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## Russia in Syria – Previous History and Present Concerns

### Description

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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.”<sup>[1]</sup> 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.<sup>[2]</sup> 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.<sup>[3]</sup> 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 Muslim population in Europe,<sup>[4]</sup> Moscow’s close attention to this region and Islam was not a matter of choice but a necessity.

In addition, having since the 10<sup>th</sup> 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 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries,[\[5\]](#) and since the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Christian Orthodox Patriarchs of Antioch had frequent relations with Russia, Ukraine, and present day Romania (at that time Wallachia and Moldova).

In 1585-86 the Patriarch of Antioch Joachim V was the first high-ranking representative of the Middle Eastern Christians to personally arrive in Moscow.[\[6\]](#) 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.[\[7\]](#) 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.[\[8\]](#)

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[\[9\]](#) 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.[\[10\]](#) 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.[\[11\]](#) 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.[\[12\]](#)

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.[\[13\]](#) 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.[\[14\]](#) 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.[\[15\]](#)

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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 Husri, called this event “the first real victory of Arab nationalism.”<sup>[16]</sup> 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,<sup>[17]</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>[18]</sup> 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,”<sup>[19]</sup> 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.”<sup>[20]</sup>

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.”<sup>[21]</sup> Consequently, the events in Russia had relatively fewer repercussions for Syria than for 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.”<sup>[22]</sup> 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.<sup>[23]</sup> 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.<sup>[24]</sup> 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.<sup>[25]</sup>

Keeping in mind that Moscow’s relations with Syria, and its various communities, has long socio-

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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, for 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”[\[26\]](#) 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.[\[27\]](#) 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.[\[28\]](#)

Although Moscow cannot afford to challenge Washington directly and has developed common ties with Israel, it still has 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”[\[29\]](#) 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.”[\[30\]](#) 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.”[\[31\]](#) 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.[\[32\]](#)

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.”[\[33\]](#) 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.[\[34\]](#) 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

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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 of 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.<sup>[35]</sup> Consequently, “painful as this is to the architects of the 1973 system, attention in the Middle East must be focused on essentials. And there exist compatible objectives.”<sup>[36]</sup>

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 a significant contribution to resolution of these two high-priority, high-risk conflicts that affect the entire region.”<sup>[37]</sup> 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.”<sup>[38]</sup> 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.”<sup>[39]</sup>

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.”<sup>[40]</sup>

At the same time the developments in Syria are of vital but probably not of direct existential importance for Moscow 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.”<sup>[41]</sup>

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 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 my or 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 aspirations by Moscow, and also shared by China and some other major regional powers to reaffirm their international importance and

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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 Dmitri 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 on a 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"<sup>[42]</sup> However, unlike Washington, Moscow's struggle is not by 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 also rightly be seen as "the struggle for survival," this time the challenge is more powerful and better coordinated than ever before. 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,"<sup>[43]</sup> although "the Kremlin cannot ignore a region so close geographically, so rich in hydrocarbons, and so unstable socially and politically."<sup>[44]</sup> 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 ensuing US-Russia diplomatic effort "has become the key testing ground for Russia's attempt to return to the global stage."<sup>[45]</sup>
2. The second reason, practical though no less important, was and still remains the goal of "containing and diminishing Islamic extremism that might otherwise expand to Russia and its immediate post-Soviet neighbourhood"<sup>[46]</sup> and 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 for now have 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 recorded or customary principles and both sides had never interrupted mutual contacts and held some respect for each other. Since the February 22, 2014 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.<sup>[47]</sup> Any possible solution of a major new crisis should be possible only due to the new forms of serious Washington, and its allies' cooperation with Moscow, but the chances for 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 stem from some common causes and it is hardly possible to treat them separately.

