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SYRIA: THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S RETURN TO THE MIDDLE EAST

ABSTRACT

Over the years, the Middle East has played a diverse role in Soviet and later Russian foreign policy. During the period of rivalry between the USSR and the US, it was an important area of confrontation. After its end, the Russian Federation became immersed in crisis and lost interest in the region. The Middle East again appeared in the Kremlin's geostrategic thinking after the Arab Spring which the Russian authorities perceived as fuelled and directed by the West, especially the US. The consequences of these social upheavals in the form of the overthrow of the Libyan leader or the explicit aspirations of the West to remove Bashar al-Assad from power, led Vladimir Putin to take action. This article is an attempt to interpret Russian actions in Syria, including its military involvement, through the prism of the Kremlin's neo-superpower policy.

Key words

Syria, Russian Federation, rebuilding influence, military involvement

Introduction

While during the Cold War, the Middle East was a violent and crucial field of competition between the USSR and the US, after the collapse of the Soviet empire, Middle Eastern affairs no longer occupied an important place in Russian foreign policy. The exceptions were the threats to Russian national security arising from terrorism and religious extremism. Russia had serious problems with these phenomena in the North Caucasus and Central Asia. Their culmination was the violent experience of terrorist attacks and two Chechen wars. The Soviet soldiers' fierce fighting in Afghanistan, and then the Russians in Tajikistan and Chechnya made the Russian authorities aware of the seriousness of the terrorist threat from Islam. These fears increased Russian interest in the Middle East after the events of the so-called Arab Spring. Another reason for the growing importance of the Middle East in Russian policy is its qualitative change expressed not only in the assertive narrative of the highest Russian authorities, but also in aggressive action, an example of which was the war with Georgia in 2008.

The events of the Arab Spring have raised particular concern in military circles. In November 2011, the Chief of the General Staff, Nikolay Makarov, expressed the opinion that modern local conflicts can unexpectedly turn into a nuclear conflict. The main guilty party was to be the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO), constantly expanding towards the borders of Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Middle East (Bridge, 2011). From this perspective, it was clear that Moscow was seeing threats to its interests as a result of Western expansion in the Middle East. In May 2012, Prime Minister Medvedev warned that Western intervention in Syria or Iraq could trigger another war with nuclear weapons (Nuclear Threat Initiative, 2012). And finally, the Libyan experience was extremely important in this context. It significantly changed Russia's way of thinking about conflict solving. The overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi turned out to be a bitter lesson for Russia. It significantly influenced Moscow's policy towards Syria and led to supporting the rule of Bashar al-Assad. Russia's attitude towards Syria is mainly determined by its foreign policy towards West.

The goal set by the author on the subject of Russian military involvement in Syria is focused on determining the motives and benefits for Russia. In recent years, scientific research on the problem of Russian imperialism has evolved significantly, in particular with regard to issues related to the military activities in the Middle East. Many studies address this phenomenon as a whole, e.g. the monographs *What Is Russia Up To in the Middle East?* by Dmitri Trenin

(2018) and *Russia's Middle East Policy: From Lenin to Putin* by Alexey Vasiliev (2018). Some refer specifically to Syria, e.g. the monographs *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* by Christopher Phillips (2016) or Nikolay Kozhanov's *Russia and the Syrian Conflict: Moscow's Domestic, Regional and Strategic Interests* (2016). Increased interest in Russia's activities in Syria directly translates into extensive, multi-layered research published in scientific journals. The articles that deal with the issue of Russian involvement in Syrian war, Russia's imperial ambitions in the Middle East, or the issues of jihadism and foreign fighters include e.g. Moritz Pieper's (2019) "Rising Power's Status and the Evolution of International Order: Conceptualising Russia's Syria Policies" in *Europe-Asia Studies*; Ralph Shield's (2018) "Russian Airpower's Success in Syria: Assessing Evolution in Kinetic Counterinsurgency" in *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*; Rod Thornton's (2018) "The Russian Military Commitment in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean: Power, Prestige and Popularity" in *The RUSI Journal*; and Marta Sara Stempień's (2019) "Russia in the Eyes of Islamic State: An Analysis of the Content of Dabiq and Rumiyah" in *Terrorism and Political Violence*.

