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„Russia's Involvement in the Syrian Civil War: Analysing its
Interests, Policies, and Ramifications in Regional and Global
Affairs“

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1 Abstract

This master's thesis explores Russia's involvement in the Middle East, spanning from its imperial times to the present day, with a particular focus on its involvement in the Syrian civil war since 2011. Investigating geopolitical, economic, and strategic interests, the research delves into historical relations and post-Soviet policies, analyzing Russia's role in conflicts. The impact of the Arab Spring and Syria's internal strife is examined, emphasizing Russia's intervention to safeguard its regional influence, like protecting ports, and counter Western dominance. Military, economic, and diplomatic dimensions of Russia's involvement are analyzed, including Russia's media portrayal of its involvement in Syria. The thesis underscores the humanitarian consequences of Russia's intervention and evaluates international reactions, offering valuable insights into Russia's complex role in the Middle East and its global ramifications. This thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of Russia's involvement in Syria, laying a foundation for future research in this critical area.

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht das russische Engagement im Nahen Osten von der Zarenzeit bis zur Gegenwart, mit besonderem Augenmerk auf die Verwicklung Russlands in den seit 2011 andauernden syrischen Bürgerkrieg. Unter Berücksichtigung geopolitischer, wirtschaftlicher und strategischer Interessen werden die historischen Beziehungen und die postsowjetische Politik untersucht, um die Rolle Russlands in den Konflikten näher zu analysieren. Die Auswirkungen des Arabischen Frühlings und der internen Unruhen in Syrien werden untersucht, wobei die Intervention Russlands zur Sicherung seines regionalen Einflusses, z. B. zum Schutz der Häfen, und gegen die westliche Dominanz hervorgehoben wird. Die militärische, wirtschaftliche und diplomatische Dimensionen des russischen Vorgehens werden analysiert, einschließlich der Darstellung der russischen Einmischung in Syrien in den Medien. Die Masterarbeit unterstreicht weiters die humanitären Folgen der russischen Intervention und bewertet die internationalen Reaktionen, was wertvolle Einblicke in Russlands komplexe Rolle im Nahen Osten und den daraus folgenden globalen Auswirkungen bietet. Ziel dieser Arbeit ist es, ein umfassendes Verständnis des russischen Engagements in Syrien zu vermitteln und eine Grundlage für künftige Forschungen in diesem wichtigen Bereich zu schaffen.

2 Introduction

Since the beginning of Syria's civil war¹ in 2011 profound repercussions were to be found, not just within Syria but also across its neighboring regions and worldwide. Syria has for a long time held a special significance for Russia² when it comes to exerting regional influence and strength as a main player in Middle Eastern affairs. The increase of military presence and also development of complex international networks involved in the civil war in Syria lately have had an impact on those affairs. As Russia emerged as a key participant with geopolitical interests in shaping the outcomes of this civil war, other international actors also played crucial roles; of particular note is the involvement of the United States.³ This situation required Russia to further its geopolitical ambitions and protect more comprehensively interests across many regions simultaneously, but especially in Syria itself.⁴

This master's thesis will investigate Russia's centuries-long engagement⁵ in the Middle East, from its imperial times up until today. It will also examine Russia's unique interplay of geopolitical, economical and strategic interests that all shape its foreign policy in this part of the globe. The research will explore Russia's historical relations with the Middle East, especially the post-Soviet Union policy towards Syria⁶. Furthermore, light will be shed on

¹ The term 'Syrian conflict' will be parallel used with 'Syrian civil war' to refer to the crisis that Syria has been suffering from since 2011. Some sources, mostly from the Syrian opposition side, use the term 'Syrian Revolution', which will be completely omitted in this thesis due to its bias meaning representing a one-sided point of view. The same thing applies to terms like 'Universal Conspiracy', which has been used by *Al-Assad's* regime to describe the threats of the Western allies towards it.

² Throughout this thesis, the name "Russia" may also be used to denote the "Soviet Union" as well in order to refer to the political and international power, whose capital was Moscow, in its communist and federal forms since the fall of the Russian Empire till Russia today.

³ Pengelly, Martin. (2015). "John McCain says US is engaged in proxy war with Russia in Syria", in *The Guardian*. Last online access 30.08.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/oct/04/john-mccain-russia-us-proxy-war-syria-obama-putin>

⁴ Bartz, Luke. (2016). "Russian-Syrian Relations: Past and Present", in *The Journal of Global Affairs*. Vol. 5. Last online access 03.09.2023: https://shareok.org/bitstream/handle/11244.46/79/9%20Russian%20and%20Syria%20Mar0916_Final_Luke%20Bartz.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=yAffairs. P.2-6

⁵ The term 'Russian involvement' will be used in this thesis to indicate not only its political intervention in Syria since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, but its military intervention there later in 2015 as well. Russia was supporting the Syrian regime politically and in international forums against the Western coalition led by the United States, which called for the removal of the Syrian regime and supported the Syrian opposition forces. There are other terms, such as 'military intervention', which refer to the Russian military presence in Syria since 2015 at the invitation of the Syrian regime to confront the opposition factions and the Islamic State (ISIS), which had made military field advances at the expense of the regime. In Arabic, the term '*al-ḍinhirāt ar-Rūsī fī Sūryā*' (for: the Russian involvement in Syria) or '*at-tadaḥḥul al-ṣaskarī ar-Rūsī fī Sūryā*' (for: Russian military intervention in Syria) are used.

⁶ The impact of the Cold War on the Middle East are seen in the high degrees of polarization in the Region, with the Soviet Union aligning with authoritarian nationalist regimes like in Egypt and Syria, and USA supporting absolute monarchies in the Arab Gulf States and authoritative regimes in Pakistan, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco. (See: UKessays. (2018). *The Middle East during the Cold War*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/history/the-middle-east-during-the-cold-war.php?vref=1>)

Russia's active role in various Middle Eastern conflicts from the Arab-Israeli disputes to the Iran-Iraq wars, where its involvement played an essential part in maintaining the balance of power in the region. Analysis of Syria itself and the effects of the Arab Spring will also be explored, noting its influence in sparking internal strife and driving further social-economic challenges and extremist groups to surface, thus, further exacerbating this crisis. Russia's intervention in Syria will be closely examined to unveil its geopolitical objectives, which primarily consist of protecting their regional influence, for example protecting vital ports⁷, challenging Western dominance by being present as an responsible global actor, and emphasizing the image of Russia fighting against terrorism as well as supporting the Syrian sovereignty.⁸ Therefore, military aspects will be examined, showing Russia's crucial role in supporting Syria and changing the outcomes on the battlefield. Economically, Russia reaps benefits in future through potential reconstruction contracts, energy investments and expanded trade.⁹ Diplomacy is used by Russia as part of their foreign policy to deepen relationships and extend their influence in the Middle East.¹⁰ The diplomatic initiatives that were taken by the Russian side in the civil war in Syria will be discussed. Other strategies conducted through military, security, economic and cultural instruments used by Moscow in order to achieve its policy goals will be analyzed. A chapter of this thesis will be dedicated to the Russian media portrayal of the Syrian conflict showing its media representation at home and worldwide and how it served as a powerful way of shaping public opinion to its favor and creating the image of national pride on an international stage.¹¹

The analysis of the thesis highlights Russia's complex involvement in the Middle East and also offers valuable insights into Russia's role in the region and its global and regional ramifications. The deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Syria – prolonged by Russia's intervention in the civil war – will also be emphasized in this thesis.

⁷ Kramer, Andrew E. (2012). "Russian Warships Said to Be Going to Naval Base in Syria", in *The New York Times*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/19/world/europe/russian-warships-said-to-be-going-to-naval-base-in-syria.html>

⁸ Smagin, Nikita. (2023). "Moscow's Original "Special Operation": Why Russia Is Staying in Syria", in *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*. Last online access 30.08.2023: <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/88958>

⁹ Nouredine, Ali. (2022). "Russia's Incursion into Syria's Economy: A Multi-Purpose Monopoly", in *Fanack.com*. Last online access 30.08.2023: <https://fanack.com/economy/features-insights/russias-incursion-into-syrias-economy-a-multi-purpose-monopoly~242839/>

¹⁰ Samagin (2023)

¹¹ Christopher, Paul; Matthews, Miriam. (2016). *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

A look will also be taken into the reactions of the international community to Russia's involvement in Syria, which helps to further explore how Russia's actions in Syria were received by various nations and involved parties in the conflict there, as well as how Russia's actions affected diplomatic relationships and regional dynamics, and also to draw the lessons learned from this dimensional interference.

The effective background and context analysis on the Russian involvement in Syria should provide an in-depth knowledge of its significance, which would then lay the groundwork for subsequent analyses and findings of research projects on this subject in the future.

2.1 State of the art

Literature reviews for this thesis seek to uncover major topics, controversies and knowledge gaps by critically reviewing the range of sources available - be they academic papers, books, articles or reports, etc. Analysis of multiple sources about Russia's involvement in Syria must be done in order to gain an overview of the topic of this thesis.

Russia's involvement in Syria has caused numerous discussions to evolve leading many researchers to study it, starting with Allison's article¹², which offers insight into Russia's unwavering support of *al-Asad's* regime as well as the potential impact of the Syrian crisis on Russia's domestic politics. Luke Bartz' (2016) study¹³ provides a thorough historical overview of Russian-Syrian ties over time, providing clarity of Russia's response to the Syrian civil war as well as showing Russia's willingness to sacrifice wider Middle Eastern and Western relations to maintain their relationships with Iran and Syria. Another study from the same year by Vladislav Inozemtsev¹⁴ analyzes Russia's policy towards Syria, providing insights into Russia's quest for recognition while at the same time wanting to prevent Syria from becoming another cause of regional instability. Kozhanov's article in 2017¹⁵ emphasizes Russia's military deployment in Syria as an instrument of its diplomacy, seeking to secure its stake in the Middle East while shaping Syria's outcome. Some Russian sources will be taken into account like Dzhygalyuk's study in 2018¹⁶, which offers essential historical context for understanding the

¹² Allison, R. (2013). "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis", in *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*. Vol. 89(4). P. 795–823

¹³ Bartz, Luke (2016)

¹⁴ Inozemtsev, Vladislav. (2016). "The Rationale And Goals Of Russia's Syria Policy", in *In The Kremlin's Actions In Syria: Origins, Timing, and Prospects*. Atlantic Council. P. 19-27

¹⁵ Kozhanov, Nikolay. (2017). "Main Drivers of Russian Military deployment in Syria", in *International Studies Journal (ISJ)*. Vol. 13(4). P. 21-38

¹⁶ Dzhygalyuk, Nataliya. (2018). "Main Impacts On The Syria's Crisis", in *Міжнародні відносини, суспільні комунікації та регіональні студії*. Vol. 2(4). P. 99-107

Syrian crisis. She examines its roots by looking back over history while portraying Syria as an opposition base - geographically and politically - between key players such as France, Great Britain and Russia. Other literature sources that are either from Russian researchers or written in the Russian language will be examined as well. The same matter applies to Arabic literature sources. For instance, ʔIbrāhīm's study (2022)¹⁷ adds perspective on Russia's intervention in Syria from an international relations viewpoint, examining both their motives for their involvement as an influential international actor as well as any ramifications it might produce. The mentioned studies are only a small part of the used literature. Articles from media all around the globe, theoretical studies and official government announcements are needed in order to complete the picture of Russia's interests and their realization in Syria.

2.2 Research questions

To meet the objectives of the thesis, the examination and analysis will address several primary aspects:

1. What are Russia's primary interests driving their participation in Syria's conflict, and have these evolved throughout it?
2. How has Russia's military intervention altered the balance of powers on the ground, and has it helped restore control to *al-ʔAsad* over much of Syria?
3. Has Russia's economic involvement in Syria contributed to meeting their economic strategic objectives both inside and beyond Syria and if so, how?
4. What was Russia's policy goals towards Syria and to what extent were they fulfilled?
5. What are the implications of Russia's involvement in Syria for their relations with other regional and global powers, such as the US, Turkey and Iran?
6. How does Russia's media portray its involvement in Syria's conflict, and what effect has this had on public opinion and domestic politics in Russia?
7. What are the implications of Russia's involvement in Syria for regional and global security, and how might this influence broader geopolitics across the Middle East regions and globally?

¹⁷ ʔIbrāhīm, Maṣālī. (2022). *At-Tadahḥul ar-rūsī fī Sūryā: ad-dawāfiʿ w al-maʔālāt*. Cairo: University of Cairo.

8. What lessons can be drawn from Russia's participation in the Syrian conflict in order to gain greater insight into international relations, geopolitics, and foreign policies more broadly?

2.3 Theoretical Frameworks

There are various theoretical frameworks which could prove valuable when analyzing Russia's geopolitical interests in Syria, including the following:

Realism is an approach to international relations that stresses the role of power and self-interest as drivers of state behavior. Realists maintain that states act to maximize their security and national interests through military and economic power.¹⁸ An understanding of this framework may offer some insight on Russia's objectives in Syria and military involvement therein.

Geopolitics is the study of how geography interacts with politics and international relations; specifically, how geography shapes state behavior and international ties.¹⁹ Geopolitics may provide useful context in understanding Syria's strategic location within the Middle East region as it pertains to regional and global security concerns - not forgetting Russia's intention in expanding their influence there as well.

Critical geopolitics is an approach which emphasizes the role of power and ideology in shaping representations and contestations of territorial boundaries and identities.²⁰ Critical geopolitics could serve as a helpful framework in understanding Russia's strategic objectives in Syria as well as its overall foreign policy goals.

Constructivism is a theory of international relations which emphasizes the power of ideas and norms to influence state behavior, noting how state interests do not remain fixed but are rather socially constructed through interaction among actors in international systems.²¹ Constructivism could provide useful framework for comprehending Russia's foreign policy objectives as they evolve against domestic norms and international ideas.

¹⁸ Antunes, Sandarina; Camisão, Isabel. (2018). "Introducing Realism in International Relations Theory", in *E-International Relations*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/27/introducing-realism-in-international-relations-theory/#:~:text=Realism%20is%20a%20theory%20that,central%20authority%20above%20the%20state>

¹⁹ Pascu, Laura C. (2015). "Geopolitics – A New Framework of Analysis: Global Challenges and Perspectives", in *SEA – Practical Application of Science*. Vol. 3(1).. P. 439

²⁰ Sharp, J.P. (2009). "Critical Geopolitics", in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*. Kitchin, Rob; Thrift, Nigel [Editors]. 2009. Amsterdam-Boston: Elsevier. P. 358-362

²¹ Finnemore, Martha; Sikkink, Kathryn. (2001). "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics", in *Annual Review of Political Science*. Vol.4. P. 391-416

Securitization is a framework that emphasizes the role of discourse and language in shaping state behavior and defining security threats,²² which can provide insight into Russia's involvement in Syria as an issue of national security and thus driving its military and economic intervention there. This understanding could assist with better comprehending of the Russian involvement.

Dependency theory provides an approach that stresses the role of economic relationships between developed and developing nations in perpetuating inequality and underdevelopment worldwide.²³ This framework could prove invaluable in comprehending Russia's economic interests in Syria as well as their effects on both conflict resolution and wider regional issues.

International law provides a framework that emphasizes the role of legal norms and rules in shaping state behavior and regulating interstate relationships,²⁴ making this context useful in comprehending Russia's military intervention in Syria as well as any implications it might have on international law and norms.

Neoliberalism is an economic policy theory that emphasizes market forces and free trade as key contributors to economic development and growth.²⁵ Neoliberalism could prove helpful when understanding Russia's interests in the Middle East region as it pursues liberalization policies there.

Overall, the studying of other theoretical frameworks could provide with a deeper overview on the Russian involvement in Syria, yet the above-mentioned theoretical frameworks are more concentrated on the main arguments and points of this thesis, and could offer an enhanced perspective on the complex dynamics underlying Syria's conflict and Russia's involvement. Furthermore, they might help uncover any underlying drivers causing Russia's actions in Syria.

²² Eroukmanoff, Clara. (2018). "Securitisation Theory: An Introduction", in *E-International Relations*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/01/14/secritisation-theory-an-introduction/#:~:text=According%20to%20secritisation%20theory%2C%20political,the%20issue%20'beyond%20politics'>

²³ Ahiakpor, James C. W. (1985). "The Success and Failure of Dependency Theory: The Experience of Ghana", in *International Organization*. Vol.39 (3). P. 535-552

²⁴ Kapferer, Sibylle. (2002). "Ends and Means in Politics: International Law as Framework for Political Decision-making", in *Revue québécoise de droit international*. Vol. 15(1). P. 101-103

²⁵ Callison, W. (2021). "The political theory of neoliberalism", in *Contemp Polit Theory*. Vol. 20 (Suppl 1). P. 36–40.

2.4 Methodology

Methodical procedures will be utilized for the investigation of the thesis, following guidelines established for conducting rigorous international relations and geopolitic research studies.

To achieve the objectives of this thesis, the study will draw upon sources that include academic literature, policy documents, media reports and theoretical frameworks that combine realist and constructivist approaches to international relations. Furthermore, most of this analysis will rely on academic and policy literature as well as articles and online resources rather than conducting original interviews and fieldwork.

Several academic databases, such as Google Scholar²⁶, JSTOR²⁷ and ProQuest²⁸ as well as specialist journals on international relations, geopolitics and Middle Eastern studies will be employed. To guarantee retrieving articles most pertinent to the search, a combination of search terms and keywords will also be employed in retrieval attempts. Some key terms include "Russia," "geopolitical interests," "Syria," "regional security" and "global security".

Boolean operators such as "AND" and "OR,"²⁹ will be utilized to efficiently combine multiple search terms together. To capture as wide of an array of sources as possible, various forms of keywords (synonyms or alternate spellings etc.) will be considered while also performing citation searching and reference list examinations to uncover any additional pertinent studies the initial search may have missed out on.

The search strategy is intended to be comprehensive, while taking into account multiple information sources and points of view. In doing this, it is crucial to aim at eliminating bias, while producing objective analysis. The overarching goal of this search strategy is to collect an array of high-quality sources that provide a holistic picture of Russia's geopolitical interests in Syria. By employing multiple databases, search terms, and inclusion criteria this strategy will ensure pertinent and up-to-date research is included to support the analyses and findings of this study.

²⁶ Google Scholar is a web search engine that is freely accessible. It indexes the full texts or metadatas of scholarly literature in a range of publication formats and disciplines. (<https://scholar.google.com/>)

²⁷ JSTOR is a digital library. It contained originally digitized back issues of academic journals, but nowadays it encompasses also books and other primary sources. (<https://www.jstor.org/>)

²⁸ ProQuest is a global information-content and technology company. (<https://www.proquest.com/>)

²⁹ Boolean logic is a system of logic designed to yield optimal search results. The Boolean operators help to construct a logical search. The main two operators that have been used in this thesis were AND and OR. (<https://libguides.umn.edu/BooleanOperators>)

2.4.1 Inclusion Criteria

These are the criteria used to include articles in this review: (1) Relevance to Russian geopolitical interests and policy in Syria and their impact on regional and global security; (2) Original research and its accessibility. Empirical studies, policy reports or academic analyses will be considered. (3) Publication dates up till 2010 or later will be required most of the time so as to include up-to-date and pertinent research. (4) The focus on the language of the original publication will be primarily on these three languages: English, Arabic and Russian. The articles used may portray a biased viewpoint of some states. Eventhough this is acknowledged by the author, these articles are still included in this thesis, because propaganda is also an important part of the media landscape.

2.4.2 Limitations

While this study employed rigorous methods, two significant drawbacks must be acknowledged despite its meticulous approach. Selection bias could have occurred, even though it is aimed to be avoided by all means, because this search technique mostly employed electronic databases and search engines. Due to a difficult accessibility for Europaens, different Russian-language sources were likely overlooked even with numerous databases being checked; as a result, this may have limited the inclusion of diverse perspectives and reduced the comprehensiveness of results. Future studies may employ alternative means of collecting different Russian publications such as reviewing regional databases or speaking to specialists familiar with this subject matter.

Another shortcoming lies within the reliance on published empirical studies, policy papers, and academic assessments, which only offer partial coverage of the available information. By relying only on these sources, this study could miss first-person reports, interviews, unpublished material written in Russian, etc. This would add greater diversity of viewpoints explored, providing a deeper understanding about Russia's geopolitical goals in Syria while bettering the grasp of regional and global security as a result of the Russian involvement in Syria. Ideally future research must take these new sources into consideration to achieve a comprehensive understanding.

3 Historical Context of the Syrian Conflict and the Russian Involvement in Middle East Conflicts

As mentioned previously, to explain Russian interest in the Middle East its geopolitical, economic and security motivations must be analyzed. Going back in time to the Russian Empire³⁰, Russia's expansionist ambitions in the region were clear, as it sought, at the height of its power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to strengthen its influence in the south, reaching as far as the Black Sea and the Mediterranean by means of maritime trade routes between the warm water ports there. This endeavor was in the interest of Russian expansionism in this region; nevertheless, these moves led to direct conflicts with the Ottoman Empire³¹ and other regional powers like Persia, which had consequences on the mutual relations between these powers as a whole.³²

Russia also clashed with Persia³³, participating in several wars against it with the aim of expanding into the Caucasus and Caspian Sea regions and also in order to control regions such as Azerbaijan and parts of present-day northern Iran.³⁴

Later, out of Russia's eternal desire to control Constantinople (now Istanbul) and the Bosphorus Strait in order to provide greater access to the Mediterranean, the Russian Empire allied itself with France and Britain during World War I against the Central Powers one of which was the Ottoman Empire to advance its expansionist interests in the Middle East.³⁵

According to Dmitry Trenin, the Middle East region continued to play a pivotal role in Russia's expansionist interests, as after the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the founding of the Soviet Union, Soviet Russia sought to form strong relations with the countries of the Middle East, most of which were formed and became independent after World War II, such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The Soviet Union was providing economic and military aid in this troubled region to gain influence there. Moreover, the Middle East played a fundamental role in shaping the ideologies between the United States and the Soviet Union in the era of the Cold War, as USSR

³⁰ also known as Imperial Russia, was the final period of the Russian monarchy from its proclamation in 1721, until its dissolution in 1917.

³¹ Russo-Turkish wars or Russo-Ottoman wars were a series of twelve wars fought between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire between the 16th and 20th centuries. It was one of the longest series of military conflicts in European history. (See: Dowling T. C. (2014). *Russia at War: From the Mongol Conquest to Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Beyond*. ABC-CLIO.)

³² Dowling T. C. (2014)

³³ The Russo-Persian Wars or Russo-Iranian Wars were a series of conflicts between 1651 and 1828. The most important belligerents of the Persian part were the Safavid and the Qajar empires.

³⁴ Multiple Authors. (1990). "Caucasus and Iran", in *Encyclopædia Iranica*. Vol. 5(1). P. 84

³⁵ Torkunov, Anatoly V.; Martyn, Boris F.; Wohlforth, William C. (2020). *History of International Relations and Russian Foreign Policy in the 20th Century*. Vol.1. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars. P.65.

supported Arab socialist and nationalist regimes, such as those led by *Ġamāl ʿAbd an-Nāṣir* in Egypt, and *al-Baʿṯ* Party³⁶ in Syria and Iraq, with the aim of gaining more ideological control over the region in order to get a better position in confronting the U.S.³⁷

Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation maintained its interests and influence in the Middle East, but with diminishing returns, as Russia especially since Vladimir Putin assumed the position of the Russian presidency tried to assert its presence within this region by becoming more involved in conflicts such as the civil war in Syria, making this part of its foreign policy objectives.³⁸

Historically, expanding geopolitical influence, access to warm water ports, territorial expansion, and countering the influence of rival powers in the Middle East have been central priorities of Russia in the region. These elements still form an integral part of today's Russian intervention in the Middle East.

3.1 Russia-Syria Relations prior to the Civil War

Russian-Syrian relations, whose roots go back to the Cold War era, had even before the civil war in Syria been long based on a broad strategic relationship. During the Cold War, Syria served as one of Russia's key allies, receiving military and economic aid from Moscow, which helped further cementing relations between the two sides. In addition to this, Syria was an outlet for Russia to extend its influence in the rest of the Middle East, making Syria a primary client state for Russia throughout this period. Russia in return supplied Syria with advanced weapons as aid, allowing *Dimašq* to modernize its military forces.³⁹

Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union and as a result the decline of Russia's influence in the Middle East, Russian-Syrian relations witnessed a period of change, even though their strategic partnership remained intact. Moscow provided military and economic aid to *Dimašq*, for example forgiving Syria of \$9.6 billion in debt, driven by motives to maintain a foothold

³⁶ The Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party (*Ḥizb al-Baʿṯ*) is a political party that was founded in Syria by *Miṣṣāl ʿAḥḥad*, *Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Bīṭār*, and associates of *Zakī al-ʿArsūzī*. The party's ideology consists of a mix of Arab nationalist, pan-Arab, Arab socialist, and anti-imperialist interests, which all espoused Ba'athism (from Arabic '*Baʿṯ*' meaning 'resurrection'. See: Agwani, Mohammed Shafi. (1961). "The Ba'ath: A Study in Contemporary Arab Politics", in *International Studies*. Vol.3(1). P. 6–24).

³⁷ Trenin, Dmitri. (2016). "Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers", in *Task Force On U.S. Policy toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia*. Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs P.2-4.

³⁸ "Vladimir Putin: The rebuilding of 'Soviet' Russia", in BBC News. (2014). Last online access 28.05.2023: <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26769481>

³⁹ Kreutz (2007). P. 2-4

within the region to counter Western influence there.⁴⁰ In addition, it played an active role in helping Syria modernize its economy by providing a helping hand in the investment and technical aspect, and assisting in the development of infrastructure as well as in the process of extracting natural resources within Syria's borders.

In an attempt to counter Western power while strengthening the Russian economy and strategic position, in 2000 Russia and Syria signed several economic and military agreements between themselves such as arms sales as well as cooperation agreements in the oil and gas sector.⁴¹ One of the notable agreements was the sale of advanced Russian weapons to Syria, which also included combat aircraft and anti-aircraft missile systems in order to increase Syria's defense capabilities and strengthen military relations with it.⁴² As for the oil and gas sector, the agreements concluded were aimed at enhancing cooperation in the fields of oil and gas exploration, production and trade. These agreements also included the presence of Russian companies to provide technical expertise and equipment or invest directly in the energy sector in Syria.⁴³

In light of tense relations with Western countries over issues such as NATO expansion, missile defense, human rights concerns, etc., Russia saw the relationship with Syria as one of the key elements for maintaining and increasing its influence in the region in response to what it saw as aggressive Western policies, making consolidating relations with Syria more important for Russia than before.⁴⁴

Following the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, as Russia initially maintained its support for the regime of *Baššār al-ʿAsad*, it quickly found itself involved in a complex web of alliances between regional and global powers in the Middle East, leading to a profound shift in Syrian-Russian relations. Over time, these conflicts spiraled out of control and turned into a proxy war between various international players and regional factions.⁴⁵ One of the most

⁴⁰ „А.Кудрин: Россия простила Сирии \$9,6 млрд долгов“, in *РБК – РосБизнесКонсалтинг*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/25/01/2005/5703ba5b9a7947afa08c75be>

⁴¹ Meyer, Henry. (2012). “Putin Pins Hope on Syria Cease-Fire to Combat U.S. Supremacy”, in *Bloomberg*. Last online access 31.08.2023: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2012-04-20/putin-pins-hope-on-syria-cease-fire-to-combat-u-s-supremacy-1-?in_source=embedded-checkout-banner

⁴² Sharp, Jeremy M. (2010). *Syria: Background and U.S. Relations*. CRS Report for Congress, Washington, DC

⁴³ Amos (2011)

⁴⁴ Weir, Fred. (2012). “Why Russia is willing to sell arms to Syria”, in *The Christian Science Monitor*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2012/0119/Why-Russia-is-willing-to-sell-arms-to-Syria>

⁴⁵ Weir, Fred (2015). “Why isn't Russia singling out ISIS in Syria? Because it never said it would”, in *The Christian Science Monitor*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2015/1014/Why-isn-t-Russia-singling-out-ISIS-in-Syria-Because-it-never-said-it-would>

important developments in the Syrian civil war was Russia's military and economic intervention within the region to establish itself as a major player both locally and in relation to international conflicts outside its own borders.

Overall, Russia and Syria have enjoyed a lasting partnership founded on shared strategic interests and mutual support. These relations were long-term and continued even after the fall of the Soviet Union, as Russian support for Syria remained one of the main pillars of its policy in the Middle East.

