the senior leadership of both the USA and UK urged Turkey to close its borders and not to allow foreign fighters cross them to Syria and Iraq. The USA also realised that the Turks did not intend to close their borders, prompting Washington to start supporting the Kurdish militia in Syria to close the border from the Syrian side.<sup>17</sup> On 24 August, the Islamic State (IS), the new name given to ISIS by the world media, captured Tabqa airbase. They executed all prisoners and posted a video of the mass killings on *YouTube*. At this stage, from merely supporting selected rebel groups, a direct US-led intervention in the Civil War became certain.

US-led coalition fighter jets started bombing ISIS in Syria on 23 August 2014, increasing the US involvement in the country to beyond just materiel and advisory support. The Arab nations of the Middle-East, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Jordan, were also active partners in this coalition.<sup>18</sup> It is reported that the US warned the FSA and the Syrian envoy to the UN about the impending strikes. The

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16 Khan, Gazanfar Ali, 'GCC slams Syrian elections as "farce"', Thomson Reuters Zawya, *Arab News*, Riyadh, 4 June 2014, [http://www.zawya.com/story/GCC\\_slams\\_Syrian\\_elections\\_as\\_farce-ZAWYA20140604035142/](http://www.zawya.com/story/GCC_slams_Syrian_elections_as_farce-ZAWYA20140604035142/) accessed on 1 November 2016.

17 Cockburn, Patrick, 'Syria Conflict: Turkish threats of intervention after Ankara bombing taken seriously by Obama', *Independent*, 21 February 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-conflict-isis-turkey-barack-obama-ankara-bombing-a6886466.html> accessed on 1 November 2016.

18 Sciutto, Jim and others, 'US airstrikes hit ISIS inside Syria', *CNN*, 23 September 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/09/22/world/meast/u-s-airstrikes-isis-syria/> accessed on 1 November 2016.

USA also attacked a specific faction of al-Nusra Front called the Khorasan Group, stating that they were a specific threat to the USA. Perhaps this action motivated Syrian forces; its Air Force carried out over 200 strikes against rebel-held areas during just 36 hours, starting 21 October 2014.<sup>19</sup> The FSA also gained momentum in southern Syria by gaining a string of victories in the six months following US intervention. By end of 2014, the coalition members agreed that the opposition factions must be united for any tangible results to be achieved against the Assad regime.<sup>20</sup> However, a Syrian government counter-offensive, named the 2015 Southern Syria Offensive, spearheaded by the Iranian Republican Guard and Hezbollah, saw the Assad regime reclaim all the lost territory.

For the next eight months, the Civil War produced gains and losses for all sides, with the Assad regime gradually reaching the limit of its capacity by August 2015. The President was forced to proclaim that his government was losing ground alarmingly and the state military forces could no longer roll back the rebels or IS. In any case, by this time, the stakes in the War had transcended the objectives for which it had been initiated by the Syrian people: the dominant players in the conflict were foreign forces and the war had taken on the colours of combined religious, sectarian and ethnic inputs. The belligerents were diverse and fighting to achieve extremely varied objectives. Syria had descended into the classic Middle-East quagmire where neighbours, religious extremists, fundamentalist groups, and ethnic collaborators pursued their independent agendas and fought the state and each other using methods that are abhorrent to basic human decency.

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19 'Syria Conflict: "200 air force strikes" in 36 hours', *BBC News*, 22 October 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29720384> accessed on 1 November 2016.

20 Blanford, Nicholas, 'Can Syria's Assad withstand latest battlefield setbacks? (+ video)', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 21 August 2015, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2015/0421/Can-Syria-s-Assad-withstand-latest-battlefield-setbacks-video> accessed on 2 November 2016.



# CHAPTER 3

## THE BELLIGERENTS

*Sixty percent of Syria is controlled either by ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra or other terrorist organisations, organisations that have been recognised as terrorist by the United States, as well as other countries and the UN. It is them and not anyone else who have control over 60 percent of Syrian territory.*

-President Vladimir Putin<sup>1</sup>

The protests against the Assad regime turned violent only after the state security forces opened fire on protesters. Even then, the lines were fairly clearly drawn: the dictatorial State fighting protesters who were demanding the institution of democratic rights to the people. This demand quickly evolved into a demand for the Assad regime to step down, much as the flow of events had dictated in neighbouring countries as defined by the so-called Arab Spring. However, the geo-strategic and political environment prevalent at that time, the geographical position of Syria, the Assad government's autocratic domestic policies, and its somewhat incoherent foreign policy initiatives combined with the increasing number of educated unemployed youth in the country to rapidly spiral this internal strife out of control into a conflict that drew almost the entire Middle-East and Western nations. From pro- and anti-government parties combatting each other, the number of belligerents increased swiftly to a large number. Further, each of the participants had their own objectives to achieve and none of them were shared.

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1 Putin, Vladimir, 'Vladimir Putin Quotes about Syria', *AZ Quotes*, [http://www.azquotes.com/author/11940-Vladimir\\_Putin/tag/syria](http://www.azquotes.com/author/11940-Vladimir_Putin/tag/syria) accessed on 11 November 2016.

## THE BA'ATHIST SYRIAN GOVERNMENT AND ITS ALLIES

Although the Assad regime started to put down the protests and subsequent rebellion using its own security apparatus and military forces, as the rebellion degenerated into armed conflict and then into full-fledged civil war, it was forced to look externally for support. By late 2015, the government depended almost completely on a mix of volunteers and 'popular' militias as well as Russian and Iranian support for its survival.<sup>2</sup> The Syrian Armed Forces that had played a leading role in the initial part of the war had been depleted of strength through defections and attrition. However, they continue to be a cohesive, if numerically small, force.

## SYRIAN ARMED FORCES

Before the protests and the civil war, the Syrian Armed Forces had an estimated strength of 325 000 regular troops, dominated by the army of about 220 000 and rest being divided among the navy, air force and air defence forces, assisted by around 300 000 reservists. Since June 2011, a steady stream of Syrian forces have defected, estimated by a Turkish official to be, so far, at least 60 000 regular soldiers.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, the Syrian Army has now become ineffective and is propped up by the militias. The Assad regime depends now almost completely on a toxic mix of volunteers and militia. Some reports suggest that some members of these groups could be also be convicted criminals. The militias have formed a Shiite counter-jihad of Lebanese, Bahrainis and Afghans, fighting under the auspices of Iran, the primary patron of the Assad regime.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Worth, Robert F, *A Rage for Order: The Middle East in Turmoil, from Tahir Square to ISIS*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, April 2016, p. 228.

3 Bayoumi, Yara, 'Military defections expose cracks in Syrian army', *Reuters World News*, 30 June 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-defections/military-defections-expose-cracks-in-syrian-army-idUSTRE75S5E620110629> accessed on 3 November 2016.

4 *ibid*, pp. 140–163.

## NATIONAL DEFENCE FORCE (NDF)

The Syrian NDF is a more than 100 000-strong fighting cadre of pro-government militias who are supported by the Syrian government through the provision of military equipment and finances.<sup>5</sup> Essentially the NDF's main role is that of the infantry, while artillery and logistical support is provided by the regular army. Direct combat on the ground against rebel forces and intense counter-insurgency operations are undertaken by these forces. The NDF operates integrated with the Army almost in tandem.

## SHABIHA

The Shabiha is an unofficial, pro-government militia drawn predominantly from Syria's Alawite minority, the sect to which the President Assad belongs. This militia was created in the 1980s by Bassel al-Assad, the current president's elder brother who died in a car accident, for 'unofficial' use in times of political unrest or internal security crisis in the country. They have been variously described as 'a notorious Alawite paramilitary, who are accused of acting as unofficial enforcers for Assad's regime'<sup>6</sup> and, according to the Qatar-based Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, are 'semi-criminal gangs comprised of thugs close to the regime.'<sup>7</sup> Since the uprising, the government has employed Shabiha to break up several protests and to control restless neighbourhoods.

As the civil war became entrenched across the country, the opposition started to use the term Shabiha to denote any civilian they suspected of supporting the Assad regime. The Shabiha has been blamed for many atrocities against the protesters and anti-government forces as well as

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5 Weiss, Michaels, 'Rise of the Militias', *NOW*, 17 May 2013, <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/rise-of-the-militias> accessed on 3 November 2016.

6 Holmes, Oliver, 'Assad's Devious, Cruel Plan to Stay in Power by Dividing Syria—And Why It's Working', *New Republic*, 15 August 2011, <https://newrepublic.com/article/93286/syria-assad-shabbiha-sectarianism> accessed on 3 November 2016.

7 Oweis, Khaled Yacoub, 'Analysis: Assad retrenches into Alawite power base', *Reuters World News*, 4 May 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-assad-alawites-idUSTRE7433X620110504> accessed on 3 November 2016.

looting and wanton destruction.<sup>8</sup> In 2012, the Shabiha was revamped further by the government with assistance from Iran and the Hezbollah and officially named the Jaysh al-Sha'bi. In December 2012, the Shabiha, in its new incarnation, was declared a terrorist organisation by the US.

## CHRISTIAN MILITIAS

The Christians in Syria comprise ethnic Assyrians and Armenians who favour the government because they believe that their survival is assured only within the secular rule of the Assads. There is more than a kernel of truth in this belief if the plight of Christian minorities in other Arab countries are taken to indicate their prospects in a Muslim country. However, the Christian militias fight both on the government side and alongside the Kurds.<sup>9</sup> Reports claim that large numbers of Christians have also joined the NDF. Essentially, the minorities have formed various militia groups oriented towards protecting their ancient villages, towns and farmsteads from the marauding IS terrorists. These groups have joined with Kurdish forces to push back the 'rebels' to serve their interests.<sup>10</sup> There have also been instances of Christian militia clashing with the Kurdish dominated YPG when their territorial claims have been at odds with each other.

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8 Oweis, Khaled Yacoub, 'Armored Syrian forces storm tons near Turkey border', *Reuters World News*, 14 September 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-idUSTRE78D3HV20110914> accessed on 3 November 2016.

9 Chulove, Martin & Shaheen, Kareem, 'Christian militia in Syria defends ancient settlements against Isis', *The Guardian*, 3 March 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/03/christian-militia-syria-defends-ancient-settlements-isis> accessed on 4 November 2016.

10 Allott, Jordan, 'Kurds and Christians Fight Back against ISIS in Syria', *National Review*, 19 November 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/427304/syria-christian-militia-takes-isis-jordan-allott> accessed on 4 November 2016.



## HEZBOLLAH

Although Hezbollah General Secretary, Hassan Nasrallah, denied their involvement in the fighting as late October 2012, Hezbollah fighters have been involved in the war almost from the beginning. In the initial phase, they controlled some strategically placed villages so that, by early 2013, they were entangled in the Syrian offensive against rebel forces.<sup>11</sup> Even so, President Assad denied in the same month that foreign fighters were aiding his military forces or fighting for the government. This was obviously false since Nasrallah announced almost immediately that Hezbollah was fighting the IS in Syria and vowed that Syrian militants would not be permitted to control areas that border Lebanon. He also confirmed that Hezbollah fighters were operating in conjunction with Assad's forces. Independent analysts estimate that around 500 Hezbollah fighters had died in Syria by the end of 2013.<sup>12</sup> The Hezbollah continue to be embedded with the Syrian army and form a formidable part of the pro-Assad forces in the civil war.

## IRAN

The official line that Iran has continued to articulate is that it provides military advice to the Syrian forces in their fight against terrorist groups. However, since the spread of the conflict and its deterioration into a civil war, Iran has diplomatically supported the Syrian government and also provided it with financial, technical and military support including the provision of combat troops.<sup>13</sup> Iran and Syria have long been strategic allies because Iran believes that the survival of the Syrian regime is critical to

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11 Barnard, Anne & Saad, Hwaida, 'Hezbollah Aids Syrian Military in Key Battle,' *The New York Times*, 19 May 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/20/world/middleeast/syrian-army-moves-to-rebel-held-qusayr.html?hp&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/20/world/middleeast/syrian-army-moves-to-rebel-held-qusayr.html?hp&_r=0) accessed on 4 November 2016.

12 'Will It Hold Together?' *The Economist*, 4 January 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21592634-civil-war-neighbouring-syria-putting-ever-greater-strain-lebanons> accessed on 4 November 2016.

13 'The Long Road to Damascus,' *The Economist*, 11 February 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21547305> accessed on 4 November 2016.

its regional interests. In the early days of the civil uprising in Syria, Iran provided the Assad regime with advice based on the expertise that it had developed during the 2009–10 Iranian protests after the elections. As Syria was engulfed in civil war, Iran started to provide limited military support and training to the Syrian army and the NDF.

Ample proof exists that the Iranian military is supporting Assad to maintain his hold on power.<sup>14</sup> Over and above the advisory teams, the support includes training, and technical and materiel support, and deployment of combat forces into Syria. The actual number of combat troops deployed by Iran varies between the hundreds to as many as 10 000, depending on the perspective of the analyst. Irrespective of the estimates, in mid-2013, Iranian forces and Hezbollah were noticeably advancing against the opposition in the battlefield. When the peace talks opened in 2014, Iran increased its support for the Assad Government with the Syrian Finance Minister announcing that Iran had given \$US15 billion to Syria. Further, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) was overseeing the training of thousands of pro-government militia fighters.<sup>15</sup> Reports state that a number of IRGC troops and commanders, including a few senior commanders, have been killed in Syria.<sup>16</sup>

## FOREIGN SHIA MILITIA

Many reports state that Shia fighters, predominantly from Afghanistan and Pakistan, largely outnumber the number of foreign Sunnis fighting in Syria. Once again, reported numbers vary from the hundreds to as many as 12 000 from Afghanistan alone. The number from Pakistan is unknown,

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14 Fulton, Will; Holliday Joseph & Wyer, Sam, *Iranian Strategy in Syria*, A Joint Report by AEI's critical threats project & Institute for the Study of War, May 2013, pp. 15–18.

15 Filkins, Dexter, 'The Shadow Commander', *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander> accessed on 4 November 2016.

16 Fulton, Will and others, *op cit*, pp. 33–37.

but about 15 per cent of Pakistan's population is Shia.<sup>17</sup> However, these Shia fighters have not received sufficient attention from the media to figure in the news. Many of these fighters have been reported as being refugees in Iran who were forced to 'volunteer' as fighters under threat because of their inability to obtain work visas or legal residence there.<sup>18</sup> Even so, while they are paid a regular salary, they appear brain-washed into accepting that they are fighting a holy war to protect Shia pilgrimage sites from vandalism by the Sunni IS.

## RUSSIA

On 30 September 2015, Russia's Federation Council unanimously granted permission to President Vladimir Putin to employ Russian military forces in Syria. Within an hour, the Russian Air Force was conducting strikes against IS targets. Since then, Russia has been the staunchest supporter of the Assad regime, both on the battlefield and at the negotiating table.<sup>19</sup>

## THE OPPOSITION

The armed opposition to the Assad regime consists of a number of disparate groups, not always working together and at times even fighting each other. Needless to say, the objectives of each group are individual and perhaps the only common cause is the perceived need to remove Basher al-Assad and his government from power. Even this common aim has not been sufficient to tone down their in-fighting. Some analysts estimate that the opposition, primarily Islamist rebels, is financed primarily by

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17 Heistein, Ari & West, James, 'Syria's Other Foreign Fighters: Iran's Afghan and Pakistani Mercenaries', *The National Interest*, 20 November 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/syrias-other-foreign-fighters-irans-afghan-pakistani-14400>, accessed on 4 November 2016.

18 *ibid.*

19 'Russia goes to war with ISIS: Why and how?' *RT News*, 30 September 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/317021-russia-syria-engagement-how/> accessed on 4 November 2016.

Saudi Arabia to the tune of \$US700 million per year.<sup>20</sup> In the north-west of the country, the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front, which is also allied with numerous small and splintered Islamist groups, hold sway. The smaller Islamist groups also operate within the broad umbrella of the FSA.<sup>21</sup> This is an advantageous position since the Western governments have designated the FSA as a 'moderate' opposition faction and therefore transfer sophisticated weaponry to them. However, these weapons in turn find their way to the Islamic rebels, effectively increasing their firepower.

In the east, IS moved in from Iraq and very rapidly achieved military gains. Eventually IS came into direct conflict with the other more moderate Islamic rebels, especially the al-Nusra Front, whose leaders refused to pledge allegiance to IS. By July 2014, the IS controlled one-third of Syrian territory and almost all of the oil and gas production facilities, thus becoming the main anti-government force.<sup>22</sup> With the civil war continuing, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar were openly supporting al-Qaeda linked or affiliated Islamic groups as well as more extreme groups with connections to the Muslim Brotherhood. Once again, these actions paved the way for weaponry to be transferred to al-Qaeda directly.<sup>23</sup> In the north-east, mostly local Kurdish militia, such as the YPG, fight with both the rebels and the government forces to carve out an autonomous Kurdish Province. The spread and spectrum of the opposition is mind-boggling and more complex than any seen before in a conflict.

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- 20 Hersh, Seymour, 'Military to Military', *London Review of Books*, Vol 38, No 1, 7 January 2016, pp. 11–14, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n01/seymour-m-hersh/military-to-military> accessed on 7 November 2016.
- 21 'FSA Brigade joins al-Qaeda group in Syria', *Al Jazeera English*, 21 September 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/09/2013920164342453621.html> accessed on 7 November 2016.
- 22 Cockburn, Patrick, 'ISIS Consolidates', *London Review of Books*, Vol 36, No 16, 21 August 2014, pp. 3–5, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n16/patrick-cockburn/isis-consolidates> accessed on 7 November 2016.
- 23 Sengupta, Kim, 'Turkey and Saudi Arabia alarm the West by backing Islamist extremists the Americans had bombed in Syria', *The Independent*, 12 May 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-crisis-turkey-and-saudi-arabia-shock-western-countries-by-supporting-anti-assad-jihadists-10242747.html> accessed on 7 November 2016.

## FREE SYRIAN ARMY

The Free Syrian Army was formed in July 2011 by a group of army officers who defected from the Syrian Army determined to defend civilian protesters from State-sponsored violence. The objective very rapidly changed to 'bring the [Syrian] regime down'.<sup>24</sup> By December 2011, only about 1000 soldiers were reported to have defected, although the FSA claimed the numbers to be as high as 25 000. The FSA functions as a loose federation rather than as a clear entity with a military chain of command and suffers from a lack of focus. In early 2013 (March–April), the USA announced that it would provide non-lethal aid to the FSA, although the term used was 'Syrian rebels.' This indicate the amorphous character of the FSA, which advocates its ineffectiveness as a cohesive force.

The nominal leader of the FSA, Salim Idriss, a defected general of the Syrian Army, acknowledged in mid–2013 that the FSA was fragmented and would not be able to depose the Assad regime on its own. More importantly, he also acknowledged that the FSA was operating in conjunction with some Islamist groups, while staying away from forming alliances with others such as the al-Nusra Front.<sup>25</sup> Subsequently, it was reported that many of the FSA members had defected to IS, thereby providing these Islamists with modern weapons and a cadre of trained fighters.<sup>26</sup> Reports claim that some elements of the FSA have joined the Kurdish militias to fight IS. Shortly after the Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War, some journalists reported that the entire FSA was a charade and that the weapons and assistance provided to them had been syphoned off to IS or other Islamist groups in the fray. In effect, US-trained and equipped fighters were now fighting the coalition forces,

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24 'Defecting troops form 'Free Syrian Army', target Assad security forces', *The World Tribune*, 3 August 2011, [http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2011/me\\_syria0973\\_08\\_03.asp](http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2011/me_syria0973_08_03.asp) accessed on 10 November 2011.

25 Enders, David, 'Syrian rebel leader Salim Idriss admits difficulty in unifying fighters', *McClatchy DC*, 7 May 2013, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24748906.html> accessed on 10 November 2016.

26 Mekhennet, Souad, 'The terrorist fighting us now? We just finished training them', *The Washington Post*, 18 August 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/08/18/the-terrorists-fighting-us-now-we-just-finished-training-them/> accessed on 10 November 2016.

having defected to other fundamentalist groups.<sup>27</sup> By early 2015, the FSA was a phantom structure.

## ISLAMIC FRONT

The Islamic Front (al-Jabhat al-Islamiyyah) was formed in November 2013 when seven rebel groups merged after battling the Assad regime since the Civil War began.<sup>28</sup> The group is believed to be backed and funded by Saudi Arabia and could have membership of around 40 000 fighters. The attempt of the Front has been to chart an independent path and not be affiliated to any other group, especially the Syrian national front. This could tactically ensure that they will be able to claim legitimacy as and when the Assad regime relinquishes power.

## AL-NUSRA FRONT

The al-Qaeda linked al-Nusra Front is the largest and the most violent jihadist group in Syria apart from IS. It is designated as a terrorist organisation by the USA and held responsible for a large number of suicide bombings in and around Damascus. Reports about the Front say it has received long-term support from the Turkish government.<sup>29</sup> There remains confusion about the al-Nusra Front having joined IS, as announced by the leadership of IS and the al-Nusra leader Abu Mohammad al-Gholani

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27 Fisk, Robert, 'Syria's moderates have disappeared...and there are no good guys', *The Independent*, 5 October 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/syria-s-moderates-have-disappeared-and-there-are-no-good-guys-a6679406.html> accessed on 10 November 2016. This is a fairly unbiased article on the actual state of affairs in Syria and the fiasco that existed before the Russian intervention. The US and its allies were blindsided by the conniving tactics of the so-called 'opposition' who were only fundamentalist Islamists masquerading as secular fighter of the non-existent FSA.

28 Morris, Loveday, 'Seven Syrian Islamist rebel groups form new Islamic Front', *The Washington Post*, 22 November 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/seven-syrian-islamist-rebel-groups-form-new-islamic-front/2013/11/22/8a504da6-53bc-11e3-9ee6-2580086d8254\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/seven-syrian-islamist-rebel-groups-form-new-islamic-front/2013/11/22/8a504da6-53bc-11e3-9ee6-2580086d8254_story.html) accessed on 10 November 2016.

29 Hersh, Seymour, *op cit.*

proclaiming that the group continues to be affiliated to the al-Qaeda leadership.<sup>30</sup> The group has a large number of foreign fighters, and is estimated to number as many as 10 000. The al-Nusra Front attempts to maintain cordial relations with the indigenous rebel groups. However, the group's fundamentalist and strict religious attitude, combined with its willingness to impose Sharia law, has alienated them from the Syrian population. The Syrian rebel groups believe that the foreigners have 'stolen' their revolution while also looting Syrian resources.<sup>31</sup> The al-Nusra Front has been accused of mistreating ethnic and religious minorities and also of bargaining for the release of prisoners with hostages that they have taken during the conflict.

## SALAFISTS

These rebels comprise an eclectic mix of extremist Salafi jihadists groups. The accuracy of the assessment of their strength varies with the source being used. On average, it could be around 20–25 per cent of the rebel forces who belong to this vague grouping.<sup>32</sup> There is also a prevalent opinion that as many as 60 per cent of the rebels could be classified as Islamic extremists.<sup>33</sup> This estimate is more believable and perhaps closer to the truth. Even though a number of foreign fighters have joined these groups, they do not represent more than about 10 per cent of the total

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30 'Al-Nusra Commits to al-Qaida, Deny Iraq Branch 'Merger', *Naharnet Newsdesk*, 10 April 2013, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/78961> accessed on 10 November 2016.

31 Chulov, Martin, 'Syria crisis: al-Qaida fighters revealing their true colours, rebels say', *The Guardian*, 18 January 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/17/syria-crisis-alqaida-fighters-true-colours> accessed on 10 November 2016.

32 Michaels, Jim, 'Kerry: Syrian rebels have not been hijacked by extremists', *USA Today*, 5 September 2013, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2013/09/04/syria-hagel-kerry-obama-rebels/2764567/> accessed on 10 November 2016.

33 '60 Percent of Syrian Rebels are Islamist Extremists', *NPR*, 20 December 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/12/20/460463173/60-percent-of-syrian-rebels-share-islamic-state-ideology-think-tank-finds> accessed on 10 November 2016.

fighters. However, if, as suggested, their number is around 15 000, the total strength of the extremist fighters would be more than 100 000, which could be an overestimation. Either way, no ascertainable accurate figures are available.

Western nations are considerably concerned that the foreign fighters will return to their home countries and use the skills that they have obtained in Syria to perpetuate acts of terrorism there. By mid-2015, various religious groups, mostly following a creed of fundamentalist extremism, had joined the Syrian Civil War on both sides of the conflict. The mostly Sunni ones opposed to the current regime, reject the Syrian National Coalition and call for the imposition of Sharia as the only source of legitimate legislation. That the religious extremist groups fight on both sides of the divide indicates that this civil war is extremely complex.

## THE SYRIAN DEMOCRATIC FORCES

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) also entail a somewhat loose alliance of Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen, Assyrian and few other militias representing ethnic minorities who share a common objective of creating a democratic and federalist Syria. While they are opposed to the Assad regime, most of their fighting effort is directed at containing the al-Nusra and IS attacks, which are an existing threat to the minorities. The SDF, which formed in December 2015 and is dominated by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), is estimated to have anything between 55 000 and 80 000 fighters.<sup>34</sup> Between 30–40 per cent of them could be non-Kurdish minorities. In March 2016, the political wing of the SDF, declared that it had created an autonomous federation in northern Syria.

Before the formation of the SDF, the YPG was the primary fighting force in the Kurdish and nearby regions, having entered the conflict in July 2012 by capturing the town of Kobani near the Turkish border from the government troops. Kurds are mostly Sunni Muslims and form about 10

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34 Perry, Tom, 'Syrian Kurds now say they now control territory the size of Qatar and Kuwait combined', *Military & Defense, Business Insider*, 14 August 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/syrian-kurds-now-say-they-now-control-territory-the-size-of-qatar-and-kuwait-combined-2015-8?IR=T> accessed on 10 November 2016.



per cent of Syria's population. They have suffered decades of discrimination and persecution, being deprived of basic civil, cultural, economic and social rights.<sup>35</sup> As the anti-government protest in the country began gathering momentum, President Bashar al-Assad granted citizenship to an estimated 200 000 stateless Kurds in attempting to prevent a potential Kurdish backlash. This attempt was obviously not successful.<sup>36</sup>

## ISLAMIC STATE

The group was initially called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (abbreviated to ISIL or ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria]) and subsequently just the Islamic State (IS). The group is also colloquially called Da'aesh. IS appeared in Syria in April 2013 and by mid-2014 controlled a large swathe: almost one-third of Syrian territory. Initially IS was affiliated with the al-Qaeda group but established its own independent identity under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi who styles himself as the 'Caliph'. The group has over 7000 fighters in Syria, many of whom are not Syrians. It has imposed strict Sharia law in the territories that it controls and has been accused of abusing human rights.<sup>37</sup> IS is also the strongest and the most vicious group in the opposition, who have also been reported

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35 'Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic', *Human Rights Council*, 23 November 2011, [http://www.lcnil.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/LCIL/documents/arabspring/syria/Syria\\_39\\_Report\\_Independent\\_International\\_Commission\\_of\\_Inquiry.pdf](http://www.lcnil.cam.ac.uk/sites/default/files/LCIL/documents/arabspring/syria/Syria_39_Report_Independent_International_Commission_of_Inquiry.pdf) accessed on 11 November 2016.

36 Muscati, Samer, 'Syrian Kurds Fleeing to Iraqi Safe Haven', *Foreign Policy in Focus*, *Human Rights Watch*, 14 May 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/05/14/syrian-kurds-fleeing-iraqi-safe-haven> accessed on 11 November 2016.

37 'Syria: Harrowing torture, summary killings in secret ISIS detention centres', *Amnesty International*, 19 December 2013, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2013/12/syria-harrowing-torture-summary-killings-secret-isis-detention-centres/> accessed on 11 November 2016.

as intolerant of all non-Sunni Muslims, foreign journalists or aid workers who have been either expelled, imprisoned, tortured or killed.<sup>38</sup>

IS also won battlefield victories over the al-Nusra Front and controlled most of Syria's oil and gas production by the second half of 2014.<sup>39</sup> The Syrian government, hard-pressed to retain a cohesive hold on power did not start to target IS before mid-2014, by which time its tentacles had become very well entrenched in the country. In their diminished state, the Government forces could not match the fervour and fanaticism of IS fighters. Although they started the Syrian campaign with about 7 000 fighters, IS was very successfully recruiting large numbers of 'fighters' to the extent that, in July 2014 alone their numbers had swelled by as much as 6300.<sup>40</sup>

The territorial gains that IS has made, its viciousness against all opposition, and its uncompromising attitude to imposing Sharia law in its strictest version have made it a much feared entity. A number of smaller rebel groups are reported to have accepted a 'non-aggression' pact with them, merely to survive as viable entities,<sup>41</sup> although these allegations have been vociferously denied by some of the groups. But Nevertheless, viewing these reports of the civil war broadly, offers the possibility that such an arrangement could have been reached. Since early 2014, the Iraqi government has been making inroads into IS-held territory, which had prompted more IS fighters and leaders to move into Syria.

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38 Birke, Sarah, 'How al-Qaeda Changed the Syrian War', *The New York Review of Books*, 27 December 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2013/12/27/how-al-qaeda-changed-syrian-war/> accessed on 11 November 2016.

39 Cockburn, Patrick, 'ISIS Consolidates', *London Review of Books*, 21 August 2014, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n16/patrick-cockburn/isis-consolidates> accessed on 11 November 2016.

40 Williams, Lauren, 'Syrians adjust to life under ISIS rule', *The Daily Star*, 30 August 2014, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2014/Aug-30/269031-syrians-adjust-to-life-under-isis-rule.ashx> accessed on 11 November 2016.

41 Masi, Alessandria, 'US-Backed Moderate Group in Syria Signs Truce with ISIS: Reports', *International Business Times*, 9 December 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/us-backed-moderate-group-syria-signs-truce-isis-reports-1687662> accessed on 11 November 2016.

## THE WESTERN COALITION

A number of nations, some of them NATO members, have joined the Combined Joint Task Force that has been assembled to combat the spread of IS, to support rebel groups, such as the FSA, and to attempt to oust the Assad government. The military actions has primarily involved air strikes, with a number of Arab nations having also joined the air campaign.<sup>42</sup> Turkey has been accused of actions that go beyond combating IS after directly fighting the Kurdish militia in both Syria and Iraq. Turkey has also been accused of collaborating with IS in some cases and of maintaining an open border that has facilitated foreigners to join IS.<sup>43</sup> It has also been alleged that Turkey has been indiscriminately supporting all the rebel groups in Syria, including IS, by transforming the program that had been set up to aid the 'moderate' rebels.<sup>44</sup>

## CONCLUSION

At the initial stage of the agitation, political movements were also aimed at creating the basics of an alternative government that could move in when the Assad government fell or was removed. At that stage, neither did anyone anticipate the 'staying power' of the government, nor its extreme ruthlessness. More importantly, the role that Russia would play in altering the situation was not foreseen by any of the participants. The unfortunate part of the Syrian Civil War is that the belligerents are a large number and the individual end-states that each one of them is striving for differ from one another. A nation that was stable and relatively prosperous as late as in 2010, is now a broken country with more than two million of its people having been displaced, infrastructure almost completely gutted,

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42 'Airstrikes Hit ISIL Terrorists in Syria, Iraq', *U.S. Department of Defence*, 30 September 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/621107/airstrikes-hit-isil-terrorists-in-syria-iraq> accessed on 11 November 2016.

