

Andrej Kreutz

University of Calgary

Russia in Syria. The Previous History and Present Concerns

After the start of the Russian military intervention in Syria, the US National Intelligence Director, James Clapper, may have been partially correct in asserting that Russian President Vladimir Putin, “was winging it, with no long term strategy” (cnn.com 2015). However, there were at least four pressing reasons for his sudden and undoubtedly risky decision:

- 1) As even some American analysts were willing to admit, Putin must have felt obliged to save the existing Syrian regime, which has been and still is, Moscow’s only ally in the region (Kreutz 2010). If an American ally, such as Saudi Arabia or Qatar, found themselves in a similar predicament, quick and powerful US support would soon come.
- 2) Allowing the Arab regimes supported by the West to overthrow another government in this politically sensitive area, with some of these regimes being far more dictatorial and oppressive than used to be the case of Syria, might have been seen as the recognition of the Right to Protect (R2P), enabling the Western Powers to intervene in the domestic affairs of other nations and overthrow the leaders which Washington dislikes (Trenin 2014). Syria was not the first country to be submitted to such treatment, and after Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya and several other examples, Moscow and even Beijing might have been concerned for their own future. The acceptance of the Western interpretation of the R2P might have been seen not only as the abdication of the previously respected doctrine of state sovereignty, but it might also have put Moscow in a potentially uncertain internal situation.
- 3) Much more numerous than in the cases of Western countries, the number of jihadists from the Russian Federation among the Syrian rebels, whose return to Russia might have caused an increased threat to Russian domestic security. Because of its geopolitical closeness to the Middle East and its largest in Europe’s Muslim population (Hackett 2015), Moscow’s close attention to this region and Islam was not a matter of choice but a necessity.

In addition, having since the 10th Century been a Christian Orthodox country, Moscow wanted to preserve close relations with the region, which was the cradle of

its religion. In fact, the protection of the Middle Eastern Christians and the Christian Holy Places located there was for centuries one of the main foci of the Moscow/St. Petersburg foreign policy and international engagement including the Crimean War, 1853–1856. The Russian Orthodox Church has also recently played a role in accelerating the present Russian intervention in Syria as a way to protect the local Christian population.

4) Last but not least, there was the will to protect the Russian navigation facility in Tartus, which provides the otherwise almost landlocked country with access to the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean unrestrained by Turkey.

With the possible exception of France, no other European nation has such a long and multifaceted relationship with Syria as Russia does. The Russian presence and influence predates, by many centuries, the creation of the present Syrian state after World War II.

According to some medieval Arab sources, Russians (there was not at that time any distinction among the Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians because they were all descendants of the same Eastern Slavic tribes and all differences among them resulted from later events which included the Mongolian domination, partition of Kievan Rus and the long foreign rule over some of its provinces) served in the Byzantine army in the present day Syria in the 10th and 11th centuries (Hopwood 1969) and since the 17th century the Christian Orthodox Patriarchs of Antioch had frequent relations with Russia, Ukraine, and present day Romania (at that time Wallachia and Moldova).

In 1585–1586 the Patriarch of Antioch Joachim V was the first high ranked representative of the Middle Eastern Christians, to personally arrive in Moscow (Gust 2014). Because of the Early Christian (Apostolic) origins of his seat, which according to tradition was founded by Jesus' Apostles Peter and Paul, he was very well received and Tsar Feodor Ivanovich used his visit to initiate efforts to establish a new Orthodox Patriarchate in Moscow (Gust 2014). As Russia (which was then called Moscovia) was at that time the only independent and relatively strong Orthodox country and its coreligionists in the Ottoman Empire needed its support, the efforts were successful, and in 1590 the Metropolitan of Moscow, Job was advanced to the rank of Patriarch (Gust 2014).

Another Patriarch of Antioch, Macarius III (Zaim) contributed to the ecclesiastical reforms of the Moscow Patriarch Nikon. In February 1652 he set out on his first trip to Wallachia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Moscovia, where he spent more than a year (16 months) as a guest of Tzar Alexis (Orthodox WIKI 2014) and the liturgical books he brought from Antioch had an impact on the Russian liturgical reforms introduced at that time. He visited Russia again in 1666 and took part in the Synod that confirmed the reforms of the Russian Orthodox Church and excommunicated the Old Believers who opposed them (Orthodox WIKI 2014). However, Macarius was also open to relations with Catholics and while travelling through the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth asked the Polish King John Casimir to work for the union between the Eastern and Western churches (Orthodox WIKI 2014). All of that might now be

seen as old and irrelevant history, but it would be good to know that a figure like Patriarch Macarius, who was quite influential at that time, was originally a Syrian Arab born in Aleppo, and before entering the priesthood had worked as a weaver (Orthodox WIKI 2014).

The religious and social relations established by Macarius have never been disrupted and particularly after the Carlovitz Treaty with the Ottoman Empire in 1699, a growing number of Russian pilgrims visited Syria on their way to Palestine, at the same time increasing their links with the local Christian communities. As an outcome of that, in 1830 Russian Consular posts started to operate in Aleppo, Latakia, Beirut and Saida, and in 1893 an additional consular office was established in Damascus (Hopwood 69: 15, 164). Shortly after that and in spite of its own serious financial problems and lack of official interest, apart from helping Russian pilgrims, the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society extended its activities to Syria (Hopwood 69: 150). By 1905, it had opened 74 schools, and by 1910 it was spending most of its income on Syrian education, even neglecting its principal obligation to the Russian pilgrims in the Holy Land (Hopwood 69: 153).

After centuries of Greek domination, the election of the Arab Patriarch of Antioch was possible with Russian diplomatic support, and won gratitude for Russia from Syrian Christians and Muslims. A prominent Arab nationalist, Sati al Hussi, called this event "the first real victory of Arab nationalism" (Hopwood 69: 159). World War I and the ensuing Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 brought temporary decline to the more active Russian presence in Syria, which became a French Mandate in the early 1920's after the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. The new Bolshevik occupants of the Kremlin had no interest and even less sympathy for the Arab Christian communities but wanted to support the emergence of the Communist parties and other radical movements in the Arab East. With their help in 1925, the Syrian Communist Party was established (Ismael and Ismael 1998: 12-13), but in the deeply traditionalist and religious country it has never been able to acquire major political importance. However, even its modest influence and, the growing Arab left wing nationalist mobilization of the Syrian population, which was sometimes associated with it, had an impact on the situation in the region.