3.2 Pre-war Political and Economic Situation in Syria

Syria was going through difficult political and economic conditions that contributed greatly to the intensification of the conflict later in the civil war that broke out in the country in 2011. According to Dzhygalyuk (2018), *al-ʿAsad* family came to power in Syria in the early 1970s, when a one-party government run by the socialist *al-Baʿth* Party was established. Economically and politically, Syria went through many different stages during the rule *Hāfiẓ al-ʿAsad*. Although Syria achieved some economic success during its growth period in the nineties, there were many challenges awaiting it later during the first decade of the twenty-first century, especially after the death of *al-ʿAsad*; the father, when his son *Baššār al-ʿAsad* unexpectedly took over the reins of power in 2000.⁴⁶ The most prominent of these economic challenges were high unemployment rates, widespread corruption, and high levels of poverty.⁴⁷ Economic disparities had since increased thanks to the privatization of state-owned companies and the creation of an elite class of wealthy, politically connected businessmen, which has made a large number of Syrians frustrated because their government has not solved their economic problems, but rather was complicit in making them worse.⁴⁸

In Syria's economic history since its independence, although it achieved some economic progress, Syria continued to suffer from major social and economic disparities, as unemployment levels among youth rose over time and rural areas suffered from poverty on a

⁴⁶ In 1988, *Baššār* graduated from medical school and began working as an army doctor. He had few political aspirations, and his father had been preparing *Baššār*'s older brother *Bāsil* as the future president. However, he died in a car accident in 1994, which paved the way *Baššār*'s future presidency. (See also: Wedeen, Lisa. (2015). *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: US: University of Chicago Press. P. 28, 39, 60–61)

⁴⁷ Dzhygalyuk, Nataliya. (2018). "Main Impacts On The Syria's Crisis", in *Міжнародні відносини, суспільні комунікації та регіональні студії*. Vol. 2(4). P. 99-107

⁴⁸ International Crisis Group. (2011). *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*. Middle East/North Africa Report N°108. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/popular-protest-north-africa-and-middle-east-vi-syrian-people-s-slow-motion-revolution>

large scale. Moreover, its economy has become heavily dependent on public spending with crony capitalism providing benefits only to selected elites close to its ruling regime.⁴⁹ With its main sectors controlled by the government, Syria's economy has generally relied on oil and gas production,⁵⁰ textiles, food processing⁵¹ and banking activities.⁵² A notable feature of this economy is that there were often shortcomings or lack of direct private sector development, due to the dominance of the state public sector over economic activities in Syria, which led to economic stagnation for years after the declaration of independence in 1946.

Politically Syria was a complex landscape before the civil war. Despite the optimism of the Syrian people regarding *Baššār al-ʿAsad* that he had studied in London and learned about democratic systems, and so he would lead the nation on a path to political and cultural openness, in contrast to the oppression and political persecution that the country experienced during his father's time - the situation became contrary to expectations, while *al-Baʿṯ* Party had the upper hand, as all forms of opposition were severely suppressed, and political pluralism and freedom were restricted under an authoritarian regime characterized by state control over the media and civil society.⁵³

To examine political developments in Syria, one must look at the segments of society there. Syria is an ethnic and religious mosaic spanning multiple populations and groups, where Arabs make up most of the population. Other ethnic groups like Kurds are one of Syria's main minorities, besides the Turkmans and Armenians. Religiously, Sunnis Muslims make up most of Syria's religious population while there exist large Alawite, Christian, and Druze communities as well.⁵⁴ Syria's ethnic and religious diversity has seen tensions between the different groups as its majority did not share one common ideology and simultaneously had a hard time accepting each others' existence and interests. Sunnis Muslims, Christians, and Kurds all battled each other, while Alawite people tried to keep control, especially later after 2011.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ International Crisis Group (2011)

⁵⁰ International Monetary Fund. (2010). *Syrian Arab Republic: 2009 Article IV Consultation -Staff Report; and Public Information Notice*. Washington: International Monetary Fund. P. 17. Last online access 27.08.2023: <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2010/cr1086.pdf>

⁵¹ CIA. "Syria", in *The World Factbook*. Last online access 27.08.2023: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/syria/>

⁵² U.S. Department of State. (2011). *Syria Sanctions*. Last online access 16.09.2023: <https://www.state.gov/syria-sanctions/>

⁵³ Lucas, Scott. (2021). "How Assad Regime Tightened Syria's One-Party Rule", in *EA WorldView*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://eaworldview.com/2021/02/how-assad-regime-tightened-syrias-one-party-rule/>

⁵⁴ Shoup, John A. (2018). *The History of Syria*. The Greenwood Histories of the Modern Nations. Santa Barbara-Denver: Greenwood. P. 6

⁵⁵ "Syria's civil war explained from the beginning", in *Al Jazeera*. (2017). Last online access 27.08.2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/14/syrias-war-explained-from-the-beginning>

Before the outbreak of civil war in Syria, attempts were made by the government at political reform. President *Baššār al-ʿAsad* initially promised some cosmetic changes that failed to address any of the deep-seated grievances within society. *Al-ʿAsad* allowed a brief period of relative media freedom that led to private newspapers being established and some openly published criticism directed toward government policies.⁵⁶ However, this period soon ended as government control over media outlets increased once again, suppressing independent reporting and criticism.⁵⁷

In 2011, the government introduced legislation providing for local council elections⁵⁸ and decentralizing administrative powers,⁵⁹ while at the same time these decentralization reforms were criticized by the opposition as insufficient to meet greater demands of political participation and accountability.⁶⁰

Baššār al-ʿAsad announced in April 2011 the lifting of the decades-long state of emergency law⁶¹, which had granted authorities extensive powers of surveillance and detention. However, many critics contended that such practices remained through other channels and lifting of emergency did little to address wider political or human rights concerns.

In 2011, a law was passed enabling political parties other than *al-Baʿṯ* Party to form and operate,⁶² which was in theory increasing pluralism, but actually placed more restrictions upon these new political entities, which severely limited their abilities to challenge or oppose the regime.

⁵⁶ “Speech of H.E. President Bashar al-Assad at Damascus University on the situation in Syria”, in *SANA - Syrian Arab News Agency*. (2011). Last online access 27.08.2023: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120525170047/http://sana.sy/eng/337/2011/06/21/pr-353686.htm>

⁵⁷ Entous, Adam; Nissenbaum, Dion. (2014). “10,000 Bodies: Inside Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's Crackdown”, in *The Wall Street Journal*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/10-000-bodies-inside-syrian-president-bashar-al-assads-crackdown-1406315472>

⁵⁸ “Constitution of the Syrian Arab Republic Approved in Popular Referendum”, in *SANA - Syrian News Agency*. (2012). Last online access 27.08.2023: <https://web.archive.org/web/20121014034300/http://sana.sy/eng/370/2012/02/28/401178.htm>

⁵⁹ “Presidential Decree on Syria's New Constitution”, in *SANA - Syrian Arab News Agency*. (2012). Last online access 27.08.2023: <https://web.archive.org/web/20120229225906/http://sana.sy/eng/21/2012/02/28/403103.htm>

⁶⁰ Oweis, Khaled Yacoub. (2007). “Embrace Democracy, Syria's top dissident urges Assad”, in *Reuters*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-dissident-idUSOWE64559820070516>

⁶¹ “Syria protests: Bashar al-Assad lifts emergency law”, in *BBC News*. (2011). Last online access 27.08.2023: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13161329>

⁶² Ali, Nour. (2011). “Syria Passes Law to Allow Rival Parties”, in *The Guardian*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/25/syria-allows-rival-parties>

In May 2012, elections to parliament were conducted, but were widely seen as neither free nor fair. Many opposition groups boycotted them, and outcomes seemed preordained by the government.⁶³

Corruption was pervasive throughout Syria, reaching from government institutions all the way through society. Patronage networks existed at all levels to maintain loyalty from key supporters, while also simultaneously encouraging nepotism within state institutions.⁶⁴ Even under a regime that sought to suppress dissidence, signs of social and political unrest surfaced prior to the civil war. Protests eventually broke out over socio-economic grievances and political repression as well as demands for greater freedom and democratic rights.

As far as Syrian foreign policy is concerned, it was marked by an intricate balance among regional and international actors. Syria maintained close ties to both Iran⁶⁵ and Russia⁶⁶, and a complex relationship with Turkey⁶⁷ and Lebanon⁶⁸ as neighbors. However, its relationships were still tenuous with Israel over *Ġawlān* Heights issues.⁶⁹

Overall, Syria's prewar political and economic environment was marked by authoritarianism, socio-economic challenges and simmering political discontent. The start of civil war in 2011 resulted from a combination of these factors as well as regional and global geopolitical dynamics, which precipitated a protracted and devastating conflict.

3.3 Russia's Role in the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Russia has always sought to establish stronger relations with the major regional players, and since its activity in Syria and the Middle East is in indirect confrontation with the United States and its allies, it considers it necessary to assert itself as a major power in the region through

⁶³ "Syria Braces to Announce Election Results as UN Warns of Civil War", in *Xinhua*. (2012). Last online access 28.08.2023: https://web.archive.org/web/20120514063005/http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2012-05/09/c_123097392.htm

⁶⁴ Gersh, Nick. (2017). "The Role of Corruption in the Syrian Civil War", in *GAB: The Global Anticorruption Blog*. Last online access 29.08.2023: <https://globalanticorruptionblog.com/2017/02/06/the-role-of-corruption-in-the-syrian-civil-war/>

⁶⁵ Bakri, Nada. (2011). "Iran Calls on Syria to Recognize Citizens' Demands", in *The New York Times*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/28/world/middleeast/28syria.html>

⁶⁶ Bartz (2016). P. 2-6

⁶⁷ Balci, Bayram. (2012). "Turkey's Relations with the Syrian Opposition", in *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2012/04/13/turkey-s-relations-with-syrian-opposition-pub-47841>

⁶⁸ "New Lebanese Prime Minister Visits Syria to Improve Relations", in *VOA News*. (2009). Last online access 29.08.2023: <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2005-07-31-voa20-66389732/548260.html>

⁶⁹ Kolko, Gabriel. (2007). "Speaking Freely: US force-marches Israel over Syria", in *Asia Times Online*. Last online access 31.08.2023: https://web.archive.org/web/20070213200012/http://atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/IB13Ak05.html

direct communication with those US-allies, most notably Israel.⁷⁰ Considering that Israel is an important ally of America, Putin sought to develop Russian-Israeli relations, especially since Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has historically stood close to America. Vladimir Putin and Netanyahu have held numerous meetings and phone calls to discuss regional issues and developments, allowing both leaders a way to directly discuss matters important to them, such as Middle East security, as Russia and Israel have begun to cooperate closely on security matters related to Syria. As events developed and the two countries became militarily involved in this conflict zone, communication was crucial to avoid unintended collisions or clashes, and to coordinate actions accordingly, thus, enabling their forces to work together without creating tensions between them.⁷¹ But despite this, Russian intervention in Syria did not prevent it from complicating its relations with Israel, because Israel views *al-Baʿth*'s rule as an existential threat to its sovereignty, therefore, launching air strikes targeting Iranian targets (supportive of *al-Baʿth* regime and threatening Israel) with implicit Russian support. Despite the complexities in alliances, Russia continues to maintain relations with Israel because of their mutual geopolitical goals in the Middle East.⁷²

Joseph Mann (2007)⁷³ points out the importance of the involvement of Syria and *al-Baʿth* Party in the Arab-Israeli conflict for their role as drivers of instability and violence throughout the region, as Syria has been one of the main participants since 1963 when the *al-Baʿth* Party first came to power and has supported various Palestinian factions against the Israeli authorities.

This Arab-Israeli conflict played a fundamental role in Syria's relationship with Russia, as this clash provided Russia with room to exert influence to gain advantages against other regional actors, including Israel, by supporting Syria as a means of applying pressure against them. Russia has also tried to present itself as a mediator between the Israelis and Arabs to resolve

⁷⁰ Katz, Mark N. (2018). "Russia and Israel: An Improbable Friendship, Russia's Return to the Middle East", in *Russia's Return to the Middle East*. Popescu, Nicu; Secieru, Stanislav [Editors]. Paris: Chaillot Papers. P.103

⁷¹ Keinon, Herb. (2018). "Analysis: The Message in the Netanyahu-Putin meeting", in *The Jerusalem Post*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/analysis-the-message-in-the-netanyahu-putin-meeting-562248>

⁷² Al-Khalidi, Suleiman. (2015). "Israeli Strikes Hit Iranian Targets Near Russia's Mediterranean Bases", in *Reuters*. Last online access 29.08.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrian-state-media-says-israel-targets-coastal-province-tartous-2022-08-14/>

⁷³ Mann, Joseph. (2007). "The Conflict with Israel According to Neo-Ba'ath Doctrine", in *Israel Affairs*. Vol. 13(1). P. 116-130

crises between them, as an attempt to demonstrate its ability as a global power to mediate peace negotiations.⁷⁴

Russia's role in the Arab-Israeli conflict can be explained by its strategic goals in the region, where it has developed relations with the main actors in this conflict, including Israel and Syria. The dynamics on the field during the Syrian civil war led to the formation of a network of tension as well as cooperation in relations between Russia and Israel, as Russia tried to use these relations as its winning cards in the face of American influence in international relations, especially among its allies in the Middle East.

3.4 Russia's Involvement in the Iran-Iraq War

Russia played an instrumental role in the Iran-Iraq War from 1980-1988. In the beginning, the Soviet support went more towards Iraq;⁷⁵ later however, it began shifting more towards Iran⁷⁶ as Russia attempted to maintain influence and prevent either side from winning decisively and taking over regional leadership. The Soviet Union's decision to provide military aid to both Iran and Iraq was driven primarily by their desire to maintain their influence in the Middle East.⁷⁷ This was seen as being essential in maintaining their strategic interests as they struggled against an increasing US influence over time.

Moscow considered Iraq an integral ally within this geopolitical sphere and sought to preserve these relationships by providing military equipment, technical and financial aid. They also provided tanks, artillery systems, fighter jets, helicopters and naval vessels as well as sending military advisors, who assisted Iraq with operations and training its armed forces.⁷⁸

However, as the war went on, in order to maintain balance of power in the region and counteract US influence in the Middle East, Soviet Russia began shifting its support towards Iran. While maintaining long-standing relations with Iraq was important, maintaining good ties with Iran as an influential regional power also played a part. During the Iran-Iraq war, Russia provided Iran some limited military aid mainly consisting of spare parts for Iranian tanks and aircrafts

⁷⁴ Lazaroff, Tovah. (2016). "Putin to Netanyahu: Israel, Russia 'Unconditional Allies' in War Against Terror", in *The Jerusalem Post*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/politics-and-diplomacy/putin-to-netanyahu-were-unconditional-allies-in-the-war-against-terror-456193>

⁷⁵ Sajjadpour, Kazem. (1997) "Neutral Statements, Committed Practice: The USSR and the War", in: *Iranian Perspectives on the Iran-Iraq War*. Rajaei, Farhang [Editor]. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. P. 29

⁷⁶ Sajjadpour (1997). P. 32

⁷⁷ Mesbahi, Mohiaddin. (1993). "The USSR and the Iran-Iraq War: From Brezhnev to Gorbachev", in: *The Iran-Iraq War: The Politics of Aggression*. Rajaei, Farhang [Editor]. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. P.74-78

⁷⁸ Schmidt, Rachel. (1991). *Global Arms Exports to Iraq, 1960-1990*. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation. P.11-27

produced by Soviet factories. Moscow also supported Iran with military hardware, technical and financial aid.⁷⁹ However, it should be borne in mind that Soviet aid to Iran was substantially smaller compared to Iraq. Rather than fully align with either side in the conflict, the Soviets sought to maintain diplomatic ties with both nations as an attempt to maintain peaceful relations.

The Soviet Union's involvement in the Iran-Iraq War had far-reaching ramifications for the regional stability as a whole. Notably, its influence had an important bearing on power dynamics across Middle Eastern states and also had dire repercussions for the Syrian *al-Baʿṯ* party.

In the initial stages of the war, Syria and Iraq were closely aligned due to shared ideologies and desires to maintain balance within their regions. Over time however, Syria shifted towards supporting Iran due to their rising influence in their area.⁸⁰ Changing support had severe ramifications for Syria's *al-Baʿṯ* party. Tensions within the party escalated further leading to its ultimate split with Iraqi branch of *al-Baʿṯ*, which caused increased political unrest across Syria and the Middle East as a whole.⁸¹

Overall, Russia played an influential role in the Iran-Iraq War by providing military aid to both sides in an effort to maintain balance of power between them. Their military assistance had profound consequences on *al-Baʿṯ* party in Syria as it led to increased tension with its Iraqi counterpart due to the Syrian tendencies to improve their relations with Iran, which led to the split of the party into the Syrian and Iraqi branches.

4 The Syrian Civil War

The causes of the Syrian Civil War are complex and multidimensional, stemming from political, social, economic, and regional considerations. It began with a wave of protests inspired by Arab Spring movement protesters calling for political reforms and more freedom within Syria in

⁷⁹ CIA. (1980). *Special National Intelligence Estimate: Soviet Interests, Policies, and Prospects with Respect to the Iran–Iraq War*. SNIE 11-34/36.2-80

⁸⁰ Goodarzi, Jubin. (2010) “Iran and Syria”, in *The Iran Primer* published by U.S. Institute of Peace. Last online access 31.08.2023: <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-syria>

⁸¹ Ma'oz, Moshe. (1995). *Syria and Israel: From War to Peacemaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. P. 153

March 2011,⁸² invoking President *Baššār al-ʿAsad* to violently suppress these demonstrations by crackdowns that sparked widespread unrest leading to all out war in the same year.⁸³

The causes of Syria's civil conflict can be examined from multiple viewpoints, from domestic dynamics within Syria itself and regional factors. Within Syria itself, one major factor was the authoritarianism and repressiveness of *al-ʿAsad* regime since 1970; lack of political freedom, corruption and economic disparities along with marginalizing certain segments of society all created deep grievances among Syrian citizens.⁸⁴ Initial calls for reform or greater political participation were met with violence that further inflamed criticisms, which ultimately lead to militarized resistance groups emerging against the ruling authorities.⁸⁵

Moreover, Syria is an ethnic and religious melting pot, home to diverse ethnic groups and religions. Under President *Baššār al-ʿAsad*'s Alawite rule over Sunnis majority population,⁸⁶ conflict escalated along sectarian lines as some factions sought a Sunni-dominated government, while others supported Alawite leadership.

Conflict in neighboring Iraq, particularly with regards to ISIS's⁸⁷ rise, also had significant repercussions in Syria.⁸⁸ Iraq was left vulnerable and powerless following U.S. invasion in 2003, creating the conditions needed for ISIS extremist groups to establish themselves there. They spread across Syria, which further complicated and prolonged the conflict in both countries. This phenomenon had profound ramifications both domestically and across international boundaries, contributing significantly to the complexity and lengthiness of the situation in Syria being an ongoing war zone. As ISIS expanded in Iraq, they took advantage of its porous border between Iraq and Syria. After declaring their self-proclaimed caliphate

⁸² Oweis, Khaled Y. (2011). "Fear barrier crumbles in Syrian 'kingdom of silence'", in *Reuters*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-fear-idUSTRE72L3ME20110322>

⁸³ Katerji, Oz. (2021). "Damascus's False Reconciliation Failed in Daraa", in *Foreign Policy Magazine*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/11/syria-assad-false-reconciliation-failed-daraa/>

⁸⁴ Sadowski, Yahya. (1987). Patronage and the Ba'th: Corruption and Control in Contemporary Syria. *Arab Studies Quarterly*. Vol.9(4). P. 442–461

⁸⁵ Mouterde, Perrine. (2011). "'Free Syrian Army' poses growing threat to Assad", in *France24*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.france24.com/en/20111014-free-syria-army-opposition-bashar-al-assad-exile-turkey-batallion>

⁸⁶ Gersh (2017)

⁸⁷ The Islamic State (IS), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), is a transnational militant Islamist terrorist group and former unrecognized quasi-state (self-proclaimed caliphate) that follows the Salafi jihadist branch of Sunni Islam. (See: Cockburn, Patrick. (2016). "End Times for the Caliphate?", in *London Review of Books*. Vol. 38(5). P. 29–30)

⁸⁸ The Wallstreet Journal. (2016). "Iraqi militia fighters pour into Syria to support Assad", in *Fox News*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.foxnews.com/world/iraqi-militia-fighters-pour-into-syria-to-support-assad>

spanning through both countries in 2014, ISIS made use of this to move fighters⁸⁹, weapons⁹⁰, and resources⁹¹ between both conflict zones freely - further blurring any distinctions between the two countries and making countering its activities much harder than anticipated.⁹²

Syria was also besieged with complex socio-economic difficulties, including high unemployment rates, poverty levels and corruption; issues compounded by limited opportunities available for the youth of the country leading to widespread frustration and unrest within its borders.⁹³

Prior to the onset of its civil war, Syria furthermore suffered through an intense drought between 2006 and 2011, which resulted in agricultural failure and forced many people out of rural areas into urban centers, where this forced migration added additional stress on the already struggling urban centers.⁹⁴

Attempts at finding peaceful resolutions at the beginning of the conflict - including Arab League peace plans and UN-brokered talks in Geneva - met significant hurdles and were ultimately unsuccessful at creating lasting cessation of hostilities.⁹⁵

When it comes to the media language of the government at that time explaining the ongoing crisis in Syria, Syrian and Russian media reported differently on the causes of conflict, reflecting each government's viewpoints and narratives. Early in the conflict, Syrian state media depicted protests as part of an outside conspiracy designed to destabilize Syria; opposition parties were seen as terrorists or extremists that needed to be fought. The Syrian state media highlighted Islamist militant groups or foreign fighters within opposition ranks, which shows

⁸⁹ Cockburn, Patrick. (2014). "War with Isis: Islamic militants have army of 200,000, claims senior Kurdish leader", in *The Independent*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/war-with-isis-islamic-militants-have-army-of-200-000-claims-kurdish-leader-9863418.html>

⁹⁰ Lister, Charles. (2014). "Not Just Iraq: The Islamic State Is Also on the March in Syria", in *HuffPost*. Last online access 31.08.2023: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/not-just-iraq-the-islamic_b_5658048

⁹¹ Matthews, Dylan. (2014). "The surreal infographics ISIS is producing, translated", in *Vox*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.vox.com/2014/6/24/5834068/the-iraqi-rebels-make-annual-reports-with-infographics-we-translated>

⁹² Reuters. (2014). "Al-Qaida offshoot in fierce offensive, carves out territory across Syria and Iraq", in *The Jerusalem Post*. Last online access 31.08.2023: <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Al-Qaida-offshoot-in-fierce-offensive-carves-out-territory-across-Syria-and-Iraq-355874>

⁹³ M. Sadowski, Yahya (1987)

⁹⁴ Climate Diplomacy. *A New Climate for Peace: Syria*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://climate-diplomacy.org/new-climate-peace-syria#:~:text=Between%202006%20and%202011%2C%20Syria,agriculture%20suffered%20total%20crop%20failure.>

⁹⁵ Lundgren, Magnus. (2016). "Mediation in Syria: initiatives, strategies, and obstacles, 2011– 2016", in *Contemporary Security Policy*. Vol. 37(2). P. 273-288

the governmental emphasis that was put on security measures against external threats by framing the ongoing conflict as a battle of a sovereign state against terrorism.⁹⁶

In order to find sustainable resolutions to the conflict in Syria, it is essential to recognize that Syria's civil war is an intricately interwoven conflict due to domestic, regional, and international dynamics in its development with numerous factors contributing to its outbreak and ongoing existence.

4.1 Arab Spring and its Impact on Syria

Syria was strongly impacted by the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings that swept across the Middle Eastern and North African Arab countries. This wave of widespread protests - initiated in Tunisia and spreading quickly throughout the Arab world - was driven by demands for political changes, judicial justice, and an end to authoritarian leadership. A followed-up reaction (and mostly a violent one) by the Tunisian government to these demands drove to unrests across several Arab countries including Tunisia itself. When this wave arrived in Syria, the situation took an entirely different direction, as President *Baššār al-ʿAsad* responded with severe violence against any demonstrations taking place there resulting eventually in full scale civil war breaking out.

Recent research on Syria and the Arab Spring has shed much-needed light on its complicated factors, which led to nowadays ongoing crisis. It sheds insight on sectarian conflicts, economic grievances, and political persecution, which all contributed to the growing dissatisfaction within society at large. According to Mansour and Thompson, the Syrian uprising⁹⁷ may have its origin in longstanding complaints by marginalized individuals, further compounded by massive demonstrations sweeping throughout Syria at that time. As part of its Arab Spring aftermath, Syria experienced significant upheaval - both inside its borders and throughout the region. Civil warfare quickly escalated into a proxy conflict⁹⁸ backed by numerous regional and international entities supporting various opposing forces. This development fueled more violence, while in addition competing countries attempted to pursue their strategic interests by also intervening

⁹⁶ The CNN Wire Staff. (2012). "State TV reports 6 dead in Damascus 'terrorist' blast", in *CNN*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/09/07/world/meast/syria-civil-war/index.html>

⁹⁷ Mansour, Imad; Thompson, William R. (2020). *Assessing Shocks and Rivalry Processes in the Middle East and North Africa. Shocks and Rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa*. Georgetown University Press. P.107-204

⁹⁸ Especially after the arming of factions of the Syrian opposition to fight against the forces of the Syrian regime in 2012. (See: Encyclopedia Britannica: *Syria*. (2023))

militarily. These military involvements by several powers like Russia and the U.S. contributed towards prolonging violence over an already turbulent Syria.

The Arab Spring had also an immense negative impact on Syria's humanitarian situation. Millions had to leave their homes as a direct result of the ongoing fighting and were forced to seek shelter elsewhere. The Syrian Civil War, which has entered its second decade, is one of the gravest humanitarian catastrophes ever witnessed, impacting millions both within Syria as well as refugees living abroad in (neighboring) states seeking for help.⁹⁹

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates indicate that more than 13 million Syrians have left their homeland since the war began, including approximately 6.7 million internally displaced people (IDPs) inside of Syria, and over 5.6 million registered Syrian refugees living outside their home state in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and other countries.¹⁰⁰ The displacement of such a vast population has put tremendous strain on host countries and the international community's capacity of providing aid and assistance. Refugee camps and host communities frequently experience overcrowding, limited access to basic services and economic challenges, which in return exacerbate humanitarian crises further.¹⁰¹

Due to the prolonged nature of this conflict and widespread destruction of infrastructure, essential services and humanitarian aid have become significantly limited for Syrians. Syria suffered severe shortages in terms of shelter, food, clean water, healthcare services, and education, while many areas were besieged or difficult to reach, making the humanitarian aid impossible to be delivered in time.¹⁰² Humanitarian agencies and organizations usually work diligently to deliver emergency aid for victims in crisis areas around the globe.¹⁰³ Unfortunately, ongoing violence, bureaucratic hurdles and security threats present significant barriers in

⁹⁹ Reid, Kathryn. (2023). "From the Field: Syrian refugee crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help", in *World Vision*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts>

¹⁰⁰ UNHCR. (2023). *The human cost of the Syria crisis is astronomical. The world must continue to support the people and intensify efforts to end the crisis*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/announcements/human-cost-syria-crisis-astronomical-world-must-continue-support-people-and#:~:text=More%20than%2015%20million%20people,for%20more%20than%20a%20decade>

¹⁰¹ Ahmed, Sharmarke. (2023). "A perfect storm of crises: Why refugee-hosting countries need more support", in *International Centre for Migration Policy Development*. Last online access 01.09.2023: icmpd.org/blog/2023/a-perfect-storm-of-crises-why-refugee-hosting-countries-need-more-support

¹⁰² "12 years into the war in Syria, the number of people needing humanitarian assistance is at a record high", in *People in Need*. Cited from Reliefweb. (2023). Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/12-years-war-syria-number-people-needing-humanitarian-assistance-record-high#:~:text=The%20war%20in%20Syria%20has,the%20highest%20recorded%20since%202011>

¹⁰³ UNHCR (2023)

reaching the affected populations in need. Humanitarian workers themselves have even experienced attacks, which further impedes aid delivery efforts in Syria.

It is important not to forget that the evolution of regional security dynamics in the Middle East had a dramatic impact on the crisis in Syria. The extremist organizations such as the Islamic State (ISIS), took advantage of the power vacuum created by fighting, which further destabilized the situation in Syria. Extremist groups' appearances also have worsened the humanitarian conditions, as ISIS' fighters have committed many massacres against innocent civilians¹⁰⁴, which also had negative repercussions on international levels.¹⁰⁵

In Syria's civil conflict there have been serious violations of both international human rights law and humanitarian convention, leading to civilian casualties as well as damage to essential infrastructure. Deliberate attacks against civilian areas including hospitals, schools or any vital facility have caused immense suffering. Chemical weapons or barrel bombs used without regard for civilian lives further increased the number of casualties leading to countless losses among civilians.¹⁰⁶ Protecting civilians - including women, children and other vulnerable groups - remained a massive challenge, where displaced populations are facing increased risks of exploitation, trafficking and abuse.¹⁰⁷ Not to mention that long term exposure also has psychological repercussions for individuals, families, and societies.

