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### **RUSSIAN ROLE IN SYRIA IN THE LIGHT OF ITS STRATEGY TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST (2015-2018)**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper contributes to the analysis the Russian strategy in the Middle East focusing on its acts in Syria. The paper raises crucial issues concerning the main aspects of Russian strategy in the ME; its motives to intervene in Syria, the relationship between Russian engagement in the conflict in Syria and the Russian-US rivalry, as well as Russian-European relations, the Russian successes and failures in Syria and how Russia's role in Syria may affect both regional and global regimes. The analysis in this paper seeks to discuss these thorny issues through a structured literature review of Russian strategy objectives and determinants in the Middle East, and its role in Syrian conflict.

**Keywords:** Russia Intervention In Syria, Russian Strategy in the Middle East, Regional Hegemony, Western Concessions, Ukrainian Issue, US-Russian Relations

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#### **1. Introduction**

Studying the Russian intervention in Syria requires considering the Russian strategy in the Middle East and its relevant objectives. While Russia may not have a clear strategy in the Middle East, it seems that it has been implementing a practical strategy through which it always seeks, on the one side, to achieve its short-term economic, military, and political interests, and on the other side, to diminish its potential rivals' short-term gains.

Syria has a strong ally to the Soviet Union during the Cold War (1947- 1991). In 1971, the Soviet Union installed its naval military base in Tartus, according to an agreement with the Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad, giving the Soviet Union a constant presence in this vital region. Actually, the Russian naval facility in Tartus is considered not only the sole Russian naval facility in the Mediterranean Region but also the remaining military facility outside the previous USSR.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Soviet Fleet left the Mediterranean waters causing rapid decline of the importance of Syrian bases. Even though, at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War (2011), Syria was considered one of the most important allies of Russia in the Middle East as a result of the Russian persistent interests in Syria. Moreover, the changing nature of U.S.-Russia relationships in 2011 was the most important factor in determining how Moscow would deal with such conflict, and determine the coming steps. Since September 2015, Russian has been openly engaged in the Syrian conflict. Russian interference in Syria crisis has revealed that Moscow aims to be more dynamically and fundamentally involved in the region.

In reality, Russian intervention has profoundly altered the tendency and outcome of the war in Syria, and led to restructure the Russian relationships with different parties involved in this conflict. This also has its reflections on the international balances and on the Russian power on the international arena.

To understand the aim of this paper better, the following main questions should be answered: What is the nature of Russian involvement in the Middle East? What are the main features of its strategy in this vital region? Why has Russia decided to intervene in the conflict in Syria? What are its motives (internally and externally)? To which extent is Russian engagement in this conflict related to the Russian-US rivalry and Russian- European relations? What are the Russia's failures and successes in Syrian issue? What are the co-factors for Russia to achieve successes? How does Russia's engagement in Syria affect both regional and global regimes?

The analysis tackled in this research is based on a structured literature review of Russian strategy's objectives and determinants in the Middle East, and its role in Syrian conflict. Accordingly, the paper is divided into the following sections: Section 2 describes the Russian strategy in the Middle East, whereas section 3 stresses why Russia decided to intervene in the conflict in Syria. Section 4 relates to the Russian involvement in Syria since 2015 and its consequences and finally, section 5 deals with the results and answers to the main questions the paper raises and concludes.

## **2. The Russian Strategy in the Middle East**

### **2.1. The Main Aspects of the Russian Strategy in the Middle East**

According to its grand strategy, Russia believes that its national security goal is to re-establish Russia as a great power, and hence be able to encounter the dominance of the US in the international system. Russia is backing a multipolar world system that would allow it to influence critical international issues. In such a desired world order, Russia would seek other great powers' recognition of Russian domination over non-NATO states in the former Soviet sphere (Eriksen, 2017).

According to the Russian security strategy during the period 2009-2020, "Russia will strive to build an equitable and valuable strategic partnership with the United States of America, on the basis of shared interests and taking into account the key influence of Russian-American relations on the international situation as a whole" (Eriksen, 2017, p. 24).