43 Zaman, Amberin, 'Syrian Kurds continue to blame Turkey for backing ISIS militants', *Al-Monitor*, 10 June 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/zaman-syria-kurds-rojava-ypg-muslim-pyd-pkk-turkey-isis.html> accessed on 11 November 2016.

44 Hersh, Seymour, *op cit*.

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and the dictatorial Government still hanging on to power. That even the world powers have not been able to bring peace and succour to the long suffering people of Syria indicates the divided world that exists today.

## CHAPTER 4

# RUSSIA AND SYRIA: A LONG-TERM FRIENDSHIP

*Russia and Syria have a deep and long political marriage that is one of necessity, and one of convenience at times, but it is also a historical relationship based on a respect that is bonded by both adversity and a creative, political struggle.*

-Luis Lazaro Tijerina<sup>1</sup>

Russia has a long history of involvement in the Middle-East, which remains largely unknown. Czar Nicholas I's ambassador to Persia, Aleksander Griboyedov, was slaughtered by an irate mob in Tehran in 1829 because Moscow had annexed Persian territory to its spreading empire after inflicting a humiliating defeat on the Persians. Thereafter, other than for brief periods of time when domestic exigencies have kept them occupied, Russia and then the Soviet Union have been continually involved in the region. It is no wonder that, when the Syrian Civil War reached a critical point for the Assad regime, Russia intervened to stabilise the government. Thus Russia ensured and its continued relevance to the Syria.

According to some medieval Arabic sources, Russians served in the Byzantine Army in the 10th and 11th centuries. After the Carlovitz Treaty with the Ottoman Empire, Russian pilgrims established links

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1 Tijerins, Luis Lazaro, 'The Russian and Syrian Alliance', *Katehon*, 2 July 2016, <http://katehon.com/article/russian-and-syrian-alliance> accessed on 18 November 2016.

with the Orthodox Christian church in Palestine.<sup>2</sup> In 1893, the Russian Empire established a consular office in Damascus, which was then a part of Ottoman Syria.<sup>3</sup> The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and the creation of the Soviet Union in 1922, ended Russian presence in Syria, a break that continued till the end of the French mandate in 1946. Even though the Soviet Union did not play a direct and active role in the region till the end of World War II and the beginning of the Cold War, it tacitly promoted the establishment of the Syrian Communist Party in 1925.<sup>4</sup>

## MODERN HISTORY

The bond between Russia and Syria was formalised in 1944 when the Soviet Union established a diplomatic relationship with Syria, which was still to become independent. In February 1946, a secret agreement was signed between the Soviet Union and the newly independent Syria that ensured Soviet support for the fledgling nation ahead of the French troops evacuating in April 1946. It specifically identified assistance to form the Syrian Arab Army and Soviet diplomatic and political support internationally.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet commitment was demonstrated almost immediately when the it's representative to the UN Security Council, Andrey Vyshinsky, demanded on 15 February 1946 that all British and French troops be withdrawn from Syrian territory.<sup>6</sup> With the onset of the Cold War, Syria was firmly ensconced in the red corner as an ally of the Soviet Union.

After the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Syria saw the rise of the Ba'ath Party and a number of military coups. In 1955, the West-inspired Baghdad Pact,

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2 Kreutz, Andrej, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe? Praeger Security International*, Westport, CT, 2007, p. 12.

3 *ibid.*

4 *ibid.*, p. 13.

5 Ginat, Rami, 'The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'ath Regime: From Hesitation to Rapprochement', *Middle Eastern Studies*, April 2000, Routledge, pp. 150–169.

6 Ginat, Rami, 'Soviet Policy towards the Arab World, 1945–48', *Middle Eastern Studies*, October 1996, pp. 321–335.

which was followed by forming the Central Treaty Organisation, modelled on NATO, further strengthened the Soviet-Syria relations. By this time, all Middle-Eastern nations had become satellites of either the Western or the Eastern blocs. Syria remained firmly with the Soviet Union.

The Suez Crisis of 1956 was a litmus test for the Soviet Middle-East. Buttressed by Soviet arms and finances, Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. Although the Israelis responded almost immediately, the French and the British action was somewhat delayed. The delay permitted the Soviet Union sufficient time to respond with the threat to intervene with nuclear force if the Western forces were not withdrawn immediately. Although the USA, under the Eisenhower administration, warned the Soviet Union not to interfere, it also ensured that the British-French-Israeli forces withdrew from Egypt.<sup>7</sup> The Soviet response increased its prestige in the Middle-East and aid being funnelled into Syria increased considerably. Between 1955 and 1958, Syria received about \$US294 million from the Soviet Union in military and direct economic assistance.<sup>8</sup>

After Hafez Assad came to power through a coup in November 1970, the Soviet Union was permitted to open a naval base in Tartus in the Mediterranean, thus providing a permanent base for it in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the Hafez Assad presidency (1970-2000), large numbers of Syrian military officers and intellectuals did higher studies in the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> In October 1980, Syria and the Soviet Union signed a 20-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.

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7 'Suez Crisis', *History.com*, <http://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/suez-crisis> accessed on 11 November 2016.

8 For a detailed description of the Soviet-Syrian relationship read: Mansfield, Peter, *A History of the Middle East*, Penguin Books, New York, originally published 1991 (Fourth Edition, Revised by Nicolas Pelham, August 2013).

9 The strategy followed by the Soviet Union to improve its influence in the Middle East during the Cold War has been examined in detail in Breslauer, George W., *Soviet Strategy in the Middle East*, Unwin Hyman, Boston, 1990.

10 Peel, Michael & Clover, Charles, 'Syria and Russia's special relationship', *Financial Times*, 10 July 2012, <https://www.ft.com/content/e64a3076-c9b2-11e1-a5e2-00144feabdc0> accessed on 14 November 2016.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TARTUS

The facility at the port of Tartus is Russia's only naval base in the Mediterranean and the only military facility outside the former Soviet Union. At the break-up of the Soviet Union, Syria owed nearly \$US14 billion to the now defunct Soviet government. Russia cancelled about \$US10 billion in exchange for tentative permission to strengthen its naval presence in the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup> In 2008, the current regime permitted Russia to convert the port into a permanent Middle-East base for its nuclear armed naval ships. Renovation of the port and its facilities have continued since 2009, albeit in a sporadic manner.

The use of the deep water port at Tartus is perhaps the greatest strategic and geo-political interest for Russia in this extremely volatile period in Middle-Eastern history. Control of the port also increases Russia's influence in the region.<sup>12</sup> Some critics of Russian activity in the region say that Russia steadfastly supports the Assad regime because Tartus has been made openly available to it to use.

## THE BASIS OF THE COOPERATION

Russia, as the successor state to the Soviet Union, has considerable economic interest in Syria. Its investments in Syria have been valued at \$US19.4 billion in 2009 and its exports to Syria were worth \$US1.1 billion in 2010, before the outbreak of the civil war.<sup>13</sup> The friendship between the two nations was built upon military cooperation with the Soviet Union accounting for 90 per cent of all Syrian military imports in the 1970s and

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- 11 Weitz, Richard, *Global Security Watch: Russia, A Reference Handbook*, Praeger Security International, Santa Barbara, California, 2010, p. 30.
  - 12 Pollard, Ruth, 'Syrian War: Russia's support for Bashar al-Assad Explained', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 September 2015, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/syrian-war-russias-support-for-bashar-alassad-explained-20150928-gjwuyy.html> accessed on 14 November 2016.
  - 13 Amos, Howard, 'Billions of Dollars of Russian Business Suffers Along With Syria', *The Moscow Times*, 1 September 2011, <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/billions-of-dollars-of-russian-business-suffers-along-with-syria-9298> accessed on 14 November 2016.



1980s. The imports cost Syria several billion dollars' and included the most sophisticated air defence systems.

In the early years of the Bashar al-Assad regime, Russia also established a joint signal intelligence collection centre in Syria. In 2012, the largest electronic intelligence gathering post outside Russian territory was set up in Latakia.<sup>14</sup> After the Israeli Operation Orchard in 2007 against an alleged nuclear reactor located at al-Kibar in Syria, Syrian air defences have been bolstered by Russia, although it denies initiating such actions. Unconfirmed reports say that Syrian forces are not capable of employing the sophisticated weapon systems to their optimum capacity without being assisted by Russian crews. Irrespective of the veracity of these reports, the Syrian air defence has been described as being 'robust'.<sup>15</sup>

When the Syrian crisis erupted in 2011, Russia unambiguously supported the internationally recognised government of Syria under Bashar al-Assad. Russia also ensured that military aid continued to flow to the Syrian government for the next three years as it became embattled without a clear strategy to achieve the desired end-state.

## RUSSIA'S POLITICAL MANOEUVRING

At the end of May 2011, Russia opposed any UN involvement in the Syrian uprising stating that the 'situation in Syria did not pose any threat to international peace and security' and that an intervention would destabilise the nation further. Russia also stated that President Assad had attempted major reforms.<sup>16</sup> However, in June, sufficient pressure was put

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14 Lazareva, Inna, 'Russian spy base in Syria used to monitor rebels and Israel seized', *The Telegraph*, 8 October 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11148857/Russian-spy-base-in-Syria-used-to-monitor-rebels-and-Israel-seized.html> accessed on 14 November 2016.

15 Borger, Julian, 'Russian military presence in Syria poses challenges to US-led intervention', *The Guardian*, 24 December 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/23/syria-crisis-russian-military-presence> accessed on 14 November 2016.

16 Meyer, Henry, Cook, Brad, & Arkhipov, Ilya, 'Russia warns U.S., NATO not to aid Syrian protesters after Libya', *Bloomberg News*, 2 June 2011, [http://www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2011/06/russia\\_warns\\_us\\_nato\\_not\\_to\\_ai.html](http://www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2011/06/russia_warns_us_nato_not_to_ai.html) accessed on 15 November 2016.

on Russian policy makers for them to accept the visit of a Syrian anti-government protesters group to Moscow. After the group met with a Russian envoy, Russia called for 'an end to any and all forms of violence'. The Western press quickly seized on this as a Russian shift away from Syria.<sup>17</sup> Through July 2011, the Russian Prime Minister, Dmitri Medvedev worked in conjunction with German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, to seek a solution to the Syrian crisis. Their aim was to end the violence that was becoming widespread to ensure that the country did not slide into civil war like Libya.<sup>18</sup>

In early August, Russia stated that it would not oppose or veto any UN resolution condemning the violence in Syria provided no sanctions were imposed on the Syrian government. The subtle shift of the Russian position was noted by analysts on both sides of the divide. On 23 August 2011, Russia, along with China and Cuba, denounced a UN inquiry into human rights violations by the Assad government.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the West, as usual led by the USA, was attempting to influence the UN to sanction the Syrian government, which was opposed by both Russia and China. For the first time, Russia stated that it would use its veto power if it became necessary to stop these moves. It also proposed a counter resolution that required Syria to speed up its reform process without imposing any sanctions.<sup>20</sup> Both proposals were met by its opponents with cynicism to the extent that mutual antagonism increased. The battlelines

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17 'Kremlin Envoy Calls for End to Syria Violence', *The Moscow Times*, 28 June 2011, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/kremlin-envoy-calls-for-end-to-syria-violence-7898> accessed on 15 November 2016.

18 Baetz, Juergen, 'Medvedev: Syria must not go the same way as Libya', *The Associated Press World Stream*, 19 July 2011 at Highbeam Research <https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1A1-6623ffa3b2104a6d817fa8dbb1f4fdef.html> and *Al Arabiya News*, 22 July 2011, <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/07/22/158845.html> both websites accessed on 15 November 2016.

19 Oweis, Khaled Yacoub, 'U.S. envoy visits Syria town, U.N. launched inquiry', *Reuters World News*, 23 August 2011, <http://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-58923120110823> accessed on 15 November 2016.

20 Charbonneau, Louis, 'Russia, China resist U.N. Syria sanctions push: envoys', *Reuters World News*, 26 August 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-un-idUSTRE77P4X920110826> accessed on 15 November 2016.

in the UN were drawn on 4 October 2011, when Russia and China jointly vetoed a Western-drafted Security Council resolution. The resolution had demanded that all violence should end and demanded 'accountability'; this importantly gave Syria 30 days to comply with the demands. Failure to do so would invoke other 'options' and 'measures' within the UN Charter. Russia had earlier stated that it would not accept any resolution that even hinted at sanctions.<sup>21</sup> The reason was that a similar UN resolution about Libya had been manipulated by the West to suit its own purposes aimed at regime change and the ensuing chaos that engulfed that country.<sup>22</sup> The other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) nations supported the Russian stance. It was clear that in Moscow's calculations, its long-term ally, Bashar al-Assad, needed to be supported against the opposition. It can also be noted that Russia would have felt that the Assad regime was better placed to survive, if sufficient military assistance was provided, than its opposition was in deposing the government.

Even at this stage, both Russia and China believed that sufficient reform of governance in Syria would contain the revolt. Accordingly, both nations issued public statements asking the Syrian government to 'respect the will of the people'. They seem to have missed the pointers on the ground that the rebellion was progressing towards becoming a full blown civil war and that the government was intransigent and used repressive force to defeat the opposition. Official statements from the Russian government continued to insist that their opposition to UN (or more correctly, Western nations) directed actions was to ensure that another Libya conflict was not repeated and that Russia was 'not protecting any regime'.<sup>23</sup> The debate and proposals and counter-proposals in the UN Security Council continued

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21 MacFarquahar, Neil, 'U.N. Resolution on Syria Blocked by Russia and China,' *The New York Times*, 4 October 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/05/world/middleeast/russia-and-china-block-united-nations-resolution-on-syria.html> accessed on 15 November 2016.

22 'Russia will not allow Libya-style regime change in Syria: Lavrov,' *Al Arabiya News*, 9 June 2012, <https://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/06/09/219590.html> and 'Russia will not allow military intervention in Syria: FM,' *Hurriyet Daily News*, 1 November 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=russia-will-not-allow-military-intervention-in-syria-fm-2011-11-01> both accessed on 15 November 2016.

23 *ibid.*

without any progress while the tempo and intensity of the conflict in Syria was escalating and unrelenting.

By early January 2012, two competing resolutions were circulated in the UN: the Russian proposal and the resolution jointly drafted by Western and Arab power. On 4 February, Russia once again vetoed the Western-Arab sponsored Security Council resolution that urged Bashar al-Assad to adhere to a peace plan drafted by the Arab League.<sup>24</sup> Russia continued its attempts to accelerate constitutional and electoral reforms in Syria, with their senior political leadership meeting with President Assad. The fundamental argument was that Syria alone had the power to change the fate of its people and that foreign intervention was not the answer. The shadow of the Libyan episode was large in the minds of the Russian leadership. However, by March, Russia was accepting that the Assad regime had ignored Russian warnings and that a number of 'mistakes' had brought Syria to the brink of a civil war.<sup>25</sup>

Even so, Russia continued to pursue a policy that would bring a peaceful solution to the Syrian imbroglio while also ensuring that the Assad regime continued in power once reforms were introduced. Russian diplomats and leadership continued to try and play a leading role in the peace process that UN envoy Kofi Annan was developing. They met both the opposition and the government forces to try and reach consensus. At the same time, Russia also continued to veto a number of UN initiatives.<sup>26</sup> A UN Security Council sponsored agreement did not sanction the Assad government but was meant to implement the six-point plan that Kofi Annan had suggested. Although Russia lauded this agreement, other nations were

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24 'The long road to Damascus', *The Economist*, Vol 402, 11 February 2012, pp. 25–28.

25 Gutterman, Steve, 'Russia out to maintain clout, improve image on Syria', *Reuters Market News*, 21 March 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/syria-russia-assad-idUSL6E8EL5WQ20120321> accessed on 15 November 2016.

26 'Syrian opposition delegation holds talks in Moscow', Associated Press, *Arab News*, 16 April 2012, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/411109> accessed on 15 November 2016.

visibly frustrated by the lack of progress in its implementation.<sup>27</sup> However, the agreement to deploy ‘unarmed’ peacekeepers did not specify that the Syrian army would return to the barracks or stop the use of heavy weapons. Further, although Russia was trying to retain the role of a peacemaker, it was obvious to even a casual observer that its actions were always biased in favour of the Syrian government.

In May 2012, 108 civilians including 34 women and 49 children were killed in an attack that was blamed on both the pro-government militia and the opposition.<sup>28</sup> The Russian reaction was true to form in that it initially condemned the Syrian army but veered sharply by sharing the blame with the opposition, before eventually blaming the opposition almost exclusively.<sup>29</sup> By then, Russia had also started to accuse the USA of setting double standards—selling weapons to participants in the opposition to the Assad regime, while criticising Russia for providing assistance to the Syrian government. Russia felt that, by supporting the opposition in Syria, the USA was openly undermining its national security. This stance should be understood within the Russian mindset that there could be only two possible outcomes of the civil war first, either Assad continued in power, which meant that Russia would continue to be a prominent influence in the region; or second, radical Islamists would take over the country, which would be a direct threat to Russia.<sup>30</sup>

Almost all of 2013 continued in the same vein: the Civil War raged across the entire country while Russia cautiously blamed the Syrian government for lacking commitment to enforce the reforms necessary to pacify the people. Even so, when the USA threatened to strike Syrian

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27 ‘Security Council authorizes UN observer mission in Syria, Ban welcomes decision,’ *UN News Centre*, 21 April 2012, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41835#.WC5FAP195PY> accessed on 18 November 2016.

28 Nebehey, Stephanie, ‘Most Houla victims killed in summary executions: UN,’ *Reuters World News*, 29 May 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-un-idUSBRE84S10020120529> accessed on 18 November 2016.

29 ‘Houla: How a massacre unfolded,’ *BBC News, Middle East*, 8 June 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18233934> accessed on 18 November 2016.

30 Rosenberg, Steve, ‘Why Russia sells Syria arms,’ *BBC News, Europe*, 29 June 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18642032> accessed on 18 November 2016.

chemical weapons facilities, Russia stepped in to prevent it, instead proposing to place them under international control for subsequent destruction.<sup>31</sup> In September 2013, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* urging the USA to avoid unilateral military action in Syria and cooperate internationally to negotiate a settlement.<sup>32</sup>

In July 2015, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad contacted the Russian President Vladimir Putin and explained Syria's military challenges and formally requested Russia to provide military assistance to defeat the international terrorism devouring his nation.<sup>33</sup> This was the culmination of more than six months of reversals suffered by the Syrian government forces leading to a political agreement that envisaged an increased involvement from Russia in the Civil War. In response to this direct appeal for help, in August 2015, Russia began to send air and ground combat assets to an airbase near the port city of Latakia in Syria.<sup>34</sup> Russia had 'officially' entered the Syrian Civil War!

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- 31 Gordon, Michale R., & Myers, Steven Lee, 'Obama Calls Russia Offer on Syria Possible 'Breakthrough'', *The New York Times*, 9 September 2103, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/10/world/middleeast/kerry-says-syria-should-hand-over-all-chemical-arms.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/10/world/middleeast/kerry-says-syria-should-hand-over-all-chemical-arms.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) accessed on 18 November 2016.
  - 32 Putin, Vladimir, V., 'A Plea for Caution from Russia', *The Opinion Pages, The New York Times*, 11 September 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html> accessed on 18 November 2106.
  - 33 Bassam, Laila & Perry, Tom, 'How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow', *Reuters World News*, 6 October 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006> accessed on 18 November 2016.
  - 34 Luhn, Alec, 'Russia sends artillery and tanks to Syria as part of continued military buildup', *The Guardian*, 15 September 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/14/russia-sends-artillery-and-tanks-to-syria-as-part-of-continued-military-buildup>; and Crawford, Jamie & Starr, Barbara, 'Russia sends fighter jets to Syria after talks with U.S.', *CNN Politics*, Washington, 18 September 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/18/politics/russia-fighter-jets-syria-carter/> both accessed on 18 November 2016.

## CONCLUSION

For almost four years, Russia kept away from physical military intervention in the Syrian Civil War, delivering arms and ammunition to the government under its contractual obligations. Although the supply was criticised by some Western and Arab nations, Russia dismissed these by stating that no arms embargo was being violated.<sup>35</sup> As the civil war became more intense and civilian casualties started to mount, Russia was careful to blame these casualties on foreign assistance to Syrian rebels. To a certain extent, there was some truth to the allegations since the West, and more importantly, the Sunni Arab nations, were providing financial and materiel assistance to all types of rebel groups almost indiscriminately. The Arab nations were singularly focused on removing Basher al-Assad and his government from power. They do not seem to have learnt the salutary lessons clearly taught by the Iraqi, Egyptian or Libyan conflicts about the consequences of removing a strongman in a Middle Eastern nation.

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35 Galpin, Richard, 'Russian arms shipment bolster Syria's embattled Assad', *BBC News Middle East*, 30 January 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16797818> accessed on 18 November 2016.





## CHAPTER 5

# RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IN SYRIA: ALTERING THE GEO-STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

*Russia's military resurgence in the Middle East comes as the White House's own military contribution to the Syrian civil war is collapsing, something even Obama's former aides are acknowledging. The question now facing Obama is whether he will cut his losses in Syria, an intervention he has never wanted, and leave Vladimir Putin holding the bag.*

-Spencer Ackerman<sup>1</sup>

In the second half of September 2015, Russia deployed a military contingent, predominantly air assets, to Bassel al-Assad international airport in the Latakia province of Syria. While this deployment made it impossible for the anti-Assad forces to capture the province, it also provided a logistics lifeline to Syrian military forces. An-124 transport aircraft and naval landing ships from Russia's Black Sea fleet delivered much-needed equipment to the beleaguered Syrian forces. The same supply chain could have also been servicing the Hezbollah forces supporting the Assad regime. On 30 September, the Russian military

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<sup>1</sup> Ackerman, Spencer, 'Russia's intervention in Syria brings Obama's dilemma to the fore', *The Guardian*, 1 October 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/30/syria-russia-assad-obama-putin-analysis> accessed on 21 November 2016.

forces started air attacks on targets in the anti-Assad rebel-held territories.<sup>2</sup> By this action, Russia demonstrated three commitments—to expand its political and military influence in the Middle-East; to emphasise its national will to initiate decisive action, and to support its allies.

This Russian initiative complicated the situation for the US-led Western coalition's complex air campaign in the region. The Russian air strikes targeted not only IS, but also all other anti-Assad rebel/jihadist forces, some of whom were and continue to be (at the time of writing) directly affiliated with the Western coalition, being trained and supplied by the USA. Although a direct confrontation between the USA and Russia was highly unlikely, the Russian intervention inserted another layer of confusion into an already grey battlespace. There was speculation at this juncture that Russian air activity was a precursor to its army commencing a joint ground offensive with Syrian forces, which would have signalled a more direct military involvement. If this had come to pass, the Russian Army would have directly engaged the US-supplied and trained Free Syrian Army and thus risked escalating consequences.<sup>3</sup> Russia also risked mission creep if a ground campaign was to be conducted, although a simultaneous ground offensive would have provided greater flexibility to the overall campaign.

## RUSSIA'S OBJECTIVES

From the very beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, Russia has articulated the need for the survival of the Assad regime to enable the country's peaceful political transition. By early 2015, a controlled regime transition, albeit only in the medium term, had become the steadfast aim of Russian political, diplomatic and military initiatives. While the survival

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- 2 Akkoc, Raziye, and others, 'Russia launches air strikes in Syria — as it happened on Wednesday 30 September', *The Telegraph World News*, 30 September 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11903681/Russia-launches-airstrikes-in-Syria-as-it-happened-on-Wednesday-30-September.html> accessed on 21 November 2016.
  - 3 Gerrans, Sam, 'Russia and US in indirect military confrontation over Islamic State', *RT News*, 3 October 2015, <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/317521-russia-us-confrontation-syria-islamic/> accessed on 21 November 2016.

of the regime was indeed the priority mid-term goal, the survival of the Syrian state as an entity was the ultimate objective.<sup>4</sup> Essentially, the Russian initiative is meant to protect its own national interests: first, although Assad is being supported, in all likelihood his position will later be used as a bargaining tool when the inevitable regime change occurs when the volatile situation has been stabilised; and second, Russia will not give up the naval base at Tartus, the only Russian base in the Mediterranean and critical to its power projection capability. By protecting the Assad regime from the current onslaught, Russia is also ensuring that it plays a decisive role in determining the future of Syria, with or without Assad at the helm, and thereby becoming the most influential power broker in the broader Middle-East region.<sup>5</sup>

Towards this end, Russia entered into an understanding on intelligence sharing with Syria, Iraq and Iran, clearly indicating that it will not let Assad be removed in a hurry. This move took the USA and its allies completely by surprise. The alliance tacitly understands that the current regime will transition to a new leadership sometime after sufficient stability has been achieved in the region.<sup>6</sup> Creating the necessary level of stability could either take a few more years or drag on for a decade without assurance of a clear end-state. Russia wants to control the timing and the modality of such a transition and also have a deciding vote on who will succeed Bashar al-Assad as leader of the fractured Syria. Russia understands that, in any negotiated settlement, Assad will, out of sheer necessity, be given an influential position and, therefore, must remain obligated to Russia at

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4 Whitney, Mike, 'Putin's Line in the Sand: No regime Change in Syria,' *Counterpunch*, 17 September 2015, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/09/17/putins-line-in-the-sand-no-regime-change-in-syria/> accessed on 21 November 2016.

5 Suchkov, Maxim A., 'Russia's Plan for the Middle East,' *The National Interest*, 15 January 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russias-plan-the-middle-east-14908> accessed on 21 November 2016.

6 *ibid.*

all times.<sup>7</sup> Bashar al-Assad has revealed himself to be a ruthless pragmatist and will play a transitional role that suits Russia. However, he is likely to bargain intensely before accepting regime change when the time comes; an eventuality that seems to be some time off, at least for now. With the Russian military intervention unexpectedly altering the strategic situation considerably, it has become clear that Russia is implementing a dynamic strategy to best protect its interests.

Russia knows that a fully negotiated settlement is unlikely to eventuate but even if it does, it is not sure that deal will hold long-term. Therefore, Russia is hedging its bets, broadening the target-base and attacking all jihadists, irrespective of whether they have been classified 'good' or 'moderates' by the Western coalition.<sup>8</sup> Smarting under US and Western enforced sanctions, Russia has carefully planned to use the Syrian conflict, in which the West has been less able, to return to the international arena as an influential global power. The military intervention was Russia's first step to break out of Western-imposed sanctions by engaging with other nations and groups involved in the conflict. The Syrian Civil War has always been a morass, which has now become increasingly unfathomable regarding who is fighting whom and why. Seemingly without closure, conflicting national, regional and global interests have faced irreconcilable religious and ideological doctrines.<sup>9</sup>

By initiating decisive action and taking a direct role in the conflict to steadfastly support the Assad regime, Russia has clearly shown the difference between its approach and that of the USA, which has been

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- 7 Omary, Raed, 'Who can replace Bashar al-Assad', *Al Arabiya English*, 20 October 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2015/10/20/Who-can-replace-Bashar-al-Assad-.html> accessed on 21 November 2016; and Yan, Holly, 'Syria: Who would take over after al-Assad', *CNN*, 27 March 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/26/world/meast/syria-next-leader/> accessed on 14 February 2016.
  - 8 'More than 90% of Russian airstrikes in Syria have not targeted Isis', says US; *The Guardian*, (Australia Edition), 8 October 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targeting-isis> accessed on 14 February 2016.
  - 9 Kainikara, Sanu, 'Russia in the Middle-East: Altering the Geo-strategic Environment', *Eurasia Review*, 21 October 2015, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/21102015-russia-in-the-middle-east-altering-the-geostrategic-environment-analysis/> accessed on 20 January 2016.

dogged by ambiguous strategy and changing strategic aims. Like a chess grand master at his or her best, President Putin has aligned his pieces on the board in such a way that the US-led coalition can no longer isolate Russia because it needs Russian participation to ensure that IS is defeated. Because Russia has also guaranteed that Assad's post-war role is not negotiable, the choices in front of US have suddenly narrowed.

## CONFLICTING VIEWS

The USA and Russia have opposing viewpoints regarding the Assad regime although some commonality of ultimate aims in the Syrian Civil War are noticeable. The USA sees Bashar al-Assad as the source of the current conflict and as having provided the IS an opening into the Levant. The USA believes that removing al-Assad is the first step towards resolving the crisis. Considering the results of recent Western interventions in Iraq and Libya, this marks a rather naïve stance. Russia on the other hand considers the Assad regime as a bulwark against the further spread of fundamentalist jihadist groups. Although Russia's view is opposite, it comes closer to the truth than is being admitted by the US-led Western coalition.<sup>10</sup>

Even though their short-term objectives are also opposite, both the USA and Russia agree that defeating IS will determine the success of any negotiated transition of political authority in Syria. IS poses a direct threat to Russia with its declaration of the Islamic Caliphate that includes the volatile North Caucasus, already home to a violent jihadist separatist movement. Additionally, by November 2015, an estimated 1700 Russians were fighting in the army of IS in Syria, with some being established in neighbouring Turkey.<sup>11</sup> The Russians fear that these extremists could return home to foment trouble. The USA is opposed to IS more in a custodial sense than feeling concerned about its homeland, at least for

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<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Shuster, Simon, 'How the Russian Fighters of ISIS Became a Terror Threat in Turkey', *Time Magazine*, 30 June 2016, <http://time.com/4390090/istanbul-attack-russian-isis-militants/> accessed 15 August 2016.

the present. However, there is no reason why US and Russian strategic objectives cannot be reconciled and aligned.

It has to be accepted that the current strategy of the Western coalition is unlikely to produce the desired end-state in the Syrian conflict. When viewed in a detached manner, three fundamental enforcement outcomes are necessary to achieve sustainable stability. First is to establish functioning governance by local authorities in the areas that are not IS-controlled, including the areas still under Assad's control. This will improve the credibility of the non-IS factions. Second is to create enforceable attack free zones within the Syrian borders, where no party is able to attack or coerce the civilian population. These zones should gradually be increased and will provide the first step to ensure stability. Third is for the Western coalition and Russia to negotiate and create a common military strategy to win the war against IS and subsequently stabilise the future. This can only happen if the USA accepts two conditions: first, that Assad has a role to play in the transition phase and, second, that Russia is important as an influential and, perhaps even controlling, factor of the Assad regime.<sup>12</sup>

After the Russian intervention, the options available to the US-led coalition to stabilise a situation that is spiralling out of control reduced drastically. The coalition's only option is to reach an understanding for military cooperation, which should then lead to creating a strong coalition that involves the regional nations including both Saudi Arabia and Iran. This might sound far-fetched, considering the pervasive hostility between some of the regional countries, but is achievable if both the USA and Russia are willing to diplomatically pressure their allies.<sup>13</sup> Within this scenario, Assad has to stay in power for the near- to mid-term to ensure an orderly transfer of power after IS has been defeated. The three-step

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12 Kainikara, Sanu, *op cit*.

13 Vonogradov, Dmitriy, 'Russian MoD: We are ready for Syria dialogue with US, but threats against our military unacceptable', *Question More*, 29 September 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/361055-syria-russia-usa-threats/> and 'US, Russia should engage in dialogue on Syria amid disagreements', *News Front*, 20 September 2016, <http://en.news-front.info/2016/09/30/us-russia-should-engage-in-dialogue-on-syria-amid-disagreements/> both accessed on 21 November 2016.

process offered in the preceding paragraph is the only way that the IS can be defeated and the region brought back to some regularity.

