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Why is Russia Standing by Syria?

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The Syrian regime headed by Bashar al-Asad is in a fight for its life. Months of violent repression of anti-government protestors have failed to produce the desired results, while generating almost universal condemnation. Western governments are now seeking to ratchet up the pressure, viewing Bashar as having lost his legitimacy and thus needing to step aside. However, their efforts to obtain a Security Council resolution imposing sanctions on the Asad regime are being resolutely opposed by Russia, Syria's historic ally and client-state for the last-half century.

What lies behind Russia's determination to stand by its old ally? By the end of the 20th century, Russia's global ambitions had been dealt a severe blow in the wake of the collapse of the USSR and the country's domestic crisis. But by the mid-2000s, Russia's internal political and economic situation had stabilized and its geopolitical ambitions were renewed. While Moscow's principal interests lie in the West, it also increasingly looks toward Asia (China, India, Japan, Korea) and the Middle East. In recent years, Russia has marketed its Middle East policies as "a return" to the region, invoking images of the Soviet epoch, when Cold War exigencies largely defined its regional policies. Nowadays, the Kremlin perceives the Middle East as an arena where it can employ a variety of tools to influence regional developments, particularly those that affect the interests of outside powers. In addition, Russia's Middle East policies are also designed to counterbalance NATO's policy in Europe towards Russia.

Hence, Moscow has newly deepened its political and military ties with traditional allies, especially Syria; engages in a lively dialogue with Israel; treats Turkey as a key regional partner; maintains a thriving, albeit complicated relationship with Iran; and promotes trade with energy-rich Gulf Arab countries, Algeria and Libya. In a radical departure from the Soviet days, Russia keeps the lines of communication open with all important actors in the region.¹

The Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with newly independent but still occupied Syria in 1944. By the early 1950s, Syria, being pro-socialist in its development, gradually became one of the USSR's most important partners in the Middle East. Their strategic relations became all the more significant when Egypt reoriented itself toward the US after the October 1973 war and signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979. Needing to maintain a presence in the region and avoid a further erosion of its position, Moscow supported Damascus in its struggle with Israel and helped enhance Syrian influence in Lebanon.

Beginning with Mikhail Gorbachev's rise to power in the mid-1980s, and continuing with the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia's interests and influence in Middle Eastern affairs declined. For Syria, this was a cause of great concern, as its most powerful supporter had turned inward. Nevertheless, Damascus was resilient: it developed independent foreign policies that enabled it to maintain its core positions while avoiding international isolation. However, the continuing state of belligerence with Israel and the constant pressure that the US and other western states exerted on Damascus left Syria in need of renewed Russian support. As for Moscow, its Middle East policy is based on the centrality of Syria's position in the region and the impossibility of achieving a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace without Damascus. Hence, Russia has sought to influence regional processes through its partnership with Syria, interaction with Syria's strategic regional ally Iran, and contacts with Syria's main clients, Hamas and Hezbollah. Former Russian Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov expressed this thinking clearly, emphasizing that the Middle East is "crucially important" for Russian "geopolitical and economic interests" and that cooperation with Syria brings "tangible economic and political dividends."²

Since 2005, Russian-Syrian cooperation has reached a new high. That year, Bashar Asad visited Moscow; 73 percent of Syria's 13.5 billion dollar debt to Russia was forgiven and a declaration articulating the countries' shared positions on urgent regional problems was signed. Asad's two subsequent visits and Russian President

Dmitry Medvedev's reciprocal visit in May 2010 have furthered the countries' strategic partnership in key spheres.

The wave of Arab Spring protests reached Syrian shores in March, sparking demonstrations and riots that ended with brutal clashes between protestors and the security forces, and generating steadily escalating US and European pressure on the Assad regime to change course. Russia, China, India, Brazil and South Africa have opposed a proposed US- and EU-led Libya-style UN resolution condemning the Syrian regime for the bloodshed and adopting sanctions against it, arguing that it would neither solve Syria's domestic problems nor promote a peaceful resolution to the situation. To be sure, Western economic sanctions can have little impact on the Syrian regime, as Assad has spent the last decade strengthening his economic ties with the East, namely Russia, China, India, as well as Turkey and South American states.

