

## **Russian Intervention in Syria: Regional and Global Implications**

By

<sup>1</sup>Muhammad Bilal, <sup>2</sup>Abdul Qadir Mengal

### **Abstract:**

*This article explains the Russian interests in Syria with respect to their historical alliance during the Cold war, how the two states were allies and USSR supported her in terms of military and economy. And how Russia is determined to protect her naval base Tartus that has substantial geostrategic importance for Russian navy, but her presence in the Mediterranean Sea is perceived as a threat in some states like Israel that might be cause of a future conflict between them. It also tries to explain Russian fight against the Islamic militancy. Another hidden reason for the Russian involvement in Syria as why Russia does not want a regime change in Syria could lie in the Russian economy. If Al Assad's regime is changed a gas pipeline from Qatar to Europe will cause a serious trouble to Russian economy because Russia is the sole exporter of gas to Europe.*

**Keywords:** Syria, Civil War, Russia, Interests, Gas, Militancy

### **Introduction:**

Arab spring that plagued the Middle Eastern region has engulfed hundreds of thousands of innocent civilian lives and much more to flee their homeland in search of surety for their lives. A small-scale demonstration that started with the suicide of Mohammad Bouzizi in Tunisia in 2010 soon spread throughout the region with much greater intensity. Bouzizi's suicide sparked a revolution in Tunisia against the tyrannical and oppressing regime of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Ben Ali as a longtime ruler of Tunisia failed to give liberties, job, rights etc. But comparing the

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<sup>1</sup>M.Phil. Scholar Department of International Relations University of Balochistan Quetta Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Qadir Mengal, Associate Professor Department of International Relations University of Balochistan Quetta Pakistan

casualties in Tunisia of those caused in Egypt. Libya and Syria are far less. And this wave of revolution spread to Egypt. Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was accused of the same tyrannical oppression, unemployment, and poverty in country as of Ben Ali. Protestors demonstrated against the government ill policies and were faced with brutal suppression by the government. As demonstrations grew in intensity and in number they became of more political nature. People started to demand constitutional amendments under which no future president could stay in office for a long time like Hosni Mubarak. The role of social media is of great importance in Egyptian uprising against Hosni Mubarak because it was social media that mobilized people on a larger scale. These waves of revolutions didn't end with Egypt and soon similar demonstrations began in Libya. The Libyan government witnessed the powers of these protests and decided to suppress them violently before they could even gain momentum. As so it happened those police killed a few peaceful demonstrators and in retaliation protestors killed several policemen. This all turned out to be extremely violent. Colonel Muammar Gaddafi the dictator of Libya made sure that these uprisings against him are ended but these turned into a rebellion against him. The loyalists of Gaddafi had access to military hardware and killings of these rebellions became a routine. Gaddafi even restricted the internet so that no demonstrations could be organized through social media. It was then the great powers decided to intervene in Libya to stop the bloodshed of innocent lives. The NATO led aerial bombardment of Libyan forces along with the help of USA and rebels on grounds restricted Gaddafi to Tripoli and some western areas. On October 20, 2011, Gaddafi was killed in his hometown Surt. thus, ending the longest reign of dictators in Middle East. (Anderson, 2011)

Assad is backed by Russia and Iran and rebels are backed by Saudi Arabia and USA (Black, 2015). Here rises a question what Russian interest that made Moscow to take such stances. It is not easy to decipher the exact motives of Vladimir Putin to back Al Assad but one could guess that Syria has been a lifelong ally of former USSR especially during the cold war. This historical alliance could be one of many reasons why Russia is prepared to do anything to maintain the status quo in Syria. Another important reason is that Russia wants to get rid of the Islamic extremism that's gaining its roots in the shape of ISIS. This Islamic militant group is causing serious troubles for the Russia in Central Asian Republics and in Afghanistan. After the disintegration of USSR, Russia lost important naval and trade seaports as an independent Ukraine emerged. One could argue that after years of isolation Russia is now back in international politics and

is displaying her strength militarily and politically and she now feels a need that world also acknowledge that Russia is the emerging as a great power. Tartus is the main reason why Russia intervened in Syria in the first place. It gives Russia an access to Mediterranean Sea without involving Turkey. Also, the strategic importance is great for Moscow. Syria has been under the Russian influence since 1970s and Moscow wants to keep it like that because there are not many friends left for Russia. Russian intervention in Syrian conflict has economic reasons too. The weapons that Al Assad's forces are using are also bought from Russia. Weapon sales to Syria helps in the growth of economy and these weapons are transported to Tartus from where they are taken by the pro Al Assad forces. This again high lightens the importance of Tartus for Russia. If Al Assad's regime falls, Russian economy will be in serious trouble as Qatar will be able to build gas pipeline from Syria to Europe and Russia does not want this to happen as Russia is now the sole exporter of natural gas to Europe but with Qatar in business Europe will naturally prefer Qatar over Russia to lessen their dependency on Russian gas so it is vital not only for strategic purposes in Mediterranean Sea but for economic reasons as well that Russia supports Bashar Al Assad.

