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Original paper



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The Syrian Vector of the Middle Eastern Policy of the USSR and Russia

Abstract

The collapse of the al-Assad regime in December 2024 as a result of an uprising by the armed Islamist opposition led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)¹ posed a serious challenge to Russia's Middle Eastern policy. Despite the change of power in the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR), Moscow — contrary to certain expectations — not only did not withdraw from Syria, but intensified contacts with the new Syrian authorities in order to preserve its military-political presence in the Mediterranean. Russian policy in the SAR has been shaped by geopolitical considerations, national security interests, and the historical legacy of Russian-Syrian relations. The strategic importance of Syria in Russia's Middle Eastern policy is demonstrated, among other things, by the special attention paid by the President of Russia to relations with Damascus. Beginning in February 2025, Vladimir Putin initiated several telephone conversations with Ahmed al-Sharaa, which opened a new chapter in bilateral relations and helped remove a number of acute issues that had hindered their development. The visit of a Russian interagency

¹ HTS is recognized in Russia as a terrorist organization and is banned.



delegation to Damascus on January 29, 2025 marked an important turning point in Russia's policy toward the SAR. Moscow made it clear that, despite the regime change, it remained interested in the development of bilateral relations. The talks held in Moscow on July 31, 2025 by Syrian Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani demonstrated that relations with Russia are critically important for the new regime in terms of its legitimation, strengthening security, sovereignty, and the territorial integrity of the country. The article examines the determinants of political interaction between Russia and Syria in historical retrospect, with the aim of identifying the factors that ensure the stability of these relations amid regional uncertainty and changing political conditions in both Syria and Russia. Particular attention is devoted to poorly studied aspects of Russian-Syrian relations in the sphere of security and the safeguarding of Russian interests in Syria. The influence of global and regional transformations on the nature of Russian-Syrian relations is also identified. The article emphasizes that Russian-Syrian relations are based not only on similar positions on key global and regional issues and mutual economic interests, but also on strong community-based and spiritual ties that have developed over the past 150 years. The author concludes that one of the possible ways to strengthen Russia's political position in the Middle East lies in mobilizing the potential accumulated by Moscow and Damascus through decades of tested bilateral cooperation in political, military-technical, and economic spheres.

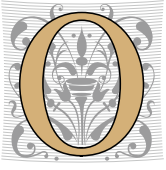
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ver recent decades, Syria has played an important role in Russia's policy in the Middle East. Russia and Syria were bound by long-standing relations of friendship and cooperation, which reached their peak in the 1970s–1980s. In 1944, the USSR was among the first states to recognize the independence of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR) and establish diplomatic relations with it². The coming to power of representatives of the left wing of the ruling Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party in 1966 secured Damascus an important place in Russia's Middle Eastern policy³. However, it was only after Hafez al-Assad came to power in November 1970 that Syria became Russia's principal ally in the Middle East.

Russia's Mediterranean outpost

In 1971, construction of a Russian naval base began in Tartus, providing Moscow with strategic positions in the Mediterranean. Under Article 6 of the 1980 Soviet-Syrian Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, Moscow was entitled to use its armed forces to defend Syria in the event of external aggression⁴. Russian military and civilian specialists effectively helped Syria build modern military and civilian infrastructure. More than 100,000 Syrians received education in universities of the USSR/Russia. Until 1984, the "Association of Postgraduate Alumni", founded in 1980 by Rifaat al-Assad, brother of the Syrian president (who himself defended a PhD dissertation in the Soviet Union) operated successfully in Damascus⁵. The association united around 50,000 Syrians and other Arabs who had defended dissertations in the USSR and Eastern European countries, many of whom later occupied high positions in

² *Ginat R.* The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'ath Regime: From Hesitation to Rapprochement. *Middle Eastern Studies*, Cilt 36. 2000. No 2. P. 150–171.

³ *Laqueur W.* Russia Enters the Middle East. *Foreign Affairs*. 1969. No 2. Vol. 4. P. 296–308.

⁴ *Committeri C.* (2012). When Domestic Factors Prevail Upon Foreign Ambitions: Russia's Strategic Game in Syria. Roma: Istituto Affari Internazionali. P. 3–9.

⁵ See: *Rifat Ali al-Assad.* Socio-Economic Development of Syria in the Period 1946–1963. PhD dissertation. Moscow, 1974.

local government structures. Approximately 35,000 Syrians who had received training in Russia served as officers in the Syrian armed forces, many of whom were married to citizens of the USSR/Russia.

Military-technical cooperation between Syria and the USSR began in 1956. Damascus received 25 MiG-21 fighter jets, as well as other types of military equipment and armaments. After the dissolution of the United Arab Republic, Egypt retained a significant portion of the Syrian Air Force. Cairo held Syrian pilots for a long time, including Hafez al-Assad himself. As a result, Damascus had to rebuild its air force from scratch⁶.

Russian assistance played a decisive role in the development of Syria's modern air force. On the eve of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Russia supplied the SAR with around one hundred MiG-21 aircraft. Syrian pilots gained combat experience by jointly participating with their Soviet counterparts in the preparation of combat operations. Between 1968 and 1973, a significant number of MiG-21 and MiG-17 aircraft were sent to Poland for repair and modernization. The Syrian Air Force suffered an acute shortage of aircraft and pilots due to heavy losses in clashes with Israeli aviation. After the October War of 1973, the Syrian Air Force possessed 338 combat aircraft, including 200 MiG-21s, 80 MiG-17s, and 58 Su-7s. Syria became one of the major importers of Russian military equipment. From 1982 to 1986, the regime purchased from Russia approximately 40 MiG-23s and 20 MiG-25s, as well as around 100 Su-22 and Su-22M aircraft. The SAR was unable to repay its debt to Moscow amounting to USD 17 billion. As a result, Damascus received only 24 of the 48 MiG-29 aircraft and 20 of the 24 Su-24 aircraft ordered in 1986. Moscow owned a number of important facilities in various regions of Syria as Russian state property. A Russian diaspora numbering between 250,000 and 300,000 people existed in Syria, including natives of the North Caucasus, the majority of whom held Russian citizenship.

After the collapse of the USSR, Russia continued its relations with Syria. However, their character changed significantly, and not for the better. The former multilateral and multi-level ties receded into the background. Russian-Syrian relations effectively "shrunk", becoming

⁶ *Hicham Bou Nassif*. "Second-Class": The Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces. *Journal of Strategic Studies*. Vol. 38. Issue 5. 2015.

largely limited to the supply of Russian weapons and spare parts. Iran and Turkey sought to replace Russia's former position in Syria.

Remaining an ally of the Soviet Union, Syria for decades was a state of socialist orientation that adopted the Soviet model of economic planning. The accumulation of financial resources occurred mainly due to the external factor of economic and military assistance from the USSR. Financial support also came from Arab oil-exporting countries within the framework of so-called "Arab solidarity", which brought Syria USD 4 billion in just five years between 1975 and 1980 and ensured economic growth. During this period, Syrians developed a strong dependence on foreign capital. As a result of falling oil prices (which led to a reduction in assistance under "Arab solidarity") and the collapse of the USSR, the country proved unprepared for an independent restructuring of its economic model. After 1991, Russia shifted to commercial terms in military-technical cooperation. As a result, a certain decline emerged in this area of Russian-Syrian relations, also caused by the lack of coordination between the two sides regarding the settlement of Syria's debt on state credits inherited from the former USSR.

The shortage of spare parts and fuel had a negative impact on the armed forces of the Syrian Arab Republic. Syrian aviation remained grounded at airfields. Average monthly flight-hour indicators declined sharply. Many officers were forced to take secondary employment as taxi drivers. Under conditions in which Russia shifted to new, market-based principles for providing military assistance to the SAR, and given the high prices of modern Russian weapons systems, the Syrian leadership began searching for alternative partners in the sphere of military-technical cooperation. The lifting by Western European states of the arms embargo on the SAR in 1994 did not lead to an expansion of defense ties with Damascus, owing to the continued tension in Syrian-Israeli relations. Military relations between Syria and Eastern European states also failed to develop significantly. In the absence of adequate state control over arms exports in these countries and amid the crisis affecting their military-industrial complexes, military-technical cooperation was carried out mainly through representatives of private companies, research-and-production associations, and manufacturing plants. After acquiring in one of these countries certain types of military equipment



Rifaat al-Assad
From open sources

that exhibited serious technical deficiencies, the Syrians treated new proposals from Eastern European partners with caution. Contacts in the military sphere with former Soviet republics — Armenia, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan — were predominantly of a one-off, transactional nature. Military cooperation with North Korea and China also encountered certain difficulties. Beijing’s refusal to supply Syria with offensive weapons, as well as the high cost of the military equipment and its relatively low quality, impeded the development of military cooperation with China.