In January 1956, the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party reinforced the stress on the progressive role of the national liberation movements in the Third World against Western imperialism, and the Arab World became an increased focus of Red Moscow's attention. When on March 8, 1963 the left wing Arab nationalist Baath Party came to power in Damascus, although the Soviet and Syrian Communists disliked Baathists, Moscow was ready to maintain and develop friendly relations with the new Syrian regime, and that was also continued after the more moderate President Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970 (Smolansky 1974: 247). According to Walter Laqueur, not only "as a field for large scale Soviet investment and political showcase from... the advantages of Soviet help, Syria was a somewhat more promising choice than Egypt" (Laquer 1969: 84) but this country "had moved

closest to the Soviet Union, not as a result of Soviet propaganda, but as the culmination of an internal radicalization”(Laquer 1969).

The decline and final collapse of the Soviet Union might have thus been seen in Damascus as a major political challenge. However, as a Russian scholar noted, “experienced Syrian leadership understood that the USSR was moving in a different direction and that it was not going to assume its earlier role as a Damascus patron and protector any longer” (Vassiliev 1993: 296). Consequently, the events in Russia had relatively fewer repercussions for Syria than other Third World countries, and the earlier ties with Moscow did not disappear completely, but were eventually resumed on the hard grounds of geopolitical interests and strong historical traditions.

The fact that post-Soviet Russia wanted to return to pre-Soviet traditions and achievements was certainly not without importance. The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society was recreated and has already started to be active in Syria. On October 6, 2015 its new Chairman, a former Prime Minister of Russia, Sergey Stepashin told a Russian journalist, “we have helped Syrian people for three years. Today the importance of this mission has increased threefold”(Stepashin 2015). According to him his organization has already delivered 12 shipments of humanitarian supplies to Damascus and other Syrian cities and its mission is aimed at supporting the civilians suffering from hostilities, regardless of their religious affiliation (Stepashin 2015). All those supplies were collected by Russian citizens and organizations and transferred to the Patriarch of Antioch and All the East and the Supreme Mufti of Syria for distribution to the needy (Stepashin 2015). The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society has also developed a program for the conservation of the cultural heritage in Syria and wants to cooperate with UNESCO and other parties to protect the ancient Syrian Christian and non-Christian monuments (Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society 2015).

Keeping in mind that Moscow’s relations with Syria, and its various communities, has long socio-historical roots and traditions, it is necessary to remember that all of them might have facilitated and helped to justify, but could not be the real causes and reasons, of the present Russian political and military involvement in this country. As Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Center in Moscow indicates, “Russia decided to intervene directly in Syria in order to prevent the ouster of the Assad regime in Damascus”(Trenin 2015) by the motley coalition of political rebels and a number of foreign mercenaries who although being mostly inspired by radical Islam and the idea of the holy war against the infidels, have still been supported by the Americans and their Arab and European allies. Western support for the anti-Assad government forces has been and still is caused mainly by its relatively independent foreign policy, close relations with Iran and reluctance to accommodate Israeli wishes in the Golan Heights, which since the 1967 war still remains under Israeli occupation. The recent discovery of oil in this region might complicate the existing situation even more (Alster 2015). It is possible that since the 1960’s if not earlier some American, Israeli and other Western experts intended not only to overthrow

the regime in Damascus but also to balkanize and divide Syria into a number of smaller and mostly religiously based entities (Perle 1966).

Although Moscow cannot afford to challenge Washington directly and has developed common ties with Israel, it has still a number of critically important geopolitical and strategic interests in the Arab countries and Islamic world at large. The destruction of the secular Syrian nation and the change of regime in Damascus imposed from the outside would be perceived by the Kremlin as a threat to its own vital interests. Even though in a much weaker position than the West and during the last few years under pressure from the US and its allies, Moscow cannot afford to leave Syria to its own fate. The Syrian President probably exaggerated a little saying, "the Middle East is the heart of the world and Syria is its core" (ITAR-TASS 2005), but the events there could not remain without having a major impact on Russia's international status and even its domestic situation.

As I have already mentioned, the Russian Federation does not want to allow the Western Powers to use force at will and without any external constraints, as this "might lead to foreign intervention close to Russian borders, or even within these borders" (Trenin 2014). In fact all the regimes except the democracies which are certified by Washington or its allies could be theoretically considered as lacking legitimacy, and the possible implications of that are quite obvious for Moscow and, though in a less outspoken way, for Beijing. The persisting tensions in and around Syria are thus also an example of the struggle between the imperial unipolar vision and the regional powers against global imperial domination. As Trenin noted, "refusing to use its influence to pressure President Assad and urging both sides in the conflict to work toward reconciliation, Russia sees itself as evenhanded" (Trenin 2013). In addition Moscow has always seen the Arab Spring not so much as a pro-democracy movement but as an Islamic revolution likely to be dominated by the radical jihadists, and fears that the Syrian conflict might become radicalized and spread to the post-Soviet territories including some parts of Russia itself, such as North Caucasus and perhaps even Tatarstan (Trenin 2013).

While debating the present Russian political and military intervention in Syria, the starting point should be to determine Moscow's initial purposes for intervention. As Putin stated on October 11, 2015, "our objective is to stabilize the legitimate authority and create conditions for a political compromise (TV Channel Russia I 2015). The Russian president must have been aware of the limitations of his country's power and the potential risk associated with the intervention in Syria (Tsygankov 2015). Consequently, Putin's aim was only to provide certain premises in order to search for an acceptable compromise for his country.

During all its long and complex history, Russia has never expanded its political domination to the Middle East and the Arab countries, and it has now even less will and means for that purpose. A chance for a compromise between Moscow and the West and its Arab allies should be seen as a realistic option and the best solution to the Syrian crisis. Henry Kissinger has elaborated upon the possibility for such an understanding. According to the former National Security Advisor, "the destruction

of ISIS is more urgent than the overthrow of Bashar Assad” and the focus of nations must be in a unified effort to guarantee that this territory does not become a hotbed for terrorism (Kissinger 2015). Consequently, “painful as this is to the architects of 1973 system, attention in the Middle East must be focused on essentials. And there exist compatible objectives” (Kissinger 2015).

