

# Russian Policy towards Syrian Conflict. Influential Factors and Prospects

V. M. Akhmedov

Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences,  
12, ul. Rozhdestvenka, Moscow, 107039, Russian Federation

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Since 1970, Syria has become Russia's major Arab ally in the Middle East. The Russian-Syrian ties were specified by multilevel character. The Soviet Union's collapse has generated negative implications on Russia — Syria relations. Nevertheless regional and international developments, Damascus remained Russian outpost in the Middle East. The Syrian crisis has become a major challenge for contemporary Russian Mideast politics. Moscow has supported Al-Assad's regime since the crisis began in March 2011, but unlike Iran did not send its forces to fight in Syria. By the end of 2015, the imminent outcome on the battlefield became apparent and was not in Al-Assad's favor. A group of influential factors determined Moscow's decision to involve military in Syria. Russia's effective diplomatic campaign combined with military efforts played a decisive role in keeping Al-Assad in power and helped Moscow to achieve all its primary goals, securing Russia's long-term strategic influence in Syria. In 2023–2024, Russia faced new challenges in Syria. Despite Al-Assad's victory over opposition the fragile stability in Syria hinders the process of political settlement and economic reconstruction. The growing Iranian military presence in Syria contradicts Russian plans to end all military hostilities and securer pullout of foreign troops from Syria. Since Gaza war eruption, Syria turned into an area for Iran Israel military race. The great power competition in the region in view of Ukraine Crisis plays important role in shaping Russian vision of its politics in Syria and Middle East, as well. The above-mentioned questions shape the urgency of presented research paper that investigates most of advanced statements and proves forwarded conclusions. The article defined by its novelty and based on sources in Arabic and Persian languages.

**Keywords:** Russia, Syria, Iran, Middle East, International relations.

## Arab Ally

Over the past decades, Syria has played an important role in Russian Mideast policy. In 1944, Soviet Union has established diplomatic relations with Syria [1, pp. 150–171]. However, it was only after Hafez al-Assad came to power in November 1970 that Syria became Russia's major ally in the Middle East. According 6-s clause of the Soviet-Syrian Friendship & Cooperation Treaty (1980), Moscow could use its military to defend Syria from foreign aggression. Syria was the second Middle East country (after Israel) hosted more than 250 thousand residents (not only Slavic origin) with Russian passport and citizenship. Russia conducted primary industrialization in Syria and build up its army forces and security services [2, pp. 3–9]. More than 100 thousand Syrians studied at universities in the USSR/Russia. About 35 thousand militaries who trained in Russia served in the Syr-

ian armed forces as officers, many of whom were married to women holding Russian citizenship. In 1971, within the context of a special treaty, Russia began to construct in Tartus its naval base, which provided Moscow with a strategic position in the Mediterranean [3].

After the collapse of the USSR (1991), the progress in bilateral relations began to decline. These developments gave space for Iran's advantages in Syria. Iranian penetration into Syria peaked in 2007–2009. Iran signed a whole series of profitable economic contracts with the new Syrian leadership and an agreement on military cooperation that has got its prolongation in 2019–2022 [4, pp. 19–45]. Nevertheless, Damascus remained Russian outpost in the Middle East in the frameworks of Russian foreign strategy.

Although Syria was not one of the rich regional states its geographical position in the Mediterranean considered as an important factor to regain Russian influences in the Middle East. The industrial facilities created and operated with Russian assistance played an important role in the Syrian economy, generating 30 % of country's electricity and more than 30 % of oil production. The Syrian army was equipped with more than 80 % of Russian-made weapons [5, pp. 2–12]. The 1997 year marked the start of Russian-Syrian cooperation in nuclear energy. Some Arab media reported Russian military deliveries to Syria for \$3 billion with financial support from Iran. Damascus was interested in purchasing modern Russian weapons, in particular MiG-31, MiG-29, Su-27, Su-22 aircrafts, Ka-50 helicopters, T-90 tanks, S-300 antimissile defense systems, electronic warfare equipment [6]. In 1999, after a 12-year break, Syrian President H. al-Assad paid an official visit to Russia. Al-Assad understood that strong ties with Russia could help his son to govern the country during the transition period and succeed him on presidential post.

