

THE POLITICO-MILITARY ASPECTS OF RUSSIAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

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Abstract: The Civil War that erupted in Syria in 2011 has become a critical conflict in the Middle East, leading to the political and military involvement of the Russian Federation, the U.S., Turkey and other regional powers. Russia's direct engagement against the opposition fighting the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has proved to be a game-changer, contributing to the fight against extremist movements, namely ISIS and other similar organizations. The conflict has highlighted the confrontation of interests among the nations involved (especially Russia and the U.S.) and the Russian desire to be recognized again as a global player. For the Russian armed forces, it has provided an opportunity to train its soldiers in combat and to test weapon systems in the conditions of real warfare. With its involvement in Syria, Russia has also gained access to the Mediterranean and the opportunity to extend the reach of its anti-access/area denial weapons systems and to verify the effectiveness of various war tactics and procedures still under development.

Keywords: Syria, Middle East, Russian armed forces, combat operations, international relations

1. Introduction

The instability in the Middle East, as demonstrated by the 'Arab Spring' and other democratically motivated revolutions, was an unexpected development for the West, and especially for Europe, causing significant concern among political and economic elites. Reliable former 'friends' and business partners, such as Muammar Gaddafi, disappeared in a relatively short time span, leaving behind only dust and rumours, which are still floating around the Middle East. Such regime changes also affect the ownership of natural resources and pipelines and the overall instability, which has fostered the emergence of radical movements. The latter has already proved to be a serious threat to Western democracies but also has the potential to impact security in a much broader region. The threat of expanding terrorism also affects the Russian Federation, and is one of the underlying motivating factors behind its attempts to stabilise the region by enhancing its influence over selected countries, while, at the same time, trying to curtail the influence of the U.S.

and other Western nations on regional leaders. As such, this seems to be a long-term vision and one of the most important aspects of Russian foreign policy, with Syria at its centre. Currently Russia is continuing the confrontation of interests, which is reminiscent of the Cold War, when ideology played a decisive role in the drive to achieve strategic dominance and control of natural resources. The Middle East (*Средний Восток* in Russian) is a very complex and extremely unstable region due to its divergent cultures, religions, ethnic groups, and nations ranging from poor to extremely wealthy, coupled with local leaders' ambitions and the internal struggle for regional dominance. Furthermore, its location at the crossroads of Eurasia and Africa, surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean, is an important factor related to land and sea lines of communications. What is more, the geographical location of the region is also important from the perspective of the locations of critical oil and gas pipelines, and gaining control over the distribution of strategic goods.

The 'colour revolutions' in the Middle East and the war in Syria have been borne out of harsh autocratic regimes, which were opposed, especially by younger generations, with the resulting social inequality and corruption causing unnecessary suffering for the civilian population in the form of war and also by activating radical and terrorist organizations. The side effect was an influx of immigrants looking for safety and security in neighbouring countries and in Europe. The competition among regional players proved once more that security is not guaranteed forever and there is always the potential of igniting a war that will impact all involved parties and many other entities as well.

The aim of this article is to present an overview of the political and economic interests of the Russian Federation along with its military involvement in the Middle East, based on Russia's national interests and desire for international recognition as an actor that is able to implement its own strategic priorities beyond its national borders. Although the focus is on the Russian military presence supporting Syria's governmental forces, there are some underlying political ambitions as well. Russia's pragmatic policy in relation to the assessment of the situation in Syria at the beginning of the war led to successful military deployment, enabling Russia to preserve its national interests both in Syria and also in the larger Middle East region. The operations conducted by the Russian military have proved to be very useful for further development of its armed forces, especially in terms of upgrading its capabilities, while also bolstering its recognition in the Middle East and worldwide. This has also created new markets for the Russian military

industry that can provide new weapon systems for battle-testing to see how they stack up against other suppliers. However, it seems that Russia's military involvement has mainly been a means for leaving a political and economic footprint in the region, along with regaining international recognition as a major player that is able to contribute effectively to ensuring security and stability in endangered regions. The first part of this article focuses on the political and strategic interests of the Russian Federation and the second part provides an overview and presents estimates of the utilization of respective services of the Russian armed forces in the Syrian Civil War.

2. Russia's Foreign Policy and its Strategic Goals

The Russian encyclopaedia defines the Middle East within the informal definition used by European nations describing the region stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to Pakistan, covering Southwest Asia and North Africa, including the Arabian Peninsula.¹ In the South, it is bordered by the Sahara desert and in the north by the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Looking eastwards, it extends to the Indian subcontinent and in the west to the Aegean Sea. In terms of political geography, the Near and Middle East includes Egypt and the Arab countries lying east of it, along with Israel, Turkey and Iran. Sometimes Afghanistan, Pakistan, Cyprus and the countries of North Africa – Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Sudan are also considered Middle Eastern countries.²

The initial period of Russian post-Soviet foreign policy under the leadership of President Yeltsin was perceived by other nations quite favourably, even though Russia itself was embroiled in an internal power struggle while also suffering from economic problems. The perception of Russia as a security threat diminished markedly along with hopes for cooperation instead of competition. As a result of inner turmoil, Russia was forced to refocus on domestic issues, which temporarily led to regions such as the Middle East taking a back seat on the foreign policy agenda, although they were never totally forgotten. The change in Russia's top leadership, the transfer of power from Yeltsin to Putin, led to the revision of foreign policy

¹ **Средний Восток.** – Академик 2000–2019. https://world_countries.academic.ru/1273 (25.08.2019).

² **Ближний и Средний Восток.** – Универсальная научно-популярная энциклопедия Кругосвет. https://www.krugosvet.ru/enc/Earth_sciences/geografiya/BLIZHNI_I_SREDNI_VOSTOK.html (25.08.2019).

priorities, refocusing once again on rebuilding its ‘great power’ status both at the regional as well as global level, with a view to becoming one of the superpowers in the new multipolar balance of powers. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia’s foreign policy was struggling to find its footing, until the 2008 war with Georgia brought it back into prominence on the global stage; a more confrontational approach could clearly be seen, along with increasing investments in its military capabilities³.

