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## **An Assessment of the presence and role of Russia in the Syria crisis**

**Nesa Zahedi<sup>1</sup>**

Mofid University, Iran

**Seyyed Ebrahim Sarparast Sadat<sup>2</sup>**

Allameh Tabataba'i University, Iran

**Morteza Dehqan Khalili**

Mofid University, Iran

### **Abstract**

Developments in the Middle East have always affected political equations worldwide. With the beginning of the crisis in Syria in 2011, regional and international actors have taken different stances based on their interests. The actors are divided into two categories: opponents of the Bashar al-Assad's regime including the United States, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Qatar and Turkey, and Bashar al-Assad's allies including Russia and Iran. Following a realist approach to foreign policy, Russia has fully supported Bashar al-Assad, since the onset of the crisis in Syria. In this research, we examine the role and stance of Russia in the Syrian crisis, using the neo-realism approach. Russia, because of its security and politics considerations and particularly the fear of radicalization in the Caucasus, as well as the fear of losing Syria, as its last remaining stronghold in the Middle East, has supported al-Assad's government. From a military and economic point of view, Russia regards the Syrian port of Tartus as an important base in the Mediterranean. Syria is also one of strategic areas for Russia's arms sale.

**Keywords:** Russia, Syria crisis, strategic areas, neo-realism, ISIL

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. E-mail: n\_zahedi@alumni.ut.ac.ir

<sup>2</sup> E-mail: sarparastsadat@gmail.com

## **1. Introduction**

The Middle East has always been important because of its huge oil reserves and geopolitical advantages. The United States has increasingly intervened in the Middle East political affairs. The geopolitics of Syria is very crucial. In March 2011, thousands of Syrians took to the streets to protest Bashar al-Assad's government. Protestors demanded civil rights such as freedom of speech, press freedom, and free elections. However, foreign actors intervened peaceful demonstrations. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Russia has taken a strong stand to defend Bashar al-Assad. Therefore, it is important to find out why Russia has unprecedentedly supported the Syrian government during the Syrian civil war.

## **2. Neo-realist analysis of Russian foreign policy in Syria**

Morgenthau theorized Realism in his classic book *Politics among Nations*. Since then, Realist assumptions have significantly changed. Legro and Moravchic believe that "realism is the oldest and most important theoretical paradigm of international relations", though it is not a single theory, but a set of theories (Legro & Moravchic, 1999, pp. 5-9). All theories of realism share three basic assumptions. The first assumption is that international actors play rationally in an anarchic environment. The second assumption is that state preferences are clear and often in conflict with preferences of other states. The third assumption is related to the structure of the international system. Distribution of material capabilities between states is essential in the international political system. In realism, the control of material resources constitutes the core of international politics (Legro & Moravchic, 1999, pp.12-18).

The widespread changes in global politics during the Cold War and subsequent revolutions led to Realist thinkers to revise realist assumptions. Realists have tried to adapt themselves to reality along with changes in the field of international relations. Neo-realism accepted the basic assumptions of classical realism, but it considers the system of states as the main factor in the behavior of states (Resende-Santos, 2007).

Structural realism was first introduced by Kenneth Waltz. He believed that the distribution of power and the structure of the international system are the main determinants of the foreign policy of the states. He also be-

lieved that states determine this structure; but after shaping it they have no longer any influence on it, and in fact, it is the structure that shapes their foreign policy. Structural realists believe that:

1. Governments are the main actors of the international system.
2. There is a distinction between foreign policy and domestic politics.
3. Governments can only operate within this structure.

For Waltz, structure is an organizational concept and the outstanding feature of international politics is the lack of order and organization. The international system, like the market, is shaped by joint actions of the units that are working for their own interests, and the underlying principle of this effort is self-help. The main goal of all governments is survival, but their other goals may vary greatly. Survival is the prerequisite for any goal that governments may have (Waltz, 2010). The question behind his theory is why governments in the international system, in spite of their political and ideological differences, display the same behavior in foreign policy? In Waltz's view, the political structure consists of three principles, namely, the organizing principle, separation of functions, and distribution of capabilities.

The organizing principle of the internal societies is hierarchical and that of the international system is anarchical. In the international system, since there is a major security concern, survival is every state's most important target. In the international system, the distribution of capabilities among units determines to what extent each can provide for their security.

