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## **Russia and the Syrian Conflict: in Search of the Perfect Endgame Scenario**

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### **Abstract**

Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict is a rare development in the post-Soviet era. For the first time since 1992, when it ended its military support to the government in Afghanistan, it has entered an armed conflict outside the borders of the former Soviet Union as its full-fledged part. By doing so, Russia has managed not only to ensure the survival of the government of President Bashar al-Assad, but also to change the course of the war in his favour. So far, however, it has failed to find a smooth exit strategy. Russia is playing a difficult game in Syria. Assad is willing to accept its military support but he has also made it clear that he would rather see his country completely destroyed than compromise with the opposition. His intransigence guarantees that the armed rebellion against him will continue, and he has set Syria on the path to a generations-long conflict. Assad's inflexibility has not caused Russia to reduce its commitment to his regime, but it clearly illustrates the limits of its influence in the country. Nevertheless, Russia plans to stay in Syria for a long time. Having limited economic resources to assist reconstruction, Russia instead tries to maintain its importance for Damascus by playing an active role in shaping the political process to settle the conflict. It now focuses its diplomatic efforts on working with those countries that have a voice in Syria, such as Iran and Turkey. However, as demonstrated by recent events, neither Iran nor Turkey is ready to play a secondary role in the conflict settlement process which makes

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the achievement of Russia's final goals in Syria even more challenging.

### **Keywords**

Syrian Civil War, Syrian Reconstruction, Russia-Iran Relations, Russian-Turkish Relations; Russian-US Relations, Syrian Conflict Settlement

### **I. Introduction**

Moscow's involvement in the Syrian conflict represents a unique case in the history of post-Soviet Russia. For the first time since 1992 when the Russian government cut its military support to the Mohammad Najibullah government in Afghanistan, the Kremlin provided full assistance to a foreign regime. By **2020, the Russians managed to ensure not only the survival of the Assad's government, but change the course of war in its favor.** Yet, so far, Russia failed to secure the smooth exit strategy from the conflict.

### **II. Ideal Post-Conflict Syria**

Moscow's key expectations from post-conflict Syria remained predominantly unchanged since the beginning of Russia's military involvement in the conflict in 2015. As a final result of its efforts, the Kremlin would like to see a united country ruled by a secular government recognized (at least, de-facto) by the majority of international players. This Syrian government is supposed to guarantee Russian economic, military and political presence while being able to control the domestic situation and ensure its survival without Moscow's extensive military support. In other words, the Russian leadership would like to ensure that its military achievements in Syria will lead to the preservation of a pro-Russian regime in power that, at the same time, would not be completely dependent on Russia's support as this was the case with the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan in the 1980-es – early 1990es.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mardasov A., 2020, "Asadnaya Oshibka [(As)sad Mistake]", *Insider*. 2020, September 30, <https://theins.ru/opinions/anton->

At the same time, Russia is relatively flexible about other parameters of the post-conflict regime in Syria as long as they help appeasing Damascus opponents, thus, serving the achievement of the above-mentioned ultimate goal. This, in turn, differentiates Moscow from its key partner in this conflict, Iran, that is much more uncompromising in its vision of the post-conflict Syria. Thus, as opposed to the Iranian leadership, Moscow is able to accept the federalization of the country, support greater freedoms for local councils, consider the provision of the special status to the Kurdish community as well as promote certain political changes in the Assad regime aimed at the greater inclusiveness for the semi-official opposition. However, this Russian flexibility, so far, did not lead to any transformation of the regime in Damascus. While being dependent on Moscow, Bashar al-Assad should not be considered a Russian puppet. Actively balancing between Iran and Russia he managed to preserve the great degree of independence. Under these circumstances, Damascus demonstrates complete unwillingness to change as well as clear beliefs that any concessions to the opposition are unnecessary. It also pushes Moscow to the idea that the military solution is the only way to win the civil war. This stubbornness of Damascus resulted in the failure of a number of Russian political initiatives including the failure of Russia's attempts to prevent regimes' purges in the areas returned under Assad's control after the beginning of Russia's military operation in 2015.<sup>1</sup>