At the same time, taking into account the continuing uncertainty surrounding peace with Israel and certain frictions in Damascus’s relations with other neighboring states, Syria’s military-political leadership consistently focused on improving the combat readiness of the national armed forces. The Syrian authorities viewed them as one of the most important factors in confronting Israel, a necessary element in resolving regional political issues, and the principal pillar of support for the ruling regime within the country. Despite the “new philosophy” in foreign policy, Russia needed reliable, time-tested partners in the Middle East. For their part, the Syrians always regarded Russia as their main partner in military-technical cooperation and as a key source of modern weapons systems.

After 1995, the Russian leadership undertook a number of active political and diplomatic steps aimed at restoring Russia's former positions in the Middle East. Above all, Russia sought to strengthen its status as a co-sponsor of the peace process. In December 1996, Moscow proposed organizing a meeting of heads of state involving Israel, the Palestinians, and Arab countries in order to revitalize the Madrid formula for Middle East settlement and resume multilateral negotiations. This was particularly important for Russia in terms of ensuring its participation and the consideration of Russian state interests in the process of shaping new geopolitical realities in the region. Russian diplomacy made efforts to create a favorable climate for Arab-Israeli negotiations. In 1996–1997, the Russian foreign minister conducted a series of talks with the leadership of a number of Arab states, Israel, and the Palestinian National Authority. In November 1997, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation Viktor Posuvalyuk was appointed Special Representative of the Russian President to the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, with a status and functions comparable to those of the U.S. representative Dennis Ross. Russia attempted to persuade Syria and Iran to exert appropriate pressure on radical movements and groups in the Levant that sought to derail Palestinian-Israeli reconciliation. As a result, Damascus and Tehran in principle agreed on the necessity of countering and combating terrorism “in any situation and under all circumstances”.

Within the framework of these efforts, Russian diplomacy emphasized the potential benefits of traditionally close ties with Syria and the Palestinians. In 1997, Russia and Syria resumed negotiations on the terms of Syria's repayment of its debt to the Russian side (approximately USD 11 billion). Excessively rigid demands for repayment of the Syrian debt (especially in comparison with precedents involving India (a 40-year deferment) and Jordan with more than 80% of its debt written off) ultimately worked against Russia itself. Damascus effectively adapted to cool relations with Moscow and did not experience an urgent need for the rapid settlement of the debt issue. Russia, meanwhile, suffered not only lost profits but also direct economic losses. Overdue debt continued to grow (reaching approximately USD 7 billion by mid-1997), further complicating the prospects of reaching mutually acceptable repayment terms in the future. In June 1997, the Russian ambassador to

the SAR made it clear that Russia sought to resolve the issue through dialogue and that it should not become an obstacle to the development of bilateral cooperation in various fields. In 1997, Russia and Syria resumed negotiations on the terms of Syria's repayment of its debt to the Russian side⁷.

As a result, military-technical cooperation (MTC) between Russia and Syria intensified. For Russia, expanding MTC with Syria was of great importance, since Russia had significantly weakened its position in the Middle Eastern arms market. Beyond direct economic benefits (in the first half of the 1990s, Syrians submitted requests to the Russian side for arms purchases worth up to USD 5 billion), increased military cooperation with Syria contributed to the revival of bilateral economic ties on a fundamentally new basis. Given the special role of the officer corps in Syria, the development of bilateral MTC provided solid stabilizing foundations for long-term relations between the two countries. In the spring of 1992, negotiations were held in Damascus between a delegation of the state military exports corporation Rosvooruzhenie and the Syrian side regarding contracts concluded in 1992–1993. In the summer of 1992, a high-level Syrian delegation visited Russia with the aim of signing contracts for the manufacture and supply of certain types of modern weapons to the SAR. In August 1997, a number of Arab media outlets reported deliveries of Russian military equipment to the SAR worth USD 3 billion.

The Syrian side showed particular interest in acquiring modern weapons systems, including MiG-31, MiG-29, Su-27, and Su-22 aircraft; Ka-50 helicopters; T-90 tanks; S-300 air defense systems; and electronic warfare and communications equipment⁸. The Syrian Air Force was able to increase the number of training flight hours and concluded a contract with Russia for the modernization of 36 gun systems for Mi-25 helicopters, 24 of which were delivered to the SAR on the eve of the events of March 2011. In 2009, the Russian Aircraft Corporation “MiG” assisted the Syrian Air Force in upgrading aircraft protection systems.

⁷ Cordesman A.H. Israel and Syria: The New Strategic and Military Realities after the Death of Hafez Assad. CSIS. Wash. 2000. P. 12–14; If Its Syria: Syrian Military Forces and Capabilities. CSIS. Wash., 2003. P. 2–12.

⁸ Al-Wasat, 11.08.1997.

Russia modernized most of the Su-24 aircraft. On the eve of the events of 2011, the Syrian Air Force operated a fleet of 535 aircraft.

Despite the fact that more than 80% of the SAR's armed forces were equipped with Russian-made military hardware, it would be incorrect to limit Russian-Syrian relations solely to traditional areas of cooperation. Beginning in 1992, Russian-Syrian trade, economic, and technical cooperation faced difficulties due to unresolved issues related to the repayment of Soviet-era credits and the termination of state support for Russian exports to Syria. Nevertheless, Russia retained its importance for the SAR as a potentially significant economic partner. With the assistance of Russian organizations, Syria undertook the construction of the Tishrin hydropower complex on the Euphrates River, continued design, irrigation construction, and land development in the Maskanah area and around Aleppo, and received support in oil production and a number of other projects. Facilities built and operated with Russian participation played an important role in Syria's economy. By the mid-1990s, they accounted for one-third of the country's electricity generation, approximately 30% of oil production, and the irrigation of more than 50,000 hectares of arid land in the Western Maskanah massif and coastal areas.

At the end of 1997, Russian-Syrian cooperation in the field of nuclear energy began. The Syrian side expressed interest in holding relevant negotiations to determine possible areas of cooperation and to sign an appropriate memorandum. An official statement by the Russian government emphasized the need to develop relations in this sphere⁹.

During negotiations held by a Russian economic delegation in Damascus in September 2000, a number of agreements on trade and economic exchange were signed. One of the most important documents was an agreement on the avoidance of double taxation, which opened broad opportunities for the development of bilateral trade and economic ties involving both state-owned and private enterprises. Although the state sector in Syria was gradually losing its former positions, its role during the transition period of the Syrian economy remained highly significant as a social buffer and a source of support for the national bourgeoisie.

⁹ Modern Syria. From Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Role in The Middle East. Brighton, 1999. P. 75, 93–95.



Soviet officers of the 231st anti-aircraft missile regiment together with Syrian colleagues — group photo
From open sources

Russia considered it justified to participate in the construction of new facilities and the implementation of projects in areas traditionally associated with Russian-Syrian cooperation, such as energy, the oil and gas industry, geological exploration, irrigation and water management construction, land development in coastal areas, and related fields. This was all the more relevant given that, over years of cooperation with the technical assistance of Soviet organizations, Syria had built a significant number of facilities crucial to its economy. These included core sectors of the Syrian economy, primarily energy, oil extraction, irrigation and transport construction, ferrous metallurgy, and other industries. Many of these facilities were effectively idle; construction of some had been suspended, while others required re-equipment and modernization.

Hafez al-Assad constantly sought new external resources capable of ensuring economic growth. New industries were actively developing in Syria, particularly in communications, telecommunications, and information technology. Given Russia's original "know-how" in these areas (which was not inferior to Western analogues and in some parameters even surpassed them), relevant Russian organizations actively promoted their projects on the Syrian market.

Another important area of joint effort was cooperation in the humanitarian sphere, which included training Syrian specialists at Russian universities, establishing joint research centers, and publishing informational and promotional materials on current issues of bilateral rela-

tions and the regional situation. Some of these projects proved highly effective. Although relatively inexpensive, they played an important role in providing support for both Russian and Syrian business, without which the establishment of productive commercial ties would have been impossible. These issues were addressed during the visit of a Syrian economic delegation to Moscow in late January 2001¹⁰.

In the summer of 1999, after a 12-year hiatus, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad paid an official visit to Russia. His talks with the Russian leadership, as well as earlier visits to Moscow by Farouk al-Sharaa and a high-ranking military delegation, demonstrated that the Syrian president highly valued the potential of Russian-Syrian relations. Al-Assad understood that strong ties with Russia could help his successor — his son — govern the country during the transitional period.

The accession to power of Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian Arab Republic in June 2000 marked a new stage in the development of Russian-Syrian relations. Bashar al-Assad did not forget the positive legacy created by his father in bilateral Russian-Syrian relations and contributed to their further strengthening and elevation to a qualitatively new level. Moreover, there were objective prerequisites for the development of bilateral ties. The deterioration of the military-political situation around Syria after the war in Iraq and the stagnation of the Middle East peace process compelled the Syrian leadership to recall that old friends are best.