In the light of its national strategy, Moscow plans to persist more effectively and essentially involved in the Middle East. Accordingly, Russia has managed to use events in the Middle East to be more involved and to reestablish its image as a great power, which enables it to control the events and conflicts ongoing in this crucial region. Russian policy's main motives have traditionally included elements such as stability, trade and prestige, but recently Russian interests have been extended to include diplomatic, economic, and business interests (Blank, 2015). As U.S. President Donald Trump said: Moscow today is interested in "making deals" (Kirasirova, 2017).

Russia also realizes the Middle East as a central region to its security. According to the Russian's strategy in the region, the main persistent security concern is the threat of terrorism which threatens its territories and its neighboring states (Sladden *et al.* 2016). Moreover, one of the most important motivations for Russia to strengthen its presence in the ME is the economic interest. Russia believes that ME is very fundamental in its strategy for securing the presence of its producers in the international oil and gas markets (Kozhanov, 2018).

Russia may not have a well-defined regional strategy and clear goals in the ME, but its movements indicate that it is implementing a comprehensive, practical strategy. It persistently seeks to enhance its short-term economic, military, and political interests while diminishing the short-term interests of its potential western opponents. Principally, Russia has played a crucial role in the ME, but it seems that it could not alone determine the outcomes in this essential region. Russia encounters restrictions on its ability to act in this region. Accordingly, Russia cannot fully determine the events in the Middle East regardless the western powers' preferences. Nevertheless, it is able to increase the cost to the West of adopting objectives which threaten its goals (Sladden *et al.* 2016).

Regarding the central issues in the Middle East, Russia has elaborated its distinguished policy which is different from the American and European one. For example, the Russian strategy in the Middle East is entirely non-ideological and independent from the Sunni-Shite struggle. This characteristic makes the Russian strategy be distinguished from the West's policy which always assures and exploits the Sunni-Shite split to achieve their interests and gain more advantages (Valori, 2017).

Concerning the Arab Spring, Russia has considered it as an American operation and evaluated each case separately according to its interests. In this regard, Moscow perceived the rebellions in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria as the repetition of the "color revolutions" that blowout through Belgrade, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in the 2000s and of the demonstrations in Russia in 2011- 2012 and Kiev in 2013 - 2014. This vision definitely affected Putin's calculations in Syria (Valori, 2017). The sudden and violent transformations of the Arab revolutions in 2011 evoked Moscow's fear that these revolutions might cause overwhelming fluctuations that might negatively affect its presence in the Middle East. This fear was one of the most important drivers that led Russia to take the decision to intervene in Syria 2013. Accordingly, the Arab revolutions have paved the way for Russia to assume a substantial role in the region. Russia has no longer considered spreading a particular ideology or pushing the countries in the region to choose between it and US, among its high priorities as it is not willing to introduce massive security and economic assistance to the Middle East states. Russia prefers to act as a reliable alternative which the countries in the region can resort to in order to face the American preferences and policies that may clash with their national interests. Russia introduces itself as a more trustful moderator than US. Moreover, it offers itself as a supplier of the equipment and know-hows which US is not willing to secure. Accordingly, this Russian strategy in the region drives the previous Cold War opponents in the region - mainly Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel – to develop a new relationship towards Russia and see in Putin "a more reliable statesman who does what he says and follows through on his commitments" (Gvosdev, 2017).

## **2.2. Russian Relations with the Main Regional Actors**

Russia's strategy in the Middle East maintains close relations with all other main actors in the Middle East. It is pursuing this strategy to secure as much influence as possible so as to become a major leader in the Middle East. Accordingly, Russia is cooperating with the main regional powers in the ME; Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey to expand and enhance its influence in this dynamic region on the short term, even though its interests may not align with these countries' interests on the long term. Russia is also trying to create such a balance which does not permit for a single power to acquire too much influence in the region. On the other side, this strategy permits Russia to coordinate with the U.S. in the Middle East in exchange for American cooperation with Russia in other region more important for it. If the U.S. rejects this offer, Russia can make the situation more challenging for it. For Russia, Ukraine is the main region so, it considers the U.S. involvement there as a big threat for its national security. Russia expected that the U.S. will not be willing to overwhelmingly interfere in the Ukraine issue as long as it focuses on the Middle East (Snyder, 2017).