In 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Ukraine corroborated the revisionist outlook of Russia’s foreign policy, while also demonstrating the capabilities of its modernized armed forces as an integral part of Russia’s ‘new generation warfare’ concept⁴. Although the focus of Russia’s activities in the international arena was closely intertwined with its domestic policy and the concept of shared neighbourhood or the so-called ‘near abroad’, encompassing former Soviet republics, Moscow has not limited itself to that geographic area alone. One of its potential targets was the destabilized Middle East, which possesses numerous advantages such as its geo-strategic location and economic factors, as the potential playground to deny and challenge U.S. interests and the West’s influence. According to Dmitry Gorenburg, “Russia’s key goals in the region are to reduce instability while increasing its own influence and reducing that of the United States.”⁵ The limited U.S. footprint was one of the consequences of its difficult experience in Iraq after the regular war had ended yet continued in the form of confrontations with rebels. At the same time, the ‘Arab Spring’ was seen in Moscow with some trepidation as it was interpreted as a follow-up to the ‘colour revolutions’ that had led to the overthrow of autocratic regimes, followed by strengthened influence of the U.S. and Western European nations in

³ **Rywkin, M.** 2008. Russia: In Quest of Superpower Status. – American Foreign Policy Interests, Vol 30(1), p. 13; and **Jacques, J.** 2017. Russia’s Return to Superpower Status. – The Trumpet, September 14. <https://www.thetrumpet.com/15647-russias-return-to-superpower-status> (18.11.2019).

⁴ **Герасимов, В.** 2013. Ценность Науки в Предвидении. Новые вызовы требуют переосмыслить формы и способы ведения боевых действий. – Военно-промышленный курьер, No 8 (476), 27.02.2013, Москва. <http://www.vpk-news.ru/articles/14632> (12.11.2019) [**Герасимов** 2013]; **Berzins, J.** 2019. Not ‘Hybrid’ but New Generation Warfare. – Howard, G. E. *et al.* (eds.). Russia’s Military Strategy and Doctrine. The Jamestown Foundation, February 2019, pp. 157–184; **Mattsson, P. A.** 2015. Russian Military Thinking – A New Generation of Warfare. – Journal on Baltic Security, Vol. 1, Issue 1, pp. 61–70.

⁵ **Gorenburg, D.** 2016. Russia’s Strategic Calculus: Threat Perceptions and Military Doctrine. Harvard University: Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, 15 November 2016. [**Gorenburg** 2016] <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/tag/russian-foreign-policy/> (12.10.2019).

the respective countries and in the whole region. The threats perceived by the current Russian leadership led to the emergence of the concept of “new generation warfare” developed under the auspices of General Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia. The so-called Gerasimov doctrine stipulates that there is already an on-going war against Russia, aimed at changing the government using ‘colour revolutions’ and utilising hybrid-type activities.⁶ This has also been pointed out by military analyst Aleksander Golts, referring to an announcement made by an official of the Russian Ministry of Defence that “‘colour revolutions’ were a new type of warfare that the West had developed” in the context of threats.⁷ Such ‘colour revolutions’ have already taken place in Central Asia and the Caucasus, which were seen in Moscow as being potentially dangerous due to their potential to “ignite Russia’s geopolitical ‘underbelly’.”⁸

Subsequently, interventions in Libya, and potentially in Syria, were also seen as an attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign states. Therefore, Russia, along with China, vetoed the UN Security Council resolutions to impose sanctions on Syria. At the same time, it strongly condemned the U.S. and NATO for actions taken in Syria. Historically, this is an interesting case, considering Russia’s decisive action in Kosovo in 1999 (seizing an airport), and subsequent wars in Georgia in 2008 (South Ossetia, Abkhazia) and in Ukraine in 2014 (Crimea, East Ukraine), using armed forces to violate the territorial integrity of sovereign nations. According to Dan Goure, these ventures were based on skilful use of propaganda, the cyber domain, fake news, bribery, paramilitary forces and also something called ‘*lawfare*’, which has been defined as “the strategy of using – or misusing – law as a substitute for traditional military means to achieve an operational objective”⁹ to undermine the adversary’s morale and its capacity to respond and resist.

Russia’s decision to intervene in Syria was based on the assessment that Assad’s chances of survival could be significant, but only if supported by

⁶ **Герасимов** 2013, *op. cit.*, and also in: **Thomas, T.** 2016. Thinking Like A Russian Officer: Basic Factors And Contemporary Thinking On The Nature of War. Fort Leavenworth: The Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO), April 2016, pp. 16–19.

⁷ **Golts, A.** 2018. Military Reform and Militarisation in Russia. – Washington D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, December 2018, p. 253.

⁸ **Trenin, D.** 2018. What is Russia up to in the Middle East? Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 42. [Trenin 2018]

⁹ **Goure, D.** 2019. This Is How Russia Commits “Lawfare” Around The World. – The National Interest, November 3. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/how-russia-commits-lawfare-around-world-93261> (18.11. 2019).

external forces. It proved to be a valid assessment, in contrast to the inaccurate judgement made by the administration of President Obama, based on the assumption that Assad would “not last long.”¹⁰ What is more, Russia has been historically supplying Syria with weapons¹¹, while also educating its officers in the Soviet Union. In return, Russia was granted access to the Syrian port of Tartus in the Mediterranean (upgraded from 2008), used for technical support of the Russian Navy. In 2017, the lease of the Russian navy base in Tartus, Syria was extended for 49 years, enabling Russia to host 11 warships (including nuclear-powered warships) in the Mediterranean. It is a critical win for the Russian Navy since other alternatives in that region are no longer available due to NATO and EU expansion. Moreover, there is a listening post in Tel Al-Hara, Syria, enabling the monitoring of Israeli armed forces, a close U.S. ally in the region. Another example is “the recent establishment of SA21 radars and missile infrastructure in eastern Syria that helps extend the air defence coverage of the Russian Federation over sovereign Turkish (NATO) airspace, including the Incirlik Airbase from where U.S. aircraft operate against terrorists in Syria.”¹²

What proved to be important was that the two nations have been linked by the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation concluded in 1980 between the Soviet Union and the Syrian Arab Republic; the treaty is not a formal alliance but rather an avenue for military cooperation, with the treaty text stating that:

*in the occurrence of situations jeopardizing peace or security for either party, the two parties would promptly contact each other to coordinate positions and cooperate to eliminate emerging threats so that peace can be restored.*¹³

Referring to that document, the Syrian government formally asked for such assistance on 30 September 2015; the request was accepted by the Russian

¹⁰ **Trenin** 2018, p. 49.