Not far behind the Syrian imbroglio is the question of Iraq, which is currently also violently unstable. The West's relationship with Iraq regarding the influence of Iran on it is vexed. Even so, Iraq has tacitly supported Assad because it believes that his removal in the current circumstances will only strengthen IS.<sup>14</sup> Iraq has also permitted Russia to use its airspace to transport weapons and equipment to Syria, even to the extent of declaring that it would not be averse to Russian air attacks on IS elements operating in Iraqi territory. There is a definitive feeling that Iraq is cautiously moving away from the stranglehold of US influence.

## IMPACT ON THE REGION AND PARTICIPANTS

The Russian initiative has created both short-term and far-reaching consequences for the participants in the conflict as well as for other nations in the region. Israel is the one nation not participating directly in the conflict but constantly attempting to steer the course of events in its preferred direction. Ever since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Israel-Russia relationship has been complex with both nations regularly meddling in each other's spheres of influence. Israel has managed to cultivate strong military-technological relations with a number of former Soviet States. Almost like a tit-for-tat reaction, Russia has staunchly supported Iran and Syria, nations that are inimical to Israel's interests and its perceived security needs. However, both Russia and Israel have maintained an acceptable level of reasoned mutual cordiality.<sup>15</sup> Israel is a pragmatic nation with a clear long-term view of its place in the Middle-East and the risks and challenges it faces. It is not difficult to imagine that Israel and Russia could arrive at a mutually agreed, beneficial security deal.

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14 Kelley, Michael, 'It Looks Like Iraq Has Joined Assad's Side in the Syrian War', *Business Insider Australia*, 6 March 2013, <http://www.businessinsider.com.au/iraq-joins-assads-side-in-syrian-war-2013-3?r=US&IR=T> accessed on 20 January 2016.

15 Rosen, Armin, 'Why Israel and Russia's Relationship Continues to Warm', *Tablet*, 8 June 2016, <http://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/204802/why-israel-and-russias-relationship-continues-to-warm> accessed on 21 November 2016.

## TURKEY'S DILEMMA

The Russian air campaign creates serious complications for Turkey's strategy seeking to emerge stronger from this conflict and thus more influential in the region. Turkey seeks ultimately to create a pliant Sunni-led Syria that functions only within Turkey's own sphere of influence. The critical factor in achieving this is removing Bashar al-Assad from power. Turkey has therefore concertedly supported anti-Assad forces and also ignored IS activities for a long time. Russian support for the Assad regime in conducting an air campaign directly negates Turkish ambitions to create a no-fly 'safe' zone in Syrian territory next to its own border. A brief background is necessary to understand the implications of recent actions by both nations.

In June 2012, a reconnaissance Phantom of the Turkish Air Force was shot down by Syrian air defence forces. Turkey immediately changed the rules of engagement and started to intrusively intercept Syrian Air Force aircraft travelling only somewhat close to their border.<sup>16</sup> With the start of the Russian air campaign, the reported Russian air violations into Turkish airspace take on a new meaning. While Russia has dismissed these violations as navigational errors compounded by bad weather, they will have to be seen as a test of Turkey's ability and will to enforce the changed rules of engagement.

At the time of the Russian intervention, Turkey under President Erdogan was facing a foreign policy debacle. After not cooperating, it opened its airbases to the Western coalition calculating that this would achieve two objectives: first, to hasten the fall of the Assad regime, and second, to facilitate Turkey's own efforts to counter the Kurdish advance along its border with Syria. Defeating the IS is not a priority for Turkey in that it waited until September 2014 to declare it a terrorist group. However, Russia now stands as an immovable obstacle to Turkey's foreign policy ambitions. After an Erdogan-Putin meeting in late 2014, no joint statement was made, which is diplomatic speak for 'respectful'

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16 Blair, David & Henderson, Barney, 'Syria shoots down Turkish fighter jet', *The Telegraph*, 22 June 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9349777/Syria-shoots-down-Turkish-fighter-jet.html> accessed on 10 December 2015.



disagreement between the two nations on what was discussed.<sup>17</sup> Russia will not provide even diplomatic support for Turkey's ambition regarding the future of Syria, since their own ambition differ to that of Turkey. In the meantime Turkey is fighting the Kurdish groups: the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, thus risking an escalation into a full Turkish civil war.

## THE UNITED STATES

Russia-USA relations were at an all-time low after Russian interfered in the Ukraine and the subsequent Western sanctions that were imposed on Russia. Russia believes that this intervention and the annexation of Crimea were legitimate actions initiated to secure Russian interests.<sup>18</sup> Considering the US reaction, it is not surprising that Russia believes the US to be its chief rival. The US-led coalition's lack of an articulated strategy to stabilise Syria is seen by Russia as an opportunity to restart a common purpose dialogue with the USA, which could subsequently lead to regular bilateral talks and gradually normalising the Russia-West relationship. The USA has indirectly indicated that it is not too concerned about the time-frame of Assad's departure, as long as a deliberate and orderly transition plan exists and will be executed.

In Syria and the fight against IS, the USA has painted itself into a corner.<sup>19</sup> It supported the Free Syrian Army, labelling it the moderate opposition that was intending to oust the Assad regime. Through its \$US500 million program run out of Turkey to train soldiers for this 'moderate' group, the USA was able to produce only 75 soldiers for

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17 Bechev, Dimitar, 'Putin and Erdogan: Partnership of convenience?' *Aljazeera*, 2 December 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/12/putin-erdogan-partnership-conven-20141227165377730.html> accessed on 7 February 2016.

18 Treisman, Daniel, 'Why Putin took Crimea', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2016 Issue, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2016-04-18/why-putin-took-crimea> accessed on 21 November 2016.

19 Lazare, Daniel, 'Only Making Matters Worse in Syria', *Consortiumnews*, 28 October 2016, <https://consortiumnews.com/2016/10/28/only-making-matters-worse-in-syria/> accessed on 21 November 2016.

Syria, most of whom scattered at the first sign of IS. Some even 'donated' their weapons and equipment to the al Qaeda elements in Syria. With IS continuing its single-minded focus to create an Islamic Caliphate, the USA has gradually prioritised removing Bashar al-Assad lower on its list of objectives, thus 'soft-peddalling' the initial demand for regime change. This involves considering that, in the long term, Assad could be removed with Russia-led negotiations after IS is defeated. Some quarters of strategy development in the USA are now considering that the Russians current targeting of the so-called moderates is but a minor inconvenience. So much for the reliability of the USA regarding support to friends and allies.

The US and Russia have now signed a memorandum of understanding on air safety in the Syrian airspace to minimise the risk of in-flight incidents.<sup>20</sup> The agreement specifies safety protocols, using specific communication frequencies, and setting up a working group to ensure smooth implementation. This entails tacit acceptance by the Western coalition that the Russian Air Force cannot be willed away from the battle zone.

## EUROPE

Russia's frustrations at losing its super power status become manifest with great intensity in its dealings with Europe. The loss of influence in what was the 'near abroad'<sup>21</sup> region of the Soviet era through the expansion of NATO and the transformative power of the European Union (EU) is anathema to the spread of Russian power and the nationalistic fervour of its leadership. A united Europe potentially threatens Russian ambition and thus Putin's strategy is to divide, disrupt and interrupt any policy initiatives aimed at achieving some semblance of unity in Europe. Creating energy

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20 Ferdinando, Lisa, 'U.S., Russia Sign Memorandum on Air Safety in Syria', *DoD News*, U.S. Department of Defense, 20 October 2015, Washington D. C., [http://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/624964/us-russia-sign-memorandum-on-air-safety-in-syria/utm\\_medium/twitter/utm\\_source/twitterfeed](http://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/624964/us-russia-sign-memorandum-on-air-safety-in-syria/utm_medium/twitter/utm_source/twitterfeed) accessed on 19 February 2016.

21 In the political language of Russia (and some of the other post-Soviet states), the term 'near abroad' refers to the newly independent republics that emerged after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

projects that would pit European nations against each other is one Russian move that facilitates and perpetuates this approach.

Russia's Syrian initiative is connected to the volatile situation in Ukraine. With the USA and Europe pre-occupied with Syria, Ukraine is relatively calm with the Russia-backed opposition growing stronger and consolidating its position.<sup>22</sup> Further, the Russian air campaign could also create dissonance between the USA and Europe, especially with the unforeseen refugee crisis that has enveloped Europe. This, in turn, has increased the terrorist threat in broader Europe. Its governments are becoming increasingly anxious at the enormity of the challenge they face. Europe's view of Bashar al-Assad is altering, with his playing a limited role in the transition process becoming acceptable along with tacit acceptance of the pivotal political role that Russia is likely to play in such transition. The failure of the Western coalition to defeat IS after more than a year has eroded its credibility and has assisted Putin to create European support for his actions in the Middle-East.

The anti-Russian sanctions are expensive and divisive for the European nations that have desired to rebuild trade with Russia for a long time. Moscow is craftily posing itself as an alternative source of power to Washington and Brussels, playing directly to populist anti-EU parties in most European nations.<sup>23</sup> Moscow aims to create further disharmony in trans-Atlantic relationships. Russian activities in the Middle-East must not be viewed purely within the geographical boundaries of that region, but as strategically all-embracing. This means understanding the angst that Russia suffered immediately after the Soviet Union collapsed and thus lost status and power and its long-term desire to again become a global power.

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22 'Council broadens EU sanctions regarding the situation in Ukraine', *European Union News Room*, 12 May 2014, [https://europa.eu/newsroom/highlights/special-coverage/eu\\_sanctions\\_en?page=7](https://europa.eu/newsroom/highlights/special-coverage/eu_sanctions_en?page=7) accessed on 17 February 2016.

23 'Conscious uncoupling', *The Economist*, 5 April 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21600111-reducing-europes-dependence-russian-gas-possible-but-it-will-take-time-money-and-sustained> accessed on 17 February 2015.

## SAUDI ARABIA

It is a tense time in Russia-Arab relations. Saudi Arabia has taken tentative steps towards improving its relationship with Russia by agreeing somewhat on economic cooperation. This move led to speculations about Saudi-USA relations being in the doldrums. However, Saudi Arabia wants Russia to moderate its support for the Assad regime, especially since it supports anti-Assad forces being targeted by the Russian air campaign.<sup>24</sup> There is an inherent risk in this situation since Russian air strikes could lead to inadvertent and unintended military confrontation with any of the large number of participants. The Saudi monarchy faces only two available, but difficult, conditions: first, that the USA's ability, or more importantly, its reliability, to restrain regional opponents is increasingly under a cloud; and second, that negotiating a full deal on Syria with Russia may lead to unpredictable consequences both in the short and long term. The USA is running out of policy options to placate Saudi Arabia and may not be able to bring it back fully into the American orbit.

For Russia, Saudi Arabia could also turn out to be the joker in the pack. Russia will not have forgotten that Saudi Arabia was the prime obstacle in its Afghanistan debacle in the 1980s and even now provides support, both materiel and financial, to Islamic rebels in Russia. It was also Saudi charities that financed the Chechen rebels in the 1990s. Saudi clerics have painted the Russian intervention in religious terms, calling it a new 'Christian Crusade' against Islam. It is also possible that the Gulf nations could ramp up their support for rebel groups that are operating in the lawless Iraq-Syria region. However, Russia has cautioned the major Arab nations against supplying the jihadists with man-portable, air defence systems, which they have labelled a 'red line never to be crossed.' The questions remain: will the Saudis create and lead a coalition to remove Assad from power, irrespective of the state of the war against IS? And, if such a situation comes to pass, how will Russia react?<sup>25</sup> Will it

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24 Lvov, Petr, 'Why Saudi Arabia and Russia Cannot Be Partners, *New Eastern Outlook*, 5 November 2015, <http://journal-neo.org/2015/11/05/why-saudi-arabia-and-russia-cannot-be-partners/> accessed on 2 February 2016.

25 Barmin, Yuri, 'Why does Russia continue to protect Assad in Syria?' *Russia Direct*, 20 April 2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/why-does-russia-continue-protect-assad-syria> accessed on 21 November 2016.

start a greater unholy conflict in the region that could involve even non-participants?

## GEO-STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Primarily, it must be recognised that the West inexorably failed strategically to control the initial extent of the Syrian Civil War and its subsequent explosive expansion through the activities of the IS. The USA has so far instituted only half-measures that have failed to succeed. The Russian intervention creates a small opportunity to initiate a long-term strategy to achieve a political solution. Russia has taken over the Syrian airbase from which it can undertake missions across the entire Levant and Eastern Mediterranean and the naval base that gives it unfettered naval access to the Mediterranean Sea. It has also expanded the ground facilities and turned the airbase into a major Russian resource, thus indicating its intent for long-term use. Effectively, this creates a permanent Russian footprint in the Middle-East by which it can project power into the Arab world.<sup>26</sup> Russia is gradually building the foundation for the quest for global status.

Russia will protect the Assad regime, at least in the mid-term, with all its resources. The Russian military has already demonstrated operational strength in its campaign and may even try to create another coalition with Syria, the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraq and Iran to counter the Western coalition. The Iraqi government has already consented to Russia using its airspace while the Russian air operations constrain the uninhibited air freedom that the Western coalition had so far enjoyed.

Some strategists believe that Russia is implementing 'reflexive control' that entails shaping the environment in such a manner that the adversary is forced to choose a course of action but one that Russia, in this case, would be ready to counter.<sup>27</sup> The decreasing strength of the Western coalition and its unstated acceptance of the role that the Assad regime will play in a

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26 Hannah, John, 'Russia's Middle East Offensive', *Foreign Policy*, 13 September 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/13/russias-middle-east-offensive/> accessed on 21 November 2016.

27 Thomas, Timothy L., Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17, Frank Cass, 2004, pp. 237–256.

future power transition is a manifestation of reflexive control. An informal Russia-Syria-Iran axis has already formed making it necessary for the US-led coalition to reassess its geo-strategic alignment.<sup>28</sup> Pragmatically, Syria has already been geographically partitioned so that returning to its pre-war boundaries as a single entity is impossible. The next phase of the Civil War, which Russia controls, will eventually shape the contour of the region.

The long-term stability of the region depends on the ability of the intervening forces to settle the simmering discord in Libya, Iraq and Syria, all created by Western interference and wayward use of force. The Russian viewpoint is that no jihadist groups can be termed as moderate. The difference between the so-called moderates and extremists, or 'good' and 'bad' jihadists, relates only to their degree of affinity to IS.<sup>29</sup> Because Russia contends that all have to be treated as terrorists, it has clearly, and cleverly, divided the conflict into the Assad regime versus the rest. Russia has also demonstrated its strategic will to initiate decisive action and is willing to take and accept risks. At the operational level, the Russian Air Force functions under much more relaxed rules of engagement than the Western coalition; this approach could make a tangible difference in the war against IS. So far, while the USA and Russia have managed to de-conflict their missions and moves, the downside is that, despite their flight safety agreements, any wrong tactical action that could lead to a confrontation at the operational level cannot be guaranteed. This is the reason for some analysts to assert that the Russian intervention will create further geo-strategic disorder.

Russia is now engaged in a long-term game of patience, perseverance and persistence, willing to wait till such times when it is sure of achieving

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28 Nasr, Vali R., "The Russian-Iranian Axis," *The New York Times*, 16 September 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/17/opinion/a-russian-iranian-axis.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/17/opinion/a-russian-iranian-axis.html?_r=0) accessed on 21 November 2016.

29 'Syria's "Good" and "bad" Terrorists: Russia Accuses Al Qaeda Rebels (Supported by US) of Violating Ceasefire', by *South Front for Global Research*, 14 September 2016, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/syrias-good-and-bad-terrorists-russia-accuses-al-qaeda-rebels-supported-by-us-of-having-violated-ceasefire/5545777> and 'There Are No Good Terrorists in Syria, Iraq: Russia's Putin,' *Alalam News*, 6 August 2016, <http://en.alalam.ir/news/1847280> both accessed on 21 November 2016.

its desired objectives, even if it means waiting for a change of US administration. Russia seeks three strategy objectives: First is emphasising the sanctity and legitimacy of a sovereign government and the non-acceptance of external intervention to effect regime change. Second is to demonstrate Russia's dedication to support its friends. Because this contrasts sharply to the USA that is seen to have abandoned its friends at will, Russia wants to be seen as a better ally. However, demonstrating such 'real-politic' dedication could become a double-edged sword. Political inconsistency and nuanced double-standards may not be avoidable in global diplomacy, especially in the prevailing volatile circumstances in the Middle-East. In the future, Russia might find itself in the same diplomatic imbroglio as the USA is currently experiencing. Such a pitfall might become apparent to Russia only when it is involved in as extensive political and military interventions as the USA has been in the past two decades.

Third, Russia wants to emerge from this conflict as the protector of the minorities in the greater Middle-East. With IS rampaging across the region, the minorities have lost faith in the ability of the West to protect them and believe that, on a number of occasions, they have been sacrificed to radical Islam and/or totalitarianism.<sup>30</sup> IS has deepened the sectarian schism in the Middle-East far beyond any other preceding time. Russia believes that it can use the minorities to create an enhanced sphere of its influence in the region. Since Russian national interests align more with Iran than any other nation in the region, it is possible that such an initiative could directly involve Iran.

Russia is pragmatic enough to accept that the only way to end this conflict is through a negotiated political settlement. However, the collective defeat of IS is fundamental to any progress in the political front and such a defeat cannot be achieved by a conditional fight against it. Russia's advantage is that it is the only entity that can influence the Assad regime to compromise and accept a negotiated settlement. Even so, it wants Bashar al-Assad to come to the negotiation table from a position of strength, although he currently controls only about 20 per cent of

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30 'Russia Confronts Mideast Salafists By Courting Christians, Minorities', *Al-Monitor Lebanon Pulse*, 30 April 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2013/04/moscow-russia-front-protect-minorities-middle-east.html> accessed on 21 November 2016.

the country.<sup>31</sup> There is also no chance of bringing the old Syria together without engaging in a bloody and protracted ground war. A future Syria can at best entail a federation of quasi-independent states, controlled by Kurds, Alawites, Sunnis and Druze. The Civil War has gone too far to hope for a reconciled country to emerge.

It is early days as yet in the renewed conflict with Russia flexing its muscle and still nothing to indicate how long the conflict will drag on. However, Russia has indicated that it wants the other regional nations, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, to be part of the negotiations regarding Syria's future with Russia arbitrating. Turkey at least seems to be inching towards accepting a transition period with Assad continuing to be part of the equation.<sup>32</sup> In a subtle diplomatic move, Saudi Arabia has also indicated that it does not rule out talks with Iran and is conscious that it needs to continue talking with the USA, Russia and Turkey, the other prominent participants in the war.

It is revealing that some Western analysts have been quick to denounce Russian intervention as having been made hastily with no exit strategy. This view reaches the height of hypocrisy, since they seem to have forgotten that the USA and its allies have not been able to articulate an exit strategy from the Middle-East for the past 14 years. The Russian action immediately exposed the bankruptcy of the US non-strategy and diplomatic rhetoric.<sup>33</sup> The USA has irrevocably damaged its reputation through fickle and ill-conceived diplomacy, injudiciously using its mighty military forces, and failing to support a number of local forces; the list of failures is long. It is likely that the USA may have abdicated the leadership of the region by default. This is a self-created vacuum of power and nature

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31 'Assad says Interim Govt. Must Include Regime, Opposition and Independents', *World Affairs*, 30 March 2016, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/content/assad-interim-government-must-include-regime-opposition-and-independents> accessed on 21 November 2106.

32 'Turkey Accepts Interim Government with Bashar Assad', *Executive Intelligence Review*, 22 August 2016, [http://www.larouchepub.com/pr/2016/160822\\_turkey\\_assad.html](http://www.larouchepub.com/pr/2016/160822_turkey_assad.html) accessed on 21 November 2016.

33 Porter, Gareth, 'Plan B" and the bankruptcy of US Syria policy', *Middle East Eye*, 1 March 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/plan-b-and-bankruptcy-us-syria-policy-253316791> accessed on 21 November 2016.



abhors a vacuum. Russia seems to be willingly stepping up to fill this vacuum.

## CONCLUSION

The Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War reveals two visible failures of the US-led Western policies: first was isolating and punishing Russia for the actions that were initiated in Ukraine; and second was placing regime change as a precondition for the success of the Syrian intervention. The Western coalition, beset with weak and indecisive leadership, lacks the moral authority to ensure success even though billions of dollars have already been spent with very little to show for it. Russia has entered the fray cautiously and not without calculating the pitfalls, as some people claim. Its military intervention should be seen as reinforcing its veto in the UN Security Council with actions on the ground that amount to another veto. From a Russian viewpoint, the air campaign in Syria is only one part of a greater 'war' being conducted to increase its influence in the global political environment.

For some obtuse reason, the Western coalition, including its Arab allies, seems to think that removing the Assad regime would in itself miraculously create a moderate alternative leadership that is characterised by democratic values. The regional nations have conveniently forgotten that no functioning democracies nor any 'moderate' regimes exist in their neighbourhood. The concept of replacing Bashar al-Assad with a democratic government is delusional. Without doubt, while Assad has been ruthless in suppressing the rebellion and may even be charged with war crimes, he has never threatened the broader region nor been a destabilising force for the outside world. IS on the other hand is a barbaric, inhuman and coarse group, poses the biggest threat to normality that has so far emerged, and is dedicated to creating a global Islamic Caliphate. The question that the Western coalition and Russia should be asking in concert is whether or not it is possible to build an all-inclusive grand coalition against IS to ensure its defeat and destruction. Regime change in Syria is of almost no consequence to the larger challenge.

If such a coalition is to successfully occur, all parties must accept certain preconditions. First, that Assad is at least the lesser of the two evils necessary to continue governance in the short term, to avoid creating

another Libya. Regime change will have to wait for the right time. Second, at the operational level, a no-fly zone cannot be created in Syrian territory; no ground incursions will come from the Turkish side of the border, even in hot pursuit; and no air strikes will be made on Assad-held sites in Syria. With the confusion about which nation openly or clandestinely supports which jihadist group, it may be impossible that participating nations, with increasingly differing objectives, will subscribe to the Russian view of not distinguishing good or bad rebels, or jihadists. Such a distinction is irreconcilable ideologically and should not be pursued.

As it stood at the time of writing, the USA and its Western allies seem to be merely hoping that Putin fails, which unfortunately is not much of a policy option. However, while who holds the stronger hand is debatable and unclear, it looks as if the USA will have to accept the inevitability of Assad being at least part of the initial solution in the political transition, whenever it occurs. The Sunni-ruled autocracies of the region could be coerced by the USA and Russia to acquiesce and allow the scene for longer-term stability to follow. However, by the same token, the reprieve might be short-lived in that the sectarian divide in the region is far too wide to be papered over by coercion.

In the Middle-East for some time now, secularism has been confused with democracy, much to the detriment of stability. While secularism, irrespective of the type of government, is a dire necessity in the region, it remains unrealistic under the current circumstances. Nevertheless, unadulterated secularism may well be an ideal to be considered, or will risk being lost to the region.

Putin is acting to advance Russian interests and to protect his nation, which cannot be totally considered to be wrong whichever way one looks at it. Russia is purely pursuing the practical side of ensuring national security. If the Russian intervention leads to stabilisation in Syria and Iraq, Russia will greatly increase its influence, prestige and status in the region as well as in the global geo-strategic environment. Getting unintentionally enmeshed in the sectarian fights of the region through mission creep remains the biggest risk to Russian intervention and will no doubt influence its future strategies.

# CHAPTER 6

## THE RUSSIAN MILITARY CAMPAIGN

*We should never forget that the US, Great Britain, France  
Saudi Arabia, and Qatar created a civil war in Syria.*

-Willy Wimmer,  
Former State Secretary of the German Defence Ministry

By the middle of 2015, the Syrian regime had suffered a series of setbacks in the Civil War and believed that the government of Bashar al-Assad would not survive to the end of the year.<sup>34</sup> By August, President Assad openly admitted that his military forces could not hold on to all the territory and that it would be necessary to focus on certain strategic areas. The Syrian army was reduced to less than 50 per cent of its pre-war strength of 300,000. Further, many of the remaining soldiers were young, inexperienced Alawite recruits with little training and low morale. Perhaps more importantly, the government was controlling only about 17 per cent territory of the entire country.<sup>35</sup> Facing almost certain defeat, Bashar al-Assad appealed for assistance to his country's long-term ally, Russia, who responded positively. Syria and Russia thus agreed to intensify

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34 Dettmer, Jamie, 'Syria's Assad Losing Ground; Political Solution Elusive', *VOA News*, 27 April 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/a/syria-assad-losing-ground-political-solution-elusive/2737190.html> accessed on 22 August 2016.

35 Strack, Columb, 'Syrian Government no longer controls 83% of the country', *IHS Jane's 360*, 24 August 2015, <http://www.janes.com/article/53771/syrian-government-no-longer-controls-83-of-the-country> accessed on 28 August 2016.

Russian involvement and move from diplomatic support in international forums to physical military intervention.<sup>36</sup>

In an agreement of 26 August 2015, made public only in January 2016, Russia open-endedly committed military assistance to Syria, which could be terminated by either party with a one-year notice.<sup>37</sup> This was a serious commitment by Russia, considering that the Assad regime was on the verge of collapse when the agreement was being formalised. The treaty also stipulated terms and conditions for Russian military forces using Syrian airports while granting jurisdictional immunity to Russian personnel operating within Syria. This agreement therefore serves the same purpose as the status of forces agreements (SOFAs) that the US signs with countries in which it has military bases.<sup>38</sup> In September 2015, Russian warships of the Black Sea Fleet entered the Mediterranean and moved to the eastern part.

For Russia and its military forces, still in process of post-Soviet era modernisation, this provided an opportunity to commence much desired comeback as a significant world power. Russia was embarking on a campaign that, for the first time, was to be conducted from the air and sea alone. It was also an opportunity to demonstrate the performance of Russian military hardware to the countries in the Middle-East who were potential customers. In 2015, the Middle East accounted for 36 per cent of Russia's defence exports.<sup>39</sup> Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Algeria have been Russia's principal customers in the region for decades.

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36 Birnbaum, Michael, 'The secret pact between Russia and Syria that gives Moscow carte blanche', *The Washington Post*, 15 January 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/15/the-secret-pact-between-russia-and-syria-that-gives-moscow-carte-blanche/> accessed on 23 February 2016.

37 *ibid.*

38 Borgen, Chris, 'Parsing the Syrian-Russian Agreement Concerning Russia's Deployment', *Opinio Juris*, 18 January 2016, <http://opiniojuris.org/2016/01/18/32350/> accessed on 23 February 2016.

39 Shankar, Sneha, 'Russia Arms Exports Crossed \$15B In 2015, Moscow Plans Similar Sales For 2016', *International Business Times*, 30 December 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/russia-arms-exports-crossed-15b-2015-moscow-plans-similar-sales-2016-2243843>, accessed on 23 February 2017.

## RUSSIAN MILITARY OPERATIONS

### **Initial Phase (October 2015)**

Russia carried out the first air strikes on 30 September 2015. Twenty sorties were carried out against the mainstream opposition groups operating around the cities of Homs and Hama.<sup>40</sup> Among the groups targeted was at least one that was trained by the USA, whose officials protested. However, Russian press releases insisted that the targets were mainly IS strongholds of strategic relevance. This was disputed by the USA and other Western nations.<sup>41</sup> Most of the initial strikes sought to neutralise the immediate threat to the Syrian government and targeted positions of the Chechen fighters, the Islamic Front's Jays al-Islam (Army of Islam) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA).<sup>42</sup> This was followed the next day by attacks on the Saudi-Turkey backed 'Army of Conquest'. The Russian Air Force also attacked IS positions in the Raqqa province in separate attacks on the same day.<sup>43</sup>

It was obvious from the very beginning that, because the military intervention was sought primarily to prop up the Assad regime, it entered the fray only when his position became critical. Russia had three important reasons for committing its military forces to a conflict that was already a morass. First, it was reasserting its position as a great power; second, in ensuring that the Assad regime was not deposed, it would be

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40 Payne, Ed; Starr, Barbara; & Cullinane, Susannah, 'Russia launches first airstrikes in Syria', *CNN Politics*, 1 October 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/30/politics/russia-syria-airstrikes-isis/> accessed on 23 February 2016.

41 Cooper, Helen and others, 'Russians Strike Targets in Syria, but Not ISIS Areas', *The New York Times*, 30 September 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/world/europe/russia-airstrikes-syria.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/world/europe/russia-airstrikes-syria.html?_r=0) accessed on 23 February 2016.

42 'Russian air strikes hit CIA-trained rebels, commander says', *Reuters World News*, 1 October 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-camp-idUSKCN0RV4KM20151001> accessed on 24 February 2016.

43 'Russia jest strike Islamic State in northern Syria: al-Mayadeen TV', *Reuters World News*, 1 October 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-raqqa-idUSKCN0RV4UV20151001> accessed on 24 February 2016.

dealing a blow to the USA that had so far insisted on Assad's removal as a precondition for negotiations; and third, it could also contain IS to territories within the Middle-East, without fearing a spill into their own territory.<sup>44</sup> This containment was crucial to Russia since IS included a large number of ethnic Chechen fighters who could become active within adjacent Russian territories (see Appendix A for a detailed sortie description, targets attacked, the operational effect of these attacks and a map indicating the area of operations).

Within a few days of the start of the Russian air campaign, it was obvious that the immediate objective of the air strikes was to blunt the effectiveness of the Western supported rebel groups who had made visible inroads into Syrian territory. They had become a tangible threat to the Assad regime and had to be neutralised for the government to survive. Even though IS was gaining ground, the Russian campaign gave it only secondary importance at this stage.<sup>45</sup>

### **November–December 2015**

The early days of November saw Russia gradually realign its targeting priorities, thus probably indicating that the immediate threat to the Assad regime had been put aside in the first month of the air campaign. While the Russians were executing their air campaign, certain restrictions on the unfettered use of Western air power were signalled. Russia declared that the West's air campaign was being intensified by using long-range bombers and also the naval forces located in the Mediterranean being tasked to work closely with the French naval group stationed there.<sup>46</sup> These operational level actions reinforced the media statements made by the Russian Minister for Defence had been making about his country's

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44 Dilanian, Ken, 'Officials: CIA-backed Syrian rebels under Russian blitz', *Associated Press*, 10 October 2015, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/officials-cia-backed-syrian-rebels-under-russian-blitz-150339616.html?ref=gs> accessed on 24 February 2016.

45 Raqqawi, Abu Ibrahim, 'Russia lied about targeting ISIS', *Raqqqa News*, 20 October 2015, <http://www.raqqqa-sl.com/en/?p=1515> accessed on 24 February 2016.