The dynamics of changes in the situation related to Russian involvement in Syria necessitates ongoing, in-depth research as the conflict continues and Russia is unlikely to abandon its ambitions are unlikely to. The general research issue of this study was formulated in the form of the following question: Why did the Russian authorities decide to engage militarily in Syria, and what has Russia gained as a result of this activity? The author formulated the following hypothesis: The involvement of the Russian Armed Forces in the Syrian conflict was of key importance in achieving strategic goals focused on building a belief that Russia is indeed a global power that wants and has the ability to block American initiatives, strength and values.

The undertaken research clearly justified the need to refer to Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, which focuses on the study of instruments of power in state policy and the balance of power in the international system (Zięba, 2012, p. 14). At the same time, the author used the analytical-inductive-hypothetico-deductive-reductive system of cognitive activities (Glen, 2014).

1. The assessment of the Syrian war from Moscow's perspective

Today, in its policy towards Syria, Russia is guided by two perspectives that justify its position and activity. The first of these is the perspective of international order. In their statements, Russian politicians often refer to the international order

recorded and shaped by the Charter of the United Nations. Unlike the USSR, which supported the UN system only verbally, and in practice relied on military strength, the territorially limited Russian Federation noticed that the UN mechanisms are convenient in confrontation with the West. Therefore, it has consistently opposed the use of force without the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) consent, in which it has a veto power. Lack of such consent creates a legal situation according to which military intervention is illegal. It also claims that, even if there is such consent, the UNSC should closely supervise and direct the military operation. Moscow is indignant about the unilateral use of force by the US (Redin & Reach, 2017, p. 36). It seems that support for Americans in certain circumstances would be acceptable if they were willing to accept the concept of a world order based on a consensus of great powers. The current multipolar idea is praised too hastily, it does not work in practice, and therefore powers should return to an order, similar to the 19th-century "concert of nations". According to Moscow, the West is directly aiming to overthrow Al-Assad as this is how the West behaved in Iraq when overthrowing Saddam Hussein. Iran was also under prolonged intervention pressure and a possible change of regime. In former Yugoslavia, NATO operation led to the separation of Kosovo from Serbia and, as a consequence, to the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević. Finally Libya, the last case. The approval of the ban on flights was originally intended to protect civilians from the brutality of the authorities, but unexpectedly evolved into NATO intervention which resulted in the overthrow of Gaddafi. The Russian elite do not want the overthrow of authoritarian authorities in Central Asia. Such a scenario could result in the fall of the Russian system. It is understandable, therefore, to spread panic through Russian media, comparing Syria to Stalingrad, and forecasting World War Three.

The second issue is the future of Syria after the overthrow of its current power. Russian policy towards Syria is a kind of interpretation of the causes and consequences of the conflict. It is not only triggered, but driven by the supply of weapons and financial support. Syria remains one of the pillars of Middle Eastern security architecture, and the overthrow of Al-Assad will have tragic consequences throughout the region. As Lavrov stated:

There is no doubt that if the current power in Syria falls, there will be strong temptation and strong pressure in some countries of the region to form a Sunni government in the Syrian Arab Republic. In this situation, we are concerned about the future of Christians and other religious minorities, such as Kurds, Alawis, Druze, etc. I cannot predict what may happen in Lebanon (...) I am saying that this process will not be without impact on Iraq, because all higher positions

have been filled by Shiites. Kurdistan remains a special problem (...) It is all very inflammatory and requires a particularly careful course of action (2012a).

According to Russia, maintaining Al-Assad's regime is necessary to maintain stability in the area stretching from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, and as a barrier against Islamic extremism. Given Russian experience of Islamic fundamentalism in the North Caucasus since 1996, these fears seem strongly justified. Russia does not want to allow chaos and fighting between various branches of Islam. Another factor is the belief that the change of power in Damascus may lead to the isolation and weakening of a key ally in the Middle East – Iran. It is safe to put forward the thesis that it is Iran and not Syria that is needed most to exert pressure on Western countries. After the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran's influence in the region significantly increased. This country will certainly be the significant player whose hegemonic ambitions Russia would like to control (Gause III, 2017, pp. 673–675). Iran itself is also interested in Al-Assad surviving because its fall will cut it off from influencing Hezbollah. Syria is a place for training the militias of this group and transferring weapons. It is also probably the place through which Iranian technology is transferred to North Korea (Bolton, 2012). In other words, a change in the Syrian regime would change the geopolitical situation in favor of the US, at the expense of Iran. From this perspective, Tehran is much more important to Russia than Damascus in political, economic and strategic terms. Looking from the perspective of the neo-Eurasian approach, which influences Putin's thinking about Russian foreign policy, Iran is needed as a partner to suppress Pan-Turkish aspirations in Ankara, limit Saudi Arabia's fundamentalism, ensure free access to the Persian Gulf, and combat Euro-Atlantic influence in the region. So Syria is the front line to oppose the American and Arab vision of regional security.