With Bashar al-Assad coming to power in 2000, the search for a new economic strategy intensified. In 2002, negotiations between the Russian and Syrian economic delegations in Moscow and Damascus resulted in signing a number of important agreements in economic, scientific and technical cooperation. In November 2003, the Russian oil company (Tatneft) won a tender for exploration of one of the large oil fields in the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR). The meeting of B. al-Assad and Vladimir Putin in January 2005 in Moscow gave new impetus to the development of Russian-Syrian relations. The visit of the Syrian president to Moscow (2006) strengthened the bilateral relations. By writing off 73 % (about \$10 billion) of Syria's debts, Russia demonstrated the consistency of its foreign policy. The fact that Moscow's stance took place in a period when Syria experienced international pressure because of its military presence in Lebanon enforced the improvement of relations on the Baath regime as a necessity [3, pp. 5–7]. The Syrian regime evaluated cooperation with Russia beyond an ordinary relation based on mutual interests and seen them as a matter of survival from their perspective. This stance indicated Syria and Russia mutual position in response to growing US dominance in the region.

## Human factor

For the last decades military has played a dominant role in Syrian politics and society. Security forces turned into a powerful stronghold in the hands of the ruling elite in maintaining internal political stability and protecting national interests outside the country [7].

Since 1970, Moscow has played a significant role in determining the main directions of Syrian foreign policy. This exceptional Russian position in Syria ensured by the presence in the shadow structures of the Syrian government the so-called "Russian Comman-

do” which representatives had the opportunity to influence directly the decision-making mechanism on key issues of the country’s foreign policy. The “Russian Commando” took shape as an organized group in the early 1970 and operated successfully until the end of the 1990s. The group mainly consisted of Soviet military universities’ graduates, some of whom trained in the intelligence centers of the KGB. Although many of them hold high positions in military intelligence services and civil leadership, few people all over the Middle East and even in Syria knew about their adherence to “Russian Commando”. The group members collaborated with Moscow based on mutual ideological and political perceptions. This believes of the Syrian president, that foreign policy should not be exclusive domain for security forces facilitated “Russian Commando’s” activity in Syria. The “Russian Commando” acted largely autonomously, outside the control of the Syrian security agencies<sup>1</sup>. General Ism Majhoul<sup>2</sup> was the author of many key decisions in building Syria’s relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Lebanon in the period from 1976 to 1999. Another alleged group member General Shoo al-Eshoo oversaw Russian-Syrian military cooperation. One of the main tasks of another “Russian Commando” member known at his nickname “al-Ankabout (Spider)” was to prevent “distortions” in the Syrian foreign policy regards behavioral voluntarism of some high officers in leading Syrian intelligence services.

The end of 20<sup>th</sup> century became crucial for “Russian Commando” in Syria. H. al-Assad’s illness pushed the power rivalry within his inner circle and deepened the split of ruling elites. By the end of the 1990, Syrian power vertical had seriously changed because of large-scale reshuffles in security services as part of H. al-Assad’s succession policy. The group of General B. Suleiman strengthened its positions in the shadow structures of the Syrian government. By that time, B. Suleiman managed to get closer to B. al-Assad and his influential cousins. One of his associate’s General H. al-Bakhtiar became responsible for foreign policy and security issues in Syria. Most members of inner military circles considered him as “Iran’s proxy in Syria”, as his surname indicates. General H. al-Bakhtiar facilitated unprecedented rapprochement between Damascus and Tehran, which had negatively impact on Syrian-Arab relation, turning Syria into a “playing card” in power struggle in the Middle East.

Moscow monitored new developments in Syria, but following principle of not interfering in Syrian internal affairs Russian authorities actually did little to prevent “Russian Commando” from leaving the corridors of real power in the SAR. On the other hand, much had changed in Syria itself by this time. The powerful Moscow’s “friends” grew old and lost their power positions. The influential generals Ali Duba and Ali Haydar were retired and played with their grandchildren on estates in Latakia. After the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, F. Shara’a (vice president since 2006) spent most of his time at his home in Damascus. The Syrian vice president A. al-Khaddam immigrated to Paris in 2005 where he died of cancer in March 2020. The powerful Minister of Defense M. Tlas left Syria in 2012 and died in Paris five years later. The “wallet” of al-Assad family, M. Makhlof lost almost all his property and left for Russia, where he died in 2020.