Former vice-Chair of the National Intelligence Council and Chief of the CIA Station in Kabul Graham Fuller has been even more optimistic about the possible Russian role in Syria and the Middle Eastern region. In his opinion, “Russia will play a major role in diplomatic arrangement in the Middle East, an overall positive factor. Russia’s ability to play a key... role in resolving the nuclear issues in Iran and chemical issues in Syria and its important voice and leverage in this country represent significant contribution to resolution of these two high-priority, high-risk conflicts that affect the entire region” (Fuller 2015). Consequently, he believes that, “it is essential that Russia’s role be accepted and integrated rather than seen as a mere projection of some neo-Cold War global struggle” (Fuller 2015). Fuller is even willing to say that: “the time has now come to bite the bullet, admit failure, and to permit if not assist Assad in quickly winding down the civil war in Syria and expelling the jihadists” (Fuller 2014).

Both Kissinger and Fuller have been retired for a long time, but they still remain very highly experienced and knowledgeable individuals. I believe that their opinions should have been given serious consideration. As Kissinger had concluded, “at question is not the strength of American arms but rather American resolve in understanding and mastering a new world” (Kissinger 2015).

At the same time the developments in Syria are for Moscow of vital but probably not of direct existential importance and its leaders still expect that “the issues of Ukraine and Russia’s security in Europe may be revisited with a greater sensitivity to Russia’s values and interests.” (Tsygankov 2015).

Two months ago while working on a draft of this article I had also been prone to keeping more hope for the prospect of a peaceful and sensible solution of the Syrian conflict and a new reset in the American-Russian relations. The diplomatic efforts and cooperation of the US State Secretary John Kerry and the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov seemed to indicate a realistic prospect for these directions, which in my view might have provided an optimal chance for peace in Syria and a more stable international world order.

Unfortunately, not quite successful peacemaking efforts in Syria and the Obama administration’s unchanged policy towards Moscow did not seem to confirm either mine nor much more knowledgeable people’s premature optimism. As I now think, none of them had sufficiently taken into account the fact that both the Syrian crisis and any of its possible settlement might prove to be crucial not only for this country and the Middle East, but as I have already indicated, there is also a potential impact on a general political situation in Eurasia and even the emerging new global order. Consequently, the stakes which are involved there are very high and it would not be easy now to predict the chances for a practical and generally acceptable peaceful

arrangement. On the Washington side there is a strong will to preserve its global domination, which it won in the mid 1990's after the decline and final collapse of the Soviet Union. On the other side there is now openly articulated by Moscow, but shared also by China and some other major regional powers aspirations to reaffirm their international importance and the acceptance of the traditional international law with its stress on the principle of sovereign equality of all states, which the Americans don't want to respect.

As Dmitiri Trenin noticed, "Vladimir Putin, when he was re[-]elected president in 2012 for a third term, began to vigorously promote Russia's distinct identity, which now openly differs from the West at values level, not just diplomatically. This policy, supported by a rise in Russian nationalism, represents a fundamental shift in Russia's standing and position in the world. Syria is just one example of this" (Trenin 2013). However, unlike Washington, Moscow's struggle is not of choice, but of necessity in order to survive as a great independent power with its own political and cultural traditions and vision of the future. Although this is nothing new in its long history, which might be also rightly be seen as "the struggle for survival," this time the challenge is more powerful and better coordinated than ever in the past. The coming future might thus be grim or in any case uncertain.

According to Trenin, "in the broader universe of Moscow's foreign policy, the Middle East generally ranks after the United States, Europe, and China and Asia," (Trenin 2016). although "the Kremlin cannot ignore a region so close geographically, so rich in hydrocarbons, and so unstable socially and politically" (Trenin 2016). In his view there are two principal drivers of this policy:

- 1) Geopolitical importance of the region, which with the beginning of the Russian military involvement on September 30, 2015 and the following US-Russia diplomatic effort "has become the key testing ground for Russia's attempt to return to the global stage" (Trenin 2016).
- 2) The second reason, practical though no less important, was and still remains the goal of "containing and diminishing Islamic extremism that might otherwise to expand to Russia and its immediate post-Soviet neighbourhood" (Trenin 2016) and to represent a serious threat to their domestic security.

The Russian military intervention in the Syrian Civil War between September 2015 and March 14, 2016 might have been seen as rather successful. Moscow was able to show its rebuilt military strength, to prevent the then threatening complete defeat of the existing Syrian state and opened the door for a new peacemaking efforts, sponsored by itself and Washington. However, the civil war in Syria has not come to an end and the hostilities towards Moscow by the Americans and their allies have increased. With the exception of Western-Iranian relations, which finally found some accommodation largely because of the persistent support and skill of Russian diplomacy, not a single Middle Eastern problem has been solved or even alleviated. The whole region remains potentially violent and very far from being stable. The situation in Europe is probably even worse than during the Cold War time when relations between the USSR and the West were regulated by a number of

written down or customary principles and both sides had never interrupted mutual contacts and held some respect for each other. Since the February 22, 2013 coup d'état in Kiev almost all previous rules of the game have been forgotten and the Russian Federation started to be surrounded by the tightening iron rings of NATO's military forces, air bases and even the ABN and nuclear missiles (Pillar 2016). Any possible solution of a major new crisis should be possible only by the new forms of serious Washington, and its allies, cooperation with Moscow but the chances of that still seem elusive. As I believe the Syrian crisis cannot be solved without the simultaneous alleviation of the tension in Europe or perhaps even some solution of the Ukrainian crisis. Both the Syrian and Ukrainian crises are coming from some common causes and it is hardly possible to treat them in separation.

The international situation is thus undoubtedly quite difficult, but Dmitri Trenin who is one of the most knowledgeable experts on Russian foreign policy and Eurasia still sounds rather optimistic and suggests to the West and Russia the ways of compromise and cooperation. Being well aware that "the difficult issue for Western countries is acknowledging the value of cooperation after it has been made clear that Russia will not 'join' the West or simply [as a junior partner] 'help' in places like Syria" (Trenin 2013), he still believes that the West should "embrace cooperation with Moscow on the basis of shared interests" (Trenin 2013). Although Moscow and Washington might disagree on the political future of Bashar al-Assad they both do not want chaos or a radical Sunni regime in Syria (Trenin 2013). The West should also acknowledge that the world order is transforming. The long era of Western domination, which the Soviet Union tried to challenge but was not able to overturn, is now finally coming to an end (Trenin 2013).