Russia has important economic interests in Syria. In particular, Syria purchases 10 percent of Russia's total arms exports, making it the third largest buyer of Russian arms, after India and Venezuela. Ninety percent of Syria's armament is Russian-made, and several recent contracts have been signed that will provide Syria with modern combat aircraft, anti-aircraft missiles, tanks, etc. Furthermore, several Russian oil and gas companies have large contracts with the Syrian government, including deals to build the Syrian portion of a pan-Arab gas pipeline and a petroleum processing factory near Palmyra.³ Several Russian companies are also involved in the development of Syrian oil and gas reserves.

Moreover, Russia sees Syria as a military ally. The Russian navy is expanding beyond its coastal zone, and considering the possibility of using the Syrian facility at Tartus as its base of operations in the Mediterranean. While Moscow denies having any real interest in Tartus, Syrian officials say they are willing to negotiate the matter. The establishment of a strong Russian naval base in the Mediterranean would certainly have geopolitical ramifications.

Among Moscow's once-strong group of Middle Eastern allies, Syria is the only state that remains close to Russia. Russia is therefore deeply interested in how the current uprisings in Syria unfold. Further, an alliance with Syria is perceived by Russia as a way to counterbalance American influence in the region, as well as an answer to NATO's eastward expansion and missile defense deployment close to its borders.

Central to Russia's calculations is Iran. The Western powers' efforts to weaken Tehran and pry Syria away from its 32-year alliance with it are deemed by Moscow as a threat to its own geopolitical interests in the Greater Middle East. The Damascus-Tehran axis is viewed as an important factor in counterbalancing the US and its regional allies. If the Syrian regime collapses and, in the worst scenario, the country shatters into several entities, Russia will lose its last close ally in the region, leaving it significantly weaker in the international geopolitical competition with the US and Europe.

In June 2011, Russia's Deputy Ambassador to the UN, Alexander Pankin, articulated Moscow's official position on the Syrian crisis: "the current situation in Syria, despite an increase in tension and confrontation, does not present a threat to international peace and security....A real threat to regional security, in our view, could arise from outside interference in Syria's domestic situation, including attempts to push ready-made solutions or taking of sides."⁴ However, on August 3, as the situation on the ground grew dire, the UN Security Council adopted a "Presidential Statement" on Syria, expressing its concern at the deteriorating situation and regret at the death of people during the demonstrations. The next day, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement that "the situation in the country must be resolved by the Syrians themselves, without outside interference through an inclusive dialogue, which is the only way to solve the crisis."⁵ On August 18, the US and Europe dramatically increased the pressure on Bashar al-Asad, with Barack Obama articulating a demand by world leaders for Asad to surrender power.⁶ In response, the Russian Foreign Ministry stated that "President Bashar al-Asad has to be given more time to carry out the declared major program of political and economic reforms... We believe that a clear and unambiguous signal has been sent to the Syrians about the need to end all violence. This signal is also for the opposition, which should enter into dialogue with the authorities and dissociate itself from extremists...Based on these considerations we do not share the US and EU point of view concerning President Bashar al-Asad and will continue to pursue our consistent and principled line on Syria."⁷

Given these considerations, Russia is likely to continue to oppose Western attempts to increase international pressure on Syria. The success of NATO's violent intervention in Libya is not a scenario which Russia wants to see repeated.

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¹ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's policy in the Middle East: prospects for consensus and conflict with the US", A Century Foundation Report / www.tcf.org

² Marwan Cabalan, "Old Ties Revived" / Syria Today / <http://syria-today.com/st/index.php/june-2010/586-politics/7769-old-ties-revived>

³ Podzerob A., "About Russia-Syrian relations" / Institute of the Middle East / <http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2010/04-01-10.htm>

⁴ "Russia sees current situation in Syria as no threat to international peace, security" / Xinhuanet/http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/world/2011-04/28/c_13849056.htm

⁵ On the Security Council Presidential Statement on Syria / The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation/
http://www.ln.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/e32a9ac606d36781c32578e200515ca8!OpenDocument

⁶ "Syria: Assad must resign, says Obama" / The Guardian / <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/aug/18/syria-assad-must-resign-obama>

⁷ Comment by Press and Information Department of Russian Foreign Ministry on a Question from Interfax News Agency Regarding the Situation in Syria / The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation / http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/o/14928FFE24BDD3A0C32578F100538F00

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