46 'Long-range bombers to fly anti-ISIS missions from Russia, Putin orders Navy to work with France', *RT News*, 17 November 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/322436-russia-strikes-syria-putin/> accessed on 24 February 2016.

focused campaign. This contrasted directly with the rather broad-based air campaign that the US-led coalition had been conducting for more than three years. In stark contrast to this drizzling mode of attack of the Western coalition, the Russian's air campaign felt like a sudden and torrential downpour. Further, Russian forces were operating under lesser constraints regarding collateral damage.<sup>47</sup>

The Russian air campaign had stifled Turkey's ambition to create a 'no-fly' zone within Syrian territory bordering it. This was a long-standing demand from Turkey and although initially denied, the USA had become soft on the demand in return for permission to use airbases in the country. Because Russian operations had increased the tensions incrementally and Turkey had repeatedly alleged air violations by Russian combat aircraft,<sup>48</sup> Turkey had declared that it would not hesitate to shoot down aircraft that violated its airspace. On 24 November 2015, a Turkish Air Force F-16 fighter aircraft shot down a Russian Su-24 attack aircraft that had violated Turkish airspace for 17 seconds and a distance of 1.36 miles.<sup>49</sup> This episode changed the flavour of the on-going conflict. However, Russian reaction was considerably statesman-like so that its feared escalation of the conflict did not occur. This strategic reaction may have surprised the Turkish leadership whose ulterior motive was to create an escalation of the fight that could be manipulated.

The end of 2015 saw the Syrian forces undertaking what could be considered their first ground offensive since the Russian intervention, in an effort to free towns in the Idlib province. Although the fighting and resistance were reported to have been fierce, the active support of the Russian air force created a fresh impetus and urgency to the ground

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47 'Russia Issues New "Rules of Engagement" in Syria,' *The Millennium Report*, 21 September 2016, <http://themillenniumreport.com/2016/09/russia-issues-new-rules-of-engagement-in-syria/> accessed on 30 September 2016.

48 'Turkey warns Russia over airspace violations from Syria after intercepting fighter plane,' *ABC News*, 6 October 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-10-05/turkey-says-russian-warplane-violated-its-air-space/6829036> accessed on 24 February 2016.

49 'Turkey shoots down Russian warplane on Syria border,' *BBC News Middle East*, 24 November 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34907983><http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34907983> accessed on 5 December 2016.

offensive. The Syrian army successfully 'liberated' the town of Al-Shaykh Maskin after a three-week campaign.<sup>50</sup> This victory was significant since the Syrian army was able to effectively sever the supply lines of the rebel groups.

### **January–February 2016**

Considering the operations that were undertaken in the first few months of the intervention, analysts assumed that Russia had reached some understanding with Israel and Jordan regarding the sanctity of these nations' individual spheres of influence after they had watched the unfolding events. However, the Russian air operations in Southern Syria surprised many, since they targeted the rebels who were being supplied by the Arab and Western nations.<sup>51</sup> The Syrian Civil War, especially the Russian air operations, had created different monitoring groups that were recording the on-going events, mainly to apportion blame for human rights violations and other war crimes. In January 2016, one such group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that Russian air strikes in the north-western town of Maarat al-Nu'man had killed about 60 people.<sup>52</sup> The strike was aimed at a court house operated by the al-Qaeda linked Nusra Front fighting the Assad regime and is reported to have killed at least 23 'fighters'.

In the meantime, the UN Security Council approved the commencement of peace talks in Geneva starting 25 January 2016. This was a rare case of USA-Russian agreement about the Syrian conflict, which by this time had already killed an estimated 250 000 people. However, a large number of details needed to be sorted out before representatives of the fighting factions could sit down to negotiate a way forward.<sup>53</sup> Even as

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50 'Tide turns in Syrian war with capture of key town', *Al Jazeera*, 27 January 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/syrian-army-captures-key-southern-town-rebels-160126040829177.html> accessed on 6 April 2017.

51 Solomon, Erika, 'Russia Helps shift balance against rebels in southern Syria', *Financial Times*, 8 January 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/69cb93de-b552-11e5-8358-9a82b43f6b2f> accessed on 6 April 2017.

52 Perry, Tom & Karouny, Mariam, 'Air strike kills dozens in Syria as U.N. envoy visits Damascus', *Reuters*, 9 January 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0UN0FW20160109> accessed on 7 April 2017.

53 *ibid.*



peace initiatives were being put in place, fighting raged across the entire country. The outlook for a negotiated settlement looked bleak, especially with the breakdown of relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the two main supporters of opposing groups. While Russia's role in ensuring that the Assad regime did not collapse is undeniable, it also gradually influenced the government to reclaim towns and territories that had been lost to the rebel forces.

On 24 January 2016, government forces recaptured the town of Rabia, the last major stronghold of the rebel forces in the western Latakia province. This was achieved with direct support of Russian air strikes, which are reported to have been 'essential' for the success of the operation. The capture of Rabia also motivated the government forces to threaten the rebel supply lines from Turkey.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, the Russian and Syrian air forces started to carry-out joint strike missions from the middle of January 2016, increasing both the strength of the air campaign and the firepower that could be brought to bear on the adversary.<sup>55</sup> Even with the military achievement that had been achieved in three months of fairly intensive air operations and the move towards peace talks, the civil war did not seem to be close to ending.

Even though the UN-mediated Geneva peace talks commenced on 1 February 2016, the Russian Air Force continued its air operations. The Russian Foreign Minister officially stated that air strikes would be continued until Russia defeated 'such terrorist organisations as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL'.<sup>56</sup> Russia mounted intensive air strikes to support a Syrian

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54 'Syria conflict: Major rebel town 'seized' in boost for Assad', *BBC News*, 24 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35395328> accessed on 7 April 2017.

55 'Syrian jest provide cover for Russian bombers in first anti-ISIS raid', *RT News*, 14 January 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/328986-syria-russia-joint-operation-isis/> accessed on 7 April 2017.

56 'Lavrov: Russia won't stop Syria strikes until 'terrorists' defeated', *Reuters*, 3 February 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-lavrov-idUSKCN0VC0SM> accessed on 12 April 2017.

and allied forces' offensive to the north-west of Aleppo that severed major supply lines to the rebels through Turkey.<sup>57</sup>

### **March–October 2016**

On 27 February, the Russian and Syrian Government forces enacted a truce that was formally referred to as a 'cessation of hostilities'.<sup>58</sup> However, even though the Russian foreign and defence ministries claimed that the truce was holding, the Russian military continued to enhance its capabilities in Syria by deploying additional surveillance assets and uninhabited aerial vehicles. Peace talks resumed in Geneva on 14 March 2016 on the same day that President Putin announced that Russia's military objectives in Syria had been 'on the whole accomplished'. Accordingly, he ordered of the 'main part' of the Russian forces deployed in Syria to withdraw.<sup>59</sup> While this was seen as a de-escalating move, no completion date or deadline was mentioned. Russia also announced that its two sites in Syria, the naval base in Tartus and the airbase in Khmeimim, would continue to operate to facilitate Russian forces to monitor the ceasefire.<sup>60</sup> The Russian Air Force is capable of mounting 100 sorties per day from the Khmeimim airbase and can rapidly escalate the military intervention at will.

In mid-March 2016, Russian forces resumed intensive operations supporting the Syrian government to reclaim the ancient city of Palmyra. IS had wantonly destroyed this world heritage site in a fervent display of orthodox Islam. Following the capture of the city, Russian de-mining

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57 Perry, Tom, Stubbs, Jack & Shirbon, Estelle, 'Russian and Turkey trade accusations over Syria', *Rueters UK*, 4 February 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0VC169>, accessed on 12 April 2017.

58 'Syria Conflict: Temporary truce comes into effect', *Daily Trust*, 28 February 2016, <https://www.dailytrust.com.ng/news/international/syria-conflict-temporary-truce-comes-into-effect/135603.html> accessed on 12 April 2017.

59 'Syria Conflict: Russia's Putin orders 'main part' of forces out', *BBC News (World)*, 14 March 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35807689> accessed on 14 April 2017.

60 Wintour, Patrick & Walker, Shaun, 'Vladimir Putin orders Russian forces to begin withdrawal from Syria', *The Guardian (Australia Edition)*, 15 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/14/vladimir-putin-orders-withdrawal-russian-troops-syria> accessed on 14 April 2017.

teams also moved to clear the city of mines planted by IS.<sup>61</sup> Desultory activities continued while the peace talks moved in fits and starts, without headway. The only positive seems to have been that the warring parties were at least conversing.

In May 2016, the Western media reported that Russian ground forces had set up a 'forward operating base' close to the liberated city of Tadmur, which broadly includes the Palmyra site.<sup>62</sup> The Russians were also installing air defence systems to protect the site from aerial attack. The implication was that, although a unilateral withdrawal of forces had been announced earlier, the Russian military forces were planning a long-term deployment. In mid-May a Syrian airbase, designated as T4, which also housed Russian air assets, suffered what was initially called an attack by IS. However, subsequent investigations proved that the blasts resulting when a fuel tank exploded rather than from external attack.

The ceasefire by now was only partially being enforced and fighting continued in a slightly more subdued manner. Around this time, Russia inducted the strategic bomber, Tu-23M3, into the campaign to strike terrorist targets. In early July, a Russian attack helicopter was shot down with a US manufactured missile by IS. The two pilots were killed in the resulting crash.<sup>63</sup> During this time, the Russian forces and Iranian-backed militia were cooperating more to support the Assad regime. In August 2016, Russian combat air assets started to be deployed in Iran's Hamedan airbase so they could be well-placed to attack Syria. This was the first time

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61 Alkousaa, Riham & Faek, Rasha, 'Despite Islamic State plundering, ancient Palmyra can be restored,' *The Washington Times*, 27 April 2016, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/apr/27/despite-isis-destruction-ancient-palmyra-in-syria-/> accessed on 14 April 2017.

62 Gibbons-Neff, Thomas, 'Despite supposed withdrawal, Russia building up new base in Syria, Pentagon says,' *The Washington Post*, 18 May 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/05/18/despite-supposed-withdrawal-russia-building-up-new-base-in-syria-pentagon-says/?utm\\_term=.ab5fb4677f83](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/05/18/despite-supposed-withdrawal-russia-building-up-new-base-in-syria-pentagon-says/?utm_term=.ab5fb4677f83) accessed on 14 April 2017.

63 Reuters, 'Two Russian helicopter pilots shot down, killed in Syria by Isil militants,' *The Telegraph*, 10 July 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/10/two-russian-helicopter-pilots-shot-down-killed-in-syria-by-isil/> accessed on 14 April 2017.

since World War II that Iran had permitted foreign military forces to use its bases to carry-out combat missions.<sup>64</sup>

The Syrian Government offensive to recapture Aleppo that began in late-September 2016 was actively supported by Russia's combat air power. Its involvement led to the US Government suspending talks on Syria with Russia.<sup>65</sup> Although the peace talks had been dragging on with no progress for few months, this remained a setback. It was also felt that the USA could now start to step up support for the rebel forces by providing more sophisticated arms, either directly or through one of the Gulf nations. Russia has also been accused of using indiscriminate force to support the Syrian ground offensive, like pursuing a scorched earth policy to uproot its people.<sup>66</sup> Some activists have claimed that as many as 250 strikes, from the air and from surface shelling were inflicted on some parts of the city in one day.<sup>67</sup> The US Government publicly accused Russia of open violations of the international law and urged international bodies to investigate for war crimes. While the situation in Aleppo was extreme regarding human distress, the military operations continued unabated.

### **October–November 2016**

On 15 October, Russia deployed its aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* to the Mediterranean to support the Syrian campaign. By 8 November,

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64 MacFarquhar, Neil & Sanger, David E., 'Russia Sends Bombers to Syria Using Base in Iran', *The New York Times*, 16 August 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/17/world/middleeast/russia-iran-base-syria.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/17/world/middleeast/russia-iran-base-syria.html?_r=0) accessed on 14 April 2017.

65 Wroughton, Leslie, 'U.S. suspends Syria ceasefire talks with Russia, blames Moscow', *Reuters World News*, 3 October 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-russia-idUSKCN1231X3> accessed on 14 April 2016.

66 Gardner, David, 'Russia aims to turn Aleppo into another Grozny', *The Financial Times*, 28 September 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/5f59f6ee-84a4-11e6-8897-2359a58ac7a5> accessed on 14 April 2017.

67 'The Agony of Aleppo', *The Economist*, 1 October 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21707937-americas-ceasefire-deal-russia-never-stood-chance-agony-aleppo> accessed on 14 April 2017.

fighter aircraft were flying off the carrier into Syrian territory.<sup>68</sup> The naval task force accompanying the carrier also contributed to the renewed bombing campaign. There were also claims that a Su-33 strike from the Russian carrier killed three 'well known' commanders of the al-Nusra Front in one of the attack missions into the Idlib province.<sup>69</sup> While the rate of airstrikes for about two weeks towards the end of October 2016 decreased, the campaign to liberate Aleppo started in earnest from mid-November. Eastern Aleppo was severely bombed by Syrian Government forces and also missile attacks from the Russian naval fleet stationed off the Mediterranean.<sup>70</sup> The assault on Aleppo was part of a major and wider offensive in which Russia played a major role.

During a summit of Pacific leaders in Peru, US President, Barack Obama, expressed that he could not believe that the Syrian government forces would recapture the eastern side of Aleppo from the rebel and jihadi elements. He nonetheless explained that this may be possible primarily because of the military backing to the regime provided by Russia and Iran.<sup>71</sup> During the last week of November, Israel attacked IS positions at its border with Syria for the first time, killing four militants as reprisal for an attack by IS affiliate, Yarmouk Martyrs Brigade, on an Israeli checkpoint in

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68 Ripley, Tim, 'Russian carrier sails for the Mediterranean', *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, *Jane's 360*, 17 October 2016, <http://www.janes.com/article/64669/russian-carrier-sails-for-the-mediterranean> accessed on 15 April 2017.

69 Fadel, Leith, 'Russian jets kill 3 high ranking jihadist commanders in Idlib', *AMN (al-Masdar News)*, Damascus, 17 November 2016, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-jets-kill-3-high-ranking-jihadist-commanders-idlib/> accessed on 15 April 2017.

70 Graham-Harrison, Emma, 'Aleppo airstrikes restart as Russia announces major Syria offensive', *The Guardian* (Australia Edition), 16 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/15/aleppo-airstrikes-resume-as-russia-announces-major-syria-offensive> accessed on 15 April 2017.

71 Antonopoulos, Paul, 'Obama believes Syrian army will take Aleppo', *al Masdar News* (AMN), 22 November 2016, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/obama-believes-syrian-army-will-take-aleppo/> accessed on 15 April 2017.

the Golan Heights.<sup>72</sup> By December the Aleppo offensive was in full swing. Both Russia and China vetoed a UN Security Council resolution seeking to create a humanitarian 'pause' in the fighting in Aleppo. By mid-December it was reported that almost the entire city of Aleppo had been recaptured by the Syrian government forces and that the rebels were 'near defeat'.<sup>73</sup>

## THE BATTLE FOR ALEPPO

### Initial Actions and Air Strikes

Aleppo was the last stronghold of the rebels and almost half the city was still under their control in September 2016. The eastern part of the city was controlled by rebels of the Fatah Halab group that also includes Free Syrian Army (FSA) units and some other splinter rebel groups.<sup>74</sup> On 22 September 2016, preparatory air strikes were conducted as a prelude to the upcoming ground offensive. They continued against rebel-held areas on 23 September with the Russian Air Force launching around 80 strikes in the first 48 hours. These were added to the dozens that were carried out by the Syrian Air force.<sup>75</sup> The Syrian army and its allies started their ground advance and this forced civilians to move to other parts of the city. The Syrian Air force conducted more than 150 air strikes against rebel

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72 Tomson, Cris, 'Israeli Air Force strikes Islamic State militants inside Syria for the first time', *al Masdar News* (AMN), 27 November 2016, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/israeli-air-force-strikes-islamic-state-militants-inside-syria-first-time/> accessed on 15 April 2017.

73 Abdulrahim, Raja, 'Syria Expands Control to Most of Aleppo', *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 December 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/syria-rebels-near-defeat-in-aleppo-1481544160> accessed on 21 April 2017.

74 Saad, Hwaida, 'Syrian Troops Clash with Rebels as Bombs Fall on Aleppo', *The New York Times*, 27 September 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/28/world/middleeast/aleppo-syria-ground-offensive.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/28/world/middleeast/aleppo-syria-ground-offensive.html?_r=0) accessed on 15 April 2017.

75 'Russian planes bomb Aleppo as Syrian army begins assault', *Citizens Report*, 24 September 2016, <http://citizensreportgy.com/?p=33593> accessed on 15 April 2017.

held neighbourhoods of Aleppo to the extent that more than 90 ‘civilians’ were killed by them.<sup>76</sup>

By the end of September, the Government forces had progressed considerably and captured a number of rebel-held areas. Palestinian militias assisted and, at times, were the lead forces in the assault.<sup>77</sup> Simultaneously, a new wave of air strikes were conducted throughout Aleppo, targeting rebel fortifications, bunkers and command centres.<sup>78</sup> The Handarat Camp changed hands once but was retaken after fierce fighting by the Palestinian militias supported by a large number of air strikes. On 29 September, the Government forces broke through the last rebel defences in the east, making it possible to advance towards the western sector.<sup>79</sup>

### **October–December 2016**

The start of the evacuation of what remained of the opposition-held parts of Aleppo marked the end of four years of resistance. It was a fundamental victory for the Assad government and its Russian ally. Although a large swath of Syria continued to be controlled by IS, other anti-government forces and the Kurdish People’s Protection Units, pro-government forces then controlled the four major cities in the country. The re-taking of Aleppo is also a testimony to the efficacy of the Russian military intervention.<sup>80</sup> At the same time is highlighted the lack of

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76 ‘Scores killed as Syrian jets pound rebel-held Aleppo’, *Aljazeera*, 24 September 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/scores-killed-syrian-jets-pound-rebel-held-aleppo-160923134637232.html> accessed on 15 April 2017.

77 Fadel, Leith, ‘[Official] Liwa Al-Quds, Syrian Army capture Handarat Camp in northern Aleppo’, *al Masdar News* (AMN), 24 September 2016, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/official-liwaa-al-quds-syrian-army-capture-handarat-camp-northern-aleppo/> accessed on 21 April 2017.

78 ‘Warplanes press attack on rebel-held eastern Aleppo’, *Reuters*, 24 September 2016, <http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-raids-idINKCN11U05D>, accessed on 21 April 2016.

79 Fadel, Leith, ‘Syrian army advances in east Aleppo’, *al Masdar News* (AMN), 30 September 2016, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-army-advances-east-aleppo/> accessed on 21 April 2017.

80 Ripley, Tim, ‘Aleppo evacuation deal marks end of resistance in key city’, *IHS Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 21 December 2016, p. 4.

influence of the USA and its European and Arab allies, since they took no part in negotiating for the planned withdrawal. Along with the evacuation, Russian President Putin announced that he planned to secure a wider ceasefire and move towards ending the five-year old conflict. He stated, "The next step is to reach an agreement on total ceasefire across the whole of Syria. We are conducting active negotiations with representatives of the armed opposition, brokered by Turkey."<sup>81</sup>

## RUSSIA'S 'WHOLE-OF-NATION' APPROACH

From the beginning of its intervention, Russia had embarked on a war that was fought by combining all elements of national power: military forces, diplomacy, information capabilities, and economic strength of the nation. The intent was to reach necessary ends, by minimally using military forces and to alter the perceptions of the world through deft manipulations of the media. Some analysts have termed this a 'hybrid' war, although this term differs according to context. What Russia is doing is adroitly combining the various factors that comprise the core elements of national power in a mixture fit to achieve the desired objectives.<sup>82</sup>

Russia consciously limited its employment of lethal force to using its Air Force at the expense of using ground forces. It banked on the pro-regime ground forces and supported them through the astutely used air power. Russia relied on the morale boosting effect that this strategy would have on the Syrian Arab Army. This in turn improved the performance of the pro-regime forces in combat, while weakening the resolve of the rebel forces. Russian air strikes very quickly stabilised the embattled regime that had been losing territory for more than three years before the intervention.

In its initial phase, the intervention did not gain significant territory for the regime. It took more than a year and 1000 Russian sorties to start repelling the rebels and IS according to the Syrian government's major strategic objective: retaking Aleppo. However, on the diplomatic front,

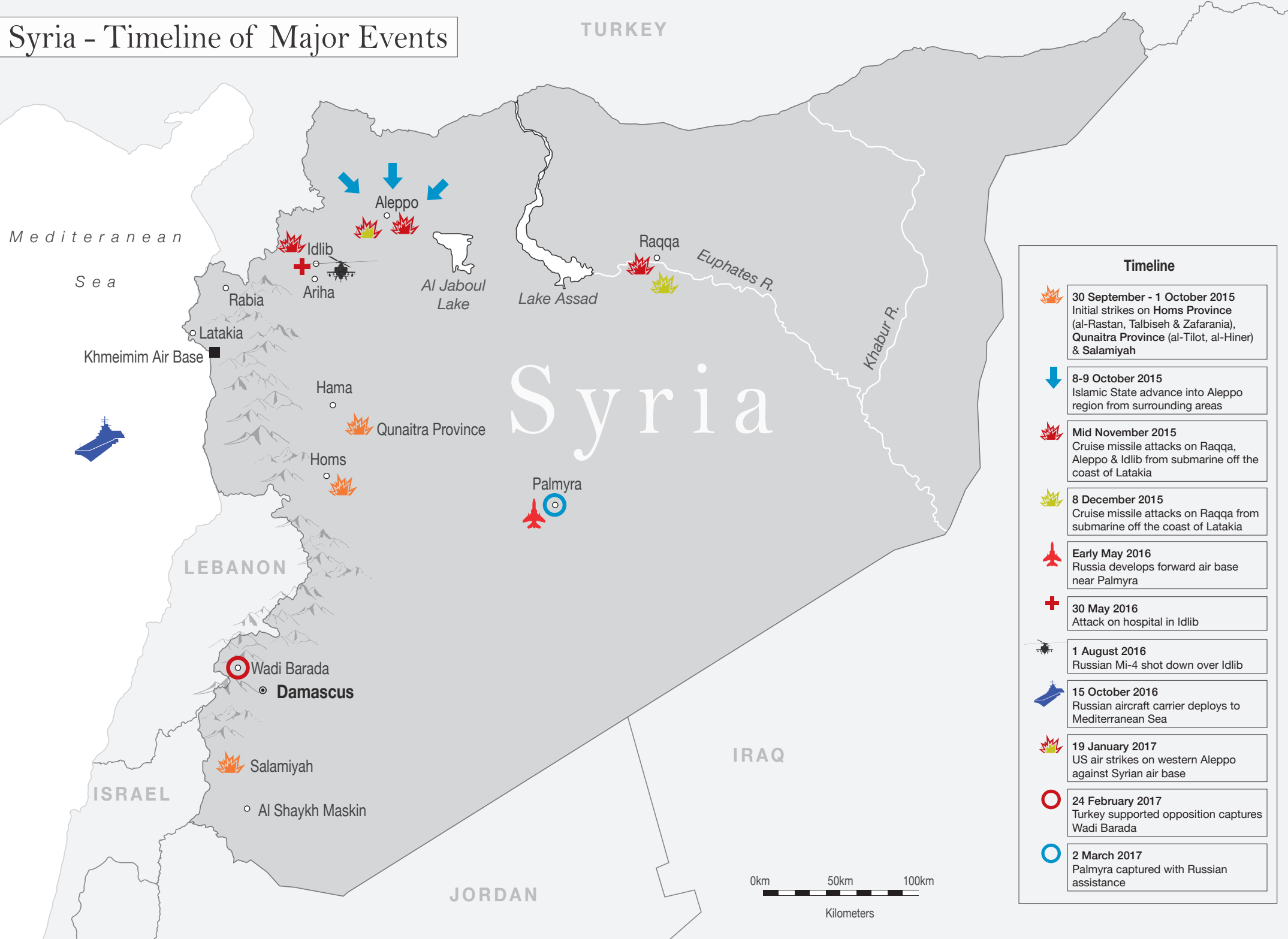
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81 *ibid.*












82 Heistein, Ari & Michlin-Shapir, Vera, 'Russia's Hybrid-Warfare Victory in Syria,' *The National Interest*, 19 May 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russias-hybrid-warfare-victory-syria-16273> accessed on 3 May 2017.

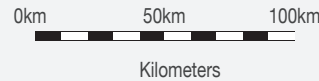


# Syria - Timeline of Major Events



## Timeline

- 
**30 September - 1 October 2015**  
 Initial strikes on Homs Province (al-Rastan, Talbiseh & Zafarania), Qunaitra Province (al-Tilot, al-Hiner) & Salamiyah
- 
**8-9 October 2015**  
 Islamic State advance into Aleppo region from surrounding areas
- 
**Mid November 2015**  
 Cruise missile attacks on Raqqa, Aleppo & Idlib from submarine off the coast of Latakia
- 
**8 December 2015**  
 Cruise missile attacks on Raqqa from submarine off the coast of Latakia
- 
**Early May 2016**  
 Russia develops forward air base near Palmyra
- 
**30 May 2016**  
 Attack on hospital in Idlib
- 
**1 August 2016**  
 Russian Mi-4 shot down over Idlib
- 
**15 October 2016**  
 Russian aircraft carrier deploys to Mediterranean Sea
- 
**19 January 2017**  
 US air strikes on western Aleppo against Syrian air base
- 
**24 February 2017**  
 Turkey supported opposition captures Wadi Barada
- 
**2 March 2017**  
 Palmyra captured with Russian assistance





Russia, from the early stages of the intervention, had placed itself as a promoter of political dialogue that could lead to a Russian-supported peace deal. This attitude made Russia acceptable as an arbitrator to most of the parties concerned. Obviously IS was not invited to the negotiating table. Russia has managed to improve its standing as a regional, if not global, power by promoting its battlefield successes and by ensuring that Russian air support is touted as having been critical to all and any success of the Syrian Arab Army.

By entering into a confrontation that the USA had labelled as unwinnable, Russia was able to gain much media mileage, especially when the intervention was accompanied by battlefield victories, however minor they might have been. This method also permitted Russia to deploy forces and use them within manageable limits. It also permitted the Russian military forces to retain complete flexibility in its actions and also to create the perception of overall success of the campaign. There is admiration in the region for the manner in which Russia has helped out an ally in need.

## CONCLUSION

By August 2017, Russia had wound down major combat operations in Syria, even though stability in the true sense of the word was distant in the largely destroyed country. IS was fully retreating and the divisions between the disparate groups of nations and alliances that were fighting the IS and the Assad regime had started to emerge. Even at this early stage of the peace negotiations, that Syria is unlikely to now produce real peace for a long time to come is easy to perceive.

The Russian military intervention however demonstrated the efficacy of a short and focused campaign in achieving political objectives. It also underlined the importance of avoiding 'mission-creep' when seeking to achieve a desired political end-state. From a Russian perspective, the military intervention was an opportunity for it to figure powerfully in international standing, especially after the sanctions imposed by the Western nations had isolated it. The Syrian intervention ensures that the world will have to work with Russia to transform the Middle-East to peace. Moreover, Russia can no longer be ignored in the global geo-political calculations.



## CHAPTER 7

# THE RUSSIAN GAMBIT IN THE MIDDLE-EAST: THE REASONS WHY

*The key to understanding what Russia is doing in Syria and the wider Middle East is that Putin is not trying to supplant US primacy there. A major Russian play for the Middle East would not make sense, even taking into account the many errors and missteps the United States has made in the region in the past 15 years.*

-Ian Parmeter<sup>1</sup>

The Middle-East has historical connotations for Russia. For nearly two centuries, its foreign policy was focused singularly on displacing the Ottoman Empire from the Balkans and the Black Sea region. In fact, one of the reasons for Russia entering World War I was its ambition to annex Constantinople (Istanbul). The Soviet Union became actively involved in the Middle-East in the mid-1950s, a situation that led to intense rivalry with the USA. During the Cold War a number of Arab

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1 Parmeter, Ian, 'Where the Russian intervention in Syria is headed,' The Interpreter, 31 August 2016, *The Lowy Institute*, Sydney, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/where-russian-intervention-syria-headed> accessed on 1 May 2017.

countries, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, South Yemen and Syria, were client states and informal allies of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup>

The last time that Russia (then the Soviet Union) intervened militarily in the Middle-East was during the Civil War in Yemen in the 1960s. The Soviet forces supported the republican forces in Yemen who had carried out a coup that resulted in a civil war with the royalist forces who were determined to return the country's Imam to the throne. After suffering a few losses, including a Russian pilot having been shot down, the Russians withdrew their army. After this brief engagement, Russia had kept away from the Middle-East with the exception of its military that remained in Egypt throughout the War of Attrition, 1967–1970.<sup>3</sup>

Analysts have found that the Russian strategy for its intervention in Yemen and the one that is being employed in Syria are similar. Fundamentally, Russia seeks to prevent the ouster of one of its client regimes. This is to be achieved by ensuring that it remains for a sufficiently long time so that each regime's oppositions quarrel within themselves to the extent that the focus on regime change will no longer be a priority.

More importantly, Russia was smarting under the loss of its global power status that abruptly followed the melt down of the Soviet Union. Hindsight indicates that the manner in which Western nations treated the failing Soviet Union and more so the Russian Federation that it became in the 1990s, was a signature lesson for the broken nation. The Russian attitude to the 'West' may have been much more sanguine if Western behaviour had been more empathetic than what occurred. On the other hand, Western democracies were at that time celebrating the fall of their primary adversary of the previous half a century and thus sought somewhat to rub Russia's nose in the dirt, which was perhaps unavoidable.

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- 2 Sella, Amnon, 'The fluctuating influence of the USSR in the middle east', *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, Vol 15-1985, Issue 1, published on line 19 June 2008, pp. 135–140, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13501678508577493?journalCode=feej19> accessed on 28 April 2017. For further reading see, William E. Griffith's article 'Soviet influence in the Middle East', in the journal *Survival, Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol 18, 1976, Issue 1, International Institute of Strategic Studies, London, pp. 2–9.
  - 3 Berro, Dylan, 'The Russia's new role in Middle East', *Geopolitical.info*, 23 January 2016, <http://www.geopolitica.info/the-russias-new-role-middle-east/> accessed on 29 April 2017.

After consolidating his position domestically, Putin started to build the power and status of Russia through direct and indirect methods. Once he had achieved the basic requirements of being a powerful nation, he was looking for an opportunity to find Russia's prominence. The opportunity to re-establish Russia's global status seemed to emerge from the time the USA started its ill-advised military intervention in the Middle-East. When the USA and its allies invaded Iraq, Russia stayed aloof, without even commenting.<sup>4</sup> The invasion was a disaster, the fundamental reason being that the coalition had not planned for a post-war, or post-Saddam, reconstruction, either physically or more importantly to institute democracy. The USA brought their idea of democracy to Iraq without any understanding that physical, demographic and educational requirements for the idea to take hold did not exist in Iraq.

The Middle-East is geopolitically of strategic importance to Russia and any turmoil there would send ripples out to its restless regions. Therefore, when Iraq became the centre of terrorist activities and thus critical, Russia had few options other than to consider directly intervening. The rebellion that became a civil war in Syria sealed the thinking. From initially channelling weapons to the Hezbollah through Iran, Russia decided to intervene directly to ensure the survival of the Assad regime. In a very short span of time, Russia became the main player in the Syrian imbroglio.