### III. Should Assad Change?

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[mardasov/235343?fbclid=IwAR1PyL\\_KpD3ErtnlYhelsHwTClrFKPm6nYeA-VtNqzSR4TAE6SwcXemTAc](https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/5/19/has-russia-grown-tired-of-syrias-bashar-al-assad/) accessed October 5, 2020

<sup>1</sup> Mardasov A., 2020, "Has Russia Grown Tired of Syria's Bashar al-Assad?", *Al Jazeera*. 2020, May 19, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/5/19/has-russia-grown-tired-of-syrias-bashar-al-assad/> accessed October 5, 2020; Nizar M., 2020, "Syrian regime hardliners undermine and challenge Russia", *TRT World*. 2020, May 19, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/syrian-regime-hardliners-undermine-and-challenge-russia-36443> accessed October 5, 2020

The ability of Assad to preserve a certain share of independence from Moscow and undermine some of Russia's initiatives is determined not only by existence of an alternative ally, Iran, that also not always share Kremlin's idea of a limited compromise with the opposing forces, but by Moscow's perception of Assad's personality. *The Kremlin* has never completely trusted Assad. The Russian authorities cannot forget that after his election, in 2000, Assad initially tried to bridge relations with Europe. Only when this attempt failed did he turn his attention to Russia. They also remember that, in the 1990s and 2000s, Damascus ignored all Moscow's requests to deal with Chechen rebels who, guilty of terrorist attacks on Russian military forces and citizens, subsequently fled to Syria.<sup>1</sup> These facts make Moscow cautious about embracing Damascus as a strategic partner. In one speech, for example, Putin stated that he did not want to repeat the mistake the Soviet Union made with Egypt by trusting a Syrian regime that could change its alliances as readily as Anwar Sadat did in the 1970s. Moreover, in 2015 – 2016, the Kremlin seriously considered options for Assad's replacement with a compromise figure from the Alawite regime who would be acceptable for both the opposition and regime. Yet, none of potential candidates convinced the Kremlin in their ability to control and manage the country. Consequently, this persuaded the Russian authorities that, at least for now, Bashar al-Assad has no alternative and plays the cornerstone (i.e. irreplaceable) role in the regime's structure. This, in turn, compels Moscow to tolerate his behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the Russian leadership is constantly hesitant in its choice of a preferred win strategy that is partially a result of never-ending discourse among the Russian political establishment: while 'siloviks' (Russian MoD and security

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see Nikolay Kozhanov, 2013, "Russian Support for Assad's Regime: Is There a Red Line?", *The International Spectator*, Volume 48, Issue 2, 2013. Pp. 25 – 31.

<sup>2</sup> Hille K., 2018, "Putin Support for Assad Paints Russia into a Dangerous Corner", *The Financial Times*, 2018, April, 16. <https://www.ft.com/content/151f0620-40c6-11e8-803a-295c97e6fd0b> accessed on October 5, 2020; Mardasov, "Has Russia Grown Tired of Syria's Bashar al-Assad?".

apparatus) believe in the possibility to achieve regime's victory by physically defeating all opposing forces, diplomats insist that there is still a room for diplomatic solution that will incorporate part of the opposition in the post-conflict Syria and allow legitimizing the Syrian regime in the eyes of the international community.<sup>1</sup> None of these strategies completely exclude either the political dialogue with the Damascus' opponents. There is a clear understanding in both camps that the final victories of the regime should be legitimized in the form of a formal political agreement. The main difference is, however, in the degree of freedom provided to the opposition: in the case of diplomatic solution, Damascus will need to accept greater changes while, after the complete military defeat, the opposition will need only to recognize its political and military losses.<sup>2</sup>

Under these circumstances, the Russian approach to the issue of the regime transformation is solely instrumental. This issue is raised by Moscow as long as it can serve the achievement of the greater goal – the launch of the political reconciliation process and international recognition of the post-conflict Syria. Yet, according to the Kremlin strategists, reconciliation can be also achieved under the regimes' gun-barrels while the external forces would have to accept the new reality in the end. Consequently, the depth of regime's transformation as well as its very necessity is often determined by the military situation on the ground: the more successful is the Assad regime in regaining control over opposition areas the less is Russian inclination to provide the opposing side with the concessions and vice versa.<sup>3</sup>

#### **IV. Russia's Strategic Thinking**

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on Syria. December 17, 2019. Higher School of Economics. Moscow.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on Syria. December 17, 2019. Higher School of Economics. Moscow.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimirov V., 2016, "Rossiya v Sirii: Stavka na Silovoye Resheniye [Russia in Syria: Accent to the Military Solution]", *Voice of America*, 2016, September 26, <https://www.golos-ameriki.ru/a/vv-russia-in-syria/3525532.html> accessed October 5, 2020.

