# Why Russia is involved in the Syrian Civil War: One Issue, Many Views

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**Abstract**: The paper analyzes Russia's role in Syria's civil war, and indicates that while Russia's military intervened in the civil war to prevent the overthrow of the Bashar al-Assad-led Syrian government, it has remained difficult to really understand the ends Russia seeks to achieve from the war. This necessitated inquiry into the question of why Russia's military intervention in Syria's civil war is aimed at keeping President Bashar al-Assad in power. Consequently, the paper discovered six different scholarly explanations of this question, which include that: Russia's military activity in Syria aims to protect its geopolitical and geostrategic interests and sphere of influence in the Middle East from western encroachment, to advance the conservative orientation of Russia's ruling elite, to defend the United Nations laws on non-intervention and State sovereignty and prevent the institutionalization of a wrong interventionist precedent the West will readily exploit in the future, to crush Islamist fundamentalism and Jihadist ideology, to pursue realist ambitions, and to implement self-help measures that will guarantee its survival. The paper concludes that, of these six explanations, the realist explanation offers the most compelling answer to Russia's goal in Syria's civil war because it forms the basis other explanations are built upon.

**Keywords:** Bashar al-Assad; Russia; Syria; Syrian civil war; Syrian opposition

## 1. Introduction

Russia's direct military involvement in the on-going civil war in Syria has raised concerns as to what its real motives are. The concerns have resulted in diverse detailed explanations in various scholarly circles. The multiplicity of explanations and the conflict associated with them reveal the complexity and ambiguity of the subject-matter. Thus, it is quite difficult to understand the motivations for Russia's intervention in the Syrian armed conflict as imperialistic interests to remain a

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strong international player, annihilation of Islamist terrorism and ISIS necessary for regional peace and stability, vindictiveness against the United States for its anti-Russian behaviour since the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and against NATO for its anti-Russian action in Ukraine, and support of an ally in trouble from being overthrown by armed opposition, are all manifested in Russia's actions in Syria (Salama, 2015).

Hence, in treating Russia's role in the Syrian civil war, the study addresses the question, "Why is Russia's military intervention in the Syrian civil war aimed at keeping President Bashar al-Assad in power?" Specific attention is given to characterizing scholarly explanations of the question. This effort leads to the discovery of six sets of scholarly explanations each of which provides a specific account for the motives behind Russia's military activity in Syria. The six sets of scholarly explanations are treated as schools of thought as each of them is founded on a theoretical framework. The first argues that geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic interests and sphere of influence in the Middle East which Russia has to protect from western encroachment account for Russia's military intervention in Syria's civil war on the side of the Syrian regime. The second contends that the conservative orientation of Russia's ruling elite is responsible for Russia's military intervention in Syria. The third is based on the legalistic approach and explains that Russia intervened in Syria's civil war in order to uphold the United Nations' (UN) laws on non-intervention and State sovereignty and to prevent the UN from creating a precedent which the West can use arbitrarily and abusively in the future to interfere in the domestic conflict of any sovereign country with anti-western regime, and change the regime.

With the fourth is the idea that Russia's abhorrence of Islamist fundamentalism and Jihadist ideology is what stirred its involvement in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Syrian government, with the motive of obviating the chances of Syria becoming an Islamic fundamentalist and Jihadist stronghold. The fifth emphasizes realism as the ideology that prompted Russia to intervene in the Syrian civil war as it prioritizes the use of power in the form of military force against western opposition in order to protect its national interests and preserve its national survival in an unfriendly international system. The sixth set of scholarly explanations holds that Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war is based on the need to apply the self-help principle for self-defence and self-preservation, which Russia found to be imperative at the material time it entered the civil war. The paper accepts that the realist school of thought best explains Russia's role in the Syrian civil war because

it explains the power-politics of states in the hostile international system as means to ends, and also forms the basis upon which the analysis of other schools of thought derive meaning.

## 2. Russia Responds to Bashar al-Assad's SOS Call

The diplomatic relations between the former Soviet Union – now Russia – and Syria, which were established in July 1944 and ratified in February 1946, have become a strategic cornerstone of co-operation between the two countries. The relations developed into a close bond following the ratification in 1971 of a treaty between the former Soviet Union and Hafiz al-Assad-led Syria, which allowed the Soviet Union to establish a naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus; a facility Russia, the legal successor of the Soviet Union, continues to use up to now. Since that time, the two countries have maintained reliable and mutually beneficial relations. In 2011, the most recent revolution in the Arab World of North Africa and the Middle East (NAME), called the Arab Spring, erupted in Tunisia on 17 December 2010 due to the dismal domestic condition of the country, and quickly pervaded to other NAME countries one of which is Syria where a ferocious civil war is going on currently.

Russia had earlier limited its roles in the Syrian civil war to providing the Syrian government with diplomatic support, arms and ammunition supplies and other military equipment and facilities, and to offering training and military advisory services to the Syrian military which is confronted by a vast number of Syrian rebel groups. However, as the civil war continued to escalate, the Islamist terrorist groups and the moderate opposition's Free Syrian Army (FSA) continued to make more and more territorial and material gains amidst huge losses of territories and most essential materials as well as dampened morale of soldiers and mounting hopelessness on the part of the Syrian regime – which had caused it to retreat from as far as the coastal province of Latakia to defend Damascus heavily – it became necessary for the Syrian government, when in September 2015 it looked like Bashar al-Assad had only few weeks in power, to officially invited Russia that same month to intervene in the civil war to help combat Islamist terrorist groups, especially ISIS. The direct intervention of Russia at the time Bashar al-Assaed faced a real threat of overthrow by a formidable alliance of the FSA and Islamist militant groups which has audaciously captured strategic territories from the Syrian army in quick succession, became the game-changer in favour of the Syrian

regime. Russia thinks it fit to fight terrorism in Syria so as to prevent the re-emergence of terrorism in its North Caucasus region which has been prone to terrorist activities. Also, it believes that the Syrian government has to be protected militarily in order not to be overthrown by rebels or terrorists because it is the legitimately elected government of Syria and also because overthrowing the government will plunge Syria into chaos. Hence, the Russian Aerospace Forces started a sustained airstrike campaign against both ISIS and the anti-Assad FSA beginning from 30 September 2015 ("Syria conflict: Russia launches fresh strikes", 2015). While the intervention of Russia on the side of the Syrian government makes the Syrian armed forces more optimistic, the civil war has continued to drag on without the hope of resolution.

## 3. Geopolitical Interest Matters Much to Russia

Certain explanations for the reasons Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war is aimed at keeping President Bashar al-Assad in power centre on the Geopolitics School of thought. While the concept of geopolitics was understood by classic scholars such as Aristotle, Montesquieu, Kant, Hegel and Humboldt (Cohen, 2003), the term was conceptualized in 1899 as "Geopolitik" by the Swedish scholar Rudolf Kjellén (1864-1922) who defined it as "the theory of the state as a geographic organism or phenomenon in space" (Cohen, 2015, p. 15). Important to this definition are "State" and "geography/space". For Haushofer who popularized the term,

Geopolitics is the science of conditioning of political processes by the earth. It is based on the broad foundations of geography, especially of political geography, as the science of political space organisms and their structure. The essence of regions as comprehended from the geographical point of view provides the framework for geopolitics within which the course of political processes must proceed if they are to succeed in the long term. Though political leaders will occasionally reach beyond this frame, the earth dependency will always eventually exert its determining influence. As thus conceived, geopolitics aims to be equipment for political action and a guidepost in political life … Geopolitics wants to and must become the geographical conscience of the state (Tuathail, 1996, pp. 46-47).

Geopolitics also refers to the relationship between power politics and geography (Child, 1985). "Geopolitics is the analysis of the interaction between, on the one

hand, geographical settings and perspectives and, on the other, political processes … Both geographical settings and political processes are dynamic, and each influences and is influenced by the other" (Cohen, 2003, p. 12). It is, at the level of international relations, a method of studying foreign policy to understand, explain and predict international political behaviour through geographical variables such as area studies, climate, topography, demography, natural resources and applied science of the region being evaluated (Evans & Newnham, 1998). Furthermore, geopolitics "is the study of international relations from a spatial or geographical perspective" (Parker, 1998). The thrust of this school is that geographical factors are key determinants of the external political behaviour of the State in terms of use of power. Important areas of geopolitics are geo-economics (which embraces maritime geopolitical perspective and resource geopolitical perspective) and geostrategy (which covers continental, aerospace and maritime geopolitical perspectives).

The arguments based on this school indicate that Russia's military intervention in Syria is intended to protect its geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic advantages and sphere of influence. In the light of this position, Valenta & Valenta (2016) provide some geostrategic explanations for Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war: the explanations centre on Russia's security and defence concerns within its geopolitical sphere, among others. The main reason Russia is directly involved in the Syrian civil war is to reclaim its geopolitical and geostrategic sphere of influence around its near-abroad of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. This is critical to consolidating on Russia's reclaimed seaport of Sevastopol and passage for its naval forces. Like previous Russian leaders dating back to centuries such as Peter the Great, the involvement of Russia in the Syrian civil war is President Putin's deliberate action to reclaim and protect Russia's strategic interests inclusive of the country's regional economic zone as well as geopolitical and defence interests, knowing that his country has the particular natural geopolitical disadvantage of lack of considerable access to the sea for its naval forces, especially on the western side.

During the Soviet era, Russia benefited enormously from controlling naval ports and other military facilities in strategic maritime locations such as the Baltic region and the Black Sea; in the latter it had a warm-water naval port in the coastal waters of Sevastopol, Ukraine, as well as the Ochamchire warm-water naval port in the coastal waters of Abkhazia, Georgia. However, when the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia had to transfer ownership and control of these coastal naval ports to new

post-Soviet republics in whose territories they are located. This development made the naval power of the essentially closed-in Russia to become seriously threatened. The collapse of the Soviet Union was a great disaster for Russia as the country forfeited not only naval ports and other military assets but also lost control of its near-abroad, thereby incurring huge geopolitical, geostrategic, military and economic losses.

Russia's military action in Syria, therefore, is part of President Putin's extensive policy of reclamation of Russia's lost sphere of influence and strategic advantages. This effort started in 2005 with victory in the second Chechen war, it followed through the 2008 invasion of Georgia's region of Abkhazia to regain control of Abkhazia's port of Ochamchire on the Black Sea coast, the reconstruction of its Tartus port in Syria and modernization of naval facility there in 2008 and 2009, the invasion and annexation of Crimea in Ukraine in 2014, and conduced to the staunch support for pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk and Lugansk regions of Ukraine which are now self-declared new republics. Essentially, "His [Putin's] aim seemed clear: re-establishing Russia's presence in the Black Sea and through the Turkish Straits to the eastern coast of the Mediterranean and Middle East in littoral Russian Azov and Black Sea coastal areas…" (Valenta & Valenta, 2016, p. 15).