Russia has kept excellent relations with Turkey which is the Second Armed Force of NATO. Turkey is also considered the strategic link between the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Turkey has traditionally been a probable threat to Russia as it controls the Bosphorus which if closed, would impede Russia's entrance to the Mediterranean. Consequently, Russia always seeks to keep good relations with it (Snyder, 2017).

In September 2017, Turkey agreed with Russia to import S-400 missile systems. This agreement caused a significant violation in the Western military and technological monopoly. Moreover, Russia's Rosatom company started to establish a nuclear power plant at Akkuyu, Southern Turkey, for approximately 20 billion US dollars (Snyder, 2017). Russia recognized Turkey as its substitute for Ukraine as a transit country for energy imports to Europe (Gvosdev, 2017). On the other side, Russia has also been keen to develop the relations between Turkey and Iran. This important geopolitical issue means that NATO has been penetrated throughout the contemporary Middle East. Accordingly, Russia uses its relations to try to slowly split the Atlantic

Alliance's strategic context. But on the other side, the Kurdish issue is considered an important element of potential struggle between Russia and Turkey as Russia has always had good relations with Kurds as well (Snyder, 2017).

Regarding Iran, despite some difficulties, Russia and Iran are considered as potential partners and strategic allies in terms of economic, commercial bilateral relations and regional cooperation (Faiiazzy, 2012), so Russia is considered now Iran's most significant and influential partner. Iranian policymakers are primarily focused on extending Iran's sphere of influence in the Middle East and encountering the Saudi's plan to expand its influence across the Arab world. On the other side, Russia is seeking to eliminate sources of instability and prevent military interventions sponsored by US, which from Moscow's outlook contributes in creating failed states (Ramani, 2018). Moscow and Tehran have shared increasingly joint interests since Trump took the office in 2017. Both of them suffer from growing tensions with US and want to increase its influence domain in the Middle East. The Trump Administration's decision to withdraw from the nuclear agreement has had its broad geostrategic cost as it caused the Russian-Iranian relations to be transformed into a growing strategic partnership (Wright, 2018). Although Iran is less dangerous to Moscow, but Russia still wants to limit Tehran's influence in the Caucasus and prevent it from gaining too much control in Syria. (Snyder, 2017).

Russia has also been trying to keep good relations with Saudi Arabia. In 5 October 2017, King Salman visited Moscow and signed 15 Memorandums of Understanding which aim to increase Saudi Arabia's investment in Russia. Moreover, there is a close cooperation between Russia and Saudi Arabia to stabilize the oil price. Actually, Saudi Arabia which has always been the US traditional strategic ally in the Middle East, is now seeking to diversify its international economic and political relations as it has increasingly realized that the United States does not aim to achieve stabilization in the Middle East, and its plans have deliberately led to divide and split it, the matter which will undoubtedly lead to other devastating and unnecessary wars. On its side, Russia has been trying to enhance its relations with Saudi Arabia so as to insulate Saudi Arabia from the United States and its strategy against terrorism in the Middle East (Snyder, 2017).

Beside these main powers in the ME, Russia is also very aware of the importance of Israel as a regional power. It understands the Israel's concern both in its security on its northern borders, and in the economic and military relations with Russia. On the other side, Israel is trying to use Russia to control Iran inside Syria. Russia takes Israel very seriously and probably wants to use it in the near future, when the balance of power in Syria may cause a probable struggle between Iran and Russia (Valori, 2017).

