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The reciprocal constitutive features of a Middle Eastern partnership: The Russian–Syrian bilateral relations



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ABSTRACT

Using the concept of reciprocal socialization, this article argues that the Damascus–Moscow partnership has been since 1970 a reciprocal constitutive relation that has influenced considerably the actions, interests, and identities of the two partners. During the last two decades of the Cold War it represented an almost ideal-type example of a relationship between a super-power and its regional ally that, through its complex consequences, shaped significantly the two partners themselves, the Middle Eastern political and security environment, and the international system as a whole. Post-2003 developments and especially the present Syrian crisis also have influenced considerably the two states' identity-building processes. After the US invasion of Iraq, the patterns of renewed bilateral cooperation have mirrored, at least in part, the Cold War ones. The Arab Spring enforced this trend. Yet, today the International Relations identity of Russia is quite different from the Soviet era one. The main consequence is that Moscow's new identity prevents it from supporting the regime in Damascus at any cost. If military operations take a turn threatening seriously the survival of that regime, it is likely that the Kremlin will not escalate its pro-al-Asad involvement, thus accepting the possible fall of its Middle Eastern ally.

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1. Introduction

This article uses the concept of reciprocal socialization in order to show that since 1970 the Damascus–Moscow partnership has been a reciprocal constitutive relation that has influenced considerably the actions, interests, and identities of the two partners. Moreover, since the US invasion of Iraq, the patterns of renewed bilateral cooperation have mirrored, at least in part, the Cold War ones. The Arab Spring has enforced this trend. The article examines in what way this is relevant for the future of the Moscow's support for the regime in Damascus. Based on an analysis of

Russia's new identity, it concludes that the Kremlin uses the renewed Syrian partnership in order to reassert its great power status but is not ready to support that regime at any cost. If military operations take a turn threatening seriously the survival of the latter, it is likely that the Kremlin will not escalate its pro-al-Asad involvement, thus accepting the possible fall of its Middle Eastern ally.

The article is organized as follows: section 2 creates the appropriate theoretical framework. Sections 3–5 depict the historical development of the Syrian–Russian relationship. Sections 6–11 present its evolution during the Arab Spring. The article's findings are analysed in the final section.

2. A special type of reciprocal socialization

Constructivism states that actors of international relations are permanently involved in socialization and

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learning processes, which modify their interests and identities. In turn, the interaction of states modifies their international environment, sometimes changing the very 'culture' of international anarchy. Identity can be defined as 'relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self' representing 'a property of international actors that generates motivational and behavioral dispositions' (Wendt, 1999: 224; a discussion of the 'identity literature of IR' can be found in Flockhart, 2006: 94–97). Identities change due to international socialization that can be defined as 'a process in which states are induced to adopt the constitutive rules of an international community' (Schimmelfennig, Engert, & Knobel, 2006: 2). Its outcome is sustained compliance based on the internalization of new norms. The actor switches from following a logic of consequences to a logic of appropriateness (Checkel, 2005: 804). Jeffrey Checkel identified two types of international socialization. The simpler, Type I internalization or socialization makes states behave appropriately by learning a role. The more advanced Type II socialization goes beyond role playing. Actors accept community or organizational norms as 'the right thing to do.' They 'adopt the interests, or even possibly the identity, of the community of which they are a part' (Checkel, 2005: 804).

In most cases, it is assumed that some states are already socialized in a community or organization while others need to be adopted into the club of socialized members. Very many international socialization studies analyse this type of one-way process. However, sometimes new members try to renegotiate the current order of the community that receives them through 'reciprocal socialization' (Terhalle, 2011: 342, 349), a process that mirrors Wendt's image of states modifying their international environment. Another frequent assumption is that there is a socializing community that reunites a relatively large number of states. This article explores a special type of reciprocal socialization: that taking place within the special bilateral relations between a great power and its regional ally. On the one hand, the influence is mutual; both partners change their identities. On the other hand, this is an asymmetrical process with the great power playing the major role. It has largely superior material resources and a favourable position in cognitive terms resulting from its experience with other, possibly numerous regional allies. Therefore, it is the great power that establishes the socializing norms. Yet, because it is a state and not a large and complex community, the great power itself is vulnerable to the influence of the regional ally and might change its own identity in a certain measure. Of course, both states are also submitted to diverse external influences and interact with other actors that influence them. Yet, depending on the intensity and importance of their bilateral relations, the latter can influence considerably the key features of the two states' International Relations identity through a process that is very similar to that described by Jeffrey Checkel. In the first stage, each of the two partners learns to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new relationship while assuming its specific role. The regional ally adapts its global foreign policy orientation to that of the great power while using the support of its partner in order to increase its regional status and influence. The great

power uses its ally as a proxy in regional affairs and takes advantage of this extension of its international reach in order to enhance its global status. Progressively, this goes beyond role playing. The two partners switch from a logic of consequences to one of appropriateness, to quote Checkel once more. A superior level of socialization is reached, with the two states profoundly and durably influencing each other.

Moreover, this process is likely to have significant repercussions on the domestic characteristics of the two partners and especially on those of the local ally. Frequently, this is a medium or relatively small state located in a turbulent region. The support of an external great power increases considerably the resources, legitimacy, and stability of the regime in place. Its leader acquires the means to increase his control of the local society, which is likely to result in the creation and/or the consolidation of a strong authoritarian regime.