Russia's interest in the Mediterranean is vitally important for military strategy. Russia's permanent naval base in the western Syrian port of Tartus, that is, on Syria's Eastern Mediterranean coast, is strategically important to Russia as it is Russia's only surviving military facility in the Middle East and the last of such outside the former Soviet space that services Russia's warships and provides its navy direct access to the friendly waters of the Mediterranean Sea since the Cold War ended. The naval base is very indispensable for Russia's economic interest, strategic posture, and military activity in the unfreezing Mediterranean waters. Russia's support for the Syrian government goes beyond its interest in Syria; it extends to protecting its geostrategic interests in the entire Middle East (Buckley, 2012; Lesch, 2012; Mankoff, 2012; Nasser-Eddine, 2012; Zifcak, 2012; Janik, 2013; Jafarova, 2014; Plakoudas, 2015; Rafizadeh, 2015; Perišić, 2017). Russia's naval presence in Syria's Mediterranean coast is linked to its economic interest in the region. Its provision of diplomatic and military supports for Bashar al-Assad respectively in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and in the fight against the Syrian opposition is intended to protect its military asset in Syria's port of Tartus which is near to "the oil terminal of the Baku-Tiflis-Ceyhan pipeline from where huge amounts of oil are being shipped to Western Europe" (Janik,

2013, p. 82). This signals Russia's possible exercise of influence over energy export from the Middle East to Europe in the future. This also strengthens alliance between Russia and Iran in the broader opposition to the United States and the Sunni Muslim extensive influence in the Middle East (Janik, 2013; Khatib, 2014).

President Putin wants Russia to remain an indispensible power in the Middle East in order to continue to influence decision-making for the entire region, as this serves Russia's geopolitical and geostrategic interests. The armed revolution in the Middle East triggered by the Arab Spring and calling for democracy poses a serious threat to these national interests of Russia. Given that Syria under Bashar al-Assad is probably Russia's only surviving stronghold in the post-Cold War era, through which it can expand its influence in the Middle East and thus remain vitally important in decision-making for the region, Russia had to intervene in the Syrian civil war so as to prevent the largely Sunni-dominated anti-Russia opposition from seizing power as doing so would jeopardize Russia's national interests (Mankoff, 2012). While Russia's arms trade with Syria is important to the bilateral relations between the two countries, and the overthrow of the Assad regime is expected to put in danger this aspect of Russia-Syria relations, in actual fact Russia's arms sales to Syria is less important now than before as it has dropped to 5 percent of Russia's global arms sales since 2011. Hence, rather than arms trade with Syria, what is more significant to Russia in its relations with Syria and for which it strongly stands by the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria's civil war are its wider strategic interests in the political geography around Syria, and the fear of the adverse impact the overthrow of the Assad-led Shi'i Alawite rule in Syria by rebellious groups of Sunni Muslims supported by their western and Gulf States allies will have on Russia's position in the Middle East (Allison, 2013).

Several western thinking that Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war is essentially motivated by the desire to protect its naval port in Tartus and to keep up arms trade with Syria, is wrong. Rather, Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war, helping Bashar al-Assad to remain in power, is for a different and greater purpose which is a struggle in defence of the geopolitical and geostrategic interests of remaining indispensable in decision-making on matters concerning the entire Arab region. Assad's Syria is likely the only guarantor of these interests since after the collapse of allied regimes in the Arab World, Syria is possibly "the last bastion of Moscow's influence in the Arab World, one that many Russians … are loathe to see disappear" (Mankoff, 2012, p. 259). Russia hopes that with secure and effective control over Syria, it can restore in post-Soviet time its Soviet-era position of

influence in the entire Middle East. Particularly, Russia seeks to present itself as a major broker in the reconciliation process between Israel and its Arab enemies, and to balance both sides by building good relations with them just as it has already achieved building relations with Israel and Iran. The ultimate goal of raising its status and power in the region is to be on a par with the United States. Russia's strong emphasis on respect for State sovereignty and on UNSC sole leadership in managing internal conflicts can be correctly viewed from the perspective of its strategic and security interests in the Middle East.

President Putin's intervention in the Syrian civil war to protect the ally regime of Bashar al-Assad is basically about protecting Russia's geopolitical and geostrategic interests in the Middle East. These interests are considered essential to achieving certain ends such as national security, economic prosperity, restoration of global strategic balance of power, prevention of Islamist extremist terrorism and unrest in Russia's North Caucasus and, ultimately, the revival of Russia's superpower status which was lost when the Cold War ended (Plakoudas, 2015). Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war is only a tip of the ice berg as President Putin has broader geopolitical interests in the Middle East. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the attendant end of the Cold War and decline of Russia's global power, the United States – the acclaimed victor – has leap-frogged by means of opportunism to acquire ex-Soviet geopolitical sphere of influence in Russia's peripheral territories, markedly Eastern Europe and the Middle East, thereby reversing the Cold War era strategic balance of power between it and Russia. By fighting in Syria, President Putin, so ardent about geopolitics, is carrying on his broader fight to restore to Russia its lost geopolitical sphere of influence, re-establish global balance of power, consolidate on its alliance with Egypt, Iran and Syria, contain United States' global expansionism and strategy in the Middle East, and eventually establish "a multipolar world in which the United States will have to share power with Russia and other powers [e.g. China]" rather than remain the only global superpower (Plakoudas, 2015, pp. 36-37). Russia sees maintaining a stronghold over Syria as essential in realizing these lofty goals. Hence, it risks great losses if it does not rescue the Bashar al-Assad regime, its last Arab ally, after NATO aided the overthrow of the other – Muammar Gaddafi of Libya.

Russia seeks to protect its; geopolitical interest built around a reliable mutual strategic and geopolitical relationship between Moscow and Damascus since the time of the Cold War which has helped Russia and Syria to maintain balance of power against the anti-Russian and anti-Syrian geopolitical interests of the United

States and its western allies in the Middle East (Rafizadeh, 2015). Russia pursues geostrategic interests in the Middle East in the form of supporting the Alawite minority government of Syria. As the Shiite-Sunni proxy war between Shiite Muslim Iran and Sunni Muslim Saudi Arabia finds a new expression in the Syrian civil war underlined by Shiite regime and Sunni opposition armed conflict, Russia, lacking allies among Sunni Arab countries in the Middle East, is bent on supporting the alternative, that is the Shiite Arab countries, and thus stands alongside Iran and Hezbollah to defend the Alawite Shiite regime of Bashar al-Assad, being Russia's only reliable ally in the Middle East, from western and Sunni Muslim overthrow. The choice of keeping Bashar al-Assad in power is to enable Russia to continue to wield some power in the Middle East, to shore up its dependability and credibility in protecting allies (Janik, 2013).

Russia wants to prevent the fall of a reliable ally and the potential loss of Russia's influence in the Middle East. While Russia and other actors – the international community, China, and the Joint UN-Arab League Special Envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan – strongly object to western military intervention against Bashar al-Assad's government given the chaotic and complex nature of the country's armed conflict, Russia particularly rejects western intervention in Syria because of its own interests in the country, which include strategic alliance with the Syrian government and political ambition in the evolving new Middle East, among others (Buckley, 2012). Russia's involvement in the civil war is to promote international law and ensure security balance in the Middle East. Russia supports Bashar al-Assad regime in order to protect its relations with Syria, maintain "international equation" and ensure the "security equation in the Middle East" by pursuing its "geopolitical goals" according to international norms (Kazemi & Jegarlouii, 2017, pp. 73-74).

Syria is a core geostrategic country in the Middle East and serves not only as one of the few remaining areas from which Russia can exercise influence in Middle East affairs but also as a springboard for Russia to rebound into its lost global status (Lesch, 2012). Russia is cautious of Saudi Arabia; it is supporting the Assad regime because Saudi Arabia – Russia's old opponent – and other countries are supporting the Syrian opposition. Since the Cold War era, Russia has been wary of the Saudis as Saudi Arabia has been notorious for opposing the Soviet Union's interests and fighting a proxy war with the Union in the Middle East by providing huge financial and military supports to groups the Soviet fought, such as in Afghanistan and in Russia's Chechnya. Now in Syria, Saudi Arabia, a staunch supporter of the Syrian rebels, is exploiting the Arab Spring to seek to overthrow

Iran's ally in Syria and establish its own whereas elsewhere, such as Bahrain, it has frustrated the Arab Spring because it threatened its allies in power. "Syria has become a domestic issue in Russia" so that it shapes Russia's foreign policy of continuous support for Bashar al-Assad even if the regime may collapse eventually (Ziadeh, Hadar, Katz, & Heydemann, 2012, p. 9).

Under the Geopolitics School, another set of explanations for Russia's pro-Assad involvement in the Syrian civil war relates to geo-economics. Geo-economics embraces maritime and resource geopolitical perspectives, and has to do with the economic or resource factors in and of any geographical features such as land, water, etc. For the economic significance of any geographical features, nations strive to exercise control directly or indirectly over such features and use their power to maintain influence over them. Accordingly, it is argued that, rather than politics per se, Russia's motive for intervening in the Syrian civil war is to protect its economic interests in Syria. Russia's endeavour to keep Bashar al-Assad in power is believed to particularly protect its geo-economic (mainly natural gas) interests in Syria and in the broader Middle East – which reinforces the sustainability of its monopolistic supply of natural gas to Europe – as these interests are threatened by the United States' position and action in Syria. Russia's action in the Syrian civil war aims to prevent the United States from stopping its control of natural gas in Syria. The question "who controls whose natural gas flow via whose territories?" (Güner & Koç, 2017, p. 1) is fundamental to understanding the mutually contradictory geo-economic interests of the United States and Russia, for which the former wants the Syrian government toppled and a Kurdish State created and for which the latter wants the reverse as the case. There is an irreconcilable struggle between the United States and Russia over geo-economic interest in Europe and the Middle East. Russia's economic importance to Europe is enormous because it is practically the only supplier of natural gas to Europe which depends so much on this vital energy. The United States is envious of this seeming dominant economic influence Russia has over Europe and is plotting to weaken it by its actions in Syria.

