



From Cold War to Civil War: 75 Years of Russian-Syrian Relations

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Abstract

The Russian-Syrian relationship turns 75 in 2019. The Soviet Union had already emerged as Syria's main military backer in the 1950s, well before the Baath Party coup of 1963, and it maintained a close if sometimes tense partnership with President Hafez al-Assad (1970–2000). However, ties loosened fast once the Cold War ended. It was only when both Moscow and Damascus separately began to drift back into conflict with the United States in the mid-00s that the relationship was revived.

Since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Russia has stood by Bashar al-Assad's embattled regime against a host of foreign and domestic enemies, most notably through its aerial intervention of 2015. Buoyed by Russian and Iranian support, the Syrian president and his supporters now control most of the population and all the major cities, although the government struggles to keep afloat economically. About one-third of the country remains under the control of Turkish-backed Sunni factions or US-backed Kurds, but deals imposed by external actors, chief among them Russia, prevent either side from moving against the other. Unless or until the foreign actors pull out, Syria is likely to remain as a half-active, half-frozen conflict, with Russia operating as the chief arbiter of its internal tensions – or trying to.

This report is a companion piece to UI Paper 2/2019, *Russia in the Middle East*, which looks at Russia's involvement with the Middle East more generally and discusses the regional impact of the Syria intervention.¹ The present paper seeks to focus on the Russian-Syrian relationship itself through a largely chronological description of its evolution up to the present day, with additional thematically organised material on Russia's current role in Syria.



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¹ Aron Lund, "Russia in the Middle East", UI Paper 2/2019, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, ui.se/butiken/uis-publikationer/ui-paper/2019/russia-in-the-middle-east. I again gratefully acknowledge the assistance with Russian-language translation and research provided by Liliia Makashova, intern at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in 2018.



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Syrian-Soviet Cold War Relations

The Soviet Union recognised Syria's independence on 22 July 1944, while the country was still struggling to free itself from French colonial rule. When the last French troops finally departed Syria in 1946, they left behind a nation closely linked to its former mandatory power and poorly prepared for independence. Internal turmoil and a war with Israel in 1948–1949 soon undermined Western influence, creating new openings for the Soviet Union just as the Cold War took off.²

Frustrated by the West's refusal to sell weapons for use against Israel and inspired by Gamal Abdel-Nasser's Egypt, Syria signed a major arms deal with Czechoslovakia in 1956.³ Once contacts with the Eastern Bloc had been established, the Kremlin slid into the role of primary backer of Syria's growing, modernising military, which had just emerged as a dominant force in domestic politics.

The Soviet Union began to export large amounts of arms to Syria but had much less success with its other main export: ideology. The Syrian Communist Party (SCP, founded in 1922) had not become a mass movement, and its popular appeal suffered from Stalin's support for Israeli independence in 1948. Nonetheless, the SCP leader, Khaled Bakdash, was elected to parliament in 1954 – a first in the Arab World.

In the armed forces, the SCP was overshadowed by the Baath Party, a radical Arab nationalist group founded in Damascus in 1947.⁴ The Baath Party agreed with the idea of seeking Soviet aid to fight Israel and shared the SCP's hostility to Syria's conservative landed elite, but was politically hostile to Marxism.

In the aftermath of the arms deals and the 1956 Suez War, Syria was sucked into a whirlwind of Cold War and intra-Arab intrigue.⁵ Beginning in 1955, right wing officers were purged by their Baath and SCP adversaries. In November 1956, Syria asked the Soviet Union to station air squadrons on its territory, although the request was denied.⁶ When Syria went on to sign a major economic agreement with Moscow in September 1957, the United States and its allies were appalled. "Syria can now be regarded as a Soviet satellite", warned the UK Foreign Office. Turkey, a NATO member state, sent troops to the Syrian border, which prompted a warning from the Kremlin that it would take "all necessary measures" if Syria came under attack. The situation became so tense that the United States briefly put its nuclear forces on alert.⁷

Although the crisis was quickly defused – it turned out that no one wanted World War III to erupt over Syria – the chaos in Damascus rumbled on.

² On this period, see e.g., Patrick Seale, *The Struggle for Syria*, Oxford University Press, 1965.

³ Andrew Rathmell, *Secret War in the Middle East: The Covert Struggle for Syria, 1949–1961*, I. B. Tauris, 2013, pp. 110–111; Yair Even, "Two Squadrons and their Pilots: The First Syrian Request for the Deployment of Soviet Military Forces on its Territory, 1956", *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*, no. 77, February 2016, wilsoncenter.org/publication/syrias-1956-request-for-soviet-military-intervention, pp. 4–5.

⁴ "Baath" means renaissance. On the early years of

the party, see Kamel S. Abu Jaber, *The Arab Ba'ith Socialist Party. History, Ideology, and Organization*, Syracuse University Press, 1966.

⁵ On intra-Arab regional politics in this period, see Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War 1958–1964. A Study of Ideology in Politics*, Oxford University Press, 1965.

⁶ Even, "Two Squadrons and their Pilots", pp. 11ff.

⁷ Alexey Vasiliev, *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin*, Routledge, 2018, pp. 46–47; Rathmell 2013, pp. 141–142.



Baathist officers now worried that the SCP had grown too powerful. In 1958, they manoeuvred the country into a union with Egypt, known as the United Arab Republic and to be led by Abdel-Nasser. The Soviet Union had “mixed reactions” to the news.⁸ Abdel-Nasser was the Kremlin’s main ally in the Middle East, but he was also an iron-fisted authoritarian whose secret police began to round up and torture Communists. The SCP was crippled and Bakdash fled to Moscow.

The United Arab Republic did not last. In 1961, a conservative anti-Cairo coup restored Syria’s independence, at the cost of resumed internal instability.

Syria under the Baath Party

In March 1963, a Baathist-Nasserite junta seized power. The Baathists then quickly disposed of their Nasserite allies.⁹ The party was now in complete control of Syria, but the coups carried on inside the new regime, which began to drift to the left.

In 1963–1964, a Baathist young guard of socialist radicals and military officers forced the party leadership to issue a new, stridently socialist programme peppered with Marxist-inspired language about the need to smash the bourgeoisie.¹⁰ Infighting continued, but in February 1966 a military faction linked to the leftist trend violently overthrew the Baath Party’s founding leaders.¹¹ The new junta was dominated by

officers from the Alawite sect, a small Shia-linked minority from western Syria, and its radical ideology was so far removed from traditional Baathism that some observers dubbed it “neo-Baathist”.¹² Syrian political culture plunged headlong into tiers-mondiste radicalism: “Curious atmosphere, with a huge picture of Che Guevara in the sentry-box at the door”, noted a British journalist visiting the Baath Party headquarters in Damascus in 1968.¹³

Although the 1966 coup had moved Syria much closer to the Soviet Union, Moscow had played no role in it. So out of the loop was the Politburo that it initially trusted the disinformation put out by a vengeful Abdel-Nasser and mistook the coup for a right wing, anti-Soviet move.¹⁴ Only after that mistake was rectified did Soviet-Syrian relations begin to revive, but cooperation then expanded very quickly. More military support arrived, economists were sent to aid in nationalisation plans, and in 1968 Soviet engineers began building a large hydroelectric dam on the Euphrates. The “somewhat romanticized” Soviet view of the new Syrian regime rested on hopes that its loud but unsystematic anti-colonial leftism would one day harden into proper Marxism-Leninism.¹⁵ Those hopes were not met. Communists were given seats in the cabinet from March 1963, but they had to serve as independents since the SCP remained illegal.¹⁶ Similarly, SCP Secretary-General Bakdash was allowed to return

⁸ Vasiliev 2018, p. 48.

⁹ Seale 1995, pp. 75–85.

¹⁰ Baath Party, *baad al-muntalaqat al-nazariyya aqarr-ha al-mutamar al-qawmi al-sadis fi tishrin al-awwal* 1963, Dar al-Baath, 8th printing, 1986.

¹¹ Several old guard Baath leaders, including party founder Michel Aflaq, would later attach themselves to the Baath Party faction that seized power in Iraq in 1968. The Iraqi group denounced the leaders of the 1966 putsch in Syria and supported the party’s traditional, more right wing political line. Over time, the Baghdad-based Baath Party became a tool of Saddam Hussein’s personal dictatorship, similar to how the Damascus-based party fell under the control of Hafez al-

Assad. The two Baaths continued to deny each other’s legitimacy until the fall of the Iraqi regime in 2003.

¹² Avraham Ben-Tzur, “The Neo-Ba’th Party of Syria”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 3, no. 3, July 1968.

¹³ Michael Adams, *Chaos or Rebirth: The Arab Outlook*, BBC Books, 1968, p. 76.

¹⁴ Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*, Basic Books, 2009, pp. 70–73.

¹⁵ Vasiliev 2018, p. 62.

¹⁶ Suleiman al-Madani and Adnan al-Manafikhi, *هؤلاء حكموا سوريا*, Dar al-Anwar, 3rd ed., 2007 p. 165.



from exile but banned from political activity.¹⁷

The Kremlin's delight at the Baath Party's leftward drift was mixed with alarm at its reckless foreign policy. Very soon, Soviet leaders came to view the Damascus junta as an "uneasy ally whose actions were beyond control, often unpredictable and the cause of complications".¹⁸

Syrian brinkmanship played a big part in triggering the 1967 Six Day War with Israel, in which the Damascus regime turned out to have none of the military muscle needed to match its fiery rhetoric. Unwilling to see its Arab allies routed, the Soviet Union drew a "red line", warning Israel against continuing on towards Damascus and Cairo, but Syria lost the Golan Heights, Egypt lost the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza, and Jordan lost East Jerusalem and the West Bank; the Palestinians lost everything.¹⁹ Outraged and embarrassed, the Soviet Union doubled down by cutting ties with Israel and shipping even greater amounts of arms to its Arab allies. Syria, not to be outdone, cut its ties with the United States.

Hafez al-Assad and the Soviet Union

In 1970, Syria's then Defence Minister, Hafez al-Assad, purged the most left wing elements of the Baath regime, styling his takeover as a "corrective movement". From then on, coup-prone Syria would be surprisingly stable, its internal intrigue kept in check by an elaborate and ruthless police state staffed at senior levels by Assad's

relatives and friends, many of whom were, like him, Alawites.

As a young man, Assad had viewed the Soviet Union "with suspicion", not least due to the strained ties between Baathists and Communists in Syria.²⁰ He had nonetheless been sent to the Soviet Union in 1958 to practice night flying and learn to pilot MiG-15s and MiG-17s: "I stayed in the Soviet Union for 11 months", he told a biographer, "I had to learn a little bit of Russian for everyday conversation and for technical terms".²¹

In his feuds with the Baathist left, Assad presented himself as a champion of the military and of realism, including on foreign policy. He insisted that Syria needed to maintain ties with Western states and conservative Arab regimes if it wanted to get the Golan back, and he warned against over-reliance on the Soviet Union. Certainly, he wanted a close and cooperative relationship with Moscow, but this should be based strictly on the national interest and stripped of all ideological content.²² He attacked the "extreme left" and accused rival party leaders of facilitating "Russian interference in Syria's internal affairs".²³

For the Soviet Union, this was a cause for concern. Western observers also took note of the geopolitical dimension of Syria's power struggle, although they did not overplay its significance. A US National Security Council memo of October 1968 noted that under Assad, "Syria might move away from the [Soviet Union] slightly, but it would still be the most radical Arab

¹⁷ Seale 1995, p. 109.

¹⁸ Vasiliev 2018, p. 74.

¹⁹ Primakov 2009, p. 114.

²⁰ Seale 1995, p. 57.

²¹ Lucien Bitterlin, *Hafez El-Assad: Le parcours d'un combattant*, Éditions du Jaguar, 1986, p. 37. Assad also told Patrick Seale that he underwent "a few intensive

weeks" of Russian language classes to pick up the terminology needed for pilot training. Seale 1995, p. 57.

²² Seale 1995, pp. 147–148.

²³ Press interview on 15 March 1969, cited in "Internal Conflicts in Baath Party: New Session of Party Congress, Promulgation of Provisional Constitution, New Cabinet formed by Dr Atassi", *Keesing's Record of World Events*, vol. 15, June 1969, p. 23421.



nation".²⁴ US Secretary of State William Rogers wrote to President Richard Nixon that the United States "should not attach undue importance" to Assad's coup, but he predicted that Assad's "more pragmatic and less doctrinaire" wing of the Baath Party would be "disposed to expand and improve its relations with other countries and to rely less exclusively on the Soviets for outside support".²⁵

Once in power, Assad moved quickly to reassure the Soviet Union that Syria would in fact remain an ally of the Eastern Bloc. In December 1970, he told the press that he wanted the Arab World to deepen its ties with the socialist camp, adding, "Any interpretation or rumour to the contrary is untrue, and our friends in the Soviet Union know it".²⁶ Within 10 weeks of seizing power, he had embarked on the first of many trips to Moscow, where he began to place the relationship on a new, "hard-headed basis" that "dropped the rhetoric but tightened the bond".²⁷

The transactional nature of the new Syrian-Soviet relationship became clear early on. In 1971, the Soviet Navy was granted permission to use ports in Latakia and Tartous, while Syria received even more weapons. Assad also permitted the SCP to resurface after many years of semi-illegality, while at the same time forcing it to join the National Progressive Front, a Baath-controlled coalition set up along East European lines. If it pleased his Soviet friends, the Communists were welcome to be part of Syrian politics – but only as a

lifeless ornament. Assad tolerated no dissent from his population and no interference from his allies.

For the remainder of Assad's many years in power, the Syrian government would bank on Soviet support and sing Moscow's praises in public, while pursuing its own interests with ruthless pragmatism and little regard for the Kremlin's point of view – unless it was offered something in return. Assad emerged as one of the Soviet Union's most valued and well-supplied Third World clients, but even the Kremlin found him exhaustingly stubborn and demanding. "It's true that Syria accepts from the Soviet Union aid, loans, student exchange, military programs – when you think of it, it accepts everything from us", said Nuritdin Mukhitdinov, a Soviet ambassador to Damascus from 1968 to 1977, and paused before adding: "Except advice".²⁸

A Close but Complicated Alliance

Syrian-Soviet ties continued to deepen after the 1973 October War, in which Egypt and Syria fought Israel. The Soviet-backed Arab side lost again, and again Moscow shipped enormous quantities of tanks and aircraft to the Middle East to save face. Similar rearmament programmes would be launched after Syrian-Israeli clashes in Lebanon in the early 1980s. Both in 1973–1974 and in 1982, the Soviet Union intervened with boots on the ground by deploying combat-ready Soviet air defence

²⁴ "293. Memorandum From John W. Foster of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant (Rostow)", 28 October 1968, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, vol. XX, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1967–1968, history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v20/d293.

²⁵ "184. Memorandum From Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon", 19 November 1970, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, Volume XXIII, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1969–1972,

history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76v23/d184.

²⁶ *Al-Akhbar* (Egypt), 1 December 1970, available in حديث السيد الفريق حافظ الأسد رئيس مجلس الوزراء وزير الدفاع لجريدة "الأخبار القاهرية", PresidentAssad.net, presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=676:1-12-1970&catid=169&Itemid=475.

²⁷ Seale 1995, pp. 186–189.

²⁸ As related by former US Ambassador to Syria Richard Murphy, speaking at "The New Narrative: Who Authors the Future?", Beirut Institute Summit 2018, youtu.be/zixOd_J1QmY, at 15.00.



brigades to Damascus to ensure that Israel would not exploit Syrian aircraft losses by advancing further.²⁹

Although Damascus was in theory expected to pay for most of the arms and assistance it received, Syria was poor and Moscow offered generous terms of credit. The Kremlin sometimes grumbled about the mounting debts, but the arms deliveries kept coming. Soviet leaders needed Syria as a shining example of their generosity, military might and reliability – but they also worried that pressuring Assad too hard might inspire him to look for other allies.

Although Syria would in fact remain in the Soviet camp for the duration of the Cold War, Moscow's fears were not entirely unfounded. In 1972, the President of Egypt, Anwar al-Sadat, had expelled thousands of Soviet military advisers. After the 1973 war he began to move closer to the United States, chilling Egypt's relationship with the Soviet Union. Cairo unilaterally abrogated the Soviet-Egyptian Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 1976, and over the following three years Washington helped Sadat broker a unilateral peace agreement with Israel, under which Egypt recovered the Sinai Peninsula and received substantial US military aid.

Sadat's defection to the Western camp severely harmed the Kremlin's regional position, and left Syria the last pro-Soviet "frontline state" in the Arab-Israeli conflict. To remain relevant in the Middle East's central political problem, the Kremlin needed Assad to stay on side, even if it was obvious that Washington stood a much better chance of ultimately delivering what Assad wanted: an Israeli retreat from the Golan Heights.

Assad also seemed to ponder the US option, although this may just have been a ruse to keep Soviet leaders on their toes. After the 1973 war, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy led to a thaw in US-Syrian relations, culminating in Nixon's June 1974 visit to Damascus, where he was met by Assad, a 21-gun salute, restored diplomatic relations, and billboards informing the world that "Revolutionary Damascus Welcomes President Nixon".³⁰ The US-Syrian rapprochement eventually foundered on irreconcilable differences over Israel, Egypt, and other matters, but although Soviet leaders drew a sigh of relief, they would remain suspicious of Assad's "baffling relationship with America" for the remainder of the Cold War.³¹

According to material published by the Soviet defector, Vasili Mitrokhin, the KGB ran a number of agents within the Syrian government and fed Assad false information to increase his mistrust of the United States. Syrian visitors to the Soviet Union, including Assad himself, were routinely spied on. The Syrian Embassy in Moscow was bugged, its secret diplomatic correspondence was intercepted, opened, and copied, and attractive women were used to snare embassy staff – in one case with such success that the diplomat and the KGB plant moved in together.³²

The lack of trust was mutual and even in the absence of a Syrian intelligence defector like Mitrokhin, it is safe to assume that Damascus spied right back. Syria's leaders were in fact known to treat their superpower patron quite roughly when the situation called for it. Arkadii Vinogradov, a Soviet diplomat who spent a quarter of a century in Damascus, has related the story of how a well-connected Syrian captain

²⁹ Even, "Two Squadrons and their Pilots", p. 16.

³⁰ John Herber, "Nixon Warmly Welcomed On Arriving in Damascus", *New York Times*, 16 June 1974, [nytimes.com/1974/06/16/archives/nixon-warmly-welcomed-on-arriving-in-damascus-syria-gives-nixon-](https://www.nytimes.com/1974/06/16/archives/nixon-warmly-welcomed-on-arriving-in-damascus-syria-gives-nixon-a.html)

[a.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1974/06/16/archives/nixon-warmly-welcomed-on-arriving-in-damascus-syria-gives-nixon-a.html).

³¹ Primakov, p. 191.

³² Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World*, Basic Books, 2005, pp. 202–204.



studying in Moscow was jailed after killing three girls when driving drunk. The Syrians retaliated by staging an accident with a Soviet captain in Damascus, forcing Moscow to accept a prisoner exchange.³³

The most serious Syrian-Soviet dispute began in June 1976, when Assad's army entered Lebanon to attack Soviet-allied Palestinian and Lebanese militias. The intervention had been quietly green-lighted by Israel and the United States, but the Soviet Union was not informed ahead of time. Instead, Assad timed the move so that the troops crossed the border just as the Soviet Prime Minister, Aleksei Kosygin, stepped off his plane in Damascus for a planned visit. If Kosygin protested, the Kremlin would appear impotent; but if he did not, it would appear complicit.³⁴ Moscow first opted for a policy of forced smiles and icy silence, but a letter from Brezhnev to Assad was later leaked to *Le Monde* in which the Soviet leader demanded

a Syrian retreat.³⁵ Assad dismissed it as "an expression of a point of view", insisted that relations were splendid, and continued to attack Moscow's allies.³⁶

The Lebanon intervention provoked major irritation in Moscow, and both sides spent the next two years twisting each other's arms while outwardly feigning unity. The Kremlin froze Syria's supply of weapons and Assad suspended Soviet access to Syrian ports.³⁷ The rift healed towards the end of the 1970s, when shared concerns over Sadat's policies, Israel's ambitions, and the continued upheaval in Lebanon brought Syrian and Soviet interests back in rough alignment.

Assad also became more responsive to Soviet concerns in the late 1970s and early 1980s. His regime suffered economic troubles, internal feuds, and a Sunni Islamist uprising, which also targeted Soviet advisers; and he worried that, after its peace

³³ Vinogradov's story is related in Florence Gaub and Nicu Popescu, "The Soviet Union in the Middle East: an overview", in Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru, *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?*, Chaillot Paper no. 146, European Union Institute for Security Studies, July 2018, p. 17, iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/CP_146.pdf. The Syrian captain in question, Mohammed Suleiman, would later become one of Bashar al-Assad's most senior, secretive advisers. He was assassinated in 2008, apparently by Israel. Matthew Cole, "Israeli Special Forces Assassinated Senior Syrian Official", *The Intercept*, 15 July 2015, theintercept.com/2015/07/15/israeli-special-forces-assassinated-senior-syrian-official.

³⁴ According to the deputy head of the Soviet Foreign Ministry's Middle East desk, Oleg Grinevsky, who brought Kosygin the news of the Syrian intervention, Kosygin complained that Assad had placed him in a "ridiculous" position: "Whatever I do, things will either be bad, or really bad. If we publically state the whole truth – that our Syrian allies did not consult us – then firstly no one will believe us, and secondly they'll ask: Who's supposed to be the lead partner in this alliance – the Soviet Union or Syria? It would be a case of the tail wagging the dog. That's really bad. It'll be even worse if I come out and condemn their action. That would pour oil on the flames of the Lebanese Civil War and might even provoke the Israelis and Americans to send their own troops in. But no way can we come out in favor of the Syrian incursion. That would only encourage the hotheads to widen the conflict and drag Israel into it."

Then what would we do – intervene in their war? The only option is the least bad one – to keep our mouths shut". Grinevsky cited in Primakov 2009, p. 181. Primakov notes that the Soviet Union's Middle East allies, such as Syria, were "often confident that circumstances would compel Moscow to go along with actions that were entirely of their own making, and that they had never even discussed". Primakov 2009, pp. 182–183.