¹¹ **Kuimova, A.** 2019. Russia’s Arms Exports to the MENA Region: Trends and Drivers. EUROMESCO Policy Brief, April 01, pp. 8–9.

¹² **Nicholson, J.** 2018. NATO’s Land Forces: Strength and Speed Matter. – PRISM, Vol. 6, No. 2. Washington, National Defence University, July 18, p. 36.

¹³ **Syria, USSR Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation Which Remains in Force.** 2015, quoted in Sputnik News, October 01. <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201510011027817141-Treaty-of-Friendship-Cooperation-Between-USSR-Syria-Which-Remains-in-Force/> (12.09.2019).

government and the Federation Council (i.e. the upper house of the Russian parliament) on the same day.

The Middle East is a special case in the Russian foreign policy framework, as it is closely linked with Russia's ambition to be recognized as a global player once again, as someone who is able to compete with the U.S. for recognition and influence. To that end, Russia has decided to pursue this new opportunity to normalise relations with Iran, taking advantage of the change of leadership in Turkey, the fragile situation in Iraq and the destabilization of the whole region due to changes in governments. The Russian interventions in the Middle East have been aiming to enhance its political footprint and international prestige, something that Moscow has been building up slowly. An important element of this approach is also its domestic aspect, i.e. to demonstrate to the Russian society the strength of the country's leadership which is able to reconstitute the desired image of Russia as a great nation. In that aspect, Russia has not only demonstrated power but has also at the same time proposed some peace-related initiatives together with the U.S., although with limited success. Striving to play an even more prominent role, Russia initiated a series of peace talks between the Syrian envoy in Turkey and the representatives of rebel factions, with Russia, Turkey and Iran serving as mediators. According to a report presented to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, the secondary aim of Russia's intervention in Syria "was probably also to force NATO Allies and the West to talk with Russia and break its isolation since its aggression against Ukraine."¹⁴ The problem is that thus far, Russia's resources have been limited to influence the situation politically and economically, and therefore, initially, Russia's only option was to provide military support for President Bashar al-Assad. Such support offered to the Syrian government proved that "Russia has regained strength and is willing to act aggressively in international relations."¹⁵ However, in the course of the crisis, other political alternatives have opened up, due to the fact that the support from Moscow has allowed the current government to survive. What is more, Russia has even taken on the role of a mediator, assuming an increasingly important role in the region, thereby indicating to other nations as well that it is seeking to restore its status as an important geopolitical player. This stance was particularly visible during the Turkish offensive launched against

¹⁴ **Juknevičienė, R.** 2017. Russia: From Partner to Competitor. General Report. Brussels: NATO Parliamentary Assembly, October 07, p. 8. <https://www.nato-pa.int/document/2017-russia-juknevičienė-report-170-pc-17-e-rev1-fin>.

¹⁵ **Robinson, N.** 2018. Contemporary Russian Politics. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 238.

the Kurds in North Syria, where Russia was in a position to negotiate the Turkish ‘safe zone’ in Syria after the withdrawal of U.S. troops. The agreement was recognized as “a ‘big success’ by Donald Trump, although his critics say it cements Russia’s role as the prime power broker in the Middle East after the U.S. president’s announcement that American special forces would withdraw from the area.”¹⁶ However, it could be argued that Russia’s foreign policy was eyeing more pragmatic gains, due to the threat created by terrorist movements linked to radicals in Central Asia. There has been strong indication that those groups could potentially also influence former Soviet republics in that region, posing a direct threat to Russia. Therefore, fighting those groups far away from national borders and on the territory of other nations was an important security factor for Russia. From a military point of view, it was important for Russia to test its new weapon systems in actual combat conditions and to demonstrate its capabilities, while also promoting its national military industry. According to a statement by Russian Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu, “300 models of weapons have been updated, and 12 models of promising weapons have been withdrawn from production and service in the Russian forces”¹⁷ since testing their capabilities in combat in Syria. This practice has enhanced the prestige of Russian armed forces. Moreover, as stated by President Putin “there is no more efficient way of training than real combat”¹⁸ and for many prototypes, it was their first deployment in battle.

3. The Military Aspects of Russia’s Intervention in Syria

After Russia adopted its new approach to modern warfare – also known as ‘*new generation warfare*’ or ‘*hybrid warfare*’ – the conflict in Syria has proved to be an important asset in many aspects from the perspective of the

¹⁶ **McKernan, B.** 2019. Russia steps up its presence in north-east Syria after Turkey deal. – The Guardian, October 23. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/23/russia-steps-up-presence-north-east-syria-after-turkey-deal> (25.10.2019).

¹⁷ **Syria serves as a “military school” for Russian forces and a “testing ground” to test its weapons.** 2019. – The Levant News, September 27. <https://thelevantnews.com/en/2019/09/syria-serves-as-a-military-school-for-russian-forces-and-a-testing-ground-to-test-its-weapons/> (26.10.2019).

