



Research Article

Role of Russia in The Syrian Crisis

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Abstract

This paper examines the Russia's role in the Syrian crisis from 2011 to the collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024. It analyses the historical foundations of the Russia–Syria relationship, the strategic rationale behind Russia's support for Bashar al-Assad, the nature and consequences of Russia's direct military intervention from September 2015, and the ultimate failure of Russia's Syrian project with the fall of the Assad government. The paper argues that Russia's intervention in Syria generated substantial short-term tactical and geopolitical gains. It prevented the immediate collapse of the Assad government, reinforced Russia's position as a major power in the Middle East, and provided an important ground for demonstrating and testing its military capabilities. However, Russia's long-term strategic commitment to the Assad regime proved increasingly unsustainable. The regime's sudden collapse in December 2024 exposed the limitations of Russia's Syria strategy and raised broader questions about the sustainability of its investment in the Assad government.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict, which started in March 2011 as part of the broader Arab Spring uprising, became one of the important geopolitical crises of the early twenty-first century. Over more than a decade of brutal civil war, Syria was transformed into a theatre of great-power competition, proxy conflict, and humanitarian catastrophe on a scale not witnessed since the Second World War. Among all the external powers that intervened in the Syrian conflict, none played a more significant role than the Russia. From its early diplomatic protection of the

Assad regime in the United Nations Security Council to its direct military intervention in September 2015, Russia emerged as the Assad regime's indispensable external actor without whose support the regime could not have survived for so many years. In December 2024, the Assad regime, despite years of Russian military and political support, collapsed rapidly following an offensive led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and allied factions. Bashar al-Assad subsequently fled to Moscow, where Russia granted him asylum. The collapse marked a significant setback for Russia's Syria policy and exposed the

limitations of external power in sustaining an authoritarian regime over the long term.

This paper examines Russia's role in the Syrian conflict across four dimensions: the historical and strategic foundations of Russia-Syria relations, the motivations behind Russia's intervention, the military strategy and its impact on the conflict, and the collapse of the Assad regime and its implications for Russian foreign policy. The paper places Russia's policy in Syria within the broader development of its post-Cold War foreign policy, particularly Moscow's efforts to strengthen its international influence and reassert its position as a major power in the Middle East.

2. Historical Evolution of Russia-Syria Relations

To understand Russia's sustained support for the Assad regime, it is necessary to trace the historical roots of the Russia-Syria relationship, which developed over several decades prior to the outbreak of the Syrian crisis. The Soviet Union developed close relations with Syria from the late 1950s, largely driven by its strategic interests amid Cold War rivalry in the Middle East. Syria became an important Soviet partner, receiving military equipment, technical advisers, and economic assistance while maintaining close political ties with Moscow and providing access to strategic facilities in the Mediterranean (Goodarzi 2006). The establishment of the Soviet naval facility at Tartus in 1971 further strengthened this relationship. It provided the Soviet Navy with a strategic foothold in the Mediterranean and later served as an important base for the Russian Navy, highlighting the enduring strategic significance of Syria to Moscow.

Following the Soviet Union collapse in 1991, Russia-Syria relations entered a period of diminished engagement as Moscow, confronted with domestic economic and political challenges, reduced its engagement in the Middle East. This approach began to change under Vladimir Putin, who came to power in 2000 and pursued a foreign policy aimed at restoring Russia's influence in strategically important regions. The Middle East particularly Syria, became an important component of this policy. Trenin (2012) argues that Moscow increasingly viewed its relations with states such as Syria as an indicator of its great-power standing. Preserving these relationships also served to demonstrate Russia's capacity to resist Western pressure and maintain an independent foreign policy.

The personal relationship between Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad strengthened these structural ties. After Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father, Hafez al-Assad, in 2000, Russia was among the external powers most willing to engage the new Syrian leadership without imposing significant political conditions. Arms sales, which had lapsed in the 1990s, were revived. Russia supplied Syria with air defence systems, fighter aircrafts, and naval equipment throughout the 2000s, making it Syria's most important arms supplier and creating deep institutional linkages between the two states military establishments (Phillips, 2016). By the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Russia-Syria bilateral relations had evolved around historical ties, strategic interests, military cooperation,

and political linkages. These factors provided a strong foundation for Russia's subsequent support for the Assad regime.

