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**THE RUSSIAN STRATEGY TOWARD SYRIAN CRISIS: CAUSES,  
FACTORS AND GOALS**

Ahmed Abdallah Eltahlawy (a)\*, Nourhan Elsheikh (b), Mohammad El Tahlawi (c)  
\*Corresponding author

(a) Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maspero, Nile Corniche, Boulaq, Cairo, Egypt, ahmedabdallah11079@yahoo.com  
(b) Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University, 1 Gamaa St., Giza, Egypt, nourhansh91@gmail.com  
(c) Faculty of Medicine, Zagazig University, Shaibet an Nakareyah, Zagazig, Egypt, tahlawi\_basha@yahoo.com

***Abstract***

Syrian Crisis was a result of an unsystematic rival. However, the crisis has a clear difference with other Arab ones, because it continues longer, and many players took share in it. Syrian crisis is the most violent one in the Arab region, and Syria itself, in terms of ethnicity, is more complicated than other “Arab-Spring” countries. It is a direct neighbouring country to some influential states, Lebanon, Jordon, Palestine, Iraq and Turkey, and an indirect neighbour to a regional essential country, Iran. All of such matters make Syrian matter more difficult and complicated.

Russia wasn't far from what was happening. It was a principle party in the crisis. Syrian file is a very essential issue in the Russian foreign policy, and an important axe of the Russian political game in the Arab region.

The study is seeking for discussing the effects of the Russian foreign policy, and its political and strategic attitudes toward Syrian crisis on the future international status of Russia in the future international order, that Russia is doing its best to change to be multi-polar system instead of the present order which is obviously a uni-polar one.

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## **1. Introduction**

Syrian Crisis was a result of an unsystematic rival which wasn't led by a unique leadership. However, the crisis has a clear difference with other Arab ones. First, it continued, and still continues, for a long time more than its counterparts in the other Arab states, taking into consideration the severe effects of all of them on their countries.

Second, many national and international parties took share in the Syrian crisis. Some of these parties have also split into smaller ones working and playing for their own interest, and the only losers are the Syrians.

Syrian crisis is the most violent one among other Arab crises, turning into a fatal civil war, hurting most of Syrian regions. This complication in this crisis has prolonged its time much more than other ones.

Syria, as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural community, is more complicated than Egypt, Tunisia or Yemen. It is, again, a direct neighbouring country to some influential states, i.e. Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Iraq and Turkey, and an indirect neighbour to a regional essential country, Iran. All of such matters make the Syrian case more difficult and complicated.

Russia wasn't far from what was happening; nay it was a principle party in the Syrian crisis after its outbreak. The Syrian file acts as a very essential issue in the Russian foreign policy, and it became one of the most important axes of the Russian political game in the Arab region, either in the face of the Western great powers, or its allies and friends in the Middle East.

The study speaks about some points clarifying Russian position towards the ongoing Syrian crisis in terms of reasons, political and strategic pillars on which the Russian leadership depends during making its political decisions toward the crisis, and the goals Russia seeks to achieve from this endless crisis.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The Russian foreign policy and its attitudes and decisions with regard to Syrian crisis as a helping indicator to predict the future status of Russia on the international arena.

## **3. Research Questions**

### **3.1. The Evolution of Russian- Syrian Relations**

Moscow has been involving in the Syrian crisis for the following reasons:

First, Syria was, and is still, a huge market for the Russian weapons. The total contracts for arms deals between the two countries during 2007- 2010 were nearly \$7.4 billion, including fighters Mig-29 and anti-ship missiles Yakhont.

Second, there is a connection between Russian involvement and Syrian oil and Gas. According to some Russian statistics, the greatest Russian petrol companies, like Tatneft and Stroitransgas, sell to Syria equipments and machinery for extracting oil and natural gas from Syrian land by more than \$1.1 billion.

Third, the volume of Russian investments in Syria is greater than its counterpart which was in Libya. This led Moscow to forcefully and fiercely intervene in the Syrian crisis. According to Moscow Times, Russia has invested more than \$19.4 billion in Syria during 2009, and the volume of trade exchange between the two countries in 2008 exceeded \$2 billion. Damascus was surely very happy when Moscow omitted Syrian debts to Russia.

Forth, Syria is one of the most important Arab commercial partners to Russia, that is the Russian- Syrian bilateral trade equals to 20% of the total the Arab- Russian mutual trade. Bilateral trade exchange has increased during the last few years to be \$1.92 billion in 2011 (58% increasing from 2010) (Walid Abdel-Hay, 2012).

Fifth, the strategic importance of Syria to Russia is considered. Syrian Tartus Port hosts nothing except the Russian military base, which has been established in the ex-Soviet era. This base is the only Russian base existing outside the ex-Soviet zone. Syria started in developing this base in 2008, and it was supposed to provide supply and repair services for large vessels starting from 2012.