³⁵ "Le message adressé le 11 juillet par M. Brejnev à la Syrie 'Vous pouvez contribuer à l'arrêt des combats en retirant vos forces,'" *Le Monde*, 20 July 1976, lemonde.fr/archives/article/1976/07/20/le-message-adresse-le-11-juillet-par-m-brejnev-a-la-syrie-vous-pouvez-contribuer-a-l-arret-des-combats-en-retirant-vos-forces_3122729_1819218.html.

³⁶ In the autumn of 1976, Assad granted an interview to Salim al-Louzi, editor-in-chief of *al-Hawadeth*, in which he apparently confirmed the authenticity of the letter published in *Le Monde*. I have not been able to locate the original text of the interview, but it is summarised and analysed in an October 1976 telegram from the US Embassy in Damascus, made available by Wikileaks. Four years later, Louzi was kidnapped, tortured, and murdered, a killing that was widely blamed on Assad's intelligence services. "Asad interview with Lebanese journalist comes down hard on Soviets", US Embassy in Damascus, 5 October 1976, 1976DAMASC06757_b, wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/1976DAMASC06757_b.html.

³⁷ Seale 1995, pp. 287, 311.



agreement with Egypt, Israel could bring its full military might to bear on Syria. In response, he began to draw closer to the Soviet Union for protection and continued military supplies. In 1980, the Syrian leader challenged Arab-Muslim public opinion by refusing to condemn the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan.³⁸ In the same year, he also made Syria's pro-Soviet orientation official by signing a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, as Moscow had long demanded.³⁹

By the mid-1980s, Soviet-Syrian ties were "close and deep" but also complicated. Billions of dollars in arms changed hands, and in 1984 the number of Eastern Bloc advisers in Syria reportedly peaked at 13,000 – far more than were hosted by any other Arab country.⁴⁰ The Soviet naval presence in the Mediterranean relied heavily on access to Syria's Tartous port, there was close intelligence cooperation, and joint Syrian-Soviet listening posts eavesdropped on Israel and its US-made military technology.⁴¹ Even then, Assad continued to frustrate Soviet leaders by occasionally arresting SCP members, running under-the-table contacts with the United States, and attacking Soviet allies such as Yasser Arafat's PLO.⁴²

³⁸ "My concern as an Arab [...] is primarily Palestine and not Afghanistan", Assad told delegates at the Baath Party's 13th National Congress, adding, "If the Soviet entry into Afghanistan presents a challenge, then it is not to us but rather to the United States". Speech by Hafez al-Assad on 2 August 1980, PresidentAssad.net, presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=532:2-8-1980&catid=262:1980&Itemid=493.

³⁹ The Soviet Union signed similar agreements with several Arab governments: Egypt in 1971 (abrogated by Sadat in 1976), Iraq in 1972, Syria in 1980, South Yemen in 1979, and North Yemen in 1984. According to Farouq al-Sharaa, Syria's deputy foreign minister at the time, Assad accepted the agreement mainly to ensure continued Soviet weapons shipments, reasoning that there was no other possible source of supply. Farouq al-Sharaa, *al-riwaya al-mafqouda: mudhakkirat wa-shahadat*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015, p. 67.

⁴⁰ Thomas Collelo (ed.), *Syria: A Country Study*, US Library of Congress, 3rd. ed., 1988, p. 227.

The End of the Soviet Union

In 1985, the reforming Communist Party leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, took charge in the Kremlin and began to reorganise its stagnating political and economic system. His reforms included a doctrine of "new thinking" that aimed to defuse tensions with the United States, de-ideologise Soviet policy, and end the Cold War.

This was bad news for Assad, who had grown accustomed to milking the Soviet Union for support. His first meeting with Gorbachev in 1985 nonetheless went well.⁴³ Arms deliveries continued, including hundreds of modern T-80 tanks, SS-23 missiles, and MiG-29 jets.⁴⁴ In July 1987, Syrian-Soviet cooperation reached such heights that it actually breached the stratosphere, as Lt. Col. Mohammed Fares, the first Syrian cosmonaut, took part in a mission to the MIR space station.⁴⁵

By that time, however, there was trouble back on Earth. In April 1987, Assad learned that that Syria would no longer be receiving its weapons on credit and that the Soviet Union intended to restore diplomatic relations with Israel.⁴⁶ Syrian attempts to keep Moscow onside by allowing it to build

⁴¹ Both Egypt and Syria had opened their ports to the Soviet Union in the years following the 1967 war, but Sadat restricted Soviet naval access in 1975. Vasiliev 2018, p. 105. A Syrian-Russian station, "Centre S" on Tell Harrah near the Golan Heights, was captured by anti-Assad rebels in 2014. It appears to have been a joint project of Syrian and Russian military intelligence (GRU). Reports have also claimed a Russian satellite imagery analysis base existed west of Damascus, near the Beirut-Damascus highway. See Inna Lazareva, "Russian spy base in Syria used to monitor rebels and Israel seized", *Daily Telegraph*, 8 October 2014, telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11148857/Russian-spy-base-in-Syria-used-to-monitor-rebels-and-Israel-seized.html.

⁴² Primakov 2009, pp. 240–245.

⁴³ Sharaa 2015, p. 135.

⁴⁴ Vasiliev 2018, pp. 247–248.

⁴⁵ In 2012, Fares defected to Turkey and joined the anti-Assad opposition.

⁴⁶ Vasiliev 2018, pp. 247–248.



its own naval resupply station in Tartous failed to change the course of history.⁴⁷ The Syrian Foreign Minister, Farouq al-Sharaa, recalled being shocked by the lack of “comradely spirit”, when in June 1988 he was brusquely informed that Syria could expect no more military support, that it needed to resolve its problems with Israel peacefully, and that it should pull out of Lebanon.⁴⁸ According to Sharaa, Assad left his last meeting with Gorbachev in April 1990 “with a ‘pessimistic’ impression of the changes in Soviet strategy towards its allies and of the beginning of a decline in the Soviet Union’s global position”.⁴⁹

To secure the Baathist regime’s transition to a unipolar, US-dominated global order, Assad spent 1989–1991 trading favours with the West. Syria joined the Israeli-Arab

peace talks and pushed its Palestinian allies to comply or stay silent. It also sent forces to fight in Kuwait under US leadership. The Gulf States rewarded Damascus with a new wave of financial support, and tacit US-Saudi backing for a settlement of the war in Lebanon that allowed Assad’s army to stay and dominate Lebanese politics at gunpoint.

At the end of 1991, the Soviet Union finally broke apart. The Cold War was over and the United States had won. In a speech to the Syrian Parliament, Assad warned that the “balance” of the world had been upset, “causing disorder followed by a turbulent motion”. Some new equilibrium would no doubt emerge, he said, but “the road ahead and its endpoint remain unclear”.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Robert Pear, “U.S. Says Soviets Are Expanding Base for Warships on Syrian Coast”, *New York Times*, 28 August 1988, [nytimes.com/1988/08/28/world/us-says-soviets-are-expanding-base-for-warships-on-syrian-coast.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/28/world/us-says-soviets-are-expanding-base-for-warships-on-syrian-coast.html).

⁴⁸ Sharaa 2015, pp. 146–147.

⁴⁹ Sharaa 2015, p. 150.

⁵⁰ Speech by Hafez al-Assad on 12 March 1992, [PresidentAssad.net](https://www.presidentassad.net), [presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=624:12-3-1992&catid=274&Itemid=493](https://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=624:12-3-1992&catid=274&Itemid=493).



Russian-Syrian Relations after the Cold War

The 1990s was an unhappy decade for Syria. The withdrawal of Soviet support cut deep into Syrian finances, and Assad's health declined, limiting the ability of his hyper-centralised state to reform and adapt. Much of the president's dwindling energy continued to be spent on foreign policy, now in the form of an ill-fated peace process with Israel and various crises in Lebanon, which was still under Syrian control.

Russia had no meaningful influence over either Israel or Lebanon, and Assad consequently reoriented his policies to focus on the United States and Europe. The Syrian President stopped visiting Moscow, as he had done regularly throughout the Cold War, and political contacts tapered off. Russia, for its part, turned inwards, trying to fix its own broken politics and tending to its near abroad. To the extent that the Kremlin paid any attention to the Middle East, it focused on building new trade relations with the Gulf Arab oil kingdoms, Turkey, and Israel and on loosening the UN sanctions on Iraq. The decrepit and cash-starved regime in Damascus no longer seemed to have anything to offer Russia and, unlike in Cold War days, the Syrians would get nothing for free.

Between 1956 and 1991, the Soviet Union had reportedly supplied Syria with 5000 tanks, more than 1200 combat aircraft, and around 70 warships – weapons worth \$26 billion.⁵¹ Much of this sum was still unpaid

but Assad refused to acknowledge Russia's right to Soviet money. Angered, the Kremlin determined to "reject any hint of charity in the matter".⁵² In 1994, Syria finally acknowledged a debt of \$11 billion but continued to demand write-offs and haggle over when and how to pay the rest.⁵³ The issue of Syria's outstanding debt would hamper trade and complicate political relations for over a decade.

Nonetheless, decades of Cold War cooperation did not simply disappear overnight. Certain cultural and economic exchanges continued, in some cases more through inertia than by design.⁵⁴ Military and intelligence cooperation also quietly continued, and a new defence agreement was signed in 1994, creating a framework for renewed arms exports. Russia also chose to maintain its naval depot in Tartous even as it began to dismantle all of its other military installations outside former-Soviet territory.

The late 1990s saw a "relative revival of political contacts", and a series of mostly unsuccessful Russian attempts to find a role in the Golan Heights peace talks.⁵⁵ Arms sales also picked up slightly around 1998, as Russia delivered new anti-tank missiles, small arms, and ammunition.⁵⁶ In July 1999, the elderly, sickly Syrian President returned to Moscow for the first time since the end of the Cold War to be feted as "an old friend of Russia".⁵⁷

⁵¹ "Военно-техническое сотрудничество России и Сирии. Досье", TASS, 30 September 2015, tass.ru/info/2305654. Translation by Liliia Makashova.

⁵² Nizameddin 1999, p. 162.

⁵³ Nizameddin 1999, pp. 163–164, 166.

⁵⁴ Vasiliev 2018, p. 385.

⁵⁵ Vasiliev 2018, p. 385. Russian attention to the Middle East, and to former Soviet allies in particular, increased again under Yevgeny Primakov, a Middle East specialist who served as Russia's foreign minister in 1996–1998 and prime minister in 1998–1999.

⁵⁶ "Военно-техническое...", TASS.

⁵⁷ "Moscow seeks greater peace role", BBC, 6 July



This was to be his final visit. On 10 June 2000, Hafez al-Assad died. Although a press statement from the Kremlin hailed him as “one of the most vivid and outstanding political personalities of our time”, neither the Russian President nor his foreign minister attended the funeral.⁵⁸ President Jacques Chirac of France, the US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, and the foreign ministers of the United Kingdom, Canada, Spain, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and the Vatican were all in attendance, but Russia was represented by State Duma Speaker Gennady Seleznyov and former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov.⁵⁹ It was a telling illustration of how distant the Syrian-Russian connection had become, and an inauspicious start for the relationship between two new presidents: Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad.

Bashar al-Assad and Russia

On inheriting power in the summer of 2000, Bashar al-Assad found himself presiding over a dilapidated and economically rotten regime. He vowed to rejuvenate and reform it, and to take Syria into the 21st century, while remaining true to the political fundamentals laid down by the elder Assad.⁶⁰

This turned out to mean a modicum of political liberalisation and administrative reform, and a markedly bolder pro-market

economic package designed to attract foreign investment and create jobs before Syria’s limited oil reserves ran dry. What it did not mean, however, was a radical transformation of Syria’s foreign policy. Syria’s new president certainly seemed more Western-oriented than his father. Hafez al-Assad had spoken little of any language other than Arabic. His outlook was singularly shaped by Arab nationalism and military intrigue, and his only exposure to life outside the Middle East before entering the corridors of power had been as a military trainee in the 1950s Soviet Union.

Bashar, by contrast, spoke at least some French and was quite fluent in English. He had trained as an ophthalmologist in the United Kingdom in 1992–1994, and was married to a London-born Syrian-British woman. He was an enthusiastic admirer of Western technology and the Internet, and he stuffed his MP3 player with Phil Collins. His favourite British politician, he had once admitted, was Margaret Thatcher.⁶¹

In the first years of his rule, Bashar al-Assad travelled widely to meet with foreign heads of state, with a heavy emphasis on the leading pro-US Arab nations such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as well as the major European capitals, but also Iran. Moscow was low on the young president’s list of priorities: it was only after three and a half years and approximately 45 visits to some 25 other countries that he finally travelled to Russia in January 2005.⁶²

1999, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/387467.stm.

⁵⁸ “President Vladimir Putin expressed his condolences to the people and leadership of the Syrian Arab Republic on the death of President Hafez Assad of Syria”, Russian Presidency, 10 June 2000, en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/38528.

⁵⁹ مليون شخص في موكب دمشق الجنائزي ومئات الألوف شاركوا في “دفن جثمان الأسد في القرداحة”, *al-Jazirah* (Saudi Arabia), 14 June 2000, al-jazirah.com/2000/20000614/fe4.htm; “المعزّون”, *al-Hayat*, 14 June 2000, alhayat.com/article/1047701.

⁶⁰ The outlines of this approach were sketched in Bashar al-Assad’s first speech as president on 17 July 2000, English translation at PresidentAssad.net,

presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=438:president-assad-2000-inauguration-speech-july-17-2000-3&catid=106&Itemid=496.

⁶¹ According to the recollections of Bashar al-Assad’s former medical instructor at Western Eye Hospital, London, Dr Edmond Schulenburg, as cited in *People*, vol. 54, no. 1, July 2000, and *Ha’aretz*, 9 February 2001.

⁶² Among the Arab nations visited by Assad before his first visit to Russia in January 2005 were Egypt (Sep. 2000, Sep. 2001, Feb. 2002, Oct. 2002, Feb. 2003, Dec. 2003, Nov. 2004), Saudi Arabia (Oct. 2000, Sep. 2001, Mar. 2002, Aug. 2002, Nov. 2002, July 2003, Mar. 2004), Jordan (Mar. 2001, Oct. 2001, Apr. 2004), the



However, the fact that Assad spent a great deal of energy on building relations with Western and US-friendly Arab leaders did not mean that he was ready to abandon the basic tenets of his father's foreign policy. Syria continued to work closely with Iran and remained locked in conflict with Israel.

As regional crises struck in swift succession, Syria retreated back into a confrontative posture. Backing Palestinian radicals during the 2000 Aqsa Intifada was wildly popular domestically, but it marked Assad as a troublemaker in Western eyes. When, after being attacked by al-Qaeda in 2001, the United States decided to remake the Middle East, the Syrian regime was high on its list of problems. Assad's use of Syria's 2002–2003 seat on the United Nations Security Council to oppose the US invasion of Iraq was, again, a popular move at home, but won him no friends in the United States. Syria's subsequent support for Iraqi rebels cemented its image as a regional menace in US eyes.⁶³

Washington imposed sanctions on Syria in May 2004, and there was more to come. In September 2004, the Security Council adopted resolution 1559, which demanded the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Lebanon, where Syria had kept troops since 1976. In February 2005, the Lebanese opposition leader, Rafiq al-Hariri, was killed in what was generally assumed to be a Syrian-directed assassination. Assad came

under heavy US, Saudi Arabian, and French pressure to pull his army out of Lebanon, which he finally did in April 2005.

The Syrian President's standing was shaken and some experts warned that his regime had reached its "end phase".⁶⁴ However, instead of breaking, the Syrian government dug down and intensified its alliance with Iran and Hezbollah, reaffirming Assad's grip on Lebanese politics while waiting out its US and EU opponents.

The Relationship Recovers

Fortunately for Bashar al-Assad, the escalating Western and Arab pressure on Syria in 2001–2005 coincided with growing friction between Russia and the West.

Five years into his presidency, Vladimir Putin had developed a long list of complaints against the United States, ranging from the US invasion of Iraq to US missile defence plans and NATO's eastward expansion. Russian leaders were also unnerved by a string of uprisings against Russia-friendly autocrats in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), and Ukraine (2004). To Russian nationalists and national security hawks, these "colour revolutions" smelled of Western-instigated subversion – perhaps aimed at a strategic encirclement of Russia. At the same time, oil price hikes after 2003 made the Russian economy much less

United Arab Emirates (Jan. 2001, Nov. 2004), Kuwait (Aug. 2001, June 2004), Tunisia (Apr. 2001, May 2004), Libya (Feb. 2001), Morocco (Apr. 2001), Oman (May 2001), Yemen (Sep. 2001), Sudan (Oct. 2001), Lebanon (Mar. 2002), Bahrain (Nov. 2002), Algeria (Dec. 2002), and Qatar (Oct. 2003). Assad made no visits to Iraq or Mauritania. Among the non-Arab nations visited by Assad before January 2005 were Iran (Jan. 2001, Mar. 2003, July 2004), Spain (May 2001, June 2004), France (June 2001), Germany (June 2001), Italy (Feb. 2002), the United Kingdom (Dec. 2002), Greece (Dec. 2003), Turkey (Jan. 2004), and China (June 2004). This list has been compiled by the author using various sources, as well as Arabic and English online press archives. Only officially acknowledged visits are included, and the list may be incomplete.

⁶³ The US military believed 65–75 per cent of foreign fighters entering Iraq were coming through Syria, with the active or passive complicity of Assad's government. In summer 2005, the US National Security Council discussed the idea of seeking "regime-change" in Damascus, but decided against it. Joel D. Rayburn and Frank K. Sobchak (eds.), *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War: Volume 1: Invasion, Insurgency, Civil War, 2003–2006*, Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2019, p. 417.

⁶⁴ Volker Perthes, "Syria: It's all over, but it could be messy", *New York Times*, 5 October 2005, [nytimes.com/2005/10/05/opinion/syria-its-all-over-but-it-could-be-messy.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/05/opinion/syria-its-all-over-but-it-could-be-messy.html)
[nytimes.com/2005/10/05/opinion/syria-its-all-over-but-it-could-be-messy.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/05/opinion/syria-its-all-over-but-it-could-be-messy.html).



sensitive to Western pressure, which gave Putin the freedom to pursue his grievances.

According to the Polish-Canadian scholar, Andrej Kreutz, "Syria's international isolation was an important factor allowing a new Moscow-Damascus rapprochement between 2004 and 2008, the highpoint of Western pressure on Syria", but "probably even more important was the renewal of Moscow's proactive foreign policy which was conceived as a defense after the American war in Iraq in 2003 and the 2004 NATO enlargement".⁶⁵

It was in this context that Assad made his first visit to Moscow. The Russian ex-diplomat and historian, Alexey Vasiliev, considers the January 2005 meeting between Assad and Putin a "historic milestone" for the relationship.⁶⁶ As he returned to Syria, Assad carried a Russian agreement to forgive nearly three-quarters of Syria's debt, set at \$13.4 billion. The write-off removed a long-standing source of friction between Moscow and Damascus, clearing the way for new Syrian arms purchases on a purely commercial basis.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Andrej Kreutz, "Syria: Russia's Best Asset in the Middle East", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, no. 55, Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI), November 2010, ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/kreutzengrussiasyria_nov2010.pdf, p. 14.

⁶⁶ Vasiliev 2018, p. 387.

⁶⁷ According to the Putin-Assad agreement, Syria acknowledged an outstanding debt of \$13.4 billion; \$2.1 billion was immediately repaid in Syrian pounds, to be used to finance Russian imports from Syria. Another \$1.5 billion was to be repaid in annual instalments until 2015. The remaining \$9.8 billion was cancelled completely. "rusiya tashtub 73% min duyoun souriya", *Aljazeera*, 25 January 2005, bit.ly/2VWy6qp.

⁶⁸ "Alexander Yakovenko, the Spokesman of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Answers a Media Question Regarding Lebanon Government Resignation", Russian Foreign Ministry, 1 March 2005, mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety_conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/447328.

⁶⁹ Kreutz 2010, p. 15. The author would like to thank Hanna Notte for valuable insights into Russia's handling of the Hariri affair.

⁷⁰ Author's telephone interview with Pieter

However, Russian leaders remained reluctant to spend diplomatic capital in defence of Syria's occupation of Lebanon, of which they had never fully approved. They also continued to prioritise relations with the United States, France, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other nations involved in the pressure campaign against Damascus. Russia abstained in the vote on resolution 1559 in 2004 and, after the Hariri assassination, joined the chorus of voices calling on Syria to withdraw from Lebanon.⁶⁸ By the autumn of 2005, however, Russian diplomats had mustered a half-hearted effort to clear Assad's name in the Hariri affair, and "staunchly opposed" Western requests for UN sanctions.⁶⁹

Assad returned to Moscow in December 2006, amid "a significant rebuilding" of the Russian-Syrian military relationship.⁷⁰ Eager to improve relations with Moscow and to improve Syria's deterrence against Israeli and US incursions, the Syrian leader began to order billions of dollars worth of modern air defence systems (Pantsyr-S1, 2K22 Tunguska, Buk-M2, and Igla-S) as well as naval missiles (Yakhont).⁷¹

Wezeman, Senior researcher, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), September 2018.