The Damascus–Moscow partnership is an excellent case study showing that the identities of the two partners were influenced considerably by their intense interaction. The Syrian regime could develop into a domestic dictatorship and a key regional player only due to Moscow's support; faced a major crisis from the end of the Cold War to Putin's Middle Eastern comeback; and returned to 'normality' only with the renewal of the Russian partnership. Symmetrically, Moscow used Syria as a valuable regional agent that enhanced its superpower status during the Cold War; had to abandon it during its own profound crisis of the 1990s; and turned its support for the al-Asad regime into a means of reasserting its own great power status during the Arab Spring. Therefore, it can be stated that, for more than four decades, the ups and downs of the Damascus–Moscow partnership have put in relation two mutually constitutive International Relations identities whose socializing interaction is illustrative of the theoretical model presented above.

3. The Syrian authoritarian construct

The present Syrian regime originates in the Ba'th coup d'état of 8 March 1963. In February 1966, the left-wing faction of the Ba'th Party headed by Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Asad defeated its rival and took power. Finally, in November 1970 the young and ambitious minister of defence, Hafiz al-Asad, imposed his personal dictatorship (Karsh, 1991: 5; Rabinovich, 2011: 117). In a country with a majority of Sunni Muslims (60 percent), Asad relied on the 'Alawi community (12 percent). Due to religious reasons, many members of the Sunni majority refused to accept a regime dominated by 'Alawis as legitimate (Rabinovich, 2011: 374). This hardly favoured the new regime's stability. Consequently, Asad increased repression and operated a vast network of police informers and agents. He created no less than fifteen security agencies numbering 50,000 employees (Rubin, 2007: 52). Political power resided in the hands of the President and of the small group of trusted confidants which constituted the core of his regime. Hafiz al-Asad also became the object of an aggressive cult of personality (Rabinovich, 2011: 118).

Extremely brutal repression was used against political enemies. The 1979–82 Sunni Islamist rebellion was brought to an end by the Hama massacre; between 10,000

and 25,000 Syrians were killed by the military (Quiades, 2009). At the same time, Asad built – for the first time in Syria's modern history – a powerful state and provided his country with stability and an important role in regional politics (Rabinovich, 2011: 374). This was remarkable for a regime that had to control a highly turbulent society while facing a threatening regional environment (which brought non-fatal but repeated military defeat at the hands of Israel). The Syrian state simply did not have the resources required by these formidable tasks. The success was mainly due to the special relationship built by the Middle Eastern dictator with the Soviet Union.

4. The Soviet Connection

A previous Soviet–Syrian honeymoon, initiated in 1954, came to an end in February 1958 following the Egyptian–Syrian merger (Karsh, 1991: 5). It was re-launched after 1966 and became 'the most enduring and uninterrupted tie that the USSR has maintained with any Middle Eastern leader in the post-war era.' In fact, before 1970 Asad had a record of outspoken criticism of Syria's growing dependence on the Soviets (Karsh, 1991: 6) and initially didn't seem predisposed to increase it. Yet, he progressively came to realize the vital importance of a strong external supporter. After Egypt's defection, Syria became Moscow's major regional ally and a recipient of vast military and economic support. During his first three years in power, Hafiz visited Moscow six times. Soviet arms exports to Syria reached \$825 million in 1977, \$1 billion in 1978 (Rubin, 2007: 55) and an average of \$2.3 billion per year until 1985 (Golan, 1990: 279). Overall, the USSR supplied around \$25 billion in military equipment and trained about 10,000 Syrian officers (Rubin, 2007: 55). Therefore, it was Soviet aid and support which, to a considerable extent, enabled Asad to transform Syria from a weak country into a regional political and military power (Karsh, 1991: 6). Crucially, this allowed Damascus to remain one of the most resolute adversaries of Israel. In turn, this and especially the 1973 war 'endowed the regime with a measure of nationalist legitimacy' (Hinnebusch, 2012: 97) that significantly strengthened Asad's rule. In the larger context of the Cold War, the Soviet alliance placed Syria resolutely in the anti-Western camp and created a durable pattern of enmity between Damascus and the West. Overall, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Syrian–Soviet partnership was constitutive of the al-Asad regime. Moscow provided the military, political, diplomatic, and economic support that allowed the dictator, domestically, to impose his brutal control on the Syrian society and, internationally, to remain the constant adversary of vastly superior Israel. This is to say that two of the defining features of the regime in Damascus, its brutal authoritarianism and its overtly anti-Israeli and anti-Western orientation, might have not existed in the absence of the Kremlin's multifaceted assistance. Of course, the situation should not be perceived as similar to that of Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe. The Ba'thist form of National Socialism was clearly different from communism. Based on al-Asad's perception of regional dynamics, Syrian foreign policy decisions were at times different from or even contrary to those of the USSR. The Damascus regime

preserved, domestically and internationally, a significant degree of autonomy. However, while avoiding satellisation, Syria's identity was shaped strongly by the Soviet partnership.

5. Adapting to Unipolarity

Given Syria's heavy reliance on the USSR, the end of the Cold War and the waning of Moscow's support weakened considerably Asad's position. As a senior Syrian official stated, 'we regret the Soviet collapse more than the Russians do' (Rubin, 2007: 55). In the new circumstances, the regime initially decided to join the American-led coalition and took part in the war against Iraq, implicitly laying the foundation for a new relationship with Washington (Rabinovich, 2009: 3). Yet, the failure of the March 2000 al-Asad–Clinton summit in Geneva put an end to the Syrian–American rapprochement (Rabinovich, 2009: 7). Three months later, Hafiz al-Asad died. He left a dreadful economy, a stagnant society, and a situation of regional and international isolation (Rubin, 2007: 131). The regime nevertheless survived under the leadership of Hafiz's son, Bashar al-Asad.