Although Russia is not and will not be part of the West, Moscow sees itself as a stabilizing force, and it would be a natural ally of the nations seeking more predictability in international relations. Last but not least, according to Trenin, "Western countries should make use of Russia's unique and pragmatic perspective born from more than a hundred years' worth of experience with imperialism, followed by revolution and the rule of ideology, the achievement of superpower status, systemic disintegration, and eventual reconstruction" (Trenin 2013).

I am not sure that these and some other Russian assets mentioned by Trenin would be able to persuade the Western leaders to perceive the present day Russia as a worthy and equal in rights partner. With the exception of, at least now, unlikely total Russian breakdown and capitulation to the US' hegemony, or even less likely change of Washington's foreign policy, I don't see any real prospect for the two great nations to reach a real alliance. However, it would perhaps be possible to achieve temporary cooperation amongst them, on certain issues, and a relatively peaceful coexistence. The Russian assets discussed by Trenin might be of real assistance here. The Western domination, which during the post-Cold War period became largely based on the skilful use of soft power, including overwhelming control of the internet and all other means of mass media and entertainment, might last much longer than Trenin seems to anticipate, but in my opinion, the Western power elites would probably need to

pay more attention to the other people's cultures and interests. A kind of rapprochement and better knowledge of Russia might be of new importance.

Living for more than 1,000 years in the very heart (centre) of Eurasia, Russians have had to acquire good knowledge of their various neighbours and the ability to coexist with them as relatively equal and respected partners. The Americans who have emerged as a nation of immigrants, far away from other major populations centres and isolated by two oceans, had in the past far less need and chances to learn how to coexist and it has made a great impact on their way of thinking and foreign policy. More open and less prejudiced relations with Russia, a country that has never believed in their own exceptionalism and has suffered more because of its inferiority complexes to the West, might thus have a positive impact not only on the American-Russian relations but as an experience to help to establish a more balanced and cooperative relationships with other peoples, especially in the Middle East and Asia, which Russians seem to know better than the West and where the Americans and some other Western politicians have already made numerous mistakes starting from Vietnam and Iraq to the present day Libya and Syria.

A the time of writing, May 2016, the truce in Syria, initiated by Moscow and Washington as co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), have been "largely in tatters" (Lee 2016). On April 29, 2016 it was announced a new, partial cease-fire that was presented as a "reinforcement" of the February 27, 2016 truce but, it does not include Aleppo, which was the centre of heaving fighting during the first week of May 2016 (Lee 2016; France 24 2016). According to the US State Department spokesman John Kirby, the US wants to "measure the commitment of the warring parties to the concept of truce that could lead to serious peace talks" (Lee 2016). As he stressed "it's a test for the Russians and for the regime, as well as for the Syrian opposition" (Lee 2016). In the view of the Associated Press Diplomatic Writer Matthew Lee, "the [US] administration's problem is that the Russians, the Assad government and the opposition backed by the US and its partners have all failed that test in the past" (Lee 2016).

Fortunately, this time the situation seems to be more promising. As an outcome of the Russian and US militaries discussions on May 3, 2016 both sides decided that a new partial ceasefire and the newly elaborated silent regime in Syria will also include Aleppo province, including Aleppo city and its surrounding areas (RT News 2016). According to Russia's UN envoy Vitaly Churkin over 90 percent of Syrian towns and villages have supported the ceasefire since the inclusion of Aleppo and according to the Syrian military, a 48-hour "regime of silence is set to start there on May 5, 2016" (RT News 2016).

These developments might prove to be crucial for the future of the country as a whole. The French and German foreign ministers praised the ceasefire in Aleppo and expressed their opinion that, "it would be crucial to renewing peace talks on ending Syria's civil war" (RT News 2016). German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier even stated in an official announcement that as he has believed,

“everyone knows and can conclude that there could be no return to the political talks in Geneva if a ceasefire in and around Aleppo is not observed” (RT News 2016).

The new ceasefire has been also welcomed enthusiastically by UN envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura who called it, “a small but very special miracle...created by a discussion taking place at the high level between the Russian Federation and the US” (RT News 2016a). Mistura has spent 45 years working for the UN and is certainly well acquainted with all aspects of the Syrian conflict in its region and the present international system. When the first ceasefire of February 27, 2016 was broken he sent an emotional message to both the Russian and American Presidents, “you own this cessation of hostilities, you are the ones who produced it. So President Putin, President Obama, you came up with remarkable achievement – protect it, make sure it doesn’t disappear. Do agree again on how this cessation of hostilities doesn’t lose its energy, because it is in danger” (RT News 2016a). He seems to believe that his appeal impressed them and as an experienced diplomat he thinks that only those great Power’s leaders could help to put an end to one of the most bloody and difficult to solve conflicts of the recent era with “about 4 million refugees and perhaps between 300,000 – 400,000 killed and 1 million wounded” (RT News 2016a).

I think that in view of the tragic situation and being concerned of a possible regional and even global escalation, both Moscow and Washington are now serious about founding a solution to the Syrian crisis or at least of putting it under some kind of more efficient control. However, these are not easy goals to achieve. The US opposed the Russian demand that Kurds, who are a major force in fighting Islamic State and the largest ethnic minority in Syria, need to be included in the peace talks (Kosachyov 2016). A no less difficult issue is created by the Russian opposition to extend the ceasefire to the groups of rebels who though supported by the US and its allies were either forced to fight for Al-Nuusra or join the jihadists voluntarily. Consequently, as Staffan de Mistura has indicated, “there must be more clarity on what are the divisions between what the UN Security Council defined as terrorists – Al Nuusra and Daesh – and other groups which are being associated with them but, in fact, are not part of the terrorist groups” (RT News 2016a). There are many other possible problems ahead but as I believe Staffan de Mistura is right that “the only possible solution to the Syrian crisis remains an implementation of the “miraculous” ceasefire brokered by Russia and the US who now bear responsibility to protect it and “recalibrate” cessation of hostilities” (RT News 2016a).

The successful extension of the ceasefire to Aleppo province, including Aleppo city and the surrounding area led to the already mentioned rising sense of hope and optimistic expectations for the end of war and a better future for Syria. As the UN envoy Staffan de Mistura stated, “miraculous ceasefire must be fostered as one and only one plan for Syria” (RT News 2016a). In his view, “there is no military solution to this conflict. There has been an attempt for five years to have a victory and a defeat. There is no victory or defeat on this. There is only a political solution, which means negotiations. But negotiations need to have a ceasefire” (RT News 2016a). Similar, though probably not as heartfelt, opinions have been expressed by the

Western and Russian diplomats who were also promising more humanitarian assistance and their countries help in the peacemaking attempt in Syria.