The United States, contrary to Russia's interest, is enormously supporting the Kurdish rebels in Syria militarily, technically and politically to achieve independence from Syria. It hopes that the actualization of this ambition would create an alternative natural gas route to Europe as Russia will have neither a voice nor influence in matters of geopolitics and geo-economics around the envisioned Kurdistan whose people are already allied with the United States. Russia's control

of the huge deposit of natural gas in northern Syria, its underground transnational conduit pipelines in Syria and its leverage in the region's geopolitical affairs would be useless if this US goal is achieved. This US ambivalence towards Russia underlines the United States strong support for the planned alternative Qatar pipeline. Russia's military involvement in the Syrian civil war is therefore primarily intended to frustrate this US malignant stratagem against it. To keep Bashar al-Assad in power, to preserve the territorial integrity of Syria and to thwart the emergence of an independent Kurdish State that will have the United States as chief patron, constitute Russia's vitally important policy for Syria that will safeguard its geopolitical influence in the Near East and maintain its monopolistic position of being the greatest exporter of natural gas to Europe (Güner & Koç, 2017).

Besides security and defence concerns, Russia sees its geo-economic interest in Syria as crucially important. Many Russian enterprises have invested heavily in Syria's oil and natural gas industry and have underground pipelines conducting these resources from Syria to Europe through Russian energy-dependent States in the Caucasus, and Ukraine. Russia believes only Bashar al-Assad regime can guarantee these investments and interests in Syria. This is a matter of serious concern for Russia as it is primarily dependent on petroleum and gas for its survival, and as "seventy percent of Russia's foreign income comes from oil and gas exports [and] sixty percent of the state budget is from energy export revenues" (Valenta & Valenta, 2016, p. 7). Russia's behaviour in the Syrian armed conflict is dictated by President Putin's motives of protecting Russia's political, economic and strategic interests in Syria, and by the significance of Syria's location in the Middle East. For instance, Syria alone buys six percent of Russia's global arms and military equipment exports and has proposed to buy "fighter jets and advanced missiles … estimated to be worth some US$4 billion" while Russia has investments in "pipeline and a liquefied natural gas processing facility 200 kilometres east of Homs." Besides, "in the Middle East, Syria is of enormous strategic significance. Libya was not" (Zifcak, 2012, p. 91). This informs Russia's tenacious commitment to preserve the allied Syrian regime.

Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war is aimed at securing a strategic position for itself in the new politics of geo-economics of the Middle East with respect to natural gas and petroleum export to Europe. Russia enjoys its status as the sole exporter of natural energy resources to Europe via underground pipelines. This geopolitical leverage and national interest is threatened as the European Union

(EU) seeks to reduce its excessive dependency on Russia for these all-important energy needs by seeking alternative sources and routes in the Middle East through East Mediterranean. This point is vividly captured in the following excerpt:

The recent discovery of vast energy reserves in the exclusive economic zones of Egypt and Israel (the Zhor and Leviathan hydrocarbon reserves respectively) has radically changed the energy landscape of the region. This development has created opportunities and risks for Russia, a "petro-state" whose federal budget depends critically on energy exports; in fact, 68 percent of the total revenues in 2013 originated from natural gas and oil exports. Russia is concerned that the energy-thirsty Europe is seeking other sources of oil and natural gas that will reduce its over-dependency on Russia for its hydrocarbon needs. In fact, the EU has approved certain energy projects (e.g. the TAP pipeline) and even considered favorably the construction of the East-Med pipeline, which would ideally transport natural gas from the vast reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean to the EU through Cyprus and Greece. By intervening in Syria and allying itself with Egypt, Moscow has acquired a strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean and, therefore, the peripheral players (Turkey, Israel, Egypt, as well as the EU) cannot ignore Russia in their future designs about the new energy Eldorado (Plakoudas, 2015, p. 36).

Russia wants to exercise power and influence in "the Fertile Crescent" of "Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon" where more than 50 percent of the world's oil reserves are situated" in order to compete symmetrically with the United States in its traditional "sphere of influence" and to further use this gained ground to project itself as a re-emergent world power that can no longer be reduced to a mere regional power restrained only to its former Soviet sphere of Eastern Europe (Plakoudas, 2015, p. 35). Russia's economic interests cover areas such as petroleum and natural gas exploration and processing investment, as well as arms sales and service. Russia has made direct investments in business and infrastructure necessary for the "production of energy extraction equipment, agricultural equipment, aviation, automobile components and tourism" (Avenäs, 2016, p. 31). Russia's investments in Syria's tourism, energy and infrastructure sectors reached $19.4 billion in 2009 only. It makes huge economic gains of roughly $5 billion from continuous armament sales to the al-Assad regime as Syria remains a major Middle East market for Russia's weapons after Russia lost billions of dollars in arms trade with Iran in keeping with UN sanction against the country, and Libya due to the deposition of Gaddafi from power (Lesch, 2012; Nasser-Eddine, 2012; Buckley, 2012; Jafarova, 2014; Rafizadeh, 2015; Perišić, 2017).

It is clear that even though Russia rejects and decries external military intervention in a sovereign State's internal affairs as flagrant abuse of international law, it is doing so with respect to Syria for its own national interests and establishments in the country which it believes can only be guaranteed with Bashar al-Assad remaining in power. For these political, strategic and economic reasons Russia has refused to support any proposal to invoke the UN principle of "Responsibility to Protect" against the Syrian government (Zifcak, 2012: 91). Accordingly, Russia does not want NATO's military intervention in Syria because it has its own vital national economic, business, military, diplomatic and strategic interests and assets to protect in the country, and is desirous of reviving its alliances in the Middle East amidst saving an ally with whom it built and enjoys steady, robust and mutually beneficial relations which started during the Cold War and has developed into profitable military, economic and political co-operations for both sides since Hafez al-Assad regime (Kildron, 2012; Lesch, 2012; Nasser-Eddine, 2012; Avenäs, 2016; Perišić, 2017).

Generally, Russia is perceived especially in the West and in some countries in the Middle East as the hindrance to international efforts to resolve the Syrian civil war by repeatedly vetoing anti-Assad UNSC draft resolutions in order to protect its own geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic interests (Buckley, 2012; Lesch, 2012; Lynch & Fordham, 2012; Nasser-Eddine, 2012; Zifcak, 2012; Jafarova, 2014; Plakoudas, 2015; Valenta & Valenta, 2016), However, Russia's intervention in Syria's civil war is ambiguous as the country's actions in Syria are rift with contradictions. Many scholars disagree with the afore-stated proposition and argue instead that Russia has little geo-economic and geostrategic interests in Syria and thus has no reason to constitute a hindrance to the resolution of the Syrian civil war (Inozemtsev, as cited in Brown, 2014, p. 56; Ziadeh, Hadar, Katz, & Heydemann, 2012; Pukhov, 2012; Hill, 2013; Trenin, 2013; Vysotsky, 2014; and Ramani, 2015).

## 4. Conservative Russian Ruling Elite Abhors Revolution in Syria

The second set of explanations for Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war on the side of the Syrian regime relates to the argument of the Conservative School, which in its Anglophone version and tradition originated with Edmund Burke. Conservatism refers to "the ideas and beliefs of people who support established ideas [and institutions] and are against sudden change" (Holmes, 2004, pp. 51-52).

It is "an ideology of system maintenance which, depending on what is to be conserved … may or may not automatically be promotive of the society's well-being, but definitely tantamount to reaction if in conditions of needed social or revolutionary change. [It is] in various degrees, the opposite of reformism, social change, and revolution" (Igwe, 2007, p. 86). Furthermore, conservatism is –

dedicated to maintaining the structure and institutions of a society threatened by … social unrest … Conservatism arises directly from the sense that one belongs to some continuing, and preexisting social order, and that this fact is all important in determining what to do … Conservatism presupposes the existence of a social organism. Its politics is concerned with sustaining the life of that organism, through sickness and health, change and decay … the bond of society – as the conservative sees it – is just such a 'transcendent' bond, and it is inevitable that the citizen will be disposed to recognize its legitimacy, will be disposed, in other words, to bestow authority upon the existing order (Scruton, 1980, pp. 15, 21, 25, & 33).

While conservatism admits the inevitability of societal change, it abhors drastic and sudden change. O'Hara (as cited in Andreasson, 2014, p. 1) emphasizes this point in stating that, conservatives do not simply reject and resist all forms of change in social, political and economic arrangements of any given society. Instead they accept that change is inevitable and have articulated a distinct approach to identifying and understanding circumstances in which change might contribute to resolving contradictions and discord in existing arrangements. In doing so, conservatives aim to aid in the preservation of institutions and practices, rather than rendering them unviable and thus tearing them asunder by rejecting any change at all.

Similarly, "conservatism as an ideology, then, is characterized in the first instance, by opposition to the idea of total or radical change, and not by the absurd idea of opposition to change as such, or by any commitment to preserving all existing institutions" (O'Sullivan, 1976, p. 9). The school is opposed to revolution. In light of this, it is stated that "The revolutionary vision stands in sharp contrast to the conservative sentiment, is indeed its anti-thesis … Where revolutionaries succeeded in bringing down existing order, radicalism habitually gave birth to terrors greater than those which revolutionaries sought to end" (Andreasson, 2014, pp. 6-7).

Against the backdrop of the Conservative argument, scholars contend that Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war can be explained by the conservative

disposition of Russia's ruling elite who abhors revolution or a drastic violent revolution. To this, Baev (2011) argues that Russia is fighting in Syria to counteract the revolution against the Syrian regime and also to halt the course of the Arab Spring from engulfing authoritarian States in the broader Middle East where it seek to build friendship. He disagrees with the idea that Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war is about economic (oil) interest in the Middle East, because Russia is already a dependable exporter of oil and gas. Rather, Russia's military activity in Syria is a demonstration of its repulsion for revolution against the Middle East's historic authoritarian political system which it benefits from. Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war only to consolidate on President Putin's successes in fighting against insurgency, which is deemed necessary to maintain stability and order in Russia because the Russian government thinks that victory for insurgents in the Arab World will likely incite similar revolution against the largely authoritarian political structure in Russia.