The new President's 'modernizing authoritarianism' introduced some change. A reform program was adopted that continued and deepened the economic liberalization begun under Hafiz. There was a replacement of the old guard which transferred power to a new generation of technocrats (Hinnebusch, 2010: 8–9). Yet, the major features of the old regime – including the authoritarian and repressive ones – were fully preserved. Essentially, the present Syrian regime is the same as the one created by Hafiz al-Asad more than four decades ago. This is equally true for foreign policy. The new leader initially accommodated the US after 9/11 by offering some intelligence sharing and cooperation against al-Qaeda. However, the old siege mentality prevailed. The American military presence in Iraq was perceived as a major threat. In response, Syria became the main gateway for the anti-US 'Sunni insurrection.' It also continued to support Hezbollah and the Palestinian terrorist groups (Rabinovich, 2009: 12) and was Iran's ally in the anti-American 'axis of resistance' (Hinnebusch, 2010: 20; Rabinovich, 2011: 374). Progressively, the hostility of both the Bush Administration and the French President Jacques Chirac reached levels reminiscent of the Cold War era. Yet, in 2008 the new French President Nicolas Sarkozy 'embraced Asad and invited him to appear as an honoured guest at France's Bastille day celebrations' (Hinnebusch, 2010: 19). In 2009, détente with France was accompanied by Turkish-sponsored peace talks with Israel and a cautious dialogue with the new Obama administration. It was clear that the significant improvement of the relations with the West was impossible without addressing the long-lasting Syrian–Israeli enmity. However, Barry Rubin identified no less than fifteen strategic, regional, and domestic reasons why Syria 'needed the conflict to continue and saw real peace as dangerous, even fatal, to its survival' (Rubin, 2007: 110–112). Asad perceived peace with Israel as endangering Syria's (and his regime's) stability. He therefore chose to remain a member of the Iran-led 'resistance axis.' Accordingly, he made constant efforts in order to enhance security and economic relations with

Russia that already had improved considerably after the American invasion of Iraq (see below). As it would become obvious in 2011 and 2012, the new Damascus–Moscow relationship enhanced visibly Asad's international position as well as the repressive capability of his regime. It is obvious that the Syrian dictator had in mind the Cold War situation and did everything in his power to recover at least in part the formidable advantages associated with the Kremlin's unconditional support.

6. The Syrian Spring

During the 2000s, new information and communication technologies – including satellite television and social media – led to the rise of a new Arab public sphere based on the internalization of a new kind of pan-Arab identity. This process was accompanied by a generational change. A frustrated youth population confronted 'hopeless economies, rampant corruption, blocked politics, and indifferent, abusive state institutions.' Once ignited, the Arab Spring 'unfolded as a single, unified narrative of protest with (...) a deeply felt sense of shared destiny' (Lynch, 2012: 8, 10, 12).

The Syrian Ba'th regime was 'a predatory state' that did nothing to alleviate the situation of citizens resenting major socio-economic frustrations, extremely poor governance, corruption, and high levels of repression (Wieland, 2011: 45, 47). Consequently, as elsewhere in the Middle East, there was the sudden mobilization of desperate youth by the new social media; the emergence of a new opposition unconnected to the traditional opposition groups, amorphous but effective; and, specific to Syria, incitement by al-Jazeera under the inspiration of Shaykh Yusuf al-Qardawi who set out to topple 'the 'Alawit regime' (Rabinovich, 2011: 374).

The first significant demonstrations were held on 15 March 2011. On 30 March Bashar al-Asad disappointed the protesters with a speech that did not offer concrete reforms and claimed that the agitation was produced from abroad through local agents (Rabinovich, 2011: 375–6). This led to increased activism. The reaction of the regime developed through three increasingly violent phases. At first, there were limited political concessions coupled with brutal repression. When this failed, the so-called security solution was set in motion in late July 2011. It sought to force entire communities into submission, mainly through the privatization of violence initiated by the security services. The bloody actions of civilian militias known as *shabbiha* came to symbolize the regime's brutality and lawlessness, but were unable to suppress the opposition movement. Finally, in late January 2012 the so-called military solution was launched: 'a scorched earth policy of rampant destruction and looting.' It 'turned what once was viewed as a national army into a broadly reviled occupation force' (International Crisis Group 2012: i, 4). The brutality of the repression was well illustrated by the 25 May 2012 massacre in Houla that left 108 dead, including 49 children (The Guardian, 1 June 2012). By 31 December 2013 around 130,000 Syrians had been killed (The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 31 December 2013). The regime itself was progressively reduced to its repressive apparatus, a 'broadly cohesive, hard-core faction fighting an increasingly bitter, fierce and

naked struggle for collective survival' – that is, 'an entity more akin to a militia than an army in both make-up and ethos' (International Crisis Group 2012: ii).

One would expect this major domestic mutation to have altered considerably Syria's International Relations identity, with the aggressive, militaristic dimension turning dominant. Actually, this did not happen. In an emotionally charged January 2013 speech at the Opera House in Damascus, President al-Asad explained once more that his fatherland is simply 'repelling a fierce outside aggression in a new disguise' as hostile states send foreigners – 'takfiris, terrorists, al-Qaeda members calling themselves Jihadis' – to 'rebel against the people.' The Syrian regime, however, is proposing a negotiated political settlement to stop the bloodshed. More importantly, international support from 'Russia, China and the BRICS' is acknowledged. These states 'won't agree to meddling in the internal affairs of countries and destabilizing the region,' thus showing that 'the West is not the entire international community' (Al-Assad, 6 January 2013). The fear of a Libyan-type Western intervention was obvious and it had strongly encouraged the regime to preserve an apparently peaceful and conciliatory profile. Still, it would be naive to believe that al-Asad really hoped to convince the West of his good intentions. The fundamental cause of his choice was the international support mobilized by the Russian ally: a 'good guy' image was what Moscow needed in order to defend Damascus at the UN. If Jeffrey Checkel's two types of international socialization are taken into consideration, it can easily be noted that the Syrian regime learned a role and has kept playing it. This has happened since the very beginning of the crisis. On 26 February 2012, one month after the beginning of the 'military solution,' al-Asad even held a referendum that approved a new, 'reformist' constitution (The Economist, 3 March 2012e). This process of international socialization most likely originated as a self-conceived propaganda strategy. Still, it soon became implicitly Russian-fuelled and cannot be abandoned as long as Moscow supports the regime. If the latter survives, in the long run it might well go beyond role playing, with Damascus fully interiorizing the idea that showing a human face (despite the harsh realities of armed repression) is 'the right thing to do.' In any case, no matter the level of interiorization, this is a further dimension of Syria's broader socialization under the influence – and in order to fully take advantage – of its partnership with the Kremlin.