3. Russia's Strategic Interests in Supporting the Assad Regime

When the Syrian uprising began in March 2011 and rapidly got escalated into armed conflict, Russia adopted a clear policy of supporting the Assad regime. This position reflected a combination of strategic interests, geopolitical considerations, and concerns about the broader implications of regime change in the Middle East. These factors shaped the foundations of Russia's policy toward the Syrian conflict and eventually formed the basis for its decision to intervene militarily in 2015.

The most immediate strategic concern for Russia was the preservation of its only significant military foothold in the Arab world. The naval facility at Tartus is strategically very important to Moscow. It provides Russia with access to the Mediterranean and supported its broader objective of maintaining a military presence and projecting influence beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Hill and Gaddy (2015) argue that Putin regarded a military presence in strategically important regions as an important component of Russia's great-power status. From this perspective, the potential loss of Tartus following the fall of the Assad regime posed a significant strategic concern, particularly if a successor government developed closer ties with Western or Gulf States. Russia also maintained a military interest in the Hmeimim air base near Latakia, which subsequently became the principal base for its military intervention in Syria.

Beyond the specific military assets, Russia's Syrian policy was driven by a broader geopolitical concern over Western-led efforts to promote regime change. The experience of Libya in 2011 was particularly influential in shaping Moscow's position. In 2011, Russia had abstained on UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorised a no-fly zone over Libya to protect civilians, but subsequently viewed NATO's military campaign and the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi as an expansion of the resolution's mandate. Putin, who was prime minister at that time, later described the Libya intervention as a '*medieval crusade*' and expressed deep personal anger at what he regarded as Western deception (Bryanski, 2011). The Libyan experience led Moscow to adopt a more cautious approach to UN-authorised intervention and to oppose international measures that could facilitate regime change. Syria subsequently became a key case in Russia's effort to prevent such an outcome. Trenin (2012) argues that Russia's position on Syria is not primarily about Syria. It is about the broader principle that sovereign governments cannot be removed by external pressure, and that Russia sought to prevent a repetition of the Libyan experience, in which external intervention contributed to regime change.

The other strategic motivation was Russia's emphasis on counterterrorism, which was also linked to its domestic security concerns. As the Syrian opposition became increasingly fragmented and jihadist groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra and

later ISIS, expanded their presence, Moscow framed its support for the Assad government as part of a broader effort to combat terrorism and prevent the spread of jihadist threats. Russia argued that removing Assad would not lead to democracy but would instead create space for Islamist extremist groups to gain power. This framing served multiple purposes: it provided legitimacy to Russia's support for a government conducting widespread atrocities against its own people, highlighted concerns shared by Western governments regarding jihadist expansion, and complemented Moscow's domestic counterterrorism narrative, particularly in relation to its experience in the North Caucasus (Gerges 2016).

Russia's support for Assad also reflected deeper ideological commitments about the nature of sovereignty and the international order. Putin's Russia had long positioned itself as a defender of the Westphalian principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, a principle that conveniently aligned with Russian interests in protecting authoritarian governments, including its own from external pressure. Hinnebusch (2012) notes that Russia's opposition to Western intervention in Syria was shaped partly by the Libyan experience, where an UN-authorized humanitarian intervention ultimately contributed to regime change.

Finally, Syria offered Russia a platform for arms exports and military relationship building that carried significant commercial and strategic value. Russia's arms industry had deep ties to the Syrian military, and the conflict provided Moscow with opportunities to demonstrate and test under combat conditions, the capabilities of its weapons systems. Russia's military intervention in Syria also provided an opportunity to demonstrate its military capabilities and enhance the international prominence of its weapons systems (Phillips, 2016).

4. Diplomatic Shield: Russia's Use of the UN Security Council

From the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Russia used its permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council to provide diplomatic support to the Assad regime and oppose measures that could facilitate its removal. Between 2011 and 2024, Russia often in cooperation with China vetoed more than fifteen UN Security Council resolutions concerning Syria. These vetoes blocked or limited efforts to refer the Syrian situation to the International Criminal Court, impose arms restrictions, establish ceasefires, and expand humanitarian access. This pattern of repeated vetoes significantly constrained the Security Council's ability to adopt collective measures and limited international efforts to exert diplomatic pressure on the actors of the conflict.