At the same time, the Russian general strategy in Syria has not changed for the last five years. It represents a complexed mix of diplomatic and military efforts and bases on the ‘carrot-and-stick’ principle. Moscow’s active support of Assad’s military operations is periodically intertwined with attempts to bring belligerents and their sponsors at the table of negotiations. The failure of these attempts usually results into the resumption of military actions. The Assad regime’s military advances in Idlib area in December 2019 – March 2020 are among most recent example of this tactics. After the failure of the Syrian constitutional committee to launch a negotiation process between the regime, opposition and civil society under the UN auspices in the late 2019, Moscow resumed its support of Damascus’s attempts to regain control over the last strongholds of the Syrian opposition, also accusing its regional supporters (Turkey and Saudi Arabia) in deliberate undermining of the reconciliation process.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Moscow’s diplomatic efforts should always be taken with great caution. While pursuing the goal to decrease military tensions in Syria, they always conducted in a way to create comfortable conditions for the survival of the Syrian regime and weaken of the opposition. Thus, Astana talks launched in 2017 and subsequent local seize-fires between Damascus and opposition forces allowed Moscow to decrease military pressure on Assad regime by freezing the conflict and provided the Syrian government with the opportunity to eliminate the opposition-controlled zones one by one instead of fighting for their control simultaneously. In each case, the opposition forces were accused of the violation of seize-fire that gave the regime a ‘legitimate right’ to act.<sup>2</sup> This scenario was also used by Damascus in Idlib area in December 2019 – March 2020 when alleged shelling of regime-controlled

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<sup>1</sup> Shervin E., Filatova I., 2019, “Operatciya Turcii v Sirii: Rossiya Balansiruyet mezhdou Moskvoy i Damaskom [Turkish Operation in Syria: Russia is Balancing between Moscow and Damascus]”, *DW*. 2019, October 16. <https://p.dw.com/p/3RLaO> accessed October 5, 2020

<sup>2</sup> Mardasov, 'Asadnaya Oshibka [(As)sad Mistake]'

areas from the opposition-controlled part of the Idlib province became the justification for the military operation by Assad forces that resulted in substantial territorial gains by the Syrian regime. As soon as Damascus ran out of abilities to continue military actions, Moscow immediately launched negotiations with Ankara in order to restore a cease-fire in the Idlib area. There are little doubts that this truce is temporary.<sup>1</sup> The Assad regime, Moscow and Tehran are convinced that the existence of large territories out of Damascus control is endangering the future process of political reconciliation as these territories can be used by the sponsors of the opposition for the creation of alternative and independent political forces less inclined for the compromise with Damascus at the table of negotiations. Consequently, it is only a matter of time and resources when Assad and Moscow resume the process of the gradual biting out of the pieces of the Idlib province from the opposition.

### **V. Moscow's Vision of the Syrian Reconstruction**

The gradual end of the military phase of the Syrian war also raises for Moscow the importance of the Syrian reconstruction.<sup>2</sup> By now, Russia has formulated three groups of goals to be pursued during the reconstruction of Syria:

1. The reconstruction of security services and army institutions which is aimed at:

- strengthening the foundations of Assad's regime;

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<sup>1</sup> Shcheglov Y., 2020, "O Faktorah Vliyayushchih na Sobludeniye Peremiriya v Siriyskoy Provintcii Idlib [On the Factors Affecting the Regime of Cease Fire in the Syrian Province of Idlib]", Institute of the Middle East (Moscow). 2020, April 5. <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=68733> accessed on October 5, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Azizi H., Issaev L., 2019, *Russian and Iranian Economic Interests in Syria*. Geneva: GCSP; Issaev L., 2018, *What is after Russia's Military Withdrawal from Syria?* Doha: Al Jazeera Center for Studies.