#### **Russia's Fight against Islamic Militancy:**

The issue of Islamic Militancy in shape of ISIS, IS-IL, Al-Qaeda is growing concern to almost every state in the world. Speaking before U.N General Assembly, Russian President Vladimir Putin indicated of a need of a global coalition against ISIS and urged the international community to act together with the Syrian government against this rising threat. Although many American scholars believe this to be a front for Russian providing support to Bashar Al Assad's forces against rebels. USA has accused that the military support that Bashar Al Assad is receiving from Russia, Iran and Shia Militia is to eradicate the resistance and rebellion. There have been reports that the air support Russian Air Force is providing has mostly targeted rebellion bases instead of ISIS.

However, the western media portraits Russia's intervention and war against ISIS, Russian forces had some victory in getting areas that were under IS control. In March 2016 Bashar Al Assad's forces took back control of city of Palmyra. Similarly, later that year in December Russian fighter jet targeted 3 ISIS hideouts in northern Syrian town Al -Bab. With defeat of ISIS in Mosul, Russian Naval Admiral Grigorovich class frigate was dispatched to carry out attacks from the Mediterranean Sea on Raqqa, Syria on ISIS stronghold along with the support of Russian Airforce. (Hollow, 2017) The retaliation against Russia is quite natural and so it

happened that Islamic militants targeted a railway station in St. Petersburg and further attacks are expected. It is important to understand that ISIS today is not limited to a region or to a group of people. Traces of ISIS presence is detected throughout the world. Russia wants to deal the source of this militancy i.e. to tackle it from the place of the origin. ISIS has been recruiting youngsters from every state specifically Afghanistan and Central Asian States. These recruits under different banners but working for same ideology and same parent organization have been carrying out activities in Russia. Especially in Chechnya the number of recruits that are joining the Jihad in Syria is very high. There is a common element of hatred against the Russian authorities because of their suppression. For example, two Chechen women in 2010 blew themselves in Moscow, in 2002 Chechen insurgent killed 170 hostages in a theater in Moscow. Putin administration believes that this question and challenge of insurgency can be dealt by elimination the source of this radicalism and militancy.

In a way, this step of Russian administration to wipe out the extremist element is appreciable. This problem has long been a headache of every state and hundreds of thousands of lives have been claimed by the growing extremism. Although Russian administration has taken advantage of the situation of by supporting Bashar Al Assads' forces against the rebels, but they indeed have worked diligently towards eradicating the extremist element. Russia's decision to support Bashar Al Assad's forces is manly to protect her national interests. If Bashar Al Assad is removed from power today Russia will lose an important naval base in the Mediterranean Sea because of which Russia intervened in the first place. Another aspect of Russia's willingness to fight against ISIS is to show her military might to the world. But then again this is another aspect of Russian intervention, so either Russia is fighting ISIS to genuinely get rid of extremist element or her fight against ISIS is a cover to her military support of Bashar Al Assad's army or is her way of showing her military might is still a debatable question.

### **Russian Naval Base in Syria; Free Entry to Mediterranean:**

Despite the fact stated above the historical alliance between Syria and Russia, they both were not as close as they are now in the early years of Putin. Rather it improved suddenly in 2005 (Katz, 2006). So what were the factors that made such a substantial change in Russia's foreign Policy. And the reasons were firstly, Moscow was capable of persuading Syria to have better relations with her neighbor. Secondly Tartus was the only naval base Russia had in Syria which was her access to Mediterranean Sea. Thirdly Syria was prepared to buy weapons from Russia and Russia

was prepared to forgive a portion of debts Syria owed to Russia in Soviet Union era. (Katz, 2006). The Tartus was built in 1971 during the Cold War so its importance to the Soviet Union was great even at that time. The prime objective of the base was to provide support and logistics to the fleets in Mediterranean Sea. (Kommersant, 2007). After the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991 the base was under the command of Russian military and after Putin came into power its strategic importance was realized once again. For that Putin played a master stroke of diplomacy and cunningness. Debts that Syria owed to Russia were about \$ 13.4 billion out of which Russia agreed to forgive \$ 9.6 billion. How Putin administration went to great lengths to protect Russian interest in Black Sea same is the case with Mediterranean Sea. During Libyan intervention by NATO led forces, Russia didn't use her veto in Security Council but in Syria, Russia is extending every kind of help to protect Al Assad and her interests. Like Russia annexed Crimea into to protect her naval base at Sevastopol. Russia isn't a land locked state so why it felt the greatest urge to have control over these bases. The reason for their utmost importance lies because these are deep warm waters. Russia has naval bases too that faces Europe but they are not operational in winters. Another important advantage especially for Tartus is that it can dock nuclear submarines. (Gardner, 2012)