Russia's diplomatic strategy served several purposes. Most directly it prevented the Syrian government from facing the level of multilateral pressure as was used against Libya. By opposing resolutions that could have authorised international intervention, Moscow sought to ensure that external action against Assad lacked Security Council authorisation thus be politically costlier for Western governments. Russia also used

the Security Council as a platform to promote its own narrative of the conflict by emphasising the role of foreign-armed jihadist groups, insisting on Assad's role in any political transition, and framing Western and Gulf support for the opposition as illegitimate external interference (Van Dam, 2017).

Russia's diplomacy at the UN was complemented by its engagement in bilateral and multilateral diplomatic initiatives aimed at advancing its strategic objectives in Syria. The Astana Peace Process initiated in January 2017 by Russia with Iran and Turkey as co-guarantors, was particularly significant. It created a diplomatic framework for the Syrian conflict that excluded the United States and European Union and operated on terms broadly favourable to the Assad regime. While the Astana Process produced a series of de-escalation agreements that temporarily reduced fighting in specific areas, critics argued that these arrangements primarily served to consolidate Assad's territorial gains rather than to advance a genuine political settlement (Alami, 2018).

5. Russia's Direct Military Intervention in Syria

The most pivotal phase of Russia's involvement in Syria began on 30 September 2015, when President Vladimir Putin announced the launch of Russian air operations in Syria at the request of the Assad government. The decision to intervene directly came at a moment when the regime was under severe military pressure. Opposition forces, had made significant territorial gains in Idlib province and were increasingly threatening the regime's strongholds in the Alawite-majority coastal region. That time without external intervention, many analysts believed the Assad government might have collapsed within months.

Russia's military deployment was centred on the Hmeimim air base near Latakia and the naval facility at Tartus. At the peak of Russia's military intervention, its contingent in Syria comprised several dozen combat aircrafts, including Su-25 ground-attack aircraft, Su-24 and Su-34 strike aircraft, and Su-35 fighters. The deployment was supported by naval forces capable of launching cruise missiles, special operations forces, artillery units, and intelligence and electronic warfare capabilities (Jones et al., 2020). The Russian military also deployed its advanced air-defence systems, including the S-400. Although these systems had no practical role against opposition forces that possessed no air power. Their deployment was widely interpreted as Russia's military capabilities and served as a deterrent to potential Western intervention (Rodkiewicz, 2016).

Although Russia publicly presented its intervention as a counterterrorism campaign against ISIS, its initial air operations reflected broader strategic priorities. During the first weeks, most Russian strikes targeted opposition-controlled areas in Hama, Idlib, Latakia, and Homs rather than ISIS controlled territory in eastern Syria. These areas were primarily contested by forces opposing the Assad government, including secular and Islamist opposition groups. Even Petrou (2015) argues that Russia's primary objective was not to combat terrorism but to support the Assad government and prevent its collapse.

The military impact of Russia's intervention was significant during the initial phase of the intervention. In coordination with Iranian-backed ground forces, including Hezbollah and Shia militias from Iraq and Afghanistan, Russian air power enabled the Assad government to recover territory and gradually regain control over areas previously held by opposition forces. The siege and recapture of Aleppo in December 2016, Syria's second city which had been partly held by opposition forces since 2012 was the most significant military achievement of this combined effort and a turning point in the conflict's military trajectory (Hokayem, 2013). By 2018, with Russian air support the regime was able to recapture control over most of Syria's major population centres, though large territories in the northeast (under Kurdish control) and northwest (including Idlib province) were outside Damascus's authority.

Russia's military intervention in Syria also provided an operational environment for testing its weapons systems, military tactics, and doctrines developed by the post-Soviet Russian armed forces. The Syrian intervention also provided Russia with an opportunity to test and refine its military capabilities. According to Russian Defence Ministry figures, more than 63,000 Russian military personnel gained combat experience in Syria, while more than 231 types of weapons and military equipment were tested during the operation (Orinoco Tribune, 2019). The Syrian campaign thus contributed to the development and refinement of Russia's military capabilities and operational practices with implications for its broader military strategy (Hill and Gaddy 2015).