The international situation is thus undoubtedly quite difficult, but Dmitri Trenin, who is one of the most

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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,”<sup>[48]</sup> he still believes that the West should “embrace cooperation with Moscow on the basis of shared interests.”<sup>[49]</sup> 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.<sup>[50]</sup> 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.<sup>[51]</sup>

Although Russia is not and will not be part of the West, Moscow sees itself as a stabilizing force, and 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.”<sup>[52]</sup>

I am not sure that these and some other Russian assets mentioned by Trenin would be able to persuade the Western leaders to perceive present day Russia as a worthy partner equal in rights. With the exception of, at least now, unlikely total Russian breakdown and capitulation to the US’ hegemony, or even a 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 during the last three centuries have emerged as a nation of immigrants, far away from other major population centres and isolated by two oceans, had in the past far less need and chances to learn how to coexist, and it has had 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 its own exceptionalism and has more likely suffered because of its inferiority complexes to the West, might have a positive impact, not only on American-Russian relations, but as an experience, to help to establish 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.

At the time of writing this, 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.”<sup>[53]</sup> On April 29, 2016 a new, partial cease-fire that was announced was presented as a “reinforcement” of the February 27, 2016 truce, but it does not include Aleppo, which was the centre of heavy fighting during the first

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week of May 2016.<sup>[54]</sup> 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.”<sup>[55]</sup> As he stressed “it’s a test for the Russians and for the regime, as well as for the Syrian opposition.”<sup>[56]</sup> 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.”<sup>[57]</sup>

Fortunately, this time the situation might have seemed 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.<sup>[58]</sup> 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.”<sup>[59]</sup>

These developments would 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.”<sup>[60]</sup> 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.”<sup>[61]</sup>

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 a high level between the Russian Federation and the US.”<sup>[62]</sup> 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 a 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.”<sup>[63]</sup> He seems to believe that his appeal impressed them and as an experienced diplomat he thinks that only these Great Power’s leaders could help 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.”<sup>[64]</sup>

I think that in view of the tragic situation and being concerned about 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 putting it under some kind of more efficient control. However, these are not easy goals to achieve. The US opposed the Russian demand that the 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.<sup>[65]</sup> 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 the divisions between which 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.”<sup>[66]</sup> There are many other possible problems ahead, but 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.”[\[67\]](#)

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, the “miraculous ceasefire must be fostered as the one and only one plan for Syria.”[\[68\]](#) 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.”[\[69\]](#) Similar, though probably not as heartfelt opinions have been expressed by 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 again proved to be short lived and war returned to the country. I think there were, and probably still 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 President Assad’s “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,”<sup>[70]</sup> according to the German intelligence service “over 95% of the fighters in Syria are foreign and not Syrian”<sup>[71]</sup> and many of them “are not even Arab, but increasingly Asians”<sup>[72]</sup> 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”<sup>[73]</sup> 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.<sup>[74]</sup> 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.<sup>[75]</sup> 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.<sup>[76]</sup> However, during the war in Syria Al Nusra has been supported and protected for a long time by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and probably other countries, including Arab and non-Arab Middle Eastern nations allied with the West. 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 controlled by government forces, part of the area held by Nusra Front militants, while another part is controlled by the so-called opposition.”<sup>[77]</sup> General Konashenkov has also said 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.”<sup>[78]</sup> British scholar and expert on Syria Helena Cabban went even further, saying that “Islamist troops loyal to the Al Nusra Front, an offshoot of Al Qaeda, dominate rebel forces fighting the Syrian Arab Army around the city of Aleppo.”<sup>[79]</sup> Even according to a 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.”<sup>[80]</sup>

The Americans and their allies are willing to fight in Syria on 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 Christians and all other religious minorities in the country might be used for that purpose.<sup>[81]</sup> 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,[\[82\]](#) 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 need 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."[\[83\]](#)

The US policy in Syria might 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.[\[84\]](#) In spite of all hidden or openly stated differences with Moscow, Washington also calls for "a Political Settlement in Syria"[\[85\]](#) through the full implementation of UN Security Council resolutions 2254 and 2268, the 2016 Munich and 2015 Vienna Statements of the ISSG and the 2015 Geneva communiqué in order to "end violence and bloodshed, counter the threat of terrorism, and ensure the implementation of international humanitarian law."[\[86\]](#) 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,[\[87\]](#) 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.[\[88\]](#) 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."[\[89\]](#) However, just one day later Ahrar al Sham joined al Qaeda in breaking the ceasefire by attacking and ethnically cleansing the Allawite sect living in the village loyal to the Syrian government[\[90\]](#) and Amnesty International accused both groups of indiscriminate attacks on civilians, including the use of chemical weapons and other war crimes.[\[91\]](#)