## RUSSIAN STRATEGY

The relationship between Russia and Iraq, and Russia and Syria extends back to the Cold War years, when the Soviet Union was the major arms supplier for both countries. The bilateral political relationships were also stable. During the Cold War, the balance of power in the Middle-East between the Soviet Union and USA had been carefully crafted and maintained over years. Because their individual spheres of influence were not interfered with, a sort of equilibrium therefore prevailed. This equilibrium had ensured that the nations of the region, most of them ruled by autocratic and ruthless leaders, did not engage in foolhardy military enterprises. The fall of the Soviet Union changed this.

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4 *ibid.*

When it was dismantled, only one super power was left in the world so that the Middle-East particularly felt a power-vacuum. Russia considers the Middle-East its border region and therefore is vitally interested in stabilising it, even if it means actively intervening in regional civil wars. Russia accepts this situation for two reasons. First, is that it sees US intervention in the Middle-East as generally a threat to its own security. It strives to ensure that the USA does not achieve a superior position of influence within the region. From the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Russia has become increasingly convinced that US actions have been incompetent and responsible for the protracted wars that continue in the region.<sup>5</sup> Russia believed that its intervention would reverse this trend.

The second reason is equally important for Russia in that it is gravely concerned about extremist fighters and terrorists returning to its borders, where militancy has not been completely eliminated. To prevent this occurring, Russia maintains stable relations with the Middle-Eastern regimes and closely monitors the gaps that the USA is leaving behind. In trying to increase their influence in the region, Russia's military intervention in Syria was almost like a pilot project. Its success made the rest of the regimes take notice of three factors: Russia's forceful pursuit of its clear objectives; the rapid mobilisation and re-arming of the Syrian military forces that had almost run out of steam; and the ability of the Russian political leadership to circumvent restrictions in applying force.<sup>6</sup> Russia also ensured the precision of its intervention by sending in its military forces once it received a formal invitation from the Assad regime. This contrasts sharply to the unilateral actions initiated by the US-led coalition, which failed to obtain a UN mandate for the military action

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5 Tierney, Dominic, 'Why Has America Stopped Winning Wars', *The Atlantic*, 2 June 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/06/america-win-loss-iraq-afghanistan/394559/> accessed on 29 April 2017.

6 McDermott, Roger, 'Russia's Application of Military Power in Syria', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol 13, Issue 41, Jamestown Foundation, 1 March 2016, , <https://jamestown.org/program/russias-application-of-military-power-in-syria/> accessed on 29 April 2017.



it conducted.<sup>7</sup> It is notable that Russia is not deploying its forces as a temporary measure for a few months but will remain in Syria for the long haul. Occupying Latakia sea port in the Mediterranean and developing infrastructure at the airbases that it occupies in Syria indicates that Russia is proclaiming to the rest of the world that it is back on the stage as a world power. There is no doubt that the rest of the world will now have to deal with Russia.<sup>8</sup>

Even though its intervention resulted in stemming the rising tide of IS victories and gradually pushed the terrorist organisation on to the back foot, debate about the 'Great/Super Power' status that is being claimed by Russia is still debated. A nation can claim Super Power status if it has demonstrably mastered the seven elements that together constitute state sovereignty: a clearly defined and universally accepted national identity; well-defined borders that are protected, without disputes and acknowledged; a population that accepts and accentuates a defined national identity; the ability to conduct political and diplomatic dialogue with other nation-states and to influence other states and international bodies; an independent and viable economy with a positive outlook, at least for the mid-term future; sufficient resources to support the economy and other national initiatives; and competent and capable military forces backed by adequate indigenous industrial capacity.<sup>9</sup>

Ever since the so-called 'Arab Spring', Russia's influence has been increasing in the Middle-East. Its arming of Syria initially and then its direct intervention reminds the Western world that the defeat of the IS is important to them. To the nations of the Middle-East, Russia seems at least for the time being to be easier to deal with than the USA and NATO, while Russian military influence also increases with each day of direct

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7 Merceir Samuel, 'The Legality of Russian Air Strikes in Syria and 'Intervention by Invitation'', *E-International Relations*, 29 April 2016, <http://www.e-info/2016/04/29/the-legality-of-russian-airstrikes-in-syria-and-intervention-by-invitation/> accessed on 30 April 2017.

8 Adelman, Jonathan, 'The Surprising Resurgence of Russia as a Great Power', *The World Post*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-adelman/the-surprising-resurgence\\_b\\_8104486.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jonathan-adelman/the-surprising-resurgence_b_8104486.html) accessed on 30 April 2017.

9 Sivan, Misha, 'Is Russia a potential super power?' *Quora*, 15 October 2016, <https://www.quora.com/Is-Russia-a-potential-superpower> accessed on 30 April 2017.

military intervention.<sup>10</sup> However, Russia can be considered a 'reluctant warrior' in the civil war in Syria for two reasons. First, the reality on the ground is that this is not a simple coalition versus coalition war that is going on. It is multi-sided and confused enough to allow any on-looker to understand who is fighting whom and why. In such circumstances, the possibility of attacking the wrong entity will always restrict action. Second, while Russian interests are best served by ensuring that the current regime continues to rule Syria as an entity, it can continue to dictate policy and influence its outcomes despite how truncated the territorial holdings may be.<sup>11</sup>

At the basic level, Russia's strategy in Syria is straightforward wherein it does not want the Assad regime to be removed from power as did the Western powers who sought to change the Syrian regime as they did in Iraq and Libya. Russia's reaction seems to have been lost on the US-led coalition that was clearly responsible for the chaos that currently encompasses the region (in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, and the Israel-Palestine conflict), brought about by failed or failing military interventions.<sup>12</sup> Russia has repeatedly reminded the USA and its allies that their failed intervention and mismanagement of the post-conflict reconstruction has caused the current situation.

## RUSSIA'S MIDDLE-EAST POLICY

After the failed attempt in the 1980s to contain Afghanistan and retain it as a satellite state of the Soviet Union, followed by the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Syrian intervention was Russia's first major foray outside its self-delineated 'near abroad'. Russia has always been active in the Middle-East, as an arms supplier and even diplomatically. However, the

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10 Kofman, Michael, 'How Russia's Gambit in Syria Changes the Game', *War on the Rocks*, 21 September 2015, <https://warontherocks.com/2015/09/how-russias-gambit-in-syria-changes-the-game/> accessed on 30 April 2017.

11 Nasr, Vali, 'Why the Russians Aren't Likely to Break with Assad', *The Atlantic*, 11 April 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/04/russia-tillerson-putin-syria-assad-chemical-weapons/522528/> accessed on 30 April 2017.

12 Berro, Dylan, *op cit.*

rapidity with which it moved to intervene shocked most observers. At the operational level, the military campaign demonstrated the sophistication of Russian weapons and indicated that Russia remains a modern military superpower.<sup>13</sup> The coordinated military action, which could be described as a campaign, achieved two immediate political outcomes for Russia.

First, Russia ended the 'isolation' imposed on it by the USA and its Western allies by forcing them to deal with the Kremlin to de-conflict military actions. Even though Russia has been somewhat criticised about its military actions and its support for the Assad regime, the same nations have kept back-channel discussions open. This suits Russia and furthers its desire to increase its regional influence. The US-Russia relationship continues to be confrontational in spirit, but cooperation is also visible in how it has distinguished the several rebel groups on the ground as friendly or adversarial. Second, Russian intervention has managed to turn the spotlight on IS rather than the Assad regime and the civil war *per se*. The rebel groups have become less important and, although the USA continues to support some groups that want to oust the regime, there is agreement that regime change is not the primary objective. Defeating IS has taken priority over all other objectives.

The military intervention was doubtlessly well thought through and long-term objectives were considered and prioritised, as opposed to the short-term or immediate aims of Russia's intervention. The broad objective is to re-establish Russia's stature and emphasise its role as a major outside power in the most volatile region in the world. With this broad objective in mind, four component objectives were also formulated: to contain the spread of the IS, while diminishing its capacity for effectiveness so that it does not spread into Russia and the post-Soviet neighbourhood; to support friendly regimes in the region and build geopolitical alliances; to create the conditions for a permanent military presence in and around the region; and to attract investment into Russia from the richer Gulf States

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13 Suchkov, Maxim, A., 'Russia's Plan for the Middle East', *The National Interest*, 15 January 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/russias-plan-the-middle-east-14908> accessed on 30 April 2017.

through being responsive to the region's politico-military requirements.<sup>14</sup> The Russian Federation includes several predominantly Muslim republics, some of which are restless, with 12 per cent of the country being Muslim. Therefore, Russia is also concerned about the ill-effects that extremism and radicalisation could have on domestic stability.

Second, the Russian intervention has altered the Western perception of President Assad, especially when the West compare his regime to IS. Ensuring that the initial call for 'regime change' by the Western coalition was gradually watered down was also one of Russia's objectives. The situation seems to have come full circle now that removing Assad from power is barely mentioned the peace talks that are sporadically held.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Russian intervention in Syria positioned it firmly as a leader in the anti-IS campaign. Including Russia in the campaign against the extremist group has far more advantages than keeping it isolated. Russian air operations have been more effective against IS mainly because they can attack targets even though collateral damage may result. The Russian forces in Syria operate within the Laws of Armed Conflict, but are not constrained by further restrictions being placed on them through narrow rules of engagement. On the other hand, Western forces are subject to rules to ensure 'zero' collateral damage that in turn make it imperative not to attack some targets even though their neutralisation is confirmed to be of military value. Such restrictive employment of lethal power dilutes the essence of an air campaign, which has been demonstrated consistently in the Syrian Civil War.

Russian engagement in the Civil War has at times been made out to be one undertaken without much strategic thought. This is incorrect. The intervention is derived from a well-considered foreign policy aiming to enhance Russia's status and role in the Middle-East, one of the most volatile regions in the world. Viewed from this angle, it is possible to glean the principal objectives of the intervention. In order of Russia's priority they could be listed as:

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14 Trenin, Dmitri, 'Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 25 March 2016, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16\\_Trenin\\_Middle\\_East\\_Moscow\\_clean.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/03-25-16_Trenin_Middle_East_Moscow_clean.pdf) accessed on 30 April 2017.

15 Suchkov, Maxim, A, op. cit.

- To protect Russian interests in the Middle-East;
- To strengthen Russia's presence in the region through stationing military forces and expanding its share in the arms, nuclear, oil and gas, food and other markets;
- To contain and limit the spread of IS and its extremist and radical ideology away from Russia and the immediate post-Soviet neighbourhood;
- To support the Syrian regime and other friendly governments and build lasting geo-political alliances with them; and
- To protect the Syrian population.<sup>16 17</sup>

From these priorities, Russia is obvious not directly involved personally with President Assad's hold on power. Russia is interested in ensuring that Syria maintains a government with the power contain IS and not allow it to spread beyond Syrian borders. Anarchy in Syria, with the distinct possibility of the war-ravaged country becoming a terrorist hub, could be disastrous for Russia's domestic stability. Russian forces will thus stay in Syria for the long term, even after IS has been defeated. Although the actual fighting seems to have become more sporadic with IS having been physically defeated in many battles, the threat of instability is far too high for the unilateral withdrawal of forces.

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16 Surkpv, Nikolay, 'Explainer: Russian foreign policy in the Middle East', *Russia Direct*, 9 March 2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org/explainer/explainer-russian-foreign-policy-middle-east>, accessed on 30 April 2017.

17 Trenin, Dmitri, 'Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers', *Task Force White Paper*, Carnegie Moscow Centre, 5 April 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/04/05/russia-in-middle-east-moscow-s-objectives-priorities-and-policy-drivers-pub-63244> accessed on 30 April 2017.

## SYRIA IS BIGGER THAN SYRIA

Historically, Russia has maintained contact with the Middle-East primarily through interaction with Turkey and Iran. However, through the progress of the Cold War, it provided military hardware to Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Libya, counting these nations also as 'partners' in a loose manner against the encroachment of the USA. At the end of the Cold War, Russia initiated measures to improve relations with Turkey by moving from age-old rivalry and mistrust to mutual respect and understanding. After the Russian intervention, this increasingly close relationship abruptly changed when Turkey shot down a Russian fighter aircraft in November 2015. In retaliation Moscow imposed economic sanctions on Turkey.<sup>18</sup>

Following an attempted coup in Turkey, and Russia's offer to help President Erdogan, the stand-off thawed and the last of the sanctions were lifted in May 2017. However, within the stand-off that had lasted for almost 18 months, the shooting down of the Russian aircraft was only the proverbial last straw.<sup>19</sup> The actual cause was the Russian intervention itself that undercut Turkey's long-term policies in its neighbourhood and directly impinged on its fundamental interests in Syria. Whereas Russia and Turkey have been reconciled, an undercurrent of tension continues to plague bilateral relations. The disagreements are geo-political in nature and cannot be papered over by reconciliatory statements by both the nations' leaders. Trust, the fundamental ingredient to a robust relationship, has been lost.

Russia's relations with Iran are complex and follows a pattern of coming together and moving apart, principally because of historical mistrust, mainly on the Iranian side. To a certain extent, the mistrust is justified, because time and again Russia is seen to have let Iran down either because

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18 Girit, Selin, 'Turkey faces big losses as Russia sanctions bite', *BBC News*, Istanbul, 2 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35209987> accessed on 1 May 2017.

19 'Russia ending last remaining sanctions on Turkey', *The New Arab & Agencies*, 4 May 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/5/4/russia-ending-final-sanctions-on-turkey>, accessed on 1 May 2017.

of international pressure or Russia pursuing its interests.<sup>20</sup> Moscow supplies significant weaponry to Iran even though Russia has succumbed to pressure at times and defaulted in delivering critical equipment. In the post-Soviet era, Russia has carefully maintained constructive relations and not condemned either Hamas or Hezbollah as terrorist organisations. While the two are currently de facto allies in the Syrian Civil War, religious, ideological and political differences at the fundamental level distinguish the two nations. It is unlikely that their relationship will improve and could more likely even deteriorate rapidly because of these distinctions.

Russia's dealings with Saudi Arabia, the other major player in the Middle-East, has been limited. During the Cold War, the two nations did not even have diplomatic contact. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia was one of the major supporters of the Mujahedeen, a memory that continues to colour mutual perceptions. In the past few years however, an engagement between the two nations has emerged, primarily because of the heavy involvement of Russia in the Syrian Civil War. The changed circumstances also coincide with the Saudi Arabian Vision 2030 that acclaims a more assertive and independent foreign policy for the desert kingdom.<sup>21</sup> Both the Russians and the Saudis have displayed a degree of pragmatism in pursuing points of agreement while also dealing with their differences. The Saudi leadership considers the improving relationship with Russia as part of diversifying its foreign policy and thus limiting any overreliance on the USA.

The thawing of Russia-Saudi relations will be limited for two reasons: the on-going military contest in Syria, and Russia's relations with Iran. Russia however has not yet drawn a differentiated Iran, Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf States in pursuing its agenda in the Middle-East. Although Moscow is aware that it will not be able to influence Saudi-Arabia more than it already has, it is still willing to wait out the current

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20 'Iran, Russia reaffirm alliance in Syrian war', *The Times of Israel*, 3 December 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-russia-reaffirm-alliance-in-syrian-war/> accessed on 1 May 2017.

21 Dubovikova, Maria, 'Saudi-Russia relations in the emerging world order', *Al Arabiya English*, 21 January 2017, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/world/2017/01/21/Saudi-Russia-relations-in-the-emerging-new-world-order.html> accessed on 1 May 2017.

situation. The attempt is to capitalise on the points of agreement and also leverage the commonality of purpose regarding stabilising oil prices. Both nations have been hard-hit by the fall in oil prices.<sup>22</sup>

From the start of the Cold War till 1972, Egypt was the mainstay of Soviet geo-political activities in the Middle-East. Although Egypt went on to embrace the USA for a time, since the latest developments, that is, ousting the Muslim Brotherhood government and General el-Sisi's rise to power, relations have once again improved. President Putin has stated openly that only el-Sisi is capable of bringing a modicum of stability to Egypt.<sup>23</sup> Russia has re-commenced supplying arms to Egypt, which used Saudi-provided money for the purchases. Further, it has chosen Russia to be preferred supplier for the nuclear power plant that Egypt wants to build for peaceful purposes.<sup>24</sup> There is palpable eagerness in both countries to re-build the relationship that has deteriorated over the past three decades. Although Russia had issued a travel warning to its citizens in the wake of the October 2015 when a Russian passenger aircraft was brought down over the Sinai, the restrictions have been fully lifted. In its dealings with Egypt, Russia is playing a careful game.

Syria remains the only country that has maintained friendly relations with Russia (and the Soviet Union) since the 1950s without a break, till today. The civil war that broke out in 2011 and the Russian military intervention in 2015 have changed the nature of the relationship. Even before the physical intervention, Russia had steadfastly supported President Bashar al-Assad in his efforts to push back initially the Arab Spring supporters and then the openly rebellious US-supported forces

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22 For a detailed background of the emerging Russia-Saudi relationship read, Katz, Mark N., 'Saudi-Russian relations Since the Abdullah-Putin Summit', *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, Vol XVI, Spring 2009, Number 1, available on line at <http://mepc.org/journal/saudi-russian-relations-abdullah-putin-summit>.

23 Trenin, Dmitri, *op cit*.

24 Nosseir, Mohammad, 'Egypt-Russia relations: Reviving the unstable', *Al Arabiya English*, 26 January 2017, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2017/01/26/Egypt-Russia-relations-Reviving-the-unstable.html> accessed on 1 May 2017.



that clamoured for regime change.<sup>25</sup> For Moscow, the intervention in Syria relates to issues that are much bigger than Syria *per se*. Having made it a die-hard ally, Russia is assiduously working on using Syria as the geographic foothold that it wants in the region. Syria provides the critical link in the axis that Russia has carefully built with its allies in the region: Iran, Iraq, the Kurds and Egypt, that stretches from the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf across to the Mediterranean and Red Seas.<sup>26</sup> The importance of Syria in maintaining this axis cannot be overemphasised.

Russia is treading carefully in its Middle-Eastern 'adventure'. Even though it has supplied arms to several of nations in the region, it had in the past kept at arms distance from domestic politics. This has changed dramatically with Russia building bridges with Iraq and Iran. Moscow also tacitly supports the aspirations of the Kurds to create an autonomous state for themselves. Since the Kurds are mainly spread across Iraq, Syria and Turkey, Kurdish ambitions are bound to threaten these nations' sovereignty aspirations.<sup>27</sup> It is notable that, in the Middle-East so far, Russia/Soviet Union has not had any permanent friends. Russian assistance and alignments are conditional and serves only its own regional interests, which are components of Russia's broader global ambitions. This can be seen in the manner in which Russia ensures that it does not get boxed into an untenable situation by supporting just one side of a multi-cornered war. It seems that Russia is sufficiently confident that it will be able to negotiate the erratic political relations that exist in the region, especially considering the situation in Israel and the stand-off between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

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25 Pukhov, Ruslan, 'Why Russia Is Backing Syria,' *The New York Times*, 6 July 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/07/opinion/why-russia-supports-syria.html>, accessed on 1 May 2017.

26 Bardos-Feltoronyi, Nicolas, in Ivan Ruxandra (ed), *New Regionalism or No Regionalism?* Routledge, London, 2012, pp. 31–40.

27 Hiltermann, Joost, 'The Kurds: A Divided Future,' *The New York Review of Books*, 19 May 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/05/19/kurds-syria-iraq-divided-future/> accessed on 1 May 2017. For a more detailed historical analysis of the Kurdish issue, read Amir Hassanpour, *The Kurdish Experience*, published in the Middle East Report No 189, Middle East Research and Information Project, Vol 24, July-August 1994, available at <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer189>.

## OPPORTUNITIES: RUSSIAN VIEWPOINT

The events of the past six years in the Middle-East have created a number of opportunities for Russia to enhance its foreign policy initiatives to return it to the international limelight as a powerful nation. Russia, and its President Vladimir Putin, have long-harboured ambitions to return Russia to its rightful place internationally, if not as a Super Power, then at least as a global influential power. The events in the Middle-East: the Arab Spring, its abject failure and its aftermath; the rise and now decline of IS; the continuing presence of al-Qaeda and its affiliates and off-shoots; raging civil wars in Yemen and Syria; the intervention by regional and external powers in these wars; the collapse of the Gadhafi regime and the subsequent implosion of Libya; the US-led nuclear deal with Iran; the visible divide between Sunni- and Shia-led nations; Saudi Arabia's concerted push to assume the mantle of both regional and religious leadership; and the on-going Islamisation and move towards dictatorship in Turkey, have made Russia realise that it must be pro-active if it is to capitalise on the turmoil.

Russia is projecting itself into the region as a non-ideological and pragmatic power with the capacity to intervene effectively both diplomatically and militarily. Russia also emphasises that it had not been antagonistic to any Middle-East state, having maintained cordial relations with the diverse set of countries of the region: Iran and Saudi Arabia; Israel and the Hezbollah; and Turkey and Syria.<sup>28</sup> The Russian military operations in Syria has raised its profile not only in the region but also globally. Undeniable is its success in ensuring that the Assad regime remains in power, and that IS is eventually defeated along with its agenda to establish a Caliphate centred on Damascus.<sup>29</sup> Without Russian intervention, IS may

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28 'Russia's Role in the Middle East', Panel Discussion, 9 December 2013, *Brookings Doha Centre*, Qatar, Transcript of discussions available at [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/russia\\_role\\_middle\\_east\\_transcript.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/russia_role_middle_east_transcript.pdf) accessed on 1 May 2017.

29 Parmeter, Ian, 'Where the Russian intervention in Syria is headed', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, Sydney, 31 August 2016, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/where-russian-intervention-syria-headed> accessed on 1 May 2017.

have eventually taken over the region and encouraged sympathisers across the Muslim world to attempt similar wars.

Russia entered the confused Civil War with four very clear and prioritised objectives: The first was to save the Assad regime from being defeated and removed. To achieve this, it was necessary to defeat the enemies of the regime other than those belonging to IS, the groups referred to as moderate opposition groups by the USA and its allies. Second, after defeating these groups, Russia moved to facilitate a cease-fire followed by negotiations overseen by Russia and the USA. The third objective was to broker a peace deal in Syria that is guaranteed jointly by Russia and the USA. Fourth, Russia sought to create a coalition with the USA, the European Union and other regional nations to fight and defeat IS. In this case, the regional nations were Iran, Iraq and Syria, thus neutralising the Sunni-Shia divide.<sup>30</sup>

The intervention went according to plan and, although the envisaged 'coalition' did not materialise as such, the defeat of IS is almost completed at the time of my writing. The Russian Air Force and its Navy performed well, that is, better than expected by a large number of critics, and their battlefield casualties have been negligible within Russia's sphere of operations.

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30 Trenin, Dmitri, *op cit.*



# CHAPTER 8

## THE BEAR IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD: EFFECTIVENESS OF THE RUSSIAN INTERVENTION

*In stark contrast with President Obama's much-maligned policy of gradual escalation, Putin's "scorched-earth tactics" in Syria have brought Washington face-to-face with a disturbing realization: co-opting hearts and minds may be less effective than bombing them to oblivion. Given Russia's evidently growing influence in negotiations over so-called cease-fires, it's important to frame Moscow's behavior not as an aberration, but as the next chapter in the bleak tale of authoritarian counterinsurgency (COIN).*

-Zach Abels<sup>1</sup>

Russian effectiveness in improving the position of Assad was visible within the first month of intervention. In about six months, its air power had facilitated the repossession of most of rebel-held Aleppo by Syrian government forces. Apart from strikes that facilitated the neutralisation of rebel strongholds, the Syrian government ground forces were greatly assisted by both Russian and Iranian intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) support. Both Russia and Iran deployed

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1 Abels, Zach, 'What's Behind the Effectiveness of Russia's Syria Strategy', *The National Interest*, 3 March 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/behind-the-effectiveness-russias-syria-strategy-15394> accessed on 5 May 2017.

uninhabited aerial vehicles extensively, providing the Syrian army with substantial 'eyes in the sky' capability.<sup>2</sup>

Russian arms supplies have also been important in gradually shifting the balance in favour of the regime. The inducted T-90 main battle tank (MBT) has an improved countermeasure system that was relatively more effective against the anti-tank guided missiles that the opposition had been equipped with by the USA. This factor alone improved the morale of Syrian government forces significantly. Further, Russia facilitated the airlifted deployment of Iraqi, Iranian and Afghan Shia militia groups, which bore the brunt of the fighting around Aleppo. The transport aircraft of both Russia and Iran also air-dropped supplies to besieged Syrian enclaves, another morale boosting activity. Before Russia entered the fray, airlift activities were considered too dangerous.

Russia also accelerated reforming the Syrian military and thus the battlefield success of its Army. The reorganisation created self-contained all-arms assault brigades and a cadre of militia oriented towards holding ground. Changes to training and force structures were directly assisted by Russian military advisers and trainers. Even though the successes were visible at the tactical level, they resulted from concerted attempts by the operational and strategic levels of command to coordinate the war efforts. As well, Syria's communication networks were established with Russian expertise and equipment.<sup>3</sup>

The initial battlefield successes were not only morale boosting for the government forces, they also led to a political and psychological campaign meant to boost support for the Assad regime and also undermine the rebel forces. The visible evidence of these successes, accompanied by threats, negotiations and political concessions, drew the opposition to the Syrian government. It also managed to establish an informal alliance with the Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG). All these gains come to be because Russia boosted the failing Syrian military forces, thus raising them to a reasonably efficient fighting force.

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2 Ripley, Tim, 'Tilting the balance: Russian Syrian ops six months on', *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 16 March 2016, p. 21.

3 *ibid.*

## THE IMMEDIATE IMPACT

The intervention went according to plan and, although the envisaged 'coalition' did not materialise as such, the defeat of IS was almost completed at the time of my writing. It is a testimony to the detailed planning that was undertaken that Russia has avoided getting stuck in an Afghanistan-style quagmire while continuing to hold sway over the Assad Government. It has also avoided, or steadfastly refused, to get drawn into the percolating Sunni–Shia squabble that IS has been repeatedly trying to keep aflame. On the political and diplomatic front, Russia has managed a difficult balancing act: it has improved its ties with the Kurds, continued to rebuild its relationship with Egypt, and also improved an almost non-existent relationship with Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup>

Russia currently faces a resources crunch and is therefore constrained by having to carefully manage the means available to pursue strategy objectives in the military campaign. Considering that only limited resources have been employed, the benefits accrued have been very high, in Syria and elsewhere. Essentially, the Syrian campaign has so far not needed a special budget and is being contained within the military budget kept aside to conduct large-scale exercises.<sup>5</sup> In the larger Middle-East, Russia has been providing only diplomatic support to the troubled nations and offering to sell them arms, thus not expending their own stretched resources in any appreciable quantity. It is also highly likely that, when peace finally comes to Syria, Russia will be the preferred nation to rebuild the war-ravaged nation. This would provide a much needed fillip for the Russian economy.

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4 Trenin, Dmitri, *op cit.*

5 Mawji, Omar, 'Disengagement from Syrian Civil War Won't Come Cheap for Russia', *Geopolitical Monitor*, 14 March 2017, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/disengagement-from-the-syrian-civil-war-wont-come-cheap-for-russia/> accessed on 2 May 2017. Also see, Connolly, Richard, 'Hard Times?' Defence Spending and the Russian Economy', *Russian Analytical Digest* No 196, 23 December 2016, pp. 2-6, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD196.pdf> accessed on 2 May 2017.

## LESSONS SO FAR...

So far, the indications are that the Russian campaign has been successful. While it may not have been brilliant compared to military victories of the past, the Russian intervention achieved much more than the confused approach of US-led coalition in Syria. From the progress so far, some preliminary observations can be made which, in the future, could provide valuable knowledge about such conflict.

In the current global geo-political situation, the likelihood of a conventional state-on-state war taking place has diminished almost completely. The trend, at least for the mid-term, is for irregular wars to occur. It is actually immaterial whom one's irregular adversary may be. What should concern military planners is that the conduct and characteristics of war have evolved, irrevocably. In these new conditions, one lesson to be learned is that it is better to pre-empt the irregular adversary rather than wait for them to initiate action and be taken by surprise.<sup>6</sup> In irregular wars, seizing the initiative is critical. Such action requires decisiveness and consistency. Russia also learned from its ill-fated intervention in Afghanistan in the 1980s to avoid open-ended ground operations. Even though none of the senior leadership who took part in these operations of the Soviet Union may still be in service, the Russian military has clearly learned from that mistake.<sup>7</sup> Ground operations in a foreign intervention must be left almost completely to the host nation and local allies, who can be supported by air power. In other words, while ensuring that adequate air control is provided, local alliances should carry out the ground campaign. Further, the necessary weapons, along with military advice and technical support, can be provided. These strategies are necessary because of the nature of irregular wars in which a foreign ground force will always be disadvantaged by being considered an invading/occupying force.

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6 Mcleary, Paul, 'Russian Military Draws Lessons From Ukraine and Syria Ops', *The Cable*, 9 December 2016, Foreign Policy Group, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/09/russian-military-draws-lessons-from-ukraine-syria-putin-war-islamic-state/> accessed on 2 May 2017.

7 Ripley, Tim, 'Russia learns military lessons in Syria', *IHS Jane's Intelligence Review*, [http://www.janes.com/images/assets/758/69758/Russia\\_learns\\_military\\_lessons\\_in\\_Syria.pdf](http://www.janes.com/images/assets/758/69758/Russia_learns_military_lessons_in_Syria.pdf) accessed on 2 May 2017.



Flowing from this particularly important lesson, air power is seen to be efficacious when used to surgically apply lethal force. The impact of such actions increases in direct proportion to the 'correctness' of the target that was neutralised, and when absolutely no collateral damage is inflicted. Also learned is that such a situation will not always be possible and therefore collateral damage within the bounds of the international Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC) is considered acceptable. In a media-speculative conflict, military forces often struggle to explain perfectly legal and legitimate employment of lethal force.<sup>8</sup> The Russian Government have been more open to accepting criticisms after an event and explaining any issues that arose than the Western democracies have been. This attitude result from the immediate threat that escalating any radical approach poses to Russia itself. Its Air Force clearly demonstrated what could be achieved when extraordinarily restrictive rules of engagement (ROE) were not imposed at the tactical level. The ROE enforced on the US-led coalition air forces go way beyond what is prescribed by the LOAC and tend to dilute the effectiveness of air power. The lesson learnt is to logically balance the legal, moral and ethical needs when applying lethal force so that its desired outcomes are achieved efficiently and military objectives are met.

Even a cursory analysis of the Russian intervention shows that military interventions against irregular forces must be accompanied by concerted diplomatic initiatives from the beginning of a campaign. The adage that there can never be a purely military solution to the issues involved in an irregular war, especially when it is being fought in the Middle-East, applies once again to the Syrian Civil War. The tragedy is that, with the number of different groups involved in the war and the conflicting interests of the US-led coalition, Turkey and Russia, an acceptable political solution to the

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8 Mercier, Samuel, 'The Legality of Russian Air Strikes in Syria and 'Intervention by Invitation', *E-International Relations*, 29 April 2016, <http://www.e-ir.info/2016/04/29/the-legality-of-russian-airstrikes-in-syria-and-intervention-by-invitation/> accessed on 2 May 2017.

For a counter-argument regarding the legality of the Russian intervention itself read, Kassab Seema, 'Russian Intervention in Syria: A Violation of International Law', *Michigan Journal of International Law*, 26 October 2016, <http://www.mjonline.org/russian-airstrikes-in-syria-a-violation-of-international-law/> accessed on 2 May 2017.

chaos does not seem to prevail.<sup>9</sup> A common military objective has to be found and achieved before a political solution will become apparent. On the other hand, a political solution is unlikely to emerge in the absence of sufficiently credible military backing. The current situation in Syria is one of a vicious circle with a political solution being as elusive as ever before. An end remains out of sight.