Lack of space prevents me from presenting the very diversified Syrian opposition and the tortuous path that on 11 November 2012 finally allowed all its groups to form the Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (El País, 29 November 2012a) which, on 19 March 2013 elected Ghassan Hitto as Prime Minister of an interim government (CBS, 19 March 2013). At least in part, this was possible due to foreign actors. Their considerable political and financial involvement was instrumental in reaching a relative consensus that would have been otherwise impossible. Overall, the Syrian conflict has acquired an increasingly important international dimension. The balance between the two camps – and therefore the issue of the civil war – seems to depend in a large measure on the actions of external actors.

7. The West

Again, lack of space does not allow me to analyse the regional actors. In fact, a certain balance took shape between the Saudis, their Gulf allies, and Turkey (who all support the rebels) and pro-al-Asad Iran. Consequently, the situation might change rapidly and decisively only due to actions taken at a higher level, with the West and Russia playing the key roles.

After an initial wait and see episode, the then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated in July 2011 ‘from our perspective, he [Asad] has lost legitimacy’ (Sharp 2011: 13). Sanctions were imposed by Washington on 10 August 2011 (*The Economist*, 13 August 2011). From 15 November both the US and EU enforced an embargo on imports of Syrian oil (*Reuters*, 28 November 2011). At the 1 April 2012 meeting in Istanbul there was ‘a strident declaration from the secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, that “we cannot sit back and wait any longer”’. At that point the US pledged solely humanitarian aid and communication equipment (*The Economist*, 7 April 2012f), but after the May 2012 Houla massacre, ‘officials in Britain, France and the United States have all said that military intervention “cannot be ruled out” in due course. (...) calls for intervention, especially in Washington, are growing’ (*The Economist*, 9 June 2012h). On 20 August 2012 President Obama stated that the use by the Syrian regime of chemical or biological weapons would trigger American military action (*The Guardian*, 20 August 2012). The Syrian National Coalition for Revolutionary and Opposition Forces created in November 2012 was immediately recognized as the ‘legitimate representative of the Syrian people’ by France followed, on 11 December 2012, by one hundred other states, including the US (*El País*, 29 November 2012a; *El País*, 12 December 2012b).

At first view, the 2011–2012 general development of the Syrian crisis seemed to duplicate the 2011 Libyan pattern. The key difference, however, was the West’s unwillingness to involve itself effectively in the Syrian civil war. A number of important reasons made direct intervention very unpopular. First, with only 7 million people, Libya had a front-line and a terrain more vulnerable to aerial attack. 23 m Syria is more densely populated. Due to heavier weapons, it might be a ‘hard nut militarily to crack’ (*The Economist*, 28 April 2012c). Second, there is a ‘diverse population in a tangle of sectarian and tribal knots,’ with the serious risk of dragging the country into an Iraq-type prolonged proxy war (*The Economist*, 28 April 2012c). Third, the regional context is different. In contrast to Libya’s isolation, Damascus is strongly supported by neighbouring Iran, which provides a certain level of military assistance. Fourth, also at regional level, there is the border shared by Syria and Israel. On 30 April 2011, Rami Makhluf, Bashar al-Asad’s cousin and the family’s banker, stated explicitly that ‘if there is no stability here, there is no way there will be stability in Israel’ (*Rabinovich*, 2011: 377). In other words, the Syrian regime threatened to respond to foreign intervention with an attack on Israel that all regional and external actors want to prevent. Fifth, President Obama is clearly unwilling to risk repeating the US experience in Iraq and Afghanistan (*Cebeci & Üstün*, 2012: 21) and is more cautious than a Republican

President might have been. Sixth, unlike Libya, Syria can count on the support of Moscow.

The ensuing Western reluctance to intervene has two important consequences. On the one hand, it helps prolong the civil war. On the other, it gives prominence to diplomatic negotiations and international political statements. These elements have been used effectively by Russia in its efforts to support the Syrian regime and, equally important, in instrumentalizing this support in order to consolidate its own great power status.

8. Russia’s Middle Eastern comeback

During the 1990s, Moscow’s diminished international status was accompanied by a foreign policy focused on the former Soviet republics and the United States (*Freedman*, 2010: 51). The relations with the Middle East were greatly influenced by bureaucratic and technocratic groups such as the Russian private sector located in Iraq and by interest communities within the Middle East (especially the Russian diaspora in Israel). Consequently, the Kremlin’s policy towards that region was heavily influenced by the new bureaucratic and technocrat circles lacking a long term strategy; and was captive to the diplomacy of Israel, Iran, and Iraq, which were able to secure Russian support (*Dagi*, 2007: 126; for developments during the Foreign Minister tenures of Andrei Kozyrev and Yevgeny Primakov see *Freedman*, 2010: 51).