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."[\[92\]](#) 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."[\[93\]](#)

Meyssan 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.”[\[94\]](#) 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.”[\[95\]](#) In his opinion the underlying cause is the US strategic interests to “contain the economic and political development of China and Russia”[\[96\]](#) 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 Meyssan exaggerates the impact of American commercial interests on the tragic events in Syria and Ukraine, and does not pay sufficient attention to a number of local and regional factors, including the role of the Gulf countries, Turkey, Israel, and France, which used to be a Mandatory Power in Syria and Lebanon, his explanation of the developments there is not without value and provides one more aspect, previously not taken into consideration, 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 “there is nothing to be gained by negotiations with people who are being paid to maintain the conflict.”[\[97\]](#) 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 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’s 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.”[\[98\]](#) 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 involve pressures on all opposition groups so that they are guided by what the UN Security Council resolution states.”[\[99\]](#) 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.”[\[100\]](#) 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.[\[101\]](#) 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.”[\[102\]](#)

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, Russia, Germany, Oman, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, attended the fifth meeting of the

ISSG in Vienna, which ended with no proposal for a date to resume peace talks between the Syrian government and the Western supported 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" at present make any expected understanding difficult to be achieved.

Gwynne Dyer a well-known Canadian journalist, whose articles are published in 45 countries, has recently approvingly quoted 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."[\[103\]](#) In his opinion, "everyone should have listened to the Russians a little bit more than they did."[\[104\]](#) Brahimi was taking on the Russian proposal of 2012 that Bashar 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."[\[105\]](#) According to him, "by mid-2015 between 80 percent and 90 percent of the Syrian rebels actively fighting the Assad regime belonged to the Islamic State or to al-Qaeda's Syrian franchise, the Nusra Front, and its Islamist allies in Ahrar al-Sham."[\[106\]](#) 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.[\[107\]](#)

Largely because of that, "it's the Baathist regime's secular character that makes it so important."[\[108\]](#) 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."[\[109\]](#) Another reason for 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 also available 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,[\[110\]](#) which was increasing its popularity among the Arab people but also made it more difficult to get Washington's recognition.

However, American-Syrian relations have never been a simple function of the US' support for Israel. [\[111\]](#) President Clinton supported the Syrian-Israeli negotiations, which, at that time, might have stabilized Arab-Israeli relations, and a success would have been considered a great achievement of his presidency.[\[112\]](#) However, Clinton's successors to the White House had to deal with Damascus' closer relations with Teheran, involvement in Lebanon and the persistent support of the Palestinians, which changed Washington's policy. According to the former NATO Commander in Europe General Wesley Clark, "the G.W. Bush administration wanted to destabilize the Middle East, turn it upside down, get it under control and Syria was on the same list as Iraq."[\[113\]](#) When in 2000 Bashar al Assad took the place of his father, Hafez al Assad, as president of Syria and the head of the ruling (Renaissance) Baath Socialist party, he became, almost from the start, marked by the Bush administration for "regime change,"[\[114\]](#) and in his speech in May 2002 Under Secretary of State John Bolton included Syria on the American list of rogue states, along with Iraq, that "can expect to become our subject."[\[115\]](#)

In an effort to find a way out of the critical situation and make use of the fact that the head of the more