The other major lesson that can be derived from the Russian intervention is that operations in a foreign nation requires public support from the domestic audience. Although the iron rule of the current government in Russia has not permitted any public airing of policy differences, it is obvious that memories of the Afghanistan fiasco during the Soviet era are not completely erased. It was fortunate for President Putin that the intervention and the military operations progressed in the manner it did, with minimal casualties and resource commitment. While the lesson has been positive, at the beginning of the campaign, it was felt that the pendulum could swing either way.<sup>10</sup> Essentially governments must be able to reassure the public that the costs involved in foreign military interventions will not unduly affect government finance and thus the lives of its citizenry. Such assurance is best achieved by clearly stating the objective and not leaving the campaign open-ended.

## THE BEAR IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Even though Russia had 'annexed' Crimea and also intervened in Georgia in 2008, it is Russia's forceful action in Syria that has raised the questions in Western minds: Is Russia becoming a threat to the West at large? Has the Syrian intervention positioned Russia as the primary geo-political adversary of the West? The answer to the first question would be

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9 Stoffel, Derek, 'World powers admit political solution to Syrian war might not be possible', *CBC News: World*, 26 September 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/syria-aleppo-settlement-1.3778827> accessed on 2 May 2017.

10 Rainsford, Sarah, 'Syria crisis: How far do Russians support intervention', *BBC News*, Moscow, 11 October 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34498862> accessed on 2 May 2017.  
Also read Kolesnikov, Andrei, 'Do Russians Want War?' *Carnegie Moscow Centre*, 14 June 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/06/14/do-russians-want-war-pub-63743> accessed on 2 May 2017.

‘no’; but the second it would have to be ‘yes’. It is imperative for nations aspiring to influence and power to have a coherent grand strategy, one that is based on a clearly appreciating the challenges and issues that face them. Russia seems to have achieved this position after years of meandering hesitantly along the path it wanted to follow within the international community.<sup>11</sup> Even though President Putin does not formally articulate his nation’s grand strategy, the actions that Russia has so far initiated in the past 18 months or so indicate the following three objectives.

Russia has fine-tuned its grand strategy primarily to create a world of different dimensions rather the US-centred world that has existed in the post-Cold War era, thus redistributing the balance of power in the international system it would prefer. Such a change would entail many Western institutions having less international influence, especially NATO. Any uncertainty that can be created within the Western world will feed directly into this initiative. To improve its standing, Russia needs greater access to new markets and funding for exports. Creating a sufficient cash flow for the Russian treasury will mean removing any economic sanctions imposed on Russia. It also seeks to regain its influence on the newly independent nations that were earlier part of the older Soviet Union. President Putin has stated that Russia is responsible for protecting its citizens abroad. Interventions, diplomatic and coercively, will have to be viewed through this prism.<sup>12</sup>

For the past decade and more, Russia has actively tried to create the perception that the USA is gradually growing weaker and therefore a natural rebalancing of power in global geo-politics is needed. This would easily translate to the USA ceding space to Russia. This shadow boxing match is being played out in Syria both overtly and covertly. While there

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11 Akin, Andy, ‘What do we know of Russia’s Grand Strategy?’ *The Washington Post*, 2 May 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/02/what-do-we-know-about-russias-grand-strategy/?utm\\_term=.1cb27828a230](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/02/what-do-we-know-about-russias-grand-strategy/?utm_term=.1cb27828a230) accessed on 3 May 2017.

12 For an extensive analysis of Russian Grand Strategy, read, Starr, S. Fredrick, & Cornell, Svante. E., (eds), *Putin’s Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University, Washington D.C., 2014, <https://www.silkroadstudies.org/resources/1409GrandStrategy.pdf> accessed on 3 May 2017.

might be a modicum of cooperation in the Syrian War, the Russian stance on Ukraine complicates matters.<sup>13</sup> Amid the attempt at give-and-take cooperation and a common aim of enforcing a ceasefire in south-western Syria, the USA's imposition of new sanctions on Russia have soured their relationship. Russia has responded by expelling US diplomats thus showing that it wishes to up the ante in the game of one upmanship.

Russia's stance is bolstered because it has the strategic high ground in the Syrian Civil War, having demonstrated not only its willingness to support a long-term ally, but also uses the might of its rejuvenated military forces. Along with the strategic advantage, President Putin is leveraging off the chaos that seems to be surrounding a politically befuddled White House. President Trump, for all his bombast and egomania, is ill-prepared to deal with a consummate diplomatic and political master like Putin. The other factor that keeps the USA on the defensive is its inability to defeat IS in Syria as the Russia has. It has been adept at crafting its foreign policy in the past few years and the results are evident in its influential stand in the Middle-East.<sup>14</sup> Bold foreign policy initiatives that require agility are often critical in protecting national interests, especially during times of geo-political complexity. Russia retains the flexibility to shape its foreign policy 'on the run' whereas the USA is hampered by unwieldy legislative requirements.

Even though the Assad regime has, for the time being at least, been strengthened and is not in a precarious position as before, Syria doubtlessly needs a great deal of stabilisation. Also clear is that the conventional battle against IS is well into its last legs. The USA and Russia reached a ceasefire agreement on 7 July, which covers some regions of Syria. The importance of this agreement is the enhanced cooperation that it signifies between the two inimical adversaries. However, the end of the Civil War remains elusive and distant. The willingness of both the USA and Russia

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13 'Russia's Lavrov says ready to cooperate with U.S. on Syria', *Reuters*, 29 April 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-usa-idUSKBN17V07Y> accessed on 3 May 2017.

14 Freedman, Robert. O., 'Russian Foreign Policy in the Middle-East 2015-2016: Pushing on an Open Door', *Johnson's Russia List*, 3 November 2016, <http://russialist.org/russian-foreign-policy-in-the-middle-east-2015-2016-pushing-on-an-open-door/> accessed on 3 May 2017.

to collaborate has not materialised out of any altruistic approach to the Syrian Civil War, but rather from pragmatically accepting a few ground realities.

The war, in its conventional form, against IS has reached its final phase in both Iraq and Syria. The need to have a strategy for the aftermath is crucial. Going by past experience, it is certain that some kind of insurgency will prevail for at least some time after the battlefield defeat of IS and other terrorist organisations. The need to stabilise Syria becomes absolutely critical in this situation if a resurgence of IS is to be avoided. To ensure that IS will not re-emerge, as it already has shown tendencies to do so in regions where there is no government control, both the USA and Russia need to collaborate to create a comprehensive stabilisation plan.<sup>15</sup> Further, they need to ensure that it is implemented by creating a fitting environment in which to re-build the war-ravaged nation. The concern is that a number of previous attempts to cease fire and to create a stabilisation plan have failed, leading to bitter recriminations from both sides.

The ultimate objectives of the USA and Russia are at odds. The defeat of IS is only the starting point while a ceasefire is almost the end point in the putative agreement. Beyond an enforceable ceasefire, the two nations have diverging views regarding the future of Syria. The USA sees the eventual removal of President Bashar al-Assad's regime and the installation of 'democratic' transitional government that is acceptable to the opposition as a non-negotiable end-state. Whether or not the population that remains loyal to the Assad regime play a role in this transition and the emerging government is not being considered or stated. To achieve long-term stability, the USA need to plan accordingly to meet this crucial challenge.<sup>16</sup> The USA also insists on ensuring that the government in Syria, which it

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15 Weichert, Brandon J., 'Stabilizing the Situation in Syria', *The Weichert Report*, 13 July 2016, (in two parts), <https://theweichertreport.com/2016/07/13/stabilizing-the-situation-in-syria/> accessed on 3 May 2017.

16 Ackerman, Spencer, 'What's trump's plan for Syria? Five different policies in two weeks', *The Guardian*, 11 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/apr/11/donald-trump-syria-bashar-al-assad-isis> accessed on 3 May 2017.

hopes is the political solution, will be able to limit Iran's influence and reach into the Syria.

Russia on the other hand has so far indicated that it would not condone dissolving the Assad regime or removing it from power, specifically because it wants to keep a friendly regime in place in Damascus. It has also worked closely with Iran in the conflict in Syria and would not want to sacrifice their improved relations. The final objectives of USA and Russia could not be more divergent. Currently, Russia significantly influences both the Syrian government and its de facto patron, Iran, because of Russia's battlefield expertise and the support it derives from the United Nations diplomatically. However, both Syria and Iran will not accept any suggestion from Russian that they perceived is contrary to their interests. There are limits to external influence, even from Russia, when that influence does not align with national interests. For example, Syrian forces loyal to Assad have violated the ceasefire on a number of occasions to pursue offensive operations against opposition units.<sup>17</sup>

Over the months, it has become obvious that enforcing the ceasefire is easier said than done. Even though the ceasefire has succeeded at the local level, broadening it into a strategic politically agreed situation has so far not been attempted. It is also unclear whether such an attempt would bear fruit. Assad's Syrian government has now established a position of power with Russian backing, and is unlikely to concede any more to the rebel forces supported by the USA. The transitional government that is being envisaged as the first step towards stabilising the country is still to be established but remains a doubtful proposition. Supported directly by Iran, the Assad regime is resolutely attempting to maximise its territorial hold. Because this would seem an unlikely move at instituting an alternative government, stability in Syria, seems at least currently to be a far cry.

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17 Hubbard, Ben & MacFarquhar, Neil, 'New Cease-Fire Begins in Syria, but Violations Are Reported Within Hours', *The New York Times*, 29 December 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/world/middleeast/syria-cease-fire.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/world/middleeast/syria-cease-fire.html?_r=0), accessed on 3 May 2017.

## RUSSIA: TAKING CENTRE-STAGE

Russia's calculated gamble to intervene militarily in Syria seems to have paid more than normal dividends. The Middle-East had so far seemed like the private playground of the USA. With an effective intervention, Russia has catapulted itself into the same grounds. Competition for influence and decision-making is clear now. Prior to Russian intervention, the USA under Obama was fatalistic about where the Syrian Civil War was heading, believing that nothing could be done to stabilise the Middle-East, particularly Syria.<sup>18</sup>

The decision by the Obama administration in 2012, not to enforce the famous 'red line' regarding Assad's use of chemical weapons caused the Middle-East to move out of the US circle strategically. That one episode, not only questioned the will of the USA but also provided Russia with an opportunity to demonstrate its ability to come to the aid of its allies. In this geo-strategic game, Russia perceived a gap and stepped up to widen it. In an oblique manner, US reluctance to intervene in the early days of the emerging Syrian Civil War could be attributed to the Obama administration being reluctant to get involved in yet another quagmire in the Middle East. However, President Putin proved that thinking to be wrong. Military interventions need not lead to an enmeshed, long-drawn and bloody encounter. It is highly likely that Russian intervention would motivate Syria to a desired political solution.

Russia did not attempt to assist the Assad regime to regain control of the entire country. It provided military support to ensure that the regime was back on a strong base and would not be dislodged through military actions of the rebels. However, it was also ensured that the regime was not in such a strong position to be able reject the Geneva peace talks. Russia's decision to pull out militarily from the conflict revealed to President Assad that he should engage in the peace talks and hammer out a viable solution. Russia of course did promise full diplomatic support. This model of military intervention does not seem to have been considered by the USA in any of its many military operations in the past few decades. A

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18 Ben-Ami, Shlom, 'Get Ready America: Russia is Back in a Big Way in the Middle East', *The National Interest*, 13 April 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/get-ready-america-russia-back-big-way-the-middle-east-15768> accessed on 3 May 2017.

fundamental lesson in military-diplomatic initiatives in troubled regions of the world has been demonstrated. Russia has undoubtedly assumed centre-stage in the Middle-East.

Russia's strategic achievements are significant, even if they do not automatically lead to solving the complex situation politically. At a fundamental level, the intervention saved the Syrian regime of President Assad, who had first been a steadfast ally of the Soviet Union and then Russia. From a Russian security perspective, this alliance has ensured that the Russian military now has a semi-permanent airbase at Latakia and a naval facility in Tartus. These two military bases will permit Russia to challenge the unfettered control of the Mediterranean by Western nations. The eastern part could well become a Russian-controlled enclave.

Russian forces in the region are small compared to the greater US military machine deployed in the Middle-East. However, Vladimir Putin has the unfaltering attention of the national leaders in the region. Russia has assiduously cultivated the image of an ally willing to assist regional friends, even if it means getting involved in a military campaign.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, the Middle-East has started to view the USA as a war-weary power wanting to extricate itself from the mire that it has created. There is a sense that the USA now wants to cut its losses and go home. Moscow's exercise in public relations has been a carefully crafted success.

In the Middle-East is a subtle, but clearly noticeable shift in the pecking order. The change can perhaps be traced back to the now infamous 'red line' threat regarding the use of chemical weapons that the USA had made to the Syrian government. The inability of the USA to back up the stern words with concerted action began its decline in influence in the region that continues. At this juncture Russia took over the lead status so that the leaders of the Middle-Eastern nations now look first to Russia when they require support to improve their position and further their interests. The senior counsel of Iran visited Russia early this year to discuss matters of mutual interest. The deputy crown prince and defence minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Muhammad bin Salman, was in Moscow in May to boost bilateral relations and increase cooperation in oil production and

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19 Torossian, Ronn, 'Russia and Putin Are Winning the Public Relations War', *Observer*, 11 November 2015, <http://observer.com/2015/11/russia-and-putin-are-winning-the-public-relations-war/> accessed on 3 May 2017.



refinement.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps the most important statement to emerge from this summit came from both nations acknowledging that they fundamentally disagree about the future of Syria. No breakthrough was achieved, but they optimistically appraised that it may be possible for both nations to work towards stability in the region.

Israel has viewed the Russian military intervention as a stop-gap measure that will slow and may even prevent a combination of Iran, Hezbollah and the Assad regime from dictating the future course of action in Syria. Such a course would have been inimical to Israel's security interests. Therefore, Israel has unreservedly coordinated all its activities at the Syrian border with the Russian military. It is hoped that the Russians will reciprocate by continuing to secure the border at the Golan Heights and keep Iranian forces away.<sup>21</sup> Since UN observers have withdrawn from that area, Israel hopes that Russia will guarantee the status quo.

Russia's strategy for the region goes far beyond stabilising the Assad regime. It seeks to create at least an informal agreement with the USA about a common approach to end the Syrian conflict. Russia believes that a jointly negotiated peace deal in Syria could lead to further understanding about more substantial issues such as the conflict in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed by Western nations. If the USA negotiates with Russia for peace, it will also have meant that the Western coalition recognises the Assad regime. However, other than activating de-confliction measures, the USA had steadfastly refused to be drawn into any kind of joint negotiations. With the Washington administration changing, the outcome

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20 Wood, Josh, 'Saudi Arabia's Muhammad bin Salman meets Putin in Moscow', *The National*, 30 May 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/saudi-arabia-s-mohammed-bin-salman-meets-putin-in-moscow-1.40212> accessed on 31 May 2017.

21 Frantzman, Seth, J., 'Despite Syria, Israel-Russia Relations are the Warmest in History', *The Jerusalem Post*, 25 March 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Despite-Syria-Israel-Russia-relations-are-the-warmest-in-history-485062> accessed on 3 May 2017.

of the negotiations between the two nations have changed in favour of Russia.<sup>22</sup>

## COLD WAR REDUX?

The intervention in Syria was a calculated strategy by Russia within a theatre where the USA has traditionally dominated militarily. The move not only indicated a resurgent Russia, but also challenged the USA. First, it gradually restricted the space for unrestricted freedom of action for the US-led coalition's military activities. Russia's initial success in its intervention and its willingness to stay the course assisted in greatly enhancing its political influence. The USA had been attempting to contain the Syrian crisis for nearly four years before the Russian intervention in September 2015. The decisiveness of Russian military action sharply contrasts the hesitancy displayed by the USA. There was only possible outcome after that: Russian influence is growing as the USA is being sidelined by the nations of the region.<sup>23</sup>

While the Obama US administration continued to vacillate when debating the value of a fully-fledged military intervention, President Putin changed the landscape of Syria in a few months of concerted military campaign. The USA was forced to ensure that its erratic military actions did not threaten the Russian campaign. This decision was based on US reluctance to confront the Russian military, even accidentally, and thus ceded the initiative in Syria to Russia.<sup>24</sup> Over the next few months, Russia ensured that the Assad regime had been made immune to any kind of

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- 22 Lamothe, Dan & Birnbaum, Michael, 'Trump and Putin Are Discussing Military Cooperation in Syria', *The Washington Post*, 16 February 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/16/trump-and-putin-are-discussing-military-cooperation-in-syria-mattis-says-russia-must-prove-itself-first/?utm\\_term=.8ff3395aad9](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/02/16/trump-and-putin-are-discussing-military-cooperation-in-syria-mattis-says-russia-must-prove-itself-first/?utm_term=.8ff3395aad9), accessed on 3 May 2017.
- 23 Hannah, John, 'Russia's Middle East Offensive', *Foreign Policy*, 13 September 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/13/russias-middle-east-offensive/> accessed on 3 May 2017.
- 24 Al-Qassab, Abdulwahab, 'The American-Russian Strategic Competition in the Arab Middle East', *Arab Center Washington D.C.*, 23 March 2017, [http://arabcenterdc.org/policy\\_analyses/us-ru-competition/](http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/us-ru-competition/) accessed on 3 May 2017.

pressure from the USA. However, Syria is only one part of the changing scenario. The geo-strategic reality is that, irrespective of the manner in which the Syrian Civil War gets resolved and the path of the peace process, the Latakia airbase in Syria will remain Russian indefinitely. Stand-offs and misunderstandings become unavoidable when two independent military forces attempt to dominate the same battlespace. The most important achievement of the intervention, from a Russian perspective, is that it has brought the Kremlin a viable and equal 'seat at the table' the means of resolving the conflict.<sup>25</sup> Russia has managed to be heard again, despite the sanctions that followed after it annexed Crimea.<sup>26</sup> Russia has been motivated by pragmatic self-interest and its actions should not be confused with pursuing honour or even standing by a friend in trouble.

## CONCLUSION

Currently, Russia is far from carrying the imperial sway that the Soviet Union once held over the Middle-East. A single, albeit spectacularly successful, military intervention should neither return great influence without any further effort nor deny that Russia lacks the wherewithal to sustain a long-term military campaign far beyond its immediate borders. President Putin has proven himself a hard pragmatist. His deployment of military forces in Syria has approached brilliance; he ensured that each operation was based on specific and achievable objectives. Consequently, he transformed Russia into the focal point and central player in the Middle-East. This move also geo-politically challenged the USA and its allies especially at a time when it was enduring a particularly contentious Presidential election. The USA is now left with little option but to redraw its strategy in Syria.

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25 Matthews, Owen, Moore, Jack & Sharkov, Damien, 'How Russia Became the Middle East's New Power Broker', *Newsweek*, 9 February 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/how-russia-became-middle-east-s-new-power-broker-554227> accessed on 3 May 2017.

26 Murskyi, Mykola, 'Syria is not Ukraine', *The National Interest*, 24 October 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/syria-not-ukraine-18168> accessed on 5 May 2017.

Officially, the Russian intervention is restricted to the conduct of a composite air campaign with a very small number of special forces on the ground. However, reports have sporadically surfaced of Russian fighters playing a more enhanced role in ground combat than the Kremlin would admit. Sources also report that such fighters are contractors or mercenaries hired by private companies rather than regular Russian troops. Even though they do not have any official status, it is claimed that they receive the privileges normally available to serving soldiers. These speculations continue with the media emphasising that these 'contractors' fly to Syria on Russian military transport aircraft and are treated in Russian military hospitals when they are injured.<sup>27</sup> As yet, the count of casualties is unavailable although Russian authorities do acknowledge some combat deaths among the serving personnel.

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27 Tsvetkova, Maria & Zverev, Anton, 'Ghost soldiers: the Russians secretly dying for the Kremlin in Syria', *Reuters World News*, 3 November 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-insight-idUSKBN12Y0M6> accessed on 5 May 2017.

## CHAPTER 9

# A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT IN SYRIA?

*As the bombs continue to fall on Aleppo, a new reality is descending on Syria: the long-held belief that the conflict there will only end with a political solution might not hold true.*

-Derek Stoffel<sup>1</sup>

It has long been accepted that all conflicts are extensions of political contests and therefore, lasting solutions to wars and conflicts need to be political. In other words, there can never be something called a ‘military solution’ to wars fought in the military realm. Fundamental to war is firstly that both its causes and their solutions remain innately political, and secondly, the nature of war is constant; it does not change. An important, seemingly contradictory factor, is that no two specific conflicts are the same: they are not fought for the same reasons irrespective of the politics in that their character and conduct will be distinctive. At the operational level, the intensity and tempo of each war, campaign and battle will be unique.

In the Syria before the Civil War, the Alawites, who comprise only 12 per cent of the population, controlled the levers of power despite being only one-sixth of Syria’s Sunni population. Since the other minorities, the Christians, Ismailis and Druze, do not fear being overwhelmed by a Sunni majority, about one-third of the population continues to support the

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1 Stoffel, Derek, ‘World powers admit political solution to Syrian war might not be possible’, *CBC News*, 26 September 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/syria-aleppo-settlement-1.3778827> accessed on 20 May 2017.

Assad regime.<sup>2</sup> The battlelines in Syria are drawn on these sectarian lines. Support for both Sunni-led militia and the predominantly Shia-oriented regime have come for across Syria's borders. The Sunni regimes supporting the rebel forces lack unity of purpose. Turkey and the USA believe that a democratic form of government is the answer to Syria's turmoil, while the autocratic regimes of Saudi Arabi, Qatar and other Sunni-states are lukewarm about the idea.

On the other hand, Syria-Iran relations strengthened greatly after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The countries signed a defence pact in 2006<sup>3</sup> and Iran assisted Assad by sending its Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps to Syria and also trained a 100 000-strong National Defence Force. This compensated for the depletion of the Syrian army's through attrition and defections. Equally importantly, Iran backed Hezbollah to help the Syrian government forces retake the territory lost to the rebels. The cost to Iran is estimated to have been about \$US6 million a year.

## SYRIAN POLITICAL SITUATION

In the heat and confusion of the Civil War, no serious thought was given to what Syria would evolve into after the war had been fought, won and lost. The Syrian Civil War has been one of the longest in recent times, even though external forces, mainly Western nations, intervened at an early stage themselves. The reason for the conflict continuing for so long in these circumstances could be attributed to the opposition not being united and the arrival of the Islamic jihadist groups. Once IS arrived, the Western military forces were more focused on defeating and containing it rather than concentrating on ousting Assad. The Civil War was perhaps the most complex that has developed in recent times with a large number of participants, and with no two groups having the same objective. For the same reason, although a tenuous ceasefire has been in force, peace cannot

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2 'Syria's beleaguered Christians', *BBC Middle East*, 25 February 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22270455> accessed on 6 May 2017.

3 Lennard, Natasha, 'Whatever happened to the Iran-Syria defense pact?' *Salon*, 10 September 2013, [http://www.salon.com/2013/09/09/whatever\\_happened\\_to\\_the\\_iran\\_syria\\_defense\\_pact/](http://www.salon.com/2013/09/09/whatever_happened_to_the_iran_syria_defense_pact/) accessed on 6 May 2017.

be assumed to have been achieved because many stumbling blocks remain to stem its progress.

Iran and Saudi Arabia continue in dispute over the way to resolve the war. Their proxy fighters are active on the ground in Syria with both sides potentially scuttling any initiative of the other. Turkey, having stood by for two years and allowed the Civil War to escalate by permitting the flow of fighters into Syria has now embarked on its own private war with the Kurds. Even though their stronghold at Aleppo has fallen to government forces, the Sunni opposition remains unwilling to compromise and accept a negotiated settlement that involves President Assad. The fragile ceasefire is a powder keg, which can be blown up by any of the various factions involved in the conflict.

The ceasefire has not been completely honoured by all parties. The peace deal brokered by the USA and Russia in early September 2016 was declared non-binding by President Bashar al-Assad. It was meant to expedite cooperation between the USA and Russia to target IS; to reinvigorate the political dialogue; to cease the fighting between all parties and thus facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Syrian people; and gradually move towards a lasting peace.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the ceasefire appeared to provide the Syrian regime the opportunity to regain control of lost territories. The USA stands to lose the most in this failure since it has not been able to oust Assad from power nor reach an internationally acceptable end-state. It cannot nonetheless risk escalating nor neutralise the Syrian military forces since they are directly supported by Russian forces. The Obama administration has diminished the capacity of the USA to bargain by not having credibly threatening to use force after having drawn a number of 'red lines' in the sand. This has lowered the USA overall US authority. Successfully bringing the conflict to an end and establishing a long-term political approach seems distant.

The European Union (EU) attempted to step into the negotiating process when the ceasefire was seem to fail. Although putatively intending to discuss the situation in the Ukraine, a meeting of the Normandy Group

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4 Verbakel, Derek, 'After Collapsed US-Russia Agreement, Advantage Assad', *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 21 October 2016, <http://www.ipcs.org/article/iran/after-the-collapsed-us-russia-agreement-advantage-assad-5159.html> accessed on 6 May 2017.

in Berlin on 19 October 2016 focused entirely on the Syrian crisis. This was more a reaction to the rising tide of migration to Europe, caused mainly by the Syrian Civil War. The EU demanded that Russia establish an immediate ceasefire and end the siege then in progress at Aleppo.<sup>5</sup> This move was meant to motivate humanitarian aid to the people of the besieged city being provided. Russia has not openly welcomed the EU intrusion into what it believes is a bilateral issue between itself and the USA. The demands from the EU would have only muddied the waters further and delayed any meaningful movement progress to a lasting solution.

## RUSSIA'S VERSION OF A NEW ORDER

In November 2016, Russia brought its only aircraft carrier, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, to the Mediterranean Sea, escorted by a modest fleet through the English Channel. Even though the carrier stayed on station for only a few months, its appearance was nothing short of a show of force and to indicate clearly Russia's broader strategic ambitions. The Syrian intervention was undertaken to achieve national objectives that have been prioritised by President Putin himself. However, Syria is only a part of a larger Russian campaign to reshape the Middle-East in a manner that better fits Russia's ambitions.<sup>6</sup> The USA has been the dominant political and military power in the region since the downfall of the British Empire more than seven decades ago. Russia is pragmatic about not having the power structure necessary to replace the USA in the region. However, by enhancing its influence in the Middle-East, Russia is hoping to alter it to a multipolar region.

Since the USA displayed its military might and the will to use it in the 1991 Gulf War, the Middle-East has lapsed into insurgencies and

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5 Schultz, Teri, 'EU leaders criticise Russian role in Syria, but no new sanctions', *DW Akademie*, 15 December 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/eu-leaders-criticize-russian-role-in-syria-but-no-new-sanctions/a-36789351> accessed on 6 May 2017.

6 Miller, Chris, 'Russia Sets Out to Bring the Middle East under New Order', *YaleGlobal Online*, 8 November 2016, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/russia-sets-out-bring-middle-east-under-new-order> accessed on 6 May 2017.



terrorism. At the same time, the USA has built-up its military relations with Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The only opposition to US hegemony in the region has come consistently from Iran, mainly by supporting anti-US non-state groups. By playing an active part in the Syrian Civil War, Russia hopes to shift the balance of power in the region<sup>7</sup>. It hopes that the current situation of US-led coalition of military hegemon states attempting to contain non-state insurgent groups will transform to regional coalitions with both the USA and Russia balancing the power.

Because Russia obviously wants to influence the Middle-East more, it has tailored its geo-political strategy accordingly. Achieving this is being assisted by a war-weary USA wanting to pull back from the region. This was apparent during the tenure of the second Obama administration with its penchant to avoid military entanglements there as far as possible. The many 'red lines' that Syria crossed without the USA retaliating exemplify this policy. It was only when Russia entered the fray decisively that the USA started to actively participate in the Syrian Civil War. The subsequent hands-off approach that the USA adopted led to Iranian power in the region increasing, much to both Saudi Arabia's and Turkey's annoyance.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, Russia chose to partner with Iran as its primary ally, fundamentally to ensure that its ambition to make the Middle-East a multipolar region is achieved. This is an obvious choice since Iran is the regional power that most wants to alter the status quo. Further, Iran and Russia are aligned in continuing extensive cooperation to support of the Assad regime in Syria. This alignment has created a situation whereby the other regional power, Saudi Arabia, also wants to improve its relations with Russia.<sup>9</sup> Thus the foundation for creating a multipolar region is being carefully laid, while the USA watches on without yet choosing any

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7 For a detailed analysis of President Putin's New Order in the Middle-East and an explanation of the concept brought out in this paragraph read, Nizameddin, Talal, *Putin's New Order in the Middle East*, C. Hurst & Co Ltd., London, 2013.

8 Miller, Chris, *op cit*.

9 Katz, Mark. N. & Ibish, Hussein, 'Can Moscow Be an Effective Mideast Mediator?', *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 24 March 2017, <http://www.agsiw.org/can-moscow-effective-mideast-mediator/> accessed on 6 May 2017.

initiatives. Russia has skilfully manipulated itself into a position of being an authoritative diplomatic arbitrator in the region.

The power equation in the Middle-East is changing and the regional powers are acutely aware of it. Accordingly, they seek to maintain the status quo and not upset the fragile balance that has so far held the power. Saudi Arabia has been forced to open a dialogue with Russia to retain the status quo so that Iran will not become more influential in the region than it is. In this battle for influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Saudis have very little to offer Russia, especially considering the special relationship that Saudi Arabia and the USA share. However, Russia continues to ensure that the channels of communications with Saudi Arabia remain open along and that the flexibility it brings to diplomatic manoeuvring remains.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Turkey has also started to 'respect' Russia and its autocratic leader more and to be more willing to negotiate. As mentioned earlier, the Russia–Turkey relationship had become strained after Turkey shot down a Russian fighter aircraft. However, because Turkey realised that Russia was increasingly influential in the Syrian Civil War along with the regional powers, it apologised to Russia. The two countries have agreed to collaborate to solve the Syrian problem.<sup>11</sup> Egypt, the nation that ejected the Soviet Union from its shores in 1972, has also started to develop a favourable relationship with Russia. This reflects the role that the USA played in ousting Hosni Mubarak from power and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. Russia does not interfere in domestic politics, which suits autocratic rulers of the region. Israel, America's closest ally in the Middle-East, has also found it expedient to deal with Russia and has declined to participate in US-led Western sanctions against Russia.<sup>12</sup> Israel is

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10 Domm, Patti, 'Russia and Saudi Arabia have more reason to extend deal than just oil', *CNBC Market Insider*, 15 May 2017, <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/15/russia-and-saudi-arabia-have-more-reasons-to-extend-deal-than-just-oil.html> accessed on 18 May 2017.

11 "Putin says Russia's relationship with Turkey have completely recovered", *Reuters*, 4 May 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-putin-idUSKBN17Z1O8> accessed on 18 May 2017.

12 Pakhomov, Nikolay, 'The Russia-Israel Relationship Is Perfect Realpolitik', *The National Interest*, 23 March 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-russia-israel-relationship-perfect-realpolitik-19881> accessed on 18 May 2017.

pragmatic about having a border with Syria that Russia can now influence. Cooperation could not be more important.