International communities and humanitarian organizations have managed on several occasions to provide essential aid for Syrians affected by the conflict. With humanitarian appeals launched to mobilize resources and funds needed for meeting urgent needs both inside the country as well as other host communities.¹⁰⁸ The humanitarian disaster caused by Syria's civil war remains a perilous challenge for humanitarian actors worldwide. Urgent action must still take

¹⁰⁴ See also: "Mass Violence and Genocide by the Islamic State/Daesh in Iraq and Syria", in *Holocaust & Genocide Education* by University of Minnesota. (2023). Last online access 15.09.2023: <https://cla.umn.edu/chgs/holocaust-genocide-education/resource-guides/mass-violence-and-genocide-islamic-statedaesh>

¹⁰⁵ Byman, Daniel L. (2015). "Comparing Al Qaeda and ISIS: Different goals, different targets", in *Brookings*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/comparing-al-qaeda-and-isis-different-goals-different-targets/>

¹⁰⁶ "In Nine Years, the Syrian Regime Has Dropped Nearly 82,000 Barrel Bombs, Killing 11,087 Civilians, Including 1,821 Children", in Syrian Network for Human Rights. Cited from Reliefweb. (2021). Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/nine-years-syrian-regime-has-dropped-nearly-82000-barrel-bombs-killing>

¹⁰⁷ United Nations. (2023). "Worsening Conditions in Syria Need Urgent Concerted Efforts from All Parties to Resume Syrian-led Political Process, Special Envoy Tells Security Council", in *Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15393.doc.htm>

¹⁰⁸ International Committee of the Red Cross. (2023). *Syria: Urgent Action Needed to Address Humanitarian Needs*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/syria-urgent-action-needed-address-humanitarian-needs>

place to provide humanitarian aid quickly to vulnerable civilians, who are still suffering until this day, while simultaneously serious international efforts must be brought into action towards finding lasting resolution for Syria must be brought into action.

At the height of the Arab Spring, media and other forms of communication were critical in shaping narratives and perspectives about Syria's civil war. Crilley and Chatterje-Doody's research from 2020 shows how Russian media channels like RT¹⁰⁹ used various tactics - comedy included - to legitimize Russian foreign policy in Syria. Shaping public opinion and altering narratives presented through media played a pivotal role in this conflict. These narratives affected how people worldwide understood the crisis' events, and what roles foreign players - particularly Russia - have played.

Overall, the Arab Spring has a significant effect on Syria both nationally and regionally. The violent government responses to demonstrations calling for political reforms and social justice have culminated in full-scale civil war within Syria. Protesters had initially sought changes through political activism as opposed to this battle turning into proxy warfare involving numerous regional and international powers backing opposing sides. Humanitarian consequences from Syria's conflict, such as mass migrations of Syrians and an increase in deterioration of their living conditions, have significantly escalated the situation.

4.2 The Emergence of Opposition Groups

As a result of the Arab Spring events, opposition organizations formed in Syria shortly, thereafter, before the civil war started.¹¹⁰ These developments were consequential and involved an intricate chain of events. Syrians took to the streets in 2011 in response to pro-democracy upheavals of the Arab Spring, where they demonstrated calling for a shift in political leadership, an end of corruption, and increased civil liberties.¹¹¹ However *Baššār al-ʿAsad* responded violently in order to keep the control of his power by suppressing protestors.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Crilley, Rhys; Precious N. Chatterje-Doody. (2020). "From Russia with Lols: Humour, RT, and the Legitimation of Russian Foreign Policy", in *Global Society*. Vol.35(2). P. 269-288

¹¹⁰ Laub (2023)

¹¹¹ Blakemore, Erin. (2019). "What was the Arab Spring and how did it spread?", in *National Geographic*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/arab-spring-cause>

¹¹² Laub (2023)

Based on what is known about Syria's early opposition groups, like the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood¹¹³, Free Syrian Army (FSA)¹¹⁴, Syrian national Council (SNC)¹¹⁵, Local Coordinating Committees (LCC)¹¹⁶, Kurdish groups¹¹⁷, and several Salafist and Jihadist groups¹¹⁸, one can observe that they encompassed an expansive spectrum of political and ideological stances. Secular activists, political parties and armed insurgent groups alike were part of this resistance movement.¹¹⁹ Some of them were favoring an Islamic-oriented state over one with open democratic ideals - reflecting an assortment of aspirational desires among Syrian citizens at this crucial juncture in time. The diversity of oppositional factions mirrored these

¹¹³ The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is a Syrian branch of the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood organization. Its objective is the transformation of Syria into an Islamic state governed by Sharia law through a gradual legal and political process. Though suppressed for decades by the government, Syrian Muslim Brotherhood made a comeback during the uprising to seek political power after President *ʿAsad* is removed. (See: Teitelbaum, Joshua. (2011). “The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1945—1958: Founding, Social Origins, Ideology”, in *The Middle East Journal*. Vol. 65(2). P. 213-233)

¹¹⁴ Established in 2011, the FSA (*ağ-Ğayş as-Sūrī al-Hurr*) quickly rose to become one of the leading armed opposition groups aiming to overthrow *ʿAsad*'s regime. It is comprised primarily of defected Syrian military personnel and civilian volunteers. Its mission was to defend civilians, while uniting opposition efforts against the regime. (See: Landis, Joshua. (2011). “Free Syrian Army Founded by Seven Officers to Fight the Syrian Army”, in *Syria Comment*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/free-syrian-army-established-to-fight-the-syrian-army/>)

¹¹⁵ Established in 2011, the Syrian National Coalition is an alliance of opposition figures, activists and intellectuals seeking political change and an end to the *ʿAsad*'s regime. They are representing their interests internationally on behalf of Syria's people, while contributing to early attempts at creating an opposition front together; yet internal divisions within SNC ranks have posed difficulties in gaining widespread support. (See: Yezdani, İpek. (2011). “Syrian dissidents form national council”, in *The Edmond Sun*.. Last online access 01.09.2023: https://archive.ph/20121204175512/http://www.edmondsun.com/news_tab3/x2122765173/Syrian-dissidents-form-national-council)

¹¹⁶ The LCC emerged as an influential grassroots movement advocating for democratic reforms and civil rights at local levels, through organized protests, documentation of human rights abuses and calling for an end to regime oppression. (See: Shadid, Anthony; Hwaida Saad. (2011). “Coalition of Factions From the Streets Fuels a New Opposition in Syria”, in *The New York Times*. Last online access 01.09.2023: https://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/01/world/middleeast/01syria.html?_r=2&pagewanted=all)

¹¹⁷ Kurdish parties and militias also became a part of the opposition landscape. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), along with its People's Protection Units (YPG), are intended to defend Kurdish areas, while advocating for greater autonomy. (See: Barfi, Barak. (2016). “Ascent of the PYD and the SDF”, in *Research Notes: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. Vol. 32. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ascent-pyd-and-sdf>)

¹¹⁸ Anti-government opposition groups were joined by more extreme factions. Salafist and jihadist factions such as *Ğabhat an-Nuṣra* (affiliated with *al-Qāʿida*) and then Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Both entities utilized Syria's power vacuum and chaos as an opportunity to establish themselves by employing extremist ideologies that they are advocating. (See: O'Bagy, Elizabeth. (2012). *Middle East Security Report 6: Jihad In Syria* [Executive Summary]. Published by Institute for the Study of War. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/jihad-syria#:~:text=Jabhat%20Nusra%2C%20Syria's%20homegrown%20Salafi,are%20gaining%20support%20within%20Syria>)

¹¹⁹ Sayigh, Yezid. (2013). “The Syrian Opposition's Leadership Problem”, in *Carnegie Middle East Center*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://carnegie-mec.org/2013/04/03/syrian-opposition-s-leadership-problem-pub-51373>

aspirational desires, as the resistance was made up of groups representing various political orientations with different ideologies.¹²⁰

As their struggle intensified, opposing sides gradually organized and militarized in response to one another's threat resulting in full-scale civil war.¹²¹ Literature provides insights into the various stages and dynamics such as territorial gains and losses incurred by various factions, extremist organizations and the participation by regional or international forces. During the Crisis many opposition organizations like Free Syrian Army as well as Islamist factions competed among themselves for influence and power, which resulted in a complex web of alliances and conflicts among themselves.¹²²

Civil warfare served as an incubator for extremist groups like ISIS to form and thrive. ISIS created its self-proclaimed caliphate in parts of Syria and Iraq¹²³ also due to the Civil War, which has created a power vacuum that gave extremist ideologies space to grow. They recruited fighters from around the globe and eventually declaring and expanding their Islamic caliphate there.¹²⁴ Literature examines ISIS, its growth, the effect on this war, and various parties' efforts to counter its influence in Syria and Iraq, as extremist organizations' participation not only added another level of complexity to an already chaotic civil conflict scenario, but also posed grave dangers both to regional and global security.

The two key effects of the Arab Spring uprisings were the formation of opposition organizations and subsequent civil war in Syria. Resistance factions had a substantial influence on how this conflict unfolded; each with their own ideology and objectives. The civil war's aftermath is marked by widespread civilian deaths and displacement. Meanwhile extremist organizations' proliferation has had strong and lasting ramifications on Syria and its surroundings. Understanding the intricate dynamics and repercussions associated with opposition organizations' development in Syria during the Civil War are crucial in analyzing Syria's ongoing crisis and finding sustainable solutions to it.

¹²⁰ Phillips, Christopher. (2013). "The Civil War in Syria: The Variety of Opposition to the Syrian Regime", in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2013*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.iemed.org/publication/the-civil-war-in-syria-the-variety-of-opposition-to-the-syrian-regime/>

¹²¹ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. (2023). "Syrian Civil War", in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Syrian-Civil-War>

¹²² Laub (2023)

¹²³ Mapping Militant Organizations. (2021). *The Islamic State*. Stanford University. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state>

¹²⁴ Reardon, Martin. (2015). "ISIL and the management of savagery", in *Al Jazeera*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/7/6/isil-and-the-management-of-savagery/>

4.3 The Role of External Actors in the Syrian Conflict

The Syrian Civil War has seen the involvement of various external actors with distinct agendas and interests, each playing an influential role in shaping the country's trajectory and dynamics. These external actors' involvement has had an enormous effect on shaping how the situation has progressed thus far.

Since its initial stages, the U.S. has been deeply engaged with Syria's conflict by providing aid, training and air support for opposition groups, while advocating for political transition and the removal of President *Baššār al-ʿAsad*.¹²⁵ Additionally, military aid was given to moderate rebel factions fighting both government forces and extremist organizations. This approach has encountered some obstacles like fragmented opposition groups as well as extremist organizations like ISIS that strongly emerged on the battlefield.

Israel has made the Syrian conflict its top concern by prioritizing safeguarding its own security interests, particularly with regard to Iranian-backed forces present and their transfer of sophisticated weaponry to *Ḥizbullāh* in Lebanon.¹²⁶ They have conducted airstrikes against Iranian and *Ḥizbullāh* targets within Syria in order to stop further proliferation of weapons that is threatening their safety directly, while simultaneously seeking balance, remaining their distance from any direct involvement in the conflicts, and protecting themselves at an optimal level.¹²⁷

Iran on the other hand has played an instrumental role in the Syrian civil war, providing aid and assistance to *al-ʿAsad*'s regime and supporting pro-*ʿAsad* militias like *Ḥizbullāh*¹²⁸, which helped the regime reclaim control over key areas, and has allowed the Syrian army retaking control over locations more quickly than anticipated.¹²⁹ They view Syria as both an ally and partner for their regional agenda, specifically, against Israeli and Western influence in this regard.

¹²⁵ Goldman, Adam; Mazzetti, Mark; Schmidt, Michael S. (2017). "Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria", in *The New York Times*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-train-trump.html>

¹²⁶ Hanauer, Larry. (2016). *Israel's Interests and Options in Syria*. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE185.html>

¹²⁷ Al-Khalidi, Suleiman. (2021). "Israel launches major air strikes on Iran-linked targets in Syria", in *Reuters*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-attack-israel-idUSKBN29H32S>

¹²⁸ *Ḥizbullāh* 'Party of Allah' or 'Party of God' is a Lebanese Shia Islamist political party and militant group (See: Jamail, Dahr. (2006). "Hezbollah's transformation", in *Asia Times*. Last online access 01.09.2023: https://web.archive.org/web/20060720154531/http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HG20Ak02.html)

¹²⁹ Sherlock, Ruth. (2014). "Iran boosts support to Syria", in *The Telegraph*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/10654144/Iran-boosts-support-to-Syria.html>

Turkey has played an evolving role in Syria. At first, they provided opposition groups with a safe haven and logistical support;¹³⁰ later however as the conflict advanced, Turkey focused its attention more closely on countering Kurdish groups such as People's Protection Units (YPG).¹³¹ In order to stop the spread of the Kurdish influence in northern Syria, Turkey launched military operations such as Euphrates Shield¹³² and Olive Branch¹³³ against these Kurdish groups along its border region.¹³⁴

Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have played an active role in aiding various rebel groups fighting *al-ʿAsad* regime, providing both financial and military assistance.¹³⁵ Their influence was eventually diminished when extremist groups emerged gaining prominence and regional rivalries threatened unification of support among opposition factions.

Russia has played a leading role in the Syrian civil war as will be explained in this thesis. Moscow has provided extensive military and diplomatic backing for *al-ʿAsad*'s regime with Russia's military intervention in 2015,¹³⁶ which helped it regain significant territory from rebel control. Russia's involvement has also served its own strategic interests by countering extremist threats, while projecting power across borders and challenging Western influence in Syria.

These are only some examples of external actors involved in Syria's civil conflict, with others such as United Kingdom, France, Jordan, and various regional and international organizations also playing key roles. Their complex web of involvement has contributed significantly to

¹³⁰ Manna, Haytham. (2012). "Syria's opposition has been led astray by violence", in *The Guardian*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jun/22/syria-opposition-led-astray-by-violence>

¹³¹ "Turkish President Erdoğan slams US over YPG support", in *Hurriyet Daily News*. (2016). Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-president-erdogan-slams-us-over-ypg-support-99783>

¹³² Euphrates Shield led to the Turkish occupation of northern Syria. (See: AFP News. (2016). "Erdogan says Syria operation aimed at IS jihadists, Kurdish PYD", in *Fondation Institut Kurde de Paris*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.institutkurde.org/en/info/latest/erdogan-says-syria-operation-aimed-against-is-jihadists-kurdish-pyd-6486/>

¹³³ Reuters Staff. (2018). "Turkey to continue Euphrates Shield operation in northern Syria: Erdogan", in *Reuters*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-turkey-erdogan/turkey-to-continue-euphrates-shield-operation-in-northern-syria-erdogan-idUSKBN1EY0UN?feedType=RSS&feedName=worldNews>

¹³⁴ Agence France-Presse in Beirut. (2015). "Turkey accused of shelling Kurdish-held village in Syria", in *The Guardian*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/27/turkey-shells-kurdish-held-village-in-syria>

¹³⁵ Karouny, Mariam. (2013). "Saudi edges Qatar to control Syrian rebel support", in *Reuters*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-saudi-insight-idUSBRE94U0ZV20130531>

¹³⁶ "Совет Федерации разрешил использовать ВС России за рубежом (The Federation Council allowed the use of the Russian Armed Forces abroad)", in *ПИА Новости*. (2015). Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://ria.ru/20150930/1292970356.html>

protracting and intensifying war efforts, while shaping political, military, and humanitarian dimensions of the conflict.

5 Russia's Motives, Interests and Concerns in Syria

5.1 Russia's Strategic Interests

Russia's involvement in Syria can be explained through various strategic goals that each have significant ramifications on Russia and the world at large. Russia values the Middle East for its historical ties, geographical factors and strategic advantages. Borshchevskaya asserts that due to Syria being situated between three continents (i.e. Europe – Asia - Africa), it serves as an essential ally in fulfilling Russia's foreign policy broader aims by exerting influence and maintaining regional power stability efforts.¹³⁷

Russia's primary strategic interest in Syria before the civil war started was preserving and protecting access to warm-water ports in the Middle East. Russia had extensive interests there that span over multiple domains. According to Kramer, the *Tartūs* naval facility provides its sole outpost outside former Soviet borders in Mediterranean.¹³⁸ Retaining this access could effectively deploy naval strength, which may compromise greater strategic objectives of Russia, thus justifying an engagement aimed at maintaining and improving marine capabilities which are essential in keeping hold of geopolitical dominance in this region.

Russia saw the regional crisis in Syria as a conflict abroad dominated by external forces led by the United States and its allies, where Russia itself also was playing an essential role. By actively participating in the Syria crisis as a part of their strategy to position themselves as a significant player and counterbalance other parties' influence, Russia demonstrated that it can conduct military operations outside its boundaries, therefore strengthening their standing on the international stage thereby promoting Russia's goals of multipolarity in world politics.¹³⁹

Russia's engagement in the Syrian conflict also allowed it to extend its regional reach and build closer ties with key entities. Russia has played an instrumental role in supporting *Baššār al-*

¹³⁷ Borshchevskaya, Anna. (2022). "Russia's Strategic Success in Syria and the Future of Moscow's Middle East Policy", in *Lawfare*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/russias-strategic-success-syria-and-future-moscows-middle-east-policy>

¹³⁸ Kramer (2012)

¹³⁹ Yacoubian, Mona. (2021). "What is Russia's Endgame in Syria?: Lacking better options, Russia appears to be pursuing a 'spheres of influence' model.", in *United States Institute of Peace*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/02/what-russias-endgame-syria>

Asad's administration by lending and backing it up before and during the Syrian conflict, which fulfills one of their main strategic interests. This would have worked for Russia through supporting the leading party in Syria, which was a continuum of the previous long and good relationship between the two countries.¹⁴⁰ Russia did not rely on other alternatives in power in the Syrian conflict, and was clear and decisive from the beginning that it stood with the Syrian regime;¹⁴¹ a position that served its initial interest and would give Russia leverage over political, economic, and military issues occurring throughout Syria - something that maybe advantageous for Russia in accessing key resources, while expanding armaments exports and building strategic relations with Syria.

5.2 Russia's Military Interests

Russia's military involvement in Syria is multidimensional, comprising various tactics and capabilities that were used to support Syrian government institutions, while safeguarding Russian strategic interests in the area. Kozhanov (2017) writes that since Russia intervened in Syria's crisis in September 2015, their military has played an influential role in shaping its direction and results. Maintaining Russia's influence over Middle Eastern affairs as well as protecting the Syrian regime and re-establishing the military and political capacities of *al-Asad's* regime were central tenets of this engagement by the Russian military personnel - thus keeping their influence strong throughout the region.¹⁴²

Russia had the intention to strategically utilize its air power as part of their military commitment. According to Charap, Treyger and Geist, their air force has later on conducted airstrikes against rebel-held areas, opposition groups, and terrorist organizations like ISIS, which greatly assisted Syria with taking back key territories, while weakening opposition troops.¹⁴³ With these strikes the so created power imbalances favoring *al-Asad's* administration and helping counter extremist organizations - such as ISIS that reemerged as a threat - were main military interests readily apparent.

The desire to carry out field military operations on a war field, such as the Syrian conflict offers, would provide Russia with the opportunity to test its military capabilities, especially with regard

¹⁴⁰ Borshchevskaya (2022)

¹⁴¹ Allison, R. (2013). "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis", in *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*. Vol. 89(4). P. 795-823

¹⁴² Kozhanov, Nikolay. (2017). "Main Drivers of Russian Military deployment in Syria", in *International Studies Journal (ISJ)*. Vol. 13(4). P.21-24

¹⁴³ Charap, Samuel; Treyger, Elina; Geist, Edward. (2019). *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*. Santa Monica: CA: RAND Corporation. P. 4-10

to the Russian soldiers who are actually on the battlefield.¹⁴⁴ Therefore deploying ground troops into Syria, including special operations soldiers¹⁴⁵, military advisors and air power would showcase the limits of the Russian military, when it comes to direct battle stages. These deployed individuals would also provide essential training, aid and guidance for Syrian army soldiers against opposition groups to be more successfully. Furthermore, this presence of Russian ground soldiers would strengthen the morale of Syrian government forces as evidence that Moscow would remain committed to supporting *al-Asad's* regime, thus empowering the strategic and military interests simultaneously.

Russia's military interests in Syria can best be summarized by their intention of executing a number of operations that consist of massive air power maneuvers, ground deployments and naval operations to defend regional strategic interests. These interests could be obtained through a direct engagement in combat against extremist organizations in order to empower the Syrian regime against its opposition. Russia has been aware of the fact that these efforts would also strain relations with Western nations further, and their military involvement would have far-reaching ramifications extending far beyond just Syria itself, yet they were willing to take actions that serve their interests in the region.

5.3 Russia's Security Concerns

Borshchevskaya (2020) asserts that Russia's engagement in Syria can be understood in terms of various security concerns that have driven Russia's strategic calculations in this area, thus impacting their involvement there. Russia placed great significance on protecting itself against extremist organizations linked to ISIS as they are presenting one of its top security challenges.¹⁴⁶ Moscow has expressed serious concerns at any possibility that terrorist acts or radicalization might spread into the North Caucasus region, where Russia has long struggled against separatist groups and Islamist insurgencies, raising alarm bells in the Kremlin.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, Russia would support the Syrian government to combat the expansion of extremist

¹⁴⁴ Tennis, Maggie. (2017). "Russia Showcases Military Capabilities", in *Arms Control Association*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2017-11/news/russia-showcases-military-capabilities>

¹⁴⁵ More on that in a later chapter.

¹⁴⁶ Borshchevskaya, Anna. (2020). "The Russian Way Of War In Syria: Threat Perception And Approaches To Counterterrorism.", in *Russia's War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*. Hamilton, Robert E; Miller, Chris; Stein, Aaron [Editors]. Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute. P. 1-2

¹⁴⁷ Ferris-Rotman, Amie. (2010). "RPT-ANALYSIS-Global jihad creeping into Russia's insurgency", in *Reuters*. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-caucasus-extremism/rpt-analysis-global-jihad-creeping-into-russias-insurgency-idINLDE61H0UQ20100305>

organizations as well as stop any formation of strongholds for militant jihadism near Russia's borders.

Kofman and Rojansky note that Russia faced various security concerns related to Syria, such as its potential impact on instability and terrorism elsewhere in the Middle East and Central Asia, where many foreign combatants from different nations - including Russia – are prevalent.¹⁴⁸ Moscow had the fears that these fighters would come back home bearing extremist beliefs, ideologies and expertise with them, so its involvement in Syria would be the justification that the direct interference in Syria would serve to stop instability from worsening as well as reducing terrorism's spread to its own regions.¹⁴⁹

Kofman and Rojansky assert that Russia would use Syria not just to maintain strategic presence in the Mediterranean but also as an opportunity to project influence beyond this region. The Syrian ports, where Russia has stationed its naval basis such as *Ṭarṭūs*, would serve an integral function in this regard. Russia would have to ensure the continuation of naval presence by protecting *ʿAsad's* government as it would protect maritime access and influence. Russia hoped this geopolitical issue would add up to its goal to counteract Western countries, specifically United States influence, in the area.¹⁵⁰ However, concerns have been expressed by analysts over the prospect of Syria's turmoil affecting neighboring nations or intensifying and leading to wider regional conflicts, if this conflict would escalate further. Unrest already affects Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq with Russia seeking to prevent regional warfare as this would have serious consequences for Russia's security as well as those of its allies such as Jordan.¹⁵¹ By exerting influence in Syria, Russia hoped to shape how conflicts in this region unfold, while keeping it within borders rather than spreading beyond them - a complicated process that Russia was willing to carry out, while being strategically, military and diplomatically alert.

Russia's security interests have also been called into question due to an unprecedented wave of migrants. The data indicated that the situation was heading towards a humanitarian crisis in Syria, according to observers and analysts. The massive displacement from Syria would place additional strain on neighboring nations as they attempt to accommodate millions of displaced individuals.¹⁵² Social and economic tensions would also worsen, while instability could increase across the region. Whether it was in Russia's intention or not to stabilize Syria, it was

¹⁴⁸ Kofman; Rojansky (2018). P. 3-4

¹⁴⁹ Kofman; Rojansky (2018). P. 4

¹⁵⁰ Kofman; Rojansky (2018). P. 3-4

¹⁵¹ Kofman; Rojansky (2018). P. 4

¹⁵² Reid (2023)

concerned to address core causes for refugee crisis and a relief by shifting burdens from nations that hosted the Syrian refugees, specifically its allies Lebanon and Jordan, in order to further regional stability.

In a general sense, Russia's security concerns in Syria can also be linked to their more extensive geopolitical competition with the United States and its allies. Western actions are seen by Russia as a direct challenge to its position as a global power, so Russian aid for the Syrian regime would become an integral part of an effort to counter the Western influence as well as the rise of extremist groups. Russia viewed Western involvement in Syria as a direct threat to their local interests, while this regional security issue was also closely tied to their larger geopolitical ambitions to establish themselves as a significant players on the world scene. Therefore, the security concerns can be directly linked to their larger geopolitical goals in order to make them a strong pole that can change the direction of the outcome of this conflict to their favors, despite the results maybe complicating the diplomatic relations with allies in the region and putting the lives of many Syrians in a danger of seeking refuge.

5.4 Russia's Economic Interests

Russia has used economic interests as the basis of its involvement in Syria, in an attempt to maintain existing business ties, protecting energy resources, taking advantage of post-conflict reconstruction opportunities and advancing broader economic goals in the Middle East. Russia's primary financial interest in Syria was to preserve preexisting commercial alliances and business ties that existed prior to the crisis, particularly within industries like energy production and arms sales. Therefore, Russia would be willing to invest significantly in Syria's oil and gas fields, power plants, and transportation networks through Russian firms.¹⁵³

Nikita Sogoloff (2017) asserts that Syria's unique location at the crossroads of key energy transit routes and large oil and gas deposits makes it an ideal partner for Russia to meet its energy goals. Energy security remains of vital significance to Russia. Being one of the primary exporters worldwide, they strive to maintain influence in global energy markets, while guaranteeing reliable access to resources. With the help from *Asad's* regime, Russia could

¹⁵³ Kosturos, Nicholas. (2012). "What Drives Russia's Unrelenting Position on Syria?: Factors Behind Russia's Misplaced Support", in *Center of American Progress*. Last online access 02.09.2023: <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/what-drives-russias-unrelenting-position-on-syria/>

remain present within Syria's energy sector, safeguarding its long-term economic interests as well as negotiating favorable energy agreements that would benefit both parties involved.¹⁵⁴

Russia recognizes Syria's post-conflict reconstruction phase as an opportunity to participate in and profit from infrastructure projects, particularly due to years of violence, which caused massive devastation of roads, bridges, utilities and other forms of infrastructure.¹⁵⁵ Lucrative contracts available through Syrian government's offerings for the repair of infrastructure would promise Russia an edge over competitors, during the rebuilding phase thus, serving Russia's economic influence and interests, while also shaping Syria's post-war future through active engagement.

Russia has set ambitious economic and commercial objectives in Syria that align with their larger commercial goals in the Middle East. Eugene Rumer states that Russia saw this region as having potential for increasing exports, attracting investments, diversifying outside of Western markets, as well as keeping its presence visible through maintaining an engagement in Syria, which expands the economic footprint in the Middle East and creates deeper business links among players within this area.¹⁵⁶

Moshe Ma'oz emphasizes in one of his interviews with The National Post that the need to recognize Russia's economic objectives in Syria go well beyond short financial returns alone. Russia viewed its involvement in Syria as a strategic move aimed at increasing geopolitical influence and challenging Western dominance over this area, thus strengthening Russia as an actor within Middle Eastern politics, while building economic relationships and becoming reliable ally for other nations through showing its economic abilities and dedication towards supporting Syrian political institutions.¹⁵⁷

Overall, Russia's economic interest in Syria encompasses several objectives, such as maintaining existing commercial links, securing energy resources, capitalizing on post-conflict rebuilding opportunities and furthering larger regional aims. Russia hoped to preserve economic

¹⁵⁴ Sogoloff, Nikita. (2017). "Russia's Energy Goals in Syria", in *Fikra Forum*. Last online access 02.09.2023: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-energy-goals-syria>

¹⁵⁵ Ramani, Samuel. (2019). "Russia's Eye on Syrian Reconstruction", in *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*. Last online access 02.09.2023: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78261>

¹⁵⁶ Rumer, Eugene. (2019). "Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None", in *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*. Last online access 02.09.2023: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/31/russia-in-middle-east-jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none-pub-80233>

¹⁵⁷ National Post Staff. (2015). "Why is Russia expected to further increase its presence in Syria? Four experts parse the geopolitics", in *National Post*. Last online access 02.09.2023: <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/why-is-russia-expected-to-further-increase-its-presence-in-syria-four-experts-parse-the-geopolitics>

assets, while expanding its political influence on Syria, which in return would entwine with the economic aspects making its involvement there multidimensional.

6 Russian Policies¹⁵⁸ in the Syrian Conflict

"Interest" and "policy goal" are related concepts in international relations; however, each refers to distinct aspects of an entity or country's actions or motivations.