Thus, during a telephone conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in November 2002, a convergence of Russian and Syrian positions on the most acute Middle Eastern issues became evident. Like Russia, Syria voted in favor of UN Security Council Resolution No. 1441 on Iraq, supporting a peaceful solution to the Iraqi problem. Damascus advocated stability and predictability in the development of the military-political situation in the Middle East and adjacent regions bordering Russia and the CIS. In this regard, Syria supported the idea of convening an international peace conference on the Middle East, believing that a comprehensive and lasting peace in the region could be achieved only through multilateral ne-

¹⁰ Modern Syria. From Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Role in The Middle East. Brighton, 1999. P. 75, 93–95.

gotiations with Russia's active participation as a co-sponsor of the Middle East peace process. In the first ten days of December 2003, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Saltanov paid a visit to Damascus, where he was received by Bashar al-Assad and delivered a personal message from President Vladimir Putin¹¹. As Russia's foreign minister stated during his visit to Damascus in the summer of 2004, involving Syria and Lebanon in the implementation of the "Road Map" project could ensure its successful advancement. The visit to Russia in January 2003 by Syrian Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam undoubtedly constituted an important event in the sphere of Russian-Syrian relations.

In 2002, during negotiations between Russian and Syrian economic delegations in Moscow and Damascus, a number of important agreements were signed in the fields of trade, economic, and scientific-technical cooperation. The signing of these documents created favorable conditions for the foreign economic activity of Russian organizations in the Syrian market and opened new areas of cooperation in the financial-banking and investment-credit spheres, tourism, and other fields. In November 2003, the Russian company Tatneft won a tender for the exploration and development of one of the major oil fields in the SAR¹².

A serious obstacle to the normalization of all areas of Russian-Syrian relations was the unresolved issue of Syria's debt to Russia. Negotiations aimed at resolving this problem were held in Damascus in December 2003 between Russian Deputy Finance Minister Alexey Ulyukaev and Syrian Prime Minister Naji al-Otari and Finance Minister Mohammad al-Hussein¹³. Of no small importance to Russia was the fact that the Syrian port of Tartus was the only naval facility in the Mediterranean where the Russian Navy could be based on a non-currency basis. In February 2004, Russian television aired a report on the restoration of the Russian military base in Tartus, which was being prepared to receive a Russian naval squadron.

The meeting between Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad in Moscow in January 2005 gave Russian-Syrian relations the long-sought im-

¹¹ Al-Ba'ath. 05.12.2003.

¹² Interfax. 27.11.2003.

¹³ Al-Ba'ath. 03.12.2003.

petus that they had been unable to gain since the collapse of the USSR. The Syrian president's visit to Moscow in the winter of 2006 and his meeting with his Russian counterpart further consolidated this trend in bilateral relations. The settlement of the Syrian debt issue (which had literally shackled bilateral relations and was used by opponents of their development) opened new horizons for cooperation and imparted a positive dynamic to it. By writing off 73% (approximately USD 10 billion) of Syria's Soviet-era debt, Russia demonstrated continuity in its policy toward its Arab partners in the Middle East and made it clear that it sought to develop cooperation with them on a broader basis, without limiting itself to the narrowly material considerations. Moreover, Russia and Syria managed to convert the resolution of this difficult issue into the acquisition of new political capital and mutual economic benefit. As a result, several dozen Russian companies and enterprises entered the Syrian market. Russia provided tangible assistance to Syria's socio-economic modernization. The 10th Congress of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, held in June 2005, recommended deepening all forms of cooperation and coordination with Russia. This recommendation also envisaged the use of Russian capabilities to strengthen Syria's defense potential and modernize its armed forces. The agreement on the development of military-technical cooperation between Damascus and Moscow, concluded in May 2005 on new mutually beneficial terms, not only ensured the supply of modern Russian weapons to the SAR, but was even more focused on training modern military personnel for the Syrian army. Regular contacts between representatives of the two defense ministries contributed to clarifying the parameters of this cooperation and assessing developments in the regional military-political situation.

Under conditions of escalating tension in the Middle East, bilateral cooperation acquired greater military significance than purely political importance. In this context, accusations that Russia was disrupting the existing balance of power in the region appeared largely contrived, since it was hardly possible to speak seriously of any balance after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the war in Lebanon in 2006. Russian-Syrian military-technical cooperation contributed to strengthening stability in the Middle East and safeguarding Russian interests there. Given the growing role of the military in the politics of Arab Eastern states, including Syria,

during the transitional period Russia's assistance in modernizing the Syrian army was intended to ensure the military's "consent" to the course of reforms and to reduce the inevitable costs for the armed forces associated with the introduction of market mechanisms. Interparliamentary and interparty contacts between the two countries noticeably intensified. Representatives of the parliamentary majority increasingly became members of Russian delegations. As a result, interparliamentary dialogue between Syria and Russia expanded and acquired a new quality. The activation of bilateral relations and their enrichment with concrete content raised the level of political ties between Russia and Syria, introducing greater trust and coordination in approaches to resolving acute regional problems. This situation was largely explained by Russia's aspiration and readiness to play a more active role in world affairs and, consequently, in political processes in the Middle East, which was becoming an increasingly important factor in global politics. Taking into account the traditionally friendly ties between Russia and Syria, the principled position of the Syrian leadership on key Middle Eastern issues, and the political climate in the region after the Iraq war, Russia's full-fledged return to the Arab East appeared most optimal precisely through the "Syrian gateway". Moreover, after Russia's traditional partner Iraq found itself in a "gray zone", Syria, owing to its geostrategic position at the center of the Middle East, became an important hub for the intersection of transportation, trade, and energy routes between the Persian Gulf countries, Turkey, and Europe. For its part, Damascus saw rapprochement with Russia as an opportunity to break out of isolation and as a certain guarantee of the survival of the ruling regime.

The "Russian Team" in the corridors of Syrian Power

During the rule of Hafez al-Assad and until the late 1990s, Moscow played a key role in shaping the main directions of Syria's foreign policy. To a large extent, this exceptional role of the USSR (and later the Russian Federation) in Syria was ensured by a number of special circumstances, one of which was the presence of the so-called "Russian Team" within the shadow structures of Syrian power. Its representatives were able to exert direct influence on the decision-making mechanism regarding key foreign policy issues.

The Russian Team took shape as an organized group in the early 1970s and operated successfully until the late 1990s. Its members included graduates of Soviet military academies, some of whom had been trained at KGB intelligence centers. Many of them held very high-ranking positions in the army, security services, and leadership of the ruling Ba'ath Party. Virtually no one in the West or in Middle Eastern countries knew about them. Several persons were known only because of the high government posts they occupied. Yet even within Syria itself, few were aware of the existence of the Russian Team as an organized force.

It is characteristic that, despite their broad opportunities due to the positions they held within the system of real power, members of the Team cooperated with Moscow mainly on an ideological and political basis, and exclusively on issues of foreign policy. Moscow sought not to interfere in Syria's "internal political kitchen" as long as this did not threaten the country's legitimate authorities and, consequently, undermine the special nature of Syrian-Russian relations. The work of the Team was conducted against a relatively favorable backdrop, determined by Hafez al-Assad's special attitude toward the formulation of foreign policy.

First, under Hafez al-Assad, foreign policy was strictly pragmatic and secular in nature, subordinated to the achievement of a principal goal: to assert the position and role of the SAR as the center of the Arab Mashriq while maintaining balanced relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Western countries. Second, Hafez al-Assad believed that foreign policy should not be the domain of the "security services" and regarded unauthorized interference by intelligence agencies in this sensitive sphere as an excess¹⁴. He sought to reduce the influence of the army and security services on the process of making key foreign policy decisions. Because of this attitude toward the role of intelligence services, members of the Russian Team operated largely autonomously, outside the framework of control by Syrian security structures.

The names of the true architects of Syrian foreign policy were little known even to a narrow circle of those close to the Syrian president. The

¹⁴ For more details on Syrian intelligence services, see: *Ziadeh R.* 2013. *Power and Policy in Syria. Intelligence Services, Foreign Relations and Democracy in the Modern Middle East.* Beirut (in Arabic). [As-Sulta wa-l-Istihbarat fi Syria]

solutions they proposed were only formally channeled through the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For example, Brigadier General Ism Majhoul (Some names have been changed by the author for ethical reasons. — V.M.) was the author of many key decisions in shaping Syria's relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Lebanon between 1976 and 1999. Another member of this group, Brigadier General Naseit Ismu, oversaw one of the most important areas of Russian-Syrian cooperation and died under mysterious circumstances at his estate on the Mediterranean coast near Latakia. Yet another member of the Team was known in narrow circles by the pseudonym "al-Ankabut" ("The Spider"). One of his main tasks was to prevent "distortions" in Syria's foreign policy resulting from the voluntarist interference of the leadership of certain Syrian intelligence services. It was largely due to his actions that high-ranking Syrian intelligence officials Muhammad Khouli (Air Force Intelligence) and Bashir Najjar (General Intelligence Directorate) were forced to resign.

