

Conference Paper

Russia As a Powerful Broker in Syria: Hard and Soft Aspects

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Abstract

The Arab Spring was regarded with suspicion by Russian decision-makers, their worst fears were seemingly confirmed with the case of Libya in 2011 when NATO was seen as abusing the UN Security Council R2P mandate for the purpose of regime change. This had a great impact on Russia's decision to support the Syrian government, when the regime change process began there. By the summer of 2015, the world was predicting the fall of the Syrian government, it was at this point Russia became directly and overtly involved with the fighting. The West tried to project a dire scenario that Russia would become embroiled in an Afghan-scenario, they made many guesses about the 'true' nature of Russia's engagement, but largely failed to comprehend or understand the actual motivation. Despite negative Western projections, Russia has been largely successful in its aims and goals. Russia has consequently emerged as an external actor of significance and influence in the MENA region, which seems to be owed somewhat to taking the decision to become directly involved in Syria as a powerful broker.

Keywords: Syrian War, Russia, military intervention, soft power, hard power, powerful broker.

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1. Introduction

The Syrian war is a highly intricate and complex conflict with multiple local, regional and international actors on each side — advocating regime change and supporting the Syrian government. Russia has been placed under pressure to pressure President Bashar al-Assad to compromise and to end its support for the Syrian government by the US-led West and the UN. Russia has used its influence to influence Assad, but refuses to give up its support [1: 276]. There has been a lot of value and normative framing of the conflict, but little in the way of a more pragmatic oriented analysis to actually understand Russia's actual interests and aims, and its level of commitment. Therefore, events of 30 September 2015, when Russia became directly involved as a participant of the conflict came as a shock, when it should not have.

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Russia's military intervention in the Syrian war drew a negative response from the West, where it was greeted with Western-centric suspicion and imagined links. It was not uncommon for assumptions that Russia viewed the Syrian war purely in terms of an anti-terrorist operation (which was the excuse used by Western powers to bomb Syria contrary to rules of war and international law) that fitted with the Global War On Terrorism. This was to form the strategic goal to be used as a springboard to bargain with the West and re-establish warmer relations [2], [3], [4]. However, such analysis ignores Russia's strategic interests and goals, and over inflates the value of the West in Russia's emerging foreign policy trajectories [5]. This article seeks to understand the underlying reasons and motivations for Russia to become directly engaged in the Syrian conflict and to try and understand some of the aims and goals.

2. Method

The approaches to textual analysis shall include content analysis (quantifications of different elements in text), argumentation analysis (the structure of argumentation used), and the qualitative analysis of ideas in the content (with a focus on foreign and security policy) [5]. The combination of these approaches is expected to yield results on the ontology (what exists) and epistemology (knowledge and how we 'know' things) of reactions to mass mediated textual depictions of Russian military engagement within the context of the Syrian conflict. The objects of study include power, people, policy, oppression and freedom, war and peace and so forth [5]. The mass media texts then contextualise the relationships according to perceived and projected power in the constructed social world order of mankind, such as justice and injustice, powerful and powerless, legitimate and illegitimate, worthy and unworthy.

It is the intention of the author to use a qualitative approach to analyzing the data, and given the size of the samples, to create an indicative study. The sample material collected for this article was found via a general Google search and a Google Scholar search in July 2019. Search terms that were entered are: hard power in conflict; soft power in conflict; Arab Spring + Russia; geopolitical regionalisms + Arab Spring; Russian military diplomacy; Russian military intervention in Syria. Some 60 articles were manually selected by scrolling through the hits, which were based upon the closeness and proximity of the primary interests of this paper, namely Russian military intervention in the Syrian War according to the frames of the selected sample of analytical and academic papers. Results in the English language were focused upon in the sample that was derived. This is not a large N sample, therefore the result should be understood

as being an indicative one and not a representative, which would require a much larger sample.

The next qualitative method involved the sending of three questions to a number of Russian experts (in English and Russian languages) on Russia's perception of the Syrian conflict and what is hoped to be achieved. These questions, which are listed directly below, were sent by email and Facebook Messenger to 10 respondents in July and August 2019, five replies were received.