Sixth, the geopolitical importance of Syria to Russia is very clear. As it is a close, strategic alliance to Russia, Syria supported Russia in its war in Chechnya, and in Georgia crisis in August 2008. Therefore, the Russian government is heavily depending on its strong relations with Syria in deepening the Russian existing pillars in the Middle East, which can be used by Moscow to play the mediator role in other crises in this region.

Seventh, Moscow sees that Syria, beside Iran, are forming the counterweight against the American influence and hegemony in the Middle East. Hence, the Syrian government is a key factor in the Russian foreign policy in the Middle Eastern region. This card, from the Russian politicians' point of view, generally acts as a deduction from the American and Western hegemonic balance in the region (Klein, 2012).

Eighth, Moscow felt that it has been deceived by the U.S. and its Western allies when they deluded it and BRICS countries that they only desired to adopt a Security Council resolution imposing a no-fly zone in Libya, to prevent transferring weapons to the Libyan conflicting groups.

Because of that, many political scientists see that if Russia loses Syria, Moscow will lose its foothold in all the Middle East. Added to that, Russia is afraid of the repetition of NATO's military intervention in Syria, which means more weakness in Russian existence and influence in the Arab region (Blank & Saivetz, 2012).

### **3.2. The Russian Position Toward the Crisis in Syria**

The Russian positions toward the Arab crises are characterized by ambiguity and lack of clarity. This led the scientists to say that this position is considered a deduction from the Russian balance in the Middle East.

In the same time the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had called the Syrian regime to catch the persons who were responsible for killing the Syrian protesters, ceased fire and violence and continued making deep social and political reforms, Russia's President had warned Al-Asad that his country might negatively change its position toward Damascus in case the Syrian regime failed to adopt series of dialogues with the opposition (El-Sheikh, 2011).

Added to that, the Russian Federal Council called for a conference gathering the Syrian regime and the keynotes of the opposition, but the Syrian government had refused.

Afterwards, Moscow announced that it supported the Syrian steps to reform, and it called for giving Damascus more time to achieve this goal which was previously announced about. Moscow had put some responsibility of what was happening in Syria on the Syrian opposition shoulder.

Also, Russia did not agree on Western and Arab countries pressures on Syrian regime to stop violence. On the contrary, Russia saw that some sort of outside conspiracy was involved in what was running in Syria (Abo El-Qassem, 2011).

From this point, Russia has been severely refusing and condemning the American and European punishments against Syria; as this would achieve nothing except more violence and complicated confusion in the Syrian scene. That led Moscow to say that Syrian regime was already starting taking some urgent actions for applying deep-rooted reforms aiming at calming the increasing tension down in all Syria (Abo El-Qassem, 2011).

At the same time, Moscow does not want to totally gamble on Syrian regime, in case the armed opposition troops achieve complete victory, and overthrow Bashar Al-Asad.

Anyway, Russia every time prevents any international resolution enacted by the Security Council condemning the Syrian regime, or imposing punishments over it. For instance, Medvedev announced in May 2011 his country refusal imposing any UN punishments against Damascus. After one month, the Russian Foreign Minister has warned the international community of presenting any help to "calls for securing the change of the present regime."

This position of Russia can be illustrated in the context of Russia's feeling that it was deceived by the West regarding to Libya. So, the Russian President announced that "there is absolutely no desire for events in Syria to follow the Libyan model, so that the Security Council resolution is used to justify a military operation against Syria".

During the meeting of the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency in June 2011, Russia rejected transferring the Syrian nuclear file to the Security Council. However, the resolution was enforced by a majority vote, as a Western attempt to pressure Syria. Again, Moscow has warned the United States and the European Union from supplying the Syrian opposition with arms, repeating Libyan scenario (El-Sheikh, 2011).

This Russian attitude towards what is happening in Syria was confirmed through Moscow's rejection to pass a Security Council resolution aiming at imposing economic punishments over Al-Asad regime. That was because Russia was explicitly refusing any foreign intervention in Syria, or even in transferring the power from the Syrian president to his deputy, as happened in Yemen (Pukhov, 2012).

It should be noted that a group of writers from those interested in the Syrian political issue believe that Russia has not changed or modified its discourse on the Syrian dilemma from its beginning until today. This group wants to say that there is a fundamentalist movement of Syrian people, exploiting a legitimate situation that has become a gift to the Arabs against their authoritarian regimes.

Thus, from the point of view of this trend, Moscow was aware that to prolong the conflict would change its character and change the conflict from struggle of people against their regime to an armed struggle that

would create the needed environment for extremists and fundamentalist trends. This led Moscow to assure the implementation of armament contracts that were delayed with Damascus, fearing that radical Islamic fundamentalism would dominate the reins of power inside Syria (Kilo, 2014).