It was Putin’s success in progressively eliminating centres of domestic opposition which challenged the authority of the President that enabled him to take full control in the field of foreign and security policy and to introduce a new approach to the Middle East. Chronologically, this coincided with the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which were accompanied by the establishment of US military bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia (*Dagi*, 2007: 128–129). Washington’s support for the Coloured Revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan further increased Moscow’s perception of an American threat in its traditional zone of influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Russian actions in the Middle East were conceived as an attempt to balance American regional influence (*Dagi*, 2007: 129) and therefore reflected clearly the emerging rivalry between the former Cold War enemies. Putin decided to formulate a new Middle Eastern strategy at the end of 2004. From that point on, the Kremlin followed a complex policy of encouraging the main anti-American and anti-Israeli forces in the Middle East – Syria, Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah – while at the same time trying to draw the major Sunni Arab states – Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates – away from their alignment with the United States, and also trying to maintain good bilateral ties with Israel. There was also the effort of preventing all Arab and Muslim states and groups from aiding the rebellion in Chechnya, which led to Russia receiving observer status in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (*Freedman*, 2010: 54–59).

While important, these geopolitical considerations tend to hide a fundamental aspect. Domestically, Putin eliminated all centres of opposition. This changed radically the way Russian Foreign Policy was made. In turn, this allowed the adoption of a completely new Middle Eastern approach that parallels and mirrors Moscow’s increasingly assertive

self-assumed world role. It would be difficult to deny that this represents a clear change of Russia's International Relations identity. The feeble, passive Yeltsin-era actor has been replaced by a rejuvenated, vocal great power that wants to play a major global and Middle Eastern role. The Syrian crisis has been instrumental in this process.

9. The Russian perception of the Arab Spring

The term 'Arab Spring' has been infrequent in mainstream Russian analysis of Middle Eastern developments. The preferred key words have been 'destabilization,' 'turmoil,' and 'extremism' – an eloquent description of what Pavel Baev labelled 'Russia's counter-revolutionary stance' (Baev, 2011: 11). Indeed, the Kremlin's perception of and reaction to the Arab protest movements has been based on a conspiracy theory strongly marked by two interconnected dimensions. On the one hand, there is Moscow's solidarity with authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, which it perceives as 'organic to the region' (Baev, 2011: 13). On the other hand, the fall of these regimes is associated with an increase in Western geopolitical influence. The then President Dmitry Medvedev spoke about a plot as early as February 2011, adding that 'in the past such a scenario was harboured for us' (President of Russia, 22 February 2011). Western secret services were accused of experimenting a 'controlled chaos' strategy (Baev, 2011: 13). More realistically, the Arab Spring allowed the coming to power of new Islamic actors that are likely to consolidate the anti-Iranian bloc. Consequently, there was a visible change in Russia's previous Middle Eastern policy favouring the 'resistance axis' but also courting Sunni states. In a context of open rivalry with the United States, Moscow now decided to limit the Saudi-inspired Wahhabi-style of Islamic activism while increasing its cooperation with Iran (Bacik, 2012: 4).

Syria is, of course, the case in point, but it was the Libyan episode that had a special importance in completing the construction of the Kremlin's new general Middle Eastern approach. In April 2011, Putin surprisingly described Qadhafi's regime as 'a warped and ugly monarchy.' Yet, he insisted that 'on the whole [it] satisfies the local public mentality and political practice' (Baev, 2011: 13). Bilateral relations had improved in previous years. President Putin visited Tripoli in April 2008. He wrote off Libya's Soviet-era \$4.6 billion debt and signed a host of new contracts, the largest being a \$3 billion railroad deal. That same year, a Russian missile frigate as well as a naval task force led by the nuclear-powered missile cruiser *Pyotr Veliky* visited the Libyan capital. Despite normalized relations with Washington, Qadhafi declared that he was willing to host a Russian naval base that 'would prevent possible attacks by the United States' (Ria Novosti 2008). He was certainly shocked to find out that Russia did not veto the March 2011 UN Security Council Resolution 1973 which led to the Western military intervention in Libya. Most likely, the cause was a temporary divergence of views between the resolutely anti-Western Prime Minister Putin and the milder President Medvedev. Possibly due to French and American pressure, the latter accepted the resolution and even reprimanded Putin publicly for describing it as 'flawed

and inadequate' and using terms like 'crusade.' Yet, during the following months that saw Western direct involvement in the Libyan civil war Medvedev gradually drifted to Putin's position (Baev, 2011: 15). On 21 October 2011, one day after Qadhafi's capture and killing at the hands of the rebels, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused NATO of war crimes due to its responsibility in the Libyan leader's death (Ria Novosti 2011). The Russians claimed they were misled – or betrayed – into signing up to regime change. 'To Mr Putin the conclusion from Libya is clear: this was a big political error, not to be repeated over Syria or anywhere else' (The Economist, 9 June 2012g). In other words, the pro-Western Libyan parenthesis proved to everybody at the Kremlin, Medvedev included, that there was no alternative to the Putin-engineered great power path. Russia's new identity could only be enforced by Moscow-Tripoli-type partnerships that implicitly enhanced the Kremlin's regional and global great power status. The failure to support a Middle Eastern ally could only be detrimental to Russia's international prestige, regional position, and internal self-confidence.