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<sup>1</sup> The essential security agencies in Syria have numbered four departments: Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence (al-Djaviya), General Directorate of Intelligence, and Political Department in Ministry of Interior Affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Some names changed due to ethic perceptions.

Only a few representatives of security community in Syria dared to help members of “Russian Commando”. One of them was General A. Shaukat (Military Intelligence Directorate), the husband of H. al-Assad’s daughter Bushra. Perhaps he simply had no idea whom exactly he assisted. Being a member of inner al-Assad’s circle, he enjoyed relative behavioral independence. Besides, very soon he found himself in trouble. In 2008, A. Shaukat’s colleagues from other security services tried to get rid of him. General A. Shaukat along with 100 Alawite officers was under arrest. His wife Bushra al-Assad sought political asylum in the UAE<sup>3</sup>.

Since “Arab Spring” has begun various Russian special services started to “scour” Syria searching for members of former “Russian Commando”. Moscow was aware that the “Russian Commando” was gradually weakening, but did not expect that it would be “cleaned out” with such thoroughness. Despite its widespread penetration into Syria, Iran learned of “Russian Commando” only in the late 1990 and was extremely wary of this circumstance. However, due to special relations with Moscow, Tehran had to put up with its existence in the depths of the Syrian government [8].

### **Russian deterrents and advantages in the Syrian Conflict**

The Syrian upheaval did not take Moscow by surprise. Before these events and in the first year of the conflict, high-ranking Russian officials repeatedly warned B. al-Assad about the danger threatening Damascus. However, Syrian president did not take Moscow’s warnings with full responsibility. The government has practically paid no attention to socio-economic deterioration in Syrian periphery due to several years of dry spells, as well as the crippling drought of 2010. Consequently, some of 1 million bankrupted farmers and unemployed villagers began moving to Syria’s mostly populated centers right before the uprising. These social strata became the explosive substance of the Syrian protests.

The Syrian crisis and its repercussions on domestic (Syrian) and regional scene has become a major challenge for contemporary Russian Mideast politics. Moscow has supported al-Assad’s regime since the crisis began in March 2011. Through the first four years, Russia interacted with Syrian conflict in limited ways and mainly by political means [9]. At the international level, Russia vetoed UN Security Council resolutions, blocked, and revised any peace plans for Syria (Geneva Communiqué) that authorized use of force and contained a hint of Al-Assad’s regime change. Before the fall of 2015, Moscow’s support for al-Assad had its limits. Moscow has committed to political resolution and negotiation process for democratic power transit in Syria. Moreover, Moscow brokered a deal with Washington to destroy the vast majority of al-Assad’s chemical weapons in 2013 in order to restrict US interventionist intentions in Syria [10].

Since 2015 international and regional developments in the Middle East has generated new military-political environment that forced Moscow to rethink its previous strategy in Syria. The Ukraine crisis marked the breakdown in Russian relations with Western countries and buried prospects for counterterrorism cooperation in the region. After the failure of the peace conferences on Syria “Geneva 1” (June 2012), “Geneva 2” (January 2014), it became clear that international diplomatic efforts and negotiation process to resolve politically Syrian conflict turned out a complete fiasco. In this regard, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Iran’s ground forces (IRGC, Artesh) supported by Lebanese Hez-

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<sup>3</sup> The date extracted from unpublished author’s correspondence (2007–2008, Damascus — Moscow).

bolah and Shia militias failed to deter massive offensive by numerous military opposition groups and jihads terrorists from ISIS\* and Al-Nusra Front\*. After successful attack on Mosul (Iraq), ISIS\* proclaimed caliphate and captured Palmira (Syria). By the end of 2015, regime controlled less than 15 % of national territory. The imminent outcome on the battlefield became apparent and was not in Al-Assad's favor. Russia's major Arab partner in the Middle East faced real danger of collapse [11, pp. 19–45].