Unfortunately, the euphoria caused by the positive trends proved to be, again, short lived and war returned to the country. I think there were, and probably are two persisting causes for that. First of all, until a very recent time the Obama administration did not take into account that in practice there was no clear-cut distinction between the “moderate” rebels, in their struggle against the President Assad “regime,” supported by the West and its Arab and non-Arab allies, and the fervently Islamist jihadists, especially aligned with the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda, Al-Nusra which from the legal view point was not included and even could not have been included into any ceasefire. In addition, though both the US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter and Secretary of State John Kerry refer to rebel jihadi groups as the “Syria opposition” (Lin 2016). according to the German intelligence service “over 95% of the fighters in Syria are foreign and not Syrian” (Lin 2016) and many of them “are not even Arab, but increasingly Asians” (Lin 2016) who during the last five years have arrived from Central Asia, China (Xinjiang) and some parts of Russia, especially Chechnya and Ingushetia. Consequently, as in September 2015 the leading British research centre has indicated, “the perceived jihadist threat to Russia is a major factor in the Kremlin’s policy making” (Chatham House Roundtable, 2016) to intervene militarily in Syria. Keeping in mind the situation in Caucasus and the growing Muslim minorities in other parts of its large country, Moscow has to be concerned about the prospects of these jihadists returning home or attacking Russian interests and citizens abroad (Chatham House Roundtable 2016). Although the Russian leaders attempted to be flexible in their relations with the “moderate” Western supported opposition forces, they do not want to compromise in relation to the openly jihadi organizations such as ISIS, Jabhad Al Nusra, Jaysh Al Mujahidden, Harakat Nouridden Ali-Zinki and Harakat Ali-Sham (Whitney 2016). Recalling the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 they argued that no ceasefire with them could be acceptable and that these jihadists should either be killed or captured ¹. However, during the war in Syria Al Nusra has been for a long time supported and protected by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and probably some other countries allied with the West, Arab and non-Arab Middle Eastern and even European ones.

The issue of Al Nusra’s role and influence among the Syrian rebels became particularly important during and shortly after the recent struggle for Aleppo. According to the Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Major-General Igor Konashenkov, “Aleppo resembles a kind of layered cake, with the largest part

¹ The UN Security Council Unanimously Adopted Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria. Reiterates its call “for Member states to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed specifically by Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL, also known as Da’esh, Al Nusra Front (ANF)) and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al Qaeda or ISIL, and other terrorist groups, ... and to eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Syria, and notes that the aforementioned ceasefire will not apply to offensive or defensive actions against these individuals, groups, undertakings and entities.”

controlled by government forces, part of the area held by Nusra Front militants, while another part is controlled by the so-called opposition" (Konashenkov 2016). General Konashenkov has said also that, "Russia has notified the US side of a number of documented occasions when opposition groups were either forced to fight for Nusra Front or joined the jihadists voluntarily" (Konashenkov 2016). British scholar and expert on Syria Helena Cabban went even further saying that, "Islamist troops loyal to Al Nusra Front, an offshoot of Al Qaeda, dominate rebel forces fighting the Syrian Arab Army around the city Aleppo" (Sputniknews.com.2016). Even according to military spokesperson of the US alliance against the Islamic State, Colonel Warren, "the rebels occupied parts of Aleppo city, are under control of al-Qaeda: It is primarily al-Nusra who holds Aleppo, and of course, al-Nusra is not part of the cessation of hostilities. So it's complicated" (moonofalabama.org 2016).

The Americans and their allies are willing to fight in Syria two opposite sides: President Assad, and the Syrian regime led by him which are considered their main enemies and need to be destroyed, and Assad's main foes, the Islamic jihadists whose Islamic fanaticism and hatred of the present secular Syrian statehood which protects Christian's and all other religious minorities in the country might be used for that purpose. In fact, this is a continuation of the policy suggested by Professor Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter's administration in Afghanistan, where in the 1960's Islamic jihadists became used to fighting the left wing government supported by the Soviet Union. Although Professor Brzezinski argued that the radical Islamists are a relatively small threat compared with Moscow, such a game might nevertheless lead to a number of contradictions and even unpleasant side effects. The Obama administration is now trying to separate the "moderate" rebels supported by them from the Islamic forces (moonofalabama.org 2016), but all of these efforts seem to be half-hearted and full of contradictions. Running even against the opinion of its own Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, then led by General Martin Dempsey who predicted that the fall of the Assad regime would lead to chaos and, probably to Syria's domination by jihadi extremists, the Obama administration persistently considered the Assad regime and Russia, that was protecting it, as its main enemies. The present American administration's policy towards Syria reflects its European policy which still remains under the strong influence of the old Cold War vision of the world and the essential needs to preserve the US global hegemony. With such a mindset it is not easy to cooperate with Russia or to work out a more realistic line of behaviour. However, some parts of the US power elite are prone to look for different approaches. It was Obama's second Secretary of State John Kerry who persuaded the US President to not follow Ashton B. Carter's more uncompromising stance against Russia and opened the way for intensive diplomatic negotiations and the attempted, but unfortunately not very successful, peacemaking in Syria. As French analyst Thierry Meyssan noticed, "these days, US foreign policy is often contradictory, as we can see in Syria, where troops trained by the Pentagon are fighting troops trained by the CIA. And yet it remains perfectly coherent on two points – to divide Europe between the European Union on one side and Russia on

the other – and to divide the Far East between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations on one side and China on the other” (Meysan 2016).

