

## **Resurgence of Russia: A case Study of Syrian Crisis**

**Dr. Zahid Yaseen**

*Assistant Professor*  
*Department of Political Science*  
*GC Women University Sialkot*

**Dr. Muhammad Muzaffar**

*Assistant Professor*  
*Department of Political Science*  
*GC Women University Sialkot*

**Sharyl Naeem**

*MS Scholar*  
*Department of Political Science*  
*GC Women University Sialkot*

### **ABSTRACT**

This explanatory study focuses on the main attributes of Russian policy towards the Middle East. The Russian resurgence in the Middle East and its defensive posture towards the western military and economic policies in the region depicts that Russia is overwhelmingly feeling insecure towards its international standing. Russia is running a foreign policy which is less aggressive towards the Middle East and Syria. Russo-Syrian relations have always been more strategically oriented rather than more economic or cultural. It is a fact that Syria will remain an important ally of Russia for the coming years because of the decades of old strategic partnership. Syrian Crisis has divided the world into two blocks, thus resulting into New Cold War. All the major powers should form an environment for negotiation with the help of UN, instead of doing politics to fulfill their strategic, economic and military interests.

**Keywords:** *Resurgence, Russo-Syrian relations, Syrian Crisis, Middle East*

### **Introduction**

The geographical position of Syria at the centre of the Eastern Mediterranean and its independent foreign policy made it a critical state in the Middle East. Allying with Iran and Russia, there has been conflict between Syria and Israel since the creation of the Jewish state in 1948, and it has also been helped by the various fighting group of Palestine. Syria legitimately called as Syrian Arab Republic, is located in Middle East along the eastern front of Mediterranean Sea and Lebanon, ordering Turkey to its north, Israel towards the Southwest, and Jordan to the south of Syria (Hussain, 2013). It is a passage to Asia and Middle East so; it has a strategic importance in the region.

Syria became independent in 1946, before this for many centuries it has been ruled by different powers and factions like Egypt, Ottoman Empire and Roman Empire etc. After the end of First World War in 1918, Syria became under the control of French administrators and it remained till it got independence. During its first decade of independence, it faced political instability and experienced military coups serially. Syria was united with Egypt in 1958 and formulated the United Arab Republic which separated after three years in 1961. During Arab-Israeli war in 1967, Syria lost Golan Heights to Israel which it got back after the dialogue

between both the states. In 1976, Syria invaded in Lebanon gripping the country into civil war, in an attempt to help the considerably suffering Christians.

Syrian troops, despite of their strong will could not control over Lebanese politics and withdrew in 2005 (Allinson, 2015). The Syria is also a religiously diverse society and increasingly more sectarian violence in parts of the country has contributed to the broader tension between Sunni and Shiite in the Middle East. The fears of the international community that the conflict could spread the border affect neighbor Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan, to create a regional disaster. For these reasons, the world powers like the United States, the European Union and the Russia is playing a role in the Syrian civil war.

The strategic importance of Syria turned into civil war in the international competition for regional influence; the two sides seek a diplomatic and military support from the various foreign sponsors. Russia, Iran and the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, and to a lesser extent, Iraq and China, the main ally of the Syrian regime (Hussain, 2013). After the recovery from the internal economic and political crisis in the mid-2000s, the Russian global ambitions have taken a new shape in the form of regional integration and vast economic cooperation.

The West is the most prominent factor in the foreign policy of Russia but it has never underestimated the importance of the Middle Eastern region. The removal of Russia from the regional politics after its disintegration was seen as a sign of the rise of uni-polarity in the 1990s but now in the contemporary era, Russia is again placing itself in the international arena. There are multiple factors behind the Russia's Middle East policy. The region is highly important for Russia for several prominent reasons. The physical proximity is one of the reasons for Russia to enhance its influence in the Middle East. The second factor was the Muslim population residing in the bordering areas of Russia and the Central Asia.