⁷¹ Syrian arms purchases listed in the SIPRI arms trade database (sipri.org). The deterioration in Syria's deterrent capabilities was on clear display in the period 2003–2008. In October 2003, Israeli jets attacked an alleged Palestinian training camp near Damascus, the first time in many years that Israel had openly breached Syrian air space. In summer 2005, US military leaders proposed to Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld that the US Air Force should bomb Damascus Airport to retaliate for the flow of jihadi fighters into Iraq from Syria; the proposal was turned down. In September 2007, Israel bombed an allegedly North Korean-built nuclear reactor in Syria's eastern deserts. In October 2008, US forces helicoptered across the Iraqi border to attack a suspected jihadi hideout on Syrian territory. Greg Myre, "Israel Attacks What It Calls a Terrorist Camp in Syria", 6 October 2003, *New York Times*, nytimes.com/2003/10/06/world/mideast-turmoil-airstrike-israel-attacks-what-it-calls-terrorist-camp-syria.html; "US helicopter raid' inside Syria", BBC, 27 October 2008, news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7692153.stm; Oliver Holmes, "Israel confirms it carried out 2007 airstrike on Syrian nuclear reactor", *The Guardian*, 21 March 2018, theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/israel



In 2008, Assad made his third trip to Russia.⁷² Earlier that year, Putin had stepped down to become prime minister having served the maximum two terms as president, but he continued to exert influence behind the scenes. His successor, Dmitri Medvedev, had a more liberal outlook but relations with the United States and the EU were nonetheless growing bitter and tense. Mimicking the old Cold War dynamics, Assad went all in on the Russian side and offered full-throated support for Russia's 2008 war with Georgia, which he called a defence of "legitimate interests".⁷³

The Russo-Georgian war prompted a major Russian military modernisation programme, which accelerated plans for a restored Russian blue-water navy. This, in turn, brought the old Russian resupply depot in Tartous back into focus.

Repair work had begun at the Russian section of the port in 2006, as Moscow prepared for its first naval sortie into the Mediterranean since the end of the Cold War, which took place in December 2007.⁷⁴

admits-it-carried-out-2007-airstrike-on-syrian-nuclear-reactor; Rayburn and Sobchak 2019, p. 417.

⁷² Ali Badwan, "إنعاش التحالف التقليدي: زيارة الأسد إلى روسيا", *al-Safir*, 30 August 2008, assafir.com/Article/133562/Archive.

⁷³ "الأسد يدعم روسيا بالكامل ويشجب المحاولات الغربية لعزلها", *al-Itihad*, 21 August 2008, bit.ly/2H1aBJ0.

⁷⁴ Uwe Klußmann, "Russia and Syria: An Old Base (Friendship) Gets a Facelift", *Der Spiegel*, 22 June 2006, spiegel.de/international/spiegel/russia-and-syria-an-old-base-friendship-gets-a-facelift-a-422911.html; Guy Faulconbridge, "Russian navy to start sorties in Mediterranean", Reuters, 5 December 2007, reuters.com/article/us-russia-navy/russian-navy-to-start-sorties-in-mediterranean-idUSL0518563620071205.

⁷⁵ Hugh Macleod, "From Syrian fishing port to naval power base: Russia moves into the Mediterranean", *The Guardian*, 8 October 2008, theguardian.com/world/2008/oct/08/syria.russia; "البحرية الروسية تعود إلى ميناء طرطوس السوري", BBC Arabic, 13 September 2008, news.bbc.co.uk/1/arabic/news/newsid_7613000/7613724.stm.

⁷⁶ "Russian Navy to base warships at Syrian port after 2012", RIA Novosti, 2 August 2010, sputniknews.com/russia/20100802160041427.

⁷⁷ Medvedev took the opportunity to meet with Khaled Meshaal, the Damascus-based leader of the

After Assad's meeting with Medvedev, new dredging works began in Tartous. By 2009–2010, Russian engineers were rebuilding the depot to cope with more traffic and larger ships.⁷⁵ Russia's Navy chief, Adm. Vladimir Vysotsky, told the media that Russia's presence in Tartous would be developed into a "naval base" capable of handling aircraft carriers.⁷⁶

In 2010, Medvedev became the first Russian (or Soviet) head of state to visit Damascus.⁷⁷ Russian-Syrian relations were now stronger than at any point since the end of the Cold War, but there were still limits to how far Russia would go for Syria. Both the United States and Israel were leaning on the Russian government to block sales of certain advanced missile systems, warning that they would upset the balance of power and empower Iran, which allegedly bankrolled some of Syria's military acquisitions.⁷⁸ Among other things, Israel had asked that Syria not be allowed to buy the long-range S-300 anti-aircraft system, even though Syria had reportedly made a down payment to initiate a deal in 2010.⁷⁹

Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, which led to a "very tense" telephone call between Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Russia's Sergei Lavrov. Barak Ravid, "FM Chides Russia after Medvedev Meets with Meshal", *Ha'aretz*, 16 May 2010, haaretz.com/1.5120961.

⁷⁸ Ravid, "FM Chides Russia..."

⁷⁹ The 2010 deal was only revealed after the fact, as Russia began to threaten to deliver S-300s to Syria during the civil war. Since 2013, Moscow has repeatedly raised the S-300 issue either directly or through press leaks, seemingly to put pressure on Israeli and US leaders, only to then back down and drop the matter. In 2018, Russia finally announced that it had donated three S-300 systems to Syria, following a particularly heated dispute with Israel. Many details remain unclear, and it is possible that the information that was gradually released after 2013 is inaccurate in part or in whole. Yiftah Shapir, "Syria, Russia, and the S-300: Military and Technical Background", *INSS Insight*, no. 426, Institute for National and Security Studies, 20 May 2013, inss.org.il/publication/syria-russia-and-the-s-300-military-and-technical-background; Alexander Winning, "Syria 'will not receive Russian S-300 missiles for at least a year,'" *The Guardian*, 31 May 2013, theguardian.com/world/2013/may/31/syria-russian-s-300-missiles; "Военно-техническое...", TASS; "Three Russian S-300PM battalion sets delivered to Syria free



The Kremlin also agreed to block the sale to Syria of Iskander-E missile batteries, which could have sent conventional or chemical payloads deep into Israel in the event of a war.⁸⁰

Although some in the Russian defence establishment grumbled that military cooperation with the Middle East had fallen “under the control of Tel Aviv”, both Medvedev and Putin seemed unwilling to let Syria upset Russia’s friendly relations with Israel.⁸¹ “In Russia, Syria has not found the champion that it seeks to rival the support the US lends to Israel”, concluded Kreutz.⁸²

Part of the problem was that beyond security and intelligence cooperation, naval access, and arms sales, Syria had very little to offer Russia. The Syrian economy was underdeveloped, riddled with corruption, and inhospitable to investors. Trade was heavily slanted towards the EU, Turkey, China, and the Middle East. Non-military economic exchanges with Russia were insignificant.⁸³

There were repeated attempts to stimulate Russian-Syrian business, but with only limited success. A Russian diplomat in Damascus gloomily noted to his US counterparts in 2006 that high-level delegations came and went without producing more than “vague public statements of mutual support, a photo op for the Syrians, and then a complete lack of follow-up by either side”.⁸⁴

As the first decade of the 21st century drew to an end, the Russia-Syria relationship had definitely been revived, but was in no way a formal alliance and lacked the political glue that had kept it together in Cold War days. It was highly asymmetric: very important to Syria but only of moderate interest to Russia. Viewed from Moscow, the Middle East was a complex mosaic of contradictory relationships. Syria’s relative importance to the Kremlin had certainly grown with the loss of influence in Iraq and with Russia’s growing estrangement from the West – but Syria was still only one piece of a larger puzzle, and rarely the most important piece.

of charge, source”, TASS, 8 October 2018, tass.com/defense/1025020.

⁸⁰ Vasiliev 2018, p. 387.

⁸¹ Colonel-General (retd) Leonid Ivashov, former head of the Russian Defense Ministry’s Directorate of International Military Cooperation, cited in Vasiliev 2018, p. 387.

⁸² Kreutz, “Syria: Russia’s Best Asset...”

⁸³ In 2010, 6.3 per cent of Syrian imports came from

Russia, of which a very large share was probably arms, while Russia received 0.29 per cent of Syria’s exports. Data collected from World Bank/WITS, wits.worldbank.org.

⁸⁴ “SARG trumpets burgeoning economic ties with Russia”, US Embassy in Damascus, 22 March 2006, 06DAMASCUS1261_a, wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06DAMASCUS1261_a.html.



Russia and the Syrian Civil War

Anti-regime demonstrations erupted in southern Syria in March 2011, inspired by the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia and Egypt. The security forces cracked down brutally but ineffectively, and the protests quickly developed into a broader anti-Assad revolt that spread across the country.

Amid rising sectarian tensions, the uprising deteriorated into armed clashes over the summer and autumn of 2011.⁸⁵ In early 2012, pitched battles raged in Homs and in some suburbs of Damascus, and rebel factions began to receive large-scale support from the Gulf states and Turkey. The government had by then lost its hold over much of the Sunni countryside, while the major cities and minority populations remained calm, reflecting Syria's underlying social and ethno-religious disparities.⁸⁶

By the summer of 2012, Syria was in the throes of a major civil war and had suffered a partial state breakdown. Islamist-led Sunni rebels controlled half of Aleppo and many of the suburbs that ring Damascus, Kurdish groups linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) had seized the northern border towns, and Assad's government brought helicopters and fixed wing aircraft to bear on opposition-held areas. Cities burned and hundreds of thousands began to flee their homes.

Why Did Russia Back Assad?

Right from the start of the conflict, the Kremlin supported the loyalist side in Syria's

civil war. For a long time, Russia stood virtually alone with Iran in the face of furious opposition from Western, Turkish, and Gulf Arab nations, but it did not budge.

The Russian position originally appears to have been motivated by a mixture of material and political interests, but also, importantly, by a fear that Western interventionism was harmful to Russia's national security and had begun to reshape the international system at Moscow's expense. As the Syrian civil war grew into a test of Russia's strength and determination, the Kremlin only became more unyielding.

Russia's material interests in Syria were limited, but they certainly must have played a role in defining early policy – there was a need to protect arms sales, intelligence cooperation, and the Tartous depot. The 2003 Iraq war had erased decades of Russian investment (up to \$18 billion in debt and contracts, according to some estimates⁸⁷) and it was reasonable to assume that a post-Assad Syria would be no kinder to Russia. Western and Gulf Arab assurances that Moscow could hold on to its assets even after Assad had been ousted made no impression, since Moscow "did not trust their promises at all".⁸⁸ Moreover, in the Russian analysis, Assad's likely successors would not be liberal or secular forces with which Moscow could bargain, but "extreme Islamists or complete chaos".⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Aron Lund, "Stumbling into Civil War: The Militarization of the Syrian Opposition in 2011", in *AMEC Insights*, vol. 2, Afro-Middle East Center, 2016.

⁸⁶ Aron Lund, *Syrian Jihadism*, UI Brief no. 13, Swedish Institute for International Affairs, 2012, <https://www.ui.se/english/publications/ui-publications/2012/syrian-jihadism>.

⁸⁷ Nizameddin 1999, p. 184.

⁸⁸ Author's interview with Martin Kragh, Director of the Russia-Eurasia Program at the Swedish Institute for International Affairs, Stockholm, November 2018.

⁸⁹ Vasiliev 2018, p. 463.



Indeed, a pessimistic view of the Middle East appears to have been at the heart of the Kremlin's Syria policy.⁹⁰ Moscow viewed Western enthusiasm for the Arab Spring as "immature and misguided", and took Western leaders to task for their "naïveté about the risks posed by Islamist movements".⁹¹ Years of conflict in Chechnya – where, in 2011, the situation was still unstable – had left the Kremlin fearful of spillover and radicalisation in the Caucasus and Central Asia.⁹²

The Arab Spring also triggered old fears of Western scheming against Russia, and of subversion through "colour revolutions", "information wars", and "hybrid warfare".⁹³ Narratives about Western subversion and manipulation were "shared across the Russian leadership and frequently and repeatedly emphasised".⁹⁴

⁹⁰ "Look at the map of this region, there are monarchies all around", Putin told reporters in April 2011. "What do you think they are – Danish-style democracies? No. There are monarchies everywhere, and this basically corresponds with the mentality of the people, as well as longstanding practice". Ellen Barry, "Putin Tested on Principles and Practicality in Syria", *New York Times*, 4 July 2012, nytimes.com/2012/07/05/world/europe/putin-tested-on-principles-and-practicality-in-syria.html. Bogdanov, too, argues that the "specificity of Arab states" demands a strong central authority to avoid chaos. Cited in Vasiliev 2018, pp. 425–426.

⁹¹ Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, IISS, Routledge, 2013, p. 173.

⁹² Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis", *International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 4, 2013, pp. 813–815. Russia's September 2015 intervention in Syria came against a backdrop of mounting fears about the stability of several Russia-allied Sunni Muslim governments in Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov was sick and frail, with no clear successor. He died in 2016. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan suffered economic crises linked to the 2014 drop in oil prices. Afghanistan seemed to be heading into worsening chaos. In December 2014, the United States withdrew 90 per cent of its forces and the ISAF mission ended, but the Taliban insurgency remained active and an Islamic State branch had just entered the fray. In Tajikistan, in 2015, the main Islamist opposition party was banned and the country's deputy defence minister reportedly attempted to launch a coup.

⁹³ Understood as a Western strategy to undermine Russia and its allies through "financial and economic pressure, informational attacks, the use of proxies and informational and ideological pressure through

Unfolding in that context, the NATO-led March 2011 intervention in Libya came to play a major role in priming the Kremlin for pushback in Syria.⁹⁵ Russian leaders grew increasingly agitated as the Libyan conflict progressed, ultimately resolving not to let Syria turn out the same way.⁹⁶ According to Dmitri Trenin, head of the Carnegie Moscow Center, "Libya was a very, very big drop in the bucket that essentially over-filled it".⁹⁷

From the Kremlin's vantage point, to back Assad against Western calls for his overthrow became a defensive action – a way to push back against US and EU policies seen as spreading extremism and instability, to save an allied secular regime, and to protect the UN-led, sovereignty-based international order that underpins Russia's own security and global influence.⁹⁸

externally financed non-governmental organisations". Monaghan 2017, p. 12. The term "hybrid warfare" has gained currency in Western debate as a description of Russian tactics in Ukraine and elsewhere, with reference to a 2013 essay by Russia's Chief of Staff, Valery Gerasimov. This inverts Gerasimov's argument: he was warning of an alleged *Western* strategy, against which Russia needed to defend itself. Monaghan 2017, p. 12, and Andrew Monaghan, "Putin's way of war: The 'war' in Russia's 'hybrid warfare,'" *Parameters*, vol. 45, no. 4, Winter 2015–2016, pp. 65–74, ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/issues/winter_2015-16/9_monaghan.pdf.

⁹⁴ Monaghan 2017, p. 12. Similar ideas feature heavily in Russia's nationalist media, where outlandish conspiracy theories flourish – for example, reimagining the chaotic Arab Spring events of 2011 as a US-directed "geopolitical operation" that aimed to "plant puppet regimes in the attacked countries". Konstantin Sivkov, "Мистики-нолики", *VPK*, 5 September 2016, vpk-news.ru/articles/32156. Translation by Liliia Makashova.

⁹⁵ Lund 2019, pp. 18–19.

⁹⁶ "It is this broader context of a resolute opposition to Western military intervention to support opposition forces to existing regimes which provides an explanation for why, after Libya, the Russian stance towards Syria was so uncompromising". Roland Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Supporting the Counter-Revolution", *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2015, pp. 83–84.

⁹⁷ Author's telephone interview with Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, November 2018.

⁹⁸ Russia's early support for Assad reflected "instrumental concerns about political legitimacy and state cohesion within Russia and its near



The longer the conflict went on, the more reasons Russia found to stick to its guns. Problems of prestige and sunk costs arose, and there were new opportunities as Western nations began to stumble over their own tangled priorities. In particular, Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 unleashed a surge of confrontational, state-backed nationalism that also translated into support for Assad, since Syria had by then come to be identified as a central front in Russia's political showdown with the West.

"Although Russia had lingering interests in Syria, the changing context of U.S.-Russia relations beginning in 2011 was a more influential factor in how Moscow would come to view this conflict", concluded Russia experts Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky.⁹⁹

A Low-effort Blocking Role, 2011–2013

Russia's early involvement in the Syrian civil war was very much an over-the-horizon venture, fought in the diplomatic arena and with limited expenditure of material support. Moscow initially seemed to hope that the crisis would blow over or that it could be contained.¹⁰⁰ Well aware that decades of regime misrule had been an important driver of the unrest, Medvedev

prodded Assad to promise reform, appease the protesters, and be mindful of international reactions.¹⁰¹ In general, however, Russian state media echoed Syrian government narratives and Russian diplomats did their best to deny or divert attention from the regime's rapidly growing list of human rights abuses.

When the United States, the EU, and several other nations called for Assad to step aside in August 2011, Russia responded by demanding that Assad be "given more time" for his "belated" but "quite realistic" reforms.¹⁰² Russian diplomats presumably realised that Assad's reforms were designed to keep him in power and would fail to satisfy his opponents – but they had little else to work with.

Russia and Assad

In making their case, Russian officials insisted that they were only trying to defend Syria's sovereignty and stability, not Assad personally. "We are not that preoccupied with the fate of al-Assad's regime", Putin declared in December 2012:

We understand what's going on there and that his family has been in power for 40 years now. Without a doubt, change is required. We're worried

neighbourhood", according to Roy Allison, Professor of Russian and Eurasian International Relations, Oxford University. "It is this, more than any deep solidarity with the Syrian leadership or commitment to the material benefits of relations with the current Syrian state, that has maintained Moscow's alignment with Damascus". Allison, "Russia and Syria...", p. 796.

⁹⁹ Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?", *Military Review*, March–April 2018, armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/Rojansky-Victory-for-Russia.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ Author's interview with Western diplomat, 2016.

¹⁰¹ As late as August 2011, Medvedev was trying to impress on Assad that he "should immediately launch reforms, reconcile with the opposition, restore civil accord, and start developing a modern state. Should he

fail to do that, he is in for a grim fate, and we will eventually have to take some decisions on Syria, too". "Interview by Dmitry Medvedev", Russian Presidency, 5 August 2011, en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/12204.

¹⁰² "Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria", White House, 18 August 2011, obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/18/statement-president-obama-situation-syria; "Comment by Press and Information Department of Russian Foreign Ministry on a Question from Interfax News Agency Regarding the Situation in Syria", Russian Foreign Ministry, 19 August 2011, mid.ru/en/web/guest/kommentarii_predstavatelya/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMqBY/content/id/197570; "Syrian opposition provoked into dialogue boycott - Lavrov", RIA Novosti, 1 September 2011, available at sputniknews.com/world/20110901166348810.



*about something else, about what happens next. We simply don't want today's opposition, having come to power, to start fighting with the current authorities, who then become the opposition, and for this to continue indefinitely.*¹⁰³

On that basis, Russian diplomats engaged in bilateral and UN-led talks with the United States and other nations to find a formula for a negotiated solution. Moscow seemed to be uncertain about whether Assad could survive and agreed that some form of transition to a new political system would be necessary.¹⁰⁴ Western leaders interpreted this to mean that Assad should be removed, but Russia consistently rejected all demands for Assad's resignation on the basis that it was an internal Syrian issue, and also unrealistic.¹⁰⁵ Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Lavrov, argued in December 2012 that Assad had "both publicly and privately" rejected calls for him to step down and there was "no possibility of changing this position".¹⁰⁶

Some US leaders would later come to the conclusion that Russia's willingness to talk about a transition in Syria was a ruse. "Their main goal was to prevent regime change and keep Assad in power, and they humoured us with discussions about governance and other stuff", said Philip Gordon, who coordinated White House

Middle East Policy in 2013–2015. "We tried to proactively say, what about this, or how about this list of potential leaders? And they would say, yeah whatever".¹⁰⁷

Russian Diplomatic Support

At the United Nations, Russian diplomats warned that they would never allow a Libya-style intervention in Syria. When Western nations tabled draft resolutions critical of Assad in October 2011 and February 2012, Russia vetoed them, citing the principle of non-interference. On both occasions China added its own veto to that of Russia.¹⁰⁸

In response, the United States, France, Qatar and other pro-opposition governments assembled a 60-nation strong coalition known as the Friends of Syria to legitimise and fund the political opposition, but also to isolate and shame Russia. At its peak in 2013, it grew to over 100 nations.¹⁰⁹ Some in Russia seemed frustrated by the mounting criticism and unsure of the wisdom of betting on a government that appeared to be crumbling, but the Kremlin did not back down.

The hard Russian stance was important for the Syrian government. Talk of a Libya-style military intervention in Syria was always mostly talk, but it was Russian vetoes that made sure it stayed that way. Without UN approval, a US-led intervention seemed out of the question, given President Barack

¹⁰³ "News conference of Vladimir Putin", Russian Presidency, 20 December 2012, en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17173.

¹⁰⁴ "Final Communiqué of the Action Group for Syria (Geneva Communiqué)", UN Peacemaker, 30 June 2012, peacemaker.un.org/node/1581.

¹⁰⁵ Transcript Lavrov's remarks at a press conference with Kofi Annan in Moscow, Russian Foreign Ministry, 16 July 2012, mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonKJE02Bw/content/id/149258.

¹⁰⁶ Ellen Barry, "Insisting on Assad's Exit Will Cost More Lives, Russian Says", *New York Times*, 29 December 2012, nytimes.com/2012/12/30/world/middleeast/syria.html.

¹⁰⁷ Author's interview with Philip H. Gordon, senior fellow with the Council on Foreign Relations, former special assistant to the US President and White House coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region (2013–2015), Washington, DC, October 2018.

¹⁰⁸ Official record of the UN Security Council, 6627th meeting, 4 October 2011, S/PV.6627, undocs.org/en/S/PV.6627; Official record of the UN Security Council, 6711th meeting, 4 February 2012, S/PV.6711, undocs.org/en/S/PV.6711.

¹⁰⁹ Aron Lund, "How Assad's Enemies Gave Up on the Syrian Opposition", The Century Foundation, 17 October 2017, tcf.org/content/report/assads-enemies-gave-syrian-opposition.



Obama's already strong opposition to getting sucked into the Syrian war.¹¹⁰ Many of Obama's regional and European allies complained and accused him of fecklessness, but none of them was ready to make a military move without US top cover.