Interests represent the core needs, wants, or concerns of any country, government, or entity. They symbolize what a nation values and seeks to protect, advance to or achieve in order to further its well-being and security. They can span economic considerations, political issues, security threats or strategic opportunities. Interests also refer to the core priorities of a nation over time and may include aspects such as national security, economic prosperity, sovereignty, territorial integrity and accessing resources for growth or stability in the region.¹⁵⁹

On the other hand, policy goals refer to specific objectives that a country or entity sets as part of their actions and decisions attained through execution and planning, representing tangible steps or outcomes they hope to reach in order to further their interests. They tend to be more precise and measurable than interests. Their outcomes, though still variable, are depending on the circumstances. Policy goals could include reaching a trade agreement, stopping nuclear weapon proliferation, increasing democracy in certain regions or providing humanitarian relief in conflict zones.¹⁶⁰

Overall, interests refer to broader motivations and concerns that drive international actions of countries; policy goals – though representing tangible objectives to a country – are sought to be attained in order to advance those interests; they serve as specific steps taken toward fulfilling and furthering those interests. Their formulation should take account of the understanding of both the interests as well as the context in which these policy goals operate.

¹⁵⁸ Policies and policy goals are two terms used interchangeably within governance and decision making; however, each has their own distinct definitions. While a policy, according to Cambridge Dictionary, refers to an overarching plan or course of action adopted by government, organizations or individuals to address an issue or situation in a comprehensive fashion (See: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/policy>. Last online access 16.09.2023), policy goals represent specific and measurable objectives or outcomes desired from policy implementation, serving as its desired endpoint or desired result. (See: <https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/policy-goal>)

¹⁵⁹ The Kootneeti Team. (2022). "National Interests in International Relations: Definition and Types", in *The Kootneeti*. Last online access 02.09.2023: <https://thekootneeti.in/2022/09/19/national-interests-in-international-relations-definition-and-types/>

¹⁶⁰ "Policy goal definition", in *Law Insider*. Last online access 01.11.2023: <https://www.lawinsider.com/dictionary/policy-goal>

Over many years of the Russian intervention in Syria, one might still question the reason behind Russia's involvement, which many find impractical and irrational, given their economic crisis and ongoing war with Ukraine today. Besides the strategic, military, economic and security interests that have been mentioned in the previous chapter, Russia officially gave two reasons for its involvement. One was its role in combatting ISIS-associated international terrorism;¹⁶¹ the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Russia supported Syrian efforts against terrorist attacks, while also offering military aid as needed.¹⁶² The second explanation given aimed to restore Syria's sovereignty and unity. Putin reiterated the goal of defeating ISIS and creating safe living conditions for all Syrian citizens regardless of ethnicity or faith, while supporting Syria's economic and social revival. All this was linked with the propaganda that *al-Asad* had been democratically elected by his people.¹⁶³ These two goals might be seen as the basis of the Russian policy towards the conflict in Syria. Only the afterward development of events will confirm whether Russia has reached its goals or not.

However, Russia's immediate military intervention in Syria does not appear to be completely justified by these official explanations. Terrorist organizations such as *al-Qā'ida* had long operated within Syria and Iraq, and many nations worldwide required outside help in order to restore sovereignty. There may be other underlying motives, which have been discussed in the previous chapter, behind Russia's actions that relate more closely with geopolitics or domestic factors than the only official explanations for their operation in Syria.¹⁶⁴ Further analysis is required in order to fully grasp these motivations behind Russian military involvement and their effects on regional and global dynamics.

6.1 Russian Geopolitical Policy

Russian military operation in Syria represented an opportunity to advance Russia's interests in this region and achieve their objectives there, marking another step forward for its foreign policy development. With Russia's intervention announced, developments both external and internal have seen dramatic shifts. Western policymakers were taken aback when Russia made

¹⁶¹ Chappell, Bill. (2015). "Russia Begins Airstrikes In Syria After Assad's Request", in *NPR – National Public Radio*. Last online access 02.09.2023: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/09/30/444679327/russia-begins-conducting-airstrikes-in-syria-at-assads-request>

¹⁶² Wroughton, Lesley; Stubbs, Jack. (2015). "Russia, U.S. clear way for Syria meeting after Kerry Moscow talks", in *Reuters*. Last online access 02.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-usa-idUSKBN0TX23O20151215>

¹⁶³ Reuters Staff. (2015). "Russia, Jordan agree on military coordination on Syria", in *Reuters*. Last online access 02.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-jordan-idUSKCN0SH1ER20151023>

¹⁶⁴ Inozemtsev, Vladislav. (2016). "The Rationale And Goals Of Russia's Syria Policy", in *In The Kremlin's Actions In Syria: Origins, Timing, and Prospects*. Atlantic Council. P. 19-20

this important move, but closer examination reveals that it fits neatly within Russia's quest for international respect and Vladimir Putin's "survival instincts". Although some could predict Russia's interventions by analyzing previous hints about their intentions in Syria and what Moscow desired from these endeavors - including clear indications that they wanted their interests met there - their goals had still to be defined and comprehended in order for any undertaken mission in analyzing their behavior to succeed.¹⁶⁵

The Russian government's goals in Syria, like their interests previously, may be divided into geopolitical, security, economic (and also cultural) considerations. Russia has prioritized national security concerns due to the war in Syria being an incubator of terrorist activities, which threaten its national interests directly.¹⁶⁶

This examination of Russia's military intervention in Syria highlights actions undertaken to advance Russian interests within Syria and the region with the infamous Cold War taken into consideration. Because Russia's involvement in Syria stems primarily from their opposition to a "unipolar world", dominated by the US.¹⁶⁷ Following the end of the Cold War, Russia felt marginalized from international politics; consequently their leadership, including figures like Putin, desired to restore Russia as an influential international actor. They tried to achieve their goal partially by projecting their military might into Syria, while American power in that region appeared low; they thus asserted themselves as significant players on the Middle Eastern scene by intervening militarily there.¹⁶⁸

Following the Cold War, Russia retained its dominant regional status, but saw its influence increasingly challenged by Western actions - such as the NATO expansion along its western borders or Ukraine moving toward Western influence. So supporting Syria provided Russia with an opportunity to find new reasons for an alliance between itself and Iran as well as demonstrating their military reach across the region, thus increasing their global leverage and increasing regional dominance.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Inozemtsev (2016). P. 19

¹⁶⁶ Trenin (2016). P. 4-5

¹⁶⁷ Matsuzato, Kimitaka. (2020). "The Syrian War in Russia's Intensifying Discourse Against the Unipolar World", in *Международная аналитика*. Vol. 13(4). P. 116-118

¹⁶⁸ Lebow, R. N. (1994). "The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism", in *International Organization*. Vol. 48(2). P. 249-277

¹⁶⁹ Freedman, R. O. (1997). "Russia And Iran: A Tactical Alliance", in *SAIS Review*. Vol.17(2). P. 93-109

Russia's response to the Ukrainian Crisis in 2014-15 led near to its total political and economic isolation from Western nations.¹⁷⁰ Following its loss of Western support, Russia set out to demonstrate it could survive on its own by developing closer ties with China and banking on rising oil prices as means for survival. Due to China's limited support and fluctuating oil prices however, Putin sought the cooperation with Western nations on certain matters.¹⁷¹ This situation besides Russia's presence in the Middle East offered him a way back into a dialogue with Western powers, while simultaneously showing Russia's willingness to cooperate and seek respect on an international stage.

Syria holds special significance due to the historical links and strategic location; as it was mentioned in Chapter 4, also regarding their ports. The *Ṭarṭūs* naval station for example provides Russia with an outpost in the Mediterranean Sea with access to warm-water ports which enable projecting their military force, while safeguarding maritime interests and protecting naval assets of Russia's maritime realm.¹⁷² It signifies its desire for recognition as an international power, regional dominance maintenance efforts, and attempts at breaking free of the isolation by the West.

Russia's aim of not living in a unipolar world shaped its strategy in Syria by counterbalancing Western political, economic and even cultural influence in the Middle East. By supporting and participating actively in Syria's civil war, Russia sought to challenge Western supremacy, while becoming an alternative power broker in this volatile region.¹⁷³

In conclusion, going through and analyzing the Russian policy goals that are strongly linked to their long-term interests, emphasizes that Russia's intervention in Syria was no random act but instead an intelligently calculated response to multiple geopolitical, regional and domestic factors.

6.2 Russian Military and Security Policy

According to Borshchevskaya, Russia's primary objective in conducting their military operation against Syria was to support *Baššār al-ʿAsad* and ensure his regime could survive against

¹⁷⁰ Trenin, Dmitri. (2014). *The Ukraine Crisis And The Resumption Of Great-Power Rivalry*. Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center. P. 15-23

¹⁷¹ Trenin (2016). P. 2-5

¹⁷² Kramer (2012)

¹⁷³ Clark, Mason. (2021). *The Russian Military's Lessons Learned In Syria*. Washington: Institute for the Study of War. P. 14-16

increasing pressure from opposition groups.¹⁷⁴ Russia aimed to offer direct military aid and play an instrumental role in regaining territory losses, while weakening opposition organizations using air power, ground troops and modern weapons.¹⁷⁵

However, Russia was aware of the possible reaction of the rebel groups, who have shown resilience and adaptability by holding back regime advances in certain areas. Even amid significant internal divisions, challenges within their ranks, advances by regime allies and other obstacles faced during the conflict, rebel factions managed to maintain pockets of control such as *Idlib* in northern Syria by using tactics such as the guerrilla tactics and underground networks alliances.¹⁷⁶

According to Clark (2021),¹⁷⁷ Moscow wanted to demonstrate its ability to project their forces beyond its immediate borders and maintain its influence in the Middle East through its military activities in Syria. Their campaign highlighted their updated military capabilities - employing advanced aircrafts, precision guided weapons and sophisticated command and control systems - deterring potential rivals, while showing Russia's commitment in protecting strategic interests in this region.

An important military development over the last several years has been the rise and subsequent fall of extremist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which emerged as an immensely powerful force, capitalizing on the chaos in Syria to seize vast territories by 2014 using brutal tactics, territorial control measures, and recruiting foreign fighters - drawing international notice at every turn.¹⁷⁸ However, an alliance comprised of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)¹⁷⁹, Kurdish militias, and international partners launched several offensives against ISIS that led to significant territorial losses and the weakening of the terrorists group.

¹⁷⁴ Borshchevskaya (2022)

¹⁷⁵ Weiss, Andrew S.; NG, Nicole. (2019). "Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria", in *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/20/collision-avoidance-lessons-of-u.s.-and-russian-operations-in-syria-pub-78571>

¹⁷⁶ Laub (2023)

¹⁷⁷ Clark (2021). P. 11-32

¹⁷⁸ Mapping Militant Organizations. (2021). *The Islamic State*. Stanford University. Last online access 01.09.2023: <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state>

¹⁷⁹ The SDF is a US backed alliance of forces formed during the Syrian civil war. It is a coalition of ethnic militias and rebel groups in North and East Syria that is primarily composed of Kurdish militias (see: The New Arab & agencies. (2016). "Syria Kurds adopt constitution for autonomous federal region", in *The New Arab*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.newarab.com/news/syria-kurds-adopt-constitution-autonomous-federal-region>) with some Arab, and Assyrian/Syriac, Armenian, Turkmen and Chechen militias. (See: "All Peoples Stand Shoulder To Shoulder Against ISIS In Rojava", in *The Rojava Report*. (2014). Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/11/26/all-peoples-stand-shoulder-to-shoulder-against-isis-in-rojava/>)

Liberations of key cities like *ar-Raqqa*¹⁸⁰ and *Dēr az-Zōr*¹⁸¹ marked major milestones in this fight, though ISIS continues to remain dangerous through sleeper cells and insurgency tactics despite losing much of their territory control.¹⁸²

All of these developments have attracted the Russian military interests, which have provided Moscow with an environment to test and improve its strategies and tactics in ways more reflective of real combat. As an active part in Syria's conflict, Moscow aimed to be able to assess its military hardware, operational ideas, and command structure against rapidly shifting battleground conditions - an invaluable opportunity that helped their ongoing military modernization efforts.¹⁸³ These lessons that could be learned throughout that fight might make the Russian military in future better prepared and more capable than ever for combat engagements. Deployment of military assets such as an airfield in *al-Lāḍiqiyya*¹⁸⁴ and the naval station in *Ṭarṭūs* would create long-term strategic footholds in the Mediterranean region for Russia which ensures the better projecting of power and interests in this area.¹⁸⁵

By being militarily involved in Syria, Russia would gain significant geopolitical leverage, strengthen its negotiation position and influence political decisions on the world scene.¹⁸⁶ Supporting military presences within negotiations and peace talks discussions in the meantime would also put them as a vital participant on the international diplomatic table. By exerting such power over the political process and the shaping of the future of Syria, Russia would establish itself as a key power broker and player within the region.¹⁸⁷

Overall, Russian military and security policy goals in Syria have proven essential in attaining key objectives, such as supporting *al-ʿAsad*'s government, showing Russia's military

¹⁸⁰ Ar-Raqqa is a town in northern Syria, which was also the capital of ISIS.

¹⁸¹ Dēr az-Zōr is a town in eastern Syria, close to the borders with Iraq.

¹⁸² Hassan, Hassan (2017). "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond", in *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, Vol. 10(11). Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/insurgents-again-the-islamic-states-calculated-reversion-to-attrition-in-the-syria-iraq-border-region-and-beyond/>

¹⁸³ Adamsky, Dmitry (Dima). (2020). "Russian Lessons from the Syrian Operation and the Culture of Military Innovation", in *Security Insights* by George C. Marshall European Center For Security Studies. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/russian-lessons-syrian-operation-and-culture-military-innovation>

¹⁸⁴ Al-Lāḍiqiyya is located on the Syrian coast on the Mediterranean Sea.

¹⁸⁵ Kozak, Christopher; Spaulding, Hugo; Urchik, Daniel. (2015). "Warning Update: Russia Expanding Facilities at Ṭarṭūs Naval Base", in *Institute for The Study of War*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.iswresearch.org/2015/09/warning-update-russia-expanding.html>

¹⁸⁶ Allison (2013). P. 795-823

¹⁸⁷ Rumer, Eugene; Weiss, Andrew S. (2019). „A Brief Guide to Russia's Return to the Middle East", in *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/24/brief-guide-to-russia-s-return-to-middle-east-pub-80134>

capabilities, testing and refining their military doctrine, increasing the geopolitical power and strengthening their regional relationships. Russia wanted to demonstrate both its dedication to protect its geopolitical interests in the Middle East, as well as their will to use forceful means to attain its desired ends, both qualities made evident later on in conflict.

6.3 Russian Diplomatic Policy

Russia's diplomatic efforts and peace negotiations for Syria had multiple goals that aligned with both the immediate and long-term interests of their nation. Russia sought to maintain its influence in Syria through an active participation in peace negotiations and actual attempts to make the fighting parties sit on the same table. These goals included maintaining an influential presence in the region, encouraging political solution and regional stability, while at the same time restricting Western influence, especially the one of the US, and promoting multipolarity.¹⁸⁸

Both Russia and the US seek to portray themselves as peacemakers and influential global players. Each pursues this aim with their own strategies and narratives.¹⁸⁹ Some of the American interventions in other countries' internal affairs, and even sometimes its military invasion into the territory of those countries under the pretext of spreading democracy and peace, ended up with heavy losses,¹⁹⁰ long-term problems and tensions within the country in question (such as the invasion of Iraq)¹⁹¹, so that many political analysts see it as causing trouble rather than bringing peace (especially biased analysts).¹⁹² Despite this, America is always trying to show the world that it is the savior and fighting terrorism, trying to promote stability and spread peace in troubled countries.¹⁹³ That image was born out of the struggle with the Soviet Union during the Cold War and until today against the Russian Federation, in an attempt by both countries to mitigate the geopolitical and regional influence of the other, and to strengthen its control and international hegemony by harnessing all means to achieve their previously set political, economic, military, diplomatic and cultural goals.

¹⁸⁸ Smagin (2023)

¹⁸⁹ Cafarella, Jennifer; Zhou, Jason. (2019). *Russia's Dead-End Diplomacy In Syria*. Washington: Institute for the Study of War. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/russias-dead-end-diplomacy-syria>

¹⁹⁰ Spector, R. H. (2023). "Vietnam War", in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War>

¹⁹¹ Wu, Edith Y. (2013). "Should The United States Intervene In International Conflicts: Why, When, And How?", in *Indiana International & Comparative Law Review*. Vol. 23(2) .P. 167-170

¹⁹² "Maqāla: al-wilāyāt al-muttaḥida ʔakbar muḥarrib li-s-salām al-ʕālamī baʕd al-ḥarb al-ʕālamīyya at-tāniya", in *Ṣaḥīfat aš-šaʕb al-yaumiyya ʔūnlān*. (2021). Last online access 03.09.2023: <http://arabic.people.com.cn/n3/2021/0917/c31663-9897726.html>

¹⁹³ Bush, George W.. (2002). *On America's International Strategy*. The White House Washington. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nssall.html>

In order to achieve that, the United States prides itself on advocating democracy, human rights, and freedom worldwide. They emphasize their dedication to spread values that foster peace and stability around the globe.¹⁹⁴ The United States actively engages in multilateral organizations and international fora, showing its willingness to utilize diplomatic measures as part of an attempt to resolve international tensions and meet global challenges. It also regularly assists countries impacted by natural disasters or conflicts by providing humanitarian aid, which shows their dedication to alleviating suffering and maintaining stability.¹⁹⁵

The United States frequently forms coalitions with like-minded nations (which in return disturbs Russia) to tackle international problems like terrorism, climate change and public health, demonstrating its capacity for leading collaborative efforts toward peace. US diplomats utilize diplomatic negotiations in an attempt to address international conflicts through communication or mediate between disputant parties - often acting as arbitrators between them if necessary.¹⁹⁶ The Camp David Accords¹⁹⁷ and the Dayton Agreement¹⁹⁸ are considered by the United States to be examples of the US being a peace broker in regional and international conflicts.¹⁹⁹

On the other hand, Russia aimed to consolidate its role as an essential mediator and power broker in the world and the Middle Eastern region, in particular by taking an active part in diplomatic initiatives. Russia advocated for a political solution for Syria, which aligned with their interests, while guaranteeing continuity for *Baššār al-ʿAsad's* rule - in contrast to Western

¹⁹⁴ OAS Peace Found. (2003). *Declaration on Security in the Americas: Adopted at the third plenary session of the Organization of American States of October 28, 2003 Mexico City, Mexico*. Virtual Library of Inter-America Peace Initiatives. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.oas.org/sap/peacefund/VirtualLibrary/DeclarationSecurityAmericas/DeclarationSecurityintheAmericas.pdf>

¹⁹⁵ Blinken, Antony J. (2023). *The United States Announces Nearly \$172 Million in Additional Humanitarian Assistance for Sudan and Neighboring Countries* [press statement]. Published by US Department of State. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.state.gov/the-united-states-announces-nearly-172-million-in-additional-humanitarian-assistance-for-sudan-and-neighboring-countries/>

¹⁹⁶ Rand, Martin. (2021). "What Can Corporate Negotiators Learn From U.S. Diplomats?", in *Forbes*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/martinrand/2021/06/11/what-can-corporate-negotiators-learn-from-us-diplomats/>

¹⁹⁷ The Camp David Accords were two political agreements signed between Egypt and Israel in 1978. (See also: Quandt, William B. (1988). *The Middle East: Ten Years After Camp David*. Washington: Brookings Institution Press. P. 2)

¹⁹⁸ The Dayton Agreement was a peace agreement that put an end to the three-and-a-half-year-long Bosnian War, which was part of the much larger Yugoslav Wars. (See also: "Summary of the Dayton Peace Agreement on Bosnia-Herzegovina", in *University of Minnesota, Human Rights Library*. (1995). Last online access 03.09.2023: <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/icty/dayton/daytonsum.html>)

¹⁹⁹ "Camp David Accords and the Arab-Israeli Peace Process", in *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations (1977-1980)*. Published in Office of the Historian. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/camp-david>

powers and other regional actors, which have demanded his removal.²⁰⁰ Moscow desired that any transition of power did not lead to *al-ʿAsad* being replaced, since the Syrian regime has been their strategic ally for decades. Russia wanted to strongly demonstrate its intention on the international stage of fighting instability by focusing on confronting terrorism. Therefore, it sought to strengthen international cooperation against terrorist threats such as ISIS through active participation in military operations and diplomatic initiatives that showed its dedication towards combatting extremism and terrorism.²⁰¹ Through such participation Russia attempted to project an image of both responsibility and pragmatism when approaching complex conflicts. Later peace initiatives like the Astana Process might be regarded as the end product of their diplomatic policy goals.²⁰²

In order to keep up with the American image of being the “superhero”, Russia sought to assist Syria with humanitarian assistance and reconstruction after the civil war had concluded. It aligned this goal with its interest of maintaining stability and shaping reconstruction processes to their advantage, which eventually serves their initial economic policy goals as well.²⁰³

Russia's diplomatic policy goals towards Syria were fundamentally tied with its overall foreign policy, which consists of maintaining influence in the region and increasing military dominance in order to counter Western supremacy by offering diplomatic initiatives and alternatives. This policy would allow them to be seen as a reliable partner in regional and global affairs.

6.4 Russia's Economic and Cultural Policy

Russia's initial policy in the Syrian conflict from 2011 were driven by strategic, geopolitical and regional considerations. While their goals adapted with changing dynamics over time, some consistent themes and objectives can still be distinguished.

An ultimate Russian policy goal had an enormous impact on their interests in Syria: namely the economic one, which was driven by strategic, commercial and geopolitical considerations. Although economic involvement was not its sole motivation, still, its influence played an essential part in shaping Russia's actions and interests during the Syria conflict. Russia had

²⁰⁰ Borshchevskaya (2022)

²⁰¹ Embassy of the Russian Federation in Norway. (2016). *Fight against international terrorism and extremism, other new challenges and threats*. Last online access 03.09.2023: https://norway.mid.ru/en/fight_against_international_terrorism_and_extremism_other_new_challenges_and_threats/

²⁰² Lewis (2022). P. 653–673

²⁰³ Smagin (2023). However recently Russia vetoes UN vote to extend key Syria aid route. (See also: United Nations. (2023). “In Meeting Following Russian Federation’s Veto of Cross-Border Aid Text, General Assembly Speakers Highlight Humanitarian Consequences for Millions”, in *Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://press.un.org/en/2023/ga12517.doc.htm>)

sought to secure its economic interests in Syria in sectors like energy, arms sales and infrastructure development.²⁰⁴ By maintaining an ongoing presence there, they hoped to take advantage of any post-conflict reconstruction opportunities, which might present themselves.²⁰⁵

Russia's state-owned energy companies²⁰⁶ expressed an interest in participating in Syria's energy sector - specifically oil and gas exploration/extraction and infrastructure development projects - during the ongoing conflict in Syria, in terms of exploration contracts or potential cooperation post conflict energy projects.²⁰⁷ Russia would eventually sign an agreement in 2017 to help modernize and expand an oil refinery located near Syria's coastal city of *Ṭarṭūs* in an attempt to increase Syria's refining capacity and domestic processing of crude oil, which is a fulfillment of Russia's initial economic policy goal.²⁰⁸

Syria has historically been one of the greatest purchasers of Russian arms.²⁰⁹ To enrich the economic profits, Russia aimed not only to maintain these deals, but also to expand them. Even during this conflict (which will also be discussed later in this thesis) Russia continued supplying weapons and military equipment directly to the Syrian government - supporting their arms industry economically.²¹⁰

Russia expressed interests in exploring and extracting Syria's mineral resources, specifically those related to phosphate mining for agricultural fertilizers and the industrial manufacturing production.²¹¹ These essential resources make up one of the cores in modern agriculture and industry alike.²¹² Phosphate deposits are essential components of agricultural productivity and

²⁰⁴ Sogoloff (2017)

²⁰⁵ Asseburg, Muriel. (2020). *Reconstruction in Syria Challenges and Policy Options for the EU and its Member States*. SWP Research Paper 11. Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs. P. 12-13

²⁰⁶ More on that see also: Soldatkin, Vladimir. (2014). "INTERVIEW-Complete Syrian peace not needed for energy deals-Russian firm", in *Reuters*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-soyuzneftegaz-syria-idUKL6N0M718Z20140313>

²⁰⁷ Sogoloff (2017)

²⁰⁸ One of the largest oil refineries in Syria is located in *Bānyās*, close to *Ṭarṭūs*. Nevertheless, the agreement allows Russia mainly to dredge the Mediterranean port in *Ṭarṭūs*, install floating berths and carry out repair works. See: Reuters [et. al.]. (2017). "Russian lease on *Ṭarṭūs* naval base expanded", in *Deutsche Welle*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.dw.com/en/new-russia-syria-accord-allows-up-to-11-warships-in-Ṭarṭūs-port-simultaneously/a-37212976>

²⁰⁹ Shuster, Simon. (2012). "Russian Realpolitik: Inside the Arms Trade with Syria", in *Time Magazine*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://world.time.com/2012/07/01/russian-realpolitik-inside-the-arms-trade-with-syria/>

²¹⁰ Fakihi, Lama. (2018). "Russia Makes a Killing off its Military Support to Assad", in *Atlantic Council*. Cited from Human Rights Watch. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/13/russia-makes-killing-its-military-support-assad>

²¹¹ Al-Allaf, Azzam; Said, Salam. (2021). *Russian investment in Syrian phosphate : opportunities and challenges*. European University Institute. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/69882>

²¹² Department of Primary Industries. *Why phosphorus is important*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/agriculture/soils/more-information/improvement/phosphorous#:~:text=Phosphorus%20is%20one%20of%20the,for%20seedlings%20and%20young%20plants>

Russia likely sought access to these reserves, so it could sustain both its own agricultural industry and potentially export fertilizers abroad. Phosphate mining is an expensive long-term undertaking requiring substantial investments in infrastructure, technology and extraction processes.²¹³ Although specific agreements might not have been struck during the conflict, Russia could have sought to establish a long-term cooperation on extracting phosphate once stability has returned in Syria.

Russia has proposed its involvement in reconstructing Syria's infrastructure, such as roads, bridges and utilities. Russia has used international forums and discussions about Syria's future to demonstrate their intention of participating in its reconstruction, such as those held within the framework of UN and other organizations.²¹⁴

Russia's participation in rebuilding key infrastructure elements could serve to showcase its engineering and construction expertise and attract future partnerships for similar projects worldwide. Russia's involvement in reconstruction could create investment opportunities in Syria's infrastructure sector for Russian firms - this may include contracts related to construction, engineering services or equipment provision.²¹⁵ While specific projects might have not come to fruition due to continued conflict in Syria, Russia nevertheless sought a stable position within reconstruction efforts in Syria as an integral player.

As far as the cultural policy goals are concerned, Russia aimed to have an immense cultural influence in Syria for years to come through diplomatic relationships, educational exchanges, artistic collaborations and shared historical ties.

Cultural influence plays a pivotal role in international relationships and power dynamics, particularly when an influential nation attempts to exert their power over smaller ones. It is one element of soft power - or the capacity to affect people through appeal and attraction rather than coercion.²¹⁶ By projecting its culture, values and way of life to smaller nations, dominant nations can build positive perceptions among local citizens as they portray positive images of themselves and increase the goodwill. While smaller countries might be at first negatively

²¹³ De Ridder, Marjolein; De Jong, Sijbren; Polchar, Joshua; Lingemann, Stephanie. (2012). *Risks and Opportunities in the Global Phosphate Rock Market*. Den Haag: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies. P. 37-56

²¹⁴ Oxford Analytica. (2017). "Syrian reconstruction plans will multiply", in *Expert Briefings*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://doi.org/10.1108/OXAN-DB2176099>

²¹⁵ Matveev, Igor. (2019). *Syria Transition Challenges Project*. The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). P. 3-5

²¹⁶ Saaïda, M. B. E. (2023). "The Role of Culture and Identity in International Relations", in *East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences*. Vol. 4(1). P.49-57

influenced by unpleasant narratives about dominant nations, cultural influence can offer another perspective and overthrow preconceived notions.²¹⁷

Cultural influence can help dominant countries establish legitimacy and acceptance among smaller nation's populations. When smaller nation residents feel an affinity or admiration towards dominant country policies and actions, their opinion can become more favorable toward such actions taken by it.²¹⁸

Cultural diplomacy uses cultural elements like arts, music, language and education to foster international relations. Engaging in cultural exchanges, educational programs or artistic collaborations allow a dominant country to build mutual understanding and cooperations with smaller countries.²¹⁹ Dominant countries tend to establish cultural norms and values they wish to spread around the globe through cultural influence. In the meantime, cultural exchange is used as a method for this distribution process and could result in smaller nations adopting practices or beliefs over time .