- creating the security and army apparatus capable to control the situation in the country or, at least, lock the conflict within the country's borders in order to allow the Russian military forces to leave;

- countering the influence of Iranian proxies in Syria (Iran is heavily reliant on para-military institutions in Syria. Consequently, Moscow believes that in order to decrease the importance of Iran-backed militia it needs to strengthen the capacities of the Syrian army and security apparatus to deal with challenges without using para-military structures).

2.Socio-political reconstruction aimed at the constitutional reform legitimizing the further existence of the Assad regime.

3.Economic reconstruction which is aimed at:

- the persuasion of other players to invest in the re-building of Syria;
- providing opportunities for the Russian companies to receive the share of funds allocated by the international community for the reconstruction of the country;

- securing the smooth entrance of the Russian companies in the oil, gas, petrochemical and mining sectors of the Syrian economy.<sup>1</sup>

Like in the case of the regime's political transformation, Russian approaches towards the Syrian reconstruction are ultimately instrumental. Moscow's raises this question only when it helps to achieve its global political goals in Syria and beyond. Moscow sees the current crisis as a result of the destabilization of the Syrian governmental institutions (i.e. the regime). Consequently, for Moscow, any social reconstruction process is expected to be spanned around the remnants of the Assad regime (which implies its preservation in one form or another). Russia is ready to discuss the prospects for Syrian reconstruction with any Syrian, regional or global players as this fits in the main principle of the Russian Middle Eastern diplomacy of balancing

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<sup>1</sup> Azizi, Issaev, *Russian and Iranian Economic Interests in Syria*; Issaev, *What is after Russia's Military Withdrawal from Syria?*



between all sides of the conflict and maintaining relations with all players ready to talk to Russia.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, Moscow has limited interest in paying for the Syrian reconstruction. Russian business can still take part in the economic reconstruction of Syria, but as a contractor rather than a financial donor and only if this helps to enter the Syrian market. Moscow believes that it can persuade the Europeans and international agencies to finance the reconstruction of Syria. Russia also counts on the GCC money and the assistance of Lebanese businessmen in helping to draw them. Under these circumstances, the factor of the third countries is important for Moscow.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the discussion of the future of Syria can also be used by the Kremlin as a leverage to affect the dynamics of its relations with the third countries. For instance, in the Russian-European dialogue Moscow can use this question both to create a common ground for the bigger dialogue and to put pressure on the EU in order to gain additional preferences for Russia in Syria or other issues of the international agenda. It is necessary to remember that Moscow is very well aware of the refugee problems experienced by the Europeans and periodically blackmail the EU with the threats that the slow reconstruction process in Syria may lead to the new waves of refugees coming to the European countries.<sup>3</sup>

## **VI. Dealing with the West**

Beyond the issues of the Syrian reconstruction, however, neither the Europeans nor the US are viewed by Moscow as particularly pivotal for a final outcome in Syria. For Russian strategists, the West either has demonstrated

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on Syria. December 17, 2019. Higher School of Economics. Moscow.

<sup>2</sup> Azizi, Issaev, *Russian and Iranian Economic Interests in Syria*; Issaev, *What is after Russia's Military Withdrawal from Syria?*

<sup>3</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on Syria. December 17, 2019. Higher School of Economics. Moscow.

insufficient interest in becoming deeply involvement in Syrian affairs, or Western governments are seen as having little influence on the ground in Syria. During Putin's meeting with Trump in Vietnam in November 2017, Russia received all that it needed from the United States: guarantees that Washington recognizes Bashar al-Assad as the Syrian president, that the US will stick to the principle of territorial integrity vis-à-vis Syria, and that the US will respect the principle of de-confliction and continue to support the Geneva process. In exchange, Putin played along with Trump, who sees the struggle against terrorism in the region as his top priority. In their joint statement, Russia confirmed its willingness to fight the Islamic State until a final victory could be achieved together with the US. All in all, Russia may be interested in talking to the United States about the future of Syria beyond those issues discussed in Vietnam only when it sees increased US involvement in intra-Syrian affairs. Moscow is, of course, concerned with the remaining presence of the US forces in the North-East of Syria that makes it hardly possible for Damascus to regain the control over these territories any time soon. Yet, as of the mid-2020, Russia did not believe in the intention and decisiveness of the Trump's administration to get deeper involved in the Syrian affairs.<sup>1</sup>

## **VII. Balancing between Regional Players**

What really worries Moscow and challenges the achievement of its final goals in Syria is the involvement of the regional players in the Syrian conflict. As opposed to the Western players, their presence is quite obvious on the ground. Neither Russia's ally, Iran, nor the sponsors of opposition such as Turkey or Saudi Arabia are ready to fully accept Moscow's will.