One of the important factors behind the effectiveness of the Russian Team was the fact that its members were not corrupt. They did not place personal enrichment at the center of their work, were not financially dependent on Iran or Saudi Arabia, and sought to maintain balance in Syria's relations with its Arab and regional partners. The Team acted in the interests of Syria's national security, which fully corresponded to Moscow's Middle Eastern policy, which regarded Damascus as its outpost in the region and sought not to impose its own political "agenda" on the Syrian leadership.

Moscow was extremely concerned by the coup attempt undertaken in 1984 by the president's brother, Rifaat al-Assad. During those tense days for Damascus, a member of the CPSU Politburo, Heydar Aliyev, arrived in the Syrian capital on an unofficial visit and held lengthy negotiations with Hafez al-Assad over the course of three days. Moscow was deeply uninterested in destabilizing the situation in Syria and did everything possible to prevent a crisis. Rifaat al-Assad was sent to Moscow accompanied by senior officers of the General Staff of the Syrian Armed Forces and Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa. Soon thereafter, Rifaat left the hospitable Russian capital.

According to the declassified British foreign policy archives released in 2017, London sought to persuade Rifaat to return to Damascus. Brit-

ish officials believed that if, through pressure by the United States, Egypt, and Israel on Hafez al-Assad, they succeeded in returning Rifaat to Syria, this could soften the regime's policies and somewhat weaken its ties with the USSR. Despite his skepticism toward Article 6 of the 1982 Treaty of Friendship with the USSR, Rifaat categorically refused to follow the British plan.

The year 1999 became critical for the Russian Team, as it proved to be filled with a number of unfavorable events for Syria that, as later became clear, had an extremely negative impact on the country's most important domestic and foreign policy development processes. During this period, Hafez al-Assad's illness sharply worsened, intensifying the struggle for power within his inner circle and, as a result, deepening the split among the ruling elites.

It was precisely at this time that the influential Syrian intelligence general Bahjat Suleiman decided to focus closely on members of the Russian Team. He had previously sought ways to approach them, hoping to use their influence to strengthen his own position within Hafez al-Assad's inner circle. However, he was unable to find common ground with them and was rebuffed. By the end of the 1990s, the situation within the power vertical of the Syrian Arab Republic had changed significantly as a result of a series of large-scale reshuffles in the army and intelligence services carried out by Hafez al-Assad as part of his course toward establishing Bashar al-Assad as the sole alternative successor. Members of the Team were forced to confront a number of new influential figures within the regime, and their positions gradually began to weaken.

Among the few who attempted to help individual members of the Team was Assef Shawkat. Perhaps he simply did not see the full picture and did not fully understand whom he was dealing with. Moreover, at that time he enjoyed relative independence, being the husband of Hafez al-Assad's daughter and the brother-in-law of the future president. Yet even his patronage failed to save some members of the Team, which soon effectively disintegrated and ceased its activities. Very soon, Assef Shawkat himself required assistance. Just one year after Bashar al-Assad's re-election for a second presidential term (2007), Damascus witnessed an escalation of the struggle for power within the president's immediate circle. In the summer of 2008, the head of Syria's Military Coun-

terintelligence Directorate, Assef Shawkat (an Alawite and the husband of the president's sister), attempted to establish control over all Syrian intelligence services. His security-service rivals tried to assign him responsibility for the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hari-ri (2005), the Israeli Air Force's bombing of strategic military facilities (2007), and the killing of Imad Mughniyeh, one of Hezbollah's leaders (2008). Assef Shawkat and other conspirators (around one hundred Alawite intelligence officers) were arrested. His wife Bushra al-Assad requested political asylum in the UAE. Following the intervention of the president's mother, Anisa Makhlouf, Bushra was allowed to return home; her husband was released and appointed Deputy Chief of Staff of the Syrian Armed Forces, receiving promotion to the rank of general¹⁵.

Such a situation testified to the emergence of the first signs of a crisis of power, the potential strengthening of confessional strife, and the fragmentation of society, processes that would soon erupt into the mass protests that began in March 2011. Gradually, the space within Syria's shadow power structures was occupied by the group of Bahjat Suleiman, who by that time had managed to grow closer to Bashar al-Assad and his influential cousins. One of Suleiman's associates was Major General Hisham al-Bakhtiar, who became responsible for Syria's foreign policy and national security. In narrow circles, he was well known as "Iran's man in Syria", a fact hinted at even by his surname. It was precisely to him that the unprecedented rapprochement between Damascus and Tehran was attributed, an alignment that had an extremely negative impact on Syria's position in the Arab world, plunging the country into endless regional confrontation, and turning Syria into a "playing card" in the global power struggle in the Middle East.

Moscow saw what was happening to its former Russian Team. Perhaps adhering to its principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of friendly Syria, or for other reasons, Russia in practice did little to prevent this group's removal from the corridors of real power in the SAR. At the same time, much had changed within Syria itself. Formerly powerful "friends of the USSR/Russia", generals Ali Duba and Ali Haydar

¹⁵ From the author's private conversations with Syrian representatives, 2007–2008, Damascus–Moscow.

(Syrian special forces), had grown old, retired, and spent time with their grandchildren in estates in Latakia. Farouk al-Sharaa (Vice President since 2006) found himself unemployed soon after the start of the Syrian civil war and spent most of his time at home in Damascus. Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam was declared a traitor to the nation and emigrated to Paris in 2005; he died of cancer in March 2020. Formerly all-powerful Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass left Syria in 2012 and died in Paris five years later. The powerful “wallet” (financial gatekeeper) of the al-Assad family, Mohammed Makhlouf, who in the 1980s had competed with Rifaat al-Assad in trade and financial ventures, moved to Russia and died there in 2020 from COVID-19.

Moscow might have decided to try to strengthen relations with a new team on a different basis — one more in keeping with the spirit of the times, in which free-market relations became a central slogan. Much could have been achieved, and things would have continued this way for some time, had it not been for the Arab Spring. From the beginning of the Arab Spring, various Russian intelligence services began scouring Syria in search of members of the former Russian Team. However, Moscow was in for an unpleasant surprise: thorough searches revealed that none of the Team’s members occupied even minimally significant positions within the Syrian leadership. Moscow understood that the Team had been weakening, but did not expect it to be purged with such thoroughness.

At the same time, Syria remained the only relic ally of the Soviet era in the Middle East through which Moscow could feel the political pulse of the Arab world¹⁶. In 2008, reconstruction of the Russian naval facility in Tartus began. Military supplies to Syria accounted for 10 percent of Russia’s total arms exports. During Dmitry Medvedev’s visit to Damascus in May 2010, more than ten new agreements and cooperation protocols were signed in various fields, including telecommunications, banking, military-technical cooperation, and the oil and gas sector. Syria still owed about \$4 billion from the total amount of previously forgiven Soviet debts.

¹⁶ *Akhmedov V. Al-Istiqrar fi al-Sharq al-Awsat: Khiyar Suria wa-Rusia (Stability in the Middle East: The Choice of Russia and Syria)*. VolterNet. May 30.2007. <https://www.voltairenet.org/article148606.html> (accessed 26.05.2024). In Arabic.



Mustafa Tlass
From open sources

Bashar al-Assad proposed that Russia support the emerging new “geopolitical reality” along the Beirut–Damascus–Ankara–Baghdad–Tehran axis, in alliance with Baku, Yerevan, Kyiv, and Minsk. In the summer of 2011, Assad, using Syrian leverage in Lebanon, facilitated the participation of Russian companies in the exploration and development of gas fields in Lebanese territorial waters. All of this seriously alarmed the United States and other Western countries, whose authorities had declared the Syrian regime illegitimate from the very beginning of the Syrian events.