A group of influential factors determined Russian decision to involve military in Syria. A primarily influential factor motivated by Russian geopolitical and national security perceptions. Moscow strived to stabilize Syrian regime and prevent U. S. from overthrowing al-Assad and replacing him with a pro-Western puppet. U. S. commitments to “colored revolutions” in Moscow's allied countries (Iraq, Libya) and geopolitical zones of vital Russian interest (Caucasia, Central Asia) was seen as clear evidences of U. S.-led NATO's strive to expand its power and influences up to Russian borders. In fact, terrorist's threat was one of the primary motives for conducting military operations in Syria. Unlike the United States Russia and Middle Eastern states shared a common geopolitical space. A bitter experiences of Afghanistan and Chechnya proved high ability of influential regional players to shove out Islamic terrorists to Russian territories with mostly Muslim population [12; 13]. Orchestrated by U. S. consolidate Western stand on Crimea forced Moscow to strengthen its military presence in Mediterranean coast and provide live-fire training for its battle units to more effectively restrict eventual Western hostility actions from the south flanks.

Russia's effective diplomatic campaign (ceasefire, de-escalations Astana agreements) combined with military efforts played a decisive role in keeping al-Assad in power and reasserting regime influence across Syria. Coordinated military and diplomatic efforts helped Moscow to achieve all its primary goals, securing Russia's long-term strategic influence and reduce U. S. rivalry in Syria. The liberation of Aleppo (2016) largely ensured the launch of the negotiation process in Astana (Kazakhstan), in which official Damascus, the Syrian opposition, Turkey and Iran took part. Moscow's consistent efforts through a series of conferences organized in Astana and Nor-Sultan created a positive basis for a national dialogue that could lead to Syrian reconciliation within a broader international format. The decisions of 20<sup>th</sup> round of Astana meeting (June 2023) rejected the regime of unilateral sanctions against Syria and contributed to the weakening of the sanctions regime against Damascus. It made difficult for the Syrian opposition forces to make decisions that bypass the Syrian regime and Russia [14]. Russia's diplomatic activity in Astana (Kazakhstan) assisted Moscow to maximize its advantages and facilitate gains at the international negotiating table (Geneva). The active work of Russian diplomats to develop a “road map” for a Syrian settlement ensured the priority of the Russian platform in Astana over the “round tables” in Geneva in the adoption of a peace plan for Syria and increased Russia's international authority in the Arab world. Moscow was able to establish almost complete control over Syrian airspace and secure its positions in the Mediterranean coastal belt from north to south. Moscow has become a key participant in the Syrian conflict, whose position the United States, Europe and leading regional countries, including Turkey and Iran, were forced to reckon with. The Russian military campaign in Syria provided an opportunity to modernize Russia's war-fighting capabilities. Russian officers received valuable experience on the ground interacting with IRGC, Hezbollah forces and

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\* Organization is recognized as an extremist in the Russian Federation.



local militias. Regards new strategic doctrine in African-Asian countries, Russia will likely develop its military facilities in Syria rearranging long-term naval and air bases for Russian forces. Moscow continues to support regime forces securing stability of Damascus (with suburbs) and Russian basing in western, northeastern Syria.

## Moscow and the Syrian Military

The crisis seriously affected national army and security apparatus. Syrian army suffered from significant reduction in personnel and military equipment; serious changes occurred in their organizational structures [15]. Syrian Army has lost 50 % of 220 thousand soldiers and officers before the crisis. As a result, no more than 20–25 thousand men left under the full control of the Syrian military command. By sectarian parameters, most of the regular armies' personnel were represented by Sunnis. However, the real leadership of the key combat units in the armed forces was in hands of the Alawites [16, p. 23–56]. Military Intelligence and other special services closely monitored the Sunni officers. Many Sunni militaries were suspected in lack of loyalty to the regime and their secret aspirations in favor for the opposition. Regime relied only on the Alawite officers, local militias, and irregular forces like "Shabiha"<sup>4</sup> [17, pp. 62–65]. Assad's reliance on the confessional militias in the fight against the armed opposition, raised serious skepticism in his strategically and military abilities [18]. The national armed forces and security agencies posed as a weak point of the ruling regime. The above-mentioned situation motivated Russia to expand their control over various security units in Syria.