10. The Russian–Syrian post-Cold War relations

It was only in 1998 that, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, Hafez al-Asad visited Moscow and the Russians decided to sell sophisticated weaponry to Syria. The first, \$2 billion contract was signed in 2000. Relations improved greatly at the end of 2003 and especially in 2004–2005, due to the American invasion of Iraq (Tawil & Mostajo, 2009: 775–778). However, Putin's warming relationship with Israel during the same period affected Russia's strategic choices regarding Syria. Contracts concerning missiles and advanced air defence systems were repeatedly cancelled due to Israeli pressure (Bourtman, 2006). Despite this limitation, Moscow represented the only great power willing to support the regime in Damascus which was internationally isolated and faced increasing US and French hostility. During Bashar al-Asad's January 2005 Moscow visit, Putin agreed to write off 73 percent of Syria's \$13.4 billion debt to the former Soviet Union (Freedman, 2010: 55). The Syrian dictator spoke to students at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations about Russia's 'very large' role in international affairs and 'colossal authority' in the countries of the Third World. He also stated that 'in these countries, there are great hopes that Russia will restore its earlier positions in world affairs' (Bourtman, 2006). Mere flattery, however, was not enough to satisfy the Kremlin. In the context of UN Security Council debates concerning the Syrian presence in Lebanon, the Russians alternated support for initiatives favourable and moderately hostile to their partner in Damascus. Al-Asad understood the message and started to align systematically his positions on those of the Kremlin. He supported the pro-Moscow leader of Chechnya and, in 2008, the Russian invasion of South Ossetia (Glasman, 2011–2012; Hinnebusch, 2010: 21).

Due to these efforts, the bilateral relations started to evolve toward a status reminiscent of the old Soviet-Syrian partnership. During a Moscow visit in 2006, Asad and Putin announced each other as the most important strategic partners in the Middle East and emphasized the multi-

dimensional cooperation between the two countries (Dagi, 2007: 131–132). Bilateral trade increased from \$218 million in 2004 to \$460 million one year later and to \$1 billion in 2008 (Glasman, 2011–2012; Tawil & Mostajo, 2009: 792). Russian companies became important investors in the Syrian oil and gas extraction industry. In 2012, Syria owed \$3.6 billion to Russia. Much of this debt was associated with arms contracts; the active ones had, also in 2012, an estimated value of \$4.5 billion (Smith, 2012: 13). Between 75 and 90 percent of Syria's new arms are Russian-made. One quarter of the weapons produced in Russia between 2005 and 2009 were exported to Damascus (Glasman, 2011–2012; *The Economist*, 9 June 2012g). Moreover, in 2006–2007 about 2000 Russian military advisors were sent to Syria to train its armed forces (Rubin, 2007: 55). Perhaps more importantly, in 2009 Moscow started modernizing the former Soviet naval station at Tartus, which represents Russia's only military base outside the former USSR. At their completion – initially scheduled for 2012 – the new installations would have been able to host Moscow's largest warships, including the nuclear-powered missile cruiser *Pyotr Veliky*, thus extending considerably Russia's naval projection capability (Glasman, 2011–2012; *The Economist*, 9 June 2012g; *The Economist*, 14 January 2012b). In other words, at the beginning of the Arab Spring Syria was well advanced in the process of acquiring a foreign protector while the Kremlin had found a valuable ally able to enhance its great power status in the Middle East.

11. Russia and Syria's bloody Spring

Russian support for the regime in Damascus has been constant and effective, both at the bilateral and international levels. Bilaterally, Russia has been one of the very few countries willing and able to sell the weapons and ammunition increasingly needed by the al-Asad repressive forces. It also dispatched to Syria warships, diplomats, and even a patriarch meant to enforce the regime by showing that it benefitted from the robust support of a great power. In January 2012, the *Admiral Kuznetsov* aircraft-carrier and a few other Russian warships were welcomed at the Syrian port of Tartus by Assad's defence minister, Daoud Rajha (Glasman, 2011–2012). Later that month, Moscow also sold \$550 m worth of fighter jets to Syria (*The Economist*, 28 January 2012d). In January 2013, ships from all four Russian fleets assembled in the Eastern Mediterranean for their biggest naval exercises since the downfall of the Soviet Union (Trenin, 2013: 12). In more than one occasion, the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, had 'productive' meetings with Bashar al-Asad. To give an example, on 7 February 2012 he visited Damascus and was greeted by cheering crowds supporting the Syrian dictator, whose commitment to 'speedy reforms' Lavrov praised (Smith, 2012: 16; *The Economist*, 11 February 2012). Most interestingly, in November 2011 Kirill, Patriarch of Moscow and all the Rus' and Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church, paid a visit to Syria (Glasman, 2011–2012). The close links between the Russian Church and the Kremlin are hardly a secret. The visit was clearly political in character and was part of Moscow's larger pro-al-Asad propaganda campaign. Thirteen percent

of the Syrians are Christian (Rubin, 2007: 28). Like other minorities and especially the 'Alawi one, Christians fear the Sunni fundamentalists in the rebels' ranks and have been perceived as supporting the regime. Kirill's visit exploited precisely this fear in order to increase domestic solidarity with and support for the dictator in Damascus. It also showed Moscow's good knowledge of the situation in Syria and its determination to assist al-Asad in any possible way.

Yet, it was at the international level that Russian support proved most effective. Trying to avoid isolation, Moscow mobilized a group of influent allies in favour of its Syrian ally. The BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) are major emerging economic powers that share the explicit goal of replacing US hegemony with a more balanced multipolar order. For this reason and due to its specific interests in the Middle East (see Yu, 2012: 143), China had adopted from the very beginning a pro-al-Asad stance. This, however, was not the case for the remaining three members of the group. It was only after the March 2012 BRICS annual summit and especially after the 11th BRICS Foreign Ministerial Meeting held in Moscow in April 2012 that Russian and Chinese persuasive efforts proved successful. India, followed by the two other states, moved significantly toward Kremlin's position (Glasman, 2011–2012; Yu, 2012: 143–4).