Russian Military Support

Ignoring Western calls for an arms boycott, Moscow refused to stop military deliveries to Syria, insisting that "defensive" weapons already on order should be delivered in full. Undeclared small arms and ammunition shipments also seemed to be arriving in growing volumes, coming in by ship from the Black Sea to Latakia and Tartous.¹¹¹

Russia did not at that point appear to be supporting Damascus for free, and it offered no advanced, high-cost equipment except what was already paid for. In January 2012, Rosboronexport agreed to sell Syria 36 new Yak-130 combat trainer aircraft, which could have been used with devastating effect against the insurgency. However, the jets were never delivered, and other, pre-war contracts for advanced weaponry eventually ran out.¹¹² "For a while up until 2013, the deliveries of these systems that had been ordered continued", according to Pieter Wezeman, an arms trade specialist with the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "but it became less and less".¹¹³ Neither side offered much detail, but it seems likely that Syria simply could not afford to pay for new high-end equipment such as combat jets or missiles,

and was instead forced to prioritise a burdensome list of daily wartime expenses.

The fact that Russia prioritised its own commercial interests over Assad's military needs frustrated many Syrian loyalists, who appeared to take it for granted that Russia would bail Damascus out as it had in Cold War days. The Assad-friendly Lebanese daily *al-Safir* later noted that Syrian sources felt Russia was "moving at less speed than the Syrians would like when it comes to fulfilling many contracts concluded with them in the past ten years".¹¹⁴

One reason why Russia could afford to restrict itself to diplomatic and indirect support was that another Damascus ally, Iran, was doing much of the military heavy lifting. In late 2012, Assad's position looked precarious and although Tehran had already trained and funded loyalist militias, it now stepped up its support drastically. In May 2013, the Hezbollah Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, publicly announced that his men were going across the border to "defend Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria".¹¹⁵

Around that time, Damascus reportedly resumed partial payments on the unfulfilled Yak-130 and S-300 contracts, in what may have been a bid to draw Moscow closer. Just as the United States began to scale up its support for Syrian rebels in mid-2013, Russia also increased the quantity of small arms delivered to loyalist forces in early and mid-2013.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine", *The Atlantic*, April 2016, theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525.

¹¹¹ Thomas Grove and Erika Solomon, "Russia boosts arms sales to Syria despite world pressure", Reuters, 21 February 2012, reuters.com/article/us-syria-russia-arms/russia-boosts-arms-sales-to-syria-despite-world-pressure-idUSTRE81K13420120221.

¹¹² "Военно-техническое...", TASS.

¹¹³ Telephone interview with Pieter Wezeman, SIPRI.

¹¹⁴ "The Russian side has adapted slowly to the new requirements of the guerrilla war waged by the Syrian army, particularly given that the latter has not been compensated for tanks lost in battle", the paper said. Mohammed Ballout, "تردد روسي ودمشق تنتظر الصياد الليلي", *al-Safir*, 7 September 2015, assafir.com/Article/442354.

¹¹⁵ "al-sayyed nasrallah li-shaab al-muqawama: ka-ma kuntu aeidu-kum bi-l-nasr daiman aeidu-kum bi-l-nasr mujaddadan" *al-Manar*, 25 May 2013, archive.almanar.com.lb/article.php?id=498289.

¹¹⁶ Thomas Grove, "Insight: Syria pays for Russian weapons to boost ties with Moscow", Reuters, 29 August 2013, reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-russia.



The Red Line Affair, 2013–2014

In mid-2013, a crisis sparked by the use of chemical weapons in Syria created an unexpected diplomatic opening for Russia. From the first months of the Syrian conflict, external observers had worried that Assad, once desperate enough, would use chemical weapons against rebels or neighbouring states, or that he might lose control of them to extremist groups. “By 2012 and 2013, that was certainly the overriding concern for the administration”, according to Derek Chollet, the US assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs in 2012–2015, “It was a concern of ours, but also of the Israelis and of others in the region”.¹¹⁷

To dissuade Assad, Obama warned in August 2012 that chemical weapons were a “red line”, the overstepping of which would have “enormous consequences”.¹¹⁸ The United States also quietly made contact with Russia, which had signalled that it took the issue seriously. As they continued to quarrel over Syria in public, US and Russian officials secretly met several times in 2012–

2013 to compare notes and discuss scenarios related to Syria’s chemical weapons. Thomas Countryman, at that time Obama’s Assistant Secretary of State for international security and non-proliferation recalls that, “In 2012, the Russians agreed that they did not want to see the regime use chemical weapons, and they told us they were reinforcing that message in Damascus”.¹¹⁹

Anonymous US officials have told the *Wall Street Journal* that there was at least one live test of the Moscow-Washington understanding. In December 2012, US intelligence intercepted Syrian government communications that revealed plans for a chemical attack. Russia was informed and in turn contacted Iran, which leaned on the Syrians to call off the attack.¹²⁰

However, the emerging US-Russian cooperation was derailed by reports of small-scale nerve gas use in the first half of 2013, and it collapsed when a major sarin attack struck near Damascus on 21 August.¹²¹ The United States and its allies held Assad responsible, although the unclassified evidence they produced to bolster their case seemed weak.¹²² The

arms-insight/insight-syria-pays-for-russian-weapons-to-boost-ties-with-moscow-idUSBRE97S0WW20130829. The United States began providing increased amounts of non-lethal support to Syrian rebels after April 2013, promised weapons deliveries in June, and apparently began to deliver them through a CIA programme by late August or September. “On-the-Record Conference Call by Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes on Syria”, White House, 13 June 2013, obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/06/13/record-conference-call-deputy-national-security-advisor-strategic-commun; Ernesto Londono and Greg Miller, “CIA begins weapons delivery to Syrian rebels”, *Washington Post*, 11 September 2013, washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-begins-weapons-delivery-to-syrian-rebels/2013/09/11/9fcf2ed8-1b0c-11e3-a628-7e6dde8f889d_story.html.

¹¹⁷ Author’s telephone interview with Derek Chollet, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (2012–2015), August 2016.

¹¹⁸ “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps”, White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 20 August 2012, obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-

office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps.

¹¹⁹ Author’s telephone interview with Thomas M. Countryman, US Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation (2011–2017), January 2019.

¹²⁰ Adam Entous, Nour Malas, and Rima Abushakra, “As Syrian Chemical Attack Loomed, Missteps Doomed Civilians”, *Wall Street Journal*, 22 November 2013, wsj.com/articles/as-syrian-chemical-attack-loomed-missteps-doomed-civilians-138517739.

¹²¹ Estimates of the number of dead in the August 21 attack varied between several hundreds and around 1,500. The CIA estimated that 1,429 Syrians had been killed. Entous, Malas, and Abushakra, “As Syrian Chemical Attack Loomed...” The head of the UN’s chemical weapons investigators estimated that the number was probably exaggerated, but said he “would not be surprised if hundreds of people had died”. Åke Sellström, Head of the UN Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic (2013), email, February 2014.

¹²² For the UK, US, and French public assessments, see “Syria: reported chemical weapons use – Joint



Kremlin took the opposite view but also dispensed with the idea of evidence altogether – in defence of his claim that Assad had been framed by the opposition, Lavrov offered a grab-bag of mutually irreconcilable conspiracy theories plucked from the Internet.¹²³

However, the United States did not bomb Damascus. While Obama did want to react in some fashion to the breach of his red line, he lacked domestic and international support and had little enthusiasm for a military response – airstrikes could not resolve the problem of Assad's chemical arsenal. When Russia proposed a joint disarmament mission in return for cancelling the attack, Obama took up the offer.¹²⁴

On 9 September 2013, Sergey Lavrov and US Secretary of State, John Kerry, agreed to eliminate Assad's chemical arsenal through the UN and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). With Russia's veto now out of the way, a Security Council resolution was quickly

drafted to seal the deal. Russia appears to have sweetened the deal for Assad by sending new arms shipments, but the threat of US airstrikes was by all accounts taken seriously in Damascus.¹²⁵ In any case, the Syrian government declared that it was in possession of 1300 tonnes of chemical weapons, and swore to destroy them. The UN-OPCW mission had successfully eliminated all of the declared weapons by June 2014.¹²⁶

US opinion was divided on the 2013 deal but for Russia it seemed to have only upsides: the Syrian government was spared airstrikes, deeper Western involvement was averted, the Syrian opposition and its regional allies were demoralised, the United States abandoned its plans to act unilaterally outside the UN system, and Moscow temporarily managed to regain its role as Washington's equal as they jointly managed a major international crisis. After many years of post-Cold War frustration, all this was music to Russian ears: "For the first time in many years of US dominance in international politics, the need to look for

Intelligence Committee letter", UK Cabinet Office, 29 August 2013, gov.uk/government/publications/syria-reported-chemical-weapons-use-joint-intelligence-committee-letter; "Government Assessment of the Syrian Government's Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013", White House, 30 August 2013, obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21; "Syrian chemical programme: National executive summary of declassified intelligence", French Foreign Ministry, 3 September 2013, diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Syrian_Chemical_Programme.pdf.

¹²³ In an interview with the *Washington Post*, Lavrov insisted that Russia had "very good evidence" that rebels were behind the attack. Pressed for more information, he admitted that the evidence he had given to the US government consisted of articles found on the Internet. He then brought up several articles floating around on online conspiracy sites: a Lebanese nun saying the entire attack was a hoax; a plagiarised letter saying rebels had staged the attack, maybe on behalf of Israel; and a notorious piece of fake news about rebels accidentally releasing nerve gas given to them by Saudi Arabia. That these narratives were incompatible with each other did not seem to matter. For a transcript of

Lavrov's interview, see "Interview by the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to the *Washington Post*, published September 25, 2013", Russian Foreign Ministry/London Embassy, rusemb.org.uk/article/260. For a discussion of the material referenced by Lavrov, including links to the original sources, see e.g. Ben Hubbard, "A Nun Lends a Voice of Skepticism on the Use of Poison Gas by Syria", *New York Times*, 21 September 2013, nytimes.com/2013/09/22/world/middleeast/seeking-credible-denial-on-poison-gas-russia-and-syria-turn-to-nun.html; Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed, "Special report: fixing intelligence on Syria?", *Le Monde diplomatique*, 25 September 2013, mondediplo.com/outsidein/special-report-fixing-intelligence-on-syria; Brian Whitaker, "Lavrov cites mystery reporter Ababneh", *al-Bab*, 26 September 2013, al-bab.com/blog/2013/09/lavrov-cites-mystery-reporter-ababneh.

¹²⁴ Aron Lund, "Red Line Redux: How Putin Tore Up Obama's 2013 Syria Deal", The Century Foundation, 3 February 2017, tcf.org/content/report/red-line-redux-putin-tore-obamas-2013-syria-deal.

¹²⁵ Jonathan Saul, "Exclusive: Russia steps up military lifeline to Syria's Assad - sources", Reuters, 17 January 2014, reuters.com/article/us-syria-russia-arms-idUSBREA0G0MN20140117.

¹²⁶ Lund, "Red Line Redux..."



compromises on complex international subjects and work collectively on diplomatic solutions prevailed over the logic of pressure and unilateral intervention”, wrote Russian diplomat Maria Khodyskaya-Golenishcheva.¹²⁷

A Window of Opportunity Closes

The red line deal would soon be followed by the first intra-Syrian talks on a political transition, held in Geneva in January and February 2014. Washington and its allies pushed the opposition to attend while Moscow was tasked with delivering the Syrian government.¹²⁸

The talks led nowhere. The United States failed to bring credible rebel commanders to the table, instead producing a group of marginally relevant exiles who were pelted with invective by their purported constituents in Syria. Russia could not make Assad accept the premise of the meeting even for show: his representatives turned up, but only to trash the idea of a transition.

As the delegations departed Geneva, the US-Russian mood had soured considerably.

One contributory factor was the crisis unfolding in Ukraine, where Russia’s forcible annexation of the Crimean Peninsula soon brought Western-Russian relations to a new low. Even if the Syrian and Ukrainian tracks were deliberately kept separate, events in Crimea greatly undermined US and EU faith in Putin’s trustworthiness as a negotiator, which spilled over to Syria. The Russian side seemed to feel no happier.

Around this time, US intelligence began warning that Assad had hidden part of his chemical arsenal in 2013, when he declared the rest. OPCW inspectors discovered a steadily mounting number of “gaps, inconsistencies and discrepancies” in the Syrian government narrative, which eventually led them to conclude, very diplomatically, that Damascus had failed to demonstrate that all of its chemical weapons were accounted for.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Khodyskaya-Golenishcheva cited in Vasiliev 2018, pp. 469–470.

¹²⁸ Vasiliev 2018, p. 470.

¹²⁹ “Conclusions on the outcome of consultations with the Syrian Arab Republic regarding its chemical

weapons declaration”, OPCW, EC-82/DG.18, 6 July 2016,

opcw.org/fileadmin/OPCW/EC/82/en/ec82dg18_e_.pdf; Author’s interview with OPCW Director-General Ahmet Üzümcü, The Hague, February 2018.



SYRIA'S CHEMICAL WEAPONS INVESTIGATIONS

In 2014, as OPCW inspectors were finalising the removal of Syria's publicly declared chemical weapons arsenal, rebel-held Syrian villages began to report new attacks with chlorine gas. The United States blamed Assad's forces, but Russia again claimed that Assad was being framed.

Wartime conditions made investigations difficult, but in 2016 and 2017 UN and OPCW inspectors ruled that at least some of the chemical bombs had been dropped by the Syrian Air Force. According to US-Russian agreements and UN resolutions adopted in 2013–2015, this determination should have triggered a UN response, such as targeted sanctions. However, Russia rejected any findings that incriminated the Syrian military and instead went on the offensive, charging Western nations with using the OPCW to stage "a propaganda show meant to blame Syria and Russia".

As UN and OPCW inspectors continued to pin chemical attacks on Damascus, Moscow finally opted to use its power of veto in late 2017, three times in a row, to override the Security Council majority and shut down the investigations. Even China chose to abstain in the final vote, leaving Moscow more isolated than at any point during the conflict.

Western nations angrily accused the Kremlin of trying to cover up war crimes and of violating UN resolutions, but Moscow doubled down on its false flag narrative. Senior Russian officials now regularly insist that they have secret evidence that Western agents are behind the gas attacks, among other colourful claims.

The chemical weapons problem remains a source of severe friction and ill-will between Russia and Western nations, and related disputes over the Skripal poisoning have further heightened tensions since 2018.



The Islamic State Group

The growing power of the jihadi group known as the Islamic State (IS) in 2013–2014 presented Russia with both opportunities and threats.

On the one hand, the rise of IS added weight to Russia's central political argument – that Assad was a lesser evil and a necessary partner against terrorist groups. As pro-opposition nations such as Jordan, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and even the United States recoiled from the extremist menace growing in Syria, they became more receptive to Russia's views.

On the other hand, IS was a threat to Russia. Chechen extremists played a prominent role within the group, and Moscow feared that permanent jihadi safe havens in a stateless post-Assad Syria would destabilise not only the Middle East, but also Central Asia and the Caucasus. IS was also a threat to Russia's client, Assad, both as a powerful military actor and because it provoked a US Air Force intervention in September 2014. Although the US-led coalition vowed not to target Assad's government, Russia had no trust in Washington's longer-term intentions. In practice, when US-backed Syrian Kurds attacked jihadis along the Turkish border, they were carving out a US zone of influence – and the Kremlin watched with mounting suspicion. Wary of being sidelined by the United States and eager to re-

legitimise Assad, Russia started to call for a "unified anti-terrorist front" that should include the Syrian army.¹³⁰ However, the United States showed no interest in the idea. Worse, Assad's position began to weaken.

In early 2015, the Syrian government found itself under punishing pressure from both IS and rival rebels backed, chiefly, by Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. The economy was failing and the army had retreated from cities such as Idlib and Palmyra. In June, the Syrian president spoke to the nation, warning that military manpower was growing thin and that the government might have to prioritise "vital areas".¹³¹ Russia reacted with alarm to Assad's military and economic reversals, which, according to Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, risked triggering "complete disintegration, rampant terrorism and extremism".¹³²

Russia at War, 2015–2019

In late September 2015, Russia shocked the international community by directly joining the war on the Syrian government's side.

The exact moment of Putin's decision to intervene remains unknown. Assad reportedly made a formal request for Russian assistance in July 2015, amid secret consultations between the Russian, Syrian, and Iranian governments.¹³³ The formalities

¹³⁰ Transcript of press conference with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Qatari Foreign Minister Khaled bin Mohammed al-Attiyah, Doha, 3 August 2015, Russian Foreign Ministry, mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/qa/-/asset_publisher/629HlryvPTwo/content/id/1630343.

¹³¹ Aron Lund, "Falling Back, Fighting On: Assad Lays Out His Strategy", Carnegie Middle East Center, 27 July 2015, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/60857; for a transcript in Arabic, see "*al-rai al-assad: al-maaraka maaraka mihwar mutakamel yumathil manhajan min al-istiqlaliya wal-karama*", SANA, 26 July 2015, sana.sy/?p=245771.

¹³² Vasiliev 2018, p. 491. Lavrov has claimed that Damascus was two to three weeks from being overrun when Russia intervened. This is clearly false, and it is probably best understood as a post-facto justification for the intervention. "Damascus was 2–3 weeks from falling when Russia intervened: Lavrov", Reuters, 17 January 2017, reuters.com/article/us-russia-lavrov-syria-damascus-idUSKBN15111N.

¹³³ Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow", Reuters, 6 October 2015, reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh/how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006; Vasiliev 2018, p. 488–489.



were codified in a Russian-Syrian agreement that was later released to the press, dated 26 August.¹³⁴

Over late August and September, equipment began moving to the Middle East concealed as extra arms deliveries for the Syrian army.¹³⁵ By the end of the month, close to 30 Russian combat jets had assembled at the Hmeymim airbase, near Latakia, backed by helicopters and air defence batteries.¹³⁶ Meanwhile, a fresh wave of Tehran-backed Shia fighters and Iranian troops filtered into Syria to join the loyalist ground forces.¹³⁷

After days of suspense, Russia launched its first wave of airstrikes in Syria on 30 September 2015. The Russian Defence Ministry insisted that it was only hitting IS, but analysis showed four in five Russian airstrikes had targeted other insurgents.¹³⁸ In practice, Russia went after any group that stood in Assad's way.

¹³⁴ A facsimile of the Russian-language original and a partial English translation are available in Michael Birnbaum, "The secret pact between Russia and Syria that gives Moscow carte blanche", *Washington Post*, 15 January 2016, washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/15/the-secret-pact-between-russia-and-syria-that-gives-moscow-carte-blanche.

¹³⁵ For an example of what was probably a diversionary leak to the press, see Ballout, "تردد روسي".

¹³⁶ On 30 September 2015, the Russian air force deployment at Hmeymim reportedly consisted of four Su-30SM fighters, four Su-34 frontline bombers, 12 Su-25SM ground attack aircraft, 12 Su-24M frontline bombers, 12 Mi-24 helicopters, and 12 Mi-8 helicopters. Vasiliev 2018, p. 512, n1.

¹³⁷ Aron Lund, "Not Just Russia: The Iranian Surge in Syria", Carnegie Middle East Center, 23 May 2016, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/63650.

¹³⁸ Jack Stubbs, "Four-fifths of Russia's Syria strikes don't target Islamic State: Reuters analysis", Reuters, 21 October 2015, reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-strikes/four-fifths-of-russias-syria-strikes-dont-target-islamic-state-reuters-analysis-idUSKCN0SF24L20151021.

¹³⁹ However, Russian public opinion was largely supportive of the intervention and agreed that the government was doing the right thing by backing Assad. "Russian Participation in the Syrian Conflict", Levada Center, 13 October 2015, levada.ru/en/2015/10/13/russian-participation-syrian-conflict.

Turning the War Around

The Russian-Iranian intervention drew considerable criticism, including of the brutal tactics used.¹³⁹ Human rights groups have repeatedly accused Russia of bombing civilian targets, including hospitals.¹⁴⁰ The Russian methods were nonetheless effective, and Iranian and Hezbollah assistance gave the loyalist ground offensives a harder edge.¹⁴¹ Soon, opposition forces were bleeding territory and beginning to show signs of strain.¹⁴² "Russia has managed to break the American scenario of a 'colour' revolution in Syria", declared military expert Viktor Baranets in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* in January 2016.¹⁴³

However, even if Russia and its allies were gaining ground, things moved slowly. In February 2016, a ceasefire brokered by Russia and the United States came into

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, "Syrian and Russian forces targeting hospitals as a strategy of war", Amnesty International, 3 March 2016, amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/03/syrian-and-russian-forces-targeting-hospitals-as-a-strategy-of-war; Stephanie Nebehay, "Russian and U.S. air strikes caused mass civilian deaths in Syria – U.N.", Reuters, 6 March 2018, uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-warcrimes/russia-and-u-s-air-strikes-caused-mass-civilian-deaths-in-syria-u-n-idUKKCN1G11E5?il=0. For a review of civilian casualties from Russia's air campaign, see "Russian Military in Syria", Airwars, n/d, airwars.org/conflict/russian-military-in-syria.

¹⁴¹ Lund, "Not Just Russia..." "We maintain contacts and relations with [Hezbollah], because we do not consider them a terrorist organisation. They have never committed any terrorist acts on Russian territory", Bogdanov noted in 2015. "Россия не считает «Хезболлу» и ХАМАС террористическими организациями", *Parlamentskaya Gazeta*, 15 November 2015, pnp.ru/politics/2015/11/15/rossiya-neschitaet-khezbollah-i-khamas-terroristicheskimi-organizაციами.html. Translation by Liliia Makashova.

¹⁴² Aron Lund, "Rebels in Northwestern Syria Buckle under Russian Bombardment", Carnegie Middle East Center, 26 January 2016, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62576.

¹⁴³ Viktor Baranets, "Чтого добилась Россия в Сирии за 100 дней", *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 13 January 2016, kp.ru/daily/26480.4/3349881. Translation by Liliia Makashova.



effect.¹⁴⁴ Despite some initial compliance on both sides, it gradually dissolved as Assad's forces continued to press their advantage, laying siege to rebel strongholds in Aleppo. Whatever minimal US-Russian trust had existed was soon gone.

