**Russian actions during the Syrian civil war**

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**Abstract:** This paper is devoted to the Syrian civil war and the participation of the Russian Federation in that region. Relations between Bashar Al-Assad and Vladimir Putin will be presented as well as the goals which they both want to reach. The most important events were presented, events which had an essential impact on the Syrian civil war, including the distribution of forces and profits of the war for the Russian Federation.

**Keywords:** Russia, Syria, civil war, Bashar Al-Assad, Vladimir Putin.

**Introduction:** The engagement of Russia in Syria has been visible since the year 2011. However, a military engagement of the Kremlin changed the situation as it pertains to this country. Officially, Russia’s military operation is meant to fight the Islamic State but the real objective is to support the government forces of Bashar Al-Assad.

In order to present the actual engagement of the Russian Federation of the Russian Federation in Syria, it is necessary to present the genesis of the conflict in this region. The basis of the Syrian conflict is to be sought on two planes: economic and economical. In 2001 the policy led by Assad favorizing Alawites became repressive to the Sunni who were affected by the new economic policy led by the president. His market reform, increasing the importance of the private sector caused unemployment and intensified social inequalities.

In 2010-2011 the wheat prices in Syria grew twofold which was caused by a drought which lasted up to 2006. Additionally, oil prices were shaken and food price
manipulations emerged. The growth of food prices which affected the Syrian population caused a wave of furious protects which turned into an armed rebellion.2

Iran supports the Assad’s government, Russia aside. The government party received material and diplomatic support from Iran from the very beginning of the conflict. This country directed financial means, oil supplies, electronic equipment – meant for the reconnaissance and instructors training Syrian officers. Additionally, voices emerged that Iranian forces took direct participation in suppressing the rebellion, however Assad’s government denied that information. Assad’s forces are also supported by the Hezbollah, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Shia righters from Yemen, Bahrain and Azerbaijan.

The opposition, however, has support from Turkey. It is on these border regions that the largest amount of rebel bases is located, most refugees who are fleeing from war pass through the Turkey border. Moreover, the opposition is also supported by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Libya as well as Qatar, Germany, France and the United Kingdom. Some of the countries mentioned even supply weapons to the rebels.

Russia is engaged in the Syrian conflict because of common interest. The Kremlin is the largest supplier of weapons from Assad’s country. Military cooperation is 7% of the Russian armament exports. Furthermore, both countries share a goal which is stopping the western influence on the regions, the United States in particular. Syria, along Iran, is the largest ally of Russia in the Middle East. Secularity of the authorities, independence from the West as well as access to the Mediterranean Sea are at the basis of good relations between the countries. One should mention here that Tartus, a Syrian port city, has served the Russian fleet for years. The Russian Federation wants to maintain a strong position in the Middle East and have a bargain card in relations with the United States. Farther, Russia’s engagement in Syria is also an element of the energy policy as well as policy towards Islamic countries.3

The Kremlin has supported Assad’s government’s party since the outbreak of the rebellion. On October 4th 2011 Russia, along with China, vetoed the project of a
resolution of the UN Security Council regarding Syria. The resolution assumed a
condemnation of Assad’s government for a bloody conduct with the opposition⁴. At
the same time Kremlin – in order to underline its support for the government sent its
flotilla, led by the Chariot aircraft carrier – to the port in Taurus. Soon after it was
accompanied by the Chariot ship which, according to the Cyprian foreign affairs
ministry, carried “dangerous cargo”⁵. One should also mention that as soon as 2011
Russia actively entered the informal „Friends of Assad” coalition.

Additionally, Russian authorities sold 36 Yak-130 training aircraft to Syria. In
February 2012 Russia, along with China, blocked the project of a UN resolution
which assumed a concession of president Bashar Al-Assad and condemned a
violation of human rights by the authorities in Damascus. Through a Russian-Chinese
veto, the resolution was blocked⁶. As the conflict progressed, Vladimir Putin decided
to send the following into Syria: military advisors, trainers and military instructors as
well as special intelligence units and reconnaissance units. Russian soldiers were to
be trained in Syria⁷.

On June 30th 2012 a conference in Geneva took place, during which a plan of a
peaceful conflict resolution was established as well as a “Syria action group” was
appointed. It was Russia that had a considerable influence on the shaping of this plan,
it led to the removal of stipulations which would disable Bashar Al-Assad’s and the
members of his government to participate in the new government.⁸.

In May 2013 there were reports of weapon supplies for Assad’s military by
Russians. According to the information Russia was so supply Syria with two types of
directed missiles: S-300 anti-aircraft and anti-ship Jachont. In the first case that meant
96 rocket launchers meant for anti-aircraft divisions⁹.