Basically, structural realists can be divided into two general groups: defensive realists and aggressive realists. Both groups have the following shared assumptions:

- States are the main units of the international system;
- Countries live in the world of anarchy and must stand for their own safety or self-help;
- Countries are rational units;
- Force and strength are useful factors in maintaining the interests of countries and their security.

Defensive realists, such as Waltz, believe that states have a number of goals, from survival to global domination, but their first concern is to achieve maximum security. He believes that a government's first interest and purpose is not to achieve maximum power, but to maintain its position in the system. On the other hand, aggressive realists believe since security and survival are never provided in the international system, states want to achieve maximum security by increasing their relative strength because its

benefits are higher than its cost. Some believe the military superiority of some countries (compared to others) will bring them more security.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia lost much of its influence in the Middle East, and was humiliated by the West. Putin's victory in the 2001 presidential election restored Russia's power in the international arena. In other words, with the arrival of Putin, a pragmatic discourse became dominant in Russian foreign policy. Russia's presence in the Syrian crisis can be interpreted as an attempt to maintain its security in international arena), from the perspective of neo-realism. In the neo-realist analysis of Russian foreign policy in Syria, it can be said that any change in the structure of international relations changes the behavior of governments. In the structure of international relations, the formation of new rival powers, such as China and Russia, is a challenge to the United States.

According to the theory of aggressive neorealism, whenever a state's power increases economically and militarily, it tends to make aggressive policies. According to this theory, Russia's power has increased since the election of Putin as the president, and this country is seeking to expand its interests and power in the international arena. Therefore, Russia pursues expansionist goals in line with its national interests in Syria. Considering the major changes in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation over the past two decades, as well as the country's political and security interests in Syrian, defensive realism as a dynamic theoretical framework can provide an acceptable picture of how Moscow faces the Syrian crisis.

### **3. The Syria crisis and intervention of foreign actors**

Syria faced a massive public uprising in March 2011. Initially, demonstrations were peaceful. The popular demands in Syria included the release of political prisoners, the observance of human rights, such as freedom of expression, the reform of the press law, and the abolition of the extraordinary law. But the external agents tried to turn this snowball into an avalanche in various dimensions. Therefore, the internal developments in Syria has largely been influenced by external factors.

Therefore, it can be argued that the Syrian crisis has been caused by external factors. On the one hand, the international players (Russia and China) and the regional ones (Iran, Hezbollah of Lebanon and Iraq) support Bashar al-Assad; on the other hand, United States, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Israel want to remove Bashar al-Assad from power. The conflict of power in

Syria has shaped an environment that can be called the new Cold War. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the position and policies of Russia in the Syrian crisis.

#### **4. The strategic place of Syria for Russia**

Given the strategic importance of Syria in Russian foreign policy, with the onset of the crisis, Russia maintained its economic, political and military ties with Syria, and fully supported the Syrian. Russia, as a regional and trans-regional superpower, has once again entered into a Cold War with the United States over the Syrian crisis. Russia has adopted the policy of defending Syria with its full weight in the Security Council and international, regional and military circles (Ghasemian, 2013, p. 156). Russia's motivation in this stance is multidimensional, including:

- 1 - The history of strategic alliance with Syria since the Soviet Union era;
- 2 – Special circumstances of the Middle East;

Western strategists believe Moscow (due to the region's events and changes) has found that the Middle East is now a volatile region with various problems creating explosive conditions. Hence, Russians are trying to take advantage of the turbulent conditions in the region to have a new card in negotiation with the United States (Charap & Shapiro, 2016).

American sources argue that Russian leaders are concerned with two developments. The most important concern is the growing role of Turkey in the Islamic and Arab countries that traditionally was the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. What adds to this concern is that the present rulers of Turkey are moderate members of the Islamic AK Party with close relationship with the United States, and Washington is trying to present this kind of political system as a model for other Muslim countries in the region. Furthermore, Turkey's membership in NATO, its alliance with the United States and its proximity to the European Union have made it a potential threat to Russia.

The second point is the sense of defeat vis-à-vis Washington in Moscow after the deployment of US missile shields in Russia's neighbors, including Turkey (Ghasemian, 2013, p. 157). Russians feel afraid and targeted, as the United States and its allies are trying to siege and weaken this country. The third point is that Assad's opponents have a bigger plan than dominating Syria. They have the goal of sending radical fighters and militants from the Caucasus and the Central Asian region to Syria. However, after the end of

the crisis in Syria, these forces would obviously go back to the Caucasus and the Central Asia, threatening Russian interests. This has intensified the efforts of the Russian government to maintain the Syrian regime (Ghasemian, 2013, p. 175).