Regarding Jordan, the main security goal is keeping stability of its border with Iraq and Syria, which in turn affects its internal political stability to a large extent. On the other side, Russia views Jordan as an ideal mediator who has the ability to contact and negotiate with all the Sunni states in the region besides its potential role as an appropriate intermediary between Russia and US concerning ME. There is also an excellent exchange of intelligence with Jordan. Consequently, Russia wanted Jordan to have a seat at the Astana negotiating table as Russia considers Jordan as an essential actor in setting the Syrian political and military situation (Valori, 2017).

Accordingly, Russia aims to enhance its bilateral relations with all the main Middle East actors, so as to create a system in which Russia becomes an essential actor in achieving and keeping the stability on both the national and regional levels.

### **3. Why Has Russia Decided to Intervene in the Conflict in Syria? What are its Motives?**

One of the main issues of the Syrian conflict is the amount of rival interests. On the internal ground, there are a lot of opposition groups and many of these groups are supported by diverse international actors. On the international arena, there is a set of great powers engaged in the conflict either militarily, economically or diplomatically (Eriksen, 2017). Accordingly, the question is what are the interests and motives that push Russia to intervene in the Syrian crisis?

### **3.1. The Historical Russian-Syrian Relations**

Russian-Syrian relations are back to the Cold War period. Actually, Moscow first began to support Syria after the 1956 Suez Crisis and since 1971, Syria became a proper dependent state of the previous Soviet Union. The Soviet Union managed to get a naval base in Tartus, on Syria's Mediterranean coast. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Soviet fleets departed the Mediterranean, so the importance of Syrian bases promptly declined. For a long time, Tartus was poorly equipped as the Russian naval activity was very limited. This status completely changed after Russian decision to intervene in Syria in 2015. Essentially, Russia decided to intervene since the U.S. military intervention this time has been much closer to Russia itself, and threatening its sole remaining ally in the Middle East. The expanded Tartus port becomes now much more capable of enhancing operations and resupplying the Russian Mediterranean squad, which was prepared in 2013 to support Syria. Russia believed that if it did not intervene in Syria to save its ally, it will lose its last base in the Middle East which enables it to influence regional events in this vital region (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018).

### **3.2. Restoring the Great Power Status in International Politics**

Post-Soviet Russia sought to intervene in Syria so as to gain a position in the ME which granted it the status of a great power in international politics. Although Russia had stubborn interests in Syria, the fluctuating U.S.-Russia relations since 2011 were the most important factor in determining how Moscow would view this conflict and how it would act. Accordingly, President Vladimir Putin's principle objective of the Russia's decision in September 2015 to intervene militarily in the Syrian war is to obstruct the America's sustained dominance in the Middle East. Russia wishes to prove that it is a principal strategic and military power and it is able to influence the US and NATO movements in the Middle East and make them peripheral. Hence, the emerging events led to what is considered the most substantial and successful Russian military venture beyond the proximate post-Soviet zone over about twenty five years (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018).

### **3.3. Acquiring a Regional Supremacy to Push the United States and the EU to Make Concessions in More Fundamental Areas for Russia, such as Ukraine**

Accordingly, Russian intervention in Syria also stems from the breakdown in Russia-West relations following Moscow's intervention in eastern Ukraine and occupation of Crimea in 2014. In this regard, U.S. and European sanctions and diplomatic pressure stimulated the Russia to take the decision to intervene in Syria. Rather than subjection to Western pressure and presenting concessions on Ukraine, Russia preferred to turn to Syria to broaden the confrontation so that it can gain benefits more favorable to it. Eventually, Russia anticipated that its intervention in Syria would force Washington and its European allies to release the western sanctions and diplomatic isolation in the interests of realizing a negotiated agreement with Russia regarding Syria (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018).

### **3.4. Preventing US from Repeating the Libyan Scenario in Syria**

The major reason that finally pushed Russia to intervene in Syria was Libya. In Libya, Russia had concluded several contracts for arms sales and infrastructure projects which estimated approximately \$7 billion. Russia's response to American intervention in Libya in that year was definitely negative. Russia abstained from impeding a United Nations Security Council resolution declaring a no-fly zone since Muammar al-Qaddafi was escalating a counterattack. This Russian negative behavior was aimed to develop its relations with the West. Ultimately, these American-led movements resulted in regime change and the collapse of the Libyan state. This ending assured to Russia that the United States had no restrictions that could prevent it from going beyond the U.N. resolutions, and that it was unable to foresee even the most proximate costs of its actions (Kirasirova, 2017).