An influential nation can use cultural influence to form narratives and construct perceptions about themselves and the world, thus shaping how its actions and intentions are understood in the international arena, shaping smaller nations' perspectives on certain matters.²²⁰ This creates long-term bonds rooted in shared cultural values and connections that extend far beyond political change and contribute to stability and cooperation between dominant and smaller countries.²²¹

Cultural relations can also open doors to economic cooperations and trade. When people in smaller nations learn and appreciate the culture of dominant countries, it often fosters commercial ties that lead to business partnerships between both nations.²²²

²¹⁷ Drew, C. (2023). "35 Cultural Influence Examples", in *Helpful Professor*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://helpfulprofessor.com/cultural-influence-examples/>

²¹⁸ Mains. S.P. (2009). "Imperialism, Cultural", in *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*. Kitchin, Rob; Thrift, Nigel [Editors]. 2009. Amsterdam-Boston: Elsevier. P. 322-329

²¹⁹ UNESCO. (2023). *Cutting Edge | From standing out to reaching out: cultural diplomacy for sustainable development*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/cutting-edge-standing-out-reaching-out-cultural-diplomacy-sustainable-development#:~:text=Building%20on%20the%20notion%20of,order%20to%20foster%20mutual%20understanding%E2%80%9D>

²²⁰ Albritton, Mamie; Pisano, Grace. (2022). *What is Cultural Perception?* [online video]. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://study.com/learn/lesson/cultural-perception-influences-examples.html#:~:text=How%20do%20cultural%20differences%20influence,view%20the%20world%20around%20them>

²²¹ Diamond, Sara; Weston, Alia. (2019). *Culture Creates Bonds. Project Report*. OCAD University Visual Analytics Lab. P. 8-15

²²² V. D. Borg, Jan; Paulo Russo, Anotnio. (2005). *The Impacts Of Culture On The Economic Development Of Cities*. European Institute for Comparative Urban Research, Erasmus University Rotterdam P. 26-31

Culture plays in general a significant role in building up national identities and prestige. Being recognized and celebrated for cultural contributions increases the global standing and influence.²²³

After World War II, Syria achieved independence from French governance in 1946,²²⁴ and diplomatic ties were immediately established with this newly independent nation by the Soviet Union.²²⁵

In order to keep this decades long cultural influence alive, Russia set a policy goal to expand on its cultural presence in Syria during and after the end of the civil conflict. They sought to enhance cultural and educational ties between the two nations, particularly through programs offering scholarships to Syrian students to study in Russia as well as cultural exchange programs.²²⁶ Russia knows how effective a language can be to deliver their cultural and literary messages in order to make the Syrian people tied to their own cultural values and standards. Therefore, Russia would encourage Syrians to learn Russian as both an act of cultural exchange and as an avenue for educational advancement in Russia.²²⁷ Their diplomatic missions had to do an enormous job and engage actively in cultural diplomacy events to foster a mutual cultural understanding and friendship between the two countries.²²⁸

Overall, Russia's economic and cultural policy goals in Syria involve strengthening diplomatic ties, expanding regional influence, and creating a mutual understanding between the two nations. Russia views these efforts as part of their overall plan and other policy goals to remain strategically present within the Middle Eastern region, while becoming an integral player under its own political, economic, military and cultural standards.

²²³ Barkow, J. H. [et.al.]. (1975). "Prestige and Culture: A Biosocial Interpretation [and Comments and Replies]", in *Current Anthropology*. Vol. 16(4). P. 553-572

²²⁴ Atassi, Karim. (2018). *Syria, the Strength of an Idea*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 101-179

²²⁵ Ginat (2000). P. 150-155

²²⁶ Study In Russia. (2019). *Higher Education in Russia for Syrian Nationals*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://studyinrussia.ru/en/actual/articles/higher-education-in-russia-for-syrian-nationals/>

²²⁷ Rantisi, Amal. (2021). "Soft power: Russia using Syrian children to boost its profile in Syria", in *Enab Baladi*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/07/soft-power-russia-using-syrian-children-to-boost-its-profile-in-syria/>. The Russian language is also nowadays a subject in the Syrian school system. Students can choose between it and French in the seventh grade. (See also: Cunningham, Svetlana. (2017). "Russian Has Become 'Second Language' Taught in Syrian Schools, Official Says", in *Voanews*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.voanews.com/a/russian-second-language-syria-schools/3820328.html>

²²⁸ Ğbūr, Nawwār. (2023). "Bayn al-Farisiyya w al-Rūsiyya... Širāf Taqāfāt fī Sūryā", in *Al-Mağalla*. Last online access 03.09.2023: <https://www.majalla.com/node/298561/%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B9/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>

7 The Russian Media Portrayal of the Syrian Conflict²²⁹

Russian media landscape is defined by a significant amount of state control and influence, raising questions of media freedom and independence. Many major media outlets in Russia are either directly state owned²³⁰ or have close ties to the Russian government.²³¹ As a result, official narratives and viewpoints tend to dominate the media landscape, while any alternative opinions can face restrictions or persecution from authorities.²³²

To the most important characteristics of the Russian media belong state influence, limited (or lack of) pluralism, censorship and restrictions, propaganda and disinformation, nationalism and patriotism.²³³ Although independent media outlets exist in Russia, their reach and influence can often be insignificant in comparison with state-controlled outlets. Independent voices may struggle to compete with the resources and reach of state media.²³⁴

Critical reporting, particularly on contentious subjects like government corruption or human rights abuses, can result in censorship, harassment or legal actions being brought against journalists and media outlets - with some facing physical harm or even death for their work.²³⁵

²²⁹ It is specifically meant here, the Russian media that is broadcasted in Russia, or the media coverage from the sources that related to the Russian government.

²³⁰ To the most well-known international TV networks that are owned by Russia belongs Russia Today (RT). RT is an international TV channel funded by Russia that broadcasts news with an emphasis on Russian government policies. Operating across multiple languages and providing international news coverage, which highlights viewpoints that support Putin/Putin's narrative. Its reporting can often be perceived as biased or even as disinformation, for which it has been criticized. (See: Haigh, Maria; Haigh, Thomas; Kozak, Nadine I. (2018). "Stopping Fake News: the work practices of peer-to-peer counter propaganda", in *Journalism Studies*. Vol. 19(14). P. 2062-2087). After the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the entire European Union as well as Canada announced they were formally ban RT. (See: Zimonjic, Peter. (2022). "CRTC bans Russian state-controlled TV channels RT, RT France from Canadian airwaves", in *CBC News*. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/crtc-russia-today-broadcasting-decision-1.6386929>). Sputnik News, another state-owned international news agency owned by Russia, that promotes their government viewpoints, covers global news and issues from an angle that often mirrors that of the Kremlin-linked narrative. (See: Missiroli, A.; Andersson, J. J.; Gaub, F.; Popescu, N.; Wilkins, J.-J. (2016). "Strategic Communications From The East", in: *Strategic communications: East and South*. Lisbon: EU Institute for Security Studies. P. 7-24). Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sputnik was banned in the European Union in February 2022. (See: Kayali, Laura. (2022). "EU to ban Russia's RT, Sputnik media outlets, von der Leyen says", in *Politico*. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.politico.eu/article/ursula-von-der-leyen-announces-rt-sputnik-ban/>)

²³¹ Krasnoboka, Natalya. (2017). "Media Landscapes: Russia", in *European Journalism Centre*. Last online access 04.09.2023: https://web.archive.org/web/20180320003807/http://ejc.net/media_landscapes/russia

²³² "Russian Federation: Events of 2022", in *Human Rights Watch*. (2022) Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/russian-federation>

²³³ Khvostunova, Olga. (2013). *A complete guide to who controls the Russian news media*. Index on Censorship. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.indexoncensorship.org/2013/12/brief-history-russian-media/>

²³⁴ Krylov, Yuri. (2022). "Independent Media Is Key To Democracy In Russia And Lasting Peace In Europe", in *Free Russia Foundation*. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.4freerussia.org/independent-media-is-key-to-democracy-in-russia-and-lasting-peace-in-europe/>

²³⁵ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. (2022) *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022: Russia*. United States Department of State. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/russia/>

Russian state media outlets have long been accused with spreading propaganda and disinformation both domestically and abroad, by pushing alternative narratives on international events or shaping the public opinion to support Kremlin-centric goals.²³⁶

State-controlled media often emphasize Russian nationalism and patriotism, portraying Russia as a strong and resilient global power. Unfortunately, their dominance in the media landscape can limit the diversity of viewpoints and diminish open discourse around controversial issues.²³⁷

It is important to note, independent media outlets and journalists in Russia play an integral part of its media environment - they strive to deliver a more accurate reporting despite the risks and pressures they must navigate daily.²³⁸ It should also be remembered that while state-controlled media are important sources, operating independently in such an environment may present its own set of challenges and restrictions, such as limited access to sources and financing.

Most likely inspired by the Russian model²³⁹, the Syrian media landscape has long been heavily controlled and manipulated by its government, particularly under *al-ʿAsad*’s reign. State control over media has been used as a weapon to spread propaganda, shape public opinion and crush any possible opposition movements or suppress dissenters.²⁴⁰ Recently however, Russian media have also made inroads into Syrian media outlets following Russia’s involvement in Syria’s conflict.

As in Russia, Syria government under *Al-Asad*’s regime has tightly managed and directed the media. State owned outlets serve to advance the regime’s agenda and portray it in an ideal light. Syria’s media outlets have long served as tools of propaganda for their ruling elite . Independent

²³⁶ Christopher, Paul; Matthews, Miriam. (2016). *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>

²³⁷ Khachaturian, Rafael. (2009). “The Specter of Russian Nationalism”, in *Dissent*. Vol. 56(1). P. 23-24

²³⁸ Myklebost, Kari Aga. (2023). “War Resistance and Independent Journalism: Russian Journalists in Exile. (Спротивлення війні і незалежна журналістика: російські журналісти в еміграції)”, in *The Barents Observer*. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/opinions/2023/07/war-resistance-and-independent-journalism-russian-journalists-exile>

²³⁹ Smīsim, ʿAbsī. (2017). “ʿAdlaḡa wa fabrakāt wa ʿakādīb... al-ʿiḡlāmayn as-Sūrī w-ar-Rūsī: madrasa wāḡida taṣnaʿuḡa al-istiḡbārāt”, in *Al-ʿArabī al-ḡadīd*. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D9%86%D8%B9%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A>

²⁴⁰ Sturdee, Nick. (2013). “BBC documentary examines Syria’s state TV channel al Ikhbariya”, in *The Guardian*. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/feb/10/bbc-documentary-syria-state-television>

journalism is severely restricted; journalists frequently face intimidation or violence for doing their work independently.²⁴¹ Syrian media tends to view itself as a protector against "terrorist" threats to society. Coverage of Syria's civil conflict typically highlights government victories and characterizes opposition groups negatively.²⁴² Remaining independent and opposition media outlets operating inside Syria have faced incredible difficulties operating effectively due to threats, harassment and repression, while many media professionals have already left due to threats and oppression.²⁴³

Since the two countries aim to protect the same interests, it is important to unite their media efforts to deliver the same message to the people who support them. A repetition of propaganda sentences that stress the importance of the war against terrorism can be seen in the Syrian media. The same pretext is used by the Russian media for its military intervention in Syria. In this thesis, a technical, media, or journalistic analysis of the Russian and Syrian media by the author will not be done, rather the focus will be on presenting the common characteristics and features between the two medias, and how they were described and analyzed by specialists in this field. The most important aspect in the present thesis as for this subject is to focus on the topics covered by the Russian media regarding its presence in Syria and how it reports the events there. However, specific examples will not be addressed per se; this is due to the difficulty or inability to access media materials issued by the Russian authorities, due to the ban by the European Union of most Russian channels that tend towards the Russian government, including Russia Today and Sputnik. Rather the aim is to give a general picture of what the Russian media is trying to spread to its people and the world.

7.1 Russian Media Coverage of the Syrian Conflict

How the Russian media has covered the Syrian civil war had an important effect on public opinion and narratives surrounding this conflict, shaping the point of view across Russia.²⁴⁴ Diana Darke contends that Russia has utilized state-controlled media channels such as RT and Sputnik as key platforms to disseminate their perspective of the war to their populations. Media coverage often features stories highlighting Russia's fight against terrorism and the support of *al-Asad's* legitimate government as central themes. They emphasize extremist organizations as

²⁴¹ Reporters Without Borders. (2023). *Syria*. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://rsf.org/en/country/syria>

²⁴² Chulov, Martin. (2012). "Syrian regime TV reporter defects", in *The Guardian*. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jul/02/syrian-regime-tv-reporter-defects>

²⁴³ Reporters Without Borders (2023)

²⁴⁴ Due to a lack of access to the material of the Russian media portraying the Syrian conflict, this chapter will focus on the literature about the Russian media, but not the Russian media itself, in order to present an overview of the Russian media coverage of the Syrian conflict.

major security risks in Syria and portray Russia's military participation as essential to defeat them and protect Russia's interests in Syria.²⁴⁵

This version characterizes the Syrian crisis as an intricate geopolitical struggle involving parties outside its borders, including America and its allies, that must be won over through international coalition. Russian media outlets tend to downplay or ignore news of human rights atrocities committed by the Syrian government members and supporters; instead, they stress extremist organizations activities as essential obstacles towards a stabilization.²⁴⁶ Through this strategy it was desired to improve the view of Russia as an advocate of sovereign rights in order to counterbalance Western hegemony.

Russian media coverage of the Syrian crisis sought to build domestic support for Russia's military involvement and portray it as a successful operation - this helped maintain national pride and justify Russia's prolonged engagement in this fight.²⁴⁷ Successes were highlighted like the provision of humanitarian supplies and the liberation of major territories from the extremist grip.

Russian media sources generally portrayed *al-ʔAsad* and the Syrian government in a favorable light, portraying them as legitimate authorities, who protect stability against external an invasion.²⁴⁸ Russia offered assistance for Syria through collaboration in counterterrorism measures as well as humanitarian supplies. These images attempted to reduce criticism directed against *al-ʔAsad* in the international media for his administration's corruption while simultaneously emphasizing his role as an effective leader fighting terrorism and trying to restore order.²⁴⁹

Russian media coverage of the Syrian civil war sought to challenge and debunk Western narratives and representations of it, frequently accusing Western outlets of providing biased reporting and coverage and disseminating disinformation. The parotitic media intentionally

²⁴⁵ Darke, Diana. (2022). "Putin in Palmyra: How Russia won the "truth" battle in Syria and learned lessons for Ukraine", in *Middle East Institute*. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/putin-palmyra-how-russia-won-truth-battle-syria-and-learned-lessons-ukraine>

²⁴⁶ Christopher, Paul; Matthews, Miriam (2016)

²⁴⁷ Walker, Shaun. (2016). "Syrian mission restores pride in Russian military after years of decay", in *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/15/syrian-mission-restores-pride-in-russian-military-after-years-of-decay>

²⁴⁸ Yūsif ʕAlī, ʔIsrāʔ Yūsif ʕAlī. (2022). "Muʕālaḡat al-ʔAzma as-Sūriyya fī al-ʔIslām ar-Rūsī "Qanāt Rūsya al-Yawm"", in *ʔĀfāq ʔĀsyawīyya*. Vol. 5(2). P. 159-176

²⁴⁹ Министерство иностранных дел Российской Федерации. (2012). *Comment of the Department of Press and Information of MFA of Russia due to the appeal of the leaders of UN agencies regarding the humanitarian assistance to Syria*. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://mid.ru/tv/?id=1623709&lang=en>

frames Russia's participation as a necessary reaction for protecting civilians against terror attacks, while questioning Western positions.²⁵⁰ Such an approach also seeks to discredit Western narratives, meanwhile elevating Russia-based outlets as sources of alternative (and more truthful) analysis and information.

Concerns have been expressed over the authenticity and impartiality of material broadcasted, since Russian medias portrayal of the Syria war has been heavily criticized for downplaying violations to human rights and civilian suffering caused by Syrian government supporters.²⁵¹ While alternative narratives might appeal to particular audiences because of their different view of Western interventionism in Middle East regions, it often offers results in a politicization of perspectives on crisis. Thus, demonstrating why in-depth studies using multiple data sources is required in order to gain a full understanding of the Syria civil war conflict.

In general, Russia's involvement in Syria met little domestic resistance at home, rather most citizens - including political opponents - accepted their government's message that its intervention aimed at combating terrorism. Reports regarding chemical weapons usage by Syrian forces and civilian casualties have not drastically shifted the public opinion. This demonstrates a resilience of the public view because of government's narrative control over media information distribution.²⁵² Similarities to Russia's misguided involvement in Afghanistan in the 1980s arose as well - an involvement that led to political and economical problems and significant casualties for the Soviet Union.²⁵³ Older Russians fear such a scenario repeating itself again in Syria which would erode public sentiment negatively. Recent conversations regarding government's reporting of casualty numbers suggest that official reports may have underestimated them - likely in an attempt to alleviate public anxieties and prevent comparisons to the intervention in Afghanistan. The Kremlin's announcements of small victories and partial troop withdrawals from Syria at that time were intended to give an appearance that the conflict was winding down. However, Russian forces remain on the ground,

²⁵⁰ Nocettei, Julien. (2019). "Dazed and Confused: Russian "Information Warfare" and the Middle East – The Syria Lessons", in *EuroMeSCo policy brief*. Vol. 93. Published by IEMed. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.iemed.org/publication/dazed-and-confused-russian-information-warfare-and-the-middle-east-the-syria-lessons/>

²⁵¹ Luhn, Alec. (2016). "Russian media could almost be covering a different war in Syria", in *The Guardian*. Last online access 04.09.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/03/russia-media-coverage-syria-war-selective-defensive-kremlin>

²⁵² Reuters Staff. (2017). "Russia's Putin says certain Syria's Assad didn't use chemical weapons", in *Reuters*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-idUSKBN18Q209>

²⁵³ Reuben, Rafael; Prakash, Aseem. (1999). "The Afghanistan war and the breakdown of the Soviet Union", in *Review of International Studies*. Vol. 25(4). P.693–708

suggesting an element of inconsistency of these announcements.²⁵⁴ Public fatigue with Syria has increased steadily among the Russian society. A poll conducted in 2019 showed that most respondents preferred the ending of military operations there due to internal challenges and other foreign policy priorities in Russia.²⁵⁵ Nowadays, it can be noticed that Russia is increasingly shifting its foreign policy focus away from Syria towards other regions and conflicts, such as Belarus' political crisis²⁵⁶ or more importantly the war in Ukraine²⁵⁷. Consequently, the Syrian conflict seem currently less urgent for Russia's foreign policy considerations in its media.²⁵⁸

In conclusion, the Russian media coverage of Syria acts as an invaluable instrument in shaping narratives, public opinion and furthering Russia's geopolitical goals. Support is shown for Syria's regime, and the critical viewpoints from Western sources are dismissed partially or even entirely. Domestic support remains intact, while the Russian military participation continues. However, criticism on the active role in Syria arises as Russia's focus point is beginning to shift to Europe. Domestic support remains intact, while Russia maintains military participation through domestic funding streams. However, it has also been criticized for appearing to minimize breaches of human rights standards, since some experts question its objectivity. For a more accurate overall picture of the situation in Syria, individuals must engage in critical analysis and research various information sources as well as media materials.

8 The Realization of Russia's Objectives in Syria

Even though Russia's operation in Syria has come under considerable criticism, they have met many of their goals successfully. It is alleged that Russia is often blamed for providing support to *al-Asad's* regime, which has been accused of committing war crimes and violating the human rights of its own citizens.²⁵⁹ Russia's involvement enabled it to strengthen *the* regime's

²⁵⁴ Petkova, Mariya. (2017). "Do Russians care about Syria?", in *Al Jazeera*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2017/9/30/do-russians-care-about-syria>

²⁵⁵ "Fewer Than Half of Russians Support Syria Campaign, Poll Says", in *The Moscow Times*. (2019). Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/06/fewer-than-half-of-russians-support-syria-campaign-poll-says-a65494>

²⁵⁶ "Putin offers help to resolve crisis at Belarus and EU border", in *Reuters*. (2021). Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-offers-help-resolve-crisis-belarus-eu-border-2021-11-14/>

²⁵⁷ Ashby, Heather; Glantz, Mary. (2023). "What You Need to Know About Russia's New Foreign Policy Concept", in *United States Institute of Peace*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/05/what-you-need-know-about-russias-new-foreign-policy-concept>

²⁵⁸ Petkova (2017)

²⁵⁹ Fakhri (2018)

position and gain back key territories - fulfilling their goal of keeping their strong allies within their regional strategy until this day.²⁶⁰

However, *al-ʿAsad*'s regime is still facing considerable difficulties in Syria, despite the fact that Russia has played an instrumental role in helping it gain back control of many key areas in Syria, including major cities like *Ḥalab*²⁶¹ and *Ḥumṣ*²⁶², which has resulted in a significant reductions of opposition military capabilities. Still, conflict and instability exist across various regions of Syria despite these gains.²⁶³

The Russia-allied regime has faced resistance from various rebel groups and Kurdish forces. Extremist groups including ISIS and *Hayʿat Taḥrīr aš-Šām* (HTS) still operate in some regions.²⁶⁴ If the The relatively small military victory put aside, the Syrian regime remains incapable of restoring order in some regions like the North-East, solving humanitarian crises upon the Syrian refugees outside of Syria (who were forced to flee due to the ongoing war) or improving the internal conditions for its people who suffer particularly because of the prolonged warfare.²⁶⁵ As for Russia, it has achieved its strategic goals, making Syria subject to achieving its other goals, such as economic and cultural in future.

8.1 The Realization of Russia's Security Objectives

Russia's involvement in combatting ISIS and other extremist groups contributed to the change of the situation and limit terrorist organizations from expanding to a certain extent, which enhanced Russia's reputation as a responsible global player in fighting terrorism.²⁶⁶ Russia established a permanent military presence in Syria through its intervention, further cementing its influence and providing it with a platform from which it could project its power into the Mediterranean region.

²⁶⁰ Borshchevskaya (2022)

²⁶¹ Ḥalab is a city in northern Syria.

²⁶² Ḥumṣ is a city in western Syria.

²⁶³ Balanche, Fabrice. (2021). "The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty Over Syria", in *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assad-regime-has-failed-restore-full-sovereignty-over-syria>

²⁶⁴ *Hayʿat Tarīr aš-Šām*. See: Holtz, Mackenzie. (2023). "Examining Extremism: Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS)", in *CSIS – Center for Strategic & International Studies*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/examining-extremism/examining-extremism-hayat-tahrir-al-sham-hts>

²⁶⁵ United Nations. (2023). "Following 12 Years Filled with War, Sanctions, Syria Faces Worsening Humanitarian, Economic Crisis of 'Epic Proportions', Special Envoy Tells Security Council", in *Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15182.doc.htm>

²⁶⁶ Kozhanov (2017). P. 21-25

On the other hand, Russia's intervention in Syria further escalated geopolitical tensions and rivalries among regional and international powers, particularly between it and other main powers such as France, the United Kingdom or the United States. Syria became a proxy battlefield, where competing interests - most prominently between Russia and USA - are colliding. These interactions further complicated existing security dynamics by adding additional activities and competing goals from outsiders, which in return increased chances for accidentally escalating incidents that may in turn have greater repercussions for the security and international safety overall.²⁶⁷

While Russia could benefit by strengthening its anti-terror capabilities and consolidating military footing in the region, as well as projecting more of their force, risks and challenges became more likely as security calculations became affected by various aspects such as the complex security situation, potential attacks against Russian forces, returning foreign fighters and their impact on geopolitical tensions. These radicalized individuals in particular, having gained both combat experience and ideological training due to participating in the Syrian conflict, presented a major threat to Russia and neighboring states. The risk posed by terrorist activities or destabilization has become of great concern in terms of national security for Russia itself and bordering/adjacent countries alike.²⁶⁸

8.2 The Realization of Russia's Military Objectives

Russia's military operations in Syria featured both conventional and unconventional strategies that demonstrated Moscow's multifaceted approach for meeting their objectives in Syria. The initial stage of the operation in Syria consisted of an intensive air campaign designed both to directly assist *al-ʿAsad*'s administration forces, while also striking opposition troops *en masse*.²⁶⁹ Russian airstrikes involving various aircrafts like fighter planes, bombers and attack helicopters have proven invaluable in degrading rebel groups' capabilities and opening the way for ground offensives. These airstrikes utilize both precision-guided bombs as well as unguided ones, thus providing various operating options.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁷ Hamilton, Robert; Miller, Chris; Stein, Aaron. (2020). *Russia's Intervention In Syria: Historical And Geopolitical Context*. Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute. P. 1-4

²⁶⁸ Kyle, Joseph. (2023). "The Return of Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Opportunities for Chechnya and Dagestan to Quell Local Insurgencies", in *The International Affairs Review*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.iar-gwu.org/print-archive/blog-post-title-three-hfb6a>

²⁶⁹ Simpson, Michael; R. Grissom, Adam; A. Mouton, Christopher; P. Godges, John; Hanson, Russell. (2022) *Road to Damascus: The Russian Air Campaign in Syria, 2015 to 2018*. Santa Monica: Rand Corporation. P. 14

²⁷⁰ Simpson, Michael; R. Grissom, Adam; A. Mouton, Christopher; P. Godges, John; Hanson, Russell (2022). P. 14-20

Russia provided support for the activities of the regime not only through an air campaign, but also through the deployment of ground soldiers, and establishment of military bases.²⁷¹ Not only have Russian Special troops engaged directly in battle, but their work also included training, advices, and assistance in direct combat operations with Syrian government troops.²⁷² Russian ground troops have participated in offensive operations against opposition-held territories alongside Syrian government troops and allied militias, providing significant reinforcement for *al-ʿAsad*'s military forces and helping it recapture control over key regions and strongholds.²⁷³

Spetsnaz are among the key troops deployed by Russia in Syria and are widely recognized for their high level of training in reconnaissance, sabotage and direct-action missions. Spetsnaz units played an indispensable part in providing advice and assistance to Syrian government forces as well as conducting covert operations against various armed groups.²⁷⁴

Spetsnaz special forces worked closely with GRU Special Forces (Spetsnaz GRU), a part of Russia's General Staff Intelligence Directorate that operates its own special forces units and was involved with intelligence gathering, target selection for airstrikes and training Syrian troops. These Spetsnaz GRU units provided intelligence gathering capabilities as well as target identification services during missions undertaken.²⁷⁵

The most well-known ground troops that were involved in Syria were part of the Wagner Group, which is a private military company (PMC) closely tied to the Russian government that operated in conflict zones all over the world on behalf of Russian interests, often including offensive campaigns that protected nationalist sentiments and Russian national pride. It is comprised mostly of former military personnel who often operated overseas. Wagner Group fighters played an essential part in combat operations in Syria.²⁷⁶ Noteworthy is how Russia used private military companies such as Wagner Group to maintain plausible deniability regarding its

²⁷¹ Axe, David. (2017). "Russia Is Launching Twice as Many Airstrikes as the U.S. in Syria", in *The Daily Beast*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russia-is-launching-twice-as-many-airstrikes-as-the-us-in-syria>

²⁷² Gibbons-Neff, Thomas. (2018). "How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria", in *The New York Times*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html>

²⁷³ Landay, Jonathan; Strobel, Warren. (2015). "U.S. sees bearable costs, key goals met for Russia in Syria so far", in *Reuters*. Last online access 10.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-syria-idUSKBN0UB0BA20151229>

²⁷⁴ Fainberg, Sarah. (2017). "Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict", in *Russie. Nei Visions*. Vol. 105. P. 8-10

²⁷⁵ Bartles, Charles; Grau, Lester. (2020). *The Russian Ground-Based Contingent In Syria*. Foreign Policy Research Institute, Russia's War In Syria. P. 11-14

²⁷⁶ Bartles; Lester (2020). P. 9-11

activities in Syria. Although these units operated with some autonomy, their actions often aligned with Russia's strategic goals in the region.²⁷⁷

8.2.1 Russia's Military Operations in Syria

Some of the key military operations and offensives conducted in Syria with Russian support included the Aleppo (*Ḥalab*) Offensive (2016). Since *Ḥalab* has a significant status of importance to Syria and the Syrian people, being the second most important Syrian city after *Dimašq* and an important economic center for the whole country, it was a striking operation that would increase the regime's-side fighting spirit in the regions retaking process. With strong support from Russian air power and advisors, the Syrian government launched a major offensive to recapture *Ḥalab* from rebel forces.²⁷⁸ This marked a turning point in the conflict as they managed to regain control of eastern *Ḥalab*, which had previously been held by opposition groups for some time.

Another important operation was the Palmyra (*Tadmur*) Liberation in 2016. Again, thanks to Russian air support, Syrian government forces managed to capture *Tadmur* back from ISIS with much symbolic significance, showing off both armies' capabilities together.²⁷⁹ *Tadmur* has an ancient cultural and historical status for the Syrians. The victory in *Tadmur* was being promoted by the Syrian media as a victory for the Syrian identity and history over the terrorists and the destroyers of civilization.