The three countries, however, were unable to influence significantly the key arena of the United Nations Security Council. This is why Russia had to act with the only support of China. The two states blocked three anti-al-Asad UN Security Council resolutions on 4 October 2011, 4 February 2012, and 19 July 2012, respectively (*The Economist*, 11 February 2012; *The New York Times*, 19 July 2012). On 2 December 2011, 1 March 2012, and 6 July 2012 they also opposed UN Human Rights Council resolutions condemning the Syrian government (Glasman, 2011–2012; Yu, 2012: 142) while on 16 February 2012 and on 3 August 2012 they voted against similar UN General Assembly resolutions (*Reuters*, 3 August 2012; Yu, 2012: 142). The Russian approach is well illustrated by the case of the May 2012 Houla massacre. The Kremlin denounced it, but – outraging the US as well as many European and Middle Eastern states – claimed that 'killings bore the marks of both sides' (*The Economist*, 9 June 2012g). In general, Moscow has made a constant effort to present its actions as a balanced quest for a political solution to the conflict. It frequently has claimed that its rejection of 'unilateral,' anti-al-Asad initiatives was due exclusively to the fact that such actions had no chance of success. To quote Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, 'it is completely unrealistic (...) to say that the only way out is the unilateral capitulation of one of the opposing sides.' Such an idea is 'naive' (RFE/RL, 1 September 2012). In fact, the systematic actions of the Kremlin have prevented Western powers from getting a UN Security Council resolution that could serve as legal basis for a Libyan-type intervention in Syria. This limited greatly the freedom of manoeuvre of anti-al-Asad states and diminished the legitimacy of their hostile actions. If the other elements mentioned earlier in this section are added, it is clear that Russian support has been instrumental in the survival of the Syrian regime.

It is interesting to see how Russians themselves explain this considerable effort. Moscow's line of reasoning was

analysed by Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre. In his opinion, to Russia, 'Syria is not primarily about Middle Eastern geopolitics, Cold War-era alliances, arms sales or (...) the Tartus naval resupply facility.' These are relevant, but Moscow is more interested in two other key elements. First, 'Syria is primarily about the world order. It is about *who decides*' – with a direct reference to America's use of force that 'might lead to foreign interventions close to Russian borders, or even within those borders' (Trenin, 2012; emphasis in the original). Second, there is the danger of Islamist radical groups gaining a foothold just a few hundred miles from Russia's own troubled North Caucasus (Trenin, 2012). Beyond these specific concerns, however, Trenin also mentioned a crucial aspect. After the political 'decoupling' from the West, Vladimir Putin 'began to vigorously promote Russia's *distinct identity*, which now openly differs from the West at the values level, not just diplomatically.' Such a move represents 'a fundamental shift in Russia's standing and position in the world. Syria is just one example of this' (Trenin, 2013: 23; my emphasis). The Kremlin's Syrian policy, then, is in fact an exercise in identity-building. It helps construct a great power identity whose features include the rejection of US interventionism and the securing of areas close to national borders. To Moscow, Syria itself is of secondary importance. It is the transformative process associated with this Middle Eastern partnership that is crucial to Russia's new international identity.

12. Conclusion

The previous sections support three broad conclusions. First, the Moscow–Damascus bilateral relationship was hardly the only process of international socialization affecting the two states. Regionally and globally, each of them also interacted with other partners and was influenced by those interactions. However, it is clear that during more than four decades the Russian–Syrian relationship was extremely important in shaping the two partners' actions and identities. Critically, it considerably influenced their international status. Second, chronologically there were three very different stages of this partnership, with the middle one marked by the total suspension of the special bilateral relations. In fact, it is this critical period that is the most illustrative of the importance the partnership had for both sides. It witnessed the Kremlin's temporary but dramatic impotence on the global arena that placed Syria in an almost desperate international position. Russia's reassertion of great power status was accompanied by the progressive reconstruction of the previous bilateral relations which in turn improved greatly Damascus' regional position while allowing Moscow to initiate the symbolically important creation of its first military base outside the former Soviet Union. Both states benefitted from the renewed partnership in a way going largely beyond simple policy adjustments and clearly affecting their International Relations identity. Third, the Arab Spring had complex and contradictory effects. By endangering the very existence of the al-Asad regime, it put the Damascus–Moscow partnership to a very serious stress test. The Russian reaction was robust and, at first view,

confirmed the Kremlin's unconditional support for its Middle Eastern ally. Yet, as shown below, certain signals suggest that the situation is qualitatively different from that of the Cold War and therefore the parallel with the Syrian–Soviet relationship might be misleading.

12.1. The reciprocal constitutive features of the Cold War period

Back in the 1970s, the heavy reliance on the Soviet Union's multifaceted assistance was constitutive to the identity of Syria as an International Relations actor. Politically, militarily, and economically the al-Asad regime could not have survived without external support due to two key factors. On the one hand, there was Syria's domestic instability, favoured by inter-community tensions. The post-independence state was weak while national consciousness was still unconsolidated. On the other hand, there was the external vulnerability to Israeli military actions as well as to other regional threats in the larger context of the turbulent Middle East. Consequently, Damascus required, received, and fully exploited considerable Soviet support that allowed it to become a regional power whose foreign policy was clearly anti-Israeli and anti-Western. At the same time, domestically al-Asad built a strongly authoritarian regime that imported the Soviet personality cult and some other 'socialist' features. This is to say that Syria's new identity took shape through a process of socialization specific to USSR's 'family' of Third World allies and clients. Of course, Damascus could not influence in the same way the identity of the Soviet Union. Yet, it would be wrong to perceive the Syrian–Soviet partnership as a purely unilateral transformative process. The Kremlin's international actions, interests, and identity also were influenced significantly by the interaction with the numerous group of allies of which Syria was a representative example. After World War II, the transformation of the USSR into a truly global superpower could not be dissociated from the support and instrumentalization of regimes like those of Syria, South Yemen, Libya, Cuba, Angola or Vietnam. The Kremlin used them but also had to take into consideration and accommodate their specific needs and interests, modifying its own views, policies, and International Relations identity accordingly. This is why during the Cold War the Damascus–Moscow constitutive relation was a reciprocal one. Moreover, its intensity, length and stability were such that initial role playing was progressively replaced by the more advanced Type II socialization and its 'logic of appropriateness.' Both the USSR and Syria genuinely perceived themselves as members of a superpower-regional ally partnership and acted accordingly.