Moreover, the Tartus base might not be of great operational value like it is for Sevastopol naval base but the geostrategic location of Tartus is of far greater importance. As mentioned above it can dock nuclear submarines. This gives an edge to Russia over her rivals because in case of a nuclear attack on Russia, she will be able to respond with her second-strike capability. Presence of nuclear submarines in Mediterranean Sea can also be used for deterrence to discourage any nation to take any aggressive measure towards Syria or Russia. Another factor for Tartus importance is logistics and delivery of weapons to Syria. Tartus is the central hub for receiving weapon shipments from Russia to Syrian government of Bashar Al Assad. Also, a repair dock for the damaged military hardware that is either repaired there or sent back to Russia. Tartus is well connected to network of well-developed roads and railways. (Synovitz, 2012). This well-connected network helps to transport equipment back and forth in to the interior of country. Although the biggest and most important military base outside the Russian territory was Sevastopol naval base (which now is a part of Russian federation) but Tartus outranks in strategic importance. Tartus has enabled Russian influence to grow and expand in eastern Mediterranean Sea. To deploy the Black Sea fleet of Sevastopol beyond Black Sea, Russian warships will have to pass through the Bosphorus Strait

which is under the control of Turkey, a NATO member. Under the Montreux Convention of 1936 Turkey is at an authority to militarily control Bosphorus Strait. An amendment which came into force in 1982 puts the right to Turkey to close the strait at her own will during peace time or during war. (Synovitz, 2012) A naval base outside the Bosphorus is of great value to Moscow because she can use her at own discretion without the approval of the Turkey and has two important advantages. Firstly, Russia can extend her influence further up the region independently. Secondly, the control of the Bosphorus by Turkey is what Moscow thinks a containment policy towards Russia by the NATO so she not only by passed their area of containment but now can contain the NATO's influence in Mediterranean Sea. Many scholars believe that if Al Assad is removed from the power Russia's strategic and economic interests will be hurt. The sale of Russian weapon to Syria will be stopped and the new government will be most likely to stop Russia from using Tartus which will obviously abolish her hegemony over the region.

Things took a drastic change when Bashar Al Assad was accused of using chemical weapons against the rebels in April 2017. The world community was at shock because of the terrible event that claimed dozens of lives. Trump administration believed this to be a failure of Barak Obama's government that they failed to do something about the Syrian Crisis which today resulted in Chemical weapon attacks. (Gordon, 2017) The US government retaliated to these chemical weapon attacks by attacking Al Assad forces' base by Tomahawk Cruise Missiles fired from the eastern Mediterranean Sea. This step of Washington offended Putin's administration because sending a US destroyer to eastern Mediterranean Sea is more likely a threat to Tartus. In response Russia dispatched a warship to the Mediterranean Sea armed with cruise missiles to balance the force US displayed by attacking Al Assad's force. There is a positive aspect to this American attack. USA was at weak position to be at negotiating table before but after display of her strength cooperation between two states is possible regarding Syria as they won't be one sided and a positive outcome can be expected from future negotiations. (Luhn, 2017).

### **Russian Presence in Mediterranean; A threat to Israel:**

It is no hidden fact that whenever the Arab world decided to wage war against the Israel it was backed by Soviet Union. Either in the form of diplomatic support or military or economic funding but Soviet Union was the support Arab world relied upon. A reason to back Syria, Egypt against Israel was part of the Cold War politics but after Soviet Union's