### ***Iran***

Russia and Iran were compelled to be friends in Syria. Both of them appeared to be extremely interested in saving the government institutions in

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<sup>1</sup> Shcheglov, "O Faktorah Vliyayushchih na Sobludeniye Peremiriya v Siriyskoy Provintcii Idlib"

Syria. Yet, each of the sides had its own motifs for this. Russia was largely driven by its security concerns and strong beliefs that the building of a new post-conflict Syria was possible only through the evolution of the old regime but not through its complete dismantle. For Tehran, the necessity to save the government institutions was determined by a different reason. By supporting Assad in Syria Iran was fighting for its place in the system of the regional affairs.

The need to develop active cooperation between the two countries in Syria was determined by the situation on the battleground. Iran was the first to supply the Syrian regime with arms, financial means and “volunteers”. Yet, Russian direct military involvement in Syria considerably eased the burden lying on Iran’s shoulders by radically changing the balance of power in favor of Damascus.

Neither Moscow not Tehran has any illusions about the ultimate goals of its partner and how different they are. Yet, they came to an understanding that in order to secure their interests in Syria they need to cooperate. Consequently, Moscow and Tehran formed a marriage of convenience where each partner tries to reach its own goals with the help of the other. So far, military coordination between the two countries has been patchy. Neither is in a hurry to create joint command structures. Their coordination is occasional, and in most cases, the sides simply prefer to take parallel paths to the same destination.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the current format of the Russian-Iranian cooperation in Syria based on the principle of the marriage of convenience prevents the dialogue between the two countries from evolving into the strategic alliance. In order to achieve the primary goal – to save the Syrian government from falling – the countries agreed to temporarily ignore the differences in their approaches towards the settlement of those issues that, at present, are of the secondary

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<sup>1</sup> Mardasov, “Asadnaya Oshibka [(As)sad Mistake]”

importance. However, this only means that the discussion of these questions (such as Iran's plans to use the territory of Syria to continue supporting the Hizbollah in Lebanon) is just temporary postponed.<sup>1</sup>

Moscow seriously believes that in the post-conflict period Tehran will become a challenge for the further political settlement in Syria, and, most of all, for the Russian control over Damascus. As a result, the Kremlin will be cautiously limiting Iran's influence whereas it can. Yet, the Russian abilities to do this are modest. On the one hand, Moscow still needs Tehran's proxies on the ground as long as the war continues. On the other hand, the Kremlin clearly understands Iran's presence in Syria cannot be completely eradicated. It is only possible to achieve certain decrease of Iran's presence in selected areas and only as a part of greater deal. For instance, Moscow could try to persuade Tehran to decrease its presence in the south of Syria or Idlib region in exchange for decrease in Israel/US's pressure on Iran. In this case, the Kremlin could do a role of a mediator and try to play the role of a guarantor of the deal.<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, Moscow cannot simply afford joining the anti-Iranian camp or making Iran believe that the Kremlin joined it. Russia sees Tehran as an important player in the Middle East, Central Asia and Caucasus whose, at least, neutral attitude towards Russia's regional initiatives is important to ensure their success. In Syria, Russia and Iran also remain mutually dependent on each other. Under these circumstances, it cannot afford any steps that would be openly aimed against Tehran. Previously, the Kremlin tried to exchange its pro-Iranian stance for better relations with the West several times. Nothing good came out of it. The Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of 1995 is the most notable example. According to this confidential document signed under heavy

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on the Middle East. Institute of Oriental Studies. Moscow, Russia. September 20, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Sarkisyan I., "Rossiya, Iran i Izrail: Smogli li Storony Dostignut Soglasheniya po Sirii? [Russia, Iran and Israel: Have the Sides Managed to Reach an Agreement on Syria?]", *The Middle East Institute (Moscow)*, July 24, 2018, <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=46320> accessed October 5, 2020.