For the researcher, he agrees with the viewpoint believing that Russia seeks to achieve its interests through peaceful means, unlike the United States, whose successive administrations saw, and still see, that military intervention in countries internal affairs under the pretext of humanitarian intervention is the most effective way to resolve crises.

The researcher also believes that the US method has made a terrible failure in many cases, as in Somalia in the nineties of the last century, and in Afghanistan since 2001, then in Iraq since 2003, and in Libya in 2011, and Syria- under the allegations of fighting terrorism of ISIS- since 2011.

In the same time, the Russian method in dealing with international crises has achieved a great deal of moral and tangible gains to Moscow. Russia adheres to a main principle, which is the priority and superiority of international law, and therefore it objects any attempts aiming at duplication in resolutions concerning Syria or elsewhere.

### **3.3. Determinants of the Russian position towards Syrian crisis**

- The occupation of Syria an important place in the Middle East as an influential element in the management of the crisis within the region borders, and the reflection of this on its relations with the international powers, especially the ex-Soviet Union, which was associated with it by a strategic alliance in the context of the conflict between the Eastern and Western camps.
- Moscow has strategic interests with Damascus. On one hand, the value of Russian exports to Syria amounted to about \$1.1 billion in 2010. On the other hand, the volume of Russian investments in Syria amounted to \$19.4 billion in 2009. On the third side, the relations between the two countries, during the last years, had witnessed active mutual political and diplomatic dialogues on some important issues in the region, especially the issue of Iranian nuclear file, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the situation in Iraq and Lebanon; as part of Russia's quest to regain its status and its influence in the region.
- Russia's fears of the spread of infection of those crises to its borders, if not the Russian interior itself. This is what Medvedev expressed when he said that "the series of events in the Middle East will have a direct impact on the situation in Russia" (Abo El-Qassem, 2011).

Those protesters -whose number was strongly increasing day after day- announced their demand to change the Russian government, which has been ruling the country for years, and replaced it by a new non-corrupt one being keen to implement the law as it should be, and real economic and democratic reforms in the country must take place (Nichol, 2012).

Moreover, there is a strong Russian fear that many fighters, who wish the "martyrdom", may return from Syria to the Caucasus. That fear was what made Moscow consider Damascus the first line of defense for Russian internal security. That was confirmed through a talk of former US Secretary of State, Henry Alfred Kissinger,

with CNN America channel about the reality of the Russian position in Syrian crisis, and the goals it aimed at when he said "Putin considers, according to my observation, the biggest concern in Syria for Putin is the possibility that this conflict will lead to increased militancy in the region, not the protection of a particular person," referring to Bashar Al-Asad (Diab, 2013).

- The confirmation that Moscow's support for Al-Assad regime is a support for the Syrian state in the face of the threat of civil war which may lead to fragmentation and division, and a repetition of the Libyan and Iraqi scenarios in Syria.
- Emphasizing that the Syrian national dialogue is the only way to resolve the crisis. The call for the importance of peaceful change, the rejection of violence, making a dialogue and the political solution within legal frameworks and on the basis of national reconciliation represented a consistent trend in the Russian official position. Moscow has supported the Syrian people's right to change but in a peaceful way.
- The rejection of any foreign military intervention in the Syrian crisis; in order to avoid repeating the Libyan tragedy and its Iraqi counterpart, and to confirm the need of the Syrians to settle the situation of their own country by themselves and without any foreign interference.
- The refusal to impose sanctions on Syria, and continue cooperating with Syrians in different fields, stressing that the imposition of sanctions ought to be authorized by the UN Security Council, and only in cases of extreme necessity (El-Sheikh, 2012).
- Moscow's realization that the Syrian crisis and the American involvement in it wasn't just to overthrow a corrupt, dictatorial and undemocratic regime, but for achieving several goals that were not in the interest of many major powers, especially Russia and China.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

In spite of what have been written about Russia and its foreign policy, which is always looking for the status of the Russian Federation among the international super powers, It appears that these writings did not explain in details of the effect of the Syrian crisis on the status of Moscow internationally in the current international order, depending upon the Russian foreign policy.

##### **4.1. The Scientific Purpose**

The study could be considered as an additional element that adds to the academic importance of the study presented for the Arab Library.

##### **4.2. The Practical Purpose.**

The study provides the necessary practical framework for the analysis of Russian foreign policy and its involvement in one of the most important issues in the Arab world, i.e. the Syrian crisis. It is therefore possible to put a foreign policy and take political and economic decisions based on what is presented to the decision makers in the Arab Middle Eastern countries.