A second deal was reached in September 2016, which would have seen Russia ban Assad's air force from parts of Syria, to be substituted by joint US-Russian aerial operations.¹⁴⁵ The deal quickly collapsed and the loyalist offensive in Aleppo continued, as Russia continued to deny any error of its own or on the part of the government.¹⁴⁶ Kerry, who had been a long-standing and often lonely proponent of dialogue with Moscow, accused Russian diplomats of living "in a parallel universe".¹⁴⁷ In early October, the United States broke off talks.¹⁴⁸

In November 2016, Donald J. Trump won the US presidential election, which changed

the diplomatic game. Russian interest in the Obama administration dwindled, as Moscow began to wait for his successor to take office.¹⁴⁹

In December 2016, loyalist forces cleared the eastern, rebel-held part of Aleppo, retaking the main opposition stronghold in Syria.¹⁵⁰ The offensive left large areas in ruins and set off more angry arguments in the Security Council. By then, however, it no longer mattered: the war had swung Russia's way and so had regional politics.

Remaking the Regional Scene

The 2015 intervention was a military operation, but it had a strong political component. By seizing the initiative in Syria, the Kremlin hoped to "broaden the confrontation [with the West] on terms more favourable to itself", break the post-

¹⁴⁴ Aron Lund, "Syria's Cessation of Hostilities: How Does It Work and How are Factions Reacting?", Carnegie Middle East Center, 29 February 2016, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/62916?lang=en.

¹⁴⁵ "Remarks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura at a Press Availability", US Department of State, 9 September 2016, state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/09/261722.htm.

¹⁴⁶ On 17 September 2016, the US-led international coalition struck a Syrian Army unit near Deir al-Zor; the Pentagon claimed that it had been a "regrettable" error. Two days later, an unclaimed airstrike hit one of the first humanitarian convoys operating under the US-Russian agreement near Aleppo and the Syrian government announced that it would no longer respect the cessation of hostilities, citing rebel violations. US intelligence apparently blamed Russia for the convoy attack. Later, a UN investigation pointed to either the Syrian or the Russian air force. The Kremlin immediately rejected the conclusions and began pumping out theories about a false flag attack staged with US and UN complicity. Spencer Ackerman, "US military admits it mistakenly targeted and killed loyalist Syrian forces", *The Guardian*, 29 November 2016, theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/29/us-military-airstrikes-mistake-syria-assad-deir-ez-zor; David Sanger and Anne Barnard, "Russia and the United States reach new agreement on Syria conflict", *New York Times*, 9 September 2016, nytimes.com/2016/09/10/world/middleeast/syria-john-kerry-ceasefire-deal-russia.html; Barbara Starr, "US

blames Russia for Syria convoy attack; Moscow points to terrorists", CNN, 21 September 2016, edition.cnn.com/2016/09/20/politics/syria-convoy-strike-us-conclusion-russia/index.html; "Letter dated 21 December 2016 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council", S/2016/1093, 21 December 2016, digitallibrary.un.org/record/853646/files/S_2016_1093-EN.pdf. For an extended version of the Kremlin's counter-arguments, or some of them, see Maria Khodynskaya-Golenishcheva, *Alep: La guerre et la diplomatie*, Pierre-Guillaume de Roux Editions, 2017, pp. 149–159.

¹⁴⁷ Somini Sengupta, Michael R. Gordon, and Anne Barnard, "John Kerry Urges Grounding of Military Aircraft in 'Key Areas' of Syria", *New York Times*, 21 September 2016, nytimes.com/2016/09/22/world/middleeast/john-kerry-syria.html.

¹⁴⁸ Michael Gordon and Andrew Kramer, "Tension With Russia Rises as U.S. Halts Syria Negotiations", *New York Times*, 3 October 2016, nytimes.com/2016/10/04/world/middleeast/us-suspends-talks-with-russia-on-syria.html.

¹⁴⁹ Author interviews, Washington, DC, October–November 2018.

¹⁵⁰ According to Vasiliev, "it can be said with a high degree of certainty that the general strategy for the battle of Aleppo was developed by Russian military advisers together with the Syrians and their allies". Vasiliev 2018, p. 506.



Crimea deadlock and prevent the United States from ignoring and isolating Russia.¹⁵¹

The intervention certainly succeeded in shaking things up, and it did force the United States to publicly re-engage with Russia. As the intervention began, the Russian and US militaries negotiated a military deconfliction system to avoid unintended clashes. In October, the Security Council issued resolution 2254, which aimed to restart the Geneva peace talks and impose a ceasefire under US-Russian supervision. That was, however, as far as it went. Repeated Russian attempts to pull the United States into a cooperative arrangement against IS were rejected, and many months of negotiations between Lavrov and Kerry failed to produce any agreement of lasting value. As conflicts piled up over civilian deaths, broken ceasefires, and chemical weapons, the Western-Russian relationship instead deteriorated further.

Russia's entry into the war made more of an impact at the regional level, where views on

the intervention had first split more or less along pro/anti-Assad lines. Iraq, Iran, and the pro-Damascus half of Lebanon welcomed Russia's entry into the war.¹⁵² Turkey, the United States, and most European and Gulf Arab nations opposed it with varying degrees of frankness.¹⁵³ A few US-allied Arab states were quietly supportive, hoping that Russia could end the war and curtail the spread of militant Islamism.¹⁵⁴ Israel simply hurried to ensure that Russia would not interfere with its attacks on Hezbollah and Iranian targets inside Syria.¹⁵⁵

As the impact of the intervention became apparent, regional opposition began to soften. "For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has shown that it is again capable of conducting a successful large-scale military operation far from its borders", wrote Baranets. "In this sense, Russia is no longer a regional power, but again a global geopolitical player. [...] Many understood that without Moscow, it

¹⁵¹ Kofman and Rojansky 2018, pp. 4–5. Alexey Vasiliev, a former Russian diplomat, summarises Russian goals as follows: "First, here was a two-fold goal: to weaken extremist, terrorist organizations ISIL, al-Nusra and their allies and to strengthen, in fact, to save the legitimate Syrian government. At the same time, the goal was to test and demonstrate, albeit on a limited scale, the revived military power of the country. The third goal, possibly unannounced, implied 'forcing' the US and its allies to cooperate with Russia under specific Syrian circumstances, first in the military-tactical field. Finally, although it has never been publicly expressed, there was a goal of finding points for broader cooperation with the West and proving that this cooperation was necessary for everyone not only in the near and Middle East, but also in Europe in throughout the world". Vasiliev 2018, p. 515.

¹⁵² "Yesterday, Russia turned a new page in the history of the world", declared *al-Akhbar*, a pro-Hezbollah Lebanese daily. Ibrahim al-Amin, "nahwa sharq awsatin jadid", *al-Akhbar*, 1 October 2015, bit.ly/2VCi2VF. Iraq announced that it would work with Russia, Syria, and Iran to quash IS, and Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi called on Russia to intervene in his country, too. "العبيدي يدعو روسيا لضرب تنظيم الدولة بالعراق", *Aljazeera*, 4 October 2015, bit.ly/2W3iyoS.

¹⁵³ The United Arab Emirates warned that any intervention would "complicate" the situation, but voiced

support for airstrikes against IS. : معالي الدكتور أنور قرقاش "علاقة الإرهاب بالتطرف علاقة عضوية تؤمن دولة الإمارات بضرورة محاربتها وتفكيكها", UAE Foreign Ministry, 1 December 2015, mofa.gov.ae/MediaCenter/News/Pages/011215-uae.aspx. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman flew to Sochi to talk to Putin. Saudi Arabian media made clear that he had "concerns" about the intervention, but the emphasis appeared to be on how to move forward. Sami Amara, "mohammed bin salman: nahres ala hall al-azma al-souriya silmiyan wa-inha muaanat al-shaab min al-nizam", *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 12 October 2015, bit.ly/2V0eG7P.

¹⁵⁴ Egyptian Foreign Minister Sami Shukri said Russia had entered Syria to "resist terrorism", and Jordan's King Abdullah hoped it would move the crisis in "the right direction". Sami Magdi, "مصر تعلن تأييدها للغارات", *Masrawy*, 4 October 2015, bit.ly/2YU25kR. "Interview with His Majesty King Abdullah II", Website of King Abdullah II, 11 November 2015, kingabdullah.jo/en/interviews/interview-his-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-4.

¹⁵⁵ "We don't interfere with them and they don't interfere with us", said Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon. Dan Williams, "Israel quiet over 'hotline' with Russia on Syria", Reuters, 22 October 2014, reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-israel-analysis/israel-quiet-over-hotline-with-russia-on-syria-idUSKCN0SG1G320151022.



would not be possible to restore order in the Middle East".¹⁵⁶

Indeed, from late 2015 regional governments began to reach out to Russia to ensure that Moscow – now clearly the leading player in Syria – would take their concerns into account.¹⁵⁷

Nowhere did views on Russia's role in Syria shift as dramatically as in Turkey, a fervent opposition supporter. In November 2015, Turkish air defences shot down a Russian Su-24. Putin responded by ramping up attacks in Syria, placing sanctions on the Turkish economy, and sending little hints that he might start supporting the PKK.¹⁵⁸ Since Washington was already supportive of the PKK's Syrian Kurdish proxies and the Ankara-backed Sunni Arab opposition was losing the war, the threat to Turkey's national security was real.

In June 2016, amid reports of Algerian mediation, the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, offered an apology of sorts for the downed jet. Putin nimbly shifted gear, announcing that Turkey and Russia could now start looking at "joint efforts on international and regional issues".¹⁵⁹ Soon after, the Russian Air Force facilitated a Turkish ground intervention near Aleppo

designed to block future Kurdish advances.¹⁶⁰

Russia's success in flipping Turkey was a turning point in the war. It marginalised other rebel backers and subordinated what remained of the Syrian opposition to Turkish state interests, which in turn had to be negotiated with Russia.¹⁶¹

However, Russian hopes that by seizing the initiative in Syria, it could break the post-Crimea deadlock and transform its relations with the United States proved too optimistic. Although Russia had taken centre stage in Syria and could no longer be ignored by US and EU leaders, its ties with the West were only growing more poisoned by the controversies over Aleppo and Syria's chemical weapons.

The Astana Process

In late December 2016, with rebels purged from Aleppo and Trump en route to the White House, Turkey joined Russia and Iran in organising their own Syrian ceasefire. The talks developed into a structured trilateral process based in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan.

The new US administration was confused and dysfunctional, and Trump was

¹⁵⁶ Baranets, "Черо добилась Россия в Сирии за 100 дней".

¹⁵⁷ Lund 2019, pp. 25 ff.

¹⁵⁸ In February 2016, a PKK-linked Syrian Kurdish group was allowed to open an office in Moscow. Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, Yale University Press, 2016, p. 222. According to an informed source who spoke to the author of this report on condition of anonymity, one or more Russian man-portable anti-aircraft missiles were also secretly handed over to the PKK for use inside Turkey, as a warning to the Turkish authorities of Russia's potential for disruption and escalation. Such a weapon was apparently used by the PKK to shoot down a Turkish helicopter in May 2016. Erin Cunningham, "Kurdish militants reportedly shoot down Turkish security forces helicopter", *Washington Post*, 14 May 2016, [washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/05/14/k](http://washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/05/14/kurdish-militants-just-challenged-turkish-air-power-in-a-major-way)

urdish-militants-just-challenged-turkish-air-power-in-a-major-way.

¹⁵⁹ Aron Lund, "The Algerian Connection: Will Turkey Change Its Syria Policy?", Carnegie Middle East Center, 20 June 2016, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/63847; Alec Luhn and Ian Black, "Erdogan has apologised for downing of Russian jet, Kremlin says", *The Guardian*, 27 June 2016, theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/27/kremlin-says-erdogan-apologises-russian-jet-turkish; "Telephone conversation with President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan", Russian Presidency, 29 June 2016, en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52295.

¹⁶⁰ Aron Lund, "After Murky Diplomacy, Turkey Intervenes in Syria", Carnegie Middle East Center, 24 August 2015, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64398.

¹⁶¹ Emile Hokayem, "How Syria defeated the Sunni powers", *New York Times*, 30 December 2016, nytimes.com/2016/12/30/opinion/how-syria-defeated-the-sunni-powers.html.



determined to reduce the US footprint in Syria, which gave the Astana trio excellent room for manoeuvre. In May 2017, they agreed to “de-escalate” the war, although each seemed to take this to mean something different. Iran wanted to end the war with Assad still in power. Russia wanted the same, but also saw an opportunity to gain leverage over Turkey, an important neighbour and NATO member. Turkey was still rhetorically hostile to Assad, but primarily focused on border security and PKK-linked Kurdish groups.

Between May 2017 and July 2018, nearly all the remaining rebel areas were picked off one by one by Assad’s forces, which also expanded to seize IS-held territory in those areas of eastern Syria not already captured by the US-backed Kurds. Russia supported the Syrian military’s operations while negotiating with Israel and Jordan (in the south), the United States (in the north-east), and Turkey (in the north-west) to prevent clashes. It assisted government advances not only with air support, but also by brokering capitulation agreements and sending Russian and Chechen military police to run checkpoints and monitor the aftermath.¹⁶² Fearful of government

retribution, some local rebels and civilians seemed to view Russian soldiers as a restraining influence on the victorious loyalist troops.¹⁶³

As agreed in Astana, Turkey assumed responsibility for the last rebel territories on its border. Turkish troops began to take up positions inside the Idlib region in autumn 2017, and, in March 2018, Turkey-backed rebels occupied Efrin, a Kurdish enclave near Aleppo, once again with Russian facilitation. Damascus protested the presence of Turkish troops on Syrian soil but carefully avoided criticism of Russia.

By July 2018, the map of Syria had assumed more or less the form it has in May 2019. Assad was by then in control of most of what mattered: state institutions, major cities, and, according to some estimates, three-quarters of the non-refugee population.¹⁶⁴ Three large chunks of Syria’s rural periphery remained outside of state control, since Russia refused to challenge Turkey and the United States on Assad’s behalf. As frontlines froze, the conflict’s centre of gravity shifted towards the diplomatic and economic arenas.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² For an example of Russia’s involvement in talks with rebels, see Sam Heller, “Aleppo’s Bitter Lessons”, The Century Foundation, 27 January 2017, [tcf.org/content/report/aleppos-bitter-lessons](https://www.tcf.org/content/report/aleppos-bitter-lessons). On the Chechnyan role, see Lund 2019, pp. 42–44.

¹⁶³ “Lessons from the Syrian State’s Return to the South”, International Crisis Group, Middle East and North Africa Report, no. 196, 25 February 2019, [crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/196-lessons-syrian-states-return-south](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/196-lessons-syrian-states-return-south).

¹⁶⁴ December 2018 data suggests that approximately 73 per cent of the Syrian non-refugee

population lives in government-held areas, while 17 per cent live in areas controlled by Turkish-backed rebel groups or jihadis in the north-west and 10 per cent in SDF-held territories. Figures extrapolated from information compiled by Mercy Corps’ Humanitarian Access Team, made available to the author.

¹⁶⁵ For an extended discussion of this process and of the factors that favour or disfavour Syria becoming a “frozen conflict”, see Aron Lund, *Syria’s Civil War: Government Victory or Frozen Conflict?*, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), FOI-R-- 4640--SE, 2018, foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI-R--4640--SE.



The State of Syria in 2019

As of May 2019, Syria remains a partially active armed conflict. Each of the major military-political entities in Syria is defended by an external actor. As a result, existing frontlines have been mostly uncontested for more than a year:

- Areas controlled by President Bashar al-Assad's government, protected by Russia and Iran.
- The Turkish-protected Sunni rebel areas in Bab, Efrin and Idlib in north-western Syria.
- A US-protected area controlled by Kurdish forces in north-eastern Syria; and a small, separate, US-protected region, Tanf, in the south-east.

Although the arrangement remains precarious and a collapse back to complete instability cannot be ruled out, future changes in the distribution of territorial control are likely to be managed through externally brokered agreements, including the Moscow-dominated Astana process.

Assad-Controlled Areas

President Bashar al-Assad now appears safe in power as Syria's head of state, assuming that he continues to avoid assassination, accidents, or internal trouble. His government controls most of southern, central, and western Syria.¹⁶⁶ Of Syria's 16 provincial capitals, 13 are under Assad's full control, including all four of the major cities: Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama.

Virtually all state functions and institutions remain under central government control, funded and run from Damascus. Apart from in army-controlled areas, the state retains an institutional presence in the SDF-held region and a much weaker, lingering influence in the Sunni insurgent-controlled north-west. Humanitarian data indicated that approximately 73 per cent of Syria's remaining, non-refugee population were living under Assad's control in late 2018.¹⁶⁷

Despite some institutional reforms and social and factional changes within the regime base, Assad's government looks little different today from how it did in 2011. It is highly authoritarian even by regional standards. The political and economic system is dominated by members of the president's extended family, their personal entourage, and the leading security chiefs, many of whom hail from the same Alawite minority as Assad. Alawites are overwhelmingly dominant within the security apparatus.¹⁶⁸ Most of the wider population is Sunni, in addition to Druze and Christian minorities. Despite its lopsided internal sectarian make-up, the government continues to uphold Baath Party secularism and promotes a vision of religious coexistence. However, political dissent is harshly repressed, and tens of thousands of Syrians are thought to have "disappeared" in government custody since 2011.¹⁶⁹

Beyond sporadic assassinations and bombings in Syrian cities or recaptured areas, Assad's rule does not, at this point,

¹⁶⁶ On the government-controlled areas, see Lund 2018, "Syria's Civil War", pp. 39–51.

¹⁶⁷ Figures extrapolated from data compiled by the Humanitarian Access Team of Mercy Corps in December 2018, made available to the author.

¹⁶⁸ Lund 2018, "Syria's Civil War", pp. 42–43.

¹⁶⁹ Commissioner Hanny Megally, International

Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, email, September 2018. See also Amnesty International, "Syria: 'Between prison and the grave': Enforced disappearances in Syria", MDE 24/2579/2015, 5 November 2015, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2579/2015/en](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2579/2015/en).



appear to face meaningful internal resistance. The government also seems to be safe from external intervention, thanks to Russian protection.

Israeli airstrikes have regularly targeted alleged Iranian and Hezbollah assets in Syria since 2013, often also hitting government installations. However, Israel generally appears to respect the Kremlin's red lines against endangering Russian citizens, interfering with Russian operations, or threatening Assad's power. Similarly, although US-led cruise missile strikes targeted government facilities in April 2017 and April 2018 in response to reports of chemical attacks, they were deliberately limited in scope, with no intent to cripple Assad's capacity to rule. The Russian Defence Ministry has claimed, without offering evidence, that Syrian air defences stopped most of the US missiles in the 2018 strike, but also made a point of noting that Russian air defences did not intervene.¹⁷⁰

Western economic pressure is a severe problem for the Syrian government. War damage is immense and the economy is in very poor shape.¹⁷¹ US and EU sanctions add to the burden and also prevent reconstruction and foreign investment. While some trade is still permitted, the US sanctions, in particular, have created "chilling effects" throughout the Western financial infrastructure.¹⁷² "It all has to go through the same international banking channels, same insurance companies, same shipping companies", according to a

Damascus-based businessman, who added, "I haven't dealt with Iran and Russia, but what are you going to do with Iran and Russia?"¹⁷³

Sanctions on the Syrian energy sector have been particularly effective at depleting state resources, given that government-held areas can now produce only about a quarter of their own oil needs.¹⁷⁴ Since late 2018, a combination of Iranian credit withdrawals and tightened US sanctions has blocked Iranian and Russian oil tanker shipments, causing serious fuel shortages and economic troubles.¹⁷⁵ If left unaddressed, the fuel crisis could imperil the functioning and stability of regime-held areas.

The North-west: Bab, Efrin, Idlib

Turkish forces prevent Assad from retaking the Sunni rebel-controlled parts of north-western Syria, which stretch from the Bab region near Aleppo through Kurdish-populated Efrin to a larger area around Idlib. According to humanitarian data, some 17 per cent of Syria's remaining inhabitants live in these areas, three-quarters of them in Idlib.¹⁷⁶

The Turkish deployments in north-western Syria (Bab in 2016, Efrin in 2018, and Idlib in 2017 and 2018) were all pre-negotiated with Russia. Turkey has since sought to prevent local rebel and jihadi groups from attacking government forces, while Russia and Iran

¹⁷⁰ "Syrian air defenses shot down 46 missiles fired in US-led strike — General Staff", TASS, 25 April 2018, tass.com/defense/1001707.

¹⁷¹ World Bank, "The Toll of War: The Economic and Social Consequences of the Conflict in Syria", 10 July 2017, worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-toll-of-war-the-economic-and-social-consequences-of-the-conflict-in-syria.

¹⁷² Aron Lund, "Briefing: Just how 'smart' are sanctions on Syria?", *The New Humanitarian*, 25 April 2019, thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2019/04/25/briefing-just-how-smart-are-sanctions-syria.

¹⁷³ Author's telephone interview with Damascus-based businessman, February 2019.

¹⁷⁴ "مكاشفة غير مسبقة حول النفط", *al-Watan*, 17 April 2019, alwatan.sy/archives/195266; Author's telephone interview with Jihad Yazigi, editor-in-chief of *The Syria Report*, February 2019.

¹⁷⁵ Aron Lund, "The blame game over Syria's winter fuel crisis", *The New Humanitarian*, 5 March 2019, thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2019/03/05/blame-game-over-syria-s-winter-fuel-crisis.

¹⁷⁶ Figures extrapolated from data compiled by the Humanitarian Access Team of Mercy Corps in December 2018, made available to the author.



have restrained the Syrian army. The degree of direct Turkish control inside this region varies from area to area.¹⁷⁷ Turkey dominates Bab and Efrin through proxy opposition institutions and Free Syrian Army-flagged Sunni rebels. It has only weak influence over internal matters in Idlib, where the Turkish presence on-the-ground is limited to 12 military outposts.

