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Russia in Syria: A Long Road to Victory

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Russia's military involvement in Syria from September 2015 led to the collapse of the rebels opposing the regime and secured the continued rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In the short term this reinforced Russia's regional and international standing, and encouraged Moscow's hopes of economic and political fruits. Yet over time, Moscow saw it was unable to restore security and stability to Syria and advance the country's reconstruction, and finds itself sinking in the mire of local enmities within Syria, as well as the mire of regional enmities. These entanglements have become a Russian problem, and Moscow finds itself with no readily available solution. In addition, Russia's hopes of leveraging its Syrian achievements against the United States in order to promote Russian interests elsewhere in the world have been dashed. Consequently, involvement in Syria, which at first looked like a knockout against rivals and enemies, has become a source of strategic discomfort for Russia. Significant resources, time, and effort must clearly precede any enjoyment by Russia of the fruits of military achievements in Syria.

Keywords: Russia, Syria, United States, Israel, Syrian civil war

Introduction

Russia's military involvement in Syria from September 2015 was decisive on the civil war battlefield. The unrestrained use of military force, mostly from the air, backed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Shiite militias that the Iranians brought with them into Syria, led to the collapse of the various rebel groups opposing the Syrian regime and secured the continued rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The self-control, the determination, and some would say, the brutality demonstrated by the Russian President in order to achieve his goals in Syria stood in direct contrast to the lack of interest, indecision, and perhaps even weakness shown by the United States administrations over the past decade.

Moscow's achievement appeared to restore its standing in the Middle East, which it lost following the collapse of the Soviet Union three decades ago. It seemed as if it could also make Vladimir Putin the power broker in Syria, and perhaps beyond. The self-control, the determination, and some would say, the brutality demonstrated by the Russian President in order to achieve his goals in Syria stood in direct contrast to the lack of interest, indecision, and perhaps even weakness shown by the United States administrations over the past decade with respect to the Syrian crisis, as well as other Middle East issues on the agenda.

Yet as the months and years went by, it became clear to the Russians that their military victory on Syria's battlefields painted an incomplete picture. More specifically, critical goals remained beyond their reach, including the achievement of calm and the restoration of security and stability throughout the country; initiation of the process of reconstruction of Syria's economy and institutions; and restoration of Syria's status as a member of the international community. They were therefore forced to continue and even intensify their

military presence in Syria and their political, security, and economic involvement.

Furthermore, it became clear to Moscow that in order to advance its ambitions and objectives in Syria, it needed the goodwill of the theater's regional actors, such as Turkey, Israel, Iran, and the Gulf states, but they in turn were far from exhibiting enthusiasm for the Russian presence in Syria. Even Tehran, Russia's partner in the defeat of the Syrian rebel camp, sees Moscow as a rival for influence and control of the country. The Russians also need financial resources that are not immediately available, and that ironically depend on the help of Western countries, led by the United States, and even the Gulf states.

In the absence of political prospects for resolving the crisis in Syria, Moscow finds itself sinking in the mire of local enmities within Syria, as well as in the mire of regional enmities that have emerged in the shadow of the civil war—such as the enmity between Israel and Iran, or between the Kurds and the Turks. The quagmire is gradually becoming a Russian problem, and Moscow finds itself without an easily available solution.

In addition, Russia's hopes of leveraging its Syrian achievements against the United States in order to promote Russian political and security interests elsewhere in the world have been dashed. Russia discovered that Washington has no interest in conducting a real dialogue with them, let alone concluding a deal on Syria. Instead, Washington has continued to make unilateral and sometimes unexpected moves on Syrian soil and throughout the Middle East, presenting the Russians with *faits accomplis*. Surprisingly, each time this happened, the Russians were deterred and avoided any direct conflict with the US.

Thus Russian involvement in Syria, which at first looked like a convincing knockout against Moscow's rivals and enemies inside Syria and beyond, and an important if not essential step toward establishing its status as a leading regional power, has gradually become a source

of strategic discomfort for the Russians, casting a shadow on its important military and political achievements there.

Russia and the Civil War in Syria

The blood-soaked civil war that raged in Syria over the past decade has been decided. The rebel camp that sought to overthrow the regime of Bashar al-Assad was defeated in battle. The rebels, or what is left of them—the armed groups, some of them Salafi-jihadist—still control the region of Idlib in the north, but this is thanks to the protection provided by Turkey. The Kurds for their part, under American protection, have established an autonomous region in the northeast of the country, although it is doubtful whether it will survive for long (Zisser, 2020; Ajami, 2012).

Unlike its enemies, the Syrian regime is in control, even if not complete, over most Syrian territory. It controls the large urban centers, the traffic routes, and the border crossings. At the same time, it continues to have difficulty in imposing its authority and maintaining governance in the rural and peripheral areas where the revolt broke out a decade ago. Although the armed groups active in these spaces have ceased fighting, they refuse to submit to the authority of the state and its institutions, and continue to maintain their independence. It is not surprising that the regime is hard-pressed to launch a process of economic reconstruction, which is essential for its ability to restore stability and calm in the long term, and above all to secure popular support. Nonetheless, the ongoing danger of the regime falling to the rebel camp, evident throughout the decade, has passed (Tsurkov, 2017).