6. The Collapse of the Assad Regime and Its Implications for Russia

Despite more than thirteen years of Russia's political, diplomatic, and military support, the Assad regime collapsed rapidly in late 2024. Beginning in late November 2024, an offensive led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and allied factions rapidly advanced through Aleppo, Hama, and Homs before finally reaching Damascus on 8th December 2024. Bashar al-Assad fled to Russia, where he was granted asylum, ending more than five decades of Assad family rule in Syria. The rapid and comprehensive collapse of the Assad regime surprised many scholars and analysts who had viewed sustained Russian support as a significant factor in its continued survival. The collapse of the Assad regime exposed significant limitations in Russia's Syria strategy and challenged the assumptions underlying its long-term support for the Assad regime. Russia had invested substantially in preserving the Assad regime, but had invested far less in strengthening the institutional, economic, and political foundations necessary for its long-term stability. The Syrian state had been weakened by prolonged conflict, corruption, and economic mismanagement, while its survival depended heavily on external military support rather than effective governance and domestic legitimacy. Russia's military involvement in Ukraine since February 2022 significantly constrained its capacity to maintain its military presence in Syria. The diversion of military assets, diplomatic attention, and financial resources to the war in Ukraine reduced

Russia's capacity to respond decisively when the rebel offensive began in late 2024. Russian air operations in Syria had been significantly reduced in the years before the offensive, while the demands of the war in Ukraine limited Moscow's ability to rapidly deploy additional forces to prevent the regime's collapse. The Syrian intervention, partly intended to demonstrate Russia's restored great-power capabilities, ultimately exposed the limitations of its strategy. The collapse of the Assad regime represented a significant strategic setback for Russia. Moscow had invested substantial military and diplomatic resources in supporting the Syrian government since its military intervention in 2015. Russia's inability to prevent the regime's collapse undermined its image as a power capable of protecting its allies and projecting military influence in the Middle East (Rodkiewicz & Chawryło, 2024).

The fall of Assad also raised significant questions about the future of Russia's military presence in Syria. The Tartus naval facility and Hmeimim air base, which formed the core of Russia's strategic presence in Syria, faced an uncertain future under the post-Assad political order, which was not necessarily bound by the agreements signed by the previous government. The position of the new Syrian authorities toward these facilities remained uncertain, and the possibility of their loss could not be ruled out. Russia thus faced the possibility that its Syrian intervention which had cost billions of dollars and hundreds of military personnel had ultimately yielded no lasting strategic benefits.

The broader implications for Russian foreign policy were significant. Russia's engagement in Syria had been presented as evidence of its renewed great-power capabilities, demonstrating its ability to project military power beyond its immediate region and support allied governments. The collapse of the Assad regime weakened this narrative and raised questions about the reliability of Russian security guarantees among other partner states. Russia's inability to prevent the fall of a government it had directly intervened to support also raised doubts about the long-term effectiveness of Russian security partnerships.

7. Implications for the International Order

Russia's role in the Syrian conflict carries important implications for the broader international order that extend well beyond the Middle East. The Syrian crisis exposed the fragility of the post-Cold War multilateral system when a major power uses its veto power to protect its strategic interests in the UN Security Council. Russia's repeated use of the veto on Syria demonstrated how the Security Council's collective security mechanism could be constrained when a permanent member sought to protect a strategic partner even amid a severe humanitarian crisis. This experience contributed to wider debates over Security Council reform and the future application of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine in an era of renewed great-power competition. Russia's continued support for the Assad government contributed to the international stalemate over Syria and limited the prospects for a stronger external response to the escalating conflict for many years.