Leaving Syria will also be a blow to the international prestige of Russia. It will eliminate Syria as an important bridgehead enabling involvement in Middle Eastern affairs and at the same time will be a bad signal for other authoritarian allies. During the first decade after the collapse of the USSR, Russia silently accepted the dominance of the United States in the Middle East, and its policy in this region was very passive. This passivity was changed by the Second Gulf War, but the main focus was on Iran, Iraq and Turkey. The rest of the region was of lesser importance. However, the current interest in almost all countries stems more from striving to restore their own prestige (Garcia, 2018, p. 106). Syria can even legitimize Russia's participation, just like the USSR once did, in the resolution of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

There is the fear that the overthrow of secular dictators and the creation of alliances with the liberal West will pave the way for Islamic radicals and Al-Qaeda type groups. The prospect of democratic governance in Arab countries, in particular Egypt and Tunisia which were a popular holiday destination for millions of Russians, did not arouse enthusiasm. According to Moscow, more civil liberties in societies without democratic traditions could have led to even more authoritarian and ruthless rulers. Concerns about the development of a similar scenario continue to refer to Syria. Opposition to Al-Assad includes jihad fighters associated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The scenario of fighting between Sunnis and Shiites, Arabs and Kurds, Muslims and Christians has also become real. Syria has considerable stocks of weapons, including ballistic missiles capable of being armed with chemical charges. This weapon can be used in any conflict. The threat is even greater because Damascus is closer to Chechnya and Dagestan than Tripoli. The psychological and sociological contexts are also significant. The average Russian lives much closer to the region of violent conflicts than the average citizen of the United States or EU countries. A citizen of the Russian Federation knows a lot about the victims on both sides of the many years of war in Chechnya, watching scenes from the shelling of Grozny which razed the city to the ground, and is aware of the costs of its reconstruction. Even though the war is officially over, the North Caucasus is not an oasis of peace and stability.

In addition, supporting Al-Assad results from economic reasons. Relations in this area have a long history and go back to the time of the Soviet Union. Economic interests relate primarily to favorable contracts for the supply of weapons, investments of Russian enterprises and cooperation in the energy sector. There is a common belief that the economic factor is the basis and justification for Russian support. However, this is not as obvious as it may seem. On the one hand, we have the Putin's opinion that conflicts of this type, like the war in Iraq, resulted in the loss of markets for Russian industry and need many years to rebuild them, on the other Medvedev's declarations that Syria is a key political ally for Russia and an important economic partner (Medvedev, 2011). In turn, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed that Syria was never an important trade and economic partner of his country (Lavrov, 2012b).

In fact, trade relations between Russia and Syria are well developed. They cannot be compared with relations with the European Union, but in quantitative terms they are comparable to trade with Egypt and Israel. Trade relations associated with large government contracts for the supply of petrochemicals and engineering from Russia. Russian enterprises carried out large projects in Syria. Economic

and military interests are important for Russia (see Kaszuba & Stempień, 2016b). They justify in some way support for the government in Damascus, but it seems that the bargaining chip has a much broader dimension and it is primarily about strategic interests. Moscow is interested in returning to the international scene as a global actor whose interests should be taken into account in every aspect of international security. From the point of view of the Russian authorities, it is important to oppose the hegemony of the United States, which in Russian belief has repeatedly bypassed the UN Security Council's decisions by undertaking unilateral action. Moscow is opposed to legitimizing actions leading to changes of governments in regions of strategic importance for Russia. It wants to expand or at least maintain its influence in the Middle East (Stempień, 2016, p. 125). Therefore, Western actions against Syria, and even earlier Iran, are considered as an attempt to eliminate Russia from a geopolitically important region. Direct threat factors are also important for Russia. Instability and internal conflicts in Middle Eastern countries not only limit its influence, but can move significantly closer to Russian borders and spread to Russia itself. The global dimension of Russia's policy towards Syria and the region differs from the Western vision of international order. This difference leads to the question: who makes decisions in matters of international security and in what way?