Accordingly, after the American intervening experience in Libya, Russia decided not to reiterate this experience again in Syria. It decided to stop U.S. intervention mainly through providing the Syrian regime with arms and equipment. Later, it started hindering any resolution that might have formed a reason or justification for military intervention in Syria. Moscow sought to have a significant role in Syria, preventing U.S.'s use of force to accomplish its own plan of changing the regimes. The keystone of Russian policy in Syria has been stopping the United States from repeating an intervention similar to that in Libya in order to overthrow Assad. Lavrov warned that some leaders of the coalition forces, and later the NATO secretary-general, called the Libyan operation a 'model' for the future. As for Russia, we will not allow anything like this to happen again in the future (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018). When President Barack Obama called for Assad to leave, Russia felt a great fear of a potential US military intervention in Syria which is much closer to it and of threatening to lose its only remaining client in this important region (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018).

### **3.5. The Russian's Interpretations of the Arab Revolutions as the Continuation of the "Color Revolutions"**

Russia perceived the protests in Tunisia, Syria and Egypt as the continuation of the "color revolutions" that spread through Belgrade, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in the 2000s and the protests in Russia in 2011 and 2012 and Kiev in 2013 and 2014. This perception definitely affected Putin's calculations in Syria and led him to take the intervening decision (Kirasirova, 2017).

### **3.6. The Fear of the Spreading the Extremists into Caucasus (Preventive War against Terrorism)**

Russia was very worried about the Chechen and other Russian North Caucasus volunteers who have been fighting in the Syrian Civil War against the government of Bashar Al-Assad since mid-2013. Therefore, Moscow was concerned about returning of those fighters to Russia (Eriksen, 2017). In September 2015, it was estimated that more than 2,500 Russian nationals were fighting together with ISIL. Accordingly, president Putin declared that their return to Russia would be a threat to the national security of Russia, and that it would be better to face and defeat them in Syria. Unlike distant Libya, Syria was too close to Russian and Central Asian borders, so if it is collapsed, this would have its direct effects on Russia. There was a fear among Russian elites that Assad's collapse would lead IS and al-Qaida guerrillas to control the country, and join militants in the North Caucasus causing insecurity and threatening regional stability (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018). In this regard, accordingly, Vladimir Posner warned "Let's not wait until the fire comes home to us.... ISIS is not a country that can be occupied ... it has a strong ideology, and we need to show them that God is not on their side." Consequently, some Russians described entering the dispute in Syria as initiating a "preventive war" against terrorism (Kirasirova, 2017).

### **3.7. Russia also Perceived the Syrian Conflict as a Chance to Test its New Weapons and Platforms**

Actually, it gave most of its military a chance to partake in the conflict as much as possible after having developed its strategies and tactics in countering non-state armed groups in Crimea and Ukraine (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018).

On the other side, Military facilities are another military motive for Russia to intervene in Syria. As the Russian Naval Facility in Tartus in Syria is considered Russia's only naval facility in the Mediterranean region, this naval facility is one of the chief inspiring factors for Russia to support the Assad government and maintain stability in the region (Theron, 2016).

### **3.8. Economic Importance and History of Arms Sales**

Russia is the second arms exporter in the world after United States. In recent years, the Middle East and North Africa region has been considered as Moscow's second most essential arms market. Russia has taken numerous steps in this region since Vladimir Putin came to power, and especially in latest years after beginning major military reform following August 2008. The Kremlin's concern with arms sales is crucial as they are considered not only a major source of financial gain, but also a tactical foreign policy instrument for exerting influence. Accordingly, avoiding the loss of a Russian ally that will purchase Russian weapons was also one of Russia's incentives for supporting the Syrian government (Theron, 2016).