### **Historical Background**

The strategic and geographical location of Middle-Eastern states attracted the capitalist economies. The world's industrial capitalist economies mostly rely on these states for the fuel of their industry. After the World War II, the economic interests of the Euro-US changed its shape into political interests when all major powers of the Europe and the US appeared as the staunch advocate of the creation of a Zionist state Israel in the heart of the Arab countries. In 1946, Syria got independence and the US wanted to establish friendly relationship with Syria; but later on Truman changed his policy and aided Israel against it. Syria and other major Arab states severely condemned this act of the US and the Great Britain.

The creation of Israel in the center of Arab states was actually due to the economic and political interests of the US and Great Britain. In 1948, Syria had attacked on Israel with the help of Egypt and Saudi Arab (Scot, et al. 2011). Similarly, in June 5, 1967, known as Six Day war, once again Arab-Israel confrontation had been occurred for the sake of removal of Zionist state from Arab Land. In this war Syria lost Golan Heights.

After Arab Oil embargo of 1973 or Yom-Kippur War, the US and its allies changed their policies. During 1980s, Arab states faced some domestic insurgencies which were the results of the democratic waves by the US and Great Britain. It was because most of the Arab states were ruled by authoritarian

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governments. The Western and the US agenda ignited the people against authoritarian governments. The poor governance in Arab countries could not stop the growing effects of the Euro-US agenda in the country. Historically, the current insurgencies and civil wars in Arab countries is the result of these events. Syrian authoritarian government has been ruling over Syria since approximately 46 years. Foreign intervention in Syrian civil war is the result of poor governance of Syrian government.

### Assad Regime and Syrian Crisis:



**Source:** Chris Novembrino, “The War in Syria”, September 3, 2013.

Syrian crises are ongoing armed conflict in Syria, which has an aim to topple down the Assad dynasty which has been ruling on Syria since 1971 (Mohns, et al. 2012). This crises has been erupted in March 2011 as the political, anti-regime and prodemocracy protest in Deraa the southern part of Syria. The anti-regime protest was in the course of Arab Spring, through which many regimes have been toppled down in Middle East. In Syria prodemocracy protest sudden becomes violent when forces open fire on protesters. As a result, violent protest escalated all over the county and reached the capital Damascus in 2012. Almost 60% of population in Syria consists of Arab Sunni and 9% Sunni Kurds but they are ruled by Arab Shia Alawite which represents 12% of whole population (Holliday, 2011).

This conflict changed the dimension and converted into civil war on the basis of ethnicity, identity and sectarianism. Since 2011, the civil war in Syria in order to confront Assad’s regime has badly affected the security situation in the Middle East. Before the civil war, Syrian people complained about the bad governance, raised unemployment, illiteracy, corruption, poverty, lack of political freedom, under the Assad’s presidency.

Then the Arab spring in Tunisia, in 2011 has further added fuel to the fire, the Syrian pro-democratic demonstrator erupted the city of Deraa demanding the President’s Assad’s resignation. The Assad’s government acted aggressively and crushes the protestors by the use of deadly force. Unfortunately, this anti-government protest spreads nationwide, thus resulting in never ending civil war in Syria. This civil war has made easier for the world and regional powers i.e., Russia, United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey to interfere into the political impasse in Syria by acting in support of (Russia and Iran) or by taking harsh steps (USA and Saudi Arabia) against Assad’s regime not for the conflict resolution but for their own interests.

The logistical, financial and political support and interference of the external powers for and against the Assad's regime, has further fueled the sectarian conflicts, terrorism, Rebellion movements and extremism. Thus, the civil war in Syria than turned into proxy battleground because of the involvement of the world and regional powers (Sadek, 2016). Now the Assad's regime has become the victim of the world's major powers, thus it has initiated a new cold war which is unlikely to get a promising end. The Syrian proxy war has again results in the formation of two blocks along with their allied states, i.e, Russia ( China, Iran and Afghanistan) US ( Saudia Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Israel).