1. What are the perceived risks and threats to Russia and other countries/regions resulting from Syria?
2. What are the different factors for Russia to decide becoming directly involved in the Syria conflict?
3. What are the primary aims and goals for Russia in Syria?

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The Road to Direct Russian Intervention in Syria

Russian foreign and security policy has been undergoing a transformation in the 21st century, especially with regards to how it views state sovereignty. One of the current features is a much more instrumental approach to realising aims and goals as opposed to an ideational approach. This situation has led to an observation that two models of sovereignty in Russian foreign policy simultaneously co-exist — 'Westphalian' (beyond the Near Abroad) and 'post-Soviet (in the Near Abroad).' These perform three functions in contemporary Russian foreign policy: 1) helps to secure Russian interests at the domestic, regional and international levels; 2) serves as a form of balancing mechanism against the US and its allies, which are perceived as moving towards a post-Westphalian model of sovereignty; 3) acts as a marker to signal a 'non-Western' power identity in an emerging multipolar global order [6: 958-959]. The Arab Spring and especially the contradictions that emerged in the regime change that occurred in terms of 'humanitarian intervention' and state sovereignty principle ensured an increasingly tougher stance.

In the wake of the events that concluded in Libya, then Prime Minister Putin affirmed that "we must not allow the Libya scenario to be attempted to be reproduced in Syria."(Putin, V., Russia and the Changing World, Rossiskaya Gazeta, <https://rg.ru/2012/02/27/putin-politika.html>, 27 February 2012 (accessed 24 July 2019)) This necessitated

a more active stance in the conflict beyond diplomacy only. Russia has chosen to take a policy of what they term as “active neutrality” in the Syrian conflict [7, no date given]: 4). The idea of active neutrality is best described in an interview that was conducted with Andrey Manoilo. “Russia will never fight on the side of Assad and protect him against enemies. Russia only fights against international terrorism at the official invitation of the Syrian government.”(Andrey Manoilo: Professor in the Faculty of Politology at Moscow State University and Advisor to the Russian Security Council. Reply was received on 22 July 2019 via Facebook messenger) In this quote, Russia positions itself as a powerful broker in the Syrian war, but does so within the context of legal legitimacy that is lacking in those countries seeking to act as powerful brokers in aiding regime change.

The situation has been the result of a number of factors occurring through international relations in a generally worsening environment of trust between Russia and the West. Some observers note and consider that the Syrian conflict concerns much more than solely the military conflict in this country and even beyond the Middle East. There have been attempts to frame the intentions and actions of the different international actors in Syria as being part of the wider international tensions which has been referred to as the New Cold War involving Russia and the US-led West, which involves attempts to increase the geopolitical influence of the West at the expense of Russia [8; 9] in a form of negative geopolitical regionalism that is based upon notions and practice of exclusion. Therefore, in the wake of the NATO-led regime change in Libya and the real possibility of Russia’s ally Syria suffering a similar fate forced either action to establish a credible international geopolitical actor or to forfeit the strategic goals of becoming a more active global actor. One of the outcomes of Libya is deep rooted territorial instability. This is also perceived as being a risk in Syria too, where an interviewee noted the threat of the disintegration of Syria into several parts and the termination of the current state. In his understanding, it is the result of different powers creating their own protectorates and enclaves on Syrian territory.(Andrey Manoilo: Professor in the Faculty of Politology at Moscow State University and Advisor to the Russian Security Council. Reply was received on 22 July 2019 via Facebook messenger) Hence the events that were unfolding in Syria were seen through the lens of how events unfolded in Libya.