The decisive result on the Syrian battlefield was achieved thanks to the involvement of Russia and Iran, which came to the aid of Bashar al-Assad as soon as the fighting erupted in March 2011. For example, Moscow provided extensive economic and military aid, which enabled the Syrian regime to survive the first few months of the uprising. It also took

action to block an attempt by the UN Security Council to adopt resolutions that amounted to condemnation of Bashar, or ascribe guilt or responsibility for the crisis in the country to him, and blocked resolutions that could have provided international legitimacy for the military action against him (Zisser, 2020, pp. 197-209).

In September 2013, Russia orchestrated the agreement to force Syria to destroy its chemical weapons. This agreement allowed US President Barack Obama to back down following the Syrian President's use of chemical weapons in August 2013 in the area of al-Ghouta al-Sharakia, east of Damascus. This attack prompted an American threat of a military response against the Syrian regime, which was obviated by the agreement finalized by Moscow and Washington (Rhodes, 2018; Hashemi, 2017).

The Middle East has traditionally been an arena of action for Russia (not only Czarist Russia, but also and mainly the Soviet Union), due to its geographical proximity and to the historic ties that linked Moscow to many Arab countries, particularly the socialist republics. These, led by Syria, were controlled by military regimes and were, at one stage or another of their historical development, its close allies. The seepage of Islamic terror from the Middle East to the Muslim areas of Russia also obliged Moscow to keep an eye on events in the region (Jones, 2020; Kozhanov, 2016). Finally, the importance of the Syrian arena specifically lay in Moscow's realization that in order to once again play a central role in the international arena, and in this way correct the "catastrophe" of the Soviet Union's breakup, which was the term once used by Vladimir Putin, Moscow must recapture positions of influence in the Middle East ("Putin Wants to Establish a New 'Soviet Union,'" 2011). The Syrian arena appeared to provide the Russians with the opportunity to do so.

Russia's Involvement in Syria

Moscow's direct military involvement in Syria began in September 2015, when it appeared

that the rebels might be gaining the upper hand and Bashar's days as President were numbered. The Iranians, or more precisely al-Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, pressured Russia to intervene in the civil war. Contacts between the two countries began in the spring of 2015, after Iran warned Moscow that the Syrian army was growing weaker and there was a danger that Bashar's regime would collapse. Consequently, President Putin decided to intervene militarily in the war, in collaboration with Iran (al-Safir, 2015).

The Russian-Iranian partnership, which was undoubtedly bolstered by their shared enmity toward the United States, was fundamentally intended to enable both countries to work together to achieve military victory in Syria, but no more than that.

In retrospect and with the benefit of hindsight, some in Moscow have argued that Russia should have intervened in the Syrian war as early as 2011, and thus quash the revolt in its infancy, before the regime lost control of wide swaths of territory and before the armed groups active in the rebellion took on Islamist colors. Above all, this intervention would have occurred before the Iranians, accompanied by Hezbollah, managed to implant in the Syrian regime the belief that it was thanks to them that it survived the first years of the war, and thus create a sense of obligation to Iran and even dependency on it, which Tehran exploited in order to entrench its presence in Syria (personal interview with a Russian diplomat, June 30, 2019).

Beginning in September 2015, the Russians dispatched war planes and helicopters to Syria, while the Syrian army attacked areas controlled by the rebels, mainly in western Syria, with the focus on civilian targets and infrastructure. These attacks, which caused enormous damage to the civilian population, were designed to harm the civilian rear that granted protection and even support to the rebel groups, and thus

to destroy their ability to fight. Fighting on the ground was entrusted to Tehran, which sent into battle Hezbollah fighters and Shiite militia volunteers from all parts of the Middle East, who were recruited, trained, and financed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Tehran also sent Iranian fighters to Syria, but recalled them due to high casualty rates among their ranks. However, the Russians left Washington and its allies to handle the fight against ISIS and the caliphates it established in eastern Syria (Duclos, 2019).

Moscow seemed to have learned the lesson of its failed involvement in Afghanistan in the 1980s and refrained from sending ground troops to fight on Syrian soil, and instead chose to use the help of Tehran and its proxies in the region. However, the Russian-Iranian partnership, which was undoubtedly bolstered by their shared enmity toward the United States, was fundamentally intended to enable both countries to work together to achieve military victory in Syria, but no more than that. Indeed, once this victory was achieved, the differences of opinion, competition, and even hostility between Tehran and Moscow regarding the future of Syria quickly emerged (Adamsky, 2018).