¹⁸ **Isachenkov, V.** 2016. President Vladimir Putin has signalled Russia’s intention to maintain a high-profile role in Syria despite its partial military withdrawal. – U.S. News & World Report, March 17. <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-03-17/putin-russia-can-rebuild-its-syria-forces-in-a-few-hours> (25.10.2019).

military. The tenets of Russia's new generation warfare were presented in theoretical literature, tactics for fighting irregular forces were implemented and tested in combat, troops were trained in actual conditions of war, and the effectiveness of new weapon platforms was also verified. For Russia, Syria offered a kind of laboratory for experimentation, and it continues to be very important for ensuring Russia's own national security as it is facing internal threats coming from radicalised groups and, as expressed in political rhetoric, fending off external aggression coming from NATO. At an estimated cost of 4 million USD per day¹⁹, it can be considered quite affordable. As pointed out by Stephen Covington:

This experimentation continues, informed further by the development of theory, execution of strategic exercises, and absorption of lessons learned from their military experiences notably in Ukraine and Syria. Moscow's military experimentation appears to center on building operational and strategic flexibility to create as many military options as possible for its security, while simultaneously denying its opponents the same flexibility.²⁰

In this context, a significant role was played by the newly formed Russian Aerospace Forces (*Воздушно-космические силы*), reorganised in 2015 by merging the Russian Air Force and its Aerospace Defence Forces. The Syrian intervention enabled Russia to test the new command and control structure, its effectiveness in joint operations and in terms of logistics, especially in ensuring the sustainment of operations. Additionally, these operations were supported by the Russian Navy with fire support. Concurrently, land forces were also used for various tasks but their combat deployment was not as intensive as in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, recognizing that large-scale personnel and equipment losses in these types of situations are unavoidable. Furthermore, the Russian military also used large-scale exercises to train its units for future operations in Syria. For example, "Center 2015", the largest military exercise conducted that year, served as the dress rehearsal for Syria (e.g. the terrain was chosen based on characteristics of the future area of operations in Syria, and tactics used for fighting terrorists and irregular forces were based on experiences from Chechnya and Afghanistan). The exercise engaged all service branches, focusing on the testing of unmanned

¹⁹ **Trenin** 2018, p. 79.

²⁰ **Covington, S.** 2016. *The Culture of Strategic Thought Behind Russia's Modern Approaches to Warfare*. Cambridge: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, p. 40.

platforms and electronic warfare assets, with a special role given to close air support and long range artillery fire meant for attacking selected targets.²¹

The exercise proved to be extremely useful in preparing troops for a completely novel operational environment and returning back to tactics used in Afghanistan and Chechnya.

The Role of the Russian Air Force in the Syrian Conflict

The Russian air force deployed in Syria in 2015 comprised 32 multirole aircraft organized as a special purpose air brigade, including: Su-24M front-line bomber, Su-34 fighter-bomber/strike, Su-30SM multirole fighter, and Su-25SM ground attack. They were complemented by another 18 airframes, among them: Il-20M1 special mission electronic signals intelligence, Mi-24P attack helicopters and Mi-8AMTSh armoured assault helicopters. The Russian air component was based at the Khmeimim air base near the city of Latakia, Syria. Over the next couple of years, the exact number of deployed aircraft varied, reaching the lowest number in March 2016 when President Putin announced a partial troop withdrawal. Nevertheless, the overall role of the Russian air force proved to be quite significant in supporting Syrian governmental forces, especially as the adversary was not in possession of similar assets. In addition, the Russian air force also conducted long-range strikes using strategic bombers (Tu-22M3, Tu-160 and Tu-95MS) operating from the Olenya / Olenegorsk air base, in the Kola Peninsula, Russia. According to reports, it was a “mammoth 8,000-mile show of strength as they flew around the edge of Europe to fire missiles at Syria”²² to demonstrate strategic strike capabilities, especially considering that those aircraft also carry nuclear missiles. Those missions were also supported by A-50 AWACS aircraft. Overall, the war in Syria offered several important advantages to the Russian air force. Firstly, it offered an opportunity to test the newly-formed Russian Aerospace Forces in the new command and control structure, with the added opportunity to test the coordination of different types of aircraft both in a direct ground attack role but also in conducting long-range strikes.

²¹ **Buvaltsev, I.; Faliczew, O.** 2015. Ближний Восток на Южном Урале (The Middle East in Southern Ural). – Military-Industrial Courier, Issue No 608, November 24. <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/27827> (04.09.2019).

²² **Farmer, B.** 2015. Russian bombers fly around Europe to strike Syria in 8,000 mile show of strength. – The Telegraph, November 20. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/12009123/Russian-bombers-fly-around-Europe-to-strike-Syria-in-8000-mile-show-of-strength.html> (12.09.2019).

Secondly, another important element was the coordination of air attacks with local forces to assess its effectiveness in both attacking ISIS's military targets and destroying their supply routes and oil trade infrastructure. Concurrently, Russian presence in the Syrian airspace prevented other regional actors (especially Turkey and partially also Israel) from conducting air attacks against Syrian troops. The scale of the air strikes conducted by Russian aircraft and the ability to sustain their intensity demonstrated that Russian forces were largely up to the task, something that was under question before the war. Ultimately, Russia's intervention in Syria can be seen as a significant boost to Russia's self-confidence and, overall, the Russian armed forces can be said to have demonstrated reliable capabilities. Moreover, it has proved Russia's claims of being a modern and capable power with force projection capabilities. From a marketing perspective, it can also be considered a rather successful promotion of the national military industry.

Thus, Putin's decision to intervene in Syria in 2016 proved critical, managing to significantly shore up President Assad's forces as its "new fighter jets, military advisers and advanced weapons stopped the bleeding of the Syrian army and allowed it to shift from defence to offence."²³

In addition to testing novel airframes, the war also served as a testing ground for air defence systems, organized in three layers, protecting military bases operated by Russian units. For example, the air base in Khmeimim was protected in the following manner: Layer 1 – the S-400 and S-200VE long-range systems; Layer 2 – the S-300FM Fort-M and Buk-M2E medium-range systems; and Layer 3 – the Osa-AKM and S-125 Pechora-2M SHORAD systems.²⁴ Finally, the Pantsir-S1 close protection system and S-400 units also contributed to the protection of the air base in question. Such protective cover was aimed to prevent attacks against Russian aircraft and to disrupt air strikes by third parties against Syrian targets. However, their utilization proved challenging, as they were often not activated to avoid engaging U.S. or Israeli aircraft, focusing mainly on the protection of Russia's own assets, rather than the positions of Syrians or Iranians. However, U.S. air

²³ **Gerges, F. A.** 2016. Syria war: Tide turns Assad's way amid ceasefire push. – BBC News, February 13. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35562943> (24.10.2019).