Russia and the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic

The events that began in March 2011 did not catch Moscow by surprise. Before the conflict and during its first year, senior Russian officials (Sergey Lavrov, Alexander Saltanov, Mikhail Fradkov) repeatedly warned Bashar al-Assad of the danger threatening Damascus. However, at that time the Syrian president did not treat Moscow’s warnings with attention. In July 2011, Russia’s official representative

Alexander Dzasokhov visited Damascus and met with Syrian leaders. In an interview following the trip, Dzasokhov noted in particular that Moscow very much wanted the Syrian regime to provide it with more positive grounds for support¹⁷. Relying on information from the Syrian opposition and defectors, the United States closely monitored the February 2012 visit to Damascus by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Director of Foreign Intelligence Service Mikhail Fradkov. According to the opposition sources cited by some Arab media outlets, during this visit a scenario for a non-violent transfer of power in Syria was discussed (in a hypothetical sense — *author*). However, it could not be implemented in practice. Moscow was not prepared to abandon its support for Bashar al-Assad's legitimate government or its involvement in resolving the Syrian crisis. Otherwise, Russian interests in Syria and the region could have suffered serious damage¹⁸. In an interview with Kommersant FM, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov outlined Russia's position on Syria in detail. He made it clear that Russia was not attempting to justify the Syrian leadership, which had reacted incorrectly to the initial manifestations of "peaceful" protests. Lavrov noted that despite numerous promises to Russia, Syrian leaders had made many mistakes and had delayed steps that were moving in the right direction. At the same time, he emphasized that the Syrian conflict had largely been provoked from outside¹⁹. Russia's policy during the Syrian conflict was dictated by broader geopolitical considerations. The Arab Spring undermined Arab regimes friendly to Russia. The alternative rulers (Islamists and Western-oriented democracies) were unacceptable to Moscow. Therefore, in Syria, Russia

¹⁷ RIA Novosti. The Syrian Crisis: Paths to Settlement from the Perspective of Moscow and Beijing. <https://ria.ru/20120213/564785904.html>, 13 February 2012.

¹⁸ An-Nashra (2012). Rusia Tu'ti Suria al-Daw' al-Akhdar wa-l-Hallu Yumkin an Yatahaqqaq fi Usbu'ayn (Russia Gives Syria the Green Light and a Solution May Be Reached Within Two Weeks). 16 February 2012. <https://www.elnashra.com/news/show/439926/> (accessed 05.01.2023). In Arabic.

¹⁹ Interview with Russian Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov on Kommersant FM radio, Moscow, 20 March 2012. https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1700371/ (accessed 20.05.2024).

sought to erect a barrier against Arab revolutions and their potential spread into Central Asia and the South Caucasus²⁰.

Until the launch of the Russian Aerospace Forces' operation in Syria in September 2015, Moscow had largely limited itself to political support for the Syrian leadership at the UN and other international platforms. Russia consistently fulfilled its contractual obligations to the Syrian regime but, unlike Tehran, did not deploy its troops in Syria. Russia blocked UN Security Council resolutions and subjected to scrutiny any plans on Syria (Geneva I and II) that envisaged the use of force against the Syrian regime. Moscow consistently adhered to a course aimed at the peaceful political resolution of the Syrian conflict and a democratic transition of power in the SAR.

Moscow and the Syrian political opposition

From the very beginning of the Syrian events, Russia attempted to establish a dialogue with the Syrian opposition and to gain certain positions there. However, in most cases such attempts ended unsuccessfully. Unlike the United States and Great Britain, Russia, with rare exceptions, tried not to engage in active work with opposition forces in the countries governed by regimes friendly to it. As a result, Moscow's relations with the internal Syrian opposition lacked a political background. Representatives of the "homegrown" Syrian opposition in Russia differed little from the political activists who had grouped themselves around the Syrian embassy in Moscow and were not taken seriously by the relevant Russian institutions as potential "assistants" within Syria's power structures. At a certain stage, relations between Moscow and the Syrian opposition reached an impasse when it came to the issue of regime change and the resignation of Bashar al-Assad. Moreover, Moscow was highly skeptical about the presence within some opposition groups (primarily

²⁰ For more on the Arab Spring, see: *Grinin L., Korotayev A. (2022). Arab Spring: Causes, conditions, and driving forces. In J.A. Goldstone, L. Grinin, & A. Korotayev (Eds.), New waves of revolutions in the 21st century – Understanding the causes and effects of disruptive political changes (p. 595–624). Springer. <http://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86468-2-23>.*

the Syrian National Council) of a significant number of Muslim Brotherhood members, whose organization was legally designated in Russia as terrorist. Russia feared that representatives of “Islamists” might come to power in post-Assad Syria. Such sentiments were reinforced by developments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. At the same time, in practical terms and from the standpoint of Moscow’s strategic interests in Syria and the Middle East as a whole, Russian representatives were far from seeing only a “green” hue in the Arab protest movement.

In late June 2011, representatives of the Syrian opposition arrived in Moscow. The Russian side urged them to begin a dialogue with the regime in order to move the conflict into the political realm. The opposition made it clear that it was ready to cooperate with certain representatives of the regime and its political institutions not implicated in crimes. At the same time, its representatives insisted on the necessity of Bashar al-Assad’s prior resignation and the removal of his regime. However, the Russian side could not agree with the opposition’s demand for the resignation of a regime to which it had been providing not only political but also military support (since August 2011)²¹. It is noteworthy that during negotiations between Russian representatives and the SNC, its head Burhan Ghalioun promised Russia, in the event of the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad’s regime, to preserve all contracts and to build another naval base in Latakia. Despite this, Russia stood by Bashar al-Assad.

This step was understandable and logical in the prevailing circumstances. The SNC was still in the process of formation, and Russia had no reliable and tested operational positions there. Moscow was alarmed by the opposition’s desire to disband the leading Syrian intelligence services, such as the Military Counterintelligence Directorate and the General Intelligence Directorate, with which their Russian counterparts had working relations²². Moreover, the Syrian opposition had not been recognized by leading members of the international community,

²¹ Information obtained by the author during meetings with members of the delegation.

²² *Sakr K. Al-Tansiq Bayna al-Jihat al-Suriyya wa-Shuraka’iha al-Rus* (Coordination Between Syrian Services and Their Russian Partners). Al-Quds al-Arabi, 2 December 2011. <https://www.alquds.co.uk/> (accessed 21.09.2023). In Arabic.



Burhan Ghalioun
From open sources

above all by Arab countries of the Middle East. Therefore, any change in Russia's status quo in Syria would automatically lead, if not to the loss, then to the erosion of its positions in the Levant. By allowing a change in the paradigm of power in the Syrian Arab Republic, Russia would never again be able to have what it had possessed before. In the second half of April 2012, representatives of the opposition from the National Coordination Committee (NCC) arrived in Moscow. During negotiations in Moscow, the Committee supported Kofi Annan's peace plan and expressed a desire to establish constructive relations with Russia. At the same time, a number of the Committee's leaders advocated a change of Syria's legitimate authorities and a radical reform of the Syrian security agencies. Unlike the SNC, the Committee opposed any external interference in Syrian affairs and the militarization of the Syrian crisis, and objected to the monopolization by any single structure of the right to represent the interests of the Syrian revolution²³.

Among various representatives of the Syrian opposition there existed a fairly broad spectrum of assessments of Russia's role in the Syrian

²³ Akhmedov V. Does the Syrian opposition present a real challenge? Burning Point. 25.04.2012. http://english.ruvr.ru/radio_broadcast/25298789/52513008.html.

events. One of the patriarchs of the “Damascus Spring” of 2000–2001, Michel Kilo, believed that a political solution in the SAR was in Moscow’s hands. He thought it necessary to secure Russia’s support in resolving the crisis through dialogue and thereby preserve Syrian statehood. Unlike the United States, Russia could not allow the destruction of the Syrian state and was sincerely interested in a peaceful resolution of the Syrian crisis. At the same time, he emphasized that Moscow had made serious miscalculations in assessing the Syrian events. He assured the Russian leadership that the Syrian opposition did not seek to remove Moscow from Syria, but rather saw Russia as a certain counterbalance to Western influence in the interests of preserving the country’s national independence after a change of regime.

One of the members of the Syrian opposition delegation that visited Moscow in April 2012, Haytham Manna, who was part of the SNC leadership, mistakenly believed that Russia fully supported Kofi Annan’s peace plan and did not set any preliminary conditions for the period of the SAR’s transition to democracy²⁴. In Manna’s view, the sixth point of Annan’s plan referred to dialogue with the state. The theme of the regime and the state in Syria as applied to Moscow’s position was also developed by Aref Dalila. He believed, in particular, that traditional Soviet “thinking” still dominated in the Russian Federation and that Moscow did not see much difference between the regime and the state. Dalila noted that during negotiations between the Committee’s delegation and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his deputy Mikhail Bogdanov, the Russian side repeatedly assured the Syrians that Moscow did not support any single person or regime and stood for reforms in Syria. For its part, Moscow believed that the Syrian opposition had still not presented an alternative political platform or a reform program for the SAR. According to Dalila, the Syrian opposition’s arguments that regime reforms amounted to little more than nothing under the conditions of total unfreedom in the country failed to find understanding in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

²⁴ Al-Rai (2011). Michel Kilo to Al-Rai: Daraa Has Broken the Wall of Silence. 27 March 2011. <https://www.alraimedia.com/Alrai/Article/264903/> (accessed 15.12.2011). In Arabic.