Moscow's success in the campaign, above all, securing the continued rule of Bashar al-Assad—when it seemed that his fate was decided and his days in power were numbered—made it an important and powerful actor, whose favor was sought and whose views were given weight by everyone in the region and elsewhere (Rosenberg, 2019). To be sure, the brutal and unrestrained use of military power, mainly aerial, against largely civilian targets, damaged Russia's image in the West (Human Rights Watch, 2020). On the other hand, it strengthened its image in the eyes of local actors in Syria and the region that were deeply impressed by the determination and destructiveness it used to promote its objectives, as well as its readiness to help an ally in trouble, and in this context, to come to the aid of the Syrian President. This stood in marked contrast to

the Obama administration, which turned its back on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak when rioting erupted in the streets of Cairo in January 2011, and which later refrained from supporting General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi when he led the revolution of June 30, 2013, which toppled the regime of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliate President Mohamed Morsi.

Israel and Turkey, Syrian neighbors with an interest in developments there, were undoubtedly impressed by the display of Russian strength and worked to prevent a possible conflict with Moscow. This was seen in Ankara, after a Russian warplane was brought down by Turkish aircraft in November 2015 (Ersen, 2017), and in Jerusalem right from the start of the Russian involvement in Syria, and certainly when it was accused by the Russians of responsibility for the incident in which a Russian reconnaissance aircraft was shot down by Syrian air defenses, following an Israeli attack on Syrian soil in September 2018 (Harel, 2018; Zeitoun & Eichner, 2018). Ankara and Jerusalem therefore came to terms with Moscow's intervention in Syria and refrained from interfering or hampering its efforts to bring the war in Syria to a decisive conclusion. At the same time, they remained committed to their interests in that country, and continued operating on its soil, often to Moscow's displeasure. Yet Russia was surprisingly restrained and evinced a willingness to stomach their moves, even if it had no choice, and in any event refrained from dragging any disagreement with them down to the level of a crisis or open hostility. Moscow was even willing—or perhaps forced—to reach understandings with them, in view of Israel's ongoing attacks on Iranian targets in Syria, or in view of the ongoing Turkish presence in northern Syria. All this was sometimes at the expense of the Syrian regime or even at the expense of Tehran (Yukselen, 2020).

Syria was not the only arena where the Russians demonstrated their power, or more precisely their ambition, to once again play a central role in the Middle East. In Egypt, Moscow

stood behind the regime of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi after the revolution that toppled the Morsi regime (Shafir et al., 2014). The Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, also sought rapprochement with Russia. In June 2015, Saudi Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman visited Russia to discuss the purchase of Russian weapons, and two years later, on October 5, 2017, King Salman bin Abdulaziz arrived in the Russian capital, the first visit of its kind. Perhaps the Gulf states hoped that Russia could support them against Iran, in view of their fears that the United States would not come to their aid in their hour of need (Osimo, 2017). In Sudan, the Russians sought to gain a foothold in Port Sudan, while also strengthening their ties with South Sudan. In Libya, Moscow helped General Khalifa Haftar establish his rule in the east of the country in the face of his Turkish-backed enemies, apparently in an attempt to get their hands on Libya's oil reserves (*Spotlight on Russia and the Middle East*, 2020; Svetlova, 2020).

Russia in Syria: A Partial Victory?

Despite its military decision on the Syrian battlefield, Russia came to realize that it still had far to go before it could leverage this victory into meaningful political, security, or economic achievements.

The Russians had hoped that the decision on the battlefield would enable the Syrian regime to stand on its own two feet and restore calm and stability throughout the country, thus releasing them from the need to continue investing financial and human resources to maintain ongoing security. The restoration of stability would also enable the Russians to proceed with the promotion of Syrian economic reconstruction, thus not only securing long-term stability but also enabling the Russians to “reap their profit,” or at least recover some of the costs of their military involvement in Syria. The return of the Syrian regime to the inter-Arab and international arena as a legitimate actor, even under Russian patronage, would have

helped Moscow in its efforts to reduce Iran's presence and influence in Syria to the absolute minimum, and would have also eased some of the tangled regional rivalries and disputes that broke out on Syrian soil and embroiled the Russians.

But none of this happened, at least not at the speed and in the manner that the Russians expected and hoped.

Russia as an actor in the internal Syrian arena: After the rebel camp collapsed, the Russians worked to promote ceasefire agreements as well as local reconciliation agreements between the regime and many of the armed groups operating throughout the country. These arrangements sometimes included Russian protection for the groups, allowing them to keep their weapons and even maintain some degree of autonomy in the areas where they were active. Thus, these armed groups continued to operate as local actors with their own agendas and limited ties to the state and its institutions—primarily in order to receive its services. However, they refused to allow the forces of the Syrian regime to deploy in areas under their control. As a result, the Russians became actively involved in the internal Syrian arena, often at the expense of the regime in Damascus, which was forced repeatedly to call on its services as a broker vis-à-vis the local forces operating under Moscow's auspices.