Internal politics in the Idlib region are dominated by Tahrir al-Sham, a Sunni jihadi group under UN counterterrorism sanctions.¹⁷⁸ Turkey officially shares the view that Tahrir al-Sham is a terrorist entity, but in practice Turkish intelligence negotiates pragmatically with its leaders in order to maintain the Astana trio's ceasefire arrangements and convey messages from Moscow. There are persistent rumours that Russian officers have also met directly with Tahrir al-Sham leaders, but the group denies this, dubbing Russia an "occupier".¹⁷⁹

Turkey has relied on its understandings with Russia to prevent major loyalist offensives against Idlib. It wants to protect opposition members sheltering in the area, to maintain its own influence in Syria, and, most of all, to avoid a new wave of refugees fleeing to Turkey, which is already host to some 3.6 million Syrians.¹⁸⁰

Russia, for its part, seems to fear that a loyalist attempt to retake Idlib against

Turkey's wishes would be unreasonably difficult and destabilising, whereas Turkey's presence offers a chance to contain and police the area on the cheap. Russia's role as chief arbiter of the Idlib problem also offers added leverage over Damascus and, more importantly, over Ankara – a key neighbour and NATO member state.¹⁸¹

The last major loyalist offensive in north-western Syria took place in the winter of 2017–2018, with Russian support and tacit Turkish approval. In August and September 2018, Russia seemed on the verge of backing a new loyalist attack, but met with stern Turkish opposition. After several weeks of sabre rattling and high-level meetings, Ankara and Moscow settled for strengthened ceasefire arrangements, which included a buffer zone.¹⁸² The status quo nonetheless remained unstable and awkward for all involved. In April and May 2019, clashes escalated again, and pro-Assad forces seized some terrain on the southern end of the enclave. However, Russia's prioritisation of its ties to Turkey will likely limit government advances.¹⁸³

The North-east and Tanf

North-eastern Syria is under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a US-backed Kurdish-Arab coalition dominated by its Kurdish element, the People's

¹⁷⁷ Lund 2018, "Syria's Civil War", pp. 52–58.

¹⁷⁸ The group runs its own system of authoritarian institutions, trade monopolies, and sharia courts. See "The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib", International Crisis Group, Middle East and North Africa Report, no. 197, March 2019, [crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/197-best-bad-options-syrias-idlib](https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/197-best-bad-options-syrias-idlib), pp. 9–11.

¹⁷⁹ Charles Lister, "Turkey's Idlib Incursion and the HTS Question: Understanding the Long Game in Syria", War on the Rocks, 31 October 2017, warontherocks.com/2017/10/turkeys-idlib-incursion-and-the-hts-question-understanding-the-long-game-in-syria/; Heba Mohammed, "al-muared al-souri al-asemi li-'l-quds al-arabi': al-rus altaqu al-joulani fi idlib marrat edda", *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 10 April 2019, bit.ly/2vPno9G; "tahrir al-sham tarudd ala id'aat al-asemi bi-shan ijtima'ei-ha

maa al-ihtilal al-rousi", *al-Dorar al-Shamiya*, eldorar.com, 12 April 2019, eldorar.com/node/133893.

¹⁸⁰ UNHCR data is available online at data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria.

¹⁸¹ "The Best of Bad Options for Syria's Idlib", International Crisis Group, pp. 24ff; Lund 2018, "Syria's Civil War", pp. 64–65. Lund 2019, pp. 33–34.

¹⁸² Aron Lund, "After Russia-Turkey deal, the fate of Syria's Idlib hangs in the balance", *IRIN News/The New Humanitarian*, 2 October 2018, [thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2018/10/02/after-russia-turkey-deal-fate-syria-s-idlib-hangs-balance](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2018/10/02/after-russia-turkey-deal-fate-syria-s-idlib-hangs-balance).

¹⁸³ Aron Lund, "As Turkey and Russia pull the strings in Syria's Idlib, civilians pay the price", *The New Humanitarian*, 21 May 2019, [thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2019/05/21/turkey-and-russia-pull-strings-syria-idlib-civilians](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2019/05/21/turkey-and-russia-pull-strings-syria-idlib-civilians).



Protection Forces (YPG). The YPG is a Syrian wing of the PKK, which has fought a decades-long war against the government in Turkey.

The SDF-controlled area reportedly holds about one-tenth of all Syrians still in the country, most of whom are Kurdish or Arab Sunnis, but also smaller numbers of Syriac Christians and other minorities.¹⁸⁴ Most of this territory was captured from IS between 2015 and 2017, with support from the United States and other members of the US-led Global Coalition.¹⁸⁵ The last remaining IS holdouts fell in March 2019.

Since September 2018, the SDF-backed local councils that serve as local government have referred to themselves as the Northern and Eastern Syria Autonomous Administration. Ultimate control in this system rests with PKK cadres, whose rule is politically authoritarian but secular, feminist, and religiously and culturally tolerant. Syrian state institutions also continue to operate in several SDF-held cities and there are open roads and communications to Damascus.

Separately, US and Coalition forces patrol a desert area around the Syrian-Iraqi border crossing at Tanf in southern Syria. The SDF is not present in these areas, where US forces instead work with a very small Sunni Arab group known as Maghawir al-Thawra.

Both the SDF region and Tanf are covered by US-Russian military deconfliction

agreements, which means that neither side will advance against the other. Attempts by loyalist forces to enter the US-protected areas without Russian backing have been violently repelled.¹⁸⁶ In February 2018, the US Air Force bombed a force belonging to the Wagner Group, a Kremlin-connected Russian private sector military contractor, as it tried to seize oil-rich SDF areas.¹⁸⁷ An unknown number of the reported 200–300 casualties were Russian nationals. It remains unclear whether the attack was a “deniable” Russian government attempt to test US reaction or an initiative by Wagner personnel that was funded privately or by the Syrian government.

Russia sees the US presence in Syria as illegal but appears content to wait for Washington to make up its mind about whether to stay or go. Under the Trump administration, US policy has been confused and fluid. On the one hand, Turkey threatens to attack SDF-held areas and Trump has repeatedly declared that he wants US troops out of Syria. On the other hand, Trump faces strong internal and allied pressure to keep troops in Syria, due to concerns that a retreat would play into the hands of Damascus, Tehran, or IS – or all three – and that it would expose the SDF to Turkish attack.¹⁸⁸ Trump announced a withdrawal in December 2018 but ended up settling for a limited draw-down after failing to reconcile Turkish and SDF interests.

As local actors try to position themselves for a future without the United States, they

¹⁸⁴ Figures extrapolated from data compiled by the Humanitarian Access Team of Mercy Corps in December 2018, made available to the author.

¹⁸⁵ Daesh is another name for the Islamic State group, which is also known as IS, ISIS, and ISIL.

¹⁸⁶ For example, “U.S. aircraft conduct strike on Syrian army convoy”, *CBS News*, 18 May 2017, [cbsnews.com/news/us-aircraft-strike-syrian-regime-forces-al-tanf-base/](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/us-aircraft-strike-syrian-regime-forces-al-tanf-base/); “U.S. bombs Syrian army position near Tanf: pro-Assad commander”, *Reuters*, 22 June 2018, [reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa/u-s-bombs-syrian-army-position-near-tanf-pro-assad-commander-idUSKBN1JH3IX](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa/u-s-bombs-syrian-army-position-near-tanf-pro-assad-commander-idUSKBN1JH3IX); Geoff Ziezulewicz, “The

inside story of how a US Navy pilot shot down a Syrian jet”, *Navy Times*, 10 September 2018, [navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2018/09/10/the-inside-story-of-how-a-us-navy-pilot-shot-down-a-syrian-jet](https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2018/09/10/the-inside-story-of-how-a-us-navy-pilot-shot-down-a-syrian-jet).

¹⁸⁷ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “How a 4-hour battle between Russian mercenaries and U.S. commandos unfolded in Syria”, *New York Times*, 24 May 2018, [nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html).

¹⁸⁸ Aron Lund, “The Making and Unmaking of Syria Strategy under Trump”, *The Century Foundation*, 29 November 2018, [tcf.org/content/report/making-unmaking-syria-strategy-trump](https://www.tcf.org/content/report/making-unmaking-syria-strategy-trump).



look to the Kremlin. Only Russia could credibly dissuade Turkey from attacking the SDF after a US withdrawal, and Russia is unique in having open channels of communication with all involved: the SDF, Damascus, Ankara, and Washington.

Russian diplomats have said that the SDF should submit to Damascus, apparently in the hope of persuading Turkey that Syrian authorities can smother Kurdish ambitions without the need for a Turkish intervention.¹⁸⁹ Anticipating an outcome along these lines, SDF negotiators have asked Moscow to first put pressure on Assad to get them a good deal that they can accept.¹⁹⁰ However, Kurdish negotiators now complain that Russia seems more interested in appeasing Turkey, which still speaks of intervening.¹⁹¹

Unlike the SDF-held region, the Tanf zone consists almost exclusively of desert. It is located on the economically important Damascus-Baghdad highway and contains a single, large refugee camp. Although the camp is located inside the US area of operations on the Syrian-Jordanian border, neither the United States nor Jordan want to supply the refugees.¹⁹² The Syrian authorities are therefore in complete control of humanitarian access. By turning food deliveries to the Tanf region on and off, the Syrian government is trying to force camp residents to return to government-held areas. Russia supports the Syrian government's approach, while also highlighting the dire situation for refugees in a US-controlled area as a way of shaming the United States into leaving Tanf.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Restoring government control over Syria's northern border while taking Turkish interests into account would be the "best and only solution", according to Lavrov, speaking in January 2019. "Erdoğan, Putin to discuss safe zone in Syria's north, Lavrov says", *Daily Sabah*, 16 January 2019, dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/01/16/erdogan-putin-to-discuss-safe-zone-in-syrias-north-lavrov-says.

¹⁹⁰ Kamal Sheikho, "خريطة طريق كردية للتفاوض مع دمشق"، *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 10 January 2019, aawsat.com/node/1539661

¹⁹¹ "Syrian Kurdish official: Damascus talks going nowhere, Russia to blame", Reuters, 12 April 2019,

reuters.com/article/us-syria-kurds-russia/syrian-kurdish-official-damascus-talks-going-nowhere-russia-to-blame-idUSKCN1RO146.

¹⁹² Aron Lund, "Blame Game over Syrians Stranded in the Desert", The Century Foundation, 18 June 2019, tcf.org/content/report/blame-game-syrians-stranded-desert.

¹⁹³ Ben Parker, "Concerns over Syria-Jordan border camp exodus, and those left behind", *The New Humanitarian*, 1 May 2019, thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2019/05/01/concerns-over-syria-jordan-border-camp-exodus-and-those-left-behind.



Russia and the Syrian Government in 2019

Russia's influence over the Syrian government has never been greater than it is today. Damascus depends on its Russian ally for military protection, arms and training, economic assistance to circumvent sanctions, and help in handling regional and international diplomacy. Even so, that influence seems imperfect. Russian diplomatic initiatives sometimes appear to stumble over the Syrian regime's political inflexibility, which may be encouraged by Iran.

Russia's Military Role

Russian military support remains the backbone of the Damascus-Moscow relationship, and Syrian authorities are full of praise for Russia's military role. Meeting Putin at the Hmeymim base in 2017, Assad spoke in emotional terms of how "the blood of Russian soldiers has mingled with the blood of the martyrs of the Syrian Arab Army in confronting terrorism".¹⁹⁴

The mainstay of Russia's military deployment in Syria is a "special air group",

the size and composition of which appear to have fluctuated between roughly 25 and 60 fixed-wing aircraft over the course of the war, in addition to helicopters.¹⁹⁵ The aerial presence is complemented by a small ground force and air defence batteries, including advanced S-400 systems.¹⁹⁶ Small numbers of Russian ground troops seem to have assisted loyalist offensives in specialist roles, but most are probably used for base protection. Ballistic missiles and long-range bombers have at times been used for high-profile strikes, mostly to test and demonstrate Russian capabilities.

The financial costs of the intervention to Russia appear to be sustainable long term, and the number of deaths has been quite low.¹⁹⁷ To date, the Defence Ministry has acknowledged around 115 military deaths in Syria, although journalists have reported "over a hundred" additional deaths among private sector military contractors.¹⁹⁸

From the start, Moscow has sought to draw benefits from the intervention in order to balance out costs. Most notably, the Russian military has acquired basing rights

¹⁹⁴ *Tishreen*, 12 December 2017, tishreen.news.sy/?p=126589.

¹⁹⁵ In late 2015, the group was reportedly composed of 16 Su-30SM fighters, four Su-27SM3 fighters, 12 Su-34 frontline bombers, 12 Su-25SM ground attack aircraft, 12 Su-24M frontline bombers, 12 Mi-24 helicopters, and 12 Mi-8 helicopters. Vasiliev 2018, p. 513, note 31.

¹⁹⁶ Mikhail Khodaryonok, "Three layers of Russian air defense at Hmeymim air base in Syria", TASS, 12 February 2016, tass.com/defense/855430.

¹⁹⁷ Author interview with Fredrik Westerlund and Jakob Hedenskog, deputy research directors at the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) project on Russian Foreign, Defence and Security Policy (RUFS), Stockholm, October 2018. See also Kristian Åtland, Tor Bukkvoll, Johannes Due Enstad and Truls Tønnessen,

"Russlands militære intervensjon i Syria – bakgrunn, gjennomføring og konsekvenser", Forsvarets forskningsinstitutt (FFI), FFI-16/00500, 15 March 2016, ffi.no/no/Rapporter/16-00500.pdf, pp. 33–34.

¹⁹⁸ "Russia lost 112 servicemen over three years of counter-terror operation in Syria – MP", TASS, 30 September 2018, tass.com/defense/1023714; "Three Russian troops killed in Syria in late February – Defense Ministry", TASS, 26 March 2019, tass.com/defense/1050458. The total figure may be slightly higher. On mercenary deaths see Maria Tsvetkova, "Military veterans to Kremlin: Come clean about Syria mission", Reuters, 5 July 2018, reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-contracto/military-veterans-to-kremlin-come-clean-about-syria-mission-idUSKBN1JV2QL.



at Hmeymim and in Tartous until 2066.¹⁹⁹ The war has also been used to test new equipment and tactics, and to market Russian arms to foreign customers.²⁰⁰ Moreover, there appears to be a deliberate effort to rotate as many troops as possible through Syria. According to Russia's Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, two-thirds of all Russian air force pilots and technicians had served in Syria by mid-2018.²⁰¹ When defending the intervention to a domestic audience, Putin stresses the "invaluable experience" gained in Syria.²⁰²

Support for the Syrian Military

In addition to participating directly in the war, Russia helps to arm, train, advise, and supply loyalist forces, having stepped up the military cooperation programmes that existed before the war.²⁰³

Since the intervention, Moscow appears to have helped to restore some of the Syrian military's much-degraded air defence capabilities, not least by delivering new weapons and equipment.²⁰⁴ Russia and Syria have reportedly "integrated" their air defences, allowing Syrian radars to feed information to the Russian headquarters at Hmeymim.²⁰⁵ However, Russia does not appear to have direct control over Syrian air defence batteries, as became clear when

Syrian forces downed a Russian IL-20 during an Israeli raid in 2018. Russia blamed Israel for the incident and responded by announcing that it was donating three S-300 systems to Syria, free of charge.²⁰⁶ If operational and genuinely under Syrian control, the S-300s would represent a considerable upgrading of Syria's air defence capabilities.²⁰⁷

In 2016, Russia also began to deploy military police units to Syria, including Chechen forces. These units have been used to patrol recaptured towns, reduce communal friction, and facilitate rebel capitulations by, for example, running checkpoints between hostile areas. Opposition fighters preparing to surrender their arms seem to have appreciated the fact that Russian troops were disciplined and unlikely to loot retaken areas, and had no stake in local sectarian, familial, or tribal animosities.

In southern Syria, Russian officers have continued to be involved in post-conflict demobilisation and local security long after the restoration of overall government control. Their presence has reportedly "somewhat mitigated" the problems of post-conflict vengeance and the persecution of ex-rebels by loyalist forces.²⁰⁸

¹⁹⁹ Both deals can be prolonged in 25-year instalments by mutual agreement. "بنود الاتفاقية الروسية السورية حول توسيع مركز الإمداد المادي والتقني الروسي في طرطوس", *Rousiya al-Yawm*, 20 January 2017, ar.rt.com/if9v; "Russia's upper house ratifies protocol to agreement on deploying air group to Syria", TASS, 19 July 2017, tass.com/politics/956891.

²⁰⁰ Kofman and Rojansky 2018, pp. 14–15.

²⁰¹ "Two thirds of Russian air force personnel received in-theater experience in Syria", TASS, 12 August 2018, tass.com/defense/1016930.

²⁰² "Direct Line with Vladimir Putin", Russian Presidency, 7 June 2018, en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57692.

²⁰³ Vasiliev reports that there were "dozens" of Russian military advisers in the Syrian Arab Army before 2011. That number excluded an unknown number of teachers at the Syrian Military Academy in Homs and in other military institutions. Syrian pilots and senior officers also received training in Russia. Vasiliev 2018,

p. 388.

²⁰⁴ "Russia helping Syria modernize its air defense system, ambassador says", TASS, 7 September 2018, tass.com/defense/1020544.

²⁰⁵ "Russia and Syria create joint air defense system", TASS, 25 August 2017, tass.com/defense/962057.

²⁰⁶ "Russia: Israel to Blame for Downed Plane Over Syria, Deliberately Misled Us", Haaretz, 23 September 2018, haaretz.com/middle-east-news/russia-israel-to-blame-for-downed-plane-over-syria-deliberately-misled-us-1.6494034. See also footnote 79.

²⁰⁷ Shapir 2013.

²⁰⁸ International Crisis Group, "Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South", p. I. Ex-rebels appear wary of relying too much on Russia, since the assumption is that foreign forces will at some point withdraw. As one former anti-government fighter told ICG: "I was going into Daraa city to register my newborn daughter. The Military Intelligence checkpoint at the



Training the Syrian Army

Russian forces were reportedly shocked at the state in which they found the Syrian Arab Army in 2015. "The 'old' divisions and brigades remained only on paper, or are in a greatly reduced and demoralised condition", wrote the military expert Yevgeny Krutikov in 2016. The most effective segments of the loyalist force consisted of "civil war veterans and highly motivated volunteers, dominated by national and religious minorities", whereas the "mass of the conscript army is not motivated at all, is extremely poorly trained, has no idea about modern battle tactics and is prone to panic".²⁰⁹ Another seasoned military expert, Mikhail Khodaryonok, offered similarly scathing reviews of the army's organisation and performance.²¹⁰

entrance checked my name on the computer and told me that I am wanted. I showed them my clearance paper. They asked if I knew about hidden weapons and ammunition. They kept me for a week, after which I was released with help from my father, who had gone to a Russian officer who made phone calls to get me released. [...] When I was released, I heard a direct threat from a young Alawite officer. He said to me: 'Do you, people of Daraa, think Russia will protect and cover you forever? The Russians will leave after one month or one year but we will arrest you all and teach you to worship Bashar al-Assad. We won't forget what you did'. International Crisis Group, "Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South", pp. 12–13.

²⁰⁹ Krutikov noted that "brigade and divisional commanders turned out to be much more flexible" than the Syrian high command, but needed time to adapt to new tactics. Although he recognised positive contributions from Iranian and Hezbollah units, he complained that they, too, were infuriatingly hard to coordinate with – they tended to "just lose track of time, have lunch or pray, and be absent at the agreed time in the agreed place". Yevgeny Krutikov, "Сирийской армии жизненно необходима реформа", *Vzglyad*, 16 December 2016, vz.ru/world/2016/12/16/849645.html. Translation by Liliia Makashova.

²¹⁰ In August 2016, Khodaryonok described Syrian battle tactics as a "disorderly crowd" milling towards the enemy, and reported that tank crews had to be retrained in basic tactics before each Russian-backed offensive. Mikhail Khodaryonok, "«Сирийский солдат получает в 10 раз меньше, чем террорист»", *Gazeta.ru*, 19 August 2016, gazeta.ru/army/2016/08/17/10137047.shtml. Translation by Liliia Makashova. In September, he warned that the war seemed impossible to win with an ally like the Syrian government army, whose soldiers were "mostly

Despite a widespread assumption that Russia wants to "regularise" the loyalist forces by restoring conventional military hierarchies, Russian advisers and troops routinely engage with militias and appear to have adapted pragmatically to the situation. For example, Russian officers have worked closely with irregular units such as the Aleppo-based Jerusalem Brigade or the Tiger Forces, an armed offshoot of the Air Force Intelligence Directorate.²¹¹

In November 2016, the Syrian high command announced the creation of the Fifth Assault Corps, which was to become Russia's special pet in the Syrian military.²¹² Senior Russian officers are embedded within its leadership.²¹³ The original aim of its creation may well have been to rebuild a conventional military structure on the basis

doing defensive duties and extorting money from the locals". Mikhail Khodaryonok, "«Проще разогнать сирийскую армию и набрать новую»", *Gazeta.ru*, 9 September 2016, gazeta.ru/army/2016/09/06/10178951.shtml, translated by Ruslan Leviev as "Here's why Assad's army can't win the war in Syria", CITEAM, 9 September 2016, citeam.org/here-s-why-assad-s-army-can-t-win-the-war-in-syria/?lang=en.

²¹¹ The group's leader, Brig. Gen. Soheil al-Hassan, has worked under Russian air support and often appeared alongside Russian officers. After emerging as a sort of military poster boy for the Syrian government's campaign against IS, he was invited to sit in on the Putin-Assad meeting at Hmeymim in 2017. "النمر يلتقي", *Enab Baladi*, 11 December 2017, enabbaladi.net/archives/190559.

²¹² "أعلنت عن تشكيل الفيلق الخامس للعمل إلى جانب القوات المسلحة", *Tishreen*, 23 November 2016, tishreen.news.sy/?p=58484. Opposition sources have portrayed the 5th Assault Corps as an element in a Russian-Iranian competition for influence within the Syrian armed forces. Raid al-Salhani, "الفيلق الخامس اقتحام : فكرة روسية لحل مليشيات الشبيحة", *al-Modon*, 22 December 2016, bit.ly/2W9U8WX; Ibrahim al-Hamidi, "الفيلق الخامس", *al-Hayat*, 9 January 2017, bit.ly/2BzERqa.