In sum, Russia's ambition of breaking the US stranglehold in the Middle-East and introducing a multipolarity to the region seems to be nearing achievement.

## FALL OF ALEPPO: THE TURNING POINT

Aleppo, mainly the eastern parts, had been controlled by the rebels since 2012. However, in mid-December 2016, Syrian government forces bolstered by Russian air power recaptured virtually the entire city. Without exaggeration, this victory was the turning point in the Civil War that had until then ground down to a stalemate of attrition. By the time this victory was being crafted, the balance of power in the region had already shifted in favour of Russia. By ensuring that, within a year of its intervention, most major Syrian towns were back in government hands, and Russia had sidelined the USA and its allies. Between October 2105 and August 2016, high-ranking officials from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Turkey had held meetings with President Putin.<sup>13</sup> With a focused but limited intervention, Putin has been able to make Russia the central power in the Middle-East decision making and also consolidated its influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

The Syrian government has been reinvigorated by the fall of Aleppo and the morale of the pro-government forces has been substantially boosted. It is certain that they will attempt to continue the war to regain more territory. However, a military resolution to the war is not a possibility.<sup>14</sup> Along with the pro-government forces, the rebel forces are also unlikely to accept a peace-deal that would permit Basher al-Assad to remain in power. Even though Aleppo has been lost, this stand is unlikely

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13 Shabaneh, Gassan Dr., 'Putin's Moment in the Middle East', *Aljazeera Centre for Studies*, 30 November 2015, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2015/10/20151019115125523394.html> accessed on 18 May 2017.

14 Segberg, Klaus Prof., 'No (military) solutions for the Syrian conflict', *Centre for Global Politics*, 5 October 2016, <https://www.global-matters.org/2016/10/no-military-solutions-for-the-syrian-conflict/> accessed on 18 May 2017.

to be changed. The capture of Aleppo may be critical in the on-going conflict but is not a tipping point that could be peacefully resolved.

## WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

It has been reported that President Trump has decided to phase out the CIA's covert training and equipping program for the Syrian rebels that was launched in 2013. This tacitly acknowledges that the USA lacks the clout to force Basher al-Assad from power. For the past few years, it has also strategically diverted the USA from focusing on fighting IS. The uncomfortable truth is that even though IS has already suffered a conventional military defeat in Syria, Syria itself is nowhere near being stabilised.<sup>15</sup> The rebel groups that were supported by the USA were able to bring enormous pressure on the Assad regime.

The situation changed in 2015 when Iran increased its support for the government in Damascus and Russia waded in on the side of the regime. The fact that both these nations deployed their own forces (eg the Russian air force and the Iranian ground forces) in the fight made all the difference to the outcome. The USA and its regional allies were not willing to risk their own forces for the rebel cause.

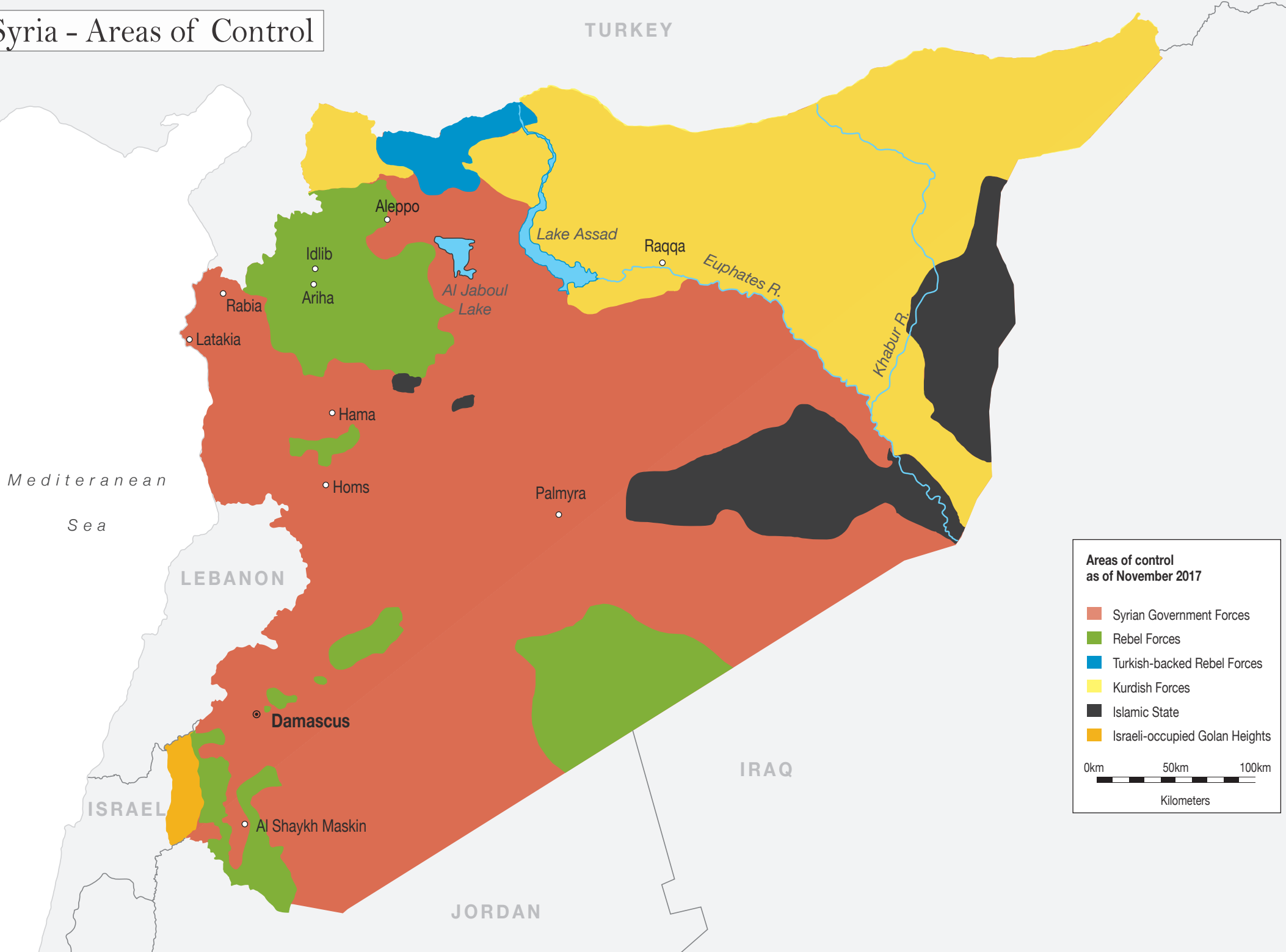
Currently, it seems that a formal end to the Civil War will be on pro-Assad terms. The emerging Russia-Iran-Syria axis is gearing up to challenge the United States. The oil-rich Gulf monarchies are foundering in the wake of this foreign policy blitzkrieg that is changing the strategic layout of the region.

The Trump administration has abandoned the US goal of coercing President Assad to abdicate, which had been the cardinal point for the previous administration for its entire tenure. This is a remarkable reversal of American foreign policy, steadfastly maintained ever since President Obama announced in August 2011 that Basher al-Assad had lost legitimacy to rule. The wheel then turned full circle as the USA attempted

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15 Speckhard, A., Shajkovci, A. & Yayla, A.S., 'Following a Military Defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq: What Happens Next after the Military Victory and the Return of Foreign Fighters?', *Journal of Terrorism Research*, International Centre for the Study of Violent Extremism, 25 February 2017, 8(1), pp.81–89, <http://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.1341> accessed on 18 May 2017.

# Syria - Areas of Control



**Areas of control as of November 2017**

- Syrian Government Forces
- Rebel Forces
- Turkish-backed Rebel Forces
- Kurdish Forces
- Islamic State
- Israeli-occupied Golan Heights

0km 50km 100km  
Kilometers



to gain diplomatic support from Russia to find a political solution in which Assad would only have a transitory role.<sup>16</sup> It was envisaged under this proposal that Assad would eventually leave power. However, the wheel has turned again and President Bashar al-Assad will continue to be in power for the foreseeable future.

The current uneasy situation poses the question, is peace possible if Assad stays? While the belief continues within the international community that Assad has only a transitory role to play after which power will devolve somewhere else, this is unlikely to eventuate. If Assad is somehow removed from power, it will repeat the mistakes that Western nations have made in Iraq and Libya. With Assad being supported within Syria, particularly by the army,<sup>17</sup> the general population fears the alternatives and would thus rather remain with the 'devil' they know. However, as long as Assad remains, the fundamental causes that created the Civil War will not have been addressed. Therefore, underlying causes of tension will remain barely hidden under the surface but could erupt at any time. In other words, the cessation of violence in favour of stability would be a farcical notion as long as the Assad regime remains.

On the other hand, assuming that removing Assad will usher in peace and stability is also questionable when one considers what sort of a government will follow. How will that government ensure sustained stability in a country that has been so bitterly divided? Even if a tenuous ceasefire and peace is achieved, how will the peaceful coexistence of the warring factions be ensured? How will the sectarian divide and mistrust that has underlain the rebellion be contained? The road ahead is uncertain, long and full of hurdles.

Irrespective of what the final political solution will turn out to be, the different factions need to communicate particularly the external patrons of these groups. Transitioning from the kind of violence that Syria has experienced for the past seven years to peace and then stability requires

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16 'White House says U. S. must accept 'political reality' in Syria', *Reuters World News*, 1 April 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-whitehouse-idUSKBN1722LV> accessed on 20 May 2017.

17 Brooks, Caroline, 'Syria: Is Peace Possible If Assad Stays?' *Eurasia Review*, 30 March 2017, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/30032017-syria-is-peace-possible-if-assad-stays-analysis/> accessed on 20 May 2017.

dedication to understand each other's viewpoint. Progress will depend on the ability and willingness of these factions to achieve a give-and-take strategy that does not favour any single group. Considering the inflexible stand that Assad has adopted, progress in this sphere has been extremely slow and minimal.

## CONCLUSION

Considering all aspects, it would seem that the Syrian Civil War has entered the beginning of its last phase. On 5 September 2017, Syrian government forces, closely coordinated with both Iranian and Russian forces broke through IS's three-year long siege of Deir el-Zour. This is a victory approaching equal importance to capturing Aleppo, thus demonstrating the increased capability of the pro-regime military forces. The capture of the city marks the completion of a logistical supply line from Iran, through Iraq, Syria, to Lebanon. This line would provide the Hezbollah fighters direct access that bypasses any disruption by Israeli. This freedom, at the same time, brings with it the potential of further conflict with Israel, yet another conflict looming large in the Middle-East.



# CONCLUSION

## A RESURGENT RUSSIA

*Nation state as a fundamental unit of man's organized life has ceased to be the principal creative force: International banks and multinational corporations are acting and planning in terms that are far in advance of the political concepts of the nation-state.*

-Zbigniew Brzezinski,  
*Between Two Ages: The Technetronic Era, 1971.*

*If Syria is to rise from the ashes it needs a united Arab world which has one thing on its agenda, not the falling of a dictator for we have seen many of those fall, but the re-emergence of a prosperous Arab nation, one that is not reliant on foreign aid but is self-sustained and set on its way to become powerful once again.*

-Ayesha Taryam

### THE MYTH OF US SUCCESS IN INTERVENTIONS

The USA has been involved in military interventions, both warranted and unwarranted, ever since World War II when it emerged as the self-proclaimed champion of democracy with claims to be the number one power in the world. Its military has been deployed around the globe at will, without being sensitive to host nations who have been coerced into accepting foreign forces in their territory. The collapse of the Soviet Union eased this process further, since the world became unipolar in the decades that followed.

While the US establishment believes that its military interventions in the Middle-East and elsewhere have been successful, this might indeed be warranted if one believes that the fundamental aim of the US-led interventions was rather to destabilise the region. Further, it seems that the approach used is to remove regimes that are not friendly to the USA and do acquiesce. From the evidence alone of the US-led interventions in the Middle-East for the past three decades, its approach will have to be considered to have failed. The military campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya also exemplify this harsh truth.

Even some analysis finds that such criticism of US intervention is harsh, it should consider that, even during the 2016 election debates, the need to establish a 'no-fly zone' inside Syria was being emphasised by the Democratic Party candidate and former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. Presumably this was needed to influence the Syrian government and their Russian allies. The questions that arise from the US-led interventions in the Middle-East and Afghanistan are simple: What has been achieved by Western forces campaigning across the region during the past 16 years? Has the world become a safer place because of such military campaigns? The answers are also simple: nothing of note for the first and a resounding no to the second question.

## THE CONSPIRACY THEORY

During 2001, when Afghanistan was invaded and now, when the wars are still on-going, the area has been turned into a breeding ground for violent extremism, thus spawning the most virulent form of religious extremism the world has yet seen. The entire region is now strategic territory that no entity controls; not the description of diplomatic success. Therefore, the next question is, why are the USA and its allies providing so much 'treasure and lives' in the region, especially when the extremist groups forming there do not pose a direct threat to Western nations? One conspiracy is that destroying the rule of law, administered by autocratic rulers, who then permit these nations to lapse into chaos and confusion, brought on by in-fighting and rampant sectarianism, were pre-planned. Even though the nations so destroyed had uniformly been ruled by autocratic rulers, the US-led Western nations have been discriminating 'good' autocrats (ie pro-Western rulers), from 'bad' autocrats (ie rulers

inimical to the Western nations) and their actions. When the actions of the Western world for the past three decades are carefully analysed, it becomes easy to believe that they all intended to diminish the status of nation-states and to create a new reality. However, there is no proof to support such a hypothesis, which must therefore be referred to as 'conspiracies'.

Irrespective of whether such a plan was conspiratorial or not, the Russian intervention in Syria was directly opposed to such a new reality to the extent of working against it. The alliance of Russia, Syria, Iran and the Hezbollah, which was forged during the initial phases of the Russian intervention, was, and continues to be improbable. That it has held together for so long is testimony to the diplomatic skills, pragmatism and a clear appreciation of all nations involved that they need to work together.

## THE US OPTIONS

At the time of my writing, the USA was definitely on the back-foot in Syria. However, it can yet become a formidable player in the Civil War if the Trump administration can manage to get its act together. So far, the USA has concentrated more on defeating IS and the last phase of this campaign is in progress. The Civil War has not stabilised fully and the USA cannot ignore it any longer. Stabilising the Civil War and getting all participants to the negotiating table is now a priority to ensure that IS and other jihadist groups do not take advantage of the instability to continue their activities.

The US options are stark and contradictory. It can either increase assisting the 'moderate' rebels that it has so far supported to overcome the Assad regime; or it can work with Russia to bring about an acceptable solution. The first option would involve further expenditure of resources and even deploying US forces on the ground, which will mean direct confrontation with both Russian and Iranian forces. For this reason, the USA is unlikely to continue equipping the rebel forces. Working together with Russia would be easier, since it desires to engage further with the USA. However, this would require the USA accepting that the Assad regime will continue. Both options will mean reversing the course that the USA has so far adopted in Syria.

If the USA enters into a negotiated settlement with Russia, it will seal the fate of the so-called 'moderate' rebels: essentially anti-Assad but non-terrorist groups. This would mean repeating the situation faced by the Kurds in Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War when the USA did not help the rebels they instigated when Saddam Hussein started genocide. The reliability of the USA as an ally will be questioned, thus leading to its rapid decline in the region. However, the USA does not have any better choices, at least for the moment. The moderate rebels will be overwhelmed and subsumed by other more virulent ant-West groups so that religious extremists will dominate the opposition to the Assad regime.

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE RUSSIAN INTERVENTION

Russia is now ruled by a nominally elected autocrat, President Putin, whose primary objective is to restore some of the lost status and influence to his nation. The rise of President Putin to absolute power can be attributed to US actions following the Soviet break-up in the early 1990s. Russia was treated with very little respect by the USA while it was at the lowest point in its downfall, actions that can be compared to kicking someone while they are down. The USA also facilitated the expansion of NATO, hostile to everything that Russia stood for, to the very doorstep of Russia. This breached a tacit agreement that the Soviet and US leadership had come to during the last days before the eventual break-up of the Soviet Union. The nation was humiliated and waited for an opportunity to get even.

From a US perspective, the Russian military intervention in Syria was as much a surprise as it was a direct threat to US hegemony. The message was loud and clear: the USA did not run the world anymore. Even so, in the initial phases of the Russian campaign, Western nations believed tacitly that it was bound to fail and that President Putin would withdraw. This was an opinion formed because of the disbelief that Russia had been audacious enough to take such a stance that directly confronted US objectives. The USA had already declared that President Basher al-Assad must be removed from power, something that was completely opposed by Russia. The miscalculation on the part of the USA was that they believed Russia would provide only materiel and moral support and not interfere by deploying military forces. The USA failed to appreciate that Russia entered

Syria because it could not afford not to be; it had no choice because its national security was at stake.

From theorising that Western nations foster chaos to effect a new order not based on nation-states, Russia believes that the next logical step will be a US-led destabilisation of Iran and then indirectly, Russia. President Putin has never tried to conceal that Russia is in Syria to protect its own national interests. Russia's actions indicates that it will compromise when required with any of the entities involved in the Middle-East, particularly in Syria. Its pursuing its national interest rather than any ideology, is a winning attitude. However, Russia's compromising would also limited by the red lines that it will draw for itself, while retaining sufficient flexibility to deal with what emerges. Russia will ensure that President Assad, and Syria as a state, will remain intact, with some minor territories in the north and east being controlled by the USA and Turkey. To Russia, this would be one red line, which cannot be crossed without repercussions.

The clear message being send to the USA is that the world is no longer its personal oyster. The confusion prevailing at the time of my writing results from the USA still not relating to this message. It can only be hoped that eventually it will acknowledge it so that stability will then evolve in Syria. The US-led Western coalition considers the conflict in Syria as being fought against Russia because of palpable discomfort about the success of Russia's military intervention. It is also possible that the ulterior motive of isolating and destabilising Russia will be exposed in the process of arriving at a negotiated settlement in Syria. Western nations, unused to being sidelined in international political challenges, have started consider why they should 'deal' with Russia, and the wherewithal to do so. The possibility that the world and particularly the Middle-East is moving rapidly towards a multipolar environment is a bitter pill for the Western world to swallow.

In the Middle-East, the world has already stopped playing the game according to US rules. Here again, the USA, acting under its hubris, seems unaware of, or is unwilling to, accept the changing circumstances and the reality on the ground. However, one fact has become clear ever since Russia intervened militarily: the US does not like Russia charting an independent foreign policy that questions the policy decisions that the US has already made. The US will now have to negotiate with Russia to solve

the Syrian Civil War and any future international crisis that might emerge. The world is becoming accustomed to being multipolar, once again.

Russia has demonstrated its resurgent military power through its Syria campaign. However, it faces a number of challenges that will detract from any concerted effort to regain global power status. Russia's economy has been severely affected by the prevailing low oil prices and sanctions imposed by Western nations following its annexation of Crimea. Russia's economy faces sustained recession and the government has been forced to reduce military spending by six per cent annually for the next three years. Obviously, this reduction will also require reducing its military commitments. Further, Russia also faces a long-term economic decline because its population is ageing rapidly, thus leading to a demographic crisis.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE CIVIL WAR

The capture of Aleppo by government forces can be counted as the beginning of the end of the Syrian Civil War, but it is far from over. However, it was the biggest victory for pro-Assad forces since the beginning of the conflict. Depending on the perspective that one takes, with the capture or liberation of Aleppo, the rebels' hopes of achieving a military triumph over the Assad regime become an impossible dream. Accordingly, their influence at the negotiating table will also be considerably reduced. Because the rebels no longer threaten the Assad regime, keeping the rebellion alive is lost.

With the Assad regime now firmly established to hold on to power, at least for the time being, it is possible that Syria's foreign allies, Iran, Russia and Hezbollah, will start to scale back their assistance. Russia definitely will look to exit from the actual conflict, since it has been obvious from the beginning that it had only catered for a limited intervention. It will limit its resource commitment while continuing to maintain its leverage and influence in Syria and broadly in the region. Russia wants to settle the conflict peacefully while it holds the predominant position of influence in the region. That would be an achievement to crown the glory of its military success.

At this juncture comes a seemingly imponderable question: will the Syrian opposition, the rebels or anti-Assad forces, collapse completely or

will the conflict morph into another form of violence? Will IS and other religious extremist groups lead the fight to a stalemate and then recoup and emerge in other forms? Russia will be uncomfortable with these options and would want to 'defeat' any opposition to the government. However, if past history is anything to go by, the likelihood is that a long-drawn guerrilla warfare will replace the direct conflict that has so far characterised the Civil War. This assessment is made after considering that most Syrian rebels are not terrorists or religious extremists. With the fall of Aleppo, the rebels have only two choices: first, to lay down arms and end the struggle, and second, to continue the struggle to rid the country of the autocratic Assad regime.

The high possibility of retribution after they have laid down arms will invariably make the rebel forces opt to continue. The only way forward would then be to adopt classic guerrilla warfare strategies and tactics. This is the most likely, because Russian air power will be less effective and the countryside will be controlled by the rebels' guerrilla forces. This is the biggest threat to Russia's sense of victory and achievement. More importantly, an entrenched guerrilla war in Syria is highly likely to degenerate into another Afghanistan for Russia. President Putin will avoid being embroiled in such an insurgency at all costs.

## AND THE WAR CONTINUES ...

Over the course of the past nearly seven years of civil war, foreign nations involved in the conflict have changed their stance to suit national imperatives. For example, Turkey has focused its foreign policy in Syria to deny any leeway for the Kurds to achieve their ambition of an autonomous territory. It has even apologised to Russia to reconcile with the current strong man of the region. Turkey initiated this action was with only one aim in mind: to ensure that its southern border is secure and not controlled by Kurds.

After seven years of war, the Syrian economy is in dire straits. Nevertheless, because Assad has been able to offer a modicum of economic stability to the areas that are government controlled, this could induce liberated rebel-held areas to support his regime. There will have to be enormous post-conflict rebuilding to bring Syria back to some semblance of normality. This will depend almost completely on foreign

aid including physical infrastructural support. The outcome can already be visualised: Iran will easily increase its influence over the nation.

Iran is now core to the future of Syria. The Assad government will now persevere and its attempt to regain more territories will continue to foment unrest. With Iran's implicit support, the government will not surrender any land. At the same time, Turkey has already adopted an uncompromising stand on the Kurdish issue. The combination of these two factors makes it clear that Syria faces long-term instability. In such a situation, where the nation will continue to be a hotbed of unrest and internal conflict, the distinct possibility is that IS will re-emerge.

What has been achieved, other than the destruction of a once-prosperous country that boasts having the two oldest continually inhabited cities in the world?



## POSTSCRIPT

Since the manuscript was finished in late 2017 and even though the main protagonists have declared that the IS has been defeated, bringing the Syrian Civil War to an end has not happened. There are far too many factions fighting the Syrian Government and each other to believe that the civil war is over. However, after seven years of bloody conflict, the successes and failures of the intervening forces can be clearly seen, especially since one was the US-led Western alliance and the other the Russia-led pro-Assad coalition. The strategic objectives of both the groups were diametrically opposed. The Western alliance went into Syria in 2011 in support of the rebels opposed to the Assad regime. They initiated a build-up of opposition as an alternative to the Assad regime for an eventual take-over. Regime change was a clear aim.

Similarly, the strategy, concepts of operations, tactics and equipment employed by the two groups were also very different. The US-led alliance walked into a morass of political confusion, different countries in the alliance supporting different local groups who were themselves not aligned with each other. The local groups fighting the Assad Government had their own wheel barrows to push with inimical objectives to others. Subsequently with the emergence of the IS as a direct threat, the removal of the Assad regime would go on the backburner.

In complete contrast, Russia did not have any political baggage to carry when it intervened in the Syrian Civil War. Their objective was very clear—Assad was an ally of long-standing and he was not going to be allowed to fall. Russia viewed the Western intervention as yet another pre-calculated ‘regime change operation’. This was a case of Russia demonstrating to the world that it would stand by any of its friends in need. Even as it initiated military operations, Russia was quick to create a coalition with Iran and Hezbollah along with Shia militia groups to ensure that a surface conflict was also launched. Russia provided the air power necessary to turn the tide and deployed only minimal ground forces. Further, Russia did not attempt to distinguish between the IS and other rebel groups since the fundamental objective was to ensure the survival of the Assad regime.

## *In the Bear's Shadow*

Anyone trying to overthrow the Syrian Government became a legitimate target.

Russia's strategic gains can be easily listed at the end of a two-year campaign.

- The Assad regime is now secure—it controls all the major cities of the country and will soon be in control of most of its territory.
- Russia dominates the Astana peace process, which is the most active initiative to resolve the conflict.
- Moscow has reemerged as the major player in the Middle-East and regained significant stature in the region that had been lost since the collapse of the Soviet Union.
- The Syrian port of Tartus has been handed over to Russia, along with the transfer for 49 years with a clause for its automatic renewal for 25 years at a time. The plan was agreed by Moscow and Damascus on 18 January 2018.<sup>1</sup>

In comparison, the Western alliance has shelved the regime-change initiative since it was an abject failure. More importantly, USA has lost all political influence in Syria and diluted its influence within the broader Middle-East.

The recent talks at Sochi, aimed at finding an acceptable solution to the Syrian challenge involved most of the regional nations. After the failure of the earlier Geneva talks, the participation of a majority of the nations is a welcome step forward. The Sochi peace process has been the first one to have some positive outcome with all belligerent parties meeting at the end on a broad, but common ground where competing self-interests remain.. Russia and Turkey also managed to push through a joint statement, which is critical to continue the efforts to find a real and acceptable solution. The statement read in part, 'To that end we agreed to form a constitutional committee comprising the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic delegation along with wide-represented opposition delegation for drafting

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1 Jones, Bruce, 'Russia approves expansion of naval facility in Syria', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 10 January 2018, London, p. 7.

## *Appendix: Chronology of the Russian Intervention In Syria*

of a constitutional reform as a contribution to the political settlement under UN auspices in accordance with Security Council Resolution 2254.<sup>2</sup>

The desire for a global, rather than a regional, solution was evident with the invitation to both UN and the European Union to attend future meetings. The main part of the Sochi statement was that there was irrevocable support for preserving the territorial integrity of the Syria. The Sochi meeting and the decisions that were made were carefully crafted and stage managed to indicate that is not the West, led by the USA that makes all international decisions of consequence. Russia, supported by Turkey and Iran emerged as the critical player in the Syrian conflict, a fact that does not sit well with the Western alliance still involved in the Syrian Civil War.

Very clearly Russian President Vladimir Putin remains the most important individual in determining the future of Syria.

Sanu Kainikara  
APDC, Canberra  
February 2018

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2 As quoted in Yahya, Harun, 'One Step Closer To A Resolution In Syria – OpEd', *Eurasia Review*, 08 February 2018, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/08022018-one-step-closer-to-a-resolution-in-syria-oped/>? Accessed on 14 February 2018.



# CHRONOLOGY OF THE RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

## Initial Phase (October 2015)

*30 September 2015:* The initial air strikes targeted rebel positions in al-Rastan, Talbiseh and Zafaraniya in Homs province; al-Tilol and al-Hmer in Quneitra province; Aydoun in the outskirts of Salamiya; and Deer Foul between Hama and Homs.<sup>3</sup>

*1 October 2015:* A series of air strikes on IS positions in territories around Raqqa, the de facto capital of IS.<sup>4</sup> This is significant in that these strikes could be considered a sop to the criticism that Russia was only targeting anti-Assad rebels and not initiating any action against the IS.

*2 October 2015:* In the morning, four sorties were launched against IS positions in the ancient city of Syriac and on the Teefor-Palmyra highway. [This highway has also been reported as T4 highway.] Reports indicated that an IS command centre was destroyed near Syriac and a convoy disrupted on the highway. Almost immediately after the air strikes, the Syrian Army pushed IS forces out of the town of Mheen after a vigorous fight that killed 18 militants. The Syrian forces were able to regain control of the main road.<sup>5</sup> The Russian Air Force also targeted the Al-Nusra Front in al-Rastan and Talbiseh in Homs and also in a number of towns in the

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3 Payne, Ed; Starr, Barbara; & Cullinane, Susannah, *op cit*.

4 'Russia jett strike Islamic State in northern Syria: al-Mayadeen TV', *op cit*.

5 Fadel, Leith, 'Russian Air Force Destroys a Large ISIS Convoy in East Homs Amid the Syrian Army's Counter-Attack', *Al-Masdar News*, 3 October 2015, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-air-force-destroys-a-large-isis-convoy-in-east-homs-amid-the-syrian-armys-counter-attack/> accessed on 23 February 2016.

Hama province. The Syrian Air Force joined the air strikes against the Al-Nusra in Jisr al-Shughur.<sup>6</sup>

On the same night, 11 sorties were carried out over Raqqa targeting the electricity grid and another five strikes in the Deir ez-Zor province against IS concentrations.<sup>7</sup> Two strikes destroyed both the IS barracks in Tabaqa military airbase and an arms/weapons supply depot in Al-'Ajrawi Farms. The IS primary headquarters in the Tabaqa National Hospital was also targetted and heavily damaged.<sup>8</sup>

*3 October 2015:* There were indications that Iranian ground forces and Hezbollah fighters were preparing a major offensive in conjunction with Russian air strikes.<sup>9</sup> It was also reported that nine IS positions around Raqqa had been bombed as per a Russian ministry of defence press release. Four sorties were also carried out against Al-Nusra Front strongholds and supply convoys.<sup>10</sup>

*7 October 2015:* Russian officials reported that four warships of the Russian Navy's Caspian Flotilla launched 26 'Kalibr' cruise missiles that hit 11 targets inside Syria. Notably, this was the first live demonstration of Russia's cruise missiles, which passed through both Iranian and Iraqi

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6 Fadel, Leith, 'Russian Air Force Begins Massive Aerial Campaign against ISIS in East Syria', *Al-Masdar News*, 2 October 2015, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-air-force-begins-massive-aerial-campaign-against-isis-in-east-syria/> accessed on 23 February 2016.

7 *ibid.*

8 Varghese, John, 'Syria: 12 Isis terrorists killed in Raqqa as Russian jettison its de facto capital', *International Business Times*, 2 October 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.in/syria-12-islamic-state-terrorists-killed-raqqa-russian-jets-pounds-isis-de-facto-capital-648924> accessed on 23 February 2016.

9 Dagher, Sam & Fitch Asa, 'Iran Expands Role in Syria in Conjunction With Russia's Airstrikes', *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 October 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-expands-role-in-syria-in-conjunction-with-russias-airstrikes-1443811030> accessed on 23 February 2016.

10 Karimi, Faith, 'Russia bombs Syrian targets for 4 day as international concerns grow', *CNN*, 3 October 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/03/middleeast/syria-russia-airstrikes/> accessed on 23 February 2016.

## *Appendix: Chronology of the Russian Intervention In Syria*

airspace and travelled in excess of 1500 kilometres.<sup>11</sup> Some reports quoted unnamed US officials as stating that four of the 26 cruise missiles crashed in Iran while travelling to their targets, a claim denied by Russia. Iran also denied that any missile had landed in its territory.<sup>12</sup> Both Iran and Russia said that the report was an effort by the West to start a 'psychological warfare'.