The US policy in Syria might be in fact seem to be full of real or apparent contradictions. Being a co-chair of ISSG, together with the Russian Federation, Washington calls for the cessation of hostilities in the country and for ensuring humanitarian access to the besieged areas and humanitarian assistance to all Syrian people in need (Voltaire Network 2016). In spite of all hidden or openly stated differences with Moscow, Washington also calls for “a Political Settlement in Syria” (Voltaire Network 2016). through the full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions 2254 and 2268, the 2016 Munich and 2015 Vienna Statements of the ISSG and 2015 Geneva communiqué in order to “end violence and bloodshed, counter the threat of terrorism, and ensure the implementation of international humanitarian law” (Voltaire Network 2016). Unfortunately, at the same time the US Government is trying to overthrow the internationally recognized Syrian government using various officially condemned terrorist organizations and the numerous jihadists from far away countries. The US’ Secretary of State John Kerry has recently asked the US’ allies, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, to separate their proxy forces in Syria from the terrorist organization al-Nusra (moonofalabama.org 2016), but when almost at the same time, Russia asked the UN to blacklist two very active jihadist groups in Syria, Ahran-al-Islam and Jaish al Islam, the US supported Britain, France, and Ukraine in blocking the bid (moonofalabama.org 2016a). Trying to explain that, the US State Department might have some points indicating a need to have dialogue with them and arguing that blacklisting them “would undermine the war-torn country’s halt in fighting,” (moonofalabama.org 2016a). however, just one day later Ahrar al Sham joined al Qaeda in breaking the ceasefire by attacking and ethnically cleansing the Allawite sect inhabited village loyal to the Syrian government (moonofalabama.org 2016a). and Amnesty International accused both groups of indiscriminate attacks on civilians, including the use of chemical weapons and other war crimes (moonofalabama.org 2016a).

It is true that the Americans now want to separate the armed opposition supported by them from Islamic jihadists, but as a French analyst has noticed, “every time the Syrian Arab Army beats the jihadists, new combatants arrive in Syria in their thousands” (Meysan 2016a). Consequently, according to him, “we are forced to admit that this war is being cultivated from the exterior, and that it will last as long as soldiers are sent to die. So, we must understand the exterior reasons which maintain it. Then, and only then, can we elaborate a strategy which will spare lives” (Meysan 2016a).

Meysan is also sharing Russian President Putin’s opinion that “the behaviour of the Western and Gulf Powers is incoherent. It is impossible on a battle field to combat both jihadists and the Republic at the same time as pretending to take a third position” (Meysan 2016a). However, as he concludes, “no one has publicly taken sides, and so the war continues. The truth is that this war has no interior cause. It is the fruit of an environment which is not regional but global” (Meysan 2016a). In his opinion the underlying cause is the US strategic interests to “contain

the economic and political development of China and Russia” (Meysan 2016a) by forcing them to continue their major foreign trade operations exclusively by the maritime routes, which for more than a century have been under American control. In order to avoid that Chinese President Xi Jinping intended to build two new continental commercial routes to the European Union. The first was projected to recreate the ancient Silk Road from China to the Middle East. The second one corresponding more to the present social and economic development was planned to cross Russia and Ukraine and go to the present economic heart of Europe, Germany. The French analyst seems puzzled that both of them were blocked by the almost simultaneously erupted bloody events in Syria and Ukraine. In his view, the chaos created by them will continue on both fronts as long as China and Russia have been unable to establish some other continental ways to the European Union.

Although I believe that Meysan exaggerates the impact of American commercial interests on the tragic events in Syria and Ukraine, without paying sufficient attention to a number of local and regional factors, including the role of the Gulf countries, Turkey, Israel, and last but not least France, which used to be a Mandatory Power in Syria and Lebanon. His explanation of the developments there are not without value and provide one more, and previously not taken into consideration, aspect of the geopolitical and geoeconomical transformations of the Middle East and Eurasia. Respecting the value of such a global perspective I still want to hope that he is too pessimistic writing that, “there is nothing to be gained by negotiations with people who are being paid to maintain the conflict”(Meysan 2016a). Even if he were right indicating the corruption of some of the parties involved in the Syrian crisis, more negotiations not only of various Syrian representatives, but also of the major powers with their interests in this country should be considered no less but even more crucial and important. Both the Russian President Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov seem to understand the need of more negotiations and founding a comprehensive agreement with Washington and the other parties including even the Syrian rebels who are willing to accept the Russian or Syrian government invitation. According to one of the recent statements by Minister Lavrov, “Russia and the US have an understanding on what needs to be done regarding the Syrian resolution” (Sputnik 2016). After his talks with US State Secretary John Kerry, Lavrov added that “we have an understanding on what we need to do, and part of these [Russian-US] agreements involves pressures on all opposition groups so that they are guided by what the UN Security Council resolution states” (Sputnik 2016). Following Lavrov, Russia’s Deputy UN Permanent Representative Vladimir Safronov put stress on the fact that he does not “see another track [to the ISSG]. Together with Americans we created... a political settlement infrastructure. And we expect others to help us, not to undermine efforts” (Sputnik 2016a). He has also noted that Moscow maintains “permanent daily dialogue” with the leadership of countries that support the Syrian government opposition including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates on the Syrian issue (Sputnik 2016a). As he admitted, “we have differences, but having

differences is a healthy situation... Majority of the people understand that the future of Syria is to be decided" (Sputnik 2016a).

This was, from him, a very optimistic and diplomatic vision, which does not always need to correspond to the realities. The critical situation in Syria is a reflection of both the complex Middle Eastern problems and the new Cold War, which arose under the Obama administration between Washington, its allies, and Moscow. On May 17, 2016 Foreign Ministers of the major and regional powers, including the US, Russian, Germany, Oman, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, attended the fifth meeting of the ISSG in Vienna with no proposal for a date to resume peace talks between the Syrian government and the Western supported, and largely Islamic militias that represent the Syrian armed opposition.

The heated discussion about the legal status of the Al-Nusra Front, and some other Islamist armed groups in the country, and the American and Saudi's call that "Assad should go" make at present any expected understanding difficult to be achieved.

Gwynne Dyer a well-known Canadian journalist, whose articles are published in 45 countries, has recently quoted approvingly Lakhdar Brahimi, the former UN Special Envoy to Syria that, "the Russians had a more realistic analysis of the [Syrian] situation than practically anybody else" (Dyer 2016). In his opinion, "everyone should have listened to the Russians a little bit more than they did" (Dyer 2016). Brahimi was taking on the Russian proposal of 2012 that Basher al Assad would leave his presidential post, but the secular and semi-socialist Baathist regime in Syria must be left in place. This proposal was submitted to the UN Security Council but the US supported by Britain and France opposed its approval. Dyer also admits, "the brutal truth is that there is no "moderate Sunni opposition" in Syria any more" (Dyer 2016). According to him, "by mid-2015 between 80 percent and 90 percent of the Syrian rebels actively fighting the Assad regime belonged to Islamic State or to al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise, the Nusra Front, and its Islamist allies in Ahrar al-Sham" (Dyer 2016a). Even the remainder of the non-fanatics or so called "moderates" became mostly allied to the Nusra Front, which accepted them as its allies in order to be protected from the American led coalition bombardment (Dyer 2016a).