²¹³ In September 2017, Lt. Gen. Valery Asapov, who had been seconded to the 5th Assault Corps, became Russia's highest-ranking casualty when he was killed by IS forces in eastern Syria. "Russia says general killed in Syria held senior post in Assad's army", Reuters, 27 September 2017, reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-general/russia-says-general-killed-in-syria-held-senior-post-in-assads-army-idUSKCN1C22TW. Kheder Khaddour, an expert on Syrian military affairs with the Carnegie Middle East Center, is sceptical of



of Russian-trained troops. However, Syria's messy reality appears to have won out in the end, as entire militias have been attached to the unit. In particular, the Fifth Assault Corps has been used as an employment vehicle for side-switching rebels in southern Syria.²¹⁴

Diplomatic Support

Defending the Syrian regime has been a heavy and often lonely task for Russian diplomacy, especially at the outset of the conflict and during the recurring chemical weapons debates in the UN Security Council and the OPCW Executive Council.²¹⁵ China is by far the most important backer of Russia's Syria policy at the diplomatic level, but even Beijing has refused to endorse all of the Kremlin's attacks on UN and OPCW investigations.²¹⁶

The war has nonetheless brought Russia some diplomatic gains. The 2015 intervention established Moscow as a tough and reliable defender of its allies and raised Russia's profile in the Middle East.²¹⁷ It was instrumental in engineering Turkey's pro-Kremlin turn in 2016, and relations with Iran have also improved as the two countries have cooperated in Syria. Of course, whether these gains can compensate for

the damage done to Russia's relationship with the West remains to be seen.²¹⁸

Russia continues to support Damascus diplomatically in a number of ways, including by subverting OPCW investigations to the best of its ability and by trying to shape the Geneva process to Assad's advantage. Most significantly, Russia has assumed a driving role in Middle Eastern diplomacy on Syria, engaging with Lebanon, Jordan, and other nations to promote Assad's interests. It also serves as the main organiser of the Astana talks, the most recent session of which, Astana XII, took place in late April 2019.²¹⁹ The Astana process has not always gone the Syrian government's way, particularly since Russia sometimes appears to be using the talks to grease its ties to Turkey at Assad's expense. On balance, however, the Russian-Turkish-Iranian cooperation has been a decisive influence on the conflict, and it continues to drive international diplomacy in a pro-Damascus direction.

The Syrian government was close to Russia even before the war, but since 2011 it has turned into a loyal shadow, endorsing Moscow's every move. The Syrian president misses no opportunity to compliment Putin, and he lavishly praises Russia's "role in protecting global stability and its stand in

reports that Asapov "commanded" the 5th Assault Corps. In Khaddour's view, Asapov was probably the commander of the Russian operation supporting the 5th Assault Corps, but the unit itself has a Syrian leader (currently Maj. Gen. Zaid Saleh, one of Assad's most important field commanders). Informally, of course, Russian influence could still be such that the Syrian staff is de facto subordinate to its Russian advisory unit. Author's telephone interview with Kheder Khaddour, fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center, September 2018.

²¹⁴ International Crisis Group, "Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South", ICG.

²¹⁵ In 2019, Russia had a rare opportunity to address a Syria-related issue where the tables were turned: President Trump's decision to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights had virtually no international support, while Russia stood

with the vast majority of UN member states. Lavrov did not hold back, castigating Trump's decision as "a flagrant violation of the UN Charter and of the principles of international law". Sami Amara, "وزير الخارجية الروسية فى "حوار مع الأهرام قبيل زيارته القاهرة", *al-Ahram*, 6 April 2019, ahram.org.eg/NewsQ/703664.aspx.

²¹⁶ Lund 2017, "Russia has finished off..."

²¹⁷ Lund 2019, pp. 25 ff, 39–40.

²¹⁸ Lund 2019, pp. 31–34.

²¹⁹ "Joint Statement by Iran, Russia and Turkey on the International Meeting on Syria in the Astana format (Nur-Sultan, 25–26 April 2019)", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 26 April 2019, mfa.gov.kz/en/content-view/sovместnoe-zaavlenie-irana-rossii-i-turcii-po-itogam-mezhdunarodnoj-vstrechi-po-sirii-v-astaninskom-formate-mvsa-12-nur-sultan-25-26-aprela-2019-goda



the face of Western attempts to gain hegemony over the states of the region”.²²⁰ Damascus supported Russia’s unilateral annexation of Crimea in 2014 despite the troubling legal implications for the Golan Heights, which Israel unilaterally annexed in 1981, and it loyally votes with Moscow in the UN General Assembly.²²¹ In May 2018, Syria also extended formal recognition to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two Russian-backed breakout regions in Georgia.²²² The Georgian government responded by severing ties with Syria.²²³

Aid, Economic Support, and Investment

In contrast to the plentiful military assistance offered by Moscow, the Syrian government is not getting much economic help. Tehran, where the domestic financial situation is worse than in Russia, has extended lines of credit to the sum of \$6.6 billion to Damascus during the war, but Moscow appears to have offered no comparable financial backing.²²⁴

Despite a regular stream of propaganda footage of smiling officers handing out bags of rice to grateful Syrian civilians, Russia’s contribution to humanitarian efforts in Syria

appears negligible. UN statistics show that Western, Gulf Arab, and like-minded states finance virtually all the humanitarian relief to Syrians, including in areas controlled by Assad.²²⁵ This probably includes much of the aid Russia takes credit for delivering. The UN registered only \$6.3 million in Russian donations to Syria in 2017, which pales in comparison to the aid provided by wealthier Western nations. For example, Germany alone donated \$1.1 billion, and more on top of that through EU institutions.²²⁶

Russia has, however, helped to provide goods and services to Syria that would otherwise be unavailable or exorbitantly expensive due to US and EU sanctions. The most obvious example is military equipment, but Russia has also printed currency for the Central Bank of Syria, among other things.²²⁷

The most important non-military support offered by Russia is probably oil products and services for the energy sector. Syria was a net exporter of crude oil before the war, but government-held areas now produce only 24 per cent of daily needs, according to official figures.²²⁸ Some is trucked in from SDF-held oil fields in the north-east, but external trade has made up for most of the shortfall, delivering Russian, Iranian, and

²²⁰ “al-raisa al-assad li-wafd hukoumi rousi: dawr rousiya muhim fi himayat al-istiqrar bi-l-alam wa-l-wuquf fi wajh muhawalat al-gharb al-heymana ala al-mintaqa”, SANA, 25 May 2014, sana.sy/?p=2862.

²²¹ UN General Assembly voting record on resolution 68/262, “Territorial Integrity of Ukraine”, UN General Assembly, 15 March 2014, papersmart.unmeetings.org/media2/2498292/voting-record.pdf; “جمهورية القرم هي جزء لا يتجزأ من روسيا: هدية عباس”, *Sputnik Arabic*, 19 October 2016, sptnkne.ws/c3GW. Russia, too, opposes Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights – see footnote 220.

²²² Samer Dahi, “سورية تعترف رسمياً بجمهورية أبخازيا”, *al-Watan*, 30 May 2018, alwatan.sy/archives/153194.

²²³ “Information about the break-off of the diplomatic relations between Georgia and Syrian Arab Republic”, Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 5 June 2016, mfa.gov.ge/News/informacia-saqartvelosa-da-siriis-arabta-respublik.aspx?CatID=5&lang=en-US.

²²⁴ Sinan Hatahet, “Russia and Iran: Economic

Influence in Syria”, Chatham House, March 2019, chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2019-03-08RussiaAndIranEconomicInfluenceInSyria.pdf, p. 10.

²²⁵ In 2017, for example, Russian state media and officials took credit for UN airdrops to the IS-besieged government-controlled city of Deir al-Zor. In fact, only the airplanes delivering the goods were Russian; the aid itself was paid for by the United States and other Western governments. Colum Lynch, “U.S. Taxpayers Are Helping Bashar Al-Assad in a Strategic City”, *Foreign Policy*, 22 July 2017, foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/22/u-s-taxpayers-are-helping-bashar-al-assad-in-a-strategic-city.

²²⁶ “Syria Regional Crisis 2017 Overview”, UN OCHA Financial Tracking Service, 2017, fts.unocha.org/emergencies/600/donors/2017?order=tot al_funding&sort=desc.

²²⁷ “طبعة روسية... الليرة السورية”, *al-Mayadeen*, 3 August 2012, mdn.tv/JR.

²²⁸ “مكاشفة غير مسبقة حول النفط”, *al-Watan*.



perhaps Iraqi oil by ship to Tartous and Latakia.

In late 2018, Iran ended oil credits to Syria and the US government tightened sanctions against both Iran and Syria. Iranian-Russian tanker traffic ground to a halt.²²⁹ Syria has since suffered a severe shortage of state-distributed heating oil, petrol and other necessities, which destabilises the wider economy but also cuts into government earnings.²³⁰ Additional US sanctions are now on the way, and whether Russia and/or Iran can find a way to supply Syria with fuel remains to be seen. If not, growing financial and social crises could undermine Assad's regime, with unpredictable consequences for the wider conflict.

Asking Assad's Enemies to Pay

Russian and Iranian fuel deliveries have been immensely helpful, but the Syrian government continues to call in vain for foreign investment and reconstruction assistance. The needs are enormous. Syria has suffered immense destruction, state resources are depleted, and private capital and competence have fled the country. In May 2018, Assad said reconstruction costs would run into "hundreds of billions, \$200 billion at least and in some estimates \$400 billion".²³¹ Later that year, he set the 2019 state budget at 3,882 billion Syrian pounds, which translates to less than \$7 billion at May 2019 exchange rates.²³² In other words, the Syrian government stands no chance of single-handedly funding a credible reconstruction programme.

Outside financing also appears to be out of the question for now, since wealthy Western and Gulf Arab nations refuse to offer reconstruction aid and have vowed to maintain sanctions as long as Assad rejects their demands for a political transition.²³³ The Syrian government takes a sour grapes attitude to these demands, claiming that it would not have accepted Western, Turkish, or Gulf Arab capital anyway. Instead, as the Economy Minister, Adib Mayyaleh, explained in a 2017 interview, Damascus plans to rebuild the country with the exclusive help of "national forces" and "Syria's real allies, Russia, China, and Iran".²³⁴

However, Syria's "real allies" have so far kept a tight grip on their wallets. Russia is actively pushing for a generously funded international reconstruction programme, which it says is the only way to stabilise the country and allow refugees to return. Putin has even argued in favour of a "new Marshall Plan" for the Middle East.²³⁵ However, it seems clear that Putin wants his new Marshall Plan to be paid for by the same nations that funded the old Marshall Plan – the West. Russia does not appear to be willing to make any significant financial contribution to Syria's recovery.²³⁶ Instead, the Russian, Iranian and Chinese governments are simply positioning themselves to take advantage of any future change in EU policy. As a senior EU diplomat told *Foreign Policy*, "Russia wants

²²⁹ Ibid.; Lund, "Blame game..."

²³⁰ Interview, Yazigi.

²³¹ "الرئيس الأسد في مقابلة مع صحيفة كاتيمرني اليونانية", SANA, 10 May 2018, sana.sy/?p=751436.

²³² "al-raï al-assad yasdur qanoun ietimadat al-muwazana al-aamma 2019", *al-Baath*, 7 December 2018, bit.ly/2H3Ossn.

²³³ "Joint Statement From the Ministerial Discussion on Syria", Office of the Spokesperson, US Department of State, 21 September 2017, state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/09/274356.htm.

²³⁴ "وزير الاقتصاد السوري -أديب ميّالـة", *al-Mayadeen*, 11

February 2017, bit.ly/2vFKmQD.

²³⁵ "Putin urges new Marshall Plan for Middle East to see recovery and growth", TASS, 27 October 2016, tass.com/politics/909103.

²³⁶ Bogdanov reportedly told EU member states that it is their responsibility to rebuild Syria to the tune of "tens of billions of dollars", whereas Russia will pay "nothing". Kathrin Hille, Erika Solomon, and Arthur Beeley, "Russia asks world powers to pay for Syria reconstruction", *Financial Times*, 22 February 2017, ft.com/content/47933554-f847-11e6-9516-2d969e0d3b65.



our money to rebuild Syria so Russian companies can get the contracts".²³⁷

As a result of the deadlock, Syria's reconstruction has proceeded at a snail's pace even in areas now free of conflict. Formerly insurgent-held neighbourhoods recaptured by the government years before, such as those in Homs (retaken in 2014), Aleppo (in 2016) and Deir al-Zor (in 2017), are still unrestored and largely uninhabitable.

Limited but Strategic Investments

Damascus does its best to project an image of healthy trade and growing investor interest from Russia, with both domestic and international audiences in mind, but the act is unconvincing. In its hunt for positive news about forthcoming Russian support, Syria's state media has been reduced to covering politically inspired, economically meaningless promises of investment from the Russian authorities in Crimea and from the breakout republics in Donetsk (Ukraine), Abkhazia (Georgia), and South Ossetia (Georgia).²³⁸

There are exceptions to the rule: both Russia and Iran take an active interest in strategic sectors such as oil, gas, mining,

transportation, and telecommunications. Companies linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps lead Tehran's economic engagement with Syria, but Iran has found it difficult to compete with Russian investors.²³⁹ Russia's most high-profile investments have involved state-run or Kremlin-linked companies, typically targeting transport, energy, and mining.

In April 2019, Stroytransgaz won a 49-year contract to manage the Tartous port after promising to invest \$500 million in expanding its capacity.²⁴⁰ The deal solidified Russian influence in Tartous, where Moscow already had a presence through the Russian Navy. Stroytransgaz had previously won long-term contracts to develop the phosphate mines in Khneifis, near Palmyra, and to restore a phosphate processing and fertiliser plant near Homs.²⁴¹ Meanwhile, Rostec-Uralvagonzavod and Russian Railways have both voiced an interest in repairing Syria's railway system. If either company were to be awarded a contract for railways linking Palmyra, Homs, and Tartous, Russia would be in control of the entire chain of Syrian phosphate production, processing, and export.²⁴²

²³⁷ Anchal Vohra, "Russia's Payback Will Be Syria's Reconstruction Money", *Foreign Policy*, 5 May 2019, foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/05/russias-payback-will-be-syrias-reconstruction-money.

²³⁸ "Syria, Crimea Sign Economic Cooperation Agreements", *The Syria Report*, 16 October 2018, syria-report.com/news/economy/syria-crimea-sign-economic-cooperation-agreements; "Yalta Forum Highlights Little Interest for Syria Among Russian Investors", *The Syria Report*, 1 May 2019, syria-report.com/news/economy/yalta-forum-highlights-little-interest-syria-among-russian-investors.

²³⁹ Bozorgmehr Sharafedin and Ellen Francis, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards reaps economic rewards in Syria", *Reuters*, 19 January 2017, reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iran/irans-revolutionary-guards-reaps-economic-rewards-in-syria-idUSKBN1531TO; Erika Solomon and Najmeh Bozormehr, "Iran faces uphill battle to profit from its role in Syria war", *Financial Times*, 14 February 2018, ft.com/content/f5129c30-0d7f-11e8-8eb7-42f857ea9f09; Hatahet, "Russia and Iran..."

²⁴⁰ Mohammed Rakan Mustafa, "الوطن تنشر تفاصيل"، *al-Watan*, 25 April 2019, alwatan.sy/archives/195867. The announcement followed on the heels of reports that Iran was being considered for a similar contract on Syria's other main commercial port in Latakia. "Iran Eyeing Control of Latakia Port", *The Syria Report*, 12 March 2019, syria-report.com/news/transport/iran-eyeing-control-latakia-port.

²⁴¹ "More Details on Tartous Port Deal as Loyalists Cry Foul", *The Syria Report*, 30 April 2019, syria-report.com/news/transport/more-details-tartous-port-deal-loyalists-cry-foul.

²⁴² "Russia Seeking Opportunities in Syria's Railway Infrastructure", *The Syria Report*, 9 October 2018, syria-report.com/news/transport/russia-seeking-opportunities-syria-s-railway-infrastructure; "Russian Conglomerate Reports Interest in Syrian Reconstruction", *The Syria Report*, 27 February 2019, syria-report.com/news/transport/russian-conglomerate-reports-interest-syrian-reconstruction.



Syrian opposition groups have accused Russia and Iran of plundering Syrian natural resources, warning that the regime has been “forced to sell and lease out most of Syria’s economic assets” as a quid pro quo for military support.²⁴³ While the Russian-Iranian expansion also seems to benefit from more mundane circumstances, such as the fact that virtually all competition has vanished due to war and sanctions, there is certainly a political dimension to it.²⁴⁴ The most egregious example of direct exploitation may be an alleged 2017 deal between a state-owned Syrian oil company and a company fronting for Russian mercenaries, which, if the leaked documents are genuine, gave away 25 per cent shares in all the oil or gas fields captured by the mercenaries.²⁴⁵

Soft Power and Elite Connections

In March 2019, the 75th anniversary of the establishment of Syrian-Soviet diplomatic relations was celebrated with cultural events in Syrian cities. There was Tchaikovsky, there was Pushkin, and there was Tolstoy.²⁴⁶ Neither Russia nor Syria is short of history and culture to draw on, but civil society and people-to-people contacts seem to play at best a small role in the bilateral relationship. Syrian society was always more closely attuned to the Middle East and to Europe than to the Soviet Union

or Russia, and commercial exchanges between the two countries have mostly been restricted to state-run military industries and business elites. That said, decades of bilateral cooperation have of course exposed many ordinary Syrians to Russian influences.

Before the war, the Syrian association of alumni from Russian universities reportedly counted 35,000 members. Additional thousands of military personnel were thought to have trained in the Soviet Union or Russia, and many more had worked with Soviet or Russian advisers in Syria.²⁴⁷ Senior Baath Party officials also regularly travelled to Russia, and even lower-level members of the party had preferential access to academic scholarships for study abroad. Soviet or Russian degrees are still commonly found on the CVs of senior officials. In the current cabinet line-up, for example, the Minister of Higher Education, Bassam Ibrahim, gained his PhD at Moscow University in 1991, and the Defence Minister, Lt. Gen. Ali Ayyoub, studied at the Frunze Military Academy in 1982–1986.²⁴⁸

There was also a Russian diaspora in Syria. An estimated 15,000 Russian women had married Syrian men in the decades before 2011, giving birth to perhaps two or three times that number of Syrian-Russian children.²⁴⁹ As late as January 2013, “several dozens of thousands” of Russian citizens reportedly lived in Syria.²⁵⁰ Although the

²⁴³ الهيئة السورية للتفاوض ترد على تصريحات بوتين وتعتبر نظام “الأسد مهزوماً”, National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, 30 April 2019, bit.ly/2UPii7x.

²⁴⁴ Hatahet, “Russia and Iran...”

²⁴⁵ Nataliya Vasilyeva, “Thousands of Russian private contractors fighting in Syria”, Associated Press, 12 December 2017, apnews.com/7f9e63cb14a54dfa9148b6430d89e873. On Wagner, see also Lund 2019, pp. 44–45, and Nils Dahlgvist, “Russia’s (not so) Private Military Companies”, Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), FOI-MEMO 6653, January 2019, foi.se/rapportsammanfattning?reportNo=FOI%20MEMO%206653.

²⁴⁶ Bilal Ahmed, “لوحات شعبية روسية على مسرح الدراما بدار “الأسد”, SANA, 7 March 2019, sana.sy/?p=906940; Fatima

Naser, “الفولكلور الروسي أمام الجمهور في اللاذقية”, SANA, 7 March 2019, sana.sy/?p=907624; افتتاح احتفالية أيام الصداقة الروسية “العربية في مركز أبو رمانة الثقافي”, Syrian Ministry of Culture, 25 March 2019, bit.ly/2Xv9FAQ.

²⁴⁷ Vasiliev 2018, p. 386.

²⁴⁸ “رئاسة مجلس الوزراء”, SANA, n.d., sana.sy/?page_id=1900, accessed 4 May 2019; “العماد علي عبد الله أيوب”, Syrian Ministry of Defense, n.d., mod.gov.sy/index.php?node=5662&nid=368, accessed 4 May 2019.

²⁴⁹ Vasiliev 2018, p. 386.

²⁵⁰ “Opening remarks by S.V. Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the press-conference devoted to the results of activities of Russian diplomacy during 2012, held in Moscow, 23 January”, Russian Foreign Ministry, 23 January 2013,



group of Syrians who had some form of personal bond to Russia was not huge, it was heavily skewed towards well-connected military, academic, and political elites, and it probably offered valuable points of contact for Russian diplomats and intelligence services as they took stock of the situation in 2011.

Russian-connected Syrian political and business figures have gained in prominence during the conflict. In 2012, Qadri Jamil, a Marxist politician and former SCP member with strong links to Russia, was hauled out of semi-obscurity and appointed deputy prime minister. A year later, however, Jamil was abruptly fired; he has since been living in self-imposed exile in Moscow.²⁵¹ Russian diplomats then began to demand his inclusion in opposition delegations.²⁵²

Before the war, the Syrian-Russian dual citizen, George Heswani, who studied in Kaliningrad in the 1970s, was a little-noticed businessman working with Stroytransgaz. Since 2011, he has gained prominence as a loyalist financial fixer, brokering hostage exchanges, as well as transportation and oil deals across the frontlines. Reported transactions with IS have landed him on US and EU sanctions lists.²⁵³ An Orthodox Christian, Heswani has also engaged in public diplomacy and civil activism, sponsoring visits by Russian clergy to Syria.²⁵⁴

mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/125958.

²⁵¹ Aron Lund, "The Qadri Jamil Affair", Carnegie Middle East Center, 1 November 2013, carnegiemec.org/diwan/53486?lang=en.

²⁵² Aron Lund, "Russia's Favorite Is Kicked Out of Syria's Parliament", Carnegie Middle East Center, 4 August 2015, carnegiemec.org/diwan/60932.

²⁵³ Jay Solomon and Benoit Faucon, "An energy mogul becomes entangled with Islamic State", *Wall Street Journal*, 9 May 2016, wsj.com/articles/an-energy-mogul-becomes-entangled-with-islamic-state-1462734922.