Another operation against ISIS was the Deir al-Zour (*Dēr az-Zōr*) Siege Break in 2017. Syria knew that taking the province of *Dēr az-Zōr* back would be like the break in the chain for ISIS, since its location serves as a bridge between the centers of influence of ISIS' fighters between Syria and Iraq. Russia was important in breaking ISIS's siege on *Dēr az-Zōr* city and lifting their blockade, providing space for further advances against ISIS across eastern Syria.²⁸⁰ This

²⁷⁷ It is important to mention that there were other important Russian special forces deployed in Syria, such as the Marine Special Forces (Morskaya Pehota) and the Alpha Group. Nevertheless, due to the main aim of this thesis being finding the ramifications that the Russian involvement in Syria had, the focus will be mostly on the consequences of the deployment of these troops in Syria, rather than the groups itself.

²⁷⁸ Marcus, Jonathan. (2016). "Syria conflict: Rebels lose third of east Aleppo territory", in *BBC News*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38128370>

²⁷⁹ Dearden, Lizzie. (2016). "Isis 'losing control' of Palmyra as Syrian troops backed by Russian air strikes approach ancient city", in *The Independent*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-losing-control-of-palmyra-as-syrian-troops-backed-by-russian-air-strikes-approach-ancient-city-a6953921.html>

²⁸⁰ "Syria war: Army breaks IS siege of Deir al-Zour", in *BBC News*. (2017). Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41162683>

operation liberated residents and opened new avenues against ISIS' fighters, as they have lost much ground over the coming months.

Moving closer to the capital and again with Russian assistance, Syrian forces launched an offensive to recapture rebel held Eastern Ghouta (*Ġūṭa*) near *Dimašq* in 2018 - a campaign of intense bombardment and ground advances which eventually resulted in its recapture.²⁸¹

To regain control of the Idlib (*ʿIdlib*) province - which had long been held by opposition forces - Syria launched a major offensive with Russian air power's assistance that ultimately resulted in several towns and villages falling back under government control. While facing significant obstacles and criticism internationally, their goal was accomplished.²⁸²

Moving in all directions, this time the South was the next destination, where the Southern Syria Offensive in 2018 took place. Backed by Russian troops, the Syrian government launched an offensive to recapture areas near Jordan's and Israel's borders in an area held by both rebel groups and ISIS-affiliated militants.²⁸³

The Kurds had played an important role in the conflict, especially a military one, as they gathered themselves and created a defensive line mostly against ISIS fighters and those of the Syrian opposition fighting groups that had been supported by Turkey in North Syria.²⁸⁴ The regime's military took their time to regain that area, moreover there were speculations (and criticism from the Syrian opposition) that the Kurdish militias were indeed working with *al-ʿAsad*, and that there was an agreement between both parties.²⁸⁵ The Northern Syria Operations, that were conducted in 2019-20, enabled with Russian support the Syrian government to gain ground previously controlled by Kurdish forces after the withdrawal of US forces and reaching an agreement between Russia and Turkey regarding this region.²⁸⁶

²⁸¹ "Eastern Ghouta: What happened and why", in *Al Jazeera*. (2018). Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/4/14/eastern-ghouta-what-happened-and-why>

²⁸² Nebhay, Stephanie. (2020). "Deadly Syrian, Russian air strikes in Idlib amount to war crimes - U.N.", in *Reuters*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-security-un-warcrimes-idUKKBN2481LK>

²⁸³ Shaheen, Karim. (2018). "Syrian government forces seal victory in southern territories", in *The Guardian*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/31/syrian-government-forces-seal-victory-in-southern-territories>

²⁸⁴ Laub (2023)

²⁸⁵ Regan, Helen; Mackintosh, Eliza. (2019). "Kurdish forces backed by US strike deal with Syria's Assad, in major shift in 8-year war", in *CNN*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/14/middleeast/syria-turkey-kurds-civilians-isis-intl-hnk/index.html>

²⁸⁶ "After 9 days of bloody clashes, Hayyaat Tahrir al-Sham with the "jihadi" factions control about 80% of the area of what is left for the opposition factions within Syrian territory", in *SOHR – The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights*. (2019). Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/111974>

8.2.2 Russia's Enhanced Military Technology and Weaponry in Syria.

As far as the used methods are concerned, Russia used hybrid warfare tactics and information operations to manipulate narratives and influence public opinion, exerting considerable control and an outsized effect over public sentiments. According to Verrier (2023) Russia's actions in Syria have been notable for including elements like misinformation campaigns, propaganda and media manipulation through state-controlled channels like RT. Their aim has been to portray the Syrian civil war as a struggle against terrorist groups while projecting Russia as the protector of stability and sovereignty - attempts that aim at gaining support from the global population for Russia's involvement in Syria.²⁸⁷

Arms deals and military cooperations between Russia and Syria have long had historical roots that predated this most recent conflict. Syria had long been an avid buyer of Russian arms even prior to the beginning hostilities. These deals not only gave Syria military equipment but also deepened strategic ties between both nations.²⁸⁸ Due to their sensitive nature, all details regarding Russian arms deals with Syria during this conflict remain unavailable for now.

Weaponry deals between Russia and Syria included mainly air defense systems and ground force equipment.²⁸⁹ Russia provided the Syrian army units with tanks, armored personnel carriers and other ground-based military vehicles that would bolster their abilities on the battlefield, artillery pieces and rocket systems for the use during combat operations as well as ammunition and small arms that have become vital parts of ground military operations. In addition to providing direct arms supplies, Russia provided training advisers to assist Syrian armed forces use equipment effectively.²⁹⁰

Russia has enhanced their operational abilities in Syria through cutting-edge military technology and sophisticated weapons²⁹¹ such as S-400 Air Defense Systems²⁹², Pantsir Air

²⁸⁷ Verrier, Martin. (2023). "Russian Propaganda And Disinformation", in *Per Concordiam*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://perconcordiam.com/russian-propaganda-and-disinformation/>

²⁸⁸ Shaikh, Zaki. (2015). "What is driving Russian arms sales to Syria?", in *Anadolu Ajansı*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/what-is-driving-russian-arms-sales-to-syria/120511>

²⁸⁹ Kuimova, Alexandra. (2019). "Russia's Arms Exports to the MENA Region: Trends and Drivers", in *EuroMeSCO policy brief*. Vol. 95. Published by IEMed. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.iemed.org/publication/russias-arms-exports-to-the-mena-region-trends-and-drivers/>

²⁹⁰ Luhn, Alec. (2015). "Russia sends artillery and tanks to Syria as part of continued military buildup", in *The Guardian*. Last online access 05.09.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/14/russia-sends-artillery-and-tanks-to-syria-as-part-of-continued-military-buildup>

²⁹¹ "Russia tested 320 types of weapons in Syria" in *Middle East Monitor*. (2021). Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210715-russia-tested-320-types-of-weapons-in-syria/>

²⁹² S-400 Air Defense System is an advanced long-range air defense missile system designed to counter an array of airborne threats such as aircrafts, missiles and drones -with a maximum range of 400 kilometers and the capability of multiple target engagement simultaneously. (See: Binnie, Jeremy; O'Connor, Sean. (2017). "Military Capabilities: Second Russian S-400 in Syria Confirmed", in *Jane's Information Group*. Last online access

Defense Systems²⁹³, Kalibr Cruise Missiles²⁹⁴, Su-35 and Su-57 Fighter Jets²⁹⁵, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)²⁹⁶, Electronic Warfare (EW) Systems²⁹⁷, T-90 Main Battle Tanks²⁹⁸ and Krasukha Electronic Warfare System.²⁹⁹ These protect Russian forces and those of *al-ʿAsad*’s regime, dissuading opponents from launching airstrikes and providing protection from further hostile assaults. Furthermore, these weapons demonstrate Russia’s anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities³⁰⁰ that limit operational flexibility of other parties involved fighting in this battle.

06.09.2023: <https://web.archive.org/web/20171002012653/http://www.janes.com/article/74500/second-russian-s-400-in-syria-confirmed>)

²⁹³ Pantsir Air Defense System is a short to medium range air defense system composed of anti-aircraft missiles and artillery to defend against aerial threats such as cruise missiles or drones. (See: “Russia’s Pantsyr missile systems successfully fought jihad mobiles in Syria”, in *Tass*. (2020). Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://tass.com/defense/1114029>)

²⁹⁴ Kalibr cruise missile systems consist of both land- and sea-launched versions, used extensively by Russia in Syria to strike at terrorist positions and infrastructure targets. (See: Russian Military Technologies, Politics & Society. (2015). *Kalibr cruise missiles strike IS targets in Syria* [online video]. Last online access 06.09.2023: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMfGtaQZJ2s&ab_channel=RussianMilitaryTechnologies%2CPolitics%26Society)

²⁹⁵ Russia has deployed advanced fighter jets such as the Su-35 and fifth-generation Su-57 fighter jets into Syria for air combat missions as well as to showcase Russia’s advanced aviation technology. (See: Roth, Andrew. (2018). “New Russian stealth fighter spotted in Syria”, in *The Guardian*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/22/new-russian-stealth-fighter-spotted-in-syria#:~:text=The%20deployment%20of%20two%20Su,Russian%20cruise%20missiles%20and%20combat>)

²⁹⁶ Russia has utilized UAVs extensively in Syria for reconnaissance, surveillance and targeting purposes. UAVs offer real-time intelligence collection as well as improved targeting capability against enemies on the battlefield. (See: Lavrov, Anton. (2016). “Russian UAVs in Syria”, in *Центр анализа стратегий и технологий (Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies)*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <http://cast.ru/products/articles/russian-uavs-in-syria.html>)

²⁹⁷ Russia has long utilized EW systems as part of their overall electronic defense arsenal in order to disrupt and jam enemy communications, radar systems, and electronic sensors. (See: Varfolomeeva, Anna. (2018). “Signaling strength: Russia’s real Syria success is electronic warfare against the US”, in *The Defense Post*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2018/05/01/russia-syria-electronic-warfare/>)

²⁹⁸ The T-90 main battle tank is an advanced main battle tank equipped with advanced armor protection and firepower capabilities that has been widely utilized during ground operations in Syria to support government forces there. These tanks were often seen assisting ground troops during ground warfighting operations against terrorist forces there. (See: Roblin, Sebastian. (2018). “What Happened When Russia Sent Its T-90 Tank To Syria?”, in *The National Interest*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/what-happened-when-russia-sent-its-t-90-tank-syria-182146>)

²⁹⁹ The Krasukha Electronic Warfare System is an advanced electronic warfare system that was used to disrupt enemy radar, satellite, and communications systems, and has proven valuable against potential threats. (See: Axe, David (2017). “Russian Army Gets Specialized Drone-Hunters”, in *Vice News*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ywbwaj/russian-army-specialized-drone-hunters-krasukha-jammer>)

³⁰⁰ Anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities are military strategies and technologies designed to keep technologically superior forces from entering or operating effectively in specific regions or zones. A2/AD strategies may also be utilized by countries with lower military capabilities in order to counter their opponent’s power projection strategies. (See: Smura, Tomasz. (2016). “Russian Anti-Access Area Denial (A2AD) capabilities-implications for NATO”, in *Pulaski Policy Papers*. Vol. 29. P. 3)

Furthermore, although details regarding specific naval deals might remain confidential, yet Russia maintains its naval presence in Syria and may have provided equipment and vessels to the Syrian navy.³⁰¹

However, it is also worth mentioning that Russia's involvement in Syria came with its own difficulties and risks. Due to Russia's continued involvement on both fronts, by land and air, of this armed conflict - in terms of resources both monetarily and personnel- Russian military capabilities have come under strain due to losses of personnel as well as costs related to maintaining its military presence there.³⁰²

Overall, in order to achieve its military policy goals, Russia employed an array of strategies and tactics in Syria during their military engagements, both conventional and unconventional, during both airstrikes and ground troop operations, the use of cutting-edge military technologies, hybrid warfare strategies as well as diplomatic efforts supporting *al-ʿAsad*'s government, while also shaping war narratives to successfully meet their strategic objectives and bring closer the realization of their goals in Syria.

8.3 The Realization of Russia's Diplomatic Objectives

As mentioned before, Russia collaborated with other international actors to establish de-escalation zones and enforce ceasefires, helping foster conditions necessary for a peaceful resolution of the conflict.³⁰³ Russia has achieved agreements to reduce violence and address humanitarian needs in certain parts of Syria through diplomatic discussions and cooperation with multiple stakeholders, reaching these agreements through bilateral talks between these stakeholders.³⁰⁴ Russia has utilized these measures to stabilize some areas in Syria, which has allowed it to portray itself as mediator and peacemaker during this war, contributing to greater regional stability as a result of these initiatives.

³⁰¹ Due to the diplomatic sensitivity associated with arms sales and purchases, certain details of some arms deals might remain concealed from public view. The examples listed above provide an idea of the types of military equipment and weaponry traded between Russia and Syria during the conflict in Syria.

³⁰² "4 Russian Special Forces Officers Killed in Syria – Reports", in *The Moscow Times*. (2020). Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/02/03/4-russian-special-forces-officers-killed-in-syria-reports-a69139>

³⁰³ Reuters Staff. (2017). "Russia, Iran, Turkey set up Syria de-escalation zones for at least six months: memorandum", in *Reuters*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-memorandum-idUSKBN1820C0>

³⁰⁴ "Syria conflict: Attacks reported as truce comes into effect", in *BBC News*. (2016). Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35674908>

8.3.1 Russia's Relations with the Involved Actors³⁰⁵ in Syria

One of the main results of Russia's engagement is an expansion in relations between the involved actors in Syria, most significantly between Russia and Iran. Both nations shared an interest in upholding Syria's status quo by supporting *Baššār al-ʿAsad* as the legitimate president of Syria. Their collaboration strengthened both strategic partnerships significantly, when Russia provided military backing, while Iran gave proxy militia support and financial help. This enabled both to pursue their individual agendas, while counterbalancing each other and pose threats against other regional and global powers in Syria and the surrounding regions.³⁰⁶

Russian participation in Syria has also impacted Turkey. At first, Turkey supported several factions of Syrian opposition forces, which caused tensions with Russia. However, things changed following the shooting down of a Turkish fighter plane in 2015. Through diplomatic efforts and collaboration on Syria-related issues, both nations managed to repair relations and join military operations together in northern Syria with simultaneously impactful repercussions in both terms of military operations as well as regional politics and effects in neighboring regions.³⁰⁷ This reconciliation not only altered the political landscape but had long-lasting results beyond its borders repercussions as well.

Russia's engagement in Syria also affects relations between itself and other regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. Saudi Arabia supported various branches of the Syrian opposition³⁰⁸ but engaged actively with Russia diplomatically to find an amicable resolution of their conflict.³⁰⁹ Russia's growing presence in the region allowed it to play an ever-increasing role in shaping relations with Saudi Arabia.

Israel's military actions raised similar worries over Iranian influence and security implications along its northern border, given Russia's operations taking place there. Out of concern for

³⁰⁵ Not all the actors, whether they were countries, organizations or militias, will be considered in the following chapter, but the main ones, namely those who had, according to analysts, the main impact on the Syrian Civil War.

³⁰⁶ Grajewski, Nicole. (2021). "The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria", in *CSIS - Center for Strategic & International Studies*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria>

³⁰⁷ İpek, C. D.; Güler, M. Ç. (2021). "Turkey and Russia in Syrian war: Hostile friendship", in *Security and Defence Quarterly*. Vol. 35(3). P. 77-92

³⁰⁸ Bröning, Michael. (2012). "Time to Back the Syrian National Coalition", in *Foreign Affairs*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2012-12-17/time-back-syrian-national-coalition>

³⁰⁹ "Al-Jubeir: Saudi Arabia to engage with Russia to support Syria political solution", *Arab News*. (2018). Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1363741/middle-east>

potential clashes arising between them both, Russia and Israel decided to begin speaking and coordinating their actions to minimize conflicts that might otherwise arise unexpectedly.³¹⁰

Russia's intervention in Syria had far-reaching ramifications for power dynamics across the Middle East region. With military actions and diplomatic initiatives from Moscow showing its ability to project strength beyond its immediate vicinity. This shift led to more multipolar regional orders by dethroning Western dominance and offering other regional actors, like Egypt, an opportunity to revisit their relationships with Russia, while exploring possible collaboration opportunities together.³¹¹

However, other regional powers - particularly the United States and its allies - have become concerned and unnerved by Russia's engagement in Syria. Growing geopolitical competition and tensions between them resulted from diverging views and interests regarding Syria's war that span beyond Syria itself and affected other conflicts like proxy warfare erupting nearby e.g., Yemen proxy conflict.³¹²

Overall, Russia's intervention in Syria had considerable repercussions for its surrounding area. Russia strengthened ties with Iran and Turkey, while their relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel were negatively impacted, altering regional power dynamics significantly and upending regional alliances and power structures within the Syria's civil war. Although Russia increased their sphere of influence within this region it also caused tension and competition with other regional and international states. Russia's intervention brought sharply into focus how complex power structures and shifting alliances are in this part of world - namely the Middle East; which in result leads so often to thus many nations getting involved in conflicts.

8.3.2 Russia's Diplomatic Efforts for Syria³¹³

By advancing on the battlefield, Russia also managed to progress diplomatically outside the combat area. Russia's diplomatic efforts for Syria have had an immense impact on its geopolitical aims there and have significantly altered the path of war there.³¹⁴ Russia has

³¹⁰ Course, Dima. (2021). *What Russian-Israeli cooperation in Syria?* NATO Defense College. P. 14-21

³¹¹ Kessler, Oren. (2017). "Egypt Picks Sides in the Syrian War", in *Foreign Affairs*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-02-12/egypt-picks-sides-syrian-war>

³¹² Krause, Peter. (2020). "Yemen's proxy wars explained", in *Analysis + Opinion* by MIT Center For International Studies. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://cis.mit.edu/publications/analysis-opinion/2020/yemens-proxy-wars-explained>

³¹³ This section does not aim to portray Russia as a positive nor negative diplomatic actor. It is merely a description and analysis of Russia's diplomatic initiatives towards Syria.

³¹⁴ Reuters. (2015). "Rūsyā tataṣaddar aġ-ġuhūd ad-diblūmāsiyya l-ḥall al-ʔazma as-Sūriyya", in *ʿArabi21*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://arabi21.com/story/861823/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7->

emerged as an effective mediator and broker of peace by engaging in both bilateral and multilateral diplomacy efforts such as the Astana process, which launched in 2017.³¹⁵ Russia also tried to work through a partnership with Iran and Turkey, which were chosen as guarantors of ceasefire accords, which in turn helped facilitate the de-escalation of violence at certain spots due to this diplomatic push by Moscow.³¹⁶ These steps provided to a certain point direct dialogue channels among the fighting parties. Furthermore, these diplomatic efforts allowed Russia to position itself to play such a role and further its geopolitical objectives.

The Astana process (also referred to as Astana talks or Astana format) refers to a series of diplomatic negotiations designed to bring an end to Syria's civil war. It was first initiated in December 2017 by Russia, Turkey and Iran as an alternative platform for peace talks alongside the United Nations-led Geneva discussions. It provided additional negotiating avenues alongside existing diplomatic efforts from various stakeholders, and presented more opportunity for negotiation than those offered through Geneva talks alone.³¹⁷

One of the main accomplishments of the Astana talks has been to establish a de-escalation zones across Syria, in an effort to both decrease violence and facilitate humanitarian assistance efforts.³¹⁸ Four de-escalation zones were initially established: the *Idlib* province, parts of the northern *Ḥumṣ* province, Eastern *Gūṭa* and portions of Southern Syria. The Astana process facilitated discussions on humanitarian aid delivery to conflict-affected areas. Negotiations sessions sought to secure safe access for humanitarian organizations that provide aid directly to civilians in need.³¹⁹ These talks have also helped facilitate several ceasefire agreements among

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 %D9%84%D8%AD%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-
 %D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9

³¹⁵ Wintour, Patrick. (2017). "Russia in power-broking role as Syria peace talks begin in Astana", in *The Guardian*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/22/russia-syria-talks-astana-kazakhstan->

³¹⁶ Gatlik, Kacper. (2022). "The Iranian-Russian alliance and Turkey taking care of its interests in the region", in *MENA-Monitor* published by Warsaw Institute. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://warsawinstitute.org/iranian-russian-alliance-turkey-taking-care-interests-region/>

³¹⁷ "Syria conflict: War of words as peace talks open in Astana", in *BBC News*. (2017). Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38714441>

³¹⁸ Orazgaliyeva, Malika. (2017). "Kazakhstan welcomes results of Syria meeting in Astana, as Russia, Iran and Turkey issue joint statement", in *The Astana Times*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/03/kazakhstan-welcomes-results-of-syria-meeting-in-astana-as-russia-iran-and-turkey-issue-joint-statement/>

³¹⁹ Cordall, Simon S. (2019). "Astana talks achieve mixed results although crucial issues broached", in *The Arab Weekly*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://the arabweekly.com/astana-talks-achieve-mixed-results-although-crucial-issues-broached>

conflicting parties. While not necessarily long-lasting or comprehensive, these ceasefires were nonetheless helpful in reducing violence and improving humanitarian situations in certain areas.

Negotiations during the Astana Process also explored issues surrounding prisoners and detainees held by various parties involved in the conflict, with agreements reached for exchange and release orders among various prisoners held captive by sides who had been involved in fighting over land ownership disputes.³²⁰

Astana provided a room for direct talks between representatives of Syria's government and opposition groups in direct communication, making negotiations possible through conversation and dialogue. Reaching comprehensive agreements may have proven difficult; nonetheless these talks allowed for organized communication among participants. Thus, this process contributed to building confidence between warring parties and external allies.³²¹ These discussions allowed face-to-face interactions on matters of mutual concern.

While the primary focus of the Astana process was de-escalation and humanitarian concerns, discussions also included wider political matters regarding Syria's future political structure, governance reforms, and constitutional revision. The Astana process highlighted Russia's effectiveness as a mediator and demonstrated its capacity to mobilize regional actors such as Turkey and Iran towards finding an endpoint to the Syrian conflict through political solution-finding negotiations, thus expanding Russia's diplomatic footprint across the region. Although the Astana process provided some positive outcomes for Syria's conflict resolution process, many challenges still persist due to conflicting interests of the various parties involved and ongoing events on the ground. It was widely criticized for failing to address some root causes behind the ongoing struggle and progress (of the conference) has been uneven.³²² Yet Russia demonstrated their readiness and made diplomatic efforts for solving the conflict a central theme within their peace efforts in Syria, contributing significantly toward shaping an overall

³²⁰ Seisembayeva, Aigerim. (2017). "Second round of Syrian talks in Astana adopt mechanism to monitor ceasefire", in *The Astana Times*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://astanatimes.com/2017/02/second-round-of-syrian-talks-in-astana-adopt-mechanism-to-monitor-ceasefire/>. However, in a later round of negotiations in the same year, a failure of reaching an agreement to that matter was reported. (See also: Anadolu Agency. (2017). "Parties fail to agree on humanitarian access, prisoner swap at Astana talks", in *Daily Sabah*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2017/11/01/parties-fail-to-agree-on-humanitarian-access-prisoner-swap-at-astana-talks>)

³²¹ Ramani, Samuel. (2019). "Russia's efforts to expand the Astana process in Syria", in *MEI – Middle East Institute*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/russias-efforts-expand-astana-process-syria>

³²² Bayramli, Nigar. (2018). "U.S. Official Says Astana Talks Failed To Curb Syria's War", in *Caspian News*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/us-official-says-astana-talks-failed-to-curb-syrias-war-2018-9-12-0/>

peace process within Syria's borders, thus reaching their initial policy goal of becoming or giving the picture of being a peace maker in the region.

At the same time as it was emphasizing a dialogue between the Syrian government and opposition organizations, Russia has actively tried to engage regional and worldwide parties to garner support for its strategy. Dialogue is still the primary mean, yet Russia has also engaged further relations with countries like Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia through diplomatic outreach in an attempt to form alliances that may alter the course of the conflict. Likewise, using its position within the United Nations Security Council, Russia shaped the international discourse around Syria.³²³

Russia's diplomatic operations in Syria include portraying itself as a mediator and advocate of political solutions, as is evident by their participation at the 2018 Sochi Conference³²⁴, bringing together various Syrian political groups in an attempt to find compromised solutions. Russia is giving the picture that it is committed³²⁵ to a diplomatic engagement as it strives to shape Syria's future through inclusive political procedures that focus on inclusive leadership structures; yet complete solutions remain out of reach. Nevertheless, these initiatives demonstrate Russia's diplomatic vigor and engagement that bring them closer to the realisation of their strategic goals.

Robinson (2023) explores Russia's humanitarian diplomacy activities by providing support for Syrian civilians affected by the conflict. Russia provided relief supplies as well as assisted with returning refugees and IDPs (Internally Displaced People) back home. It achieved all this while portraying itself as a humanitarian player, simultaneously solving urgent needs and supporting stability³²⁶ - an aspect aligning well with Russia's larger diplomatic goals. This dual focus also strengthened their image as a responsible and influential regional actor.

At their core, Russia's diplomatic efforts in Syria have covered an wide spectrum and been designed to achieve various policy goals. Russia has attempted to influence the war narrative, arbitrate between parties involved, protect strategic interests through various diplomatic

³²³ Kozak, Chris. (2017). "The Strategic Convergence Of Russia And Iran", in *Institute for the Study of War*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/strategic-convergence-russia-and-iran>

³²⁴ Ensor, Josie. (2018). "Shaky start to Syria peace talks in Russia as opposition delegates refuse to leave Sochi airport", in *The Telegraph*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/30/shaky-start-syria-peace-talks-russia-opposition-delegates-refuse/>

³²⁵ Further analysis must be undertaken to fully understand Russia's real diplomatic intentions.

³²⁶ Robinson, Jonathan. (2023). "Exploring Russia's Views on Humanitarian Aid in Syria", in *Fikra Forum*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/exploring-russias-views-humanitarian-aid-syria>

avenues including the Astana process involvement with regional and international actors advocacy of political solutions information campaigns humanitarian diplomacy, although its effects remain unpredictable. Notably, however, is that the situation in Syria remains highly complex and fluid and that achieving long-term peace remains difficult to attain. While Russia has made strides towards fulfilling their interests in Syria, their long-term consequences and implications will only emerge over time.

8.4 The Realization of Russia's Economic Objectives

Working simultaneously on many sides including geopolitical, security, military, regional and diplomatic affairs, helped Russia to achieve one of its most significant goals in Syria, namely the economic ones. Russia took advantage of their involvement in Syria by seeking various economic interests that may benefit Russia despite the destructions caused by fightings and the current economic ruin in Syria. Received lucrative restoration contracts could economically prove extremely advantageous for Russia.³²⁷ One key goal was the gain of potentially lucrative contracts to rebuild Syria by Russia, because as the battle drew to an end, Russia saw itself as a potential partner in rebuilding. They planned on capitalizing on extensive rehabilitation projects necessary in the war-ravaged country.³²⁸ Russian businesses operating in the construction and energy sectors had predicted that there would be opportunities for lucrative contracts related to infrastructure building, oil exploration and power production.³²⁹ Russia and Syria recently signed several agreements designed to foster economic cooperation through trade and investment ties, creating the groundwork for potential economic ties once stability returns to Syria.³³⁰

Russia's potential post-conflict reconstruction deals indicate successful steps taken towards furthering their economic interests in Syria. Furthermore, immediately profitable deals were made, as far as the arms sales are concerned. Russia's involvement in Syria has provided it with the chance to increase military sales across the Middle East region, also serving as an

³²⁷ Nouredine (2022)

³²⁸ ʔilyās, Sāmīr. (2020). "At-Tadaḥḥul ar-Rūsī fī Sūryā: 5 sanawāt min al-haymana bilā ḥasim", in *Al-Ṣarabī al-ḡadīd*. Last online access 06.09.2023: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-5-%D8%B3%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%85>

³²⁹ Petkova, Mariya. (2020). "What has Russia gained from five years of fighting in Syria", in *Al Jazeera*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/10/1/what-has-russia-gained-from-five-years-of-fighting-in-syria>

³³⁰ Ramani (2019)

opportunity to test out weapons they could sell as demonstration pieces in battle zones like Syria.³³¹ Russian weaponry's efficiency and dependability, through the deployments of equipment/weapons/means such as aircrafts and missile systems, have increased Russia's allure among regional entities - potentially translating to greater export sales of weaponry resulting in economic gains for Russia through export sales.³³²

The battle in Syria provided Russia also with an opportunity to expand its energy presence in the region. Russia has long been an influential participant in global energy markets and its engagement in Syria was a chance for them to increase energy cooperation - such as oil and gas exploration agreements or accessing Syrian energy resources and creating transit routes to the European market³³³ - strengthening Russia's position as a significant energy supplier in Europe and diversifying its export routes in the world in general.

Russia's engagement in Syria had furthermore far-reaching economic and trade implications. Russia improved its relations with countries in the region such as Iran³³⁴ and Turkey³³⁵ who had also previously sought closer economic ties - this included business deals, investment opportunities and collaborative initiatives that promoted regional cohesion through expansion and collaboration with organizations that promoted greater prosperity.