Becoming directly involved in Syria, Moscow adopted a new tactical approach combining navy, airpower, ground forces (special operations forces, civil-military units). On the ground, Russia coordinated its military efforts with the Syrian army, IRGC, Shiites militias. Russian attack helicopters served as airborne artillery for the pro-regime advance [19]. Unlike Iran, Russia focused on rebuilding the basic institutions of the Syrian state, primarily its army and special services along with reducing the role of foreign militia. At the end of 2016, Moscow initiated the creation of the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps of the Syrian Army, which, unlike the 4<sup>th</sup> Corps, carried out military operations throughout the country, and not just in the Mediterranean region. Moscow started to engage loyal Syrian personnel and the Syrian military trained in Russia into the most efficient units of the Syrian army and security forces and initiated massive reshuffles in Syrian secret services This gives Russia the ability to actually control their activities, and in some cases, manage them [20; 21; 22]. In the context of Syrian normalization, Moscow was concerned about the reinstatement of former defectors, who were predominantly Sunni. Their incorporation into regular army units legitimized the return of Sunni officers to serve in the army, and reduced the severity of sectarian strife in the Syrian armed forces (see [4]). This step increased the authority of Moscow as a guarantor of the peaceful transit of power in the SAR and reliable partner of Arabian Peninsula states and Turkey in the matter of Syrian normalization.

However, the spread of Iran-backed militias in Syria complicated Russian efforts in rebuilding Syrian army and security services.

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<sup>4</sup> "Al-Shabiha" in Arabic means "The Ghost". Irregular paramilitary gangs formed by Alawite warlords in Latakia district. When unrests erupted, they sided with regime, which green lighted their action against Sunny population in Syria. Today regime forces got rid of them as they compromised it and rejected to obey to the Damascus authorities.

## Russia and Iran-backed militias

As the Syrian armed conflict expanded Iran increased its military presence through deployment in Syria the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in tandem with its Army's regular units (Artesh). Since 2013, Iran started to form the Local Defense Forces (LDF) numbered 50,000 fighters [23]. By the end of 2021, Iran recruited in Shia's militias 53,000 fighters, mostly from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. The number of Afghan Fatemiyoun fighters totaled between 10,000 and 20,000 [24]. By the end of 2019, the number of Iran-backed militias in Iraq, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan totaled 250,000 fighters [25, p. 11]. B. al-Assad abandoned the idea of disbanding numerous Shiite militias, fearing their possible insurgent strives. Syrian regime carried out reforms in armed forces and incorporated 25 % of pro-Iranian militias (Local Defense Forces) in the Syrian Army. The integration of armed groups allowed Tehran to provide a multi-layered and longer-term influence in Syria.

The Iran-backed militias provided advantage over Russia and helped Tehran to reinforce influence all over Syrian territory. Moscow could not compete on equal terms with Tehran in working with religious militias and relied on cooperation with local groups loyal to the regime and returning defecting officers [26]. Moscow coordinated military operations in Syria with the 25<sup>th</sup> Tiger Forces division under the command of General S. Hassan, the al-Quds Brigade and Christian militias in Hama province. Moscow sought to strengthen its position in southern Syria using ties with the eighth Brigade of 5<sup>th</sup> Corps former opposition forces in Dara'a province who sided with the regime. However, Syrian regime did not officially recognize this formation because of Iran's pressure. Russia managed to safeguard its influence in Dara'a province and did not completely withdraw from the region [26; 27]. In order to increase its influence in Northeast region Russia established contacts with the local tribes and some military from National Defense Forces (NDF). Moscow Special Military Operation in Ukraine affected Russian-backed militias in Syria. Because of the salary problems, some militia's fighters defected to Iranian-backed groups. However, distance from Western military in Syria, Russian officers demonstrated high operative level in engaging militia's commanders and managing its operations along with Moscow's line in Syria.

As sectarian militias has provoked tension between Moscow and Tehran. Iran build a parallel military organization, whose personnel was indoctrinated on sectarian basis and which would be subordinate primarily to Tehran, rather than Damascus. For example fighters of al-Abbas, al-Fatemiyoun and al-Zainabiyoun Brigades shared allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader (Vilayat-e Faqih) [28]. Iran's politic acquired a pronounced confessional character, which partly corresponded with the course of B. al-Assad in confessional issues [29]. About 80 % of the military fighting for B. al-Assad was foreigners like Hezbollah and other Shiite formations. Their behavioral independence can undermine the sovereignty of the Syrian state and further exacerbate sectarian conflicts in the country [30]. Rather than becoming a stabilizing factor in fight against terrorism, Shiite militias could serve as a catalyst for jihadist sentiments, which during Gaza war (2023–2024), embodied in renewing actions of "Islamic State"\* [31; 32].