The relations between Russia and Syria are affected by four factors: political, military, security and economic.

**a) Political dimension:** Under the new Russian strategy, the country is trying to preserve Syria as its last remaining stronghold in the Middle East, following the overthrow of Saddam Hossein by the United States. The collapse of the Syrian political system for Russian leaders means NATO's entry into Russians' influence zone and the weakening of the position, credibility and the international status of Russia (Mansouri, 2013, pp. 180-181). Syria is now the only channel through which Russia can influence the Middle East, and consolidate its position as a global power (Shoori, 2015). According to Ruslan Pokhof, Russia's armaments and international affairs specialist, the transformation of the regime in Syria means weakening the status of Russia in the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea's strategic zone. It is an important step towards reducing Russian power and limiting its influence to its borders. This policy has successfully been followed by the United States in the Balkans, the Central Asia and the Caucasus (Pokhof, 2012).

**b) Military dimension:** With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia lost all its military bases outside the Soviet Union, with the exception of the port of Tartus in Syria. This site has been preserved by Russia for its strategic importance. The Tartus Marine Base was supplied to the Soviet Union from the 1970s. This base is the only Russian base in the Mediterranean Sea, and Russia can have access to warm waters through this way.

If Russia loses this base, then the entire Mediterranean would be in the hands of NATO. (Adami & Akheraddin, 2013, p. 57). Fighters, submarines and merchant ships are allowed to use this port facility, under an agreement between the former Soviet Union and Syria. Therefore, the port of Tartus on the Mediterranean coast is important, and strategically and geopolitically increases Russia's power.

In general, military cooperation between Damascus and Moscow includes the sale of MiG-31 fighters, delivery of the S-300 anti-aircraft system to Syria, the deployment of Russian missile defense system SS-26 or Eskandar in Syria, the transfer of Russian Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol to establish a naval base in the Syrian Tartus port in the Mediterranean and to reinforce the Syrian defense capabilities with new and modern weapons.

It should also be noted that in 2005 Russia cancelled 70% of Syrian debt so that Damascus could re-purchase more weapons and military supplies from Russia (Adami & Akheraddin, 2013, p. 57).

**c) Security dimension:** The Middle East crisis can affect Russia's security and its interests in the region. The main reason for such a concern is that more than 20 million Muslims live in Russia, and with the decline of the Slavic-Orthodox population of Russia, this concern has been intensified. In terms of the number of its followers, Islam is the second religion in Russia. Russian wars with Chechen separatists in 1994 and 1999 radicalized a part of the Muslim population and spread Salafi Islam in the country. In the second round of Putin's presidency, Russia is trying to improve its image in Islamic societies (Kiani, 2008, pp. 376-379). Therefore, Russia has tried to prevent radicalization in its land through improving relations with Arab and Muslim countries in the Middle East.

**d) Economic dimension:** The economic factor is related to the sale of arms and energy. During several decades of relations with the former Soviet Union and Russia, Syria has become a strategic market for Russian arms sales and exports. Russia has arms deal contracts with Middle Eastern customers such as Iran, Syria, Algeria and Libya (Kiani, 2013, p. 94).

According to the International Institute for International Peace Research in Stockholm (SIPRI), the United States (31%) and Russia (27%) had the largest amount of arms exports in the world between 2010 and 2014, while no other country has been able to sell over 5%. Today there are about 600 companies and thousands of technology and weapons factories in Russia. In 2016, the Russian Roosevelt Corporation sold more than \$ 11 billion in weapons worldwide, of which \$ 4 billion was bought by Syria. Russia does not want to lose its arms market in the West.

Alongside arms deal, energy is one of the main areas of Russia's commercial activity in the Middle East. Moscow seeks to work with the countries of the region to put pressure on the European Union in this regard (Kiani, 2013, p. 94). The Middle East is the third largest natural gas supplier and the second largest supplier of oil, but in recent years (Kiani, 2013, p. 92). Although it is important for Russia to enjoy economic benefits in Syria, but the supportive approach toward the Syrian government has to be studied within the wider strategic and geopolitical considerations. Russia's struggle to consolidate its new position in the international system and its competition with Western rivals, especially the United States, are very decisive in adopting such a position (Zargar, 2013, pp. 58-59).