Partial success in the effort to rebuild the Syrian army: The Russians invested considerable efforts to rebuild the Syrian army and improve its operational fitness. They led a process of structural reorganization, including with new units, paid for by the Russians, who had some degree of influence over their commanders. The Russians also equipped the Syrian army with advanced weapon systems such as the S-300 air defense missiles. The system was delivered to Damascus following the downing of a Russian plane by Syrian missiles that were fired at Israeli planes in September 2018. However, Russian success in reconstructing the Syrian army was only partial, because at the end of the civil war

the Syrian army was left utterly depleted, with a shortage of manpower and operational ability, not only against Israel or Turkey, but also against domestic enemies seeking to take control in various parts of the country—whether ISIS, which continued to operate on the fringes of the Syrian desert in the south and east, or the groups of armed rebels that operated under Turkish patronage in the north, and occasionally other armed groups that refused to submit to the regime's authority (Barel, 2012; Valensi & Dekel, 2020).

The weakness of the Syrian regime and army forced the Russians to pin their hopes on local forces that they established and sponsored. An example is the Fifth Corps, which was originally planned as a fighting strike force whose goal was to defeat the rebels in battle, but in effect became a militia that relied partly on armed groups that were previously in the rebel camp and had laid down their arms. For example, in southern Syria, Fifth Corps forces operated under the command of Ahmed al-Oudeh, the former commander of one of these rebel groups, Shabab al-Sunneh. It appears that the Russians viewed this situation as a necessary evil, fearing that it would be hard for the regime to take control of the region using only its own forces, or that militias faithful to Iran would ultimately take over. But the unavoidable outcome was that it sank into the quagmire of internal disputes, instead of being able to rely on the Syrian regime ("Russian-backed Fifth Corps," 2020).

In view of its weakness, the regime continued to rely on help from Russia, but also and perhaps mainly from Iran and the Shiite militias. Iran was quick to exploit this dependency to extract concessions from the Syrians, and above all to achieve positions of influence and power—politically, economically, and militarily—to assure its hold on the country for the foreseeable future. The Iranians were also helped by Shiite militias from outside the area, such as Fatimiyoun, Khaydariyoun, and Zainebiyoun, whose personnel were recruited

in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan, and operated under the Revolutionary Guards Quds Force. But in addition, Iran, like the Russians, lent its patronage to armed groups and even sought to take control of regular Syrian forces such as the Fourth Division under the command of Maher al-Assad, brother of the Syrian President. This division is perceived as being close to Iran and under its influence, although in the spring of 2021 there were reports of clashes with Shiite militias brought to Syria by Iran (Harmoon, 2020; al-Assi, 2020; “Clashes Continued,” 2021). The result was competition, rivalry, and even outright tension that often erupted into the open, leading to actual clashes between militias that relied on Russian support and those that were supported by Iran, and ultimately, between all of them and the forces of the regular Syrian army (“Fourth Division,” 2021; Mardasov, 2019; “11 Dead in Syrian Clashes,” 2019).

While all this tended to weaken the Syrian regime, at the same time it gave it room to maneuver vis-à-vis its patrons and enabled it to maintain a certain degree of independence. As evidence, Bashar more than once made it hard for Moscow to promote moves in the international arena or together with Arab countries and Turkey that were intended to reap political gains that could force his regime to make concessions and compromises. Even with Iran, Bashar was careful to maintain his freedom to decide and act, and for example, refrained from letting them drag him into conflict with Israel whenever Israel attacked Iranian targets on Syrian soil.

The economic aspect: Moscow wanted to lead Syria’s reconstruction process, while gaining possession of economic assets, such as the Port of Tartus, which was leased to Russia by the Syrian government for 49 years for both military and economic purposes. The Russians also took steps to obtain contracts in the fields of construction, transport, electricity and water, industry, and agriculture. They invested particular effort in the attempt to acquire concessions to search for and produce gas from

the gas fields along the Syrian Mediterranean coast, and from the oil and gas fields to the east of Syria. Companies owned by Russian oligarchs even sent Russian mercenaries to secure their grip on these fields, which were mostly in Kurdish-controlled areas, and this led to clashes between Russian mercenaries and Kurdish forces, as well as clashes with US forces stationed in the region. The US soldiers drove back the Russian mercenaries, inflicting many casualties on them (Kofman, 2019). There were also reports that attempts by regular Russian forces to establish a presence in the Kurdish areas, and in other parts of the country such as Jabal al-Druze, often encountered opposition from the local population, which refused to accept Russian offers of patronage and financial aid, and more than once met them with demonstrations and stone-throwing (Tsurkov, 2021).

Whatever the case, the ability of the Russians to derive gains from their hold on Syria remains limited. Post-war Syria is a ruined country, with some three quarters of its economic infrastructure destroyed. According to estimates, reconstruction will cost hundreds of billions of dollars, if including the oil and gas sectors, water supplies, electricity, and agriculture, which before the war was the source of income for over a third of the population.