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\* Organization is recognized as an extremist in the Russian Federation.

## Russian “Security Roadmap”

The end of major battles in Syria at the turn of 2020–2022 marked the beginning of a new stage in the development of Syrian events.

Despite some successes of B. al-Assad in regain control all over Syria, the security situation remained difficult. In Syria, political rivalry persisted, based on internal religious, ideological, and ethnic contradictions. The economic crisis affected the state of food security, which by the spring of 2022 left 12 million people outside of it, which is 51 % more than in 2019 [33]. Today, Syria politically divided into zones of influence of regional and international forces. On the other hand, despite the dangers of the current crisis, it has affected the state and society largely than the regime, which continues to retain power through the “optimization” of the power elites, placing them under the strict personalized control of the head of state [34].

In January 2024, al-Assad conducted reshuffles in officer corps that considered as an attempt to restructure security services under Russian supervision. In fact, Moscow has been working on rebuilding Syrian security apparatuses, in order to limit them to just one that can be under control. The Syrian president appointed General A. Mamluk as his advisor replacing him at the head of National Security Bureau with General K. al-Melhem. The fact that A. Mamluk was in charge of relations with Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt inspired some experts considered his sacking as an attempt to seek a new political approach in Syrian Arab relations [35]. Meanwhile, unlike typical military hierarchy when appointment on mostly formal post of president's security advisor determined only by old age or bad health indicating at upcoming retire, A. Mamluk preserved his office at the National Security apparatus and got a new one at the Presidential Palace. General K. Hassan was moved from the Palestine Branch leadership to become Military Intelligence Chief instead of General K. al-Melhem. All those officers belong to the Alawite sect. According local security sources, Moscow prepares A. Mamluk to play broader role in addition to his security responsibilities and was behind the appointment of K. al-Melhem as his successor, while K. al-Hassan had affiliation with Iran. These changes goes in line with Russian plan to restructure the security and intelligence apparatuses managed by the regime, in order to merge and dismantle some security branches [36]. This also applies to ongoing security campaign against Syrian warlords in Mediterranean coast and Homs province who for years has been opposing Russian efforts to engage local groups in the “Russian Commando”.

Few days latter Syrian president headed a meeting for highest security officers in the Armed Forces that ended with a “Security Roadmap”. One of the provisions of this document was to improve the coordination of the work of various security forces in the process of reorganizing security agencies and ensuring Syrian normalization [37]. The “Security Roadmap” supposed to reflect strategic vision of domestic and regional challenges that affect Syria security in view of preemptive role played by security bodies in fighting terrorism [38]. These statements fall in context of B. al-Assad's attempts along with Russia to control and structure Syrian security forces. During the Syrian Crisis, many security agencies went from being regime and state protectors while acting in total freedom. Because of the Syrian state's weakness and deep Iranian involvement, they turned into a power centers linked with multiple loyalties.

The spring of 2003 brought a number of positive developments in the regional situation. The resumption of Iranian-Saudi and Syrian-Saudi diplomatic relations marked the



end of the political isolation of Damascus and facilitated the process of Syrian reconciliation, returning the Syrian Arab Republic to the Arab League. At the same time, Russia promoted the process of Syrian-Turkish reconciliation as one of the important factors in launching peaceful transit in the Syrian Arab Republic, taking into account the deployment of Turkish armed forces in northern Syria and the presence of more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees on Turkish territory [39]. Iran's growing military presence in the Syrian Arab Republic, based on the strategy of fighting Israel and the United States, ran counter to the plans of Moscow and Damascus to finally end the military phase of the conflict and withdraw foreign troops from the country.