Another reason for protecting Al-Assad's rule, often raised by the media, is that the Russians can use a naval base in Syria (Harmer, 2012, pp. 3–5). The Syrian port of Tartus allows Russian ships in the Mediterranean to replenish and maintain supplies without returning to ports in the Black Sea. This base was established in 1971 to secure the activities of the Soviet Mediterranean naval squadron. After 1991, the squadron was dissolved and the port was sporadically used to supply passing ships. The infrastructure of the base consists of three floating docks and a floating repair workshop, warehouses and a residential facility for fifty people. It is highly likely that a change of government in Syria would result in the termination of the current agreement that regulates the use of Tartus by Russian naval forces. This danger justifies the considerable Russian commitment to maintaining the current Syrian status quo. We are not able to state, unequivocally, whether Russian ships cannot operate without this base, but the need to maintain it is constantly brought forward. Various arguments are used, such as Russia's participation in an international operation against pirates in the Gulf of Aden or the need to protect Russian citizens.

In 2008, Russian-Syrian talks were held on the modernization and expansion of the base in such a way that it could be fully used by the Black Sea Fleet. This lively interest resulted from the development of the situation in Ukraine. The change

of power in Kiev after the Orange Revolution, its aspirations for membership in NATO, which were to result in accession to the NATO Membership Action Plan, and the non-extension of the lease agreement for the Sevastopol naval port after 2017, forced a search for alternative solutions. One of them was the acceleration of the construction of a military base in Novorossiysk on the Black Sea. Currently, after the annexation of Crimea, these circumstances have disappeared but Tartus remains the focus of the Russian Federation's attention. It is not only justified by events in Syria. It should be noted that the full freedom of Russian naval operations is limited by the Montreux Convention and the possibility of blocking and controlling the Bosphorus and Dardanelles by Turkish naval forces, which are, after all, part of the military potential of the North Atlantic Alliance. This base is necessary for potential longer-term maritime operations in the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean. In addition, since the Arab Spring, and especially the conflicts in Libya and Syria, Russia has intensified its presence and exercises in the Mediterranean, many times using its base in Tartus. In January 2013, ships from four Russian fleets conducted the largest naval maneuvers since the fall of the USSR ("Moskva otvetila na slukhi", 2012). The goal was not – as Russian media reported – the evacuation of Russian citizens from Syria, but a demonstration that Russian Naval Forces, after a twenty-year break, had returned to international waters.

It is also important to remember that thousands of Russian citizens live in Syria. They are mainly wives of Syrian military men who studied in the Soviet Union, and their children. Only about 3,000, however, are registered at the Russian consulate in Damascus. Of this group, about 1,000 holders of Russian passports left for Russia after the start of the civil war, but thousands remained in Syria ("MChS vyvezlo iz Sirii", 2013).

2. Russian intervention in the Bashar Al-Assad's state

The Russians became involved in the conflict in Syria when, in October 2011, Hilary Clinton – US Secretary of State in the Obama administration – announced a reduction in US activity in the region. After the American declaration, a grey, undeveloped zone has been created which has encouraged regional powers – Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran – to formulate their hegemonic ambitions more clearly. Russia, which has not shown any major activity since the end of the Cold War, was recognized – mainly by Riyadh and Ankara – as an insignificant actor. That is why Moscow's attitude and its subsequent involvement caused quite a surprise in Sunni capitals (Federek, 2015). More than

two decades after the fall of the USSR, Russia has become a serious player on the international scene.

The building of the Russian military presence in Syria began with naval operations in spring 2012. The Black Sea Fleet was entrusted with the task of supplying military equipment, armaments, water, food and fuel to the Syrian armed forces. In the Syrian port of Tartus, where the Russian Navy has its only base outside the former USSR, the necessary modernization work was carried out to prepare it for an increased number of ships. It was assumed that the strong presence of Russian naval forces would be necessary in the face of the planned armed intervention of the coalition of Western states in Syria. Moscow was confident that Western countries, including the US, were planning a military operation that will begin with a special forces landing operation to seize and secure Syrian chemical weapons (Ruchkin, 2012, p. 3).