### **Putin's Policy towards Syria**

Russia's Syria policy is an outcome of Vladimir Putin's new ideas evolved from the previous decade of confrontational behavior to indict the United States responsible for unrest in most of the regional states. Another factor is the Putin regime's stability throughout its tenure in Russia is more manageable and coherent as compared to the starting decade of the post-cold war era (Schneider, 2012). At domestic level, Putin administration is taking measures to prevent any chaotic situation that can result in the destabilization of the Putin regime. The transformation process which took place in Russia from 2002 onwards was the key to put Russia internationally in a strong position to defend its status of being again as a dominant power in international politics.

Syria is strategically and economically important to both US and Russia in the Middle East. Russia along with China has increased its political, economic and military support to the Assad's regime. The primary goal of Russia is to protect and support the Assad's regime against the international intervention, Russia wants to counter the United States influence in the Middle East and Russia has the vast economic interests in Syria. Syria is one of the largest importers of military equipment, about 4 billion dollars of arms contracts have been signed between Syria and Russia.

Besides military equipment's, Russian oil and gas companies has been invested in Syria. Soiuzneftegaz and Tatneft have been extracting oil and gas in Syria since 2003, Stroitransgaz has built extensive natural gas pipeline and processing plants. Currently it is constructing a second plant near the city of Rakka which will process, approximately 1.3 billion cubic meters of gas. Russian companies are also constructing nuclear power plant for the production of energy (Srivastava, 2016). Manufacturing companies of Russia i.e, Uralmash which provides drilling equipment to the petroleum company of Syria, Tupolev and Aviastar-SP has provided passenger airplanes to the Syrian Air lines. Beside economic interest, strategic interests of Russia in this region are of great importance.

For this, the only Tartus naval base of Russia in Syria is left, but it's not a true military base because it is not hosted permanently by the Russian army, its only purpose is to repair and resupply the ships to the Mediterranean. Therefore, Russian government and the Russian exporters fear that the regime change in Syria will lead to the loss of contracts and as well as economy and will weaken the Russian influence in Syria, as well as in the Middle East. There for Assad's support, the marginalized Sunni population of Syria seeks military aid from Sunni non-state actors i.e. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

### **Causes of Russian Resurgence in Syria**

After the deployment of Russian troops in Syria and active role of Russian Air force in combat operations against the Syrian rebels, the international support for the settlement of the Syrian crisis has increased over the previous months. Moreover the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions attempting to sanction the Assad regime were many times vetoed by the Russian side. By posturing itself as a defender of Assad regime Russia is continuously showing the dominant behavior in the Middle East.

The resurgence of Russia in a new form like militarily strong enough to counter the terrorists and the ISIS in Syria, has provided a new shape to the international politics. Many IR scholars believe that the Syrian conflict would lead the world to the start of a new cold war between Russia and the US (Kirasirova, 2018). The war of resources could take a new phase and the regional stability could be at stake. The shift of power from multi-polarity to uni-polarity or bi-polarity is a serious debate which is taking place in the renowned sectors of international academia. Russia is regaining its global position by indicating its strong presence in the Middle East.

### **Support of Russia and USA to Syrian (Non-State Armed Groups) NSAGs**

With the internal dimension of Syrian crises the strong role of external powers could not be neglected. External powers has significant concerns with Middle Eastern politics. Middle Eastern regimes are serving the agendas of great powers in the region since the long period of time. Oil resources of Middle East are the life line for industries around the globe(Ruys, 2014). There are many stakeholders from east to west which have lot of concerns in the region and want to maximize their sphere of influence over the region, for this purpose, international stakeholders' makes alliances and provide strategic and economic assistance to the regional powers.

If we study the Syrian crises meticulously, we could not deny the role of external as well as regional powers in the conflict. Bashar's regime want to stay in power but rebels want immediate topple down of the regime. Bashar's regime is backed by Tehran and Moscow and both are playing on status quo agenda in Syria. On the other hand Washington DC and Riyadh along with GCC countries, Turkey, Jordan, UK, and France want to radicalize the system in Syria and are busy in supporting rebels and western media is running campaign against Syrian government as well as highlighting the atrocities of Syrian forces.