On September 9th the same year the Russian foreign affairs minister Sergey
Lavrov proposed an establishment of international control on Syrian chemical
weaponry. Additionally, he submitted a proposal for Syria to join an international
convention banning all chemical weapons. In return the United States were to refrain
from the idea of a military strike at Assad’s country¹⁰. An agreement in this regard
was concluded on September 14th. It assumed international control and liquidation of
Syrian chemical weapons. It was also concluded that an international conference should took place, the aim of which would be to negotiate a settlement on the civil war in Syria\(^{11}\).

In 2014 Russia did not engage in the Syrian conflict anymore because its attention was concentrated on the Donbas conflict.

News regarding Russia’s increased engagement into the conflict emerged in August 2015. It was then that Kremlin sent its soldiers to Latakia and their objective was to adjust the Bassel Al-Assad international airport for the presence of the Russian military. This base was created and it is still being developed.

According to American intelligence data in 2015 Russians transferers the following into Syria:

- 12 Su-25 machines,
- 12 battle Su-24M2 machines,
- 20 battle helicopters,
- 4 Su-30 SM aircraft,
- an unknown number of drones,
- an unknown number of T-72 tanks,
- an unknown number of trucks and artillery,
- 1,500-3,000 soldiers\(^{12}\).

In summer 2015 Russia along with France and Arabic countries submitted a project of a coalition against the Islamic State into which Assads government was to enter. At the same time Russia conducted intensive military maneuvers which were to be in preparation for a military intervention in Syria. In August alone the Russian army took part in 80 military trainings with various scenarios\(^{13}\). In the same month significant Russian forces were transported to Syria through sea and air. A declared transport of “humanitarian aid” crossed the Bosporus strait but the United States blocked a transit of aircraft with the supposed “humanitarian aid” through Bulgaria and Greece. Faced with this situation Russia created an air bridge above Iraq and Iran. Until September 18th Russia manager to place 250-500 troops from the

Satellite imagery also revealed that at that time Pchelda-IT and Eleron-3SW drones, Eleron-3SW as well as 1R-66 Orlan 1-radioelectric jamming vehicles were transported to latakia. Latakia also reeived 3 transport helicopters and 3 assault Mi24s.

Russian air force entered the field for the first time on September 25th 2015, attacking ISIS position in the eastern Aleppo province. The Russian Alavistan’ military operation began soon after a Turkish forces attack, aimed at an establishment of an ‘Islamic State-free zone’. The direct pretext of the beginning of the military operation was a request submitted by Bashar Al-Assad.

At the end of September 2015 Russian planes were to take part in CAS (close air support) operations and they were seen in the following Syrian regions: Latakia, Daamascus.)

The intensity of battle actions of the Russian air force in Syria falls onto September 30th until October 5th. At that time the Russian air force performer over 100 battle flights, the target of which was the Islamic State and formations supported by Arabic countries, Turkey and the United States. The aim of these attacks confirmed that Russia aims at the strengthening of Bashar Al-Assad’s position in Syria as well as showing the helplessness of the anti-Assad opposition.

As a result of Russian air raids the Free Syrian Army and the Al-Nusra Front. One must stress that only three air raids were aimed at the Islamic State targets in Syria. On October 3rd and 4th the Russian air force violated the Turkish airspace which was met by an objection of Ankara. On October 7th a team of rocket ships operating in the Caspian Sea entered the armed conflict. In total 3 corvettes and one frigate fired 26 Caliber’ cruise missiles onto 11 Syrian targets.
IN November 2015 the Kremlin intensified military activity in Syria which was aimed at the Islamic State after an attempt at a Russian passenger plane. It was then that the Russian air force supported by bombers made a series of strikes against ISIS combatants in Raqqa. Vladimir Putin declared a terrorist-fighting front and Russian commanders were instructed to treat French armed forces as allies and coordinate military actions against the Islamic State in Syria with them.

In the same month Russia undertook diplomatic attempts in order to solve the Syrian conflict. On November 14th the Russian foreign affairs minister, Sergey Lavrov took action in this regard during the ‘friends of Syria’ meeting in Vienna while on November 15th-16th during the G-20 summit in Antalya Vladimir Putin tried to submit a proposal of solving the conflict in Syria which was to convince the West to conduct an armed intervention.18

On November 24th Turkey shot down a Russian bomber which led activity in Syria. This was one of the most important events during the Russian ‘Alavistan’ operation. Russia accused the Ankara authorities of supporting the Islamic State. Four days later Vladimir Putin imposed economic and visa sanctions. Kremlin’s actions were aimed at an elimination of Turkey from the conflict in Syria19.