It must be remembered though, that Russia's economic gains through its engagement in Syria did not come without risks of its own. Due to the battle itself, economic conditions became unstable and turbulent - making realizing economic gains challenging in the short-term. Substantial destruction, population dislocation and ongoing security concerns further undermined any attempts at development or restoration operations; additionally international

³³¹ Mirovalev, Mansur. (2016). "Syria's war: A showroom for Russian arms sales", in *Al Jazeera*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/4/6/syrias-war-a-showroom-for-russian-arms-sales>

³³² Borshchevskaya (2022)

³³³ "Al-Mušādaqa ʿalā al-ʿaqd al-muaqqaʿ bayn (an-naft as-Sūriyya wa šarikat Kābītāl ar-Rūsiyya) li-t-tanqīb ʿan al-bitrōl", in *Sīrāndīz (Syrian Days)*. (2021).. Last online access 07.09.2023: https://www.syriandays.com/index.php?page=show_det&id=65472

³³⁴ "Russia, Iran Tighten Trade Ties Amid US Sanctions", in *Bloomberg News*. (2022). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-25/russia-iran-tighten-trade-ties-amid-us-sanctions-interfax-says#xj4y7vzkg>

³³⁵ Daily Sabah; Anadolu Ajansı. (2019). "TurkStream natural gas pipeline to impact region's gas flow", in *Daily Sabah*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2019/10/22/turkstream-natural-gas-pipeline-to-impact-regions-gas-flow>

sanctions levied against Russia due to its actions in the Ukraine affected its economical involvement in Syria as well.³³⁶

In conclusion, Russia's economic interests in Syria spanned numerous areas during this conflict, from seeking lucrative reconstruction contracts and arms sales expansion, strengthening energy links and developing expanded commercial relations with regional partners to reaching the full economic potential of its presence there. But the limitations due to international sanctions imposed as part of its going warfare made reaching this full economic potential more challenging and riskier. It is also noteworthy that Syria's economic condition has been significantly damaged due to the longstanding conflict, sanctions and destruction of infrastructure. Russia has expressed intentions of helping Syria recover financially; however due to the complex geopolitical and economic landscape this could pose difficulties when implemented, and only the future will show the effectiveness of the economic deals that have been made between both countries.

8.5 The Realization of Russia's Cultural Objectives

In order to be intellectually present in Syria, Russia had to offer cultural alternatives to Syrian people to those from the Western countries, especially from the US. Cultural ties between Syria and the Soviet Union expanded even during the Cold War period with educational exchanges, scholarships, and cultural events strengthening the cooperation between both sides. Soviet Russia and later Russia established cultural centers in *Dimašq*, providing language courses³³⁷, art exhibitions and cultural events showcasing the Russian literature, music and arts.³³⁸ Russian musicians and performers were invited to Syria as an introduction for the local population to Russian musical and theatrical arts.³³⁹ Moreover, Russian literature works were translated into Arabic, which made classic Russian literature more accessible for Syrian Arabic readers.³⁴⁰ The

³³⁶ Daher, Joseph. (2022). "The Hellish Cycle Continues for Syria: The Economic Impacts of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine", in *MEDirections Blog*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://blogs.eui.eu/medirections/the-hellish-cycle-continues-for-syria-the-economic-impacts-of-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>

³³⁷ SANA - Syrian Arab News Agency. (2020). "Russian Cultural Center Resumes Activities", in *The Syrian Observer*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://syrianobserver.com/news/58312/russian-cultural-center-resumes-activities.html>

³³⁸ Bušrā; Manār; Māzin. (2020). "After hiatus for years, the Russian Cultural Center organizes an exhibition of plastic art and handicrafts", in *SANA, Syrian Arab News Agency*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://sana.sy/en/?p=214668>

³³⁹ Reuters. (2016). "Palmyra: Russia's Mariinsky orchestra performs concert in amphitheatre used by Islamic State for executions", in *ABC News*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-05-05/russian-orchestra-to-play-syrias-palmyra-amphitheatre/7389134>

³⁴⁰ Rāʿif, ʿImād ad-Dīn. (2022). "ʿAn ʾazmat at-tarǧama al-ʾadabiyya bayn ar-Rūsīyya wa al-ʿArabiyya", in *Al Mayadeen*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.almayadeen.net/arts-culture/%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A9->

establishment of cultural centers, educational exchange programs and collaborations in various cultural fields have greatly strengthened the ties and understanding between both nations.

Russia has indeed managed to promote its language in Syria by supporting Syrians learning Russian as a cultural exchange and educational opportunity - offering scholarships to Syrian students studying in Russia, provided for cultural immersion and academic exchange.³⁴¹ The Russian language has also become a subject at Syrian schools,³⁴² introducing their literature and language in an educational and systematic manner, which demonstrates the fulfillment of the Russian cultural policy goals among Syrian young generations.

In order to attract and influence the upcoming generations on an academic level, Russia had to make important educational partnerships, and academic and research collaboration. Educational institutions from both nations collaborated on joint research projects; academic exchanges and conferences aimed at strengthening cultural and educational cooperation between their two nations. Intellectual discussions and seminars enabled scholars and thinkers from Syria and Russia to participate in cross-cultural conversations.³⁴³

Russia has granted scholarships to Syrian students so they may pursue higher education at Russian universities, furthering academic exchange and creating long-term educational ties between Moscow and *Dimašq*.³⁴⁴

Some of the cultural collaborations between Russia and Syria include organizing literary events such as book fairs and author readings to bring writers, poets and intellectuals from both nations together for interactions that foster mutual appreciation and a dialogue on literature and ideas.³⁴⁵ Additionally, Periodic Russian Cultural Weeks have been organized in Syria, featuring various

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%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9

³⁴¹ Fox, Edward. (2019). "Russia Offers Support to Syrian Higher Education", in *Al-Fanar Media*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2019/03/russia-offers-support-to-syrian-higher-education/>

³⁴² "Tarbiyat an-nizām: 31 ʔalf ʔālib yataʔallamūn al-luġa ar-Rūsīyya fī 217 madrasa", in *Syria TV*. (2021). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.syria.tv/%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-31-%D8%A3%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-217-%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A9>

³⁴³ Fox (2019)

³⁴⁴ Study in Russia (2019)

³⁴⁵ Syrian CH- Programs/Qanāa as-sūriyya. (2022). *Šabāḥ al-Ḥēr Sūryā – Našāʔāt wa Fašāliyyāt Mutanawwiʿa wa Hāma fī al-Markaz at-Ṭaqāʔī ar-Rūsī bi Dimašq* [online video]. Last online access 07.09.2023: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Op-c0drSGA&ab_channel=%D9%82%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%A9%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%ACSyrianCH-Programs

performances, art exhibitions, film screenings and lectures designed to celebrate Russian culture and encourage intercultural exchange.³⁴⁶

Cultural diplomacy worked as Russia planned for, as their diplomatic missions in Syria engaged actively in cultural diplomacy by organizing events designed to foster cultural understanding and friendship between different groups in the society. Cultural delegations visited Syria to meet local artists, intellectuals and cultural figures and strengthen cross-cultural discussions through meaningful encounters and engagement opportunities.³⁴⁷

Russia also acted as “a cultural hero”, as far as the heritage preservation and restoration of the Syrian culture is concerned, as Russia actively participated in efforts to preserve Syria's cultural heritage sites, such as historical monuments and archaeological sites, with joint initiatives focused on renovating historical buildings and artifacts as a demonstration of Russia's dedication towards safeguarding Syria's rich history.³⁴⁸

Russia was instrumental in the restoration of Tadmur after it was recaptured from ISIS control by the Syrian forces with Russian support in 2016. A team of specialists provided expert help for reconstructing the *Tadmur* Arch and the rehabilitation of other important structures within the *Tadmur* city limits.³⁴⁹

Russia collaborated with UNESCO in protecting Syria's cultural heritage, through the sharing of informations about heritage sites' statuses as well as supporting documentation and restoration initiatives.³⁵⁰ Moreover, Russian experts have taken an active part in documenting

³⁴⁶ “?Intilāq ?Asābī? at-?aqāfa ar-Rūsiyya fī Sūryā”, in *Qanāt al-ʿĀlam*. (2021). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.alalam.ir/news/5625503/%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7>

³⁴⁷ Syrian Arabic Republic [sic!], Presidency of the Council of Ministers. (2021) *?Āfāq Taṭwīr at-Taṣāwun at-Ṭaqāfī bayn Sūrya wa Rūsyā*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <http://pministry.gov.sy/contents/21222/%D8%A2%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7>

³⁴⁸ Rantisi, Amal; Rahima, Diana; Darwish, Ali. (2021). “The guard is also the thief: Why is Russia so interested in the Syrian cultural heritage?”, in *Enab Baladi*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2021/06/the-guard-is-also-the-thief-why-is-russia-so-interested-in-the-syrian-cultural-heritage/>

³⁴⁹ “UNESCO approves Russia’s resolution on restoration of Palmyra”, in *Tass*. (2016). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://tass.com/world/869196>

³⁵⁰ UNESCO. (2014). *Irina Bokova and President Vladimir Putin discuss protection of heritage and cultural diversity in Syria and Iraq*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/irina-bokova-and-president-vladimir-putin-discuss-protection-heritage-and-cultural-diversity-syria>

and researching Syria's cultural heritage to better comprehend the extent of damage done by ISIS, as well as to develop effective restoration plans. Russia has used media platforms to spread awareness about Syria's cultural heritage and raise awareness of its need to be protected, garnering international support for the preservation efforts.³⁵¹

Russia was aware of the benefits of their diplomatic cultural goals in an effort to gain Syrian people actively on its side by preserving their most beloved historical sites, which act as a part of the Syrian cultural identity. By taking initiatives like these, Russia did not guarantee that the whole Syrian population would stand on its side but could see the benefits long-term among the new generations, provided that their ally - *al-ʿAsad*'s regime - remains in power. Overall, Russia's cultural achievements in Syria have not only strengthened Russia's image as an advocate of cultural exchange and academic collaboration but have also served to bolster Syria's cultural resilience and identity. They demonstrate the efficacy of cultural diplomacy in forging lasting relationships, mutual respect, and an appreciation of arts, history, and knowledge that benefit everyone involved.

9 The Worldwide Perception of Russia's Involvement in Syria

Russia's engagement in Syria's conflict has significantly elevated regional tensions and intensified competition between Washington and Moscow's allies. This involvement also further escalated hostilities within an already volatile area, increasing instability further which might be leading to new wars or proxy conflicts erupting across this part of the world.³⁵²

One of the critic points towards Russia is that its engagement in Syria has contributed to prolonging the conflict and hindered attempts at finding peaceful resolutions due to its military aid provided directly to *al-ʿAsad*'s regime, which bolstered his capabilities against opposition groups. This led, according to the critics, to protracting the fighting, which has been highly destructive. This resulted among other consequences in the displacement, loss of lives and

³⁵¹ "Террористическая организация "Исламское государство". Досье", in *Tass*. (2016). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://tass.ru/info/1264570>

³⁵² Rabinovich, Itamar. (2016). "The Russian-U.S. Relationship In The Middle East: A Five- Year Projection", in *Task Force On U.S. Policy toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia*. Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs. P. 3-4

limited access to essential resources for millions of Syrians, who are remaining living under cruel circumstances till this day.³⁵³

Another critical argument against Russia's intervention in Syria is that it has come under scrutiny due to the profound changes it is having on regional politics and for its lasting repercussions. Russia's involvement has not only escalated tensions between global powers like Russia and the US, but has also caused regional relations to fracture, leading to a complicated network of alliances and rivalries between governments and groups, who support various factions, fighting one another, which could have long-term effects for the peace and security of the Middle East as fragmentation increases due to Russia's and America's engagement.³⁵⁴

Russia being furthermore a factor in Syria's humanitarian situation has come under considerable criticism, specifically regarding the airstrikes conducted by its military, which resulted in civilian casualties and the damage of essential infrastructure like hospitals, schools and housing areas being completely demolished. Such attacks raised serious allegations regarding violations to international humanitarian law standards and human rights observance.

Overall, Russia's involvement in Syria has drawn considerable scrutiny due to various aspects of its engagement there, from supporting the Syrian regime's forces, disturbing regional power balances and prolonging the conflict to intensifying the humanitarian catastrophe. However, to end the violence in Syria, a political solution should be found that is both inclusive and welcoming to all sides. As lives continue to be lost and people suffer greatly in war's continuation, addressing any critiques or challenges related to Russia's engagement is paramount if long-term recovery and reconciliation in Syria are to succeed.

³⁵³ Copeland, Matthew. (2021). "Syria's Decade of War and Russia's Encouragement of the Ongoing Conflict", in *Global Risk Insights*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://globalriskinsights.com/2021/06/syrias-decade-of-war-and-russias-encouragement-of-the-ongoing-conflict/>

³⁵⁴ Center for Preventive Action. (2023). "Conflict in Syria", in *Global Conflict Tracker* by Council on Foreign Relations. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-syria>

9.1 Comparison with Other Interventions in the Region³⁵⁵

Russia's involvement in Syria parallels two other major operations conducted in the Middle East, which were America's invasion of Iraq in 2003³⁵⁶, and NATO's attack on Libya in 2011³⁵⁷. Though these interventions and military actions share many similar features, each has distinct goals, methods and results that distinguishes it.³⁵⁸

First and foremost, all three interventions resulted in civilian casualties and damage to the infrastructure, with military actions leading to unintended harm for civilian populations and being met by varied degrees of international criticism.

Although these interventions in Iraq and Libya aimed at uprooting authoritarian regimes and advancing democratic ideals³⁵⁹, their unexpected effects caused a destabilization to spread throughout both nations³⁶⁰ – for example the breakdown of state institutions and the formation of extremist groups, which led to a destabilized environment with widespread anarchy. On the other side, Russia's involvement in Syria has focused mainly on protecting Syria's territorial integrity and maintaining the authority of its government, through military assistance provided to *al-ʿAsad*'s regime. Unfortunately, many lives have been lost in course of these three

³⁵⁵ The following two military intervention will be taking into consideration particularly due to the proximity in time of their occurrence to the Russian intervention in Syria. Both of them also had a huge impact on the Middle East and the world as a whole.

³⁵⁶ The invasion phase of Iraq lasted just over one month, beginning with the air phase on 19 March 2003, followed by the ground strike on 20 March 2003. (See: Torreon, Barbara S., Miller, Carly A. (2022). *U.S. Periods of War and Dates of Recent Conflicts*. Washington: Library of Congress - Congressional Research Service. P. 9-10)

³⁵⁷ A multi-state NATO-led coalition began a military intervention in Libya in response to events during the 2011 Libyan civil war. (See: United Nations. (2011). “Security Council Approves ‘No-Fly Zone’ over Libya, Authorizing ‘All Necessary Measures’ to Protect Civilians, by Vote of 10 in Favour with 5 Abstentions”, in *Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://press.un.org/en/2011/sc10200.doc.htm>)

³⁵⁸ It is worth mentioning that Russia would bring these examples in its arguments facing the criticism proclaimed by Western powers and pointed at Russia's intervention in Syria and Ukraine recently. (See also: Yürük, Betül. (2023). “Russia rejects links between Ukraine war, US-led invasion of Iraq”, in *Anadolu Ajansı*. Last online access 18.09.2023: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/russia-ukraine-war/russia-rejects-links-between-ukraine-war-us-led-invasion-of-iraq/2851304>)

³⁵⁹ More specifically for Iraq, the US claimed the intent was to disarm Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, to end *Ṣaddām Ḥusayn*'s support for terrorism and to free the Iraqi people. (See also: Bush, George W. (2003). “President Discusses Beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom”, in *President's Radio Address*. Published by the Office of the Press Secretary. Last online access 18.09.2023: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030322.html>). As for Libya it was announced that the goal was to have an immediate ceasefire there, including an end to the then ongoing attacks against civilians, a no-fly zone and tightened sanctions on the *Muṣammar al-Qaḍḍāfī* regime and its supporters. (See also: United Nations (2011))

³⁶⁰ “Consequences of the War and Occupation of Iraq”, in *Global Policy Forum*. (2021). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://archive.globalpolicy.org/security/issues/iraq/attack/conseqindex.htm> (See also: Ogburn, Langdon. (2021). “Libya: State Fragility 10 Years After Intervention”, in *Fund for Peace*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://fundforpeace.org/2021/11/02/libya-state-fragility-10-years-after-intervention/>)

interventions while millions were displaced resulting in significant financial costs being borne by all sides involved.

Russia's involvement in Syria has increased instability and bloodshed across the region (the same outcome applies on the other two interventions)³⁶¹, heightening tensions with other nations, while at the same time increasing Moscow's power, which in return prolonged the conflict to such an extent, that finding lasting political solutions is getting more difficult.

Comparative to the operations in Iraq and Libya, Russia's strategy in Syria has placed greater importance on maintaining stability within Syria's preexisting political order than on trying to overthrow an old government or introduce democratic reforms into it. Although this strategy ensured the continuity of the Syrian government, it also extended the conflict and hindered efforts at finding a peaceful resolution.

When it comes to further differences between these three military interventions, the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 caused considerable debate due to lack of clear United Nations authorization and the intelligence miscalculation regarding weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).³⁶² NATO's Libya intervention was justified on humanitarian grounds under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)³⁶³, while Russia entered Syria formally upon invitation by their government.³⁶⁴

The American-led invasion of Iraq was predominantly a unilateral action taken by a coalition of countries willing to intervene, with others opposing it.³⁶⁵ The NATO's intervention in Libya had a wider international coalition³⁶⁶, while Russia's intervention into Syria was in coordination with *al-Asad's* regime forces and their allies.

³⁶¹ Liu, Yueqin. (2013). "On the Great Power Intervention in the Middle East Upheaval and Political Trend in the Middle East", in *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)*. Vol. 7(2). P. 2-18

³⁶² Fisher, D.; Biggar, N. (2011). "Was Iraq an unjust war? A debate on the Iraq war and reflections on Libya", in *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*. Vol. 87(3). P.687-707

³⁶³ Williams, P. D.; Bellamy, A. J. (2012). "Principles, Politics, and Prudence: Libya, the Responsibility to Protect, and the Use of Military Force", in *Global Governance*. Vol. 18(3). P. 273-297

³⁶⁴ Chappell (2015)

³⁶⁵ "Why did the US and allies invade Iraq, 20 years ago?", in *BBC News*. (2023). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-64980565>

³⁶⁶ Isaac, Sally K. (2012). "NATO's Intervention in Libya: Assessment and Implications", in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2012*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.iemed.org/publication/natos-intervention-in-libya-assessment-and-implications/>

These interventions produced diverging outcomes: Iraq was beset with sectarian strife, insurgency and political instability following its war with *Ṣaddām Ḥusayn*.³⁶⁷ Libya experienced a power vacuum and continued instability that eventually resulted in conflict and fragmentation;³⁶⁸ Syria experienced considerable destruction, despite restoring many territories under the control of the old Syrian regime with Russian aid.

The American-led invasion of Iraq and the NATO intervention in Libya both involved ground troops occupying physically controlled land areas directly,³⁶⁹ while Russia's involvement in Syria consisted primarily of air support, military advisors, and limited ground troops.

Overall, while these interventions share many similarities in terms of military action and unintended outcomes, their legal justification, international support, long-term outcomes, extent of involvement and impact on regional and global dynamics differ considerably. Military operations conducted in Iraq, Libya and Syria shed light on the intricate workings and unintended ramifications of foreign military participation in these regions. Invading Iraq led by the US and the attack on Libya led by NATO were intended to topple autocratic regimes and advance democracy; yet their outcomes have resulted in chaos, instability, and the formation of extremist groups. Russia has taken an interest in Syria with the intent of supporting and stabilizing its current government; yet their involvement has only contributed to prolonging this conflict and heightening regional tensions. Each intervention has had unique consequences that together have changed the political and security landscape in the Middle East.

9.2 Reactions to the Russian Involvement in Syria

There were conflicting opinions and statements about the Russian intervention in Syria, which depends on the public interests of the source of this criticism or support. It is worth noting that there are some states, who believe that the Russian intervention in Syria has been positive. On the other hand, there were those countries, which strongly criticized the involvement and

³⁶⁷ Center for Preventive Action. (2023). "Instability in Iraq" in *Global Conflict Tracker* by Council on Foreign Relations. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/political-instability-iraq>

³⁶⁸ Center for Preventive Action. (2023). "Civil Conflict in Libya", in *Global Conflict Tracker* by Council on Foreign Relations. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-libya>

³⁶⁹ "U.S. has 100,000 troops in Kuwait", in *CNN*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/02/18/sprj.iqr.deployment/index.html>. (Meanwhile the intervention in Libya did not employ foreign ground troops, except for special forces, which were not covered by the UN resolution. See also: Norton-Taylor, Richard. (2011). "Nato will not put troops on ground in Libya", in *The Guardian*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/24/nato-will-not-put-troops-ground-libya>)

supported the opposition groups. There was a group of countries that was more pragmatic or even neutral in their reactions. It is important to keep into consideration that these responses to the Russian involvement in Syria vary according to the individual geopolitical interests, historical ties, regional security concerns and ideological positions.

Starting with the country that sought for the Russian intervention to begin with, Syria. The Syrian regime has promoted the Russian military intervention as a cooperation with an international ally to help it eliminate terrorism and restore stability and security in the country. *Riyāḍ Ḥaddād*, the Syrian ambassador to Russia, issued a statement in October 2015, declaring that Russia is operating its air force in complete harmony with Syria's army and asserted the legality of their involvement as per international law, while simultaneously inviting other nations to support this "non-criminal" intervention into Syria.³⁷⁰ *Baššār al-ʿAsad* welcomed Russia's involvement as a vital lifeline, seeing military support as essential in maintaining stability within Syria and combatting rebel groups.³⁷¹

The first ally of Syria in this conflict - Iran - expressed its positive and supportive reaction to the Russian involvement.³⁷² Iran and Syria share common interests in maintaining *al-ʿAsad*'s regime, combatting rebel groups, and restricting Sunni extremist influence in Syria. Both have welcomed the Russian intervention as strategic allies.

China as one of the major players in world politics has welcomed Russia's military involvement in Syria as an effective measure against terrorism worldwide.³⁷³ China sees Russia's engagement as contributing towards international anti-terror initiatives. While China did not

³⁷⁰ Mišāl, Māyān. (2015). "Safīr Sūryā ladā Mōskō: al-ṣamaliyyāt al-latī taqūduha Rūsyā fī Dimašq faʿṣāla", in *Mobtada*. Last online access 07.09.2023: mobtada.com/world/389154/ -سفیر-سوریا-لدى-موسكو-العمليات-التي-تقودها-روسيا-في-دمشق-فعالة

³⁷¹ "Al-ʿAsad yuʾakkid istiṣḍāḥ li-l-ḥiwār maʿ Wašīnṭun wa yuraḥḥib bi tawassuʿ al-wuḡūd ar-Rūsī bi-l-marāfiʿ as-Sūriyya", in *France 24*. (2015). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.france24.com/ar/20150327-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%86%D8%B7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A9>

³⁷² Farhamānd, Mahrādād. (2015). "At-Tadaḥḥul al-ṣaskarī ar-Rūsī fī Sūryā 'yaṣṭī dafʿa qawīyya li-ʿIrān'", in *BBC News*. Last online access 07.09.2023: https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast/2015/10/151010_iran_syria_analysis

³⁷³ Kaczmariski, Marcin. (2016). "OSW Commentary: China on Russia's intervention in Syria", in *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2016-01-19/china-russias-intervention-syria>

intend to join Syria's military activities directly, their special envoy for Syria lauded Russia for their contribution in helping resolve this conflict.³⁷⁴

An important neighbor, which shares a long history with Syria and suffered extremely from similar crisis as Syria, is Iraq which emphasized their positive reactions to the Russian involvement in Syria. A country, in which the Shi'is play an important role in politics nowadays, less surprisingly stands with the Alawite counterpart in Syria in order to face the Sunni opposition. Iraq's government, while committed to fighting ISIS independently, recognizes Russia's contribution in combatting regional terrorism. Their strong relationship with both Russia and Iran influences how they view the conflict in Syria.³⁷⁵

As far as the main player in this involvement is concerned, Russia has taken measures to avoid repeating the humiliating conditions that marked the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Official Russian casualty figures for troops and private military contractors (PMCs) in Syria have been intentionally reduced or remain hidden from public view.³⁷⁶ Concerned about the possible ramifications of its extended involvement in Syria, Russia has taken proactive steps in declaring small victories periodically and creating the impression of impending peace within this conflict. Putin announced two times the "withdrawal of Russian troops," first in 2016 and again in 2017, due to their continued presence in Syria.³⁷⁷

Reports in US mainstream media indicated in May 2012 that Russian Orthodox Church, headed by Patriarch Kirill I and run by its leadership, expressed support for Syria's current government, while raising concerns regarding any threat posed to the Christian minority - approximately

³⁷⁴ This envoy is Guan Youfei, director of China's Office for International Military Cooperation of their Central Military Commission, who visited *Dimašq* and acknowledged their longstanding amicable (military) relations. Additionally, he expressed China's eagerness to increase exchanges and collaboration between their militaries. (See: Reuters Staff. (2016). "China says seeks closer military ties with Syria", in *Reuters*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-china-idUSKCN10R10R>)

³⁷⁵ Al-Malāʾika, Mulham. (2015). "Al-ʿIrāq ʿalā muftaraq at-tadhḥul al-ʿaskarī ar-Rūsī fī Sūryā", in *DW ʿarabiyya*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.dw.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7/a-18753975>

³⁷⁶ Kofman, Michael. (2018). "U.S. Strikes and Russian PMC Casualties in Syria – Fact vs Fiction", in *Russia Military Analysis* [blog]. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://russianmilitaryanalysis.wordpress.com/tag/syria/>

³⁷⁷ Issaev, Leonid M. (2018). "What is After Russia's Military Withdrawal From Syria?", in *Al Jazeera Centre For Studies*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/02/russia-military-withdrawal-syria-180205061719003.html>

10% of Syria's total population at that time.³⁷⁸ In September 2015, Russia's Chief Mufti Talgat Tadzhuddin³⁷⁹ gave his full support to Russia's military deployment against international terrorism.³⁸⁰

By November 2015, Tadzhuddin released a public statement claiming he had pitched Vladimir Putin the idea of Syria's annexation as well. In early January 2016, Patriarch Kirill openly supported Russia's military engagement in Syria as "protection of the fatherland".³⁸¹

As the military intervention becomes a prolonged affair, there has been widespread weariness about the war in Russian society.³⁸² As was mentioned before, at first many Russian people supported Russia's involvement in Syria; however, over time their opinions have evolved, in spite of attempts by the Russian media outlets to exploit national pride when discussing counter-terrorism operations. Moving forward to May 2019, *The Moscow Times* reported that 55% of Russian respondents indicated in the Levada Poll (August 2017) that they believe the country should end its military involvement in Syria - an increase of 49 % at that time. This poll results revealed that only relatively few Russians consider Russia's military intervention into Syria's civil war as successful.³⁸³

Moving on to the critical and oppositional reactions, the United States has strongly condemned Russia's intervention, viewing it as an attempt to prop up *Baššār al-ʿAsad* and expand Russia's influence in Syria. Additionally, Washington accused Moscow of targeting moderate rebel groups instead of solely ISIS extremism. In early October 2015 the former president Barack Obama granted authorization for the resupply of 25,000 Syrian Kurds and 5,000 members of the Syrian opposition fighting ISIL, in particular in the period in which Russia had entered the

³⁷⁸ Barry, Ellen. (2012). "Russian Church Is a Strong Voice Opposing Intervention in Syria", in *The New York Times*. Last online access 07.09.2023: https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/world/europe/russian-church-opposes-syrian-intervention.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

³⁷⁹ Talgat Tadzhuddin is the Grand Mufti of Russia and Chairman of the Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Russia.