Russia understood and perceived a certain dissonance between the rhetoric and the actions of the Obama administration and their strong opposition to the Russian proposal to deploy air power to Syria to fight ISIS and to support state stability. In the Syrian conflict, Russia saw a two-front war being waged by the US and its allies, one nominally against ISIS and another against President Bashar al Assad and the

Syrian government (a Russian ally). President Putin had also pointed, on a number of occasions, the results of the US-led regime change policy in the MENA region invariably worsened conditions for the local population, such as seen in Iraq, Egypt and Libya. (Cohen, S. F. & Batchelor, J., Has Russia Been Right All Along About the 'Arab Spring'?, *The Nation*, <https://www.thenation.com/article/has-russia-been-right-all-along-about-the-arab-spring/>, 9 September 2015 (accessed 19 July 2019))

One of the aspects that traditionally held back Russia's influence was the inability to protect allies in the MENA region, such as exemplified by the US-led regime change operations in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 (Russell, 2018: 9). Russia felt betrayed by the US-led West in Libya in 2011 when they supported the no-fly zone, which permitted NATO to attack government forces and led to regime change at a time when it seemed Gaddafi may prevail over the 'opposition' forces [10 176; 11: 12]. The result after NATO had regime changed Gaddafi was far direr than when he was in control of the country, human rights rapidly spiralled downwards and the country descended into a failed state that became a safe haven for terrorist groups to operate. In fact, NATO's 'well-intentioned' intervention has increased the death toll to acts of violence by 10-fold [12: 68-72]. The huge gap between the words and deeds of the NATO-led regime change in Libya tended to confirm the fears of the 'true' purpose of the Western humanitarian intervention concept.

Therefore, when the US attempted a similar path to regime change in Syria with the attempted UN Security Council resolution, both China and Russia vetoed it. Russia stood to lose its closest ally in the MENA region, naval facilities at Tartus, economic and trade relations in Syria. There was also the calculation that with regime change there would be no smooth transition to 'democracy' that was pro-US, instead there was likely to be chaos and the spread of radicalism would result in the MENA region and beyond (including Russia), where Assad was seen as an effective barrier to the spread of Sunni fundamentalism [13; 14,; 15, 16, 17]. (Katz, M. N., *Russia and the Arab Spring*, Middle East Institute, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-and-arab-spring>, 3 April 2012 (accessed 19 July 2019); Pearson, A. & Sanders, L., *Syria Conflict: What do the US, Russia, Turkey and Iran Want?*, DW, <https://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604>, 23 January 2019 (accessed 17 July 2019); TNI Staff, *Syria: Why Russia Went in*, *The National Interest*, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/syria-why-russia-went-14030>, 8 October 2015 (accessed 17 July 2019)) Given the transforming world order and the appearance of a more multipolar world, Russia's foreign policy interests and relationships have been gradually moving away from a Western-centric focus to a more diverse set of regional

relations, which has made the MENA region more attractive for a variety of economic, political and security reasons [5]. Different reasons, local, regional and global compelled Russia to become directly and overtly involved in the Syrian war.

An email interview with Nikolai Soukhov confirmed the above reasons and yielded some additional interests and goals, which were divided into the global level, regional level, local level and internal level. (Nikolai Vadimovitch Soukhov — PhD in History, Researcher at the Centre of Arab and Islamic Studies at the Russian Academy of Science's Institute of Oriental Studies. Received on 25 July 2019 via email) Russian interests at the global level are multi-varied, one of them being to promote cooperation between US and Europe with Russia in fighting ISIS, but also as a means of a mechanism of rapprochement after the Crimean events. Being involved in Syria is also seen as a path to Russia being recognised as a global power. There is also the concern about the Western intention to impose regime change in Syria. Three principles guide the Russian perception of the world order — any country's government cannot be replaced in an "abnormal" way; foreign forces cannot carry out military intervention or arm the 'opposition' without the legitimate government's request; it is impossible to impose sanctions. At the regional level, Russia lost its influence in the MENA region with the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was a form of trauma. It tried to return from the year 2000, but the Arab Spring presented an opportunity. Russia has two strategic allies in the region, Iran and Syria and is prepared to defend both of them, and now to grow its political and economic influence. This is paying dividends with leaders from the MENA region increasingly visiting Moscow. There is also the goal to prevent gas and oil supplies from the Gulf Countries to the Mediterranean by US companies, which will undermine Russian oil and gas supplies to Europe. At the local level, the main goal is to support the current government of Syria politically and militarily to allow it to remain in power and thus secure Russian military bases and economic contracts in to the long term, and to further develop economic collaboration. There is also the aspect of combat operations against all sorts of jihadist groups. Internal level considerations include keeping ISIS fighters with Russian citizenship in Syria dead or alive, and not to return to Russia. The aspect of public opinion is also important, where Russia as a great power is popular.