U.S. pressure during another period of reconciliation between Moscow and Washington, the Russian government agreed to stop fulfilling contracts to export military supplies to the Islamic Republic by 1999 and to conclude no new deals with Iran in this field. These steps came with a high price for Russia. By 2000, exports of Russian military equipment to Iran had been halted (the loss to Russia's military-industrial complex was estimated by a Russian economist to be \$3 billion).<sup>1</sup> This and some other cases taught Moscow a lesson that any straightforward deals with the US regarding Iran are useless and even harmful. Under this circumstances, Moscow can only either offer some minor amendments in its stance on Iran or, which is more possible, its role as a mediator to negotiate the new deal between the US and Iran. Yet, it is doubtful that this will be enough for the US to strike a deal with Moscow that could offset the main negative trend of the Russian-American relations.<sup>2</sup>

Strong Russian presence in post-conflict Syria may also be a serious impediment for the fulfillment of Iran's regional plans. Moscow will definitely be against of using the Syrian territory for the anti-Israeli activities. The Kremlin can also object to Tehran's plans to resume the discussion with Damascus about the building of the Iran-Iraq-Syria-the Mediterranean Sea gas pipeline whose construction can be against Russian interests in the international gas market.

### Israel

Iran's presence in Syria remains one of the main topic to discuss between Russia and Israel during often meetings between top-ranking officials of these countries (only since the beginning of 2019, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

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<sup>1</sup> Evseev V., 2010, "Rossiysko-Iranskoye Nastorozhennoye Partnerstvo [The Russian-Iranian Watchful Partnership]", *Vestnik Kavkaza*. 2010, July 5. <http://www.vestikavkaza.ru/analytics/politika/22111.html>, accessed on March 10, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on the Middle East. Institute of Oriental Studies. Moscow, Russia. September 20, 2019.

Netanyahu travelled to Russia four times). At this moment, close relations with Israel, a close ally of the US and the EU, are important to Moscow for several reasons. First, they undermine Western efforts to put Russia under international isolation for its role in the Ukrainian war and its annexation of Crimea. Second, Russia needs close coordination with Israel, which plays a major role in determining security and political arrangements in the Levant (especially through its alliance with the US), to secure its positions in Syria. The stability of a Russian-backed regime in Damascus is contingent on this cooperation. Thirdly, Russia and Israel also have strong economic and cultural ties, given the significant population of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union. In 2019, Russian-Israeli trade reached USD5bln, bringing Israel into the cohort of Russia's main trade partners in the region.<sup>1</sup>

For years now, Russia has been striking a balancing act between Israel and Iran in the region. By 2015, the Kremlin managed to make Tehran and Tel Aviv accept the fact that Moscow is not going to choose between them while being equally ready to develop cooperation with both. This policy has been repeatedly challenged by events surrounding the Syrian civil war, where Israel and Iran have come into direct confrontation. In the spring of 2018, Moscow managed to negotiate an informal agreement between the two countries which largely kept the Iranians and their proxies away from the Syrian-Israeli border in exchange for a halt to Israeli air-strikes against Iranian positions that did not threaten Israeli security directly.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, the agreement has been violated by both sides repeatedly, but Russia has continued to put pressure on Tehran and Tel Aviv to deescalate. The Kremlin has threatened to leave the Iranian forces and proxies without Russian air support and has warned Israel that if it continued its aggressive air-strikes

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see Russian official trade statistics <http://russian-trade.com/> accessed October 5, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Sarkisyan, "Rossiya, Iran i Izrail: Smogli li Storony Dostignut Soglasheniya po Sirii?"

against the Iranians beyond southern Syria, it will supply Damascus with additional air defense systems (S-300, TOR-M1 and etc).<sup>1</sup>

This position of an arbiter gives Russia both political leverage in the region and international prestige and for this reason it would very much like to preserve the status quo of Israeli-Iranian tensions without open conflict. However, Moscow still cannot give Israel guarantees that the Iranians and their proxies will completely pull back from the south of Syria. Consequently, the current de-escalation in the Iranian-Israeli relations in Syria is temporary. Both countries need a break in their confrontation, but they are ready to resume it as soon as the chance occurs.