²⁴ For more information: **Khodaryonok, M.** 2016. Three layers of Russian air defense at Hmeymim air base in Syria. – TASS News Agency, February 09. <https://tass.com/defense/855430> (24.10.2019), and **Näbig, R.** 2019. Russia's anti-air & air defense systems in Syria: more for show than substance? 2019. – Offiziere.ch, September 12. <https://www.offiziere.ch/?p=36518> (24.10. 2019). [**Näbig** 2019]

force operations and Israeli attacks, using aircraft and drones to saturate air defences, demonstrated the limitations of these Russian defensive assets.

What is more, these combat operations caused losses to the Russians, to the air force in particular, given the fact that air force assets were used most intensively. It is estimated that as of September 2018, Russia had lost 17 aircraft both in combat and also as a result of accidents.²⁵ In November 2018, a devastating incident that destroyed a Su-24M was linked to an attack by the Turkish air force. During these operations, Russia also lost one Il-20M1, which was mistakenly shot down in September 2018 by a Syrian S-200 medium-to-high altitude surface-to-air missile during an Israeli F-16 attack against targets in the Latakia province. This was interpreted by Russian authorities as a provocation considering that they received no prior warning from Israel with regard to Russian aircraft not being allowed to leave the planned area of attack, exposing it to Syrian S-200 system²⁶; as a result, in October 2018, Russia delivered “the long-promised three S-300 batteries to Syria.”²⁷ In addition, a few helicopters were damaged or destroyed by ground fire during search and rescue missions and due to technical problems. Russia also lost some UAV type Orlan-10 used for various missions (mainly reconnaissance, collecting aerial imagery or 3D-mapping) that were destroyed by rebels but also by the Turkish air force after violating their national airspace. Additionally, there were some non-combat losses due to crash landings or due to technical problems. It is important to note that some losses are attributable to ISIS and other rebel groups that possess only limited anti-air capabilities, not comparable to the modern armed forces of leading world powers. However, those losses were not always made public (e.g. those suffered by the private military company ‘Wagner’ during a battle near Deir ez-Zor, although it resulted in the deaths of several Russian citizens; in comparison to the public condemnation that followed after Turkey shot down Su-24M that resulted in the death of one of the pilots who was posthumously awarded the Hero of the Russian Federation, the country’s highest military honour). Thus, it could be surmised that compared to other nations, in Russia there is still relatively high acceptance that incurring casualties in war is just

²⁵ McCarthy, N. 2018. Aircraft Lost During The Syrian Civil War. – Statista, September 18. <https://www.statista.com/chart/15492/estimated-number-of-aircraft-shot-down-or-destroyed-in-accidents-in-syria/> (24.10. 2019).

²⁶ Rosyjski Il-20 zestrzelony u wybrzeży Syrii 2018. – Altair Agencja Lotnicza, September 18. https://www.altair.com.pl/news/view?news_id=26150 (24.10. 2019).

²⁷ Nābig 2019, *op. cit.*

par for the course; however, it is not something to be dismissed – it matters and is used strategically for publicity purposes.

The Role of the Russian Navy in the Syrian Conflict

In October 2015, the Russian Navy launched its operations in Syria, demonstrating its new capability by employing a new weapon system – the ‘*Kalibr*’ ship-launched cruise missiles. These missiles were launched using the *Buyan*-class missile corvettes from the “Caspian Sea and flew across Iran and northern Iraq to reach their targets”²⁸. As such, it constituted a test of a new weapon system that served the parallel function of demonstrating to other nations Russia’s ability to reach targets within the range of approximately 2,500 kilometres. This test was repeated later when Kilo-class submarines ‘*Veliky Novgorod*’ and ‘*Kolpino*’ launched ‘*Kalibr*’ missiles against ISIS targets from a submerged position. The fact that those missiles can be launched from coastal defence systems, long-range aircraft, and submarines using anti-ship, land-attack, and anti-submarine variants, poses a challenge for deploying U.S. troops to Europe in case of armed conflict. The actual results and effectiveness of those missiles is not yet clear, but such tests will enable the Russian navy to improve their accuracy, making those types of missiles even more dangerous. The presence of the Russian navy was also demonstrated by the guided missile cruiser ‘*Moskva*’, which was replaced in the spring of 2016 by its sister guided missile cruiser ‘*Varyag*’, a flagship of the Russian naval task force in the Mediterranean. Both types of cruisers contributed to the air defence of Russia’s naval facility in Tartus, Syria. Additionally, Russian armed forces also deployed the ‘*Bastion*’ anti-surface mobile coastal defence missile system for extended protection. However, the most notable deployment was that of the ‘*Admiral Kuznetsov*’ aircraft carrier, sailing from Kola Bay to the Mediterranean in October 2016, accompanied by the heavy nuclear missile cruiser ‘*Piotr Velikiy*’, two destroyers and several other vessels. It was escorted by the United Kingdom’s Royal Navy. Its operations in support of air strikes were discussed primarily in the context of aircraft losses (e.g. one of Russia’s MiG-29KUB crashed during take-off and Su-33S crashed during landing due to the malfunction of an arrestor cable).

²⁸ **Russian missiles ‘hit IS in Syria from Caspian Sea’**. 2015. – BBC News, October 07. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34465425> (04.09.2019).



Figure 1. Russian military bases in Syria²⁹

The deployment of the *'Admiral Kuznetsov'* aircraft carrier had a primarily symbolic meaning as those aircraft were later launched from an air field, not to mention that their deployment from Russia would have been less problematic by just flying them in. Thus, it could be surmised that the deployment of an aircraft carrier was motivated by Russia's desire to demonstrate stronger force projection abilities to distant regions. However this 'demonstration' did not succeed in that regard, revealing the shortcomings of the Russian Navy in this category of warships. Subsequently, the Russian navy has been constantly present in the region, reaching significant numbers in 2018, demonstrating force projection and the ability to conduct naval exercises with approximately 25 warships and 30 aircraft. In addition, the Russian Navy continued its mission related to the protection of sea lines of communication, essential for the sustainment of the military detachment in Syria using the seaports of Tartus and Latakia.

²⁹ Composed on the basis of information presented in: **Russia builds four new air bases in Syria, deploys another 6,000 troops.** 2018. – Algora Blog. https://www.algora.com/Algora_blog/2018/02/02/russia-builds-four-new-air-bases-in-syria-deploys-another-6000-troops (28.10.2019); the map is courtesy of the Library of the University of Texas at Austin: https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/cia16/syria_sm_2016.gif (28.10.2019).