In practical terms of regional geopolitics, the events in Libya threatened Russia's credibility as an actor of note and unless rectified, even stood to ensure Russia's influence in the MENA region would evaporate after significant economic, political and diplomatic investments had been made in the first years of the 21st century. Russia's support to the Syrian government can be regarded as being a secondary

consideration to Moscow's greater domestic and foreign strategic interests [15: 179]. According to Dmitry Trenin, Russia political objective is to engineer a peace settlement that protects Russian interests in Syria and the wider region, to generate durable political and economic ties. But also to return Russia to a prominent place among the leading powers of international relations [20: 26]. Some researchers asserted that Russia was unlikely to back up with Syrian government with military assistance owing to a lack of vital strategic interests and the fear of a Soviet-like Afghanistan scenario [21: 823]. This however demonstrated a lack of understanding of the local, regional and global interests at stake, and the growing political resolve to halt the erosion of Russian interests, not only in Syria, but the wider region and world.

3.2. Use of Soft Power on and in Syria

The mastery of soft power and its operationalisation in foreign and security policy was seen by Russia as a means to defend Russia's international (and domestic) interests, and as a means to counter what is seen as the subversive application of political warfare against foreign countries by the US [22: 396]. Soft power is defined and conceptualised differently in Russia than by Nye. In 2012 Putin defined soft power as "the promotion of one's own interests and approaches through persuasion and attraction of empathy (*simpatii*) towards one's country, based on its achievements not only in the material sphere but also in the spheres of intellect and culture." (*Soveshchanie poslov I postoyannikh predstavitelei Rossii* (meeting of ambassadors and permanent representatives of Russia), Kremlin, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/15902>, 9 July 2012 (accessed 30 July 2019)) Thus the Russian picture fits into the debates mentioned in this article earlier that the vision by Nye was too US centric and a more adapted version was needed to meet the specificities of the Russian political environment and circumstances.

To a certain degree, Russia's non-coercive military diplomacy advantages in the MENA region are owed to missteps by the United States and Russia's direct military involvement in the Syrian war. The US unilateral approach to Iraq in 2003 and the Arab Spring, together with policy such as Obama's *Asia Pivot*, contributed to them being seen as an unreliable partner and a cause of regional instability, mixed with a partial regional withdrawal seemed to confirm it. Russia has managed to some extent fill at least some role as an external hegemon, which has resulted in greater regional influence in events and trends as well as significantly expanding arms sales. (Korybko, A., Moscow's

Military Diplomacy in the Middle East: A Major Headache for the US, American Herald Tribune, <https://ahtribune.com/world/europe/russia/3309-moscow-military-diplomacy.html>, 16 July 2019 (accessed 17 July 2019)) In 2005, Russia endorsed the World Summit Outcome declaration that saw international recognition for the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine [23, 2016: 1]. However, the subsequent experience of the regime changes during the Colour Revolutions and Arab Spring also spurred Russia to mimic some aspects of Western ‘humanitarian intervention’, which is seen in a Russian approach to the R2P doctrine. This has been labelled as being instrumental and at odds with the ‘international’ understandings of R2P [24, 25, 23; 26]. The NATO use of R2P in Libya in 2011 seems to have confirmed suspicions and caused Russia to equate humanitarian intervention with R2P [25] Thus the logic is consistent with Ziegler’s [27] assessment of Russia’s instrumental and multiple understandings of sovereignty in international relations.