With its anti-revolution war and posture in Syria and in the entire Middle East, as well as its solidarity with the Bashar al-Assad regime and improved relations with other conservative regimes in the wider Middle East in times of region-wide fears of revolution amidst abandonment of allies by the United States as seen in Egypt, Russia seeks to win over the traditionally pro-western leaders of the Middle East who are already wary of the West for failing to achieve democratization of the region and for throwing Libya into chaos (Baev, 2011). Russians are afraid of losing the most reliable strategic ally in the Middle East. This makes the Russian government to be disinterested in external military intervention in Syria. Russia worries that if the western-backed opposition overthrows the Syrian government, the opposition-led government will align Syria with the West, especially Russia's greatest rival, the United States, to the total detriment of Russia. Since only Bashar al-Assad government can guarantee the continuous protection of Russia's interests in Syria, Russia cannot afford to allow the ouster of the regime (Rafizadeh, 2015; Avenäs, 2016). Russians believe that the United States is in the habit of inciting public demonstrations for democratic reforms only to overthrow governments and create a very different situation instead. However, the non-intervention of the United States in the Syrian civil war directly against the Bashar al-Assad regime gives Russia all the latitude to strongly protect the Assad regime (Ziadeh, Hadar, Katz, & Heydemann, 2012).

Russia seeks to preserve stability in the Middle East by preventing the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad. It fears the likely aftermath in the event that the Bashar al-

Assad regime is overthrown. Drawing inferences from the seemingly intractable sectarian, socio-political, Jihadist and security crises in post-Hussein Iraq and post-Gaddafi Libya after US-led interventions, Russia cannot afford the range of consequences such as complex sectarian strife, Islamist terrorism, vindictiveness, and socio-political, economic and security crises that would plague a post-Assad multi-ethnic and sectarian Syria if President Bashar al-Assad is killed or forcefully overthrown through foreign intervention (Mankoff, 2012). On regional level, the overthrow of the Syrian regime is likely to cause a spillover of the Syrian civil war which will destabilize the Middle East, worsen the on-going regional "Sunni-Shiite cold war" and threaten weak authoritarian regimes in Central Asia – another Russia's sphere of influence –, and even Russia itself "which has a Muslim population of up to 15 million" (Mankoff, 2012, p. 262) particularly in North Caucasus where Islamist extremism has constituted a serious national security threat to the Russian Federation and in central Russia city of Kazan where Islamist terrorism has emerged. While the United States encourages the Arab revolution in the hope that it will consequently kick start democratization of the Middle East irrespective of inexorable instability, Russia's seemingly realistic position is that the prospect of democracy in the Middle East is not certain in the foreseeable future, especially when it is forced from outside, given the region's deeply entrenched authoritarian political system and also given that such prospect lacks enabling internal factors currently. In the light of this thinking, Russia decries the Arab revolution and objects to, based on hindsight from the Libyan experience and as a matter of foreign policy, western-proposed foreign military intervention in Syria, but is supportive of respect for State sovereignty and UNSC leadership in international conflict management (Mankoff, 2012).

Russia maintains a conservative abhorrence of revolution and as such it opposes the Syrian civil war. It opposes external military intervention and wants to prevent the war from escalating into a regional war because it worries that, if a regional war eventually occurs, the Russian nation and Russia's leverage in the Middle East could come under threats, especially as democratization, which is the said original goal of the Arab Spring, is fast giving way to Islamization. Besides abhorring revolution, Russia perceives some selfish ulterior motive in the West's anti-Assad behaviour; it believes the West wants the Assad regime overthrown not particularly to benefit the Syrian population, but to punish and contain Iran which is a strong ally of Syria. Accordingly, Russia is opposed to external intervention but fully supports Syria's initiative to resolve Syrian conflict. Russia worries that given the

Islamist nature of the majority of the Syrian opposition, western support for them will likely help to create Syria's kind of al Qaeda just as the US support for Afghan mujahedeen in the latter's resistance of Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s helped in creating al Qaeda that has hit the United States so hard (Lesch, 2012). Russia's diplomacy of consistent advocacy for the preservation of the political order in the Middle East for the sake of regional stability and for respect for the principle of international law that objects to foreign intervention in domestic conflicts of sovereign nations, are aimed to serve its preference for the status quo (Plakoudas, 2015).

Ziadeh, Hadar, Katz, & Heydemann (2012, p. 7) dispute the relevance of the mainstream knowledge that the reasons Russia is firmly supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime are because of "Russian arms relationship with Syria that it fears it might lose; Russian investments in the Syrian petroleum sector; the naval facility that Russia has at Tartus, the only one it has outside the former Soviet Union", which it fears it would lose if the Assad regime collapses. Instead, they argue, based on majority of responses they garnered from an interview with Russian experts and western journalists in Moscow, that the reason the Russian government is firmly supporting the Assad regime with the approval of Russians is because the generality of Russians are disgusted by the United States' endless campaigns of destroying society and civilization in Middle East countries as has happened in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, and also because they strongly believe that it is the intention of the United States to also destroy Syria and throw it into chaos. Russians believe, moreover, that the United States is deliberately destroying these countries located comparatively very close to Russia with a malicious ultimate goal of harming Russia in particular while itself is far secure away across great oceans.

Russia's military involvement in the Syrian civil war to protect the Syrian regime is intended to stop the United States from executing in Syria its perilous and self-serving ambition to impose democracy externally on the traditionally conservative and authoritarian Middle East countries, by means of discriminatory military invasion and/or overthrow of non-ally (pro-Russian) regimes. This ambition is pursued in fulfillment of US "Greater Middle East" plan – a subset of the Middle East Policy formulated by the George Bush Jnr administration in the first half of the 2000s – intended supposedly to take development and modernization to the Middle East. Russians believe that the Arab Spring is only a negative physical manifestation of a remote and continuous US policy to impose democratization on the Middle East, which eventually turns out to be destabilizing. Hence, while the

Arab Spring assumed regional and international dimensions, Russia perceives the West who came brazenly and swiftly to the support of rebel forces in their rebellion, claiming democracy, as actually camouflaging behind the Spring to aid willing and ostensibly pro-democracy rebels in order to overthrow the non-ally regime in Syria in the name of helping to institutionalize democracy, which will be nothing but a travesty (Vysotsky (2014, p. 46).

The Arab Spring fortunately provides the opportunity the United States and other western countries seek to be able to further the "Greater Middle East" plan in order to advance their own geopolitical interest of comfortably having allies and securing control over virtually the whole Middle East to Russia's detriment. Russia has historical evidences which show that everywhere the United States had carried out military invasion and/or regime change in the Middle East supposedly to establish and institutionalize democracy, the consequences have always been a charade of democracy, as well as socio-economic and sectarian crises. Thus, it wants to stop the West from imposing democracy on Syria, as it repudiates their success in doing the same thing in some other Middle East countries (Vysotsky, 2014: 46). Russia's military activity in Syria aims to halt the course of the Arab Spring as the Russian government fears the Arab Spring might spill over to Russia (MacFarquhar, 2011; Ajami, 2012). On the contrary, several Russian sources state that Moscow's foreign policy towards Syria is not because Russia fears that the Arab Spring threatens Russia's elite interests (Fel'gengauer, as cited in Brown, 2014, p. 56) as Russia's characteristics vary distinctively from those of the Arab nations, but because Russia believes that the rebellion against the Syrian government will not produce democracy (Morozov, as cited in Brown, 2014, p. 56). Russia does not trust the West anymore after the dismal Libyan experience it regretted and, as such, is not willing to capitulate to western pressure or support their draft resolution for intervention in Syria, even if it does not explicitly refer to military action against Bashar al-Assad. Russia's position is strengthened by the fact that so many Syrians reject drastic regime change and external military intervention in their country (Janik, 2013).

## 5. Russia Wants to Defend UN Principles and International Law

Another body of scholarly arguments as to the reason Russia is involved in the Syrian civil war rests on the third, Legalistic, school. The school sees legalism as being malleable by the State or political actors either for a selfish or altruistic end.

On the one hand, legalism explains crafty deployment of extant laws in politics as a cover for ignorance, or as a means to project unpopular ideas or to pursue unreasonable ends. It is an exercise of pedantry and a preference for the technicality of law over the spirit of law in such a crafty manner that promotes selfish ends against justice. Legalism involves the manipulation of the interpretative meaning of law in order to defend conservatism by States opposed to change even when change is pragmatically necessary. In sum, it is "mainly an anti-revolutionary and anti-progressive doctrine at the service of those who … wish to conceal the immorality of certain actions, and the injustices of a policy" (Igwe, 2007, pp. 228-229). Therefore, it is argued by some scholars that Russia's legalistic attitude towards the Syrian civil war, including its firm insistence on respect for UN's principles and international laws, is merely a cover to pursue its selfish interests in Syria, one of which is to have President Bashar al-Assad remain in power. On the other hand, however, legalism may be deployed altruistically and justly by beneficent and honest political leaders who have preference for justice over opportunism in ensuring the maintenance of stability in a complicated situation (Igwe, 2007). As regards this, it is contended that Russia's resolute defence of UN's principles and international laws in preventing western military intervention in Syria's civil war is the most prudent action altruistically motivated for the good of Syria and the entire Middle East because by such action, Russia helps in forestalling a bigger conflict with region-wide ramifications.

This understanding lends credence to the arguments under this school which state that by intervening in the Syrian civil war, Russia demonstrates its firm defence of UN's legal institutions particularly its international laws concerning non-intervention and State sovereignty. By defending UN's legal institutions, therefore, Russia wants to protect the Syrian government from forceful foreign overthrow and to prevent the creation by the UNSC of a precedent that will allow the United States and its western allies to use NATO to arbitrarily intervene in the domestic conflict of a less powerful sovereign country and change regime, in the name of implementing "Responsibility to Protect" but actually furthering their own selfish ideological, national and geopolitical interests. Russia demonstrates strong opposition to foreign military intervention and regime change in Syria. It strongly accentuates the primacy and imperative of upholding the principles of sovereignty of independent State and of non-interference in their domestic matters in order to maximize international sympathy and support against the Arab revolution and to frustrate it, safeguard its basic anti-revolution interest, and to save its ally, Syrian

President Bashar al-Assad, from revolutionary overthrow. President Putin argumentatively founds this policy position on the failure of the UNSC mission in Libya and on the attendant catastrophe that plague the country (Baev, 2011; Janik, 2013; Rafizadeh, 2015).