Indeed, Syria’s economic resources are meager at best, and even its Russian and Iranian allies lack the means required to rebuild its economic infrastructure, or even provide the basic necessities for its population. Iran is under economic sanctions imposed by the Trump administration, and Russia also faces considerable problems, partly due to sanctions imposed by the Western powers (Asseburg, 2020). All this became clear when Syria’s economic distress deteriorated from early 2020 onward. This distress derived from the civil war and was compounded by the pandemic, which struck Syria in spring 2020, and the more stringent American sanctions on Damascus, such as the Caesar Act advanced by the US

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administration in late 2019. This situation led to a shortage of oil and foreign currency, with obvious repercussions for the population's economic plight, and for the first time in several years there were protests against the regime, such as in as-Suwayda in the Jabal al-Druze area in spring 2020, formerly one of the bastions of support for the regime. The help from Iran and Russia—Iranian oil and Russian wheat—was not sufficient, especially as Israel occasionally attacked Iranian containers en route to Syria (AP, 2019; Christou & Shaar, 2020).

The leading priority for the Syrian regime was and remains reconstruction of the military and its security mechanisms, which assured its victory in battle. The regime has never hidden its lack of interest and even its opposition to the return of millions of Sunni refugees who fled the country and whom it sees as potential enemies that can upset the shaky demographic balance between the various communities in Syria. On the other hand, Moscow has a clear interest in encouraging the return of the refugees, as part of Russia's effort to obtain support from the United States and the Europeans for its activity in Syria and lend legitimacy to the Assad regime. The Russian assumption was that such a move would encourage countries of the region, above all Jordan and Turkey, as well as the European countries, to work together to restore stability to Syria.

Thus, for example, in early August 2018 it was reported from Washington that on July 19, 2018, Russian Chief of Staff Valery Gerasimov contacted his American counterpart, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph F. Dunford Jr., through a confidential channel, with a proposal that the United States help reconstruct Syria so that it could re-absorb the refugees that had fled the country. Naturally there was no

response to this request from Washington, and most Syrian refugees likely do not want to return. A conference initiated by the Russians in Damascus in November 2020 to discuss the question of the refugees was a complete failure, partly due to foot-dragging by the Syrian regime (Reuters & AP, 2018; France 24, 2020).

True, Russian sources claimed repeatedly that Russia's expenses for its military involvement in Syria were negligible, since the Russian military presence was based on regular soldiers whose cost to the army is fixed, irrespective of where they serve, so that the costs of the military activity of Russian forces in Syria were the same as the training costs that these forces would require even if they remained in Russia. It was also claimed that the operational experience acquired by the Russian army in Syria was valuable, as well as the essential information that was collected for the Russian arms industries, that are in fact "testing" their new weapons in this arena. However, this appears to be a smokescreen intended to hide the fact that Russian involvement in Syria exacted a heavy price of billions of dollars from the Kremlin—a few hundred million up to a billion each year, and perhaps even more—certainly a high price tag for national pride and the ability to demonstrate strength and power at home and abroad (Ellyatt, 2015; Kofman, 2019).

Russian Entanglement in the Regional and International Struggle for Syria

The Russians presumably hoped that their decisive win on the battlefield would bring an end to foreign involvement in Syria, and at any rate put an end to the fighting on its soil. But the Russians discovered that the end of the Syrian civil war paradoxically only intensified the struggles between the regional and international forces, and new conflicts broke out that until then were hidden or kept on the back burner. Among these are the competition between Russia itself and Iran for control and influence in the country, as

well as the struggle between Israel and Iran on the question of the Iranian presence in Syria and the ongoing involvement of Turkey, which has not abandoned its ambitions, although for the time being they are focused in the north of Syria. Moreover, in spite of President Trump's promises that he would withdraw US forces from Syria, and in spite of the entry of Joe Biden to the White House in January 2021, Washington still has a military presence on Syrian soil.

Iran and Russia: The Competition over Syria

Crushing the revolt and securing the continued rule of Bashar al-Assad led to a reawakening of tension and even enmity between the two allies, who until then had worked together for Bashar's victory. True, this is not a zero-sum game, since both countries continue to cooperate on a range of issues in the Syrian arena and beyond. Ultimately, they aspire to push a common enemy—the United States—out of the region, and in any case both see their own entrenchment with a position of influence and even control in Syria as a strategic goal, and they are both determined to achieve it, even at the other's expense (Behravesch & Cafiero, 2019; Hatahet, 2019).

For Iran, Syria is an important link in the overland route it wishes to create from Iran through Iraq to Lebanon, and it also hopes to make this country its vanguard base against its enemies, above all Israel and the United States. Senior Iranian officials defined Syria as "the golden belt," intended to defend Iran and repel any possible danger (Ahmadian, 2018, 2019). For that purpose, over the past decade Iran has worked to station Shiite militias recruited from all over the Middle East on Syrian soil. It sent regular Iranian forces as well as weapon systems such as UAVs and air defense systems and advanced missiles, some of which are manned by Iranian fighters. Iran has also worked to gain a grip on ports such as Latakia and on Syrian airfields, for economic as well as military reasons, since the deployment of Iranian fleets

or planes in Syria could give Iran deterrent ability and even threaten Israel. It has likewise worked to obtain concessions and contracts to rebuild Syria in the fields of construction, transport, energy, and agriculture, and to set up and operate industrial and economic ventures (Mardasov, 2019; "11 Dead in Syria Clashes," 2019). In addition, the Iranians have worked on promoting a process of "Shiization" among the Alawite population and even among the Sunnis, in order to strengthen and secure the Iranian presence in Syria.