## **5. Russia's Policy in Support of Bashar al-Assad's Government**

### **5.1. Efforts to resolve the Syrian crisis peacefully**

Russia has, so far, vetoed three draft UN Security Council resolutions against Syria. These resolutions called for punitive measures and sanctions against the Syrian government. Russia has declared its opposition to the UN Security Council's unilateral measures against the Assad regime, and called for negotiations between the government and its opposition (Adami & Akheraddin, 2013). On the other hand, Russia has tried to prevent the intensification of pressure on the Syrian government through cooperation with Iran and Turkey (Mansouri, 2013, p. 186). Emphasizing that the Syrian crisis must be resolved by Syrians, rather than foreigners, Moscow believes that granting international legitimacy to armed opposition groups, at the expense of the Syrian government, does not help to resolve the problem in the country.

### **5.2. Military Intervention**

Targeting terrorist groups such as ISIL is Russia's main reason for entering Syria. The country intends to use and optimize a potential coalition of different countries of the region, and to gain international legitimacy as the leader of anti-terrorist activities in the world. Russia has trained more than 30,000 Syrian officers over the past years at various academies (Bahman, 2015).

### **5.3. Military Equipment**

Russia signed a contract for the sale of military equipment which had long been in place between the two countries. Sergei Lavrov, Russian foreign minister, stressed that this military equipment could only be used if Syria was attacked. There is also a \$ 0.5 billion military and arms deal with Syria, which was signed to strengthen the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The contract includes imported weapons such as MI 25 helicopters, air defense systems and a number of MiG-29 warplanes. Another case of arms deal, signed at the start of the crisis in Syria between Russia and Damascus, includes the sale of 36 JAG-130 training combat aircraft. This contract will be executed immediately after the Damascus authorities make a prepayment. According to one Russian official, Abron Sport, the total value of the contract is about



\$ 550 million. Following the European Union's decision to lift the boycott of arms transfers to the Syrian opposition and after the Israeli invasion of Syria, Russia, despite the opposition from Israel and the United States, handed over the S-300 air defense system to the Syrian government, emphasizing its strong position in defending its interests in Syria. (Adami & Akheraddin, 2013, pp. 61-64).

#### **5.4. Economic support**

Senior Syrian officials have requested economic assistance as well as the supplies for oil products from Russia (Washington Post, 2012). Russia's response included:

- dispatch of 38 tons of humanitarian aid including tents and foodstuffs to Syria;
- grant of about \$ 1.5 billion to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to provide financial assistance to Syria;
- grant about 4.5 million dollars to the UN Food and Drug Administration to help Syria;
- supply of fuel for heavy vehicles such as Syrian tanks;
- sale of Syria's oil by its own oil companies in world markets on behalf of Damascus (Adami & Akheraddin, 2013, p. 63).

Vladimir Putin in an interview with CBS and PBS said that the only way to defeat the ISIL terrorist group in Syria is to strengthen the country's government. He added: "we are looking to strengthen the regime in Syria; we help the Syrian legitimate authorities; in addition, I firmly believe that any action other than this means that by destroying the legitimate institutions of power, we will face a situation similar to that observed in some countries in the region or parts of the world (for example, Libya); where all state institutions are completely disrupted" (Babaei, 2015).

In another interview with Rashatoodi Channel, he mentioned: "today, some are seeking to employ al-Qaeda members or another terrorist network with similar views to achieve their goals in Syria; this policy is very short-sighted and could have serious consequences for its executives" (RT, 2012). Due to Syria's importance in Russian foreign policy, Russia is expected to be involved in the region more seriously. In this regard, various meetings were held between the Russian foreign minister and the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia and the United States. Also, a tripartite summit between the UAE, Saudi Arabia, the United States and Russia was also held. In addition,

contacts between the Russian foreign policy apparatus and the opponents of Bashar al-Assad have been established within the same framework. Nevertheless, Russians have not achieved the desired result so far; because all other parties emphasize the removal of Bashar al-Assad, which has not been accepted by Russians. The failure of Russia's diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis in Syria have inclined them towards military presence more than before; so that they can change the balance of power in the region to their advantage (Shuri, 2015).

### **5.5. Russia's efforts to attract countries having problems with the United States**

Russia's policy is to attract countries that have been struggling in their relationship with the West and the US, in particular. For this purpose, it is trying to win over Egypt, Turkey, Greece and even Saudi Arabia. In this regard, the Turks and Russians have committed to increase the volume of joint business cooperation from \$ 33 billion to \$ 100 billion by the end of the current decade. It is noteworthy that Turkey, after the countries of the former Soviet Union, is the second largest importer of Russian gas.