In April and May, the missile destroyer *Smietlivyi* began patrolling the coast of Syria. Under its cover, more naval units flowed into the Syrian region: the landing ships *Caesar Kunikov* (Voice of Russia, 2012) and *Nikolai Filchenko* (TVN24, 2013). By that means, safe conditions were created for transport ships which regularly carried supplies from Novorossiysk to the port of Tartus. With the intensification of the fighting, a 40-person contingent of special marine forces on board the *Smietlivyi* arrived at Tartus. Soon a 20–40-person marine sub-unit was on each Russian ship. In addition to naval forces, other military specialists and advisers were sent to Syria. A group of operational officers and analysts from the Foreign Intelligence Service (*Sluzhba vneshney razvedki Rossiyskoy Federatsii* – SVR RF), responsible for the Middle East service headquarters, also arrived. They kept Moscow informed about the development of the situation and advised Syrian government institutions. An illegal SVR agent network, managed by Directorate “S”, was also launched. Russian military experts and technicians have taken control of the distribution and use of weapons supplied from Russia. The result of the work of military advisers and secret service officers was the rapid transformation of the Syrian armed forces. Heavy military units were reorganized to stop the anticipated massive attack by Israeli and Turkish conventional forces. In their place, smaller, decentralized and mobile battle groups were created, capable of conducting irregular operations. Technical experts trained soldiers to operate and use the new weapon systems in the most optimal way. Russian personnel were ordered to stay in safe places and were prohibited from active engagement in military operations, or even being in the vicinity.

In the first half of 2012, the Kremlin considered sending a military contingent to Syria, under the pretext of joint exercises with Syrian armed forces. It was

assumed that an international peacekeeping force could move into Syria. In this situation, Russian troops would constitute the main and largest military contingent of 5,000 soldiers. There was no doubt that the authorities in Damascus could count on Russians. The international nature of the peacekeeping force was to be ensured by the joint command of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (“CSTO Sec-Gen”, 2012) and the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). A preliminary agreement, on the principles of involvement in this operation was signed with the United Nations (“CSTO allowed to deploy”, 2012). The Russian forces were to include Specnaz GRU (Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation), assault troops and marines. They were to be led by the Commander-in-Chief of Russian Airborne Troops (VDV) Col. Gen. Vladimir Shamanov, who was also appointed the head of the Joined Staff of the CSTO (for more on the role of the CSTO in the foreign security of Russia see Kaszuba, 2019). The intervention forces in Syria were to include components of the 76th Guards Air Assault Division from Pskov, 15th Mixed Brigade from Samara, 810th Marine Brigade of the Black Sea Fleet, 336th Guards Naval Infantry Brigade, GRU special forces, naval forces and air forces (Bodansky, 2015, p. 5).

Russia did not support the operations under the command of the US and NATO in Syria. It was aware that it did not have this type of expeditionary ability and was afraid that it would repeat the Libyan scenario in Syria (“Russia Will Not Allow”, 2012). Moscow did not want to allow any possible intervention of the Western coalition in the area of its vital interests. It did not want to be put in the role of a passive observer, having no influence on the course of events. In order for this scenario not to be implemented, it had to transform its naval forces in such a way that three fleets – North, Baltic and Black Sea – could conduct coordinated sea operations in the Mediterranean. Fleets were divided into two groups of task forces. The first was to demonstrate the constant presence of Russia in the waters of the Mediterranean, while the second was to create – autonomously or jointly with the Syrian forces – a protective wall for air and sea defence against an attack on Syria by the US and other NATO countries. In the autumn, the planned contingents of three Russian fleets were present in the Mediterranean.

In December 2012, there was a high probability that Syrian government forces would be defeated. Large groups of well-armed and trained jihadi fighters began to flow across the Turkish border, and the Turkish army provoked border incidents, suggesting possible military intervention. Groups of fighters trained and equipped by the US in Jordan attacked government forces near Damascus

airport, threatening Russians. Concerns over the possibility of the fall of Al-Assad have prompted Moscow to send more expert intelligence, armed forces and emergency personnel. A significant number were located at the airports in Damascus and Aleppo. Their task was to coordinate the supply of armaments and resources necessary for the Syrian forces (Borger, 2012), but at the same time to organize the evacuation of over 20,000 Russian citizens and other CIS countries.

Thanks to Russian supplies and experts, with additional support and armaments from Iran, in early 2013 Syrian forces displaced jihadi fighters from strategic facilities and regions. When the authorities in Ankara assured Moscow that they were not going to allow armed intervention from Turkish territory, Al-Assad's forces were controlling the situation again. An additional guarantee that the intervention would not occur was provided by Russian ships on the Syrian coast with marines on board. The authorities in Damascus could count on survival.