The Syrian conflict also demonstrated the dynamics of contemporary proxy warfare and the interaction between direct military intervention and proxy support networks. Russia combined extensive air power with special operations forces, military advisers, and support for Iranian-backed ground forces, including Hezbollah and other allied militias. This combination enabled Moscow to exert significant influence on battlefield developments while limiting its reliance on large-scale Russian ground deployments. Russia's ability to coordinate its own military capabilities with allied and partner forces became an important feature of its intervention strategy in Syria (Goransson, 2023)

For the Middle East region, the collapse of the Assad regime and the resulting limitations on Russia's ability to sustain its regional position marked the beginning of a new and uncertain phase in the regional order. Russia's long-standing military and political involvement in Syria had been an important element of the regional balance of power. The end of the Assad government therefore altered the strategic environment in which regional actors operated. Turkey, the Gulf States, and Israel were required to reassess their policies and strategic interests in response to the changing political and security environment in Syria. The post-Assad period consequently created new uncertainties regarding the distribution of regional influence and the future role of external powers in the Middle East. Russia's ability to play a constructive role in shaping Syria's post-conflict political order was significantly constrained by its close association with the Assad regime and its longstanding support for the Syrian government throughout the conflict. Russia's military intervention and diplomatic backing contributed to perceptions among sections of Syrian society that Moscow had played a central role in sustaining a government responsible for extensive violence and destruction. This legacy limited Russia's ability to present itself as a neutral actor or mediator in the post-Assad political process and complicated its efforts to preserve influence in Syria.

8. CONCLUSION

Russia's role in the Syrian crisis was shaped by a combination of historical ties, strategic interests, and broader geopolitical objectives. The relationship between Russia and Syria had developed over several decades. The Soviet Union established close political and military ties with Syria during the Cold War. These relations continued, although their intensity declined following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under the President Vladimir Putin, Syria regained importance within Russia's broader Middle East policy. The long-standing relationship provided the foundation for Russia's sustained support for the Assad government after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011.

Russia's support for Assad was driven by several strategic factors. The preservation of its military presence at Tartus was an important concern. Russia also sought to prevent a repetition of the Libyan experience and opposed externally supported regime change. Counterterrorism concerns further shaped

Moscow's approach. Syria also provided opportunities for arms sales and the testing of Russian military capabilities. These interests indicated that Russia's Syria policy was shaped by broader strategic objectives. These included maintaining its influence in the Middle East region and strengthening its position as a major power.

Diplomacy was an important part of Russia's strategy. Moscow repeatedly used its permanent seat in the UN Security Council to protect the Assad government from international pressure. It also used the Astana Peace Process to influence the political and military environment in Syria. These efforts helped Russia preserve the Assad government for many years and increase its influence over the conflict's political process. At the same time, they limited the ability of the international community to develop a stronger collective response to the conflict.

Russia's direct military intervention in September 2015 marked a significant turning point of its involvement in Syria. Russian air power, special operations forces, military advisers, and other capabilities supported the Syrian government and its allied ground forces. This intervention prevented the immediate collapse of the Assad government. It also helped the government to recover important territory. The recapture of Aleppo in 2016 was a major turning point in the military course of the conflict. Russia also gained valuable operational experience and opportunities to test military equipment under combat conditions.

These achievements highlight the short-term effectiveness of Russia's strategy in Syria. The intervention strengthened the Assad government and expanded Russia's influence in the Middle East. It also demonstrated Moscow's capacity to project military power beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Russia was able to combine direct military action with support from regional allies. This approach allowed it to achieve significant battlefield effects without relying on a large-scale Russian ground deployment.

In the long term however, Russia's strategic gains proved less sustainable. The Assad regime collapsed in December 2024 despite more than thirteen years of Russian political, diplomatic, and military support. The collapse exposed important limitations in Russia's Syria strategy. Russian military support had strengthened the regime but had not resolved its deeper political, economic, and institutional weaknesses. The war in Ukraine also placed additional constraints on Russia's ability to maintain its military engagement in Syria.

The fall of the Assad regime also created uncertainty about Russia's future position in Syria. The status of the Tartus naval facility and Hmeimim air base became uncertain. These facilities had been central to Russia's military presence in the country. Their future therefore became an important question for Russian regional strategy. The collapse also weakened the image of Russia as a reliable power capable of protecting its partners over the long term. Overall, Russia's intervention in Syria can be assessed as a short-term tactical and geopolitical success, but a long-term strategic setback.

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