### **3.9. The Domestic Political Considerations**

Putin sought to achieve more conquests either internally or externally, following the western sanctions regarding Ukraine which negatively affected the Russian economy specially which was already suffering as a result of low energy prices (Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Sakwa, 2015).

Although Moscow has recognized that entering a civil war in Syria was not an easy risk, Russia's acceptance of the threats associated with intervention increased dramatically in the face of these internal and external difficulties. Accordingly, Russian intervention alternative in Syria was accepted to reduce political risk at home (Malasheenko, 2013). In this regard, some analysis is that the Russian regime is pursuing an information strategy for the purpose of diverting the attention of the Russian population from the economic crisis by appealing to the increasing status of great power, provided by the engagement in Syria, in order to bolster the regime's legitimacy (Eriksen, 2017).

## **4. The Russian Role in Syria since 2015 and its Impact**

Although Russia directly intervened in the Syrian conflict since September 2015, its intervention has totally changed the war's outcome. The question here is whether Russia has achieved a victory. To reply such question, there must be an evaluation of what Russia managed to achieve and what it failed to realize in the light of the previous analysis of its motives to intervene in Syria. In other words, what did Moscow intend to achieve and what has it actually achieved?

### **4.1. What Russia Has Achieved in Syria and What it Has Failed to Achieve**

By mid-2015, Russia's alternatives to save the Assad regime were limited. Assad's military was depressed as they were exhausted and they were falling back on almost all fronts. At that time, the head of Iran's Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani travelled several times with senior Syrian officials to Moscow to coordinate a military intervention. Finally, Russia and Iran reached an agreement which endorsed the Russian military intervention in Syria and assured that Russian air strikes would support land operations launched by Iranian, Syrian and Lebanese Hezbollah forces. Russian military intervention has changed the course of the Syrian war and established a new Iranian-Russian alliance to save the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. By August 2015, Russia launched deploying its forces in Syria, and its flight began to arrive at Khmeimim Air Base in September 2015 (Bassam and Perry, 2015).

The Russian government justified its military intervention in Syria as a necessary movement to restore stability to the country and to deter Washington from using force to overthrow Syrian President. Russia considers its military campaign as an essential step towards achieving its broader goal of establishing itself as a central guarantor of the security in the region (Ramani, 2018).

In this regard, it can be said that Russia managed to achieve the following goals. Russia's interference in Syrian conflict in September 2015 essentially changed the balance of the Syrian Civil War (Casagrande and Weinberger, 2017). Russia managed to dramatically change the balance in Assad's interest through destroying the opposition's ability to continue fighting. The Syrian military has rapidly returned back most of Syrian territory and population centers from the

hands of anti-regime opposition groups. Moreover, Russia succeeded in compelling rivals to change their policies, forcing them and their allies in the conflict to accept negotiations according to terms favorable to Russia's alliance (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018). Accordingly, Russia managed to convince Saudi Arabia and Turkey that their own alternatives had no chance of victory in that war. It also pushed the United States to abandon its policy which seeks to change the regime and to realize that its backing for the Syrian opposition would not succeed.

Moreover, Russia managed to maintain its influence in the Middle East region and to challenge the domination of U.S. diplomatic leadership and the monopoly of the Geneva process. It has successfully incorporated both the Astana negotiations which it launched in 2016 and the formal international process backed by the UN (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018). In this regard, It managed to organize a lot of meetings for the diverse opposition groups to stimulate the emergence of a common opposition alignment, which may accept to negotiate with the Assad regime. Hence, Russia has become a prospective powerbroker, and conceivably a balancer against U.S. power. Additionally, Russia managed to compel its rivals to make changes to their positions, including Turkey, the United States, Saudi Arabia and Israel, though the road to this outcome was not easy or straightforward. Most significantly, Russia has obviously got the US acceptance of its role as a main broker in Syria's future. It also succeeded in managing its relations with allies like Iran and other local guerrillas. Actually, the contradictory political motivations and competing objectives of the different parties led to a complicated conflict which might be escalated to a direct war between the intervening main powers. This actually happened when Syria was accused by using chemical weapons in March 2017 which led to a quick revengeful American cruise missile attack. It also happened when Turkey shot down a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M2 in November 2016 (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018).