Largely because of that, "it's the Baathist regime's secular character that makes it so important" (Dyer 2016). Although its leadership might be dominated by the Alawite religious minority, "it has a much broader popular support because all Syria's non-Muslim minorities, Christian and Druze, see it as their only protection from Islamist extremists. Many Sunni Muslims, especially in the cities, see it the same way" (Dyer 2016). Another reason of the still relatively large social support for the present Syrian regime is the fact that as the only surviving Arab left-wing nationalist regime in the region, it is willing to guarantee to its citizens free education, health care and other social services, which are available also for the Palestinian refugees living in the country. Last, but not least, during the last decades the Syrian government has been the only Arab government in the region with the courage to oppose Israel (Dyer 2016).

The five years and extremely destructive war in the country certainly undermined, but did not destroy, “the legitimacy of the Syrian nation-state and its institutions” (Mirachian 2005) and “the legitimacy of the State certainly exceeds that of the Assad regime” (Mirachian 2005). According to the Italian scholar, “the Alawis may have created a State which can survive without them” (Mirachian 2005). However, the very survival of the only secular and semi-socialist left wing state in the regions is by no means certain. The prevailing consensus of the American elite of power is that the Baathist regime in Syria has to be overthrown. This consensus was probably established after the failure of several American efforts to get Syrian approval for the Arab-Israeli settlement, which was supported by the Americans and very favourable for Israel. In March 2000 during his meeting with the US President Bill Clinton in Geneva, the Syrian President Hafez al Assad insisted that there must be a full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights to the Israeli-Syrian borders that existed on June 4, 1967, before the Arab-Israeli war of that year. As he argued there were two basic principles for peaceful settlement in the region, Israel should fully withdraw from the territories its acquired in 1967 and Palestinian rights must be restored (Perlez 2000, Clinton 1994). None of these requirements were acceptable to Washington and it would be even more difficult to think of their acceptance today.

Being neither a prophet nor willing to play the role of fortune-teller, I feel unable to predict the future events of the Syrian crisis and their possible regional and global consequences. Providing that the relevant materials will not be destroyed, their comprehensive research and analysis needs to be the task of future generations. My own effort was only focused on the discussion of the last year’s Syrian developments with a stress on their regional and global causes and consequences, because the situation has been and remains very volatile and the available sources of information might be either biased or insufficient, my modest project was not easy to complete and might be far from perfect. In addition, the present Syrian conflict involves a public relations war with a level of sophistication we have never seen before. As I have already mentioned, the Western domination is now largely based on the use of soft power, including overwhelming control of the internet and all other means of mass media, meaning any attempt to present a relatively accurate picture and analysis of the Middle Eastern events have become a major intellectual and moral challenge to any scholar or other writer interested in this region. However, both the ongoing Syrian drama and the Russian relationship with this small, but rich in history and distinguished culture, should not be left without our attention.

References

- Alster Paul. 2015. *Potentially game changing oil reserves discovered in Israel*, October 8, 2015, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2015/10/07/potentially-game-changing-oil-reserves-discovered-in-israel.html>.
- Chatham House Roundtable. 2016. *Exporting Jihad: Fighters from the North Caucasus and Central Asia and the Syrian Civil War*, Chatham House Roundtable, February 10, 2016.

- cnn.com 2015. *Vladimir Putin in Syria is 'winging this'*, October 30, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/29/politics/james-clapper-russia-syria-winging-it/>.
- Clinton William J. XLII President of the US: 1993–2001. 1994. *The President's News Conference With President Hafez al-Assad of Syria in Damascus*, October 27, 1994.
- Dyer Gwynne. 2016. "The Russians were right about Syria. They foresaw a compromise with Assad, but now it looks like the only hope". *The Hamilton Spectator*, May 18, 2016.
- Dyer Gwynne, 2016a, *What Would a Peace Deal Look Like*, April 4, 2016, <http://gwynne-dyer.com/2016/what-would-a-syrian-peace-deal-look-like/>.
- France 24. 2016. *Accord américano-russe pour une nouvelle trêve en Syrie, qui n'inclut pas Alep*, April 30, 2016, <http://www.france24.com/fr/20160429-accord-treuve-syrie-washington-russie-alep-damas-lattaquie>.
- Fuller Graham. 2014. "Embracing Assad Is a Better Strategy for the US Than Supporting the Least Bad Jihadis". *World Post/Huffington Post*, September 29, 2014.
- Fuller Graham. 2015. *Graham Fuller's Five Middle East Predictions for 2015*, January 3, 2015, <http://grahamefuller.com/340/>.
- Gust Pavel. 2014. "Orthodox Interchurch relations in the 16th-17th centuries", *ARABINFORM The International Journal of Arab Studies*, July 12, 2014.
- Hackett Conrad. 2015. *5 facts about the Muslim population in Europe*, Pewresearch.com, November 17, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/>.
- Hopwood, Derek. 1969. *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine 1843-1914, Church and Politics in the Near East*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS). 2015. December 28, 2015. (<http://ippo.info/en/>).
- Ismael Tareq Y. and Ismael T. S. 1998. *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press.
- ITAR-TASS. 2005. *Syrian President Says Arab-Israeli War Remains Central Problem in Middle East*, January 25, 2005.
- Kissinger Henry A. 2015. "A Path Out of the Middle East Collapse with Russia in Syria: a geopolitical structure that lasted four decades is in shambles. The US needs a new strategy and priorities". *Wall Street Journal*, October 19, 2015.
- Konashenkov Major-General. 2016. *Most of Aleppo Controlled by Syrian Army, But Situation Remains Difficult*, May 4, 2016, <http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20160-504/1039089488/aleppo-syrian-army.html>.
- Kosachyov, Konstantin. 2016. *Blocking UN Draft Resolution on Inclusive Intra-Syrian Talks Destructive*, Russian International Affairs Council, April 25, 2016, http://rus-siancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=7607#top-content.
- Kreutz, Andrej. 2010. "Syria: Russia's Best Asset in the Middle East". *Russie. Nei. Visions* No. 55, November 10, 2010.
- Laquer, Walter. 1969. *The Struggle for the Middle East, The Soviet Union in the Mediterranean 1958–1968*. London: Macmillan.
- Lee, Matthew. 2016. *US Once Again Forced to Turn to Russia For Help on Syria*, Associated Press, May 1, 2016. (http://hosted2.ap.org/APDEFAULT/3d281c11a-96b4ad082fe88aa0db04305/Article_2016-05-01-United%20States-Syria/id-59795ca8d2a94317af264c75cec69b4f).