Iran for its part has not hidden its concern and even suspicion that Russia is choosing to ignore or even provide tacit approval for Israel's air attacks in Syria against Iranian targets, as part of Moscow's double game in the area.

Russia has not hidden its concern lest Iran's efforts to acquire permanent strongholds in Syria, both military and civilian, should undermine the country's fragile stability, damage its ability to retain and raise the external investment so vital to its recovery, and perhaps deteriorate into military conflict with Israel. Iran for its part has not hidden its concern and even suspicion that Russia is choosing to ignore or even provide tacit approval for Israel's air attacks in Syria against Iranian targets, as part of Moscow's double game in the area, and this could even lead to Russian cooperation with Israel and the United States on a political move intended to drive Iran out of Syria (Hetou, 2018; "Russia Will Not Allow Syria," 2021).

For his part, Bashar is trying to maneuver between the two, and is determined to maintain his freedom of movement. He gives clear priority to the alliance with Moscow and its patronage, but he still needs Iran and wants to retain his ties with Iran, which, together with Hezbollah, was the first to come to his aid when the war broke out in Syria, and provided important contributions to the victory in the land battles with the rebels. At the same time, there is no

doubt that Bashar is aware that unlike the Russians who base their status in Syria on his regime or on local Syrian forces that form part of the Syrian fabric and are ready to submit—even if only for appearances—to the authority of the state and its institutions, the Iranians are securing their hold in Syria with the help of non-Syrian Shiite militias that they brought into Syria for this purpose. This is a significant development that is not welcomed by Bashar al-Assad or the Russians, and it is not surprising that there are frequent reports of attempts by the Syrian regime to limit the Iranian presence.

Turkey's Role

Turkish military involvement within Syria has focused above all on the attempt to prevent the formation of a Kurdish autonomous region on its border with Syria. In August 2016 Turkey embarked on Operation Euphrates Shield, and in January 2018 on Operation Olive Branch, both intended to prevent the Kurds from achieving territorial contiguity from the east to the Mediterranean coast. In October 2019 the Turks launched Operation Spring of Peace, to topple the Kurdish autonomy in the northwest of Syria and take control of the vital expanse along the border as a kind of buffer zone that they handed to the Syrian rebels who were loyal to them. In early 2020 the Russians encouraged the Syrian regime to attack and take control of the Idlib district. Operation Defense of Spring was Turkey's response in March 2020, when it confronted the forces of the Syrian army and Hezbollah fighters and forced them to stop the attack on Idlib (Dalay, 2020; Gauthier-Villars, 2020).

Thus Russia played a double and even triple game with Ankara, Tehran, and Damascus. In November 2015 Russia came into conflict with Turkey following the downing of a Russian plane by the Turks, but later reached a series of understandings with Ankara regarding Syria (the Moscow Declaration of December 2016 and the Astana and Sochi Conferences in the years 2017-2018). These allowed Russia and

its protégé Bashar al-Assad—even if that was not the original intention of the Turks—to put down the revolt against the Syrian regime and establish its control over large parts of the country, from Aleppo in December 2016 to the Homs area in early 2018. The Russians also reached an unprecedented agreement with Ankara on the sale of a battery of S-400 missiles to Turkey, which was determined to advance the deal in spite of protests and threats from Washington (Tsurkov, 2020; Yuxselen, 2020).

The Struggle between Israel and Iran

The Israeli-Iranian struggle that began on Syrian soil appears to be the most volatile, and with the most potential for spiraling out of control and igniting not only Syria but also other parts of the region.

Israel avoided intervening in the war in Syria in support of any side, apart from limited assistance to armed groups that were active in the towns and villages on the Syrian Golan, but at the same time it exploited the window of opportunity presented by the war for its “campaign between wars” operations against Iran and Hezbollah. During the long years of fighting, Israel carried out a series of repeated aerial attacks in order to interfere with the transfers of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah; prevent Iranian Revolutionary Guard forces and pro-Iranian Shiite militias from strengthening their grip on Syria; and slow down the progress of the precision project, which was designed to allow missiles that Iran had supplied to Hezbollah to be converted into advanced long-range missiles with precision capabilities. Later Israel also attacked Iranian tankers taking oil to Syria (Lappin, 2019).

But it was hard for Israel to maintain a low profile in this struggle against Iran, and expanding the scope of its military attacks in Syria gave them public acknowledgment; thus a limited, secret campaign became an open, broad, and frontal struggle. Israeli attacks on Syrian soil led to exchanges of blows between Israel and Iran, such as the missiles fired by Iran

toward the Golan Heights in May 2018, or the Israeli response against Iranian targets all over Syria. Israel's moves did impede Iran's efforts to consolidate a military grip in Syria, but did not completely stop them. The estimate in Israel was and remains that Iran will continue to act, even if more slowly and gradually, to increase its hold on Syria, and that a clash is unavoidable (Marcus, 2019; Eilam, 2020).