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conciliatory Labour Party, Ehud Barak won the Israeli elections on May 17, 1999, Bashar al Assad in 2000 initiated secret talks with Israel in Turkey.<sup>[116]</sup> By August 2005 these negotiations “had reached a very advanced form and covered territorial, water, border and political questions”<sup>[117]</sup> and according to the Canadian historian the outcomes represented “a quantum leap in solving one of the region’s crucial problems.”<sup>[118]</sup> A number of documents, published then by the respected Israeli newspaper Haaretz, included the draft accord of the possible Syrian-Israeli treaty, which was supported, at that time, by a meaningful part of the Israeli establishment and had the silent approval of the Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Olmert. However, George W. Bush’s administration was against the negotiations and the possible peace treaty between the two nations. While President Bush refrained from publicly criticizing the Israeli Prime Minister’s decision to negotiate with Syria, privately the US President, and several of his aides, missed no opportunity to express their unhappiness to Israel. In November 2008 during the Israeli Prime Minister’s visit in Washington, Bush asked him, “why do you want to give Assad the Golan Heights for nothing?”<sup>[119]</sup> According to Israeli sources Olmert replied that, “it is not for nothing. It is in exchange for a change in the region’s strategic alignment.”<sup>[120]</sup> The Bush administration did not want to accept that, and although a number of formerly high ranked Israeli officials, including Shlomo Ben-Ami, a former Israeli Foreign Minister, argued that the issues involved were “too important”<sup>[121]</sup> for Israel to endorse yet “another failure in the US strategy,”<sup>[122]</sup> Prime Minister Olmert frankly admitted that “the Bush administration opposes a negotiated peace with Syria. Therefore, he is also opposed to it.”<sup>[123]</sup>

Even at that time the Baathist regime faced critical challenges, but was able to retain its political legitimacy among the majority of Syrians and maintain control of the country. According to all credible public opinion polls in Syria, even the last five years of the extremely destructive war had undermined, but not destroy “the legitimacy of the Syrian nation-state and its institutions”<sup>[124]</sup> and “the legitimacy of the State certainly exceeds that of the Assad regime.”<sup>[125]</sup> According to the Italian scholar, “the Alawis may have created a State which can survive without them.”<sup>[126]</sup> However, the very survival of the only secular and semi-socialist left wing state in the region 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 was very favourable for Israel, but certainly some other factors might have been involved. In March 2000 during his meeting with US President Bill Clinton in Geneva, 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 it acquired in 1967 and Palestinian rights must be restored.<sup>[127]</sup> 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 few years of 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 balanced analysis deviating from the official mainstream narrative of the Middle Eastern events has become a major intellectual and moral challenge to any scholar or writer interested in this region. However, both the ongoing drama in Syria and the Russian relationship with this small, but culturally rich nation should not be left without our attention.

At the end of this article (August 2016) I have to admit that all of our hopes for peace in Syria have not come true and that there is ongoing fighting, especially in the Aleppo region, and unclear prospects for the future. However, the situation in Syria and the nature of the struggle has already submitted the country to deep and, as I believe, negative changes and transformations which might prevent any chances for a peaceful settlement that would be supported by the local population. According to a respected New York-based foreign affairs analyst, Joe Lauria, US policy on Syria with its obsession about overthrowing President Bashar Assad was based on assumptions five years out of date. He says, "it's a policy on Syria that is stuck in 2011. It's not the same country anymore. And it's not the same war."[\[128\]](#) In his view, "the conflict in Syria [has] long [since] ceased to be a popular uprising and instead is a war of foreign Islamists backed by the Gulf states, Turkey and the United States."[\[129\]](#) As I have already mentioned, British Syria expert and historian Helena Cobban expresses a similar opinion and indicates that even according to the spokesman for the US military's Operation Inherent Resolve "it is primarily the Nusra Front who holds Aleppo."[\[130\]](#) In addition, because the opposition groups fighting in Syria are deeply divided and often unstable, any negotiations with them might be both difficult to be achieved and their results are often uncertain. As Joe Lauria pointed out, "the jihadists' insurgency in Syria is a cesspool. There are about 1,500 different rebel groups, and only about 100 agreed to the [recent] ceasefire. Fighters regularly change sides. Many are foreign mercenaries who will fight for the highest pay."[\[131\]](#) The prospect for the Syrian people does not seem to be bright and even the survival of the nation as one entity is by no means certain.