In this crises not only states are involved but also different non-state actors like different foreign back radical jihadist outfits (ISIS, Al Nusra front, Army of Mujahidin, Islamic front, Hezbollah) and radical ethnic militant groups (Rojava, Iraqi Kurdistan, Euphrates Volcano, Syriac Military Council) are engaged.(Rodgers, et al.2016) Russian Involvement in Syrian crises has been perceived as a threat to the US interests in the region. Both the states are following totally different polices over Syria. Bashar Al Assad is the close and steadfast ally of Moscow.

There is Russian military presence in Latakia which enlarges Moscow's approach in Mediterranean Sea. So, the overthrow of Bashar's regime would be totally unacceptable for Moscow. For assisting Syrian forces Russia is doing

bombardment on jihadists and rebels, as well as Russia providing them technical and financial assistance (Blanchard, et al, 2014). According to Moscow, they will target all terrorists groups in Syria but since September 2015 air strikes were mainly against western backed rebels. Russian stance over peaceful settlement of the dispute is status quo not on the favor of toppling the regime. Moscow is the most prominent backer of Bashar al Assad. In this way Moscow totally refutes the western and Arab formula which asserts on “no role of Bashar in the future of Syria”.

Russia criticizes on the US and Arab states on the act of supplying arms to rebels and proclaim that there is no guaranty that these arms are in the “safe” hands of moderate rebels or caught up by radical jihadist. On the other hand Washington has totally contrary approach on Syria. According to Obama administration, for peaceful settlement of the issue there would be no role of Bashar Al Assad in Syria because he is responsible of massacre and ethnic cleansing. He committed war crimes and violated basic human rights. Washington supports Syrian rebels and provide limited arm assistance against Syrian forces. In September 2014, the US launched air strike against ISIS and other jihadi outfits but it was not effective in favor of Bashar. Washington has a plan to train Syrian “moderate” rebels to fight ISIS. On 30<sup>th</sup> October 2015 the US decided to deploy 50 commandos in Syria to fight against ISIS.

Moscow's drive to establish and develop the relations with Hamas was shaped after the year 2005, in which Russia presented itself as the second energy exporter of the world and expanded its currency saves significantly. Russia's help from Hamas will be continued just on the off chance that it doesn't prompt the escalation of controversy between Russia at the one side and the US and Israel at the other. Truth be told, Russia has endeavored to extend its relations in different aspects with the majority of the nations in the Middle East and its periphery which in a few definitions has been called ‘The Greater Middle East’.

Russia has an imperative status in the global strategic equations, particularly from the military perspective; however regarding technology and the ability of financial support it couldn't contend with the US.

### **Conclusion**

Syrian Crisis is of great importance in the global politics, as it involves the major powers and divided them again into two blocks. It has taken the shape of New Cold War. The Syrian crisis has dramatically changed the international scenario by depicting major policy shifts towards the Middle East. The alliance making has taken a new shape during this crisis. Russian influence is increasing in the Middle East and Putin is more adamant at keeping the Assad's regime alive in Syria. Moreover two moves of the United States were totally gone wrong. To isolate Russia after Crimean Crisis and the aggressive approach of US to oust the Bashar al Assad. The Russian capability of launching successful military operations in the Middle East has shown that the US has lost its sole position as a military guarantor of the region. The economic ties of Russia with the Saudi Arabia and its enhanced cooperation on counter terrorism has provided Russia with a chance of winning back its old position of a major power status in the Middle East.

### **Recommendations**

- Syrian Crisis can be resolved with the sincere effort of major powers, especially Russia and United States. In order to fulfill their own interest in the Middle East region, they should act as a mediator to resolve the crisis.
- Assad should promote only those developmental projects within Syria which is in the national interest of Syria. Moreover, he should try to negotiate with the rebel groups and Kurds. Try to find out a peaceful solution of their problems.
- Middle Eastern peace and stability is linked with the peace and stability within the Syria. So, its geostrategic importance can't be denied. Syria should try to develop cordial relations with the regional states, especially Israel.
- Middle East is the favorite region of the Non-State actors. Therefore, these terrorists' organizations have added fuel to the fire not only in Syria as well as within the region. Their logistical and financial aid should be stopped; therefore, borders should be secured properly in order to control the networking of small arms proliferations.

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