Russia tried in its own way to maintain a balance between Iran and Israel, as well as Turkey, inciting them against each other or allowing them to exchange blows and then rushing in to mediate, thus strengthening its position in the region in general. For example, the Russians took steps to prevent any Iranian military presence within 80 km of the border with Israel, but their success was only partial. In any event, moving the focus of Iranian activity to the center of Syria, and even more so to the east of the country, aroused tensions between Russia and Iran in these areas.

The Russian Effort to Achieve a Political Agreement in Syria

It appears that the Russians fully understood the complex reality in which they found themselves, and in fact even during the war and before any military decision was achieved, but clearly following the military victory on the battlefield, they worked to reach a political settlement that would end the war. In the absence of the United States, the Russians turned to Turkey and Iran for help in reaching such a political settlement (Zaman, 2021). However, the understandings achieved by Moscow in the Moscow Declaration and the Astana and Sochi Conferences proved limited and did not bring the hoped-for peace. Moreover, Bashar al-Assad and the Iranians often worked to frustrate these efforts by Russia to promote a political settlement—such as the Geneva talks held under the auspices of the UN with a US presence, starting in 2016; the discussions of the Constitutional Committee starting in October 2019; or the meeting of the Conference on Refugee Affairs in December

2020—whenever they suspected that such a settlement would be at their expense or harm their interests.

Russia tried in its own way to maintain a balance between Iran and Israel, as well as Turkey, inciting them against each other or allowing them to exchange blows and then rushing in to mediate, thus strengthening its position in the region in general.

Russia against the United States in the Syrian Crisis

To an onlooker from the sidelines it appears as if the Russians exploited the weakness and particularly the apparent indecision of the United States, which only wished to withdraw from a region whose strategic importance for it as a source of energy was declining and almost disappearing, or at least to avoid sinking into any renewed involvement there. It is therefore understandable why many in the Middle East saw the helplessness and even lack of interest shown by the Americans regarding the Russian moves in Syria, and the response of the White House to the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the collapse of many Arab regimes that had been allies of Washington for many years, as an expression of the declining regional and even international status of the United States (Batchelor, 2015; Philips, 2016).

But it appears that Russia itself had no such illusions, and therefore continued to be concerned by the power of the United States and its ability to damage Russian interests in Syria, the Middle East, and throughout the world. After all, Russian involvement in Syria was originally intended, inter alia, to score points in their struggle against the United States in various hotspots worldwide, such as Ukraine and the Baltic States, Central Asia, and the Far East.

Therefore, from the outset of its involvement in Syria, Moscow showed willingness to cooperate with Washington on the promotion of a political settlement for the Syrian crisis.

Perhaps this was just a pretense designed to buy time for Moscow to pursue a military decision on the battlefield, but the fact is that Russia did not shut the door to any dialogue with the United States that could make further fighting unnecessary and grant them a “political victory” essentially disarming the rebels and leaving Bashar al-Assad in place. The Russian recognition of the need for a political settlement to complete their military victory increased, certainly as they came to understand the challenge and the difficulty of stabilizing the situation in Syria and of realizing their military achievements (Hetou, 2018; Parker, 2019; Talbott & Tennis, 2020).

But to their surprise the Russians discovered that neither the Obama administration nor the Trump administration had any interest or desire for a real dialogue with them on the future of Syria, and certainly had no interest in reaching an overall deal that tied the Syrian question to other issues of interest to the United States in crisis areas elsewhere. It appears that in the absence of any clear American interest in Syria, Washington came to the conclusion that it would be better to refrain from any involvement in the Syrian war, except for the fight against ISIS, and subsequently, protection of its Kurdish allies (Ford, 2021).

Presumably the United States estimated or even hoped at first that Russia would become mired in a demanding morass, as occurred in Afghanistan a few decades earlier (Bahout, 2015). However, whenever their pressing security interests were involved, the Americans took unilateral moves without considering the Russians, such as establishing and maintaining their presence in southern Syria, around the al-Tanf base in the southeast, or in Kurdish areas in the northeast, where most of the Syrian oilfields are located (Harris, 2018).

On December 20, 2018, President Donald Trump tweeted his intention to withdraw American forces, some two thousand troops, out of Syria (“Trump Gives No Timetable for Pullout,” 2019). Trump’s announcement sparked

severe criticism of the United States, including among its allies in the Middle East, headed by Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Kurds, who enjoyed autonomy in the north under American protection, embarked on contacts with Russia and the Damascus regime, with which they were careful to maintain open channels of communication throughout the war, and were even ready to allow the return of the Syrian army to areas under their control, in order to prevent Turkey from taking over (Arkin, 2018). But Trump kept to his plan, explaining that, “We’re talking about sand and death....We’re not talking about vast wealth [a country with resources]” (Marcin, 2019). However, under pressure from his advisers and allies, and possibly from a desire to maintain American control of the oilfields in northern Syria, Trump left the US troops in place, and the Biden administration, which came into power in January 2021, is in no hurry to withdraw them.