### *Saudi Arabia*

For long period, the Russian support for Bashar Assad remained one of the main deterrents for the development of the Russian-Saudi contacts. Since the beginning of the civil war, Riyadh heavily criticized the Kremlin for its stance on the conflict. Yet, in order to shape the situation in Syria towards its interests, Russia needs to cooperate with Saudi Arabia that has an influence on a certain part of the Syrian opposition. To establish this cooperation, Moscow used the strategy of stick and carrot. On one hand, after the deployment of its military forces in Syria in 2015, Moscow has been persistently weakening those military groupings supported by Saudi Arabia. By 2017, the Kingdom was put in the situation when it had to talk to Russia. Otherwise, its remaining assets on the Syrian ground could have been militarily taken out of the game.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Russia offered a number of incentives for the intensification of the political dialogue on Syria. First of all, by the mid-2017, Russia supported Saudi efforts to assemble the united opposition group to take part in Geneva talks. Secondly, the Kremlin demonstrated to Riyadh that there

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a Russian expert on the Middle East. Higher School of Economics. Moscow, Russia. September 19, 2018

are other topics of mutual interest (including the situation in the international oil market) that could be discussed if the disagreements on Syria are either put aside or overcome. Finally, the Kremlin also demonstrated its readiness to give certain concessions to Saudi Arabia in exchange for the reciprocal moves of Riyadh. Thus, by mid-2017, Russia agreed not to voice any objections against Saudi actions in Yemen in exchange for Saudi flexible position on Syria. The rationale behind the Russian transactions with the Saudi side is simple.<sup>1</sup> Moscow would like to prepare ground for launching the political process of the conflict settlement in Syria. It assumes that Saudi connections with certain groupings of the Syrian opposition might be useful for the achievement of Russia's goals. In exchange for Saudi support in bringing the Syrian opposition at the table of negotiations, Russia is ready to secure Riyadh's economic and political presence in the post-conflict Syria. In 2019, Russia was also discussing with Riyadh possibilities to use Saudi money for Syrian reconstruction project as well as the Kremlin is asking the Kingdom assistance in the re-establishment of the relations between Syria, the Arab countries and regional organizations such as the LAS.

Yet, the quid-pro-quo approach has brought only limited results. Saudi Arabia helped Moscow to launch the dialogue with part of the Syrian opposition supported by Riyadh. In 2018, Saudi Arabia gave its silent consent regarding Bahrain and the UAE intentions to re-open their embassies in Damascus. In addition, on 19 April 2019, deputy head of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Vershinin, and Russian special president envoy on Syria Aleksandr Lavrentyev visited Riyadh and Damascus. In Saudi Arabia, they met with Mohammad bin Salman. After that, they arguably delivered to Assad the Saudi consent to discuss the restoration of ties between Riyadh and

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<sup>1</sup> Belenkaya M., 2018, "Yemen Poprosil u Rossii Zerno i Prizval Ee Okazat Davleniye na Iran [Yemen Asked Grain from Russia and Called upon it to Put Pressure on Iran]", *Kommersant*. 2018, January 23. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3527227> accessed May 18, 2019; Interview with a Russian expert on the Middle East. Higher School of Economics. Moscow, Russia. 19 September 2018



Damascus.<sup>1</sup> Yet, Saudi Arabia still binds its assistance to Syria with the transformation of the Assad regime as well as the decreased presence of Iran in the country. However, Moscow had little progress or even interest in doing this, thus, further irritating the Saudi authorities. It had a direct impact on the opposition activities at the Syrian constitutional committee where pro-Saudi figures demonstrated little intention to cooperate with the regime.

### *Turkey*

Turkey's intention to secure its presence in the North-West of Syria including the control over the opposition-held Idlib area remains one of the main challenges for the Russian diplomacy in Syria: the success of the Turkish strategy implies the preservation of territorial enclaves that are out of control by the Syrian regime. In August 2018, Moscow failed to return the de-escalation zone in Idlib province under the government control. The Syrian branch of al-Qaeda, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front successfully blocked these attempts. However, Moscow and Damascus repeated them in December 2019 – February 2020 when the Syrian regime launched initially successful military operation in Idlib area that was stopped only after the Turkish military involvement into the fight and subsequent negotiations between Putin and Erdogan in March 2020.<sup>2</sup>