- Lin Christine, 2016. "Asian rebels in Aleppo, Western blind spot". *Asia Times*, February 9, 2016.
- Meyssan Thierry, 2016. *US foreign policy*, Voltaire Network, May 9, 2016, <http://www.voltairenet.org/article191679.html>.
- Meyssan Thierry, 2016a. "War can be limited". *Voltaire Network*, May 11, 2016.
- Mirachian Laura. 2005. "Syria and its Neighbourhood, Research Centre on the Southern System and Wider Mediterranean". *Working Paper* No. 6-2005.
- moonofalabama.org 2016. *Kerry to Negotiate new Ceasefire in Syria – But With His Own Side*, May 2, 2016, <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2016/05/kerry-to-negotiate-new-ceasefire-in-syria-but-with-his-own-side.html>.
- moonofalabama.org 2016a. "Terrorists Commit War Crimes U.S. State Department: We Continue to have dialogue with them". *Moon of Alabama*, May 13, 2016.
- Orthodox WIKI. 2014. *Macarius III (Zaim) of Antioch*, December 26, 2014, [http://orthodoxwiki.org/Macarius_III_\(Zaim\)_of_Antioch](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Macarius_III_(Zaim)_of_Antioch).
- Perle Richard. 1966. *A Clean Break. A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*. Washington, D.C. and Tel Aviv: Institute for Advanced Strategic Political Studies.
- Perlez Jane, 2000. "In Geneva, Clinton Bet That Assad Would Bend, and Lost". *New York Times*, March 28, 2000.
- Pillar Paul R., 2016. *US Troops on Russia's Borders*, consortiumnews.com, March 31, 2016, <https://consortiumnews.com/2016/03/31/u-s-troops-on-russias-borders/>.
- RT News. 2016. *US, Russia agree to include Aleppo in Syria ceasefire deal*, May 4, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/news/341844-syria-ceasefire-aleppo-truce/>.
- RT News 2016a. *Miracle ceasefire' must be fostered as one and only plan for Syria – UN envoy de Mistura to RT*, April 29, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/341318-un-mistura-syria-interview/>.
- Smolansky, Oles M. 1974. *The Soviet Union and the Arab East under Khrushchev*, Levisbury, Pennsylvania, Bucknell University Press.
- Sputnik 2016. "Moscow Expects Int'l Support of Russia-US Settlement in Syria". *Sputnik*, May 16, 2016.
- Sputnik 2016a. "Russia hopes that the Syrian political settlement framework orchestrated by Moscow and Washington will not be undermined". Russia's Deputy UN Permanent Representative Vladimir Safronov told Sputnik", *Sputnik* May 16, 2016.
- Sputniknews.com. 2016. *Al-Nusra Front Troops Dominate Syrian Opposition Forces in Aleppo Fighting*, May 6, 2016, <http://sputniknews.com/analysis/20160506/1039160584/nusra-dominates-syrian-opposition.html>.
- Stepashin Sergey. 2015. *Interview by with K. P. (Komsomolskaya Pravda), Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS)*, December 6, 2015. (<http://ippo.info/en/news/sergei-stepa-shin-tells-kp-we-have-helped-syrian-people-for-three-years-today-the-importance-of-this-/>).
- Trenin Dmitri. 2013. "The Mythological Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy". *Carnegie Moscow Center*, February 12, 2013.
- Trenin, Dmitri. 2014. "For Russia, Syria is not about Syria". *Daily Star* (Lebanon), 03/10/2014.
- Trenin, Dmitri. 2015. "Putin Syria Gambit Aims at Something Bigger than Syria. What is Russia up to in the Middle East?". *Tablet*, October 13, 2015.

- Trenin, Dmitri. 2016. *Russia in the Middle East: Moscow's Objectives, Priorities, and Policy Drivers*, Carnegie.ru. April 5 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/04/05/russia-in-middle-east-moscow-s-objectives-priorities-and-policy-drivers/iwnei>.
- Tsygankov, Andrei. 2015. "The Kremlin's Syria gamble is risky, but could have a big payoff". *Russia Direct*, October 3, 2015.
- TV Channel Russia I. 2015. *President Putin's interview with Vladimir Soloviev on TV Channel Russia I*, October 11, 2015.
- Vassiliev, Alexei. 1993, *Rossiya Na Blizhnem i Srednem Vostoke: Ot Messionstva k Pragmatizmu*. Moscow: Nauka.
- Voltaire Network 2016. "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the United States". *Voltaire Network*, May 9, 2016.
- Whitney, Mike. 2016. "Putin's Aleppo Gamble Plays Off". *Counterpunch*, February 10, 2016.

Russia's role in Syria

Abstract

Dramatic development of events in Syria of the last 6 years in an unprecedented way impacted not only the Middle East countries, but also a number of other, the USA included, and probably indirectly affected the international system as a whole. Said events claimed at least 400,000 casualties and immeasurable loss in terms of material and cultural value. They additionally focused the world attention on the relatively small country of more than 2000 year-long history, extraordinary diversity of cultural heritage and tradition.

The article attempts at casting light at the Syria conflict in all its complexity. Particular emphasis was put on the role Russia (formerly the USSR) plays in it. The country's influence is possible due to the withdrawal of colonial forces.

Acting as a natural successor of the USSR, Russia continues to be present in the region taking advantage of its geopolitical importance and building a zone of influence. In recent years Russia has been solidifying its presence utilizing the bloody conflict that grew to something more than just civil war involving external forces. Said forces refer to various reasons and motives to justify any open or covert intervention due to the escalating situation and the increasing threat of spreading of the conflict to the whole Middle East, and therefore the danger of a world war.

The article analyzes the numerous internal factors conditioning the civil war and points to its causes intensified by a cumulating conflicts of various origin – ethnic, religious, cultural, historic. Furthermore it determines conflicting economic and strategic interests threatened by external forces struggle connected to the involvement of neighboring and world powers. Regardless of other conflicts and events impacting the destabilization of international situation, the Syrian conflict is currently the most serious in terms of world peace and international order.

Key words: Syria, civil war, Middle East, history and politics, colonial forces, Russian-American rivalry, Islamic State, ethnic and religious conflicts, international terrorism