Overall, the above assessments of Moscow's role in the Syrian crisis were positive in nature. However, they reflected the viewpoint of the left-liberal wing of the Syrian opposition and representatives of one part of the country's creative and scientific-technical intelligentsia. From the very beginning of the "Damascus Spring" in 2001, they believed in the possibility of reforming the political system of the SAR from above through evolution rather than revolution. When in February 2001 Bashar al-Assad, under pressure from his security entourage, curtailed the reform program, their positions weakened noticeably. Moreover, their opinion never played a decisive role within the Syrian opposition movement, and under conditions of civil war it had little chance of becoming dominant. Armed opposition units held a different view of Moscow's policy in the SAR. Many of them believed that Russia was incapable of truly "intervening" in Syrian affairs and carrying its line through to a victorious conclusion. Moscow, they argued, had enough strength only to preserve its positions in the near abroad, while regimes like that of al-Assad were needed by Russia in order to project its influence onto "distant frontiers"²⁵.

The Syrian opposition became markedly more active after the explosion in July 2012 at the SAR National Security headquarters, as a result of which several high-ranking leaders of the Syrian security services were killed²⁶. On the eve of the Syrian Opposition Conference scheduled for early July 2012 in Cairo, 26 SNC members illegally entered Syrian territory to coordinate the actions of internal and external opposition units. During a visit to Moscow in July 2012, Syrian opposition representative Michel Kilo lobbied for the candidacy of General Manaf Tlass (who had fled to the West and was the son of former Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass) as head of Syria's transitional government in the event of Bashar al-Assad's departure. Manaf Tlass advocated preserving the "healthy" part of the regime built by Hafez al-Assad as a guarantee of saving Syrian statehood from complete destruction and, on that basis, uniting all opposition forces. Many of the figures involved

²⁵ From the author's conversations with representatives of the Syrian opposition, Damascus–Moscow, 2001–2015.

²⁶ *Hicham Bou Nassif*. "Second-Class": The Grievances of Sunni Officers in the Syrian Armed Forces. *Journal of Strategic Studies*. 2015. Vol. 38. Issue 5. P. 626–649.

in this plan were well known to Moscow. Nevertheless, Russia opposed al-Assad's resignation.

In an interview with the Saudi newspaper *Al-Watan*, the Russian President's Special Representative for the Middle East, Mikhail Bogdanov, stated that Moscow sought to adhere to "neutrality" and not to give preference to either side of the conflict. Russia was doing much to achieve a rapid ceasefire in Syria and maintained contacts with the Syrian opposition in search of a way out of the current situation²⁷. In early September, Bogdanov was in Paris, where, according to Syrian opposition sources, he met with SNC President Abdulbaset Sieda, Manaf Tlass, and a delegation of the Coordination Committees. The meetings of the Russian representative in Paris coincided with a visit to Moscow by delegates of one of the Syrian opposition groups loyal to Moscow and the Syrian regime, the "Path for Peaceful Change in Syria", headed by Fateh Jassem, who at one time had led the combat wing of the Syrian Communist Party (the Fighting Vanguard - *author*). Representatives of the Syrian Muslim and Christian clergy also arrived in Moscow. Following consultations with the Syrian opposition, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs demanded that the head of the NCSROF, Moaz al-Khatib, present concrete proposals for establishing a dialogue with al-Assad.

The meeting between the Syrian opposition and representatives of the regime held in Moscow in late January 2014, despite a number of certain shortcomings, could be regarded as a certain success of Russian diplomacy. First, for several years Russia had been striving to organize such a forum in its capital. Second, the holding of this event was supported not only by Washington but also by Riyadh. This sent a clear signal that the key international and regional actors in the Syrian crisis viewed Moscow as one of the principal participants in the future process of Syrian settlement and were prepared to take its opinion on the Syrian issue into account. Third, despite a number of known difficulties, the organizers and moderators of the Moscow forum managed to carry it out almost in full. At the final stage, the participants were able to agree on a document entitled the "10 Moscow Principles", the most important of which was the recognition of a political settlement as the

²⁷ Al-Watan (Saudi Arabia). 14.08.2012.

only viable way to resolve the Syrian crisis. The need for a joint struggle against the terrorist threat posed by jihadist organizations operating in the Syrian Arab Republic, such as ISIS, was emphasized.

Russia continued to conduct negotiations with the opposition while supporting the Syrian regime. However, this situation could not last indefinitely. In the context of civil war and the threat of foreign intervention, one or both of the opposing sides could at some point cease to trust Russia, and Russian interests in Syria would then be put at risk²⁸.

Russia's forceful entry into the Middle East

From the beginning of 2015, developments in Syria and the region as a whole formed a new military-political reality that compelled Moscow to revise its strategy in the Syrian conflict. After the failure of the Syrian peace conferences “Geneva I” (June 2012) and “Geneva II” (January 2014), it became clear that diplomatic efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis peacefully had collapsed. The Ukrainian crisis marked a rupture in Russian–American relations and buried prospects for cooperation between Moscow and Washington in combating the terrorist threat in the Middle East. The Syrian army and Iranian armed forces (represented by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of Iran and the Artesh (regular Iranian army units), supported by Hezbollah and Shiite militias) were unable to contain the massive offensive of the armed Syrian opposition. By the autumn of 2015, the Syrian regime controlled no more than 15 percent of the country’s territory. Russia’s main ally in the Middle East was on the verge of collapse.

A group of factors rooted in geopolitical considerations and national security interests influenced Moscow’s decision to deploy its armed forces to Syria. The introduction of Russian troops into the SAR took place against the backdrop of an intensifying confrontation with the United States and NATO. In this sense, the issue was not so much competition between Moscow and Washington for Syria as the assertion of new principles of the global world order. The Western position on

²⁸ ISIS (Islamic State) is a terrorist organization banned in Russia.

Crimea (consolidated by Washington and NATO's expansion toward Russia's borders) forced Moscow to strengthen its military presence in the Mediterranean in order to deter potential Western aggression from the southern flanks and prevent the penetration of extremist and terrorist forces into Russia. Military support for the regime in its struggle against international terrorism and the armed opposition, in the interests of preserving Syrian statehood, became the priority task of the operation of the Russian Aerospace Forces in the SAR. Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict was determined by the priorities of its foreign policy. Moscow consistently supported existing regimes and opposed their violent overthrow. The Russian special operation forced the Syrian opposition to return to the negotiating table. Moscow's diplomatic initiatives aimed at ceasefires and the creation of de-escalation zones, combined with military operations, played a decisive role in strengthening control over a significant part of Syrian territory. In the conditions of civil war, the Syrian armed forces underwent a radical transformation, with their manpower reduced by 50 percent. Russia provided substantial military-technical and logistical support to the Syrian Arab Armed Forces and created new units within the Syrian army.

As a result of the weakening of state institutions in the SAR, Syrian security agencies turned into autonomous centers of power based on the principle of loyalty. This contradicted Moscow's policy on Syrian normalization in addressing key issues such as return of refugees, drug control, and border control. Moscow contributed to strengthening the personnel base of the Syrian security services through the implementation of training and educational programs for Syrian officers. The civil war had had a devastating impact on Syrian society and the national economy. Russian military and civilian specialists, together with their Syrian counterparts, began restoring oil and gas and energy infrastructure. Work was carried out to modernize thermal power plants, reconstruct gas transportation infrastructure, and refurbish oil refining facilities. Russia's diplomatic and military efforts contributed to the resolution of Moscow's tactical objectives in the SAR and ensured Russia's strategic interests in the Middle East. Moscow established almost complete control over Syrian airspace and secured its positions along the Mediterranean coastal belt from north to south. Support for

the pro-regime forces helped ensure Bashar al-Assad's victory over the armed Syrian opposition and international terrorism. The armed opposition was virtually crushed. The regime's political opponents relied mainly on support from external forces in Arab countries, Turkey, and a number of Western states. Russia returned most of Syrian territory under the control of the Syrian government. The balance of power in the SAR shifted in favor of the ruling regime. The issue of changing the incumbent authorities in the SAR was removed from the Syrian negotiation agenda. Russia became a key participant in the Syrian conflict, whose position the United States, Europe, and leading regional countries were forced to take into account.

Conclusion

Russia's "return" to the Middle East coincided with an escalation of tensions in international relations. The restoration of a semblance of multipolarity as a result of Moscow's forceful entry into Syria did not guarantee security in the region. Russia found itself drawn into a major regional game involving the United States, Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries. Under these circumstances, it was hardly possible to speak of the absolute dominance of any one participant in the Middle Eastern conflict in completely reformatting the local military-political infrastructure in accordance with its own national strategy.