Russia abhors foreign incursion in Syria, sees the Syrian armed conflict as motivated by the West, and wants to defend the principle of sovereignty of States (Rather, Ali, & Abbas, 2015). It disapproves of regime change by external forces and believes differently that the UNSC's role is not to be permitting external intervention to change a legitimate government of a country with some domestic crisis (Charap, 2013). Russia's military involvement in Syria is based on President Putin's readiness to uphold the principles of non-interference and State sovereignty and to stop the cycle of western-inspired crises purported to institute democracy but actually aimed at regime change in Middle East countries with anti-western (pro-Russian) regimes. Russia's opposition to external intervention in Syria is because the consequences of such interference will be socio-political instability, economic crisis and insecurity. The provocative mischief displayed by NATO by blatantly abusing the UNSC resolution 1973 in Libya and aiding the assassination of Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, was the circumstance that markedly changed Russia's attitude from reluctance, seeming indifference and passivity towards the Arab Spring to that of assertiveness, active involvement, and resolute defence of its strong belief in the principles of non-interference and respect for the sovereignty of independent States (Vysotsky, 2014). Russia also decries the United States' violation of international law by conducting air strikes against ISIL in Syria's airspace and by creating a military presence in Syria without the permission of the Syrian government (Avenäs, 2016).

Russia believes in the defence of two core values of its international identity, which are the principles of national sovereignty and multilateralism. Russia wants the United States to reframe from harmful interference in Syria's domestic affairs and not to overthrow the Assad regime because the regime is the lawfully instituted and UN-recognised government of Syria, as overthrowing it means infringing on Syria's national sovereignty. Russian media describe Russia not as a friend and supporter of Bashar al-Assad but as an altruistic player seeking to make peace and broker a consensual resolution of the Syrian armed conflict in such a way that leads to a coalitional transition government pursuant to elections (Pirogov, as cited in Brown, 2014, p. 56; Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 2012c). The media describe the unbending attitude of the Syrian opposition (Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 2012d, as cited in

Brown, 2014, p. 56) and their western supporters as the hindrances to Russia's effort in this regard, by demanding that Bashar al-Assad must step down before any agreement can be reached. This decision to protect Syria's national sovereignty and lawful government from United States' abuse is strengthened by Russia's suspicion that the United States is not interested in establishing real democracy but in spreading its selfish influence everywhere it executes regime change (Ramani, 2015). Russia is defending the principles of non-interference and State sovereignty in Syria by trying to stop external intervention and externally motivated regime change in the country (Vysotsky, 2014). Thus, Russia's resolution to support Bashar al-Assad is also a demonstration of its steadfast stand to protect international law, regional stability, and the principles of national sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-intervention which weaker States need in order to survive in a vicious and lawless international system. Against the backcloth of the Libyan incident, Russia thinks the West wants to use the UNSC to gain permission to oust the al-Assad regime of Syria. On its part, Russia wants to preserve the principles of international law in Syria, encourage gradualist change of regime, and retaliate against the West over their wrong action in Libya.

Russia and China are careful not to allow a repetition of the appalling Libyan experience in Syria or any form of economic sanctions against the Syrian regime in the name of fighting human rights abuse, because they are scared of helping to create a norm or model that the West can use against them someday. Russia decries western aggressive approach to the Syrian conflict because it considers the West as hypocritical and guileful for virtually ignoring the violent repression by the minority Sunni regime in Bahrain against peaceful anti-regime Shia demonstrators in the capitol, Manama, while simultaneously leading external support for similar protest in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt (Lesch, 2012).

Three major press in Russia and in the West were used to conduct a comparative study of media reporting and portrayal of the Syrian civil war as well as public perceptions and attitude in Russia and the West towards the war. The press show that contrary to the thinking that Russia rejected western approach towards the Syrian armed conflict because it has some special ties with Bashar al-Assad, Russia actually rejected western idea of solving the conflict because the idea encourages foreign military intervention and overthrow of the government of a sovereign State, which goes against the basic principles of the United Nations. Hence, Russia has no selfish interests to protect fighting in Syria; instead, "Russia is saving the world in Syria" by promoting altruism and protecting the principles of international law

from western abuses (Brown, 2014, p. 56). Russia wants to protect the international system because, given the horrors in Iraq and Libya following US-led military interventions, if the United States plan for a US-led military interference and forceful change of Syria's government is left unchecked, there would be a continuation of the United States policy of forcefully changing strong regimes that are opposed to the West, using humanitarian concern as an excuse. Forceful regime change in Syria will lead to catastrophic consequences because, unlike Libya which already has grave post-intervention consequences whilst not strategically located, Syria is a strategically located centre of Middle East security such that intractable crisis in Syria will harm the entire region's security (Brown, 2014).

This is particularly worrisome as Russia believes that the West wants to use the principle of "Responsibility to Protect" as pretence to abuse Syria's national sovereignty and overthrow the Bashar al-Assad regime. Hence, Russia prefers to uphold the principles of national sovereignty of States and of non-interference to the principle of "Responsibility to Protect" in the Syrian context. Russia's intervention in the Syrian conflict aims to prevent western military intervention in Syria because Russia, just like other BRICS nations, is a traditional defender of the principles of national sovereignty of States and of non-interference. It strongly opposes any attempt to abuse these principles, especially for selfish reasons. Russia accepted the concept of "Responsibility to Protect" with reluctance and the suspicion that the West may exploit it to interfere militarily in the domestic conflicts of other countries under the guise of humanitarian concerns. Hence, Russia opposed and vetoed western draft UNSC resolutions proposing military intervention in Syria based on the principle of "Responsibility to Protect". This is because Russia favours national sovereignty over "Responsibility to Protect" and believes after the Libya experience that the West wants to intervene in Syria for their selfish interests. Rather, Russia prefers a diplomatic settlement of the conflict (Staniste, 2015). Its support for the Bashar al-Assad regime in the civil war is not because of its military and economic interests in Syria but because it is opposed to the US-led western expansion in the Middle East by means of military force and open support for anti-regimes forces, as such actions contravene the principles of the UN and international law, and have created chaos and instability across the region (Pukhov, 2012; Ziadeh, Hadar, Katz, & Heydemann, 2012).

## 6. In Syria, Russia Continues the Fight against Jihad and Islamic Fundamentalism

Fourth, scholarly arguments also state that Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war is motivated by the desire to curb Jihadist activity, sectarianization of the war, and other forms of Islamic fundamentalism that characterize the civil war. These religious features of the civil war relate to the question of identity and conflict, and are thus explained by two schools of thought: primordialism and instrumentalism. The primordial school argues that identity, such as ethnicity and religion, represents a shared social bond that is firmly entrenched in the social relations and psychology of a people, binding them together as one larger collectivity. Ethnic values drive mobilization which reflects the emotional and often illogical ideas of group solidarity and support (Stack Jr., 1986; Connor, 1993; Smith, 1998; Lake & Rothchild, 1998). Also, "in societies where other forms of social solidarity around gender, labor or class are weak, ethno-religious mobilization is often an integral part of political life" (Hashemi, 2016, p. 67). These identities, which are already part of Syria's political life, are deployed for political and combat mobilization and for incitement of people within the camps of the Syrian regime and the Syrian rebels towards group solidarity and support because they address the emotional and irrational part of the people. The Syrian civil war is characterized by ethno-sectarian values leading to Sunni-Shia conflict, Jihad, and other forms of Islamic fundamentalism all of which represent primordial identity and value.

Instrumentalism buttresses the primordial understanding of the Syrian civil war in that, like Hashemi (2016, p. 67) notes, these primordial identities are "malleable and … defined as part of a political process." John Dewey (1859-1952), the founder of the instrumentalism school, states by way of definition that "Instrumentalism is an attempt to establish a precise logical theory of concepts, of judgments and inferences in their various forms, by considering primarily how thought functions in the experimental determinations of future consequences" (Dewey, as quoted in Boydston, 1984, p. 14). Instrumentalism argues that concepts such as ethno-religious identity have no consequence themselves. Rather, they are manipulated by political leaders, who strive to advance their political and economic interests through conflict, to become helpful in achieving goals such as identity-based mass mobilization, and mass solidarity. For instrumentalists, primordial concepts are used by the elite as means to ends (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; Smith, 2001; Hashemi, 2016). With regard to the Syrian civil war, the elite in the radical rebel groups deploy the sectarian sentiment of their supporters to incite extremist

behaviour such as Jihad, terrorism and other atrocity crimes which become instrumental in furtherance of their Islamic fundamentalist cause. The promotion of Jihad, sectarian sentiment and Islamic fundamentalism in the civil war is the result of the personal actions of radical rebel leaders who seek to use these features, coupled with their ethno-religious beliefs, as an instrument of mass mobilization and solidarity and as a tool for their armed competition for power and resources against the Syrian regime, because they find them more effective. They strive to use the primordial factors of ethnicity, Islamic fundamentalism and religious sectarianism as instrumental means to achieve their revolutionary ends one of which is the establishment of an Islamic State based on Islamic religious legal system.

While primordialism states that identity is an objective reality with historical basis in the tradition and culture of a people, instrumentalism asserts that identity can be manipulated by leaders for mass mobilization and attainment of group goals. Also, primordialists believe that identity is social and not conflictual in itself, and that the elite and leaders play a critical role in exploiting identity in mass mobilization process. In sum, primordial identities such as ethnicity, religion and sectarianism are concepts which various rebel leaders, especially radical Islamists ones, deploy as an instrument of mass mobilization and solidarity in their fight against the Syrian regime which itself perceives the civil war as driven by sectarianism.

Based on these two schools, scholars debate essentially that Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war in support of the Syrian regime is inspired by its characteristic abhorrence of Islamist fundamentalism, sectarianism and Jihadist ideology. The current of these arguments is that Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war is directed at preventing Jihadist rebel groups from overthrowing the Syrian government and from further exploiting Islamic sectarianism to promote Islamic fundamentalist activity in the war. It is for this purpose of stemming Islamist terrorism and other religious fundamentalist behaviour of some of the Syrian rebel groups that the Syrian regime invited Russia in September 2015 to intervene in Syria's civil war. Moreover, Putin's statement – "Let me remind you that thousands of militants, natives of Central Asian countries, with which we have no controlled borders, are massing on Syrian territory. It was better to deal with them and destroy them over there than confront them with lethal force here [in Russia]" (Majumdar, 2018, pp. 6-7) – reinforces Russia's interest in decimating Islamic militants as one of the motivators of Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war.