Moscow has also succeeded in re-contextualize itself as a positive force in the battle against terrorism, and compelled the United States to cooperate with it in the military sphere. Ultimately, United States implicitly indorsed the Russian crucial rule in this conflict, and the Assad's victory over the extremists and the opposition supported by US (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018).

On the global level, Russia seeks to oppose American and European values, interests and strategies and impose its will against them. Therefore, Russia's entire movements in Syria contribute in achieving the Kremlin's goal of restoring of Russia's power in the world, presenting itself as a strong opponent against "imperialist" Westerners. This image will positively enhance Vladimir Putin's power at home (Theron, 2016).

Additionally, Syria has had a profound impact on the Russian armed forces, as numerous officers have participated in the military operations to attain fighting experience. This experience will contribute in determining the Russian military philosophy and decisions for the coming years. Moreover, Moscow has invested its victories to secure its military facilities at Kheimim and Tartus for a long period together with securing the Russian firms, a profound and profitable role in Syrian reconstruction, mainly in the energy and energy transfer sectors (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018).

Conclusively, Moscow achieved success on both the military and political fronts, compelling rivals to make negotiating changes to their positions. It has managed to defeat the Syrian opposition and convince opponents to adjust their policies, driving them and their allies in the conflict to negotiate on terms favorable to Russia's coalition (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018). In his visit to Russian air base in Syria in December 2017, President Vladimir Putin stated that military mission has been accomplished, and the conditions were ready for a political settlement. As a Syrian official in Damascus said it is clear a track is underway, and the Russians are overseeing it (Haaretz, 2017). While supporting the Geneva negotiations, Moscow has also encouraged talks between the Syrian government and the opposition in Astana, Kazakhstan which starts in January 2017 and included Iran and Turkey (Pearson, 2017). In this regard, Russia has effectively incorporated both the Astana negotiations to the international negotiating process backed by UN (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018).



#### 4.2. The Factors that Helped Russia to Achieve Success

Russia managed to capitalize on the competition among U.S. allies in the Middle East, who often express their disagreement with the American policy. Moreover, Russia exploits the European disagreement regarding prioritization and lack of political unity to provoke crumbling in Europe. For example, France's first priority is fighting ISIS and radicalization everywhere, while Germany, the Nordic countries, the Central and some West European states consider the refugee crisis as the major threat to the EU, thus they give the priority to an end to the war in Syria. According to most of the East European members in EU and NATO, the Europe's main threat lies in Eastern Europe. By disintegrating the EU, Russia would have a great advantage, as it would be easier to influence a bilateral relationship than the European institution (Eriksen, 2017).

Moreover, Russia succeeded in attracting the main regional power to cooperate with it regarding Syria and other issues of common concern. It has sought to utilize the clash of interests between US and these regional powers to articulate common interests versus US. Moreover, the victory which Russia has made on the Syrian front, was an impetus for these powers to try to develop their relations with Russia as a central player in the ME. Accordingly, Russia has succeeded in maintaining fruitful ties with each of the other key regional actors, ranging from Saudi Arabia to Iran in spite of their different interests, proxies and preferable alternatives.

For example, while Washington considered Kurds as their main ally against IS in Syria, Turkey was viewed Kurdish fighters in Syria as more dangerous than al-Assad or IS. Russia managed to attain Turkish cooperation after defeating the proxies supported by Turkey in Syria. Washington also did not want to support Sunni extremist groups which were backed by Saudis and other Arab states and did not realize them as a proper alternative to the Syrian regime. On its side, Saudi Arabia began to be more flexible and the Saudi king visited Russia in October 2017 for the first time. This visit was considered as recognition of Moscow's growing importance in the Middle East.