The Role of Russian Land Forces and Special Forces in the Syrian Conflict

The Russian land forces amounted to approximately 3,000–4,000 soldiers during different periods of the war in Syria; however, they were not used for combat operations but mainly for the protection of military installations. The overall objective was not to engage in costly ground combat. This approach was based on Russia's rather shocking experiences of engagement in irregular warfare in Afghanistan, as well as the example of the U.S. struggles with insurgents in the Middle East (i.e. in Iraq). To some extent, the West implemented a similar approach in Libya when NATO's "air power element was crucial"³⁰ during Operation Unified Protector as the facilitator of ground combat with Libyan rebel forces. Those were the lessons that Russia applied in Syria by deploying its air force in support of Syrian land forces. In addition, it was also due to the risk of heavy losses that could be incurred in direct combat and the related propaganda effect, especially videos of ISIS's treatment of captured military personnel. For Russia, the so-called CNN effect could have had negative reverberations both domestically and on the international arena. This fear was well-founded, as the al-Nusra Front, a Salafist jihadist organization seeking to establish an Islamic state and fighting against Syrian government forces, announced a reward of approximately 15,900 USD for capturing Russian soldiers, later specifying on social media that 5,300 USD of that sum would go directly to the fighter and 10,600 USD to their faction.³¹ For terrorists, it was a rather significant amount of money, encouraging them to go after it.

Russia also sent its advisers to the headquarters of the Syrian forces and also to individual units to support th

e planning and execution of operations. It was especially important with regard to the coordination of air strikes delivered by the Russian air force. The units of the Russian land forces were equipped with modern equipment, including T-90 main battle tanks, armoured personnel carriers BTR-82AM,

³⁰ **Gaub, F.** 2013. *The North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Libya: Reviewing Operation Unified Protector*. Carlisle: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, June 2013, pp. 6–8. <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=739913>.

³¹ **Al-Qaeda Affiliate Issues Bounty for Capture of Russian Soldiers in Syria.** 2015. – Newsweek, February 10. <https://www.newsweek.com/al-qaeda-affiliate-issues-bounty-capture-russian-soldiers-syria-334013> (02.10.2019).

armoured vehicles (*'Typhon'*, *'Tajfun'* and *'Rys'*), 152mm howitzers and other platforms.

Thus, for Russia, Syria was a critical testing ground to verify concepts of developing unmanned land and aerial platforms in support of operations, a very dynamic approach based on the capabilities of the national military industry complex and supported by Russian top leadership. As such, it supports the development of effective methods of warfare, as some could be used without involving manpower, enabling the utilization of unmanned platforms for combat operations. Additionally, it supports the concepts related to the 'hybrid' approach to conflicts and drives the widespread implementation of new generation warfare tools and tactics. During a meeting of the Military-Industrial Commission in January 2017, President Putin said, "autonomous robotic complexes are an important and promising direction. They are able to fundamentally change the whole system of the armament of armed forces, and we need to develop our own effective solutions in this area as well."³² Thus, emerging technologies facilitate the implementation of new tactical-technical characteristics and new ways of leading combat that are not available for manned platforms. According to some sources, during the Syrian war, Russia managed to test its unmanned ground vehicles (UGVs) in real combat conditions, providing valuable input for further development. For example, the *'Uran 6'* complex was tested in mine clearing operations in Palmyra and other locations³³. It is estimated that the Russian Mine Action Centre cleared some "6,500 hectares of land, 1,500 km of roads, more than 17,000 buildings and facilities, defused and eliminated more than 105,000 explosive devices (incl. more than 30,000 improvised ones)."³⁴ There is also unconfirmed information about the use of the armed UGVs *'Platforma-M'* and *'Argo'* in Syria. If true, it could be a major verification of the combat capabilities of such UGVs; however, their utilization is not clear or confirmed. Overall, all these tests are indicative of a trend towards developing multirole

³² The speech by President Putin during the meeting of the Military–Industrial Commission on 26 January 2017, see: **II-я военно-научная конференция и выставочная экспозиция 'Роботизация Вооруженных Сил Российской Федерации'**. 2017. – The Conference Website. <http://www.patriot-expo.ru/robotics/> (04.10.2019).

³³ **Warriors of Steel: Meet Russia's Robot Army**. 2016. – Sputnik News, May 29. <https://sputniknews.com/military/201605291040446567-russian-battle-robots-video/> (04.10.2019).

³⁴ **Equipment of Russian Mine Action Centre sealifted from Syria to Russia**. – Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation. <https://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12154863@egNews> (23.10.2019).

platforms, which could be used to mount a variety of weapon systems or be adapted to combat and non-combat functions, such as combat support and logistics.

As regards Russian special forces in Syria, they comprised troops from *Spetsnaz* and other specialised units focused mainly on two types of missions: reconnaissance and special security missions. They were also responsible for directing artillery fire and air strikes, as well as providing security for embassies and VIPs, along with training Syrian special units and troops. At their peak, some 250 Russian special troops were deployed in Syria, including from the GRU (the foreign military-intelligence agency of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation), and the Naval *Spetsnaz* from the 431st Naval Reconnaissance Point and Special Operations Forces Command.³⁵ According to official sources, some 120 Russian military personnel lost their lives and many were wounded (as of the end of 2018 that number stood at 112 soldiers).³⁶ The major single losses were from the An-26 transport aircraft catastrophe and the shooting down of Il-20. However, actual data on Russia's war casualties are unknown, with many losses incurred in the course of ground operations conducted by private military companies employing Russian citizens, but not accounted for by the armed forces. In this context, it also bears noting that the world-renowned Alexandrov Ensemble Choir lost some 60 members in a plane crash en route to Latakia in December 2016. In addition, the Russian Military Police were also deployed for a variety of tasks, incl. providing security in de-escalation zones, ensuring the security of humanitarian assistance, handling of prisoners and other tasks. Those activities became particularly visible especially after Turkey and Russia concluded an agreement regarding the border 'safe zone' and as Russian military police assumed control in select cities.