12.2. History repeats itself, but only in part

Everything appeared to come to an end after the Cold War. New identities were forged. Under Yeltsin, Moscow turned into a weak power struggling to maintain control of its former Soviet neighbourhood and totally unable to play a significant role in the Middle East. Damascus became an isolated, insecure state forced to rely increasingly on Iran.

However, Putin's ambitious policies and especially his anti-American Middle Eastern strategy set up in response to the US invasion of Iraq progressively recreated the framework of the previous cooperation. Despite the generational change, the Syrian regime was as eager as three decades earlier to use Moscow's support in order to improve its international status. The Kremlin believed that providing arms to Damascus, training its military, and building a naval facility at Tartus was the best way to reassert its great power status in the Middle East. The partnership developed in a way mirroring at least in part the 1970s relations. Finally, the Arab Spring gave Moscow the opportunity to support its Syrian ally with arms and Security Council vetoes exactly as it had done during the Cold War. At first view, the history has been repeating itself.

There are, however, two major differences. First, the complex reality of the new relationship requires a finessed and nuanced assessment. Both partners find themselves in critical stages of their identity development. Present Russia is not the powerful, self-confident Soviet Union. Its reassertion of great power status only has started one decade ago. The Kremlin leader still faces some anti-authoritarian criticism at home and serious challenges abroad, not to mention rather limited resources. His political project needs more time to come to maturity and, during this transitory phase, Moscow preserves a certain degree of vulnerability. For its part, the 44-year old Syrian regime is experiencing its darkest hour. It has been reduced to a killing apparatus that tries to maintain international honourability. As it fights for its very survival, the range of its political choices as well as the ensuing responsiveness to domestic and external inputs have diminished considerably. The partnership, then, is plagued by significant weaknesses and should not be expected to work as it did thirty years ago. Most importantly, for the time being it has little chances to go beyond the role playing, Type I socialization. This means that, in the foreseeable future, it will remain rather superficial and might break at the first serious shock.

The second difference stems from the present structure of the international system. Unlike the USSR, the new Russia is not the lethal enemy of the US. It does not reject radically the present international order. If Wendt's cultures of anarchy are taken into consideration, the Moscow-Washington relationship is one of Lockean rivalry. This hardly means friendship, but also is far from total adversity. Russian foreign policy in the Middle East might follow patterns inspired by the Soviet ones, but this does not mean that the identities of Russia and of the USSR are the same. Consequently, Russian-American crises are unlikely to take extreme forms and an understanding between the two states is always possible. With respect to the Syrian case, this means that Russia will never go as far as the Soviet Union in order to protect its ally. In 2004, Lavrov stated 'the foreign policy of Russia is neither pro-Arab nor pro-Israeli. It is directed at securing Russian national interests' (Glasman, 2011–2012). Three years later, Andrej Kreutz noted that 'Putin's relations with Syria and the rest of the Arab World have been cautious and marked by self-interested pragmatism' (Kreutz, 2007: 25). During the Arab Spring, the Kremlin has supported al-Asad vocally and effectively because this served its own global interests.

However, in the case of military defeat of the Syrian regime it is unlikely that Putin will choose to escalate his country's support for an almost lost cause. He will not call for sanctions against states helping the rebels, he will not threaten to send Russian troops to Syria, and he will not harbour an al-Asad government in exile as the Soviets might have done. He probably will prefer to 'secure Russian national interests' by negotiating with his rivals in Washington. This is not a simple speculation. On 13 December 2012, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov stated that Syria's government was 'progressively losing control' and that 'the victory of the Syrian opposition cannot be excluded' (BBC, 14 December 2012). One day later, the Foreign Ministry denied that Moscow had changed its pro-al-Asad position. Still, nothing happened to Bogdanov, which is highly atypical for a Russian official expressing opinions that contradict Putin's views. It is likely that this was a signal suggesting that Moscow could contemplate a change of its Syrian policy as the military actions of the rebels looked, at that time, increasingly successful. Later, the chances of survival of the regime in Damascus somehow improved and the Kremlin didn't need to prepare for a worst case scenario, at least in the short run. But this remains a possibility for the future. Ironically, it is not sure that such signals will be answered. As noted by Erol Cebeci and Kadir Üstün, 'the US does not see sufficiently vital interests in Syria to be (...) worth seriously bargaining for' (Cebeci & Üstün, 2012: 21). Even in that case, the Kremlin probably will choose moderation.

To sum up, for a long time and in a very profound way, the Damascus–Moscow partnership has been a reciprocal constitutive relation. During the last two decades of the Cold War it represented an almost ideal-type example of a relationship between a super-power and its regional ally that, through its complex consequences, shaped significantly the two partners themselves, the Middle Eastern political and security environment, and the international system as a whole. Post-2003 developments and especially the present Syrian crisis also have influenced considerably the two states' identity-building processes. Yet, today the International Relations identity of Russia is very different from that of the Cold War period. The main consequence is that, despite patterns of bilateral cooperation that seem to mirror those of the Soviet era, Moscow's new identity prevents it from perceiving its relations with the Syrian government as a matter of life and death. Damascus is instrumental in Russia's reassertion of great power status. However, if that is the course of military operations, the Kremlin should be expected to accept the possible fall of its ally and to adapt its Middle Eastern policy to the new regional context.

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