Despite disagreement with Turkey regarding the the Kurdish self-defense forces, and with Saudi Arabia over the "legitimate" Syrian opposition which would be represented at Geneva, Russian diplomacy (backed by military force) has succeeded in getting recognition from both. Furthermore, the Russian-Iranian relations remain mostly stable (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018). Iran managed to keep its domination on much of Syrian territories and to secure its passage to Lebanon and Hezoalah. Turkey has obtained a zone in Northern Syria, as Assad regime is not likely to be isolated, while Saudi Arabia did not achieve any of its goals (Eriksen, 2017).

#### 4.3. What Russia could not Achieve in Syria?

Russia's Syria campaign has failed to impulse Europe and the United States to expand the platform to encompass the diplomatic relations after the Ukraine crisis and the western sanctions. Although Russia has succeeded in pushing US to start deconfliction negotiations, those negotiations have not developed a comprehensive cooperation between Russia and US which the Kremlin had sought. Strictly, the Western countries have not got the will to involve Syria and Ukraine in trade-off deal. Moreover, as the Ukraine conflict is simply much closer to them, the European governments did not want to make any concessions regarding the sanctions related to the Minsk treaties, even though they suffer from the influxes of refugees caused by the Syrian civil war (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018).

At last, Russia faces constraints on what it can achieve in the ME. There are substantial restrictions that undermine Russia to achieve its objectives. Essentially, Russia's economic position has deteriorated since the start of the Arab Spring. So, it lacks the appropriate economic power to support a long-term strategy in the Middle East. While Russia has achieved some important short-term goals, mainly in Syria, it is doubted that Russia has the resource capacity to achieve a long-term strategy (Sladden *et al.* 2016). Even though Moscow has achieved outstanding success in Syria, it may not be in a position to translate this success into a strategic strength in Syria which may incur long-term instability (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018).

## 5. Conclusion

The war in Syria turned decisively in Assad's favor. So, Russia will maintain its client regime, at least for the foreseeable future. As Assad's situation has gone up highly since the Russian intervention two years ago, he managed to impose the terms of his participation in the Geneva process. Accordingly, the Russia has already won the war in Syria and become the dominated power in the Middle East. The military power reached by Russia with the Syrian operations has been largely developed at the expense of the United States. This Russian victory in Syria has been achieved with notable effectiveness, flexibility, and harmonization between both military and political actions.

After acquiring Washington's approval of its role as a key player in determining Syria's future, Russia is seeking through the conflict in Syria to become a power broker in the Middle East, and a balancing power for those who seek to encounter U.S. influence. On a global scale, Russia challenges the American and European strategies and tries to enforce its will against their interests and policies. Accordingly, it can be said that a global competition is currently ongoing and Moscow is in the forefront.

Moscow is seeking for a coalition along with the United States which will need an essential alteration in Western views of Russia from an opponent to a partner in the global battle against terrorism. Russia can use its impressive power to build partnerships and talk with the problematic divisions in the Middle East - Sunnis and Shiites; Israel and the Palestinians; Israel and Iran; Iran and Saudi Arabia; Turkey and the Kurds (Kirasirova, 2017).

After seizing most of Syrian territories from the Jihadists and militant opposition, Russia directs its attention toward the post conflict diplomatic resolution. In November 2017, Presidents Trump and Putin confirmed that they will continue their negotiations regarding the deconfliction and accentuated the importance of this political process for shaping a post conflict future for Syria. Truly, this process is proceeding according with the Russia's fundamental strategic interests.

Russia's main focus is in Ukraine, not in the Middle East. Essentially, Russia has succeeded in gaining influence in one of the most important areas for U.S. Russia wants this influence to be translated into concessions on Ukraine and eliminations of the western sanctions, but till now U.S and its western allies refused to make any link between Middle East and other region. According to some analysts, Syria is a "microcosm" of a world order being reconstructed from U.S. hegemony to a multipolar system that involves Russia and other powers (Kirasirova, 2017).

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