Despite the successes achieved in Syria, political rivalry persisted, rooted in internal contradictions. Many regions of the country fell prey to extremist groups. Syria became politically fragmented into zones of influence of regional and international forces. The war in Gaza intensified the Iranian–Israeli confrontation, including in zones of vital interest to Russia (the South Caucasus), which posed a potential threat to Moscow's positions in the Middle East and affected the national security of the Russian Federation.

From the beginning of 2024, Moscow became particularly disillusioned with the policies of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who proved unable to curb corruption within his inner circle, among trusted businessmen managing his family's finances, or to suppress the activities of

drug traffickers and arms barons along the Mediterranean coast and in southern Syria. Against the backdrop of a severe economic situation, this reduced the level of social support for the regime. The large-scale reshuffles in the army undertaken by Bashar al-Assad in the summer of 2024, aimed at limiting the omnipotence of the security services, were clearly overdue and only alarmed the heads of local security agencies, reducing their motivation to defend the regime. Assad's unwillingness to ensure the peaceful return of refugees, enter into dialogue with the opposition, begin a peaceful transition of power, and halt drug trafficking to neighboring Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia slowed Moscow's efforts to finally end the armed phase of the conflict and remove Syria from political isolation on the basis of consolidated Arab support.

Assad's refusal to meet with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan effectively torpedoed Moscow's high-level efforts toward Syrian–Turkish normalization, which aimed to encourage Ankara to take decisive measures against the jihadists in Idlib and normalize the situation in the Kurdish areas of northeastern Syria. Contrary to Russian warnings, Bashar al-Assad's unilateral orientation toward Iran and Hezbollah led to Damascus being drawn into the war in Gaza. As a result, Assad found himself trapped between the Israeli “rock” and the Iranian “hard place”. Attempts by Assad to maneuver between Tel Aviv and Tehran ended fatally for his personal power²⁹.

Two months before the outbreak of the HTS offensive, Moscow warned Assad of a planned terrorist attack from Idlib. After the capture of Aleppo, Russian intelligence received information that about 80 percent of the population was ready to support an Islamist advance on Hama, Homs, and Damascus. At the same time, data were obtained on large-scale betrayal within the army as a result of a catastrophic decline in material and financial support for soldiers and officers. During Assad's visit to Moscow in late November 2024, he was urged to immediately begin dialogue with the political opposition and to start formalizing procedures for a political transition of power in accordance with

²⁹ Al-Quds. Hal Hiya Kalimat Sir Bashar al-Assad? (Is This Bashar al-Assad's Password?) 1 December 2024. <https://www.alquds.co.uk> / <https://tinyurl.com/mrxcvh88> (accessed 05.12.2024). In Arabic.

UN Security Council Resolution No. 2254. However, as in March 2011, Assad ignored Russian warnings.

The change in the balance of power within Syria and the growth of international rivalry strengthened expansionist sentiments among some opponents of the Syrian regime and, conversely, reduced the level of support for it from Russia and Iran. The political costs of supporting al-Assad (who by his actions was effectively nullifying Moscow's achievements in rescuing him and consolidating Russian influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East) risked becoming far higher than the potential benefits of preserving the regime. In order to avoid large-scale bloodshed in Syria, the Russian Aerospace Forces refused to provide air support to pro-Iranian armed militias that were preparing to advance from Iraq to assist the regime. As a result, the Syrian regime proved unable to withstand socio-economic overloads and was overthrown by the Islamist opposition led by HTS.

The fall of the Assad regime marked a critical turning point in the Syrian conflict and influenced the definition of parameters for the future development of the Middle East. The Ba'athist regime of al-Assad was replaced by Islamists represented by HTS, an organization that only recently had been the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. In January 2025, the head of HTS, Ahmed al-Sharaa (al-Golani), was elected Syria's new president for a transitional period. The new authorities faced the tasks of building an inclusive state and preserving the country's territorial integrity. An emphasis on external relations distracted al-Sharaa from addressing acute socio-economic problems and security issues. Flirting with the United States and the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf did not help remove the threat of de facto occupation of a number of strategic areas in the south, northeast, and west of the Syrian Arab Republic by Israel and Turkey, respectively. One-off investments from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE could not produce the expected effect in terms of economic recovery. Ensuring effective governance across the entire country solely by extrapolating the successful administrative experience of the Syrian Salvation Government in Idlib proved impossible³⁰. Syria remains a frag-

³⁰ In 2017, HTS established the "Salvation Government" in Idlib, which proved relatively effective in administering territories under Islamist control.

mented country where the interests collide not only of the victorious opposition and Assad loyalists, but also of diverse ethnic and confessional groups, as well as regional and global powers. Certain areas are under the control of external forces and are turning into autonomous centers of power, which may ultimately lead to the country's disintegration.

In March 2025, supporters of the ousted President al-Assad attempted to regain power by staging a bloody uprising on the Mediterranean coast. The armed revolt of Assad loyalists, aimed at creating a territorial enclave on the Syrian coast with the support of external forces, revealed a number of important trends in the development of Syria's future³¹. Since HTS had come to power in the SAR, the coastal uprising was far from the first clash between supporters and opponents of the new authorities. However, it became the most bloody and dangerous one. Since December 2024, Syria's Mediterranean coast has witnessed armed clashes between Islamists and supporters of al-Assad. Both sides enjoyed support from Israel, Turkey, and Iran as part of their regional rivalry and struggle for Syria. Tel Aviv, Ankara, and Tehran equally exploited the religious factor, playing on the fears of the local population: Alawites on the coast, Druze in the south, and Kurds in northeastern Syria.

Unlike previous conflicts, the uprising of Assad loyalists in March 2025 was carefully planned and prepared. Statements by Alawite sheikhs indicated that the rebels expected to seize all coastal areas and secure the support of Russian troops stationed at the bases in Tartus and Khmeimim. The insurgents also counted on exploiting the conflict between the new Syrian authorities and Israel, which supported the separatist aspirations of the Druze of Suwayda and also provided assistance to Kurdish opposition groups in the northeast of the country. The organizers of the uprising relied on support from Iran, which sought to change the balance of power in Syria in its favor.

The methods used by the authorities to suppress the Alawite revolt on the coast and the secessionist actions of the Druze in July 2025 in Suwayda strengthened doubts al-Sharaa's readiness to fulfill previously assumed ob-

³¹ Asharq Al-Awsat. Hiwar Wazir al-Kharijiyya al-Suri ma'a Tony Blair fi Davos (Conversation of the Syrian Foreign Minister with Tony Blair in Davos). 13 January 2025. <https://www.mc-doualiya.com> / <https://tinyurl.com/bddftnzb> (accessed 01.02.2025). In Arabic.

ligations toward minorities. Despite his statements condemning excessive violence, the danger of a recurrence of such events persists due to insufficient preventive work by security agencies with the civilian population. Ineffective methods employed by security forces to disarm civilians and suppress the activities of arms dealers perpetuate the threat of militarization of the local population along confessional lines. Large quantities of weapons remain in civilian hands in Damascus, Suwayda, Hama, and Aleppo³².

Events on the Syrian coast and in the south occurred against the backdrop of a sharp deterioration in the material conditions of the local population as a result of government measures to restructure the state sector of the economy, unresolved relations between the transitional government and the Druze community, and tensions with the administration of the Kurdish regions. The government was preparing to privatize 107 state-owned enterprises and intended to shut down unprofitable ones. According to government estimates, no more than 600,000 people (50% of those employed in the public sector) should remain in the state sector. The dismissal of hundreds of thousands of civilian and military specialists could negatively affect internal political stability, triggering a growth in unemployment and social tension. The new authorities would require around USD 10 billion annually to restore social infrastructure and maintain it at an adequate level. Today, the Syrian economy continues to operate in a wartime mode, and its transition to peaceful development will require great effort and significant expenditures. If we speak only of the civilian economy, the GDP associated with it is unlikely to exceed USD 18 billion. To return to previous GDP levels, the Syrian economy would need to grow by 6–7% annually. Such growth can be expected only in certain sectors under favorable contracts, and sustaining it over a long period is impossible. At best, growth will fluctuate within 4–5% per year. According to various estimates, economic reconstruction will require at least ten years to return to the indicators of 2010³³.

³² Al-Quds. 2025. How Syria might rig off tyrannical regime's image? Al-Quds. 03.12.2025. <https://www.alquds.co.uk> (accessed 03.18.2025 (in Arabic)). [Keifa-tfhju-syria-vin-nizam-al-abd?].

³³ Omran Strategic Studies. Governance Challenges in the Upcoming Phase: General Concepts. Omran for Strategic Studies. 02 January 2025/<https://www.OmranStudies.org/>. 03.01.2025EN.pdf/. P. 1–8 (accessed 05/01/2025).