In January 2013, Russia significantly transformed its maritime contingent. It introduced the ships of all four fleets to the Mediterranean: the Northern Fleet from Murmansk, the Baltic Fleet from Kaliningrad, the Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol and the Pacific Fleet from Vladivostok. The combined forces of these four fleets conducted a 10-day exercise, carried out in parallel in two theatres: the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Twenty-three ships and long-range strategic aviation forces participated. Among the vessels there were 10 warships, including a rocket destroyer, an anti-submarine ship, two escort ships, four landing ships with 300 marines and 10 armored personnel carriers on board, and two submarines, one of which was nuclear-powered. The combat ships were accompanied by support units. This exercise was not of a routine nature, it was a demonstration of force whose message was to show that the armed forces of the Russian Federation are capable of carrying out a large-scale military operation in regions distant from its territory.

It was the largest naval exercise since the collapse of the USSR. It showed Russia's readiness to act as a superpower in any conflict in any region of the world. Thus, Western countries received a clear message that the situation in the Middle East is not indifferent to Russia and in fact constitutes a threat to its security and allies (Magen, 2013).

Given the international conditions of the conflict in Syria, it is clear that the rhetoric of the exercise was to camouflage the actual military operation. After all, Russia had sent its naval forces to an area of real armed conflict in which anti-government forces are widely supported by various state and non-state entities.

Thus, these forces could join a real military operation at any time. The West's reaction to the Russian demonstration is significant. It aroused almost no interest in Western media. This lack of reaction should be considered as a category of information war, in which the lack of information directed at the adversary can also be a significant instrument. The West, and especially the United States, has shown that the behaviour, which the Russians assumed was to show assertiveness and strength, did not impress, and it treated the demonstration of Russian capabilities as arrogant (Magen, 2013).

Observing the development of the situation in Syria, Russian experts have concluded that the survival of the Al-Assad regime depends on two factors. The first of these is the support of the minorities inhabiting Syria – Alawites, Druze, Orthodox Christians, Arab Shiites, Armenians and the economic elite of Arab Sunnis. The second factor was the defeat of Sunni jihadi fighters, supported by the US and allies: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Russia was also aware that in the conditions of destabilization and chaos of a significant part of the Maghreb – from Morocco to Libya – it must think about ensuring its security and economic interests in this region. In such a situation, establishing a protective shield for the entire region and isolating it, and especially Syria, against the actions of regional forces and coalitions under US leadership, has become a key factor in Russian strategy.

In the autumn of 2013, the Kremlin had begun to increase its naval force potential in the Mediterranean, focusing mainly on the Syrian coast. In implementing this plan, it used large landing ships: *Nowoherkask*, *Minsk*, *Shabalin*, *Admiral Nевyelskoy*, *Peresvyet*; the destroyer *Admiral Panteleev*; the frigate *Neustrashyi*; and the electronic reconnaissance ship *Pryazovye*. Russia's intention was to ensure the continuous rotation of ships in the Mediterranean, ensuring a constant presence of about ten combat and auxiliary vessels ("Russia to expand Mediterranean fleet", 2013).

At the beginning of 2014, Russia was the initiator of several international negotiations aimed at ending the conflict in Syria. However, they failed because opposition, supported by the United States, firmly set the condition of Al-Assad's resignation. As a result, Russia increased the supply of arms and other military as well as technical and expert assistance. On 30 September 2015 Russia launched an air operation in Syria and the first strikes were made against opposition forces in northern Syria, located about 50 km from the main IS forces. Russian air forces supported the land operation of government security forces against opposition groups occupying the area south of Aleppo (Stempień, 2018, pp. 264–265). This grouping included sub-units of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard

Corps (IRGC). Russia attacked the IS position after Al-Assad regained control in north-western Syria. Its helicopters and artillery stationed in Homs and Hama Governorates, supporting government forces north of Damascus. Direct actions against IS were probably only taken when jihadi forces threatened the Syrian authorities or if there was a need to support the offensive of government forces. The air campaign was also aimed to show the North Atlantic Alliance the strategic capabilities of the Russian air force (for more information about air operation, see Pawlikowicz, 2019).