*8 and 9 October 2015:* The tempo of operations increased significantly with over 60 sorties being carried out on both days. Up to 60 IS targets were targeted and Russian defence ministry reported over 300 militants had been killed over the two days. The Russian Air Force used precision-guided munitions to attack IS command network and claimed that two senior militant commanders were killed.<sup>13</sup> However, IS militants advanced in the Aleppo region capturing a number of villages. This advance was not contested by either by the Western coalition or Russian Air force, which is surprising considering the air superiority that was prevalent for both these groups at that time.<sup>14</sup> The IS advance also targetted the rebel groups that were being attacked in the Russian offensive, dealing them mortal blows and reducing their effectiveness.

In mid-October. the anti-Assad regime targeted rebels in Aleppo by a joint offensive conducted by Russia, Syria, Iran and Hezbollah, the four major forces that were operating within Syria, to ensure the survival

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- 11 'Russian missiles hit IS in Syria from Caspian Sea', *BBC Middle East*, 7 October 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34465425> accessed on 24 February 2016. Additional analysis by Jonathan Marcus in the same News Item.
  - 12 Starr, Barbara & Diamond Jeremy, 'First on CNN: U.S. officials say Russian missiles heading for Syria landed in Iran', *CNN Politics*, 8 October 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/08/politics/russian-missiles-syria-landed-iran/> accessed on 24 February 2016.
  - 13 'Russian Air Force Hits 60 Islamic State Targets in Syria; Kills 300 Jihadis', Reuters in *The Times of India*, 9 October 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/Russian-air-force-hits-60-Islamic-State-targets-in-Syria-kills-300-jihadists/articleshow/49292491.cms> accessed on 24 February 2016.
  - 14 Karam, Zeina, & Mroue, Bassem, 'Islamic State advances near Syria's Aleppo despite Russian strikes', Associated Press in *USA Today*, 9 October 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/10/09/islamic-state-syria-aleppo-advance-russia-airstrikes/73671254/> accessed on 24 February 2016.

of Bashar al-Assad and his government.<sup>15</sup> The group of journalists monitoring the Civil War stated that the rebel groups who started out opposing the Syrian government were being slaughtered by all other groups and also that Russia was predominantly attacking these groups and the IS was of only secondary importance to them. This was in keeping with the undeclared objective of the Russian intervention, which was to ensure the survival of the Assad regime.

### **November–December 2015**

In mid-November, Russia employed its long-range strategic bombers: Tu-160, Tu-95 and Tu-23M3, to fire cruise missiles on IS targets in Raqqa, Aleppo and Idlib.<sup>16</sup> By this time, the Russian Air Force contingent in Syria numbered more than 50 aircraft and started to intensify what was an already relatively intense campaign. The cruise missile attacks by the bomber force continued for a few days more with the claim that more than 600 militants had been killed in these air strikes.<sup>17</sup> However, no definitive way was available to confirm the veracity of the claims made by the government spokespersons and reported in the media.

On 24 November, a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 strike aircraft was shot down by a Turkish Air Force F-16 fighter for allegedly violating its airspace. The pilot was shot dead by rebels while descending on a parachute from the stricken aircraft. This could be considered the culmination of the gradually increasing tensions between Russia and Turkey. In response, Russia deployed additional air defence systems into the area and also started

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15 'Syria and allies Iran and Russia prepare for Aleppo offensive', *Euronews*, 14 October 2015, <http://www.euronews.com/2015/10/14/syria-and-allies-iran-and-russia-prepare-for-aleppo-offensive> accessed on 24 February 2016.

16 Cenciotti, David, '25 Russian long-range strategic bombers in action over Syria for the very first time', *The Aviationist*, 17 November 2015, <https://theaviationist.com/2015/11/17/russian-tu-22s-joined-the-syria-air-war/> accessed on 24 February 2016.

17 'Russia says eliminated 600 rebels in Syria; Lavrov, Kerry hold phone talk', *Reuters Industrials*, 20 November 2015, <http://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-russia-rebels-idINR4N13B02N20151120> accessed on 24 February 2016.



## *Appendix: Chronology of the Russian Intervention In Syria*

to 'escort' its strike aircraft with fighters.<sup>18</sup> Russia prepared to expand its military operations by opening the al-Shayrat airbase near the city of Homs, where attack helicopters had been based.<sup>19</sup> On 29 November, Russian aircraft attacked targets in the Idlib province of Syria, including in the town of Ariha that had almost six months earlier been captured by IS. These strikes also targeted the Turkistan Islamic Party's offices and some relief organisations infrastructure.<sup>20</sup>

On 8 December, Russian submarines launched cruise missiles on targets in Al-Raqqa. The first such strikes were from the Mediterranean Sea and while others intensified air strikes in Syria. Between 5 and 8 December, the Russian Air Force flew in excess of 300 sorties, attacking over 600 different targets of different types. The strike fleet was joined by the Tu-22M3 strategic bombers. This was followed by President Putin ordering, through a televised address to the forces, the destruction of any threatening target. There was some misunderstanding about one of these statements, being interpreted as Russia supporting anti-Assad forces, which was almost immediately clarified. Russia was only supporting the 'legitimate authorities of the Syrian Arab Republic.'<sup>21</sup> By mid-December, the Russian defence minister was openly stating that Russian forces would not hold back from 'reaching the Euphrates' in Syria and that, to that point, Russia had been restrained in using its military power, which

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- 18 Pitel, Laura & Beard, Nadia, 'Russia deploys advanced S-400 air defence missile system in Syria after Turkey downed one of its jets', *The Independent*, 26 November 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-deploys-advanced-s-400-air-defence-missile-system-in-syria-after-turkey-downs-one-of-its-jets-a6749041.html>, accessed on 5 December 2016.
- 19 Perfitt, Tom, 'Russia builds new base for more jets in Syria', *The Times*, 1 December 2015, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article4628231.ece>, accessed on 5 December 2016.
- 20 'Deadly 'Russian airstrike' hits market in Syria's Idlib', *MWC News*, 29 November 2015, <http://mwcnews.net/news/middle-east/55809-russian-airstrike.html> accessed on 6 April 2017.
- 21 'Putin vows "extremely tough" action on Syria threats', *BBC News*, 11 December 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35070354> accessed on 5 December 2016.

may not be the case in the future.<sup>22</sup> The Russians clearly stated that more military means would be employed 'if deemed necessary'.

On 25 December, in an interview on local television, Lt. Gen Sergey Rudskoy, Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, released some statistics: from 30 September 2015, Russian Air Force had carried out 5240 sorties over Syria of which 145 were by long-range aviation. It was also very clearly mentioned that Russia had not attacked any civilian targets in Syria. In the same interview, the general also revealed that Russian intelligence had unveiled the oil smuggling route through which Turkey was receiving IS oil.<sup>23</sup>

After nearly three months of Russian air activity, the Syrian government was sufficiently emboldened to undertake its first major ground assault in southern Syria. The offensive started on 28 December 2015 and was completed by the end of January 2016. The assault was against the southern city of Al-Shaykh Maskin that had been held by the rebel, Southern Front, since December 2014 and was marked by extremely heavy fighting.<sup>24</sup> In mid-January 2016, the Russian military replaced its cruiser, *Moskva*, with its sister ship *Varyag* off the Syrian coast, considered the flagship of the Russian naval task force. This established Russia's intention to maintain a long-term presence in the Mediterranean Sea. It is significant that the display of might and intention came immediately before the planned peace talks commenced in Geneva.<sup>25</sup>

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- 22 Solovyov, Dmitry, 'Putin — Russia ready to use "more military means" in Syria if need be: agencies', *Reuters*, 19 December 2015, <http://af.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKBN0U20IP20151219> accessed on 5 December 2016.
  - 23 'Russia Reveals Oil Smuggling Route: Turkey Gets ISIS Oil from Iraq through Zakho Checkpoint', *AWD News*, 25 December 2015 <http://awdnews.com/political/russia-reveals-oil-smuggling-route-turkey-gets-isis-oil-from-iraq-through-zakho-checkpoint>, accessed on 6 April 2017.
  - 24 Reuters, 'Syrian army backed by jets clashes with rebels holding southern town', *The Jerusalem Post*, 30 December 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/Breaking-News/Syrian-army-backed-by-jets-clashes-with-rebels-holding-southern-town-438836> accessed on 6 April 2017.
  - 25 'Russian warships make Soviet-era display of might off coast of Syria', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/22/russian-warships-make-soviet-era-display-of-might-off-coast-of-syria> accessed on 7 April 2017.

### **January–February 2016**

In January Russia deployed, for the first time, Sukhoi S-35S fighter jets equipped with 'Khibiny' electronic warfare systems to the Khmeimim airbase. Almost immediately they started to carry-out operational missions. Earlier, the Russian Syrian Air Forces had started to conduct joint operations.<sup>26</sup> On 1 February, the presence of Russian military personnel on the ground in Syria was confirmed when a Russian military 'adviser' succumbed to injuries received in the shelling of a training centre in the Homs Province.<sup>27</sup>

### **March–December 2016**

*13-20 March 2016:* Russia withdrew about 16 fixed-wing combat aircraft, mostly Su-25 fighters, from Syria, offset by an extra Su-24M fighter attack aircraft. Additional attack helicopters were also deployed to ensure adequate fire power.<sup>28</sup> Airbus Defence and Space satellite imagery reports of 20 March showed that the Russian air group had 12 Su-24Ms; three Su-30SMs; four Su-34s; three Su-35Ss; and 14 attack helicopters in its Humaymim airbase.<sup>29</sup>Formidable ground-based air defences (S-400 long-range and two Pantsyr-S short-range systems) were also deployed.

*27 March 2016:* Syrian Government recaptured the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Palmyra with concerted support from the Russian forces.<sup>30</sup> Intensive de-mining activities by the Russian forces were needed to clear the minefields planted by IS.

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26 'Syrian jest provide cover for Russian bombers in first anti-ISIS raid', *RT News*, 14 January 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/328986-syria-russia-joint-operation-isis/> accessed on 12 April 2017.

27 Nechepurenko, Ivan, 'Shelling Kills Russian Military Adviser in Syria', *The New York Times*, 5 February 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/05/world/europe/shelling-kills-russian-military-adviser-in-syria.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/05/world/europe/shelling-kills-russian-military-adviser-in-syria.html?_r=0) accessed on 12 April 2017.

28 Binnie, Jeremy & O'Connor, Sean, 'Analysis: Russian air group in Syria remains a powerful force', *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 30 March 2016, p. 6.

29 *ibid*, p. 7.

30 Shaheen, Kareem, 'Assad hails Syrian regime's capture of Palmyra from Isis', *The Guardian*, 27 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/27/syrian-regime-forces-retake-all-of-palmyra-from-isis> accessed on 14 April 2017.

## *In the Bear's Shadow*

*Early May 2016:* Russia develops a forward base near Palmyra, ostensibly for de-mining and installing air defence systems.

*12 May 2016:* Opposition fighters, mainly from Nusra Front, affiliated to al-Qaeda, capture the Alawite village of al-Zara and kidnap many civilians.<sup>31</sup>

*17 May 2016:* Stratfor reported that four Russian attack helicopters, 20 supply trucks and a Syrian MiG-25 was destroyed in attacks by IS, providing detailed satellite imagery. Although the attack theory was debunked, analysis of the satellite imagery tends to indicate that an attack did indeed occur.<sup>32</sup>

*23 May 2016:* nearly 150 people killed and at least 200 injured in a series of car bomb and suicide attacks in Jableh and Tartus, in government controlled territory that hosts Russian military bases. IS claims responsibility.<sup>33</sup>

*30 May 2016:* Russian aircraft attack the Syrian National Hospital in Idlib; at least 50 reported dead and 250 injured.<sup>34</sup>

*4 June 2016:* Russian Foreign Ministry announces that the USA asked Russia not to carry out airstrikes on al-Qaeda linked Nusra Front, labelling them 'moderate opposition'.<sup>35</sup>

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31 'Insurgents seize Syrian Alawite village, killing 19: Observatory', *Reuters World News*, 13 May 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-village-idUSKCN0Y41ME> accessed on 14 April 2017.

32 'Discerning Damage to a Crucial Syrian Airbase', *Stratfor Worldview*, 24 May 2016, <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/discerning-damage-crucial-syrian-air-base> accessed on 14 April 2017.

33 Davison, John, 'Bombs kill nearly 150 in Syrian government-held cities: monitor', *Reuters World News*, 23 May 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-latakia-idUSKCN0YE0PB> accessed on 14 April 2017.

34 Read, Russ, 'Russian Warplanes Descend on Syrian Hospitals Killing and Injuring over 250', *The Daily Caller News Foundation*, 30 May 2016, <http://dailycaller.com/2016/05/30/russian-warplanes-descend-on-syrian-hospitals-killing-and-injuring-over-250/> accessed on 14 April 2017.

35 Isachenkov, Vladimir, 'US asks Russia to not hit Nusra Front in Syria, Moscow says', *AP News*, 3 June 2016, <https://apnews.com/d5682585f9ef460aa0eb8b5d41d8a0ae/us-asks-russia-not-hit-nusra-front-syria-moscow-says> accessed on 14 April 2017.

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9 June 2016: Rebel-held town of Darayya receives first food aid since 2012. Reported that Syrian government forces bombed the town immediately after the food was distributed. The USA and France condemn the Assad regime for the attacks.<sup>36</sup>

17 June 2016: Government helicopters strike areas in opposition-held parts of Aleppo city (Katirci and Tark el-BaB), killing 15 civilians and injuring many more.<sup>37</sup>

26 June 2016: Russian and Syrian air forces strike IS-held al-Qulriyah town, killing at least 82 people including some civilians.<sup>38</sup>

7 July 2016: With direct support from Russian and Syrian air forces, Syrian government ground forces capture territory that imposes fire control over Castello Road, the only supply route to rebel-controlled Aleppo.<sup>39</sup>

12 July 2016: A hospital was destroyed and three people killed in an airstrike. The Syrian government has been accused of deliberately targeting infrastructure such as hospitals and bakeries. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, in 2016 alone, 80 medical facilities have been attacked and 81 medical workers killed.<sup>40</sup>

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36 'Assad forces 'bombed Daraya' after food delivery', *Al Arabia English*, 10 June 2016, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/06/10/France-outraged-by-Syrian-bombing-of-Daraya-after-food-aid.html> accessed on 14 April 2017.

37 Suleyman, Halit, 'Regime barrel-bomb attacks kill 15 in Syria's Aleppo', *Anadolu Post*, 17 June 2016, <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/regime-barrel-bomb-attacks-kill-15-in-syria-s-aleppo/593477> accessed on 14 April 2017.

38 'Syria's civil war: 'Dozens Killed' in Deir Az Zor Raids', *Aljazeera News*, 26 June 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/syria-civil-war-dozens-killed-deir-az-zor-raids-160626055423637.html> accessed on 14 April 2017.

39 Barrington, Lisa & Perry, Tom, 'Syrian army fire cuts only road into rebel-held Aleppo', *Reuters World News*, 7 July 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-idUSKCN0ZN0U2> accessed on 14 April 2017.

40 For details of attacks on vital facilities throughout the Syrian Civil War visit [http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/daily\\_news/attacks-on-vital-facilities/](http://sn4hr.org/blog/category/daily_news/attacks-on-vital-facilities/) the Syrian Network for Human Rights website.

## *In the Bear's Shadow*

28 July 2016: Syrian government forces completely encircle Aleppo; announce three-month amnesty for rebel fighters who lay down arms.<sup>41</sup>

30 July 2016: Russia announces the opening of several corridors outward from rebel-held areas of Aleppo to facilitate civilian escape before the planned Russo-Syrian offensive.<sup>42</sup>

1 August 2016: A Russian Mi-8AMTSh transport helicopter was shot down by ground fire in the Idlib province while returning to Khmeimim base at the end of a humanitarian mission to Aleppo. The helicopter was carrying two Russian officials from Russia's Reconciliation Centre in Syria and three crew members. All five occupants were killed in the crash.<sup>43</sup>

10 August 2016: An alleged chemical attack carried out by government forces in the Zubdiya area of rebel-held part of Aleppo.<sup>44</sup>

11 September 2016: Hours after the US and Russia announced a plan for a ceasefire, air attacks in Aleppo and Idlib kill more than 100 people.<sup>45</sup>

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41 Kozak, Chris, 'Syria Situation Report: July 22-29, 2016', *Institute for the Study of War*, Washington D.C., 29 July 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-situation-report-july-22-29-2016> accessed on 14 April 2017.

42 Kozak, Chris, 'Syria Situation Report: July 30-August 5, 2016', *Institute for the Study of War*, Washington D.C., 5 August 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-situation-report-july-30-august-5-2016> accessed on 14 April 2017.

43 'Russian helicopter delivering aid to Aleppo shot down in Syria, five killed', *ABC News*, 2 August 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-08-01/russian-helicopter-shot-down-in-syria-kills-five/7680516> accessed on 14 April 2017.

44 'Syria's civil war: Suspected chemical attack in Aleppo', *Aljazeera News*, 11 August 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/syria-civil-war-suspected-chemical-attack-aleppo-160811051215993.html> accessed on 15 April 2017.

45 'More Than 100 Dead in Airstrikes before Syria Ceasefire Begins', *Sky News*, 11 September 2016, <http://news.sky.com/story/us-and-russia-announce-syria-peace-plan-10571819> accessed on 15 April 2017.

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17 September 2016: US fighter aircraft struck a target in Deir Az Azor that was Syrian government force, killing 62 soldiers. The attacks were discontinued on Russian officials informing the US of the mistake.<sup>46</sup>

15 October 2016: Russian aircraft carrier, *Admiral Kuznetsov*, sailed out of Kola Bay with a task group to deploy to the Mediterranean. The task group included the *Kirov*-class missile cruiser *Pyotr Velikiy*, two *Udaloy*-class destroyers and other vessels.<sup>47</sup>

18 October 2016: Russia stops airstrikes against rebel positions in Aleppo, Hama, and Latakia regions in accordance with an eight-hour ceasefire.<sup>48</sup>

22 October 2016: The following Russian forces have been confirmed to be operating in Syria<sup>49</sup>:

- 4000 personnel consisting of air and ground crew; Marine infantry units; Airborne forces, Artillery battalions, Special Forces; and Civilian support staff
- 40 fixed wing fighter aircraft including bombers; and 40 helicopters including attack helicopters
- One aircraft carrier with a complement of 15 fighters and 10 helicopters; three guided missile cruisers
- Air defence systems S-300VM and S-400 Triumph; other systems such as Osa-AKM, Pantsir-S1, Buk-M2E

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46 'Coalition Halts Airstrike in Progress against Possible Syrian Military Position,' *U.S. Department of Defense*, 17 September 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/947829/coalition-halts-airstrike-in-progress-against-possible-syrian-military-position/> accessed on 15 April 2017.

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## *In the Bear's Shadow*

8 November 2016: Fighter jets from *Admiral Kuznetsov* were reported to be flying off the Syrian coast.

14 November 2016: A Russian MiG-29K crashed into the sea while returning to the carrier from a mission over Syria.<sup>50</sup>

18 November 2016: Final phase of Syrian Army's Operation 'Dawn of Victory' begins in Aleppo.<sup>51</sup>

24 November 2016: Syrian Arab Air Force conducted an air strike against Turkish Special Operations Forces, killing three Turkish soldiers and injuring 10.<sup>52</sup>

12-13 December 2016: Culmination of Operation 'Dawn of Victory' with opposition fighters backed into a 2.5 square kilometre area on the west bank of River Quwayq.<sup>53</sup>

15 December 2016: Evacuation of remaining rebel-held areas of Aleppo starts.

16 December 2016: President Putin announces that the plan is now to secure a wider ceasefire.<sup>54</sup>

### **January–April 2017**

2 January 2017: Syrian opposition stops peace negotiations because of multiple ceasefire violations by Government forces.<sup>55</sup>

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50 Newton, Jennifer, 'Russian fighter jet crashes into the Mediterranean close to Putin's flagship aircraft carrier sent to support Assad in Syria', *Daily Mail*, 15 November 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3935088/Russian-fighter-jet-CRASHES-Mediterranean-close-Putin-s-flagship-aircraft-carrier-sent-support-Assad-Syria.html> accessed on 15 April 2017.

51 Ripley, Tim, 'Aleppo evacuation deal marks end of resistance in key city', *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 21 December 2016, p. 4.

52 Fadel, Leith, 'Syrian Air Force kills Turkish soldiers in east Aleppo: report', *al Masdar News* (AMN), 24 November 2016, <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/syrian-air-force-kills-turkish-soldiers-east-aleppo-report/> accessed on 21 April 2017.

53 *IHS Jane's Defence Weekly*, 21 December 2016, op. cit.

54 *ibid.*

55 'Syrian war: Peace talks under threat amid rebel warning', *BBC News*, Middle East, 3 January 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38492939> accessed on 21 April 2017.



## *Appendix: Chronology of the Russian Intervention In Syria*

19 January 2017: US forces carry out air strikes on Syrian Army Sheikh Suleiman Military Base in western Aleppo, now under al-Qaeda affiliates' control, killing more than 76 jihadists.<sup>56</sup>

29 January 2017: Syrian Government forces take full control of Wadi Barada water supply and restore it to the estimated five million people resident in greater Damascus.<sup>57</sup>

24 February 2017: Turkey-supported Free Syrian Army takes control of the city of al-Bab, as part of Operation Euphrates Shield.<sup>58</sup>

2 March 2017: Syrian Army, with the help of Russian Military forces, capture Palmyra from IS.<sup>59</sup>

9 March 2017: US Marine units began to deploy at Northern Syria District of Raqqa Governorate as part of operations to help SDF forces take control of Raqqa from ISIL.<sup>60</sup>

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56 'In the largest death toll by assassinations against Fateh al-Sham Front... coalition's warplanes kill 76 members and commanders at least and injure tens of others in bombardment of Regiment 111 west of Aleppo,' *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 22 January 2017, <http://www.syriaahr.com/en/?p=59620> accessed on 21 April 2017.

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29 March 2017: Syrian Forces capture Deir Hafer in Eastern Aleppo, according to an Army source.<sup>61</sup> Turkey announces the end of its military operations in Syria, concluding Operation Euphrates Shield.

12 April 2017: The Syrian army captures more than 230 square miles of territory around Palmyra and expands the buffer zone.

19 April 2017: Pro-government forces enter the west Damascus district of Zabadani for the first time after the start of the civil war.<sup>62</sup>

### **May–August 2017**

2 May 2017: Russia and Turkey announce support for creating safe zones in Syria, at the peace talks in Astana.<sup>63</sup> The proposal was sponsored by Russia, Turkey and Iran and covers four areas: the Idlib and Homs governorates, Eastern Ghouta and the Badia region.

9 May 2017: The Trump administration approves a plan to arm Syrian Kurdish rebels despite protests from Turkey.<sup>64</sup>

26 May 2017: 106 civilians are killed in Al Mayadeen in Syria by US-led coalition air strike.<sup>65</sup> Syrian forces retake Damascus-Palmyra highway from IS.

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61 'Syrian army captures Islamic State village near Aleppo', *Reuters*, 30 March 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-army/syrian-army-captures-islamic-state-village-near-aleppo-idUSKBN1702B0> accessed on 21 April 2017.

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## Appendix: Chronology of the Russian Intervention In Syria

6 June 2017: Syrian Defence Forces commence the fifth phase of the offensive to recapture Raqqa.<sup>66</sup>

20 June 2017: The Australian Department of Defence announces that the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) has stopped its aerial military involvement in the Syrian Civil War after a Russian warning.<sup>67</sup> The RAAF resumed air operations on 21 June 2017.

30 June 2017: The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights announces that IS has withdrawn from the Aleppo province.<sup>68</sup>

4 July 2017: Another round of peace talks is organised by Russia, Turkey and Iran in Astana. Only limited progress is expected.

29 July 2017: Syrian Observatory of Human Rights reports that ISIS has lost 6000 square kilometres of territory in the past one month.<sup>69</sup> The figures are estimates and cannot be corroborated.

28 August 2017: ISIS forces agree to withdraw from two towns in Idlib province in a deal negotiated by Hezbollah.<sup>70</sup> The deal permits the Lebanese and Syrian forces to gain control of their border for the first time in six years.

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66 'US-backed Syrian forces launch offensive to retake Raqqa from ISIS', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/06/syrian-forces-launch-offensive-to-recapture-raqqa-from-islamic-state> accessed on 3 October 2017.

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68 'ISIS withdraws from Syria's Aleppo, nearby villages', *Al Arabiya English*, 30 June 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2017/06/30/ISIS-withdraws-from-Syria-s-Aleppo-province.html> accessed on 3 October 2017.

69 'ISIS loses about 6000 square kilometres during the first month of the 4th year of its Caliphate declaration', *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 29 July 2017, <http://www.syriaohr.com/en/?p=70814> accessed on 3 October 2017.

70 Ensor, Josie, 'Isil fighters bussed from Lebanon-Syria border after first deal to surrender', *The Telegraph*, 29 August 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/29/isil-fighters-bussed-lebanon-syria-border-first-ever-deal-surrender/> accessed on 3 October 2017.

## September – December 2017

1 September 2017: Syrian Democratic Force announces that they have seized full control of the Old City in Raqqa.<sup>71</sup>

2 September 2017: Syrian Army captures the city of Uqayribat from IS, the last stronghold of the group in Hama province.<sup>72</sup>

5 September 2017: Russian frigate Admiral Essen launches cruise missiles from the Mediterranean on IS targets near Deir ez-Zor, destroying C2 posts and killing many fighters.

11 September 2017: Russian fighter jets attack IS-held village of al-Khrayta. There are reports of 19 'civilian' casualties.<sup>73</sup>

15 September 2017: The representatives of Russia, Iran and Turkey reach an agreement for the implementation of a 'de-escalation zone' in the Idlib province.<sup>74</sup> This was accompanied by an unsourced report in a government-linked Turkish newspaper that the three nations planned to divide the province between them.

23 September 2017: Multiple Russian airstrikes in Hama and Idlib provinces. 50 IS fighters are claimed to have been killed.

28 September 2017: Talks held between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara.<sup>75</sup> The

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71 'SDF: ISIL removed from Raqqa's Old City', *Aljazeera News*, 2 September 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/sdf-isil-removed-raqqa-city-170901145721259.html> accessed on 8 February 2018.

72 'Syrian army captures key IS stronghold in Hama province', *XinhuaNet*, 2 September 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/02/c\\_136575576.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/02/c_136575576.htm) accessed on 8 February 2018.

73 'Syria army readies push into IS-held parts of Deir Ezzor', *Daily Mail Australia*, 11 September 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-4872508/Syria-army-readies-push-IS-held-parts-Deir-Ezzor.html> accessed on 8 February 2018.

74 'Russia, Turkey, Iran agree borders of de-escalation zone in Syria's Idlib-Anadolu', *Reuters*, 15 September 2017, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-idlib/russia-turkey-iran-agree-borders-of-de-escalation-zone-in-syrias-idlib-anadolu-idUKKCN1BQ13D> accessed on 8 February 2018.

75 Arkhipov, Ilya and Hacaoglu, Selcan, 'Putin, Erdogan Agree to Coordinate Steps on Syria Zones', *Bloomberg Politics*, 28 September 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-09-28/putin-erdogan-to-hold-talks-on-missile-sale-syria-cooperation> accessed on 8 February 2018.

## *Appendix: Chronology of the Russian Intervention In Syria*

discussion centred on the setup and monitoring of a combat-free zone in Syria.

*3 November 2017:* Israeli Defence Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, declared that Assad was 'victorious' in the Syrian Civil War, mentioning that former enemies were now 'courting' him.<sup>76</sup>

*4 October 2017:* Russian defence minister Igor Konashenkov claims that IS undertook several missions on Syrian cities through US controlled areas.<sup>77</sup> At the same time some Human Rights groups accuse Russian and Syrian governments of targeting hospitals. There were also unsubstantiated reports of Russian fighter jets attacking rubber dinghies carrying families fleeing the town of Al-Ashara, killing around 60 civilians.

*10 October 2017:* A Russian Air Force Sukhoi Su-24 fighter crashes at Khmeimim air base in Latakia, killing both the crew members on board.<sup>78</sup>

*17 October 2017:* After nearly four months of fierce fighting and the aid of the US-led coalition's bombardment, the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces announced they had established full control over the city of Raqqa, previously the de-facto capital of IS.<sup>79</sup>

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76 'Israeli defence minister says Syria's Assad victorious', *Al Arabiya English*, 3 October 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2017/10/03/Israeli-defense-minister-says-Syria-s-Assad-victorious-.html> accessed on 8 February 2018.

77 'Russia says IS attacks in Syria come from location near U. S. forces', *Reuters*, 5 October 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-usa/russia-says-is-attacks-in-syria-come-from-location-near-u-s-forces-idUSKBN1C920H?il=0> accessed on 8 February 2018.

78 'Russian Su-24 attack aircraft crashes during take-off in Syria, crew killed – MoD', *RT News*, 10 October 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/406201-su24-crash-syria-killed/> accessed on 8 February 2018.

79 Baranard, Anne & Saad, Hwaida, 'Raqqa, ISIS Capital, Is Captured, U.S. backed Forces Say', *New York Times*, 17 October 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/17/world/middleeast/isis-syria-raqqa.html> accessed on 8 February 2018.

3 November 2017: Syrian army captures Deir al-Zor for IS.<sup>80</sup>

By mid-November 2017, Syrian government forces and allied militia established full control over the town of Albu Kamal, captured the Hamdan Military Airbase. Although Albu Kamal changed hands with IS once, by around 19 November it was firmly in Syrian government's hands.<sup>81</sup>

In December the Russian government announced Syria to have been 'completely liberated' from IS. Russian President Vladimir Putin visited the Russian base in Syria where he ordered a partial withdrawal of deployed Russian forces. On 26 December Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that Russia had started to establish permanent presence in two military bases – Tartus and Latakia – in Syria.<sup>82</sup>

In January 2018, the Syrian army and its allies continued advances against the remaining strongholds of IS and other rebels in the Hama province. Meanwhile on 20 January, Turkish military forces commenced a cross-border operation into the Kurdish-majority Afrin township and canton in Northern Syria against the Kurdish-led (US supported) People's Protection Units (YPG).

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80 Loveluck, Louisa & El-Ghobhashi, Tamer, 'Syrian army declares victory in Deir al-Zour as Islamic State territory crumbles', *The Washington Post*, 3 November 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/syrian-army-declares-victory-in-deir-al-zour-as-islamic-state-territory-crumbles/2017/11/03/db717d38-c09e-11e7-af84-d3e2ee4b2af1\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.898928570f27](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrian-army-declares-victory-in-deir-al-zour-as-islamic-state-territory-crumbles/2017/11/03/db717d38-c09e-11e7-af84-d3e2ee4b2af1_story.html?utm_term=.898928570f27) accessed on 8 February 2018.

81 'Syria army, allies retake Albu Kamal from IS: Military Sources', *Daily Mail Australia*, 20 November 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/afp/article-5097673/Syria-army-allies-retake-Albu-Kamal-IS-military-source.html> accessed on 8 February 2018.

82 Talmazan, Yuliya, 'Russia establishing permanent presence at its Syrian bases: minister of defence', *NBC World News*, 26 December 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russia-establishing-permanent-presence-its-syrian-bases-minister-defense-n832596> accessed on 8 February 2018.