Prolonged uncertainty in constitutional and party-political development, against the backdrop of a difficult socio-economic situation, slowed the processes of national reconciliation, the provision of internal security through the creation of a new army, and the development of an independent foreign policy capable of ensuring the national sovereignty of the SAR. At the same time, political dynamics in the SAR and intensifying international competition amid the regional escalation caused by the war in Gaza have demonstrated that the likelihood of new territorial fractures in the Middle East is more real than before. Under these conditions, the new Syrian authorities needed, within a short period of time, to restructure the national strategy in order to retain power and preserve the country's territorial integrity. The transitional government's ability to ensure economic security largely depended on the new authorities' policy in establishing a system of governance over Syrian territory. During the crisis, many areas of Syria slipped out of Damascus's control, giving rise to the development of various governance models based on local legislative practices. The civil war led to further defragmentation of the centralized system of governance and the development of local self-government, taking into account regional specificities and established practices of resource distribution and provision of social needs. After the change of power, the task of unifying the country and creating a new system of administrative governance became extremely urgent. The former system of local self-government required large-scale reform.

In Idlib, the HTS government abandoned the provincial principle of governance, placing emphasis on the development of several large municipal districts. Such an approach is unlikely to be applicable in other Syrian provinces. Given the prolonged fragmentation of the local population along ethnic and confessional lines, the authorities in Damascus will struggle to achieve a centralized system of governance. It is hardly possible to manage various social groups solely on the basis of their religious or ethnic preferences and loyalties.

At the same time, Syria cannot be governed in an asymmetric manner. Attempts by the new authorities to balance civil relations solely on the basis of confessional identity may place the administration in a difficult position in areas where the cultural and religious customs and

beliefs of the local population do not correspond to the ideological and political orientations of the authorities. Agreements with individual representatives of local communities do not guarantee the loyalty of other provincial leaders. The prospects for creating an effective governance system largely depend on the ability of the new authorities to adapt to a changing socio-economic situation and to identify common patterns across different models of local self-government in order to create equal opportunities in the distribution of resources and material benefits.

Economic threats can pose dangers equally from the standpoint of maintaining defense capability and preserving civil peace in the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as for regional security in the Middle East. An economic downturn and the unjust distribution of economic benefits can lead to the political defeat of the regime.

The weakening of Iran's positions in the Middle East pushed Tehran to come very close to developing nuclear weapons. The Iranian nuclear issue could have affected the nature of U.S. relations with its Arab allies in matters of nuclear nonproliferation, which would have had a negative impact on international security. Under these circumstances, Tel Aviv and Washington carried out military strikes against Iran in order to resolve the Iranian nuclear problem once and for all and to cut Hamas and Hezbollah off from their supply base, which led to a new surge of tension in the Middle East. Many military and political figures in Israel still harbor plans to launch new military strikes against Iran with the involvement of U.S. military contingents in the Middle East. Developments in Syria's political dynamics show that the likelihood of new territorial fragmentation in the Middle East today is more real than ever before.

Under these conditions, Russia's Middle East policy is acquiring new dimensions. Today, Russia's outlook in the Middle East is mostly shaped by available resources and the policies of regional players. Middle Eastern states control the regional agenda and largely determine the nature of relations with Russia. A relatively limited set of non-military instruments constrains Moscow's influence on the policies of regional powers, including Syria. Russia needs to consolidate the long-term character of its relations with regional powers and expand its presence

in the region in order to gain the ability to shape regional dynamics in its favor. Alongside civilizational, humanitarian, and cultural aspects of relations with Middle Eastern states, the task of establishing reliable military, economic, and political positions in the Middle East is of particular importance. Otherwise, in the long term this may lead to a decline in Russian influence in the region.

From this perspective, strengthening Russian influence in the SAR could facilitate Russia's achievement of the above-mentioned objectives. During negotiations with the Syrian delegation in Moscow on July 31, 2025, the parties discussed the possibility of revising bilateral agreements in the fields of defense and security, joint counterterrorism efforts, and military-technical cooperation. Given that 80% of Syrian armed forces equipment consists of Russian-made weapons and hardware, and that Syria's state debt to Russia amounts to approximately USD 15 billion, it is assumed that new agreements would be made more attractive for the al-Sharaa regime than the previous arrangements with al-Assad. At the same time, Moscow will not extradite al-Assad and his close associates, but is prepared to consider the issue of unfreezing Syrian financial assets held in Russian banks and affiliated commercial structures.

Damascus is interested in Russia intensifying efforts to transform the Khmeimim airbase into an air-defense shield for Syria's Mediterranean and central regions by deploying Russian air-defense systems such as the S-300 and S-400, as well as electronic warfare assets that were dismantled in 2016. For its part, Moscow wants the Syrian authorities to agree that the base, as before, should remain under Russian military control and serve operational-tactical and logistical purposes for Russian operations in Africa and for ensuring Russia's strategic security on its southern flanks. In the interest of ensuring security on the Golan Heights, Moscow is prepared to consider the deployment of a Russian peacekeeping contingent in al-Quneitra. Russia is also interested in continuing to strengthen its military presence at the airfield in Qamishli. Possible steps include Russia's participation in opening new border crossings on the Syrian-Turkish border (similar to Abu al-Zeydan in 2024), joint Russian-Turkish patrols along the M4 highway, and the resumption of work begun in 2024 on constructing a Russian base in the Ayn al-Arab area.

These measures could facilitate the establishment of working contacts in the fight against international terrorism with Kurdish armed formations, which control several prisons holding tens of thousands of ISIS militants along with their families. It would also be easier for Moscow to work on adapting to new conditions those officers of the Assad army and security services who took refuge in this area, gradually incorporating them into the structures of the new Syrian army, based on the experience of interaction with the former Eighth Brigade of the Syrian Arab Army, militias, and tribes of southern Syria in 2021–2022³⁴.

Strengthening security in northeastern Syria could create favorable conditions for attracting Russian oil and gas companies to this resource-rich region. The participation of Russian companies in exploration, extraction, restoration, and use of oil and gas pipeline routes from Iraq to Baniyas and Latakia appears particularly important in light of crude oil deliveries from Azerbaijan to Europe via northern Syria under the patronage of Turkey and the United States, which began in August 2025 without any regard for Russian interests. The several hundred thousand tons of crude oil supplied by Russia since February 2025 via a tanker fleet operating under foreign flags certainly improve Russia's image in Syrian business circles, but do not provide a comprehensive solution to the problem of strengthening Russian influence in Syria's political and economic niche. Enhancing Russia's presence in areas critical to Syria's security implies accompanying military measures with active humanitarian diplomacy. From this perspective, it would be advisable to extend agreements reached with the Syrian regime on establishing a Russian military field hospital in al-Suwayda to the coastal regions and northeastern Syria. Since the 1970s–1980s, contacts with the Druze community of Lebanon and Syria have served as an important instrument for strengthening Russia's positions in the Levant. Today, about 90% of Druze doctors and engineers in the Levant were educated in Russia, and many are married to Russian citizens. An active segment of the Syrian diaspora in Moscow is represented by the Druze. Removing the "Druze dossier" from the influence of Israel and the United States

³⁴ *Grajewski N.* The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria. CSIS, 2021.

and returning it to Russia's political assets appears important given the situation in southern Syria.

Moscow has extensive experience in interacting with religious minorities of the Levant. Unlike France and Great Britain, Russia never had colonies in the Levant. Taking into account the general trend of anti-neocolonialism in Arab countries' policies, Moscow can intensify its engagement with Syrian minorities based on their sympathies toward Russia. Such sentiments manifested themselves quite clearly during the Syrian conflict and the events on the Syrian coast in March 2025. The societal dimension of Russia's policy in the SAR should not contradict the development of relations with the new Syrian leadership, which represents the Sunni majority, and should be pursued under the banner of creating favorable conditions for a national dialogue in the interests of the swift adoption of a new Constitution and the strengthening of Syria's unity and sovereignty. From this standpoint, Russia's interaction with minorities should be based not on confessional grounds but on principles of citizenship. Otherwise, Moscow risks losing out to large transboundary ethno-confessional communities of the Arab East, which increasingly influence the determination of key policy parameters of regional states.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the brother of the current Syrian leader (who has held several senior positions in the new administration) graduated from Voronezh State Medical Academy with a degree in gynecology and is married to a Russian citizen who runs a business in southern Russia. This seemingly isolated fact underscores the need to resume active engagement with the Russian-speaking diaspora, which prior to the events of 2011, together with Russian women married to Syrians and migrants from Russia's North Caucasus regions, had numbered around 250,000 people and later became divided over assessments of Moscow's policy during the Civil War. Such work implies not only granting Russian citizenship and issuing Russian foreign passports, but also mobilizing the Russian-speaking diaspora of the SAR in Russia's interests. At the same time, given the uncertainty surrounding the current Syrian regime's ability to retain power amid escalating tensions in the Middle East, these measures should be pursued in a balanced and carefully considered manner.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.



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