Russia’s approach to intervention and R2P has been described as being “framed within a largely rational argument rooted in statist international law” [24: 813]. Russia regarded with suspicion a move that mirrored early events in Libya, when the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition forces that was promoted as representing the Syrian people, but included Islamist extremist elements that included an Al Qaeda affiliate, this diverse group only had one common goal, which was regime change. Russia argued further that the majority of the Syrian people supported the Syrian government and were fearful of consequences that would follow a Libya-scenario in the case of regime change [24: 819-820] This background has led Russian to conclude a different path to the application of its R2P vision in Syria.

One of the first points and underlying reasons for Russia to support the Syrian government against those forces seeking the implement regime change that are supported by various foreign powers, the belief that Syrians should be able to decide for themselves the path out of the current conflict. There is also the belief that a strong state sovereignty strengthens rather than weakens a country’s capacity for legitimate governance that facilitates humanitarian conditions for the civilian population (where Libya was used as an example of what happens in contrary circumstances) [24: 822-823]. The official position displays the simultaneous presence and use of both statist and humanitarian norms.

Contrary to many Western estimates of Russia’s direct involvement in the Syrian conflict would reduce influence and operational choices in the MENA region, an Israeli assessment stated “it seems that the opposite is the case. In place of a foothold it is

losing in the Middle East, Russia is working to consolidate a new camp of supporters” [13: 3]. This has been subsequently confirmed in a European Parliament briefing.

Russia’s success in imposing its agenda in Syria has bolstered its influence throughout the wider region. Although Moscow’s role is not always a constructive one, it has become a key actor and sometimes mediator in regional conflicts from Libya to Yemen. Russia’s regional clout is also helped by its skilful use of energy cooperation to further economic and geopolitical interests. Russia’s drive to become a major Middle Eastern player should be seen in the wider context of global geopolitical rivalry with the United States. Moscow’s growing influence in the region is as much the result of Western policy failures as its own strength [18: 1].

One of the successes of Russian soft power in Syria has been the ability to render the United States somewhat irrelevant through co-opting the international mediation role. From 2012 until December 2017 the US monopolised the narrative of the Syrian conflict through peace talks in Geneva, which also served as the basis for their role as a powerful (rather than honest) broker. This was done through subjectively picking and choosing which actors could and could not attend, and through rhetorically assigning blame (not legally). This was interrupted and eventually usurped by the Russian-led peace talks in Astana and Sochi. In this case, Russia was in the position to assume the role of powerful broker in the conflict [19: 21-23; 16: 36-37; 18: 2, 5, 9]. Suchkov noted further that “ongoing talks with Iran and Turkey over “American succession” in Syria show the Astana format is the best venue for the three to discuss their own internal disagreements and push forward their respective agendas.” (Maxim Suchkov, senior fellow at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University) and editor of *AI-Monitor’s* Russia-Mideast coverage. Reply was received on 1 August 2019 via Facebook messenger) These sentiments are echoed in a public statement to the UN Security Council by the Russian representative. “We will be doing so [to bring peace to Syria] in our national capacity, as a member state of the UN Security Council, and as part of the “Astana troika” — the format has done more than any other one to achieve de-escalation in Syria, elimination of the terrorist threat, expanding of humanitarian assistance and promotion of political process.” (Statement by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia at the UN Security Council Meeting on Syria, Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, http://russiaun.ru/en/news/syria_hum3007, 30 July 2019 (accessed 19 August 2019)) Russia engages as a powerful broker, however, tends to not exclude significant local and regional players from the mediation process (the US, as a powerful broker excluded Iran, which is a significant actor in the Syrian conflict).

One of the successful mechanisms employed in the conflict was the use of negotiated settlements between the anti-government forces, international forces and the government forces, where Russia acted as a broker. Amnesties, de-confliction/de-escalation agreements and offers to relocate were made to groups that offered a way out of likely death that would result from standing and fighting in isolated pockets [17: 21-23]. However, Russia has also been unsuccessful in attempting to broker change in Syria. One such example has been an attempt through official and confidential conversations to allow a greater level of opposition representation in politics in order to alleviate some criticism from the West. This was however rejected as the current tide of the fortunes of war is favouring the Syrian government. (Nikolai Vadimovitch Soukhov — PhD in History, Researcher at the Centre of Arab and Islamic Studies at the Russian Academy of Science's Institute of Oriental Studies. Received on 25 July 2019 via email) This demonstrates the declining ability to mediate when one side perceives it is winning the military conflict and therefore does not feel the need to enter political negotiations.