In the light of this statement, Russia's involvement in Syria's civil war is to pursue an anti-Islamist extremism interest for its own national security concern. Russia rejects regime change in Syria and wants to maintain stability, fearing that the toppling of Bashar al-Assad and his secular government will turn Syria into a stronghold of Islamic fundamentalism, Jihad, and sectarian violence (Rafizadeh, 2015). Russia needs to prevent the revival of Islamist extremism, terrorism and Jihadist groups as the civil war had turned religious and sectarian. It also has to protect its domestic stability and security against anticipated spillover of Syria's Islamist terrorism and Jihad to its territory of North Caucasus from where several Chechen Islamist Jihadists had travelled to Syria to fight actively for Islamist groups such as the Islamic State and to which they will someday return to instigate Islamist Jihad, terrorism and nationalist movement. Russia's North Caucasus region is home to mainly Russian Muslim citizens and the Russian government fears that the region is vulnerable to the resurgence of Islamist extremism if Islamist groups become victorious in Syria. Russia also needs to prevent Syria's Islamist terrorism from spilling over to Central Asia where it has beefed up security for the region's ruling despotic allies since the Soviet era who have become vulnerable presently. By initiating and encouraging a US-Russia led international coalition against Islamist Jihad, President Putin seeks to improve relations with the West, especially the United States, with a prospect of getting them to terminate isolation of Russia and to lift sanctions imposed on it for its involvement in the Ukrainian crisis. Decimating the Islamist extremist groups and preventing the overthrow of the Syrian regime are critical to this cause (Plakoudas, 2015; Avenäs, 2016; Kim, 2017). The entrenchment of Islamist terrorism region-wide is a disturbing possibility Russia cannot allow to happen (Mankoff, 2012).

Contrary to the mainstream thinking among most western authorities and media outlets that the only rationale for Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war is to save its old, reliable, Soviet-era ally – the Assad government – from overthrown by western military invasion and to protect its own "military contracts and bases" in Syria, it has been argued differently that Russia is far less engaged in Syria militarily to prevent external military intervention against the Syrian regime. Instead, Russia's involvement in the Syrian armed conflict is far more informed by a range of recent events that happened in Russia's border region and peripheral States after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which are detrimental to its national interest. The events constitute the basis of Russia's new attitude towards the Arab Spring, and have also shaped Russia's framework of relations not only with the

West in matters concerning Eastern European (former Soviet Republics) countries such as Ukraine and Middle East countries like Syria, but also with these particular countries themselves in matters concerning its own relations with them (Vysotsky, 2014, p. 42).

One of such event is the activity of radical Islam. Radical Islamist/Jihadist groups have firmly emerged in some parts of the Middle East and are seeking a regional entrenchment. Russia has perpetual suspicion and abhorrence of these groups because they constitute a huge menace to its security interests since the Cold War era. Russia, for example, has consequently taken measures in its own North Caucasus republics of Chechnya and Dagestan, and has supported secular Arab regimes of Central Asian countries such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan (to which the radical Islamists are opposed) to suppress radical Islam. Given the Jihadist character and radical Islamist elements of the Arab Spring, Russia came to the acknowledgment that there is congruence between radical Islam and the Spring, believing the latter to be the vehicle for reviving, strengthening and pervading the former across the Middle East and into Russia. This knowledge thus reawakens the old Islamist threat to Russia's security, integrity and stability. With the premonition that the strengthening and spread of radical Islam and Jihadist orientation in Russia would be catastrophic for Russian citizens and government, the Russian government therefore sees the Arab Spring and the speed at which it is spreading upward the Middle East, as a threat. To this, Russia has become very active in the Middle East since February 2013 having once again found the region to be pivotal to its security and overall interests (Vysotsky, 2014).

Given the fact that the conflicts that followed the Arab Spring have only strengthened Islamist Jihadism and extremism which constitute a serious threat and anathema to the Russian government, there is therefore the common negative atmosphere in Russia that the ultimate goal of the Arab Spring and the possible aftermath of the Syrian civil war should Bashar al-Assad be defeated will be calamitous for the region and for Russia itself. The difficult experiences Russia has had fighting Islamist extremism in its North Caucasus make it to believe that preserving secular authoritarian governments in the Middle East significantly helps in keeping Islamist extremism out of the region or in reducing it to a minimal level. This is because Russia has realized the underpinnings of Islamic sectarian strife in the Syrian armed conflict, and thinks that a new political system to be established if the West-backed revolution and regime change succeed would be a parody of democracy that will only foster and fester Islamist extremism (Pukhov, 2012).

Russia's role in the Syrian civil war is difficult to understand, but it is certain Russia does not want Jihadist groups to topple the Bashar al-Assad regime because having al-Assad in power provides it with the authority to fight in Syria in the name of protecting State stability against Islamist attack. Russia's military campaign is intended not necessarily to win a zero-sum game, but to secure a huge advantage that will make it a major player above other actors in negotiating the future of post-war Syria (Jenkins, 2015). Russia seeks to protect a vital national interest by intensifying national security through incapacitating Islamist extremists and terrorists, as well as by counteracting the resurgence of same in its North Caucasus region. Importantly, Russia has the responsibility to secure its strategic alliance with Syria by protecting Barshar al-Assad regime – an age-long reliable ally – from Islamist overthrow (Perišić, 2017).

With regards to his multipolar interest and multilateral approach to solving international conflict, Russian President Putin is using the influence and successes earned while supporting Bashar al-Assad in his war against Islamist extremism to build a multilateral coalition of European and Middle East countries against Jihadist groups. By urging the West to stop supporting the opposition as several Jihadists have joined its ranks and because the Syrian government is the only credible party fighting Jihadists, Putin wants the West to accept and co-operate with the Bashar al-Assad regime in a collective fight against Jihadists given that Assad, despites several difficulties and losses, has maintained effective control over the Syrian national army which is distinguished by its unity and loyalty to the regime as the only force effectively fighting Islamist extremist groups (Ramani, 2015).

Since it started supporting Bashar al-Assad, Russia has been demonstrating to the world that it leads in the war against ISIS and in diplomatic efforts to resolve the Syrian armed conflict, and that it has been getting approval and co-operation from several Arab leaders such as Iraqi Prime-Minister, and Kurdish leader, and from many European countries such as Turkey, Germany, Italy and France that have now come to terms with the realities of the civil war (Ramani, 2015). Russia seeks a leadership role in the war against Jihad as an opportunity to boost its positive image in the Middle East and in Central Asia (Plakoudas, 2015). Its intervention in the Syrian civil war is therefore purposively to curb the threat of terrorism in Syria which has made political settlement of the conflict impossible ("Russia's intervention", 2015).

Ideology is central to Russia's activity in the civil war. Russia is supporting the al-Assad regime in defence of its ideological orientation towards the Middle East, which is at variance with those of the United States and other western countries. Russia doubts whether democracy will succeed in the Middle East and strongly believes that the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad, which the West so much clamours for, will not create a genuine democracy in Syria. Instead, it will create an aggressive Islamist Sunni regime which will become a nightmare for the entire region. Hence, Russia's foreign policy and international politics in the Middle East has been to support secular Arab nationalist regimes, such as the al-Assad regime of Syria, because these regimes have been instrumental in reining in fundamentalist Islam, and are preferable, no matter their deficiencies, to a government of radical Islamists. Russians believe that the United States incites public demonstrations for democratic reforms in the Middle East only to overthrow governments and create a very different situation instead. However, Russia enjoys all the latitude to strongly protect the Assad regime because it has observed that the United States does not really want to intervene against the regime, given its atypical behaviour of seeking UNSC permission before it can lead a military action against the regime (Ziadeh, Hadar, Katz, & Heydemann, 2012).

## 7. Resurgent Russia Wants a High Place in the World

Another scholarly view of the reason Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war is founded on Realism which is also known as the Realist/Power-politics School. Realism is one of the most prominent and compelling classic theories of all times which has shaped the discipline of international relations. It was pre-eminent in the years after 1940 and during the Cold War and was revived in the 1980s as neo-realism. Realism is originally traceable to the ancient Greeks and particularly to Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* in which power politics was first used as an approach to characterize the origins of international conflict. It was later traced to Machiavelli in *The Prince* (1513) and Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651). In modern times, its most notable adherents include H. J. Morgenthau, G. Schwarzenberger, N. Spykman, M. Wight, G. F. Kennan, R. Neibuhr, and J. Herz among others (Evans & Newnham, 1998). The thrust of this school of thought is that the desire of a nation-state to preserve its national survival in a hostile international system makes it to prioritize acquisition of power as a foreign policy objective, which it in turn projects either as economic or military force, or

otherwise in trying to get other countries to do what it wants (Evans & Newnham, 1998; Holmes, 2004). Since States, the arch-actors in international relations, are inevitably bound to relate with other States in a lawless and savage international system, the ultimate goal of statecraft has to be the pursuit of national survival which makes the acquisition of power for such survival a necessary, appropriate and prudent enterprise of foreign policy (Evans & Newnham, 1998).

The argument of this school relates to Russia's attitude towards the West with regards to the Syrian civil war. Scholars who argue from the Realist approach generally contend that the desire of Russia to ensure its national survival in a hostile international system makes it to prioritize the use of power as a foreign policy tool which it projects in the Syrian civil war as military might in trying to get other countries, particularly the West, to do what it wants. Accordingly, it has been observed that since relations between Russia and the West declined sharply due to Russia's commitment to defend the Bashar al-Assad regime from western military overthrow, after allowing the West to intervene in Libya in early 2011, western observers have concluded that the greatest reason Russia is protecting the Bashar al-Assad regime is to safeguard it naval facility in Syria's port of Tartus and to maintain its lucrative arms sales to Syria. However, these reasons do not qualify as a strong explanation of Russia's defence of the al-Assad regime from collapsing because Russia's military base in Tartus is practically symbolic as it cannot play any substantial role in Russia's major naval operations and strategy in the Mediterranean. Instead, Russia wants Bashar al-Assad to remain in power for some bigger reason – the shared general atmosphere in Russia that reflects "the Kremlin's traditional aversion to unilateral Western interventionism" and that supports counteracting "Western meddling and expansionism" (Pukhov, 2012, p. 2).

Russia is worried about western expansion in the Middle East and fears the possible consequences the loss of Syria would have on its own national interests, particularly security interest. Most importantly, the Kremlin fears that losing Syria to the West will be a grave harm to its national pride and interest as well as a catastrophic loss of its only surviving stronghold in the Middle East. Russia's foreign policy towards Syria is not influenced particularly by the current armed conflict in the country but by a combination of all extant factors and how the Kremlin reacts to them psychologically. President Putin's raised sense of self-preservation and consolidation of power amidst threat to his government by "a growing protest movement that receives political endorsement from the West" also

makes him to share Bashar al-Assad's predicament and to see the need to support him (Pukhov, 2012, p. 2).