Whatever the case, Washington still has a military presence of a few thousand troops on Syrian soil, and under its protection the Kurds have established an independent government on about a quarter of its territory. The economic pressure exerted by the US on Iran, and indirectly on Syria, has certainly weakened those countries, and even if Washington continues to withdraw forces from Syria, without active American involvement it will be hard to start the process of reconstruction for Syria and its economy. Consequently, with regard to Syria’s future, a lot depends on what President Biden decides: will he retain the view that the United States has no interest in the Middle East and Syria, and take steps to withdraw the American troops still there, thus leaving the country to the mercies of Bashar al-Assad and his allies Russia and Iran; or will he continue to promote a policy of active involvement in Syria, which would have significant implications for the future of the country and for Russian involvement.

In a more general perspective, the Arab countries as well as Turkey and Israel have sought to advance their relations with Russia,

but at each junction or point in time, the Arab countries have preferred the friendship of the United States, as well as the financial and security aid that it offers them, over the embrace of the Russian bear. In the end, all that Putin's Russia could give them were weapons, or alternatively, the assurance that it would refrain from harming them or their interests. But it could certainly not grant them the economic aid many of them desperately need. Moreover, Moscow's ability to influence its partners turned out to be quite limited, as Iran has continued to operate against Israel and against many Arab countries.

Thus it appears that the well-known rule about my enemy's enemy—and in this case the threatening shadow of Iran, which has become Moscow's friend—is what led many of the Gulf states to continue sheltering under the wings of the United States, with which they have maintained a network of close security, political, and economic ties for many years. After that, all the United States needed to restore its standing in the region was to land a blow against Bashar al-Assad in April 2017, and a year later in April 2018, when his army used chemical weapons, and to eliminate Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. This was enough to deter Iran, as well as Russia (Katz, 2020).

Conclusion

Russia's military intervention in the war in Syria went well, and led to a decision on the battlefield. This convincing victory, achieved thanks to the unrestrained determination of the Russians against their rivals and enemies, would give them not only hegemony in Syria and influence on its geopolitical environment, but also economic, military, and political gains.

But the end of the Syrian civil war has not brought peace and stability, and without economic resources, it is hard for the Russians to start the economic reconstruction that is essential to secure the future of its investment in the country. Moreover, the end of the war paradoxically led to the outbreak of new

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struggles that until then were hidden from view or kept on the back burner.

Whatever the case, it has emerged that Russian involvement in Syria, which at first looked like Moscow's convincing knockout over rivals and enemies inside Syria and beyond, and an important and perhaps essential step to establish its status as a leading regional power, is gradually becoming a source of concern and a headache for the Russians. They are required to invest ever-growing resources to maintain their hold on the country, and to this end, ironically, also need the support of their rivals and adversaries—Iran or Turkey at the regional level, and the United States at the international level.

The Russians have thus found themselves at a dead end in Syria, or sinking in a demanding quagmire of disputes and of "ridiculous and endless wars, many of them tribal-based," according to President Trump, who at the end of 2019 explained the rationale behind his decision to pull his troops out of Syria (Wright, 2019).

True, Russia's image as the all-powerful neighborhood bully was strengthened at home and throughout the Middle East, and since few care what happens in Syria, the arena was left almost entirely under its control, and Moscow was also able to enjoy its economic resources, however limited. Russia's determination to fight for its allies also gave it some points, certainly in the eyes of regional rulers.

Russia's most important asset is its ability to cause damage, which deters many and leads others to take it and its views into consideration, or even try to placate it and gain its good will.

Yet even so, the Syrian case is different, because Russia's ability to cause damage was not viable leverage against its rivals and enemies. Rather, Syria is a case of an asset that is owned by Moscow and from which it is trying to derive profit, and only partially succeeding.

Thus, the Russians learned that the United States, as well as Turkey and Israel, also has the ability to cause damage, and they must take this into account, since it could harm their efforts to promote peace and stability in Syria. These actors have no interest in strengthening the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. For that reason, Moscow was forced to be very cautious in its dealings with Ankara, Jerusalem, and Washington, and certainly had to bite its tongue many times in order to secure their cooperation, or at least to dissuade them from intervening or thwarting its efforts to promote its interests in Syria.

In the final account, it is impossible to shake off the impression that the days of world wars, both hot and cold, have long gone, and with them the importance of military strongholds, which, rather, become a source of political, military, and above all economic headaches for those that try stubbornly to cling to what they see as an expression of national strength or a source of economic gains. It is true that Russia is the current winner in the "struggle for Syria," and there is no doubt that the determination and military force it demonstrated are important for its regional and international status. Nonetheless, it is still hard-pressed to reap the fruits of its victory.

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