In the field of technological and spatial cooperation, the Turkish Institute for Scientific Research and Technology "Tubitak" has signed an agreement with the Russian Space Research Center and the University of Ghazan.

Kremlin's policy towards Syria has consistently been based on a three-pronged approach:

**1** - Opposition to foreign intervention in the Syrian crisis. Russians are afraid of repeating the Libyan experience; so Moscow opposes any form of interference in the internal affairs of Syria.

**2** - Opposition to any sanction, punishment and political or economic blockades against Damascus. Hence, so far, no regional and transatlantic sanctions have been accepted by Russia (Ghasemian, 2013, p. 159).

**3** - Vetoing resolutions against Syria in the UN Security Council. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the domestic opposition and Syria's external enemies have been trying to form a strong coalition (from the United States and the European Union to Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) to give the Syrian crisis an international dimension, in compliance with the Seventh Chapter of the United Nations Charter, which deals with endangering global peace. They wished to get a permit for military intervention from the UN

Security Council, but their attempts were faced with the Russian-Chinese veto and failed.

4 - Opposition to establishing sanctuary areas for the Syrian rebels. Moscow also criticized Western policy in Syria, and has warned them of interfering in Syria's internal affairs and repeating the Libyan experience (Ghasemian, 2013, p. 159).

At the same time, Russia has made serious recommendations to the Syrian government:

- Avoiding to use force and recourse to violence by all parties;
- Accelerating reforms and holding elections;
- Conducting a constructive dialogue with the opposition;
- Cooperating with the Arab League to implement the initiative of the League to take Syria out of the current crisis (Ghasemian, 2013, p. 159)

## **6. Russia's position in the Syrian crisis**

Today, Bashar al-Assad's forces have the control of much of the country in their hands. Foreign interventions, however, have made the situation in Syria more volatile. US airstrikes against ISIL and Russian military involvement in supporting government forces have made Syria more complicated. The interference of the two mentioned powers can change the scene toward to their own favor. Alongside them, a significant external player is Iran. There are other foreign stakeholders, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which do not have the ability to play a role without American support (Elkashtko, 2015). With regard to the goals of the three countries of the United States, Russia and Iran, we can mention the following:

- 1 - United States: suppression of ISIL, Assad's overthrow
- 2 - Russia: repressing ISIL, keeping Assad in power, testing new weapons, reducing international isolation of Russia, maintaining Syria's integrity, consolidating its position as a global actor
- 3 - Iran: suppressing ISIL, maintaining Syria's integrity and Assad in power, keeping its influence in Syria.

Comparing the interests of these three external stakeholders, we find some important points: first of all, the United States has the least strategic interest. The main interest of the US is a crackdown on ISIL, beyond which it does not care much about what would happen after Assad in Syria. The common interest of these three countries was the defeat of ISIL. Theoretically, defeating ISIS could be a motive for a tripartite coalition. Because of American's policy over the past seventy years, it is unlikely that the coali-

tion would ever be formed as the US is not ready to take into account the interests of the other parties. The US looks for toppling Al-Assad; while for the overthrow of a legal government through civil war is contrary to Russia's view of the international system. Such a stance creates mistrust between the United States and Russia. Iran and the United States cannot have an effective dialogue about Syria, because of their mutual distrust of each other (Elkashtko, 2015).

Therefore, it seems that at the moment, Russia and Iran's alliance is the most stable and longest coalition with regard to the Syria crisis. Although the two countries do not fully trust each other, there is an extensive scope for cooperation between them. The interests of the two countries in Syria are not the same, but they are not in conflict either. The combination of military manpower (including the Iraqi forces that armed by Iran) and the financial resources of Russia and Iran, is strong reinforcement for Assad. Russia and Iran, while cooperating with each other, may not be able to completely eliminate ISIL, but they have the ability to mitigate ISIL's influence and areas. Although Russia has strategic interests in Syria, it does not intend to maintain a permanent military presence in the Middle East.

Vladimir Putin sees Russia as a global power which is playing a role in peace talks in the region. However, Moscow has no financial and economic ability to support the Middle East countries and no soft power to convince his allies. In such a situation, Russia's strategic interests are limited. Moscow should maintain good relations with the Syrian government so that it can maintain its naval base in Tartus and remain at the top of Syrian arms suppliers.