Russia is using its power in the UNSC as well as its diplomatic influence and military activity in Syria to prevent the West from being able to intervene in Syria militarily. It does not want the West to intervene militarily in the Syrian armed conflict for whatever reason because it senses that behind the West's proposal for military intervention in Syria on humanitarian ground lies a covert desire to externally execute regime change in the country which Russia is not ready to allow. Russia renounces and does not want the further spread of western values and interference in the wealthy Middle East to extend to Syria which has been a vitally important dependant on Russian weapons. Russia strongly believes it risk losing Syria to the West if the latter succeeds in executing military intervention in the former. Even though such intervention is for a different mission, Russia argues that the West will use it eventually to topple the Syrian regime just like it did in Libya where it fought battle with the Libyan regime under the pretext of implementing UNSC Resolution 1973 (Jafarova, 2014).

Russia wants to project its international power, pressure the United States to treat it as an equal superpower in international negotiation, and demonstrate to the world its objection and opposition to foreign intervention in the domestic affairs of countries undergoing crisis. Russia is using its defence of the Assad regime in the Syrian armed conflict to demonstrate these interests and its firm stance on them, and not because Moscow is obsessed with Bashar al-Assad himself or because it has total control over the Syrian government (Khatib, 2014). What Russia is also trying to do is to retain and rebuild its existing alliances in the Middle East. Accordingly, Russia is supporting the Assad regime in Syria's civil war because the regime is Russia's longstanding reliable ally whose continuity can only guarantee the maintenance of Russia's interests (Janik, 2013). Intervening in Syria is also part of Russia's plan to restrain the United States' dominant influence in the Middle East and to break US containment policy against Russia which it has began doing by improving relations with Arab nations and other nations that have dispute with the United States. Russia and Syria have cultivated good and reliable relations that began in 1946 after they both signed a secret agreement to co-operate on several political issues on the platform of socialism. Moreover, the strategic location of Syria – neighbouring Israel, a dependable ally of the United States which is Russia's major competitor – also makes Syria vitally important to Russia. Russia and Syria also have military co-operation established following Syria's

experiences during the Cold War era, particularly during the Suez Crisis of 1956. The bond of friendship derived from these relationships endears the Assad-led Syria to Russia (Yazici, 2015).

Similar to the perspectives of Ziadeh, Hadar, Katz, & Heydemann (2012) and Pukhov (2012), objection has been made to the dominant argument among several western scholars that, contrary to its original goal of combating Islamist terrorism, Russia has turned from fighting ISIS to fighting the FSA because it needed to defend and preserve its only ally in the Middle East, Bashar al-Assad, in order to protect its strategic, economic and military interests in Syria. Rather, it is argued differently that, considering that Russia has been seriously affected financially and diplomatically in the Sunni majority Middle East since it entered the Syrian civil war, there must be a greater reason for intervening in the civil war on the side of the al-Assad regime. The reason is about using its military campaign against ISIS to project itself as a "power broker" and also as a linchpin among anti-western nations. Russia dislikes how the United States unilaterally controls the international system because it has so much to lose in such a one-way directional system. So, by supporting the Bashar al-Assad regime, Russia seeks to encourage multipolarism and a multilateral approach to solving international conflict, as well as to discourage US ambition of dominating and Americanizing the world, because achieving these goals helps Russia to exercise its power effectively. Regarding this, President Putin is using his support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria's civil war to inform its allies, loyalists, and prospective allies that, unlike the United States that abandons allies in times of conflict and adversity, Russia is a power to trust in times of trouble (Ramani, 2015). He is also already courting new alliances with nations that have troubled relations with the US and the EU, by negotiating "arms contracts, alliances and energy deals" with them (Ramani, 2015, p. 2). Hence, Russia is fighting in Syria to defend its international image, challenge the US-led western dominated international system, reassure its allies of its support and inform the world that Russia is, once again, a great power to listen to.

The core intentions of Russia in the Syrian civil war are to actualize "Putin's "eternal" rule and Russia's triumphant return to the global scene as a power with which to contend" (Machnikowski, 2015, p. 27). Russia aims to create a multipolar world order in which the United States' putative superpower status and global supremacy will be eroded and Russia will emerge as a great power and centre of influence which regional hegemons across the world will look to for support. Russia's forceful behaviour in Syria is also meant to draw western attention to its

vast military power and to the global danger of disregarding Russia's interests and sidelining it in international conflict resolution process. Moreover, Russia's anti-western action in Syria, which started with the ruse and guise of fighting ISIS, dovetails with Putin's broader plan to cause chaos, crisis and destabilization for the West, the EU (that has incurred fragility from acrimonious wrangling over refugee issues and migration policy) and NATO, and to sabotage the United States' global hegemony and influence in the Middle East on the one hand, and to improve strategic alliance with Iran on the other hand (Machnikowski, 2015). Russia is using its war against Islamist groups such as ISIL to test its new military strategy and sophisticated weapons (Plakoudas, 2015).

Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war is partly to support the Syrian regime with whom it has a longstanding and reliable alliance since the 1950s during the Soviet era and partly to force the United States and other western nations to accept Russia's position over the conflict in Ukraine (Ibrahim, 2017). There is also a domestic political reason for Russia's military intervention in Syria. It is the desire to re-establish a strong confidence and national pride in the generality of the Russian people who felt demoralized, disconcerted and depressed after Russia lost its global superpower status and pride following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. During the period of decline, Russia sat idly by and watched helplessly as the United States led military campaigns against former Yugoslavia and Iraq. So, to correct the disheartening situation, Russian President Vladimir Putin has firmly prioritized programmes aimed at reviving Russian military power and returning Russia once again to the global stage as a major player (Kim, 2017). With its action in Syria, Russia seeks to revive its leverage and policies in the Middle East more strongly in order to re-establish itself as a powerful player in the region and to get other nations to allow it to lead in the crafting of a new Middle East strategy. By fighting terrorism in Syria and in the Levant, Russia has advanced its power in the Middle East and the Mediterranean to compensate for the strategic advantages it lost in the region and in Ukraine. Russia wants to check Saudi Arabia's, Qatar's and Turkey's regional goals in the current order of the region. It craves to make all Assad's allies to support its efforts in using its leverage and leadership to create a new regional strategy (Kahf, 2016).

Russia has made a resolute decision to use its military power in Syria and diplomatic power in the UNSC to frustrate all western efforts and proposals to lead external military intervention and execute regime change in Syria. "Military, industrial, religious, intelligence-gathering and so on" factors constitute the basis of

Russia's strong relationship with Syria, but they are not the interests Russia seeks in Syria or the reasons it is protecting Bashar al-Assad (Charap, 2013, p. 1). Instead, there is the thinking in Russia that the post-intervention circumstances the United States created in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya since the Cold War ended have seriously destabilized the international system, and that there is no reason to allow it to create another regime change in Syria because allowing that will further destabilize the international system and may even embolden the United States to advance to incite or cause regime change in Russia in the future. Hence, Russia does not want to approve something that can be used against it someday. It believes that the United States wants to intervene in Syria and change the Assad regime not on account of displeasure over Syria's humanitarian crisis the regime is accused of causing, but because it wants to expand its selfish geopolitical ambition to Syria since the Syrian regime opposes it and support its enemy, Iran. In a nutshell, "Russia's stance on international action on the Syrian crisis has more to do with anxieties about the implications of US power than it does with Syria itself" (Charap, 2013, p. 2).

Russia believes the West was behind the Syrian conflict starting, because they want to change the Syrian regime. NATO's flagrant abuse of the May 2011 UNSC resolution 1973 – which clearly mandated NATO to enforce a "no-fly-zone" over Libya's airspace for the humanitarian purpose of preventing aerial bombardment of civilian targets by Libya's regime forces – by aiding fractious rebels to kill the Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi (Russia's ally), and implement regime change proved true Putin's premonition and outcry that the UN mission was going to be a cover for NATO to execute regime change in Libya. The appalling incident aggrieved and provoked Russian ruling elite to strongly oppose any form of foreign military intervention in Syria while simultaneously spearheading some negotiations for a political settlement of the armed conflict, especially as they perceive that the West is pursuing its own self-centred interests in the war. Russia is disillusioned with the West for betraying trust and using the pretext of implementing UNSC resolution 1973 to execute regime change in Libya and, thus, will not accept western military intervention in Syria. Vladimir Putin had criticized former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev because his administration abstained from vetoing UNSC resolution 1973 which allowed the West to implement regime change in Libya. Now he is president, his opposition to a similar western proposed intervention in Syria has become a central part of Russia's foreign policy. The Libyan experience convinces Russia that if it permits military intervention in Syria,

it will be allowing what happened in Libya to recur in Syria of which there will be no democracy except expansion of US interests. To this, Russia offers diplomatic and military supports, among others, to the Syrian regime against the Syrian rebels and their western and Arab patrons in order to prevent the occurrence in Syria of the dismal situation created in Libya, given that the civil war has gone international and the West and its Arab allies, contrary to international law, have been covertly and overtly providing the rebels with military, technical, economic and financial supports, among others, to the point that the Syrian regime's fall was imminent without external help. This is apt because while the Russian government strongly believes in the principle of non-interference in a sovereign country's domestic affairs, it also needs to protect its vital interests in Syria as Syria is Russia's last stronghold in the Middle East with which it has a reliable long-lasting alliance and where it can easily exercise influence and counter-balance the United States. (Baev, 2011; Kildron, 2012; Lesch, 2012; Rather, Ali, & Abbas 2015; Ramani, 2015; Avenäs, 2016; Perišić, 2017).

Russia is worried about western bias against only the Syrian regime which reflected in their draft resolutions that seek to sanction only the regime but allow room which the Syrian opposition can exploit to sabotage peace plans without punishment. The decision of Russia to protect the Bashar al-Assad regime and frustrate western schemes to overthrow it also derives partly from its disappointment in the West over Libya and partly from the desire for retaliation against them for refusing to compensate it in post-Gaddafi Libya. Russia had envisaged that the West would recompense it with some economic benefits for sacrificing its real economic interests in Gaddafi's Libya after its abstention from vetoing UNSC resolution 1973 enabled the West to implement regime change there. Unfortunately, the West did not only dash this hope; it is also determined to overthrow the Syrian regime and end Russia's economic interest in Syria. Russia believes the West has some ulterior sinister motives against the Syrian government and would most likely abuse any UNSC-sanctioned military intervention in order to achieve the motives just like they did in Libya and created a bloody regime change there (Janik, 2013). Russia is also opposed to western intervention in Syria because such intervention would not only lead to regime change of a loyal ally but would also cause a decline of Russia's influence in the Middle East as a consequence (Buckley, 2012).