## Conclusion

After the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2024, Syria became the arena of Iranian-Israeli armed confrontation, the victims of which were more than a dozen senior personnel of the IRGC and pro-Iranian militias. The Syrian regime was under growing political pressure and was careful to maintain a balance in its relations with Russia and Iran. Despite the security decisions taken by B.al-Assad as the first step in preparing the country for a transition period, many in Syria and abroad viewed these measures as a rivalry race between Iran and Russia for dominance over Syrian power mechanism. Contrary to some expectations, the ongoing attacks by Shiite militias on American targets in Syria and Iraq have not yet led to the withdrawal of American troops from these Arab countries. Despite the denial by official representatives of the US administration of any plans to withdraw US military personnel from Syria, no one today can predict what effect the renewed attacks by pro-Iranian forces on US military personnel in the Syrian Arab Republic since the end of February 2024 will have in the context of the upcoming US presidential elections. It has become very true after the exchange of air-artillery strikes between Iran and Israel in April 2024. The regional and world powers persistent competition in the Middle East could play an important role in determining Iran's military strategy in the region. In the absence of a "nuclear" dialogue with Iran, the resumption of US contacts with Tehran on security issues could reduce the severity of the confrontation in the Middle East. Under these conditions, it would be reasonable to propose a broader framework for the Syrian settlement, covering the issues of Palestine, Iraq and the Iranian presence in the region. At the beginning of 2024, Russia initiated the "Regional Agreement" that included a number of provisions of the Syrian constitutional amendments forwarded by Russian Foreign Ministry in 2017. At the same time, it would be wrong to believe that a settlement in the Middle East could take place at the expense of Moscow's relations with Damascus and Tehran.

Thus, in 2023–2024, Russia faced new challenges in Syria that formed specific determinants of Russian Middle East politics. In the near future situation in Ukraine and new developments in the Middle East, which may go beyond Moscow's red lines, will determine Russian policy in Syria<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Despite some expectations after al-Assad's fall (December 8, 2024) Moscow did not surrender and advanced in securing its strategic influence in Syria. The official visit of high-ranking Russian delegation to Syria in January 29 and unprecedented direct communications between A. al-Sharaa and V. Putin on February 12, March 20, 2025 stressed Moscow and Damascus continued willingness to cooperate practically with new Syrian reality across the full spectrum of bilateral relations, in order to strengthen the traditionally friendly relations between Russia and Syria.

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#### Author's information:

Vladimir M. Akhmedov — PhD in History; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4952-2964>,  
shamyarabist@gmail.com

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\* Organization is recognized as an extremist in the Russian Federation.

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С начала 1970 г. Сирия является основным арабским союзником России на Ближнем Востоке. Российско-сирийские отношения охватывали различные сферы сотрудничества. Несмотря на распад Советского Союза, Дамаск оставался форпостом России на Ближнем Востоке. Сирийский кризис и его последствия стали серьезным вызовом для современной ближневосточной политики России. С начала кризиса Москва поддержала режим Б. аль-Асада, но в отличие от Ирана не направляла свои вооруженные силы сражаться в Сирии. В конце 2015 г. неизбежный исход сражений с вооруженной оппозицией стал складываться не в пользу аль-Асада. Группа факторов оказала влияние на принятие Москвой решения направить свои вооруженные силы в Сирию. Активная дипломатическая кампания России в сочетании с военными усилиями сыграла решающую роль в удержании на влажном поприще режима аль-Асада. В 2023–2024 гг. Россия оказалась перед лицом новых вызовов в Сирии. Несмотря на победу аль-Асада, хрупкая стабильность в Сирии осложняет процессы политического урегулирования и экономической реконструкции. Растущее военное присутствие Ирана в Сирии идет вразрез с планами России положить конец вооруженным столкновениям и обеспечить вывод иностранных войск из Сирии. После начала войны в Газе Сирия превратилась в арену ирано-израильского вооруженного противостояния. Растущая конкуренция мировых держав на Ближнем Востоке в контексте украинского кризиса играет важную роль в определении российских политических приоритетов в Сирии и регионе в целом. Изложенные выше положения объясняют причину избрания автором указанной темы исследования и нашли научное обоснование в рамках представленной статьи. С учетом последних событий на Ближнем Востоке в контексте обеспечения интересов России в Сирии статья отличается актуальностью и вносит несомненный научный вклад в изучение изложенной проблематики.

*Ключевые слова:* Россия, Сирия, Иран, Ближний Восток, международные отношения.

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## Контактная информация:

*Ахмедов Владимир Муртузович* — канд. ист. наук; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4952-2964>,  
[shamyarabist@gmail.com](mailto:shamyarabist@gmail.com)