None of the above objectives is in conflict with the interests of Iran. The alliance between Iran and Russia has led Iran to buy more weapons from Russia. At the same time, Russia must accept Iran's demand for keeping Syria in its sphere of influence. Such an alliance can turn Iran into an influential regional power. In addition to extensive control of hydrocarbon resources, this alliance will open new routes for the transfer of these resources through the axis of Iran-Iraq-Syria- Lebanon to the Mediterranean Sea.

All these factors change the strategic situation of the Middle East dramatically. Now the Syria war has entered its eighth year. In the last seven years, there have been widespread economic, political and areas of influence changes. The victories of the Syrian government on the ground pressed all opposition parties to accept the anti-terrorism clause in the first and second round of the Astana talks, and the fourth round of the Geneva peace talks.

Confrontation of the resistance axis (including Iran, Hezbollah, Iraq and Russia's support for Syrian government) against terrorist groups has strengthened Syrian political discourse. On the other hand, the enemies of the Syrian government do not have any bargaining chip except for human rights and refugees. In the last seven years, a large number of Western parliamentary delegations have travelled to Syria and met Bashar al-Assad. They reaffirmed their solidarity with Damascus against the terrorist outbreak. The remarkable point about is that many of their respective governments (including French, Turkish and Belgian delegations) have adopted a hostile stance against the Syria government.

## **7. Future Studies of the Syrian Crisis**

One of the issues that has been raised since the beginning of the Syrian crisis and has been followed by international and regional actors (in particular, by the UN Secretary-General's representatives) in Syria is ceasefire and discontinuation of violence and killing in Syria. The motivation for ceasefire in various periods has gone up and down, depending on the situation on the ground. For instance, when terrorist armed groups have an upper hand in the field, they or their foreign supporters are not inclined to request a ceasefire. But after the Munich meeting, and failure the third round of talks in Geneva, the US insisted on a ceasefire. Following the Munich meeting, a small working group was formed to work out a ceasefire mechanism with the participation of Russia and the United States, under UN monitoring. Most of ceasefire attempts have so far failed, mainly because of terrorist groups' reluctance. Terrorists consist of two groups: local groups controlled by regional and international actors and ISIL and Al-Nusra. Regarding a request for ceasefire, the first follows the commands of their foreign supporters, while the latter is out of control. Nevertheless, the United States and the United Nations have never tried to outline a clear mechanism for ceasefire. Since 2016 the Syrian army take over territories under the rebel control, first Aleppo, which was dominated by these groups for more than four years, then the ancient city of Tadmor (Palmyra) from the occupation of the ISIS terrorist group, up to now that more than %65 of the country is in the hands of the government. The Syrian Ministry of Reconstruction has worked hard, in these years, to seek reconciliation in troubled areas. As a result of the reconciliation procedure, in several areas, gunmen surrendered and handed over weapons. Perhaps the best way to resolve the Syrian crisis is to activate

regional, international and multilateral diplomacy, through which regional and international players can reach a consensual agreement

## **8. Conclusion**

Russia's position on the developments in the Arab countries following the Arab Spring has been vague. Moscow has not seen the shift in the region to the advantage of its Middle East policy, and has viewed them as undermining the stability of the region. Russians perceive such political changes to favor the interests of the United States and its allies, which could have a negative impact on Russia's interests in the Middle East. Therefore, since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Moscow has provided significant economic, political and military support to the Assad government.

One of the main reasons for Russia's presence in the Syrian crisis is the fight against terrorism. Moscow believes that in the past seven years in Syria and Iraq there has been a kind of terrorism which can be described as international terrorism. A worrying issue for Moscow is the presence of 5 to 7 thousand Russian and Central Asian and Caucasian nationals within these terrorist groups. Russians are worried that if the Syrian crisis subsides and these terrorists want to return to their countries, then Russia will face countless security threats. Moscow believes that the combination of religious extremism and ethnic separatism can ignite more conflicts within its borders as well as in the countries of Central Asian countries and the Caucasus.

Hence, Moscow prefers to destroy terrorist groups inside Syria, rather than confronting them in their own territory. The return of experienced terrorists from Syria to Russia, where millions of Muslims live, and have already witnessed Russians' misbehavior and iron fist in places such as Chechnya, Abkhazia and Ossetia, is worrying for Moscow. The Syrian crisis has had the potential to proliferate extremisms of religious and ethnic type, endanger the security of the Russian Federation, an issue that cannot be overlooked by whoever residing in the Kremlin.

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