³⁸⁰ "Russian church: The fight in Syria is a 'holy war'", *Al Arabiya News*. (2015). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2015/09/30/Church-says-Russia-fighting-holy-battle-in-Syria#:~:text=Russia's%20powerful%20Orthodox%20Church%20on,it%20a%20%E2%80%9Choly%20battle.%E2%80%9D>

³⁸¹ "Патриарх Кирилл поддержал военную операцию России в Сирии (Patriarch Kirill supported Russia's military operation in Syria)", in *Интерфакс*. (2016). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/488620>

³⁸² Petkova (2017)

³⁸³ "Fewer Than Half of Russians Support Syria Campaign, Poll Says", in *The Moscow Times*. (2019)

conflict. Obama stressed his country's dedication to continuing its support despite Russia entering, explicitly rejecting any idea of military collaboration between both nations in Syria.³⁸⁴

In October 2016, President Obama made the decision public to abandon any further efforts at creating a rebel force within Syria to combat the Islamic State, acknowledging its ineffectiveness through spending \$500 million to train numerous fighters and recruit more rebels. Instead, their administration announced they will redirect these funds toward providing ammunition and weaponry directly to groups already engaged in the battle against ISIS.³⁸⁵

In November, in response to Turkey shooting down a Russian bomber that briefly violated Turkish airspace near the Syrian border for only 17 seconds, President Obama stated that Turkey has the right to defend their territory and airspace. He further noted that Russia appears to be targeting moderate opposition groups supported not only by Turkey but by various other nations as well.³⁸⁶ The US-led coalition was conducting airstrikes against ISIS when Russia targeted other entities as well. Furthermore, they objected to *al-ʿAsad*'s participating in an intelligence sharing despite having subjected his citizens to brutalization under his regime, said Col. Steven H Warren from US-led coalition.³⁸⁷

Further important players on this critical side were the EU member states, which have voiced serious reservations over Russia's intervention into the regional stability and humanitarian affairs of the Middle East, rather prompting a debate within Europe as to whether Russian involvement actually compounds or helps resolve conflicts. The same thing applies to the NATO, which has strongly condemned Russian air strikes³⁸⁸, called on Moscow to cease supporting *al-ʿAsad* and issued renewed assurances in light of the "escalation in Russian military activities".³⁸⁹

³⁸⁴ Starr, Barbara; Labott, Elise; Acosta, Jim. (2015). "Obama authorizes resupply of Syrian opposition", in *CNN*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/05/politics/russia-ground-campaign-syria-isis/>

³⁸⁵ Cooper, Michael D; Shear, Helene; Schmitt, Eric. (2015). "Obama Administration Ends Effort to Train Syrians to Combat ISIS", in *The New York Times*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/10/world/middleeast/pentagon-program-islamic-state-syria.html>

³⁸⁶ "Obama points finger at Russia over jet shoot-down by Turkey", in *Fox News*. (2015). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/obama-points-finger-at-russia-over-jet-shoot-down-by-turkey>

³⁸⁷ Gordon, Michael R. (2015). "Russia Surprises U.S. With Accord on Battling ISIS", in *The New York Times*. Last online access 07.09.2023: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/28/world/middleeast/iraq-agrees-to-share-intelligence-on-isis-with-russia-syria-and-iran.html?_r=0

³⁸⁸ Barnes, Julian E.; Lubold, Gordon. (2015). "NATO Condemns Russian Bombings in Syria", in *The Wall Street Journal*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/defense-ministers-from-nato-hit-out-at-russian-action-in-syria-1444291618>

³⁸⁹ "Syria crisis: Nato renews pledge amid Russia 'escalation'", in *BBC News*. (2015). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34471849>

Saudi Arabia and some Gulf states - with Sunni majorities - have also strongly denounced Russia's support of *al-ʿAsad* and Iran in Syria. They considered these actions as exacerbating the conflict further by contributing to its continuation.³⁹⁰

Moving to the third group of reactions: mixed or pragmatic, where two significant countries are to be listed. Starting with Turkey, it is important to mention that Turkey has strong concerns regarding the Kurdish actions in Syria, which have had an impact on how they respond to Russia's actions in general.³⁹¹ In early October 2015, a Russian military aircraft had made several reported incursions into Turkish airspace and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed concerns that Russia's actions in Syria may sever bilateral relationships between both nations.³⁹²

Recep Erdogan first took steps towards healing the relations between Turkey and Russia in June 2016, by offering his regret over the shooting down of a Russian military air plane by the Turkish aircraft.³⁹³ On June 29th, Putin and Erdogan engaged in an impactful telephone dialogue that Russian and Turkish government officials thought was productive. Following this meeting, travel restrictions for Russian visitors visiting Turkey were lifted as well as measures taken by Moscow to normalize the trade between the two nations.³⁹⁴

The second country in this pragmatic group is Israel. At the outset of Russia's intervention in Syria, both the Israel Defense Forces and the Russian military established a collaborative task force dedicated to coordinate their respective actions on Syria across different categories such as air, maritime activities and electromagnetic operations.³⁹⁵ Israel sought to protect its security interests by avoiding potential alliances between *Ḥizbullāh* and Russia which might pose

³⁹⁰ Golubkova, Katya; Baczynska, Gabriela. (2015). "Russia, Saudis fail in talks to agree on fate of Syria's Assad", in *Reuters*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-meast-crisis-russia-assad-idUSKCN0QG13G20150811>

³⁹¹ Center for Preventive Action. (2023). "Conflict Between Turkey and Armed Kurdish Groups", in *Global Conflict Tracker* by Council on Foreign Relations. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-between-turkey-and-armed-kurdish-groups>

³⁹² Zalewski, Piotr; Jones, Sam; Hille, Kathrin. (2015). "Turkey warns Russia of fallout over Syria", in *Financial Times*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.ft.com/content/6a69996c-6c2d-11e5-8171-ba1968cf791a>

³⁹³ Luhn, Alec; Black, Ian. (2016). "Erdogan has apologised for downing of Russian jet, Kremlin says", in *The Guardian*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/27/kremlin-says-erdogan-apologises-russian-jet-turkish>

³⁹⁴ "Russia closes 'crisis chapter' with Turkey", in *Al Jazeera*. (2016). Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/6/29/russia-closes-crisis-chapter-with-turkey>

³⁹⁵ Lappin, Yaakov. (2015). "Russia gave Israel advance notice of its airstrikes in Syria", in *The Jerusalem Post*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Defense-sources-Russia-gave-Israel-advance-notice-of-its-airstrikes-in-Syria-419514>

negative implications for Israel's own interests.³⁹⁶ Israel has expressed concerns regarding an increase of Iranian-backed forces in Syria due to Russia's involvement. While not directly opposing Russia's involvement, Israel has taken measures to safeguard its own security interests by targeting Iranian positions within Syria.³⁹⁷

As far as the neutral or non-interfering reactions are concerned, many Latin American and African countries have not prominently taken a side on Russia's involvement in Syria, as this conflict seems distant and innocuous to their interests; many simply remain disengaged from it.³⁹⁸

A major Asian player - India - has taken an indirect and relatively neutral stance towards Syria's conflict and terror rise; instead focusing on finding political resolution, while raising alarm over terrorist activities and maintaining good relations with both Russia and the Arab states.³⁹⁹

Russian involvement in Syria also brought on diverse responses among fighting militias and religious actors present there, due to an intricate web of alliances, rivalries, and ideologies present among factions involved, extending beyond only the relations to the major countries involved.

Opposition rebel groups in Syria had mixed responses to Russia's intervention. Many saw Russia's intervention as further exacerbating the conflict, making their goals harder to attain, while some saw it as an attempt by *al-ʿAsad*'s regime forces to subvert opposition efforts and undermine resistance movements' work. Meanwhile other factions saw Russia's participation as evidence of vulnerability, believing that increased international pressure might bring negotiations or political solutions that would be conducive for peacemaking efforts in Syria.⁴⁰⁰

³⁹⁶ Tsvetkova, Maria. (2015). "Israel, Russia to coordinate military action on Syria: Netanyahu", in *Reuters*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-israel-idUSKCN0RL10K20150921>

³⁹⁷ Al-Khalidi (2021)

³⁹⁸ Caranza, Diego. (2018). "Latin America silent over war in Syria", in *Anadolu Ajansı*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/latin-america-silent-over-war-in-syria/1115543>

³⁹⁹ Vaid, Dharvi. (2023). "India builds Syria ties to boost Middle East presence", in *Deutsche Welle*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.dw.com/en/india-builds-syria-ties-to-boost-middle-east-presence/a-66674793>

⁴⁰⁰ Zayn al-ʿĀbdīn, Bīšr. (2015). "At-Tadaḥḥul ar-Rūsī fī Sūrya: al-maḥāṭir wa-l-furaṣ al-kāmina", in *Omran Center for Strategic Studies*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.omrandirasat.org/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AB/%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D8%AB%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%AE%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B7%D8%B1->

Kurdish militias such as the People's Protection Units (YPG) and its political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) however, were wary about Russia's engagement. Although ISIS were common enemies between them both, they feared potential implications from Russia collaborating with *al-ʿAsad's* regime, particularly in terms of strengthening their autonomous regions and reaching an acceptable political settlement that respected their rights.⁴⁰¹

The extremist group ISIS saw Russia's intervention as yet another obstacle to their ambitions, particularly as ISIS focused largely on creating its self-proclaimed caliphate. Russia's airstrikes targeted positions occupied by ISIS, which compromised their territorial control and ability to launch offensives. Yet these strikes also gave ISIS another excuse for rallies across their territories, which eventually gave Russia further propaganda benefits about them fighting a huge web of international terrorism.⁴⁰²

Militant groups such as *Ġabhat an-Nuṣra* (now *Hayʿat Taḥrīr aš-Šām*) were critical of Russia's intervention, since they saw it as an effort by an outside force to support an authoritarian regime opposed by them, therefore seeing Moscow as an opponent.⁴⁰³ Further animosity emerged due to airstrikes conducted both by Moscow and the Syrian government that often fell on these militant groups as well.

Ḥizbullāh, an Iranian proxy, supported Russia's intervention and shared an interest in maintaining *al-ʿAsad's* regime and preventing its collapse in order to lessen the Sunni influence over regional affairs. Russian support provided strategic air cover for Iranian-affiliated militia operations.⁴⁰⁴

In conclusion, Russia's involvement in Syria has generated an intricate international reaction, which can best be described as complex. Its perception varies depending on individual strategic interests, historical relationships and regional dynamics. Some nations and fighting militias and

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 %D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A9.html

⁴⁰¹ Perry, Tom. (2017). "U.S.-allied Kurd militia says struck Syria base deal with Russia", in *Reuters*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-idUSKBN16R1H>

⁴⁰² Paraszczuk, Joanna. (2015). "Islamic State, Al-Nusra Front Call For 'Jihad' Against Russia", in *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-nusra-jihad-russia/27306477.html>

⁴⁰³ Newsweek Team. (2015). "Al-Qaeda Affiliate Issues Bounty for Capture of Russian Soldiers in Syria", in *Newsweek*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.newsweek.com/al-qaeda-affiliate-issues-bounty-capture-russian-soldiers-syria-334013>

⁴⁰⁴ Groisman, Mayan. (2016). "'Hezbollah has become a small faction serving the Russian bear,' group's founder says", in *The Jerusalem Post*. Last online access 07.09.2023: <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran/hezbollah-has-become-a-small-faction-serving-the-russian-bear-groups-founder-says-445617>

religious groups openly supported or opposed Russia's actions, while others take a more pragmatic or neutral position based on their own considerations and benefits.

10 Findings

As to summarizing the findings of this thesis, it is essential to acknowledge that not all relevant literature on this topic was included. However, a substantial body of literature was consulted to construct an overview that serves as a foundational research base for the future expansion of this topic and related subjects in a subsequent PhD thesis on Russian policies.

The relations of Russia and the Middle East go back centuries. Geopolitical considerations and economic opportunities were central factors guiding Russian monarchy interests in the Middle East during Tsarist rule. Their main objectives included geopolitical influence in the region and the control of ports in the Black and Mediterranean Sea as well as economic interests - like reaching new markets for their goods and becoming an import supplier for textiles and spices. They also wanted to support the Orthodox Christian communities in the Middle East. These motives put Imperial Russia on the front line of confrontations with regional powers like the Ottoman Empire and Persian ruling dynasties.

In the Soviet Union era during the Cold War, the Russian interests in the Middle East have been expanded, which extantated the Eastern camp led by the Soviet Union. This camp also included countries like Syria and Egypt confronting the Western camp that was led by the US. Despite the changes of the global power balance after the two World Wars and the Cold War, Russia in its federational form remains committed today to its interests in the Middle East.

Russia's role in the conflicts in the Middle East, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, or the Iran-Iraq War, can be explained by its strategic goals in the region, where it has developed its relations with the main actors in this conflict. Field developments during these conflicts led to the formation of a network of tension and cooperation in relations between Russia and these actors, as Russia tried to use these relations as its winning cards in the face of American influence in international relations, especially among its allies in the Middle East. Russia played an influential role in these conflicts by providing military aid to all/ some fighting sides in an attempt to maintain the balance of power between them.

Russia and Syria have enjoyed a longstanding partnership founded on shared strategic interests and mutual support. These relations were long-term and continued even after the fall of the Soviet Union, as Russian support for Syria remained one of the main pillars of its policy in the Middle East.

Syria's prewar political and economic environment was marked by authoritarianism, socio-economic challenges and simmering political discontent. The start of the civil war in 2011 resulted from a combination of these factors as well as regional and global geopolitical dynamics, which precipitated a protracted and devastating conflict.

The Arab Spring had a significant effect on Syria. The violent government response to demonstrations calling for political reforms and social justice, culminated in a full-scale civil war within Syria, while simultaneously turning it into proxy warfare involving numerous regional and international powers backing opposing sides. The humanitarian consequences from Syria's conflict, such as mass migrations of Syrians and a deterioration of their living conditions, have significantly escalated the situation.

The aftermath of this conflict is marked by widespread civilian deaths and displacement. Meanwhile the spreading of extremist organizations has had strong and lasting ramifications on Syria and its surroundings.

Furthermore , the Syrian civil war has seen the involvement of various external actors with distinct agendas and interests. These external actors' involvement has had an enormous effect on shaping how the situation has progressed thus far -Russia being a crucial one.

Russia had numerous interests and policy goals that drove its involvement in Syria, the most important one being to keep intact and even increase their influence and presence in the Middle East in order to counterbalance the influence of the Western powers, especially of the United States. Russia held on to Syria as an essential partner that offered access to warm-water ports as gateways into the Mediterranean Sea. In return, Russia provided assistance to the Syrian government to defend its regional geopolitical interests and long-term policy, as Moscow had to prevent the overthrowing of *al-ʿAsad*'s regime by the opposition groups and Western powers. The removal of *al-ʿAsad* might have threatened Russia's strategic footing in the region and eventually the fulfillment of its stated objectives there. Russia tried to use Syria's civil war as an opportunity to establish itself as a central figure in shaping its political future and exerting its influence over wider regional dynamics in the Middle East.

Russia gave official reasons for its actions in Syria in an attempt to justify its military presence there to its population and the international community. One of the reasons being their goal of fighting terrorist organizations and upholding the regional peace. Russia insisted on showcasing its dedication to combat extremist organizations like ISIS and stopping its spread into its own borders.

The Russian military engagement in Syria's conflict has had an outsized and considerable effect on its balance of power, fundamentally altering the dynamics of fighting on the battlefield. Russia basically helped the Syrian regime restore control to a significant portion of Syria, including major cities and other key locations -an outcome that shows how powerful Russia as a game changer has been throughout this war.

Russia's military interests in Syria can best be summarized by their intention of conducting a number of operations that consisted of massive air power maneuvers, ground deployments and naval capabilities to defend regional strategic interests. Since 2015, Russia's involvement has been marked by an aggressive and destructive air assault by their Aerospace Forces on opposition-held territories, as massive airstrikes meant to reduce the military capabilities and infrastructure of opposition groups, while at the same time degrading resistance troops' capacities opposing the regime. Such strikes caused many losses among opposition troops. Russia played an essential role in changing military dynamics to favor *al-Asad* by achieving overwhelming air dominance.

Russia's direct ground support has also played a pivotal role in helping the regime make significant advances on the battlefield. Advisors, special forces and paramilitary organizations from Russia have been sent directly into Syria in order to train and assist government troops there. As a result of Russia's financial support, the regime's military capabilities have seen dramatic improvements that included granting access to advanced weaponry, information and tactical skills.

Russia employed an array of strategies and tactics in Syria during their military engagements, both conventional and unconventional, through airstrikes, ground troop operations, the use of cutting-edge military technologies and hybrid warfare strategies -an attempt to showcase its military capabilities in a proxy confrontation with the Nato and Western powers.

Russia's economic gains in Syria spanned numerous areas during this conflict, such as lucrative reconstruction contracts and arms sales expansions, the strengthening of energy links and developing expanded commercial relations with regional partners.

Russia gained through its involvement in Syria long-term economic advantages. It achieved its economic objectives via various projects and partnerships. Russia has made significant investments in Syria's oil and gas sectors through major energy corporations. Such investments helped it achieve multiple objectives simultaneously.

Russia secured and diversified its energy sources through accessing Syria's resources, giving Russia more energy options, while increasing its economic power over *al-ʿAsad*'s administration by controlling oil and gas resources, which gave Russia greater economic clout as oil-and-gas control translates directly into economic dominance in the world, especially in the European market. Russia also managed to position itself as essential partner in the economic recovery of Syria through integration of their companies into repair efforts of the demolished infrastructure in the country, including roads and bridges, in a future post-war reconstruction period.

Russia also worked on its diplomatic policy goals towards Syria, which were integrally tied with its overall foreign policy, which in turn consists of maintaining influence in the region, and increasing military dominance in order to counter Western supremacy by offering diplomatic alternatives.

Russia's other policy goals in Syria, such as the cultural ones, involved strengthening diplomatic ties, expanding regional influence, and creating mutual understanding between the two nations. Russia viewed these efforts as part of their overall plan and other policy goals to remain strategically present within the Middle Eastern region, and become an integral player under its own political, economic, military and cultural standards.

Concerning Russia's involvement in Syria, media representation of it has played an essential role in shaping both the public opinion and politics at home. Narratives depicting Russia as a responsible global power have been highlighted. Its military activities depicted as necessary for fighting terror or protecting national interests are showcasing the enormous control the Russian state has over the media in its country, and how it can manipulate the public opinion for its own advantages.

Russian state media coverage of the Syrian War frequently emphasizes Russia's participation in fighting terrorism as one of its key themes. Often emphasizing danger posed by extremist organizations present there and justifying Russia's participation through these narratives. Such stories strike an emotional chord among Russian population, who has experienced horrific acts of terrorism, which Russia exploited very well in order to further justify its military engagement in Syria.

Russian state media portray Russia's participation in Syria as an effort to uphold international law and safeguard Syria's sovereignty, emphasizing their championing role for national sovereignty and denouncing western interventionist actions as invaders of sovereignty - striking an emotional chord among Russian citizens, especially those with deep national pride. This also served to counter allegations regarding Russia's activities by portraying them as legitimate and meeting international standards - something Russia has been doing regularly when responding to criticism about their activities in Syria and Ukraine.

Through its involvement in Syria Russia has had far reaching repercussions for its relations with other regional and global powers such as the US, Turkey, Iran, among many others. Russia due to war's complex dynamics have surfaced between these nations; particularly their relationship with US has suffered significantly. Increased tensions and diminished diplomatic ties are two direct results from their involvements in Syria, furthering competition between them both. The United States of America has heavily criticized Russia for supporting *al-Asad's* regime and has accused Russia of violating human rights and committing war crimes. Their diverging views regarding Syria has further inflamed tensions; with America providing support to rebel organizations fighting *al-Asad* while Russia providing military aid directly to the regime.

Russia's involvement in Syria has had an enormous influence on its relationship with Turkey in several keyways. Their interests during the Syrian crisis were often diametrically opposed, showing support for opposing sides; but both nations also participated in diplomatic initiatives designed to ease tensions and identify areas in which they might reach agreements, such as joining Iran on the Astana peace process to negotiate ceasefires and set de-escalation zones within Syria. However, there have been instances of direct military conflict between Russian and Turkish troops. Yet these nations have managed to maintain an advantageous balance of cooperation and competition within their bilateral relationship despite these obstacles.

Russia's engagement in Syria has had an unpredictable influence on Iran-Russia ties as both work to maintain and preserve *al-Asad's* administration. Russia and Iran remain competing powers with an inherent sense of competition and friction, competing for influence in Syria and the wider Middle East, while having goals, which do not always align. However, their military operations and aid to Syria has been greatly expanded through cooperation, strengthening their alliance and leaving an even larger mark in the region.

Another thing to state is, that there are conflicting opinions and statements about the Russian intervention in Syria, and this depends on the public interests of the source of this criticism or support. Russia's involvement in Syria has generated international reactions, which can best be described as complex. It varies from country to country depending on the strategic interests, historical relationships and regional dynamics. Some nations, fighting militias and religious groups openly supported or opposed Russia's actions, while others took a more pragmatic or neutral position based on their own considerations and benefits.

10.1 Conclusions

From the Tsarist era through the Cold War in Soviet Russia to the modern Russian Federation, Russia's engagement in the Middle East has spanned centuries, always being driven by geopolitical and economic interests reflected in its foreign policy, which has always viewed this region as being of critical importance to it. Even after the fall of Soviet Russia, Russian support for Syria remained central to its policy in the Middle East. Driven by strategic objectives within the region, Russia has developed relations with key actors involved in the Middle East conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iran-Iraq war, providing military assistance and logistical support to the conflicting parties in order to maintain the balance of power in the region.

The Arab Spring played an influential role in provoking violence in Syria, as it resulted in the formation of opposition organizations, some of which were also armed to confront the Syrian regime, which ultimately led to a large-scale civil war in the country. The social and economic challenges faced by the Syrian people, and the growing discontent that reached its peak right before the Arab Spring passed through Syria. What has further complicated the matter is the spread of extremist groups throughout Syria and in the wider region. This conflict had profound and lasting repercussions at the local and regional levels. Russia aimed to avoid an uprising against *al-Asad* that might threaten Russia's strategic foothold in the Middle East. Russia's involvement in Syria can be explained in terms of its political goals: maintaining regional

influence, protecting warm-water ports, and combating Western hegemony. Combating terrorism and maintaining regional stability were among Russia's most prominent justifications for its operations in Syria, where it was able to impose itself as a responsible global player that supports international law and Syrian sovereignty. Massive Russian airstrikes, ground support, and the provision of advanced weapons have helped bolster the capabilities of the Syrian regime, with the hybrid warfare tactics being used by Russian soldiers on the international stage as evidence of Russia's strength and prowess. The Russian military intervention in Syria has had an undeniable impact on the balance of power there. Economically, Russia has gained benefits from its involvement in Syria through reconstruction contracts, investments in the energy sector, and expanded trade relations, as they have gained access to Syria's oil and gas reserves that have increased their economic power. On the diplomatic front, Russian cultural diplomacy efforts were aimed at strengthening relations and expanding influence - this fit with their larger goal of regional hegemony – as well as providing diplomatic alternatives against the Western hegemony. Media representation has been an effective force in shaping public opinion and politics in Russia, especially narratives highlighting Russia's efforts to combat terrorism and uphold international law, as these narratives have been used strategically to generate support both at home and abroad. Russia's involvement in Syria has had serious repercussions on its relations with global and regional powers, most notably with the United States. Tensions escalated into criticism and allegations of human rights violations as both supported opposing sides in the Syrian civil war.

Russia's involvement in Syria has been multidimensional, driven by geopolitical, economic, and strategic interests spanning from geo-economic to strategic to cultural ones. Russia has left its mark in Syria during the tense conflict there - - a conflict from which millions of Syrians and countries in the region are still suffering. It has even had repercussions on Europe and Western countries, especially after the “wave” of refugees coming to the European continent also caused by the developments of the military events in Syria. Improving the current situation in Syria by finding practical and effective solutions in the Middle East is considered one of the most important challenges for the great powers, especially after all the political and military complications witnessed by the Syrian crisis. Only time will be the decisive factor in knowing what things will lead to in the region, with the hope that it will be for the better for the entire Syrian people with all its spectra.

10.2 Lessons That Can Be Drawn from Russia's Involvement in the Syrian Conflict to Further Study International Relations, Geopolitics, and Foreign Policy

Russia's involvement in Syria offers numerous invaluable lessons that may be applied to international relations, geopolitics and foreign policy studies more generally. First it illuminates how crucial strategic interests are in shaping any nation's foreign policy choices - Russia became involved in the Syrian conflict due to several considerations including geopolitical power maintenance, combatting terrorism and protecting military facilities - just to name some motives behind their involvement. When studying state actions within an international setting it is important that one has an accurate picture of these hidden interests and objectives that drive states' foreign policy, otherwise one may miss crucial analytical elements. These interests usually require further exploring and examination!

Second, Syria illustrates both the difficulties and importance of multilateral diplomacy as well as alliances in shaping international policy results. Russia's success at reaching its objectives in Syria can largely be credited to their ability to maintain effective ties with regional and global powers such as Iran and Turkey - an affirmation of how powerful alliances can be if used effectively to further national interests while shaping battle outcomes. This highlights why creating alliances should not only be encouraged but should be leveraged effectively to advance main objectives outside one's borders.

In addition, Russia's involvement in Syria also serves to highlight the evolving nature of military operations in the 21st century, drawing the attention to their changing character compared to older, more common forms. The Russian approach incorporated classic military operations alongside supporting local proxy forces and sophisticated information warfare strategies. By employing this multifaceted strategy they demonstrated its growing relevance as a way of exerting influence or reaching objectives in current conflicts.

Syria has served to illustrate both the challenges and limitations involved in intervening from outside in civil battles. Russia, despite their military engagement, has had difficulty reaching an agreement that will bring an end to this civil conflict once and for all, despite having an army presence there and despite sectarian splits and multiple players with competing interests within Syria's boundaries. Military action alone cannot achieve a lasting political resolution since it requires adopting an inclusive holistic strategy, which addresses core causes as well as key players involved.

How the Russian media portrays Russia's role in Syria provides some fascinating insight into how information and propaganda may be deployed as tools of influence. Russia has utilized state-controlled media sources to shape the public opinion and push its narrative on Syria - showing just how influential informational sources such as media can be when used for this purpose. Furthermore, such practices raise fundamental questions concerning their use during modern wars, and regarding their influence as instruments of global politics.

The key to effective conflict management lies in taking an all-inclusive approach that addresses core issues, involves all relevant parties and supports inclusive political processes. International parties should focus on diplomatic efforts, mediation and dialogue to facilitate negotiations leading to political settlements. Lessons learned from the Syrian crisis have shown the importance of understanding and taking into account important stakeholders' interests and regional dynamics when making strategic decisions. Policymakers need to take extra precautions when making decisions that could impact those dynamics by engaging diplomatic initiatives that aim at mitigating any conflicts of interests and creating stability.

Additionally, propaganda and disinformation used as methods of influence during the Syrian crisis have demonstrated its relevance for policymakers and international organizations to invest in combatting misinformation campaigns, supporting independent journalism, fostering media literacy education programs, as well as increasing an informed view of conflicts by expanding an information eco-system that enhances more a nuanced understanding and peaceful solutions.

Russia's involvement in Syria also highlights the value of global coordination and cooperation when it comes to resolving disputes. Navigating through various parties with competing interests, regional and international powers and non-state actors alike – can be dauntingly complex, yet improving coordination structures like multilateral forums or dialogue platforms may promote a improved communication, foster greater collaboration, and increase chances that issues will be resolved successfully.

These findings also underscore the significance of long-term planning and successful post-conflict reconstruction initiatives as millions have been uprooted by Syria's civil war, creating severe humanitarian hardship. To aid the recovery in post-conflict times and avoid its reappearance, international actors should prioritize aiding infrastructure repair projects, providing humanitarian relief assistance, and encouraging socioeconomic development initiatives as key priorities in post-conflict recovery initiatives.

Russian involvement in Syria provides instructive lessons to international relations, geopolitics and foreign policy studies alike. It offers insight into strategic interests, alliances, military operations, civil conflicts and the media's power of exerting influence. Students, scholars and politicians may gain greater insights into modern conflict dynamics by examining this involvement further and deeper, and also discover new perspectives for possible solutions more successfully.

10.3 Future Research Direction

As one considers Russia's involvement in Syria's crisis, it is imperative to look ahead and investigate some critical areas. Future research should examine how Russian military interventions altered regional power dynamics and relationships among key actors like the United States, Turkey and Iran. One must determine whether Russia has increased regional influence through increased power projection. Russia's participation may have far-reaching ramifications on the international stability that should also be explored further.

Russia's role in controlling Syria's economy is an essential area of study. This will involve researching both positive and negative economic effects. Investigating its motivations behind their economic involvement further may reveal more confidential details to the economic agreements and arms deals that have been held between Russia and Syria.

The non-state actors' roles and connections to Russia in Syria is another subject worth investigating further. Russian ties to Syrian government forces, opposition groups and extremist organizations should be investigated thoroughly to gain greater insight into Russian tactics, goals and obstacles within Syria's crisis.

Future research should examine the effects of Syria's conflict on humanitarian assistance and post-conflict reconstruction efforts, with particular attention paid to assess the international humanitarian aid effectiveness as well as challenges encountered when providing it directly to the affected populations. Also important is looking at the reconstruction process with particular interest on the involvement of different actors (Russia included) rebuilding the infrastructure, restoring governance structures and encouraging socio-economic development as a part of measuring prospects for long-term stability and recovery.

Media plays an immense role in shaping the public opinion and narratives; therefore, further research should explore its influence on the perception of the Syrian conflict coverage in various media outlets. This can be done by evaluating the framing and representation practices across

media sources and considering the role of propaganda and disinformation techniques used during the conflict. Further research should also include the impact assessments for media narratives on attitudes and public debates. An understanding of the media influence will offer invaluable insight into information warfare challenges encountered during various conflict situations.

There are many topics related to this thesis that need to be researched and elaborated on further, some of which will only be possible in the future with hindsight. The main objective of this research was to give a general picture of several key points related to the Russian interests and policy in Syria, specifically with regard to the Syrian civil war since 2011. A further expanding on this topic will be sought in a PhD thesis in the future.

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