After shooting down a Russian Bomber which was to violate Turkish airspace there was a sudden cooling of Russian-Turkish relations. It was especially noticeable during Russian actions in Syria. On February 1st 2016 the Russian Ministry of Defense decided to strengthen its air group with 4 Su-35 fighters. At the same time there was information about an alleged fire of Russian positions in Latakia by the Turkish party.20 Soon after the Turkish military performer an artillery attack on position occupied by Kurdistan Democratic Party. This caused a decisive reaction of Russia which treated this attack as a provocation21.

However, in June 2016 there was a cooling of Russian – Turkish relations and as soon as August 24th when the Turkish military undertook the ‘Euphrates Shield’ operation in Syria, they began cooperation with Russian forces.22

The engagement of Russia in Syria caused a significant worsening on the Washington-Moscow line. On October 9th the U.S. Department of State froze
communication channels with Moscow which were established based on a September 9th agreement regarding a cease fire in Syria. This caused a liquidation of an American-Russian group of experts which was to oversee the realization of the decisions about a cease fire created in Geneva. By its decision the United States have determined that Russia is not interested in any way and the cease fire is being use to strengthen Bashar Al-Assad’s forces and to broaden the areas controlled by government forces. The United States finally decided to retract from a policy of diplomatic engagement, the goal of convincing Russia to regulate the conflict in Syria. This formula included a postponement of the issue of removing Assad from power, among others. Kremlin realized its goals and strengthened Assad’s position and undermined the credibility of the United States in the eyes of the opposition toward Syrian government armed forces.23

The year 2017 begun with signing an agreement regarding the presence of Russian military in Syria. The first of the accords regarded a broadening of the territory in the Syrian Taurus port whereas the other was a protocol to the agreement concluded in August 2015 regarding a construction of a Russian base in the Humajmim airport. The accords were signed for 49 years. They guarantee the usage of the buildings and territories free of charge and give it full versatility. Additionally, Russia received privileges for base personnel and their families as well as for Russian companies, e.g. customs-free import of goods, exclusion from Syrian law within the premises bases and Syria as well as a responsibility coverage of damage caused by Russian armed forces to third parties by Syria.24

The year 2017 brought new tension on the Moscow-Ankara line related to a Russia’s operation in Syria. This was caused by information about a formation of a Russian military base in the Syrian canton of Afrin. Russia denied this information; however it confirmed its cooperation with the Kurdish Democratic Union Party. Relations worsened even more after the information of a death of a Turkish soldier who was killed while fighting with Kurdish forces25.

Russia did not abandon Assad even after a chemical attack which the Syrian military was to perform in April this year. On April 12th Russia vetoed the UN
Security Council’s revolution project by the United Stated calling Assad’s government to share information and to cooperate in an investigation regarding a chemical attack performed in Khan Shaykhun on April 4th. According to Russia the project submitted by the United States could not be adopted because it forejudged the blame of Assad before the investigation was complete. A day later the Russian ambassador and Iran submitted a motion to form a special committee to investigate the matter. On April 20th this motion was rejected, though.

In its actions regarding Syria Russia tried to play along with Turkey. To confirm this, on October 22nd 2019 the presidents of Russia, Vladimir Putin, and of Turkey, Recep Eayyip Erdoğan agreed in terms of coordinating actions in northern Syria, including a future Turkish military Operation Peace Spring. It was determined that e.g. a cease fire of Turkey against Syrian Kurds, maintaining a Turkish control over the occupied territory and introducing Russian-Turkish and Syrian-Russian patrols.

A few months later, on March 5th 2020 the presidents of Russia and Turkey declared an agreement. This time Russia forced Turkey to a complete cease fire on midnight March the 6th and to create a neutral ‘safety corridor’ between the forces opposing Assad and the government’s army.

Currently, thanks to the support of Moscow Bashar Al-Assad is sure that the government party will not be omitted during any attempts of regulating the conflict on an international forum. Using Russia’s commitment, government forces will undertake effective attempts to broaden their territory during an ongoing civil war.

Russia’s engagement in the Syrian conflict is proof that the Kremlin did not give up on its power position. Influences in the Middle East are incredibly crucial and each country aspiring to the rank of a power is involved in the matters of countries in this region. Russia attempts to build influence zones in Syria and to have a strong argument while negotiating with the United States.
References