In addition to military involvement in Syria, Russia also waged an information war in which it effectively distorted the reality. To legitimize Al-Assad's authority, it provided falsehoods, blurring the boundaries between armed anti-regime groups and terrorists. Al-Assad had spoken in a similar tone since the beginning of the conflict ("Bashar al-Assad", 2012). The Russians also manipulated information about the types of targets attacked (Institute for the Study of War, 2015).

At the same time, there were attempts to undermine the international support and legitimacy of opposition groups to ensure the sustainability of the authorities in Damascus. Reputational-diplomatic hypocrisy was widely used. During international negotiations on the conflict in Syria in Vienna in November 2015, the Russian Foreign Minister Russia Sergey Lavrov announced Russia's support for "the entire spectrum of opposition forces". He stated that these forces should reach an agreement and by January 2016 create a transitional structure of the so-called "national unity government" that would draft a new constitution and lead to elections within 18 months ("Vienna talks", 2015). Despite these noble statements, Russia has proposed to the West and regional players two lists categorizing opposition groups in Syria. The second list contained legitimate opposition groups that could participate in future dialogue and the peace process. Russia, however, incorrectly classified these groups placing, for example, on the list of terrorist groups, the entire opposition from the north-western Syria, which has alleged links with Al-Qaeda. This clearly suggests that the Russians wanted to remove all major groups from negotiations and enable them to be physically liquidated as terrorist organizations in the future. The very concept of creating such lists reinforced the narrative that only Moscow is determined to combat terrorists, while the United States and its allies are strongly associated with radical groups (Spaulding, 2015, p. 5).

The operation of the Russian air forces against opposition groups led to a serious reduction of their resources and deprived them of legitimacy. This was exactly what Al-Assad had been doing since the beginning of the conflict. Three

moderate groups, in the face of the increased military activity of Russia, have joined the Jabhat al-Nusra group associated with Al-Qaeda (Spaulding, 2015, p. 5). Strikes against opposition groups weakened their morale, combat value and blurred the differences between moderate members and terrorists.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, the Bashar Al-Assad regime would not have survived without the Kremlin's military involvement. Thanks to Russian support, it not only remained in power, but also regained control over a large area (see Kaszuba & Stempień, 2016a). Vladimir Putin himself claims that Russia has achieved all the goals of its military involvement in Syria. The military intervention of the Russian armed forces was primarily aimed at strengthening the regime and enabling it to conduct any peace negotiations from a position of power. Al-Assad's remaining in power also opened up new opportunities for Russia's naval and air forces in the Mediterranean, allowing it to influence Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, as well as the US and southern European countries – members of NATO and the EU.

The situation in Syria was used by the Kremlin to emerge from international isolation after the annexation of Crimea. Putin's decision to intervene in Syria resulted from his fear of losing the image of a world power with its own sphere of influence. This decision was justified by the need to fight terrorism, which in Russia's opinion required the strengthening of the Al-Assad regime. The fall of the government in Damascus – in Moscow's opinion – could have increased terrorist activity. Therefore, the consolidation of state institutions in the region (especially in Syria) was necessary to defeat the Islamic State. By engaging militarily in Syria, the Kremlin has given regional players a clear and strong signal that, unlike the United States, Russia will support leaders and governments facing social protests against their power. It would not leave them, just as the US left Hosni Mubarak in 2011. The Syrian gambit is therefore part of a broader strategy to safeguard Russia's influence and position in the region. It is noteworthy that in the second half of 2015, the leaders of Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates paid a visit to Moscow, and some of them signed contracts for the purchase of Russian weapons. Saudi Arabia – a "traditional" US ally – has even committed to investing USD 10 billion, mainly in the agriculture sector. If Riyadh fulfils this obligation it will be the largest one-off foreign investment in Russia (Papchenkova & Lyutov, 2015). Such contacts are also maintained with Israel. The subjects of this dialogue are issues of avoiding possible aircraft

incidents in the Syrian airspace. It also includes Israel's tolerance for members of Lebanese Hezbollah who are fighting on the side of Damascus. Israel has no sympathy for Al-Assad, but shares Russia's position regarding keeping the leader in power. Chaos after the fall of the regime would certainly be a serious threat to Israel's security, especially since the border with Syria was stable and peaceful until the outbreak of the Syrian war.

Certainly, Putin's main goal in Syria was to force the US to recognize the importance of Russia in the Middle East. However, it is worth asking the question whether, in fact, this is not the first step to build a triad of powers consisting of China, Russia and the US, determining international order. This is the dream of the Kremlin elite.

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