From a short-term perspective, Moscow and Damascus came as winners from that situation. First, the Syrian government forces have retained under their control all of the territories occupied during the January-February offensive (about 600 square kilometers). Second, the Turkish side has pledged to continue the fight against some of the opposition armed groups, primarily

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<sup>1</sup> RIA Novosti, 2019, "Lavrentyev Peredal Sirii Poslaniye ot Saudovskoy Aravii, Soobshchil Istochnik [Sources Say: Lavrentyev Delivered to Syria a Message from Saudi Arabia]", *RIA Novosti*, 2019, April 20, <https://ria.ru/20190420/1552878420.html> accessed May 18, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Kovalev V., 2020, "K Voprosu o Dorozhnoy Karte po Idlibu mezhdu Rossiyye i Turtsiyye [On the Question about the Russian-Turkish Road Map in Idlib]", *Middle East Institute (Moscow) Webpage*. 2020, March 24. <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=68196#more-68196> accessed October 5, 2020

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, considered as terrorist by Russia. Third, a 6-kilometer-deep security zone is being created on both sides of the M4 highway, effectively consolidating Damascus control over this strategic road. From a military point of view, the security corridor along the M4 highway dramatically affects the ability of Turkish-backed rebel forces to defend Idlib. If and when fighting resumes in Idlib, government forces will be able to move quickly into this demilitarized security zone. Thus, the cease-fire allowed Turkey to temporarily protect part of rebel-controlled Idlib, but at the cost of its future security. Finally, Moscow has once again demonstrated its leading role in the Syrian settlement.<sup>1</sup>

However, from now on, Turkey clearly signaled out that any confrontation between Damascus and the opposition in the Idlib area will be quickly transformed into Damascus confrontation with the Turkish army. Ankara also prevented the Syrian regime from immediate capturing of Idlib and its subsequent cleansing, thus, keeping afloat this semi-state enclave of the opposition. This means that Moscow will need to treat the opposition voices from this enclave seriously should it try again to resume the work of the Constitutional Committee or any other formats of political reconciliation in Syria. This, in turn, means that the resumption of Damascus attempts to regain the control over Idlib is just a matter of time. However, it also means that Damascus and Moscow will need to neutralize Ankara first (i.e. to make it withdraw its support of the Syrian opposition). Of course, Russia demonstrated that it can use force against the Turkish forces to support Assad, but this does not mean that the Kremlin is prepared for a full-fledged conflict with Turkey.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, Russia is playing a difficult game in Syria. While Assad is willing to accept Russia's military support, he also made it clear that he would rather

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<sup>1</sup> Shcheglov, "O Faktorah Vliyayushchih na Sobludeniyе Peremiriya v Siriyskoy Provintcii Idlib"

see his country completely destroyed than compromise with his opposition. His intransigence guarantees that the armed rebellion against him will continue to radicalize. In this way, he set Syria on the path to a generations-long conflict. The Assad inflexibility has not changed Russia's commitment to his regime, but it clearly illustrates the limits of the Kremlin's influence in Syria.

Nevertheless, Moscow plans to stay in Syria for long. Despite the fact that the Russian-supported regime of Assad can today consider itself the winner in the civil war, this does not guarantee Moscow a comfortable presence in post-conflict Syria. During the active phase of the armed conflict, it was military assistance to the Syrian regime that provided Russia with the effective leverage of influence on Damascus. However, with the transition to the post-conflict period, the significance of the military factor will be steadily decreasing, giving way to the financial and economical aspects of cooperation. Yet, it is still questioned whether the Russian broken economy will be able to provide Moscow with resources necessary to launch the reconstruction process. It is notable, that Russia was not in a hurry to state its readiness to participate in the reconstruction of post-war Syria.

Having limited economic resources to assist the Syrian reconstruction, Moscow tries to maintain its importance for Damascus through the diplomatic track by playing active role in shaping the political process of the conflict settlement. Currently, Moscow is focusing its diplomatic efforts on work with those countries that have a word to say on the Syrian ground such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. However, neither Iran nor Turkey are ready to play a secondary role in the negotiation process, which was demonstrated by the recent events. In the meantime, one can still state only situational interest and tactical similarity, but not the strategic commonality of the three countries.

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