One of the reasons proposed by Stepanova [5] for Russia's relative success in the MENA region after the Syrian intervention is that it has adapted to and grasps more readily the growing role of regional processes and dynamics, and is prepared to engage regional actors on an equal footing. This is achieved through multiple partnerships, a non-ideological approach, pragmatism and cultural relativism. These specifics are something that the West has been not so readily able to adjust to, the regionalisation of politics and security in the MENA region (Kozhanov, 2016: 97-100). Russia's success in the hard power field has paved the way to a more soft power approach in the Syrian conflict.

According to Maxim Suchkov, Moscow is likely to pursue the initiatives it established in 2018 within a framework of three pillars: 1) creation of a constitutional committee; 2) the return of refugees; and 3) facilitating the re-legitimation of the Syrian government and the pursuit of funds for re-building the country. For this to be successful would require functional collaboration with different stakeholders, such as the United Nations Envoy to Syria and various regional powers (for human security and reconstruction funds). Suchkov noted that actors outside the immediate region would be welcomed, such as the EU, France and other European countries. However, any collaboration would not deter Russia from seeking the realisation of its goals and the process would go ahead with or without these countries. (Maxim Suchkov, senior fellow at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University) and editor of Al-Monitor's Russia-Mideast coverage. Reply was received on 1 August 2019 via Facebook messenger) By actively engaging in Syria and preventing what seemed at one point, to be an 'inevitable'

regime change that the US-led West framed within the Arab Spring, Russia has managed to reverse its declining fortunes in the MENA region and perhaps somewhat even beyond.

4. Conclusions

In the method section, three questions were posed for further investigation and analysis, these were: 1) what are the perceived risks and threats to Russia and other countries/regions resulting from Syria?; 2) What are the different factors for Russia to decide becoming directly involved in the Syria conflict?; and 3) What are the primary aims and goals for Russia in Syria? These questions shall be taken each in turn, based on the evidence presented by the literature review and the expert interviews.

Russia decided to become involved for a number of different reasons, including the reasons above that constituted a threats-based approach. One of the key moments that helped to sway Russian decision-makers to become directly and overtly involved in the armed conflict was the sense of betrayal and double standards of the West after the regime change and perceived abuse of the UN Security Council mandate that created the Libya-based scenario of regime change. Furthermore, Russia was compelled to act in Syria after abstaining from Libya. To do nothing and watch regime change would destroy any credibility of Russia being a great power and the likelihood of losing all gains after nearly a decade of somewhat moderately successful public diplomacy and interaction in the wider MENA region. The domestic factor also needs to be considered, when public support for the idea of Russia being a great power was popular.

The primary aims and goals of Russia have evolved with time and circumstance. At the time of Russia's direct engagement with kinetic operations in Syria in September 2015, the emphasis was Russia's role as a powerful broker using hard power to achieve the immediate objectives. These immediate objectives were to stabilise the Syrian government, to fight what were deemed as being terrorist forces and circumventing Western attempts at the isolation of Russia. This came as a surprise, when there were already plenty of tell-tale signs to indicate what was coming as Russia was taking a more assertive and increasing non-Western line in its international relations. These aims and goals have been mostly realized by Russia at this point, which means the goals and the operational approach needs to evolve. The current objectives are aimed at the return of refugees, reconstruction of Syria and the re-legitimization of the Syrian government. Russia still retains its powerful broker role and status in Syria (and now even in other conflicts in the MENA region — such as Yemen and Libya, these objectives require a

more soft power approach. It seems that the soft power potential would not have been possible or have been much less effective without the initial use of hard power in Syria to assert Russian interests and objectives.

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