In the context of military operations, it is also important to mention that the Russian armed forces contingent in Syria was supplied by air, across Iran and Iraq, facing some challenges in the later stages of the conflict. This arrangement supported the relations between Moscow and the nations concerned, including Iraq, which is important for the U.S.. Later on, the so called 'Syrian Express' took advantage of the fact that the Black Sea and

³⁵ **Marsh, Ch.** 2017. *Developments in Russian Special Operations*. Ontario: Forces Command, Canadian Special Operations, pp. 26–27.

³⁶ **Сафронов, И.** 2019. В Сирии погибли трое российских военнослужащих. Минобороны опровергло эту информацию. – *Vedomosti*, 05.09.2019. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2019/09/05/810570-v-voennosluzhaschih> (02.10.2019).

Bosporus Straits were not being interrupted by Turkey due to improved relations, regardless of attacks on Russian air force assets.³⁷ In Syria, the air base near Latakia and commercial ports in Latakia and Tartus were also used as supply hubs for the delivery of fuel and ammunition, playing a key role in the continued uninterrupted flow of supplies needed to sustain intensive operations of all the service branches of the Russian armed forces deployed in support of the Syrian Army.

As to Russian combat units, many of the operations in Syria were conducted or supported by private military companies (PMC), also in support of Syrian forces. The PMCs are still not legal in Russia, but they nonetheless continue to recruit Russian citizens. For example, Russian mercenaries from PMC *‘Wagner’* “have been fighting major battles in both Ukraine and Syria – including the battles of Palmyra”³⁸ enabling them to acquire useful combat experience. According to Pavel Felgenhauer, “the deployment of military contractors is consistent with the Russian take on ‘hybrid-war’”.³⁹ Moreover, it is estimated that “Russia is using large numbers of contractors in Syria because that allows Moscow to put more boots on the ground without risking regular soldiers whose deaths have to be accounted for”.⁴⁰ It seems to be a valid argument because when Syrian units attacked the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces that were accompanied by U.S. special forces near Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria, the official statement by the Russian government only

³⁷ **Как изменился «Сирийский экспресс» за три года.** – News.ru, 08.10.2018. <https://news.rambler.ru/army/40978500-kak-izmenilsya-siriyskiy-ekspress-za-tri-goda/> (18.11.2019); **«Сирийский экспресс» под угрозой: США попытаются лишить Сирию снабжения.** – Topcor.ru, 12.07.2019. <https://topcor.ru/10112-sirijskij-jekspress-pougrozoi-ssha-popytajsja-lishit-siriju-snabzhenija.html> (18.11.2019).

³⁸ **Miller, J.** 2016. Putin’s Attack Helicopters and Mercenaries Are Winning the War for Assad. – Foreign Policy, March 30. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/30/putins-attack-helicopters-and-mercenaries-are-winning-the-war-for-assad/> (12.09.2019). See also: **Они сражались за Пальмиру.** – Fontanka, 29.03.2016. <http://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/> (12.09.2019).

³⁹ **Sparks, J.** 2016. Revealed: Russia’s ‘Secret Syria Mercenaries’ 2016. – Sky News, August 10. <http://news.sky.com/story/revealed-russias-secret-syria-mercenaries-10529248> (12.10.2019); **Russian Private Military Companies As Licensed Tool of Terror.** 2015. – InformNapalm, November 24, based on article by Vyacheslav Gusarov (‘Information Resistance’), translated by Stepan Grishin. <https://informnapalm.org/en/russian-private-military-companies-as-licensed-tool-of-terror/> (14.10.2019).

⁴⁰ **Tsvetkova, M.** 2018. Russian toll in Syria battle was 300 killed and wounded: sources. – Reuters, February 15. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-casualty/russian-toll-in-syria-battle-was-300-killed-and-wounded-sources-idUSKCN1FZ2DZ> (12.09.2019). [Tsvetkova 2018]

mentioned the deaths of five Russian citizens (not connected to the armed forces), whereas the private Russian paramilitary “*Wagner Group*” suffered great losses when some 100 mercenaries were killed and 200 wounded in that very same battle.⁴¹ The Russian mercenaries suffered losses particularly because of raids by U.S. fighters;⁴² and it is significant to note that neither the Russian air defence nor the Russian Air Force responded to protect them. However, in reality, there are close links between the Russian armed forces and the PMCs because the latter’s troops are trained in Molkiino, a Special Forces base of the Russian armed forces. It is supported by the Russian leadership because the commander of PMC ‘*Wagner*’, Dmitri Utkin, used to serve as the commander of the GRU’s *Spetsnaz* brigade⁴³. Thus, it could be surmised that Russia is putting into practice the theory of ‘new generation warfare’ in Syria using military and non-military assets to acquire more experience on how to deal with any type of threat coming from inside and outside of the country. Such threats could be related to terrorist organizations inside Russia and the threat of internal ‘colour revolutions’, not to mention those that are active in the Middle East.

Already back in 2016, some experts estimated that “Russia has the interest and the resources to become a serious player in the region. The establishment of Russia’s permanent military presence in Syria over the course of the last year (2015) has further increased Russian influence in the Middle East, to the extent that some analysts argue that Russia now has a commanding position in Syria and perhaps in the region as a whole.”⁴⁴ The ongoing developments indicate that such estimates were not inaccurate or wrong. What is more, in the long term, “Russia’s economic interaction with the Middle East helps Moscow both escape the impact of Western economic sanctions and limit its economic dependence on China.”⁴⁵ Both factors are of vital interest for

⁴¹ Tsvetkova 2018.

⁴² Roblin, S. 2018. Did Russia and America Almost Go to War in Syria? – National Interest, June 16. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/did-russia-america-almost-go-war-syria-26279?page=0%2C1> (12.09.2019).

⁴³ Read: Reynolds, N. 2019. Putin’s Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics and the Wagner Group. – Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 08. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/08/putin-s-not-so-secret-mercenaries-patronage-geopolitics-and-wagner-group-pub-79442> (12.09.2019). The Moran Security Group is also managed by former military officers. See Website: **The Moran Security Group**. <http://moran-group.org/en/about/index> (12.09.2019).