²⁵⁴ "wafd knisi rousi yaslim 4 ayqounat manhouta ala al-khashab ila addad min al-kanaes bi-dimashq wa-rif-ha", SANA, 26 March 2019, sana.sy/?p=919045.

²⁵⁵ David Axelrod, "Rare glimpse of Assad family ties

At the pinnacle of the political elite, Syria's ruling family has since 2015 started to highlight the fact that it is cultivating a personal connection with Russia. In 2018, Assad revealed that his children had spent time at Artak, a summer camp in Russian-occupied Crimea that has operated since Soviet times.²⁵⁵ The eldest of the Assad children, 18-year old Hafez, who is a potential candidate to succeed his father, reportedly studies Russian, while his younger siblings study Spanish and Chinese.²⁵⁶

Media and Education

Russian state media, such as the Arabic-language *Russia Today* clone *Rusiya al-Yawm* and an Arabic version of *Sputnik News*, have had some success in Syria. In a polling-based study conducted in late 2015 and early 2016, *Russia Today* was reported as the seventh-most popular Arab or international satellite television channel among Syrians, with a higher degree of popularity among pro-Assad viewers. It ranked sixth in government-controlled areas and third in the loyalist core regions of Tartous and Latakia. *Russia Today* was also the fourth-most followed news website in government-held regions.²⁵⁷

Education is another potential vector of Russian influence, but Moscow does not

to Russia in kids' stay at seaside camp", Reuters, 19 April 2018, reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-family/rare-glimpse-of-assad-family-ties-to-russia-in-kids-stay-at-seaside-camp-idUSKBN1HQ2CP.

²⁵⁶ Basma Atassi, "Assad's children 'learn languages, practise hobbies'", *Al Jazeera*, 25 January 2016, aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/assad-children-learn-languages-practice-hobbies-160123091337305.html; "بشار الأسد يوجّه ابنه حافظ لتعلم اللغة الروسية", *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 22 January 2016, bit.ly/2VIADaN.

²⁵⁷ Anke Fiedler, Bart Veenstra and Dirk Spilker, "Syria Audience Research 2016", Media in Cooperation and Transition, 2016, mict-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FPU_GMDF_MiCT_audience_research_syria_2016.pdf, pp. 33–34, 43.



appear to have invested much in it. Since 2015, the number of Master's Degree and PhD scholarships offered to Syrians has increased from 100 to 500 per year, but the total number of students over the entire war period is still in the low thousands.²⁵⁸ In 2018, the two countries also agreed to allow Syrian children to enrol in Russian military boarding schools, where they will be given a Russian-language education and cadet training.²⁵⁹ However, the programme appears to be very small – the first batch of students to arrive in St Petersburg in 2018 consisted of just eight children.²⁶⁰

In 2014, Syria's Ministry of Education decided to offer Russian as an optional second foreign language (the alternative is French) after English at high school level.²⁶¹ The reform seems to have been politically motivated and was poorly prepared – there were very few qualified teachers. However, that problem is slowly being addressed since the opening of a new Russian language training centre at Damascus University.²⁶² Russian-language enrolment remains small in relation to the total student cohort, but it is growing. According to official figures, 2,500 students studied Russian in late 2014, 15,000 in 2017, and 25,000 in 2019.²⁶³ The classes are most popular among students in Latakia and Tartous, loyalist strongholds where many military families live.²⁶⁴

Does Russia Control Syria?

According to the Syrian government, the relationship with Moscow has always been a perfect model of principled cooperation between equals. "Not once did Russia try to impose anything on us, even in moments of disagreement like the [1976] entry into Lebanon", Bashar al-Assad told an interviewer in 2016, adding, "Despite our differences with the Soviet Union at the time, it did not try to impose any particular decision on us, though we were very dependent on it, in particular for arms".²⁶⁵ This is a self-serving narrative. As is noted above, the Soviet Union did in fact unsuccessfully try to force Syria to comply with its policies in Lebanon, including by cutting off arms supplies.

The opposite extreme, however, that Russia could force Assad to submit to a political transition if only it wanted to, seems just as far-fetched. The Syrian regime was constructed by father and son Assad using their own relatives and friends as building blocks, and it relies on an underlying system of military factionalism and Alawite family politics that is incomprehensible even to most Syrian loyalists. The idea that Russian diplomats or spies could outmanoeuvre Assad in such an environment beggars belief.

Historically, Moscow has never had anything even close to that level of influence over Syria. Even at the height of

²⁵⁸ Fadi Bek al-Sharif, "منحة دراسية روسية للطلاب 300", *al-Watan*, 14 July 2016, alwatan.sy/archives/61657; Fadi Bek al-Sharif, "منح روسية", *al-Watan*, 11 March 2018, alwatan.sy/archives/142647.

²⁵⁹ "Russian military schools to offer free education to young Syrians", *Russia Today*, 13 July 2018, on.rt.com/9a2u.

²⁶⁰ "التحاق أول دفعة من التلاميذ السوريين بالمدارس العسكرية", *Rusiya al-Yawm*, 16 August 2018, ar.rt.com/knmp.

²⁶¹ "اللغة الروسية في المدارس بداية العام الدراسي القادم", Syrian Ministry of Education, 4 January 2014, bit.ly/2PRYz6g.

²⁶² "مركز روسي بجامعة دمشق لتنسيق التعاون لتعليم اللغة الروسية",

SANA, 9 October 2017, sana.sy/?p=640100.

²⁶³ بحث إدخال اللغة الروسية في المناهج السورية بملئى العالم الروسي "الثامن", SANA, 3 November 2014, sana.sy/?p=87231; "مركز روسي بجامعة دمشق لتنسيق التعاون لتعليم اللغة الروسية", SANA, 9 October 2017, sana.sy/?p=640100; "٢٥ ألف طالباً يدرسون", *Tishreen*, 22 April 2019, tishreen.news.sy/?p=319933.

²⁶⁴ Svetlana Smetanina, "There is more demand for the Russian language in Syria right now than ever before," *Russkiy Mir Foundation*, 22 June 2017, russkiymir.ru/en/publications/226358.

²⁶⁵ Waddah Abd-Rabbo, "الرئيس بشار الأسد في حوار خاص", *al-Watan*, 8 December 2016, alwatan.sy/archives/82031.



Cold War cooperation, with thousands of advisers in the Syrian armed forces, the Kremlin was unable to resolve the 1983–1984 power struggle between Hafez al-Assad and his brother Refaat.²⁶⁶ In the 1990s, Russian diplomats seemed to be as much in the dark as their Western counterparts about the regime's internal machinations.²⁶⁷ Nor could they make Syria pay its debts. Since 2011, Russia has struggled to make Damascus feign any interest in compromise and, in so far as it genuinely tried, failed to make Assad offer serious concessions.²⁶⁸ Lavrov once compared Moscow's lack of control over Assad with Washington's inability to dictate to Israel.²⁶⁹

Of course, the balance of the relationship has tipped deeply in Russia's favour since 2015. Russia now has the tools to shape Syrian military strategy by selectively denying support to specific operations, and it has done so on several occasions. Russia has also secured trade advantages and long-term basing rights of a kind that were never on offer during the Cold War, and Syrian diplomats now dance to Russia's tune whereas formerly they just nodded along.

Even so, there is no reason to think that an ability to wring concessions from the Syrian

government on economic, diplomatic, or even military matters would translate into Russian influence – much less control – over something as fundamental to the regime as Assad's position. In addition, any attempt to assert dominance over Assad would be likely to run up against resistance from Iran.

Russia and Iran

The Kremlin is not alone on the scene in loyalist Syria. Whatever the real extent of Russia's influence in Damascus, Iran also has a say. Russia and Iran have differing political outlooks, shared but not identical interests in Syria, and only partly overlapping regional aims.²⁷⁰ In 2015–2016, some of Assad's enemies speculated that these differences could eventually lead Russia to abandon Assad, push out Iran, or both.²⁷¹

That has not happened, even though Russia has listened with apparent interest to Israeli, Western, and Gulf Arab concerns about Iranian influence in Syria. In 2017–2018, Russian diplomats and military leaders engaged with Israel and the United States to limit Iran's role in battles near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.²⁷² Syrian opposition media has also published reports about skirmishes between Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian militias, although

²⁶⁶ The conflict is described in Seale 1995, pp. 421–440, noting (p. 433) a failed Soviet mediation attempt in March 1984.

²⁶⁷ Aron Lund, "Mikhail Bogdanov and the Syrian Black Box", Carnegie Middle East Center, 18 March 2014, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/55006.

²⁶⁸ For example, during the Geneva meetings in 2014 and 2016–2017, in discussions about ceasefires and humanitarian access in 2016, and during negotiations on a constitutional committee in 2018–2019. Attempts to organise prisoner exchanges via the Astana process have so far produced little of substance, and Russian hopes for a deal between Damascus and the SDF that could pull the rug from under the US military presence have failed to materialise, in part because of the rigidity of the Syrian government.

²⁶⁹ Taha Barakah interviews Lakhdar Brahimi for the show *الذاكرة السياسية*, Part 1, *al-Arabiya*, 20 March 2015, ara.tv/zg7en.

²⁷⁰ Author's interviews with Nikolay Kozhanov, former Russian diplomat and visiting lecturer in the

political economy of the Middle East at the European University of St Petersburg, telephone, June 2016; Dina Esfandiary, fellow with The Century Foundation and international security program research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, telephone, September 2018; and Rouzbeh Parsi, Director of the Middle East Program at the Swedish Institute for International Affairs, Stockholm, October 2018. See also Lund 2019, pp. 31–32.

²⁷¹ Russia probably encouraged this line of thinking as a way of marketing its presence in Syria as beneficial to Israel and to Western interests. Aron Lund, "Stand Together or Fall Apart: The Russian-Iranian Alliance in Syria", Carnegie Middle East Center, 31 May 2016, carnegie-mec.org/diwan/63699.

²⁷² "Keeping the Calm in Southern Syria", International Crisis Group, Middle East and North Africa Report, no. 187, June 2018, crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/187-keeping-calm-southern-syria.



these reports are hard to confirm or contextualise.²⁷³

Thus far, Russia-Iran relations in Syria appear to have been mostly amicable and cooperative. This is probably because their differences over Syria were always exaggerated and are studiously compartmentalised, but also because both sides know the limits of their own influence and depend on the other in their mission to save Assad's rule.²⁷⁴ As long as the Syrian

government remains under threat, neither Russia nor Iran is likely to want to break up the battle-tested coalition that has brought them to the cusp of victory. For Assad, it may even be a fairly comfortable arrangement – with two major foreign partners, he can always lean on one to counterbalance the other.

²⁷³ For example: "قوات مدعومة روسيًا تدهم مقرات لحزب الله في"، *Enab Baladi*, 29 April 2019, enabbaladi.net/archives/297383.

²⁷⁴ Lund, "Stand Together or Fall Apart..."



Conclusion

In 2019, Damascus and Moscow mark 75 years since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations. Over the course of seven and a half tumultuous decades, the character of their bilateral connection has changed considerably, but the two nations have remained constantly friendly and, most of the time, very close. The roots of that friendship can be found in the mid-1950s, when Syria sought foreign assistance against Israel and could not find it in the West. The Syrian-Czech arms deal of 1956 and subsequent defence agreements with Moscow kindled a military relationship that has lasted to this day.

Syrian-Soviet relations grew closer following the 1963 Baath Party coup, particularly after the Baath's left wing seized power in 1966 and laid the foundations for today's regime.

Hafez al-Assad's internal power grab in 1970 made the relationship at once deeper and more complicated. Ideological and sentimental factors were thrown out, but the interest-based, practical underpinnings of the relationship were reinforced. The driving mind of this development was Assad himself. He was a skilled tactician who excelled at being the tail that wagged the dog, and in the 1970s and 1980s he had much room for manoeuvre due to Soviet insecurities about its regional position.

At the end of the Cold War, however, the Damascus-Moscow connection withered. It was only in the early 2000s that Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin found new common cause in resisting US policies in Iraq. Resumed Syrian arms purchases and Russia's own slow drift towards conflict with the West helped to close the gap.

When the Syrian civil war began in 2011, Russian-Syrian relations were warm but not overly close. Although Moscow had material stakes to defend in Syria, such as its old naval depot in Tartous, its vehement reaction against Western calls for Assad's overthrow had less to do with any great love for the Syrian regime than with political transformations of a higher order in Russia's view of the West. In Syria in 2011, the Kremlin decided to hit back against what it perceived as Western policies inimical to Russian security, to reassert its global relevance, and to force the United States to take Russian interests into account.

Russia's defence of the government in Syria proved effective. To some extent, success stemmed simply from aligning with the strongest party to the conflict, but Moscow also made sure to pick achievable goals and then pursue them with ruthlessness and single-minded purpose.

Western nations did the opposite on all counts. In Syria, the United States engaged in a quixotic struggle to unify hundreds of rural Sunni militias behind a powerless liberal exile leadership, while aiming for a delicately balanced transition that would merge a reformed insurgency and a decapitated regime into a stable whole. By contrast, Russia settled for simply adding muscle to Assad's regime just as it was, warts and all. Although Russian leaders do not seem to have been any better informed about Syria's political and social nuances than their Western colleagues, they certainly did a better job at grasping the basic mechanics of power and conflict.

When vetoing UN resolutions and drip-feeding ammunition to the Syrian loyalists was no longer enough, Putin opted to radically out-escalate his fumbling



adversaries. In 2015, he launched a decisive and often brutal military operation that ended up tipping the scales of the Syrian war and set a match to the anti-Assad camp's explosive internal contradictions.

Three and a half years later, Assad's position is no longer directly under threat, and Putin takes credit for having prevented the "somalisation" of Syria.²⁷⁵ The war has demonstrated Russia's military mettle and raised eyebrows in the Middle East as well as globally.²⁷⁶ However, Moscow had little success in its ambition to press gang the United States into a "lukewarm friendship" as co-sponsors of a peace deal in Syria.²⁷⁷ In fact, a peace deal remains elusive even today, and Moscow is finding that the United States, instead of adapting to Russia's winning gambit, is simply losing interest in the game.

Having mostly defeated its enemies without managing to bring the conflict to a close, Russia is turning into the chief referee of Syria's remaining internal and external rivalries. It is sometimes an awkward position to be in, but the Kremlin clearly enjoys the influence it has won. In particular, Turkey's pro-Russian turn after 2016 is a greater prize than Russia could have hoped for going into the conflict.

However, all is not well. Syrian state institutions have been badly weakened and drained of competent staff and resources,

and Assad's regime is more narrowly based and inflexible than before the war. Syrian society has grown more violent and polarised than ever before – thoroughly militarised and riddled with sectarian, ethnic, and social animosities. Russia's formerly useful if pig-headed ally in Damascus has turned into a dependent client with costly needs, even if Assad is not the feckless marionette he is sometimes made out to be. The West's refusal to fund Syria's reconstruction or lift sanctions prevents the regime from regenerating its patronage networks and denies Russia a financial payoff from the war, but it also maintains Syria in a volatile state of simmering crisis. In particular, the fuel shortages that hit in late 2018 could become seriously disruptive unless resolved, not to mention that the military conflict is likely to still have a few terrible rumblings left in it – and unpredictable events could still occur.

Stabilising and healing Syria's broken and truncated polity is turning out to be a more complex task than simply blocking regime change. Having excelled at the latter, the Kremlin now finds itself under pressure to deliver solutions to problems that threaten to raise the cost in Russian energy and resources, and that may depend on the co-option or defeat of strong-willed rival actors. How Russia chooses to meet these challenges will shape not only its own future role in Syria, but Syria itself.

²⁷⁵ "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", Russian Presidency, 18 October 2018, en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/58848. As for Assad's position, Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, said in April 2019, when asked whether Assad's fate comes up in bilateral talks on Syria, that "it is not a subject of debate". "Everyone has turned that page, she added. "rousiya: rahil bashar al-assad safha tawaha al-jamie", *Rusiya al-Yawm*, 4 April 2019, ar.rt.com/loe5.

²⁷⁶ "The Middle East has now become the platform

or arena beyond the post-Soviet space that Russia uses to project influence and signal its great-power status, striving to be on equal terms with the United States", according to Hanna Notte, an expert on Moscow's relations with the Middle East. Author's telephone interview with Hanna Notte, political officer with the Shaikh Group, October 2018.

²⁷⁷ Hanna Notte, "Russia in Syria: Domestic Drivers and Regional Implications", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, *Policy Paper*, no. 8, January 2017, kas.de/wf/en/33.47817, p. 24.



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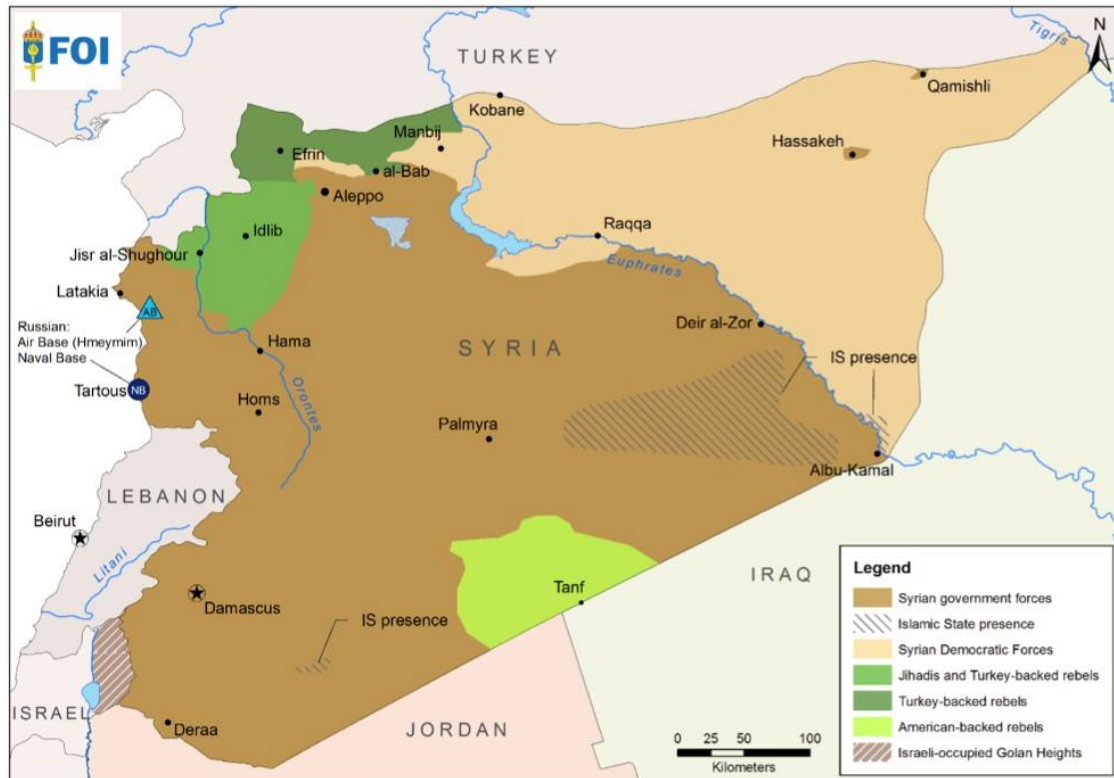
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Map: Syria in winter 2018.



Map by Per Wikström, reproduced with the permission of the Swedish Defence Research Institute (FOI).



TIMELINE:

1920
1924
1944
1946
1947
1948-1949
1953
1955-1956
1957
1958-1961
1963
1964
1966
1967
1970
1973
1976
1979-1982
1982
1985
1987
1989
1990
1991

TIMELINE:

1992
1999
2000
2003
2005
2006
2008
2010
2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016
2017
2018
2019

SYRIAN-SOVIET RELATIONS

Syria created as French mandate
Syrian Communist Party founded
Syrian-Soviet relations established
France leaves, Syria independent
Baath Party founded
Syria fights Israel; first Syrian coup
Stalin dies
Syria begins to buy Eastern Bloc arms
US-Soviet tension over Syria
Syria, Egypt form United Arab Republic
Baath Party seizes power in Syria
Khrushchev deposed
Leftist coup in Baath Party
Six Day War, Syria loses Golan Heights
Coups by Hafez al-Assad
October War: Egypt, Syria vs. Israel
Syria intervenes in Lebanon
Islamist uprising in Syria
Syria-Israel clashes in Lebanon
Gorbachev takes power in Soviet Union
Soviet Union limits support for Syria
Communist regimes fall in East Europe
Iraq invades Kuwait; Lebanon peace deal
Soviet Union ends; Arab-Israeli peace talks

SYRIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Syria refuses to pay post-Soviet debt
Vladimir Putin President of Russia
Hafez dies, Bashar al-Assad president
Russia and Syria oppose Iraq war
Bashar in Russia, wins debt write-off
Syrian arms purchases resume
Putin replaced by Dmitri Medvedev
Medvedev first Russian leader in Syria
Arab Spring, conflict begins in Syria
Putin resumes Russian presidency
Russian-US deal on chemical arms
Rise of IS, USA enters Syria
Assad loses Idlib, Russia enters Syria
Turkey enters Syria, East Aleppo retaken
Astana agreement by Russia, Turkey, Iran
Turkey takes Efrin, Assad retakes South
USA says Golan Israeli, Russia protests



STATE VISITS SINCE 1970

	Syrian leader in Soviet Union/Russia	Soviet/Russian leader in Syria
1971	January ²⁷⁸	—
1972	July	—
1974	April	—
1975	October	—
1976	October	—
1977	April	—
1978	February	—
1978	October	—
1979	June	—
1979	October	—
1980	October	—
1984	October	—
1985	June	—
1986	June	—
1987	April	—
1990	April	—
1999	July	—
2005	January	—
2006	December	—
2008	August	—
2010	—	May
2015	October	—
2017	November	December
2018	May	—

Only officially declared visits are included.

Sources: Hashem Othman, *tarikh souriya al-hadith: ahd hafez al-assad 1971-2000*, Riyad el-Rayyes Books, 2014; *New York Times* database; presidentassad.net; kremlin.ru; sana.sy.

²⁷⁸ Hafez al-Assad's 1971 visit to the Soviet Union took place while he was formally only Syria's prime minister. He was elected president two months later.



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