disintegration its relation between Russia and Israel became friendly and cordial. After the Syrian crisis, their relations are at a pace towards deterioration. Israel has been at a conflict over maritime territory with Lebanon and has been reported to be bombing over the Hezbollah's hideouts in Syria that is backed by Lebanon. This maritime territory is about 800 square kilometers that is in the Mediterranean Sea. Hezbollah which is a Shiite radical group is backed by Russians and in return they are fighting alongside the pro-Assad forces because Al Assad himself belongs to the Shiite sect. Israel doesn't want Russians to back Hezbollah because Hezbollah is a threat to Israel's national security (Selman, 2017). Russians have been providing latest weapons to Hezbollah that includes long range missiles and sophisticated air defense systems that will give a protection system like the Israel's iron dome. Israel has even claimed that Russia is providing chemical weapons to Hezbollah and has warned Russia that Israel's weapon is far greater and advanced than Russians. Moreover, the growing Iran's influence is also a threat to Israel. Israel's plan to gain power in the Mediterranean is to counter the Iran and Lebanon and to get benefit from the natural resources that are in the Mediterranean. But the Russian presence in Mediterranean is now being perceived as a threat. Russia has strong navy and nuclear submarines in the region which can be used against Israel and US because the rebels don't have any navy (Selman, 2017). Another reason for Israel's concern is the physical proximity of the naval base Tartus. In case of a conflict Russia can dispatch warships towards Israel very quickly. Both states have managed to avoid any direct confrontation, but things can get out of hands if one of them isn't careful enough. But Israel's bombing of Hezbollah and pro Assad forces is very provoking and this recent issue of annexing maritime territory and challenging Russian supremacy in Mediterranean can prove into an issue that might escalate to an armed crisis.

### **Gas; the Fuel to the Crisis:**

One hidden factor that is usually overlooked intentionally or unintentionally that could be one of the main reason for why a civil war broke out in Syria in the first place and is most probably the reason why the crisis has been prolonged. Russia's economy depends mostly on the gas it exports to Europe. Gazprom the state controlled gas company sells roughly around 80% of the gas to Europe but Europeans doesn't like being dependent that much on Russia for their gas and this is also encouraged by US to find some alternate source of gas, Obama said very clearly that Europe must not be too much reliable on Russia (Chang, 2015). However, Russia doesn't want to lose her edge over the European state because her

export of gas is also a political tool than just an economic means like Russia cut off the gas supply to European states during her crisis with Georgia and Ukraine and finding some other source of gas means Russia will lose her supremacy over Europe. So the quest for gas exporting states started to find means of exporting cheap gas to Russia and in this quest Qatar and Iran was the bidders. Qatar gave her plan for the gas pipeline in 2009 that stretched from Qatar to Syria and from there to Turkey and to Europe. The largest natural gas field is in the Persian Gulf, but Qatar cannot utilize it to fullest because it must sell gas in tankers thus making it expensive. A direct line to the Europe would have been cheap but unfortunately Syria refused to allow a gas pipeline to go through Syria which obviously did under Russian pressure. Meanwhile Iran also proposed a gas line that extended from Iran to Iraq and then too Syria and from there to Europe. Syria too agreed to allow Iran's gas pipeline to pass through her territory. Unfortunately, the element of sectarianism is responsible for allowing Iran because of it being a Shiite majority while denying Qatar being a Sunni majority and being a Saudi ally, which is backed by the USA. It was under such circumstances when war broke in Syria and the design for pipelines from Qatar or Iran couldn't take practical shape but if by any chance Bashar Al Assad's regime changes, Qatar will be one of the beneficiaries as the new government might not be under Russian influence and she can have access to the European markets. It is also reported that Qatar has been funding the rebels because if rebels succeed in overthrowing Qatar will have that pipeline. And to stop rebels from overthrowing Al Assad's government is in Russian interests because along with her base in Tartus, Russia will also lose her leverage over the Europe which can prove a death blow to the Russian economy. So, Russia must do anything to protect Bashar Al Assad in order to protect her interests otherwise what Russia has done will all be in vain. (Chang, 2015)

**Conclusion:**

The crisis that began in Tunisia known as Arab Spring was against the oppression of the regime but as it spread throughout the region it changed in intensity and nature. When the western forces intervened in Libya that was for their own purpose because a regime change suited their motives and today what's happening in Syria is again a well laid out plan of USA and Russia. What are Russian interests and how they are protected if Bashar Al Assad remains in power are quite clear now. And Russia is prepared to pay any price to protect her interest. But if Bashar Al Assad is removed from power the western powers will benefit from it in shape of Qatar's gas pipeline and NATO can contain Russia once again and Israel



will have a monopoly over the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Whoever wins in this struggle the only thing that is lost is humanity. Hundreds of thousands of lives lost and millions scattered from their places and still there is no chance of this civil war to end in the foreseen future. To avoid any such formidable circumstances that could lead towards war both states must sit at a table and talk to resolve this crisis. Russia could let go her position to support Al Assad if USA guarantees the new government will extend Russia the sovereignty over Tartus. In return Russia could let Qatar build her pipeline if Russia is properly compensated. The world community should make Iran and Saudi Arab to sort out their sectarian differences that have burned half of the Middle East because of their proxy wars. For ISIS, Russia, USA, Saudi Arabia, Iran must work together to wipe out the extremist element from the region that will bring peace to the whole world.

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