The West sees Russia as being paradoxical in that while it acquiesced to UNSC resolution for military intervention in Libya for humanitarian reason based on the

UN principle of "Responsibility to Protect", it has effectively thwarted the UNSC's efforts to apply the same measure in Syria. Russia's ironic stance is judged not unintelligent, however; it suits the preservation of its national interest (Zifcak, 2012). Russia does not want Syria to be divided because the wisdom hindsight and lessons learnt from the Colour Revolution in former Soviet countries, coupled with NATO's mischief in Libya where Russia consequently lost huge economic advantages and assets by stopping arms trade and operation of oil rigs, have taught it to take a decisive position against proposed western intervention in Syria. For this reason, Russia is supporting the Syrian government to avoid suffering the same losses it suffered in Libya following the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi (Yazici, 2015). By tenaciously supporting Bashar al-Assad, blocking UNSC draft resolutions, and being impervious to diplomatic overtures from the West and their Arab allies, Russia is punishing the West whilst demonstrating its disappointment in them for betraying it and for abusing the mandate of "no-fly zone" in Libya. Russia does not want the same thing to happen in Syria no matter western pressure (Ziadeh, Hadar, Katz, & Heydemann, 2012).

## 8. **Russia Looks to Itself for Help**

Similar to the Realist/Power-politics School, some other scholars argue from the perspective of the sixth, Self-help, school to assert that by intervening directly in the Syrian civil war, Russian President Vladimir Putin seeks to restore Russia to its former status as a superpower, having lost trust in the West. The central argument of this school of thought is that when sovereign States are confronted by events that constitute threats to their national survival and advancement in the anarchical international system, they are naturally gravitated towards the use of force for self-defence and self-preservation, which are requirements of self-help. Since the international system is ungoverned and lawless, "self-defence", "self-reliance" and "self-preservation" become crucially important security goals of sovereign States in pursuance of their fundamental desire to promote their national survival and advancement. "States answer to no higher authority and so must look to themselves to protect their interests and to ensure survival" (Evans & Newnham, 1998, p. 36). In doing this, "self-defence is regarded as the most basic manifestation and requirement of the institution of self-help … [which has] balance of power and collective security [as] variants of it, not alternatives." Moreover, "the search for security in a system of politics without government means that self-help is a

necessary function of self-preservation. It is a natural response to the security dilemma as traditionally conceived" (Evans & Newnham, 1998, p. 41).

Accordingly, Lukyanov (2016) argues that Putin's military activity in Syria is inclined towards restoring Russia's former superpower status because he can no longer trust the West as honest partners who respect Russia and its wellbeing. Russia's anti-western military action in Syria's civil war is a clear message to the West that Russia is reclaiming its power – which they believed it lost to the United States when the Soviet Union disintegrated – to re-establish itself as a superpower. Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine buttresses this message to the West. Russia disagrees with western belief that it lost the Cold War when the Soviet Union ended in 1991, that it will continue to decline in power, and that since 1991 the United States has remained the only superpower and thus should be accorded the right to global leadership. Instead, Russia contends that even after the end of the Soviet Union, a unipolar world order dominated by the United States never emerged. Rather, a multipolar world order has emerged in which Russia has an enormous global role to play and in which mutual co-operation – like the successful ones between Russia and the United States over the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile – is necessary to constructively manage international conflicts, and such co-operation is critical in stopping the United States from further distorting the sacrosanct principles of the Cold War era international system such as "… balance of power, respect for sovereignty, noninterference in other States' internal affairs, and the need to obtain the UN Security Council's approval before using military force" (Lukyanov, 2016, p. 30-31).

The EU and NATO have expanded into Eastern Europe, which used to be a Cold War-era buffer zone, up to Russia's neighbouring States. NATO had demonstrated an aggressive character post-Cold War as manifested in the overthrow of Serbian leader, Slobodan Milosevic, in the Kosovo War in 1999; in the invasion of Afghanistan in 2002, Iraq in 2004 and Libya in 2011, as well as in the ouster of the anti-western regimes in these States. These antagonistic developments make Russian President Putin to think that the glorious new world order envisioned by Soviet leaders – who for that reason compromised to end the Cold War – has been rejected by the West which, rather than appreciate the wisdom of those Soviet leaders, has now determined to strip Russia of its great powers. In light of this fact, Russia is using its military action in Syria to inform the United States that it has to deal with Russia as a co-equal in handling international conflicts, rather than as a

subordinate. Russia is discontented with western expansionist behaviour in the Middle East that contravenes the principles of international law. It is fighting in Syria to restore its lost glory and to reclaim its superpower status (Lukyanov, 2016). Therefore, Russia's action in the Syrian civil war is to tell the West that Russia remains an indispensible power in the world. Since the 1999 Kosovo War when NATO bombarded Serbia in disregard of Russia's earnest objection, the West has continued to see Russia as an irrelevant player in international politics. The Syrian civil war therefore serves as an opportunity for Russia to disprove the West and to counteract United States' unbridled efforts to rule the world (Ramani, 2015).

## 9. Summary and Conclusion

The thrust of this paper deals with the rationale behind Russia's military intervention in the Syrian civil war to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power. This is particularly important because the protracted civil war in Syria has become a major global issue and also because of the ambiguity associated with understanding why Russia is involved in the war in support of Bashar al-Assad. Close analysis of a wide range of literature on the subject-matter revealed six sets of scholarly explanations each of which is founded on a theoretical basis. The accounts of the six schools of thought provide deep insight into why Russia chose to support the Syrian government in the Syrian civil war. The first account hinges on geopolitics, and posits that Russia's military intervention in Syria is intended to protect its geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic interests and sphere of influence which are crucially important to its national security and defence. Securing these interests is thought to enhance Russia's military and strategic posture in the entire Middle East, reinforce its naval presence in Syria's port of Tartus and military operations in the Mediterranean, increase its influence over energy economics, and make it a key player in Middle East affairs.

Another account centres on conservatism in its analysis. It maintains that Russian leaders are staunch conservatives and as such they abhor the Syrian revolution aimed at deposing the government of Syria, especially because the revolution is externally sponsored and untimely, and will be cataclysmic in end. Thus, Russia is bent on counteracting the revolution in Syria and determined to halt the course of the Arab Spring from engulfing authoritarian States in the broader Middle East.

Russia prioritizes stability in the Middle East and consequently rejects revolution against the region's historic authoritarian political system which it benefits from.

Furthermore, Russia considers external military intervention against the Syrian regime as inappropriate, illegal and contrary to international law and the principles of the UN. This legalistic account stresses that Russia deployed its diplomatic and military powers against the anti-Assad wishes of the West and their Arab allies not only to protect the Syrian regime, but essentially to uphold the principles of the UN and international laws that relate to respect for State sovereignty and non-interference, which the West never mind abusing to satisfy their selfish interests. The audacious defence of these international values makes Russia a defender of international norms and law. Hence, Russia is saving the world in Syria.

While Russia is committed to protect these values in Syria at all cost, it is also drawn into the country's civil war in order to decimate Islamist terrorist groups like ISIS and prevent Islamist radicalism and terrorism from spreading to Russia, especially to the North Caucasus, and to Central Asia and other Middle East countries, fearing that a region-wide entrenchment of Islamist fundamentalism and terrorism will spell doom for the Middle East. Russia's desire to curb Jihadist activity, sectarian sentiments and Islamist fundamentalism that characterize the Syrian civil war is inspired by its abhorrence of Jihadist ideology, sectarianism and Islamist fundamentalism. The primordialist and instrumentalist schools of thought greatly bear on this point. They argue that religious sectarianism and Islamist fundamentalism are primordial values which have been rendered instrumental in shaping the cause of the civil war.

The realist account maintains that Russia's military intervention in the Syrian civil war is motivated by the desire to use its military might to confront the West over the Syrian conflict and to ensure its national survival in a hostile international system. Russia is opposed to the West's bold expansion to former Soviet Space and in the Middle East, and believes it wants to exploit the Syrian civil war to spread its expansionist goal to Syria, as such behaviour is directly opposed to Russia's interests and is intended to harm its national security in the long run. Consequently, Russia deploys its military and political might as countermeasures to overcome the West's anti-Russian strategy and particularly to prevent the United States from extending its control and influence to Syria. Russia's struggle with the West in Syria is partly aimed at achieving its bigger ambition of reclaiming its lost glory and returning to the global stage as a great power to reckon with in international

affairs, and also aimed at restoring the principles of the Cold War era international system such as balance of power, respect for sovereignty, non-interference in other States' internal affairs, and the need to obtain the UNSC's approval before using military force externally.

The self-help account contends that Russia is confronted by serious incidents – the Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war and western antagonism among others – that threaten its national survival and advancement and as such it is naturally compelled to use its military forces for self-defence and self-preservation.

Despite the fact that all the schools of thought presented in this paper agree that all of Russia's supports to the Syrian regime are orientated ultimately towards protecting Russia's interests in Syria and in the broader Middle East, they disagree on what those interests are exactly and thus provide different accounts to explain Russia's military intervention in Syria's civil war in support of Bashar al-Assad. Altogether, the prolonged civil war in Syria has long become a regional and global concern. It has pitched several external actors against each other depending on where their interests lie or which internal actors to the armed conflict they support. While Russia leads the camp that supports the Syrian regime against the Syrian rebels, the United States leads the camp that supports the Syrian rebels against the Syrian regime. The great powers leading the two opposing camps are logically enmeshed in a proxy war. As the civil war is already complicated, the acrimony and power struggle between Russia and the United States may lead to a major military confrontation in the Middle East, with untold ramifications.

Although the geopolitical, conservative, legalistic, primordial and instrumental, and self-help schools of thought make compelling arguments concerning why Russia intervened in the Syrian civil war to support the Bashar al-Assad regime, the realist school of thought provides the best and most important explanation to the question of this paper. This is because every other explanation will be inconsequential without the realist steps taken by the Russian government. The realist school of thought states that since the international system is hostile and ungoverned, nations which seeks to protect their interests amidst opposition naturally turn to the use of physical force to pursue the interests, thereby making true the axiom, "might is right". The desire to protect national interests in Syria and to prevent Syrian rebel groups and their external patrons from ousting the Syrian regime will not have been achieved if it was never matched with pragmatic action and tremendous military might by the Russian government.

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