⁴⁴ Gorenburg 2016, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ Katz, M. 2019. Russian Activities in the Middle East. – Peterson, N. (ed.). Russian Strategic Intentions. A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA). White Paper. Washington: the U.S. Department of Defence, May, p. 58.

Russian foreign policy and also from the perspective of its domestic situation as the Russian economy is facing some serious challenges amid ongoing sanctions imposed by the West.

4. Conclusions

The combination of Russia's military footprint in Syria coupled with diplomatic efforts in the wider region has serious ramifications for the whole Middle East and a potentially even broader impact by positioning Russia as a credible global actor. It is already visible in Russia's closer relations with Iran, Iraq and organizations such as Hezbollah, not to mention its diplomatic alliance with Turkey, a member of NATO. Russia's relations with Israel have also been very important, indicated by high-level meetings; however, it does not seem to be a strategic partnership, rather it seems to be based on pragmatic interests on both sides. However, those interests could be impacted by relations with Syria, given the fact that they are fighting on opposite sides, and as a result, their relationship could deteriorate quickly in case Israel should decide to go against pro-Iranian forces in Syria, not to mention their differences with regard to the role of the U.S. in the Middle East. Nevertheless, for now, both sides need for their relations to remain stable. It seems that Russia, having left the region and not playing a significant role during the Gulf Wars, has decided to return and has strategically taken advantage of the window of opportunity presented by the war in Syria. When taking into consideration the not so successful outcomes of the U.S. and the West's interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq or Libya, it could be said that for now Moscow has effectively supported the Syrian government in its struggle for survival against the opposition and radical organizations. The Russian advantage is that it is not questioning the type of regime in Syria and it is also not discussing democratic reforms nor is it concerned about human rights and the rule of law. All this has broader implications for the whole Middle East region and as such will help Russia cement its position there, especially as many Middle Eastern countries have governments that are in essence authoritarian, identifying more closely with Russian-type leadership as opposed to the narratives and values espoused by the U.S. and the West. Thus, Russia has taken on an important role and a mammoth responsibility in the region, which has become very problematic as of late. For example, Russia is still facing some very complex security problems and the situation could easily implode due to rivalry among nations, religious diversity and economic interests that are based on historical and geopolitical backgrounds.

In this context, Russia holds many cards but the situation also entails several risks that would not be so easy to handle in case of crisis. Additionally, Russia's position could be furthermore undermined by other out-of-region actors.

The military perspective provides some broader lessons related to the effectiveness and limitations of Russian capabilities. It is indicated by the discussions in Western Europe about Russian anti-access/area denial (AA/AD) 'bubbles' located in Kaliningrad, Crimea or in St. Petersburg, or the High North in Murmansk, in the Kola Peninsula. However, by intervening in Syria, Russia managed to extend those AA/AD bubbles on the West's borders and its own peripheral areas. The air defence assets are an important element of those AA/AD bubbles. With respect to the Baltic countries, the Kaliningrad oblast, bordering Lithuania and Poland, serves as a potential threat of denying the flow of NATO troops to the region in the case of conflict with Russia. Thus, the Syrian case demonstrates that the AA/AD umbrella is not completely impenetrable. However, new systems such as the S-400 with new missiles are already in development, although their effectiveness is not yet fully confirmed. What is more, NATO investments into fifth generation aircraft, guided ammunition and cruise missiles, drones, electronic warfare and the utilization of waves attack tactics to suppress enemy air defence could deny Russian assets the capabilities to effectively interrupt the deployment of Alliance troops and operations on its Eastern Flank. It is crucial for Western nations to maintain and further develop their technological advantage, ensuring their superiority over Russia's capabilities on the opposing side.

Russia's intervention in Syria also proved that limited operational force projection capabilities are present, and therefore Russia could conduct and sustain reasonable forces, something that was being questioned before the events in Syria. For Russian soldiers it has offered a unique opportunity to practice their professional skills in combat and to test modernized and novel equipment. It is estimated that as many as 63,000 soldiers and 25,700 officers⁴⁶ participated in operations in Syria, a significant number, undoubtedly leading to many future promotions. It has been especially useful for training pilots and ground crews that conduct intensive strikes; they have acquired many valuable lessons, considering the critical role played by the air force in modern conflicts. Russia's military power exhibited during the war in Syria was also effectively used for domestic propaganda purposes

⁴⁶ **Delanoë, I.** 2018. What Russia Gained From Its Military Intervention in Syria. – *Orient XXI*, October 09. <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/what-russia-gained-from-its-military-intervention-in-syria,2676> (30.10.2019).

to demonstrate national capabilities and the heroism of Russian soldiers in defending a sovereign nation against “terrorists” supported by the U.S. and West European nations. The operations Russia engaged in were quite intensive, especially those conducted by the air force, but they were not joint operations as coordination with other Russian armed forces services was limited. It was mainly in the form of support offered to the Syrian Army, in many cases coordinated by Russian military advisers or special forces units.

Another advantageous aspect for Russia is the much desired opportunity to export arms to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, enabling competition with France and the U.S. Russian weapons have been battle-tested and have thus proved their effectiveness in fighting non-conventional enemies, a serious concern for many nations in the Middle East, making Russian offerings even more attractive. For Russia, the sale of military equipment carries an important economic and foreign policy aspect and this is definitely one of the advantages gained from the war in Syria, and certainly Syria will remain open to such offerings. It is also important to note that the Tartus seaport in Syria is the only such facility outside of the Russian Federation that enables Russia to secure its constant presence in the region, the rotation of warships and their sustainment in the Mediterranean. It also enables Russia to deploy a variety of naval assets equipped with long-range missiles like ‘*Kalibr*’, which are able to reach targets across the whole region, including NATO air and navy bases. Therefore, Russia’s military presence in Syria, in conjunction with political and economic support, facilitates the increase of Russia’s influence in the whole Middle East and the wider Mediterranean region. In addition, it provides the opportunity for Russia to protect its wide-ranging economic interests related to energy resources and military exports, not to mention potential contracts for post-war reconstruction. Thus, other nations that might also want to partake in this will need to take Russia’s position as Syria’s strategic partner into serious consideration.

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