In fact since the February 27, 2016 ceasefire and the ensuing withdrawal in mid March of part of the Russian forces from the country, anti-Assad rebels have made good use of the time, and with the help of Turkey and Saudi Arabia, largely overturned the previous strategic and territorial advantages achieved by the Syrian Arab Army.[\[132\]](#) The long disputed, in the West, supply of portable ground to air missile launchers was finally delivered to them and soon made a visible impact on the balance of power existing in the country. The Syrian government, which previously enjoyed unchallenged air power, no longer has that advantage.[\[133\]](#) During just one month it lost three combat planes that were shot down by the rebel forces in northern Syria.[\[134\]](#) The previous saturation bombing of the Islamic targets and the extensive air cover which was previously provided to its troops and its allies' ground operations now became impossible to be continued.[\[135\]](#) Consequently, both the Syrian Arab Army and its allies such as Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah have recently suffered heavy casualties, especially in the fighting in the south-western region of Aleppo.[\[136\]](#)

The growing human and material costs of the involvement in the war in Syria could not remain without an impact on the perceptions of the situation there by major protagonists in the acute crisis. Washington's War Party, feeling the new strength and a chance to win the war in Syria inspired 51 US State Department officials to sign a memo asking President Obama to launch air and missile strikes on the Damascus government of Bashar al Assad, calling this a "judicious use of stand-off and air weapons"[\[137\]](#) which "would undergird and drive a more focused and hard nosed US led diplomatic process."[\[138\]](#) On the Russian side there was no lack of voices of concern and even calls for a

withdrawal from the costly and risky Middle Eastern engagement.

The memo which might have been inspired by some people in the Obama administration in order to frighten and impress Russians and Syrians, at least for now remained without any practical consequences, and Patrick Buchanan, who is himself a well known traditional conservative politician and journalist asked: “Assume the US strikes break Syria’s regime and Assad falls and flees. Who fills the power vacuum in Damascus, if not the most ruthless of the terrorist forces in that country – al Nusra and ISIL? Should ISIL reach Damascus first, and the slaughter of Alavites and Christians ensue, would we send an American army to save them? Does it make sense then that we would launch air and missile strikes against a Syrian regime and army that is today the last line of defense between ISIS and Damascus?”[\[139\]](#)

However, the US government did not want to listen to the Russian pleas to persuade “moderate” opposition groups supported by Washington to separate from the al-Nusra Front[\[140\]](#) and not to ally with the groups which though they “accede to cessation of hostilities [and are getting support from the West and its Middle Eastern allies] when it suits them, ...pull out of these arrangements and then only to go back.”[\[141\]](#) Feeling desperate in view of the failure of his diplomatic efforts, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov asked, “Isn’t the US aware of what is going on? It’s indeed surreal how one chooses to see the “Nusra Front.””[\[142\]](#)

Having to face in Moscow an influential pro-American Liberal lobby, which since the beginning opposed any Russian intervention in the Syrian crisis[\[143\]](#) caused by the last months disenchantment of even those people who otherwise supported Putin[\[144\]](#) who became afraid of the possible cost of the Syrian intervention, the Russian government in order to achieve at least some political cooperation with the West avoided open criticism of the Americans’ role in Syria. However, recently Moscow has become less patient and finally, perhaps also under the Iranian influence, came to the conclusion that the Americans have been using “delaying tactics – presumably, hand-in-glove with Israel and Saudi Arabia – to buy time for Nusra to make some territorial gains by exploiting the Russian self-restraint.”[\[145\]](#)

While Teheran has always been suspicious about Western diplomacy and perceived the ceasefire in Syria as a “hoax and the US and its allies’ conspiracy to reverse the tide of the military balance in Syria which favoured Assad’s regime currently, by creating space for Nusra Front to operate without fear of Russian air strikes,”[\[146\]](#) Moscow had apparently trusted more its Western “partners” and persistently searched for their recognition and compromise.[\[147\]](#) However, in the view of the lack of positive outcomes of its long-term policy, by the end of June 2016 “it communicated to the Obama administration that it no longer will remain passive while the Nusra Front made territorial gains.”[\[148\]](#) Following that, Russian jets attacked the American backed Syrian opposition groups around Tanf in southern Syria bordering Jordan and Iraq. At that time there was no Nusra presence there and Washington strongly protested, but Moscow wanted to make a point that if the Americans can’t separate the moderate groups from the al Nusra Front, Russian jets also won’t distinguish between “good and bad targets.”[\[149\]](#)

As an expert Ambassador Bhadrakumar, already quoted by me