## 5. Research Methods

The study used two approaches: *National Interest approach*, which was one of the approaches that have revealed the domination of Realism over the international relations studies since the end of World War II, and Crisis Management approach, which aims at taking quick and rational decisions to face international challenges, developments and emergencies, to prevent the widening of conflicts.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. The Fear of Repeating the Scenario of the Islamic Caucasus Countries

Moscow undoubtedly is afraid of restoring the tragedy scenarios of the internal unrest in the Islamic Caucasus Republics and seeing it repeated in Syria. During the 1990s, the Russian government involved into armed confrontations against several Islamic groups from some Caucasus countries, such as Chechnya, Dagestan and others. Thus, Moscow feels afraid of repeating that scenario, especially after the involvement of more than one radical Islamic armed group in the midst of the battles in Syria (e.g. Nasra Front, Qaeda, etc...), joined by many, not only Arabs, but also volunteers from Western countries, and even from Russia itself.

As stated above, Russia's foreign policy adopts the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, supports the peaceful solutions and the non-use of armed force. That is because it is afraid of taking a case of international intervention in one country as a recognized precedent against the complex interior in Russia, which witnessed demonstrations and popular uprisings in some countries in Russian Commonwealth as what was then called "the colored revolutions".

### 6.2. Russia and the problem of "mutually exclusive interests".

The Russian position faces some challenges and problems in relations with some of major Arab countries, especially the so-called "problem of mutually exclusive interests". For example, there is a contradiction between the Russian and Iranian positions on the inadmissibility of external military intervention in Syria and the inadmissibility of overthrowing the Syrian regime under pressure from abroad, with Saudi's position that President al-Assad should step down, prosecute war crimes in Syria. This Saudi viewpoint is matching with other Arab countries'.

In fact, this Russian position stems from a Russian vision of the crises that took place in some Arab countries before the Syrian one, starting with the occupation of Iraq in 2003, and ending with the crises of the Arab Spring. When the regime of Saddam Hussein was overthrown in Iraq, the contradictions between Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds and other Iraqi sects and minorities deepened, and hostile conflicts developed by each sect against the other(s). The conflicts escalated, and the differences between different races and nationalities increased. That led to fall of Iraq in Iran's hands on one side, the United States on the other, the extremist Islamic organizations on the third, and internal corruption rampant in the institutions that were created after Saddam on the fourth hand.

### **6.3. The Russian refusal of the imbalanced game**

Moscow opposes some asymmetrical attitudes towards the government and the opposition because it can change the existing balance of power and give the advantage of military supremacy to one of the parties, reducing the militarily superior party's desire to find a peaceful political solution to the crisis. For example, Russia has voted against calls to ban giving weapons to the Syrian regime, while opposition fighters are able to maintain weapons smuggling channels.

Therefore, it is clear that Moscow is moving towards achieving the goal of maintaining the balance of power between various parties, so that this balance will push those parties to the table of negotiation to find a peaceful solution ending the crisis without external military intervention in Syria. That reduces the American and Western pretexts to intervene militarily in Syrian affairs, and to remove the threat of Western presence near the Russian borders.

## **7. Conclusion**

Russian foreign policy adopts the non-interference principle in the internal affairs of States, supports the principles of both resorting to peaceful solutions, and non-use of armed force against other countries. That is because Moscow is afraid of that international intervention in a country might be taken as a for-granted precedent against the Russian inherently complex internal affairs.

However, this Russian position is facing now some challenges and problems with some of the major Arab countries in the region, in particular the so-called problem of "mutually exclusive interests".

For example, there is a contradiction between the Russian and Iranian positions on the inadmissibility of external military intervention in Syria or overthrowing Syrian regime under outside pressure, on one side, and the Saudi position which calls for overthrowing President al-Assad, Punishing those accused of war crimes in Syria.

Moscow opposes some asymmetrical attitudes towards Syrian government and opposition groups, because that can change the existing balance of power and give the advantage of military supremacy to one of the parties, thereby reducing its desire to find out a peaceful political solution for the crisis.

Thus, it is clear that Moscow is seeking to achieve a balance of power between various parties, so that this balance will push those parties to the political negotiating table; to find a peaceful solution to end the crisis without external military intervention in Syria, and this may reduce the American and Western pretexts to intervene militarily in Syria.

It seems that Russia shows a big success until now in its goals, and we can notice that in;

- The ability of Moscow to prevent the Big Powers from intervening in Syria, specially the U.S., achieving a clear victory in terms of imposing its desired status-quo on the Syrian battlefield, or imposing certain conditions on the players there.
- Succeeding in protecting its main ally in the region, i.e. Iran, from falling under the US pressure with regard to the Iranian nuclear file.

- Elapsing of many years since the beginning of Syrian crisis without any signs or indications about an imminent departure of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, or even an agreement with Moscow on choosing a new Syrian president for the country and throwing Moscow's ally out.
- Preventing every UN resolution aiming at condemning al-Assad and his regime. In fact, that is logic, so as that Russia felt that China and it were cheated by the UN Security Council in Libya. So, it is no longer ready to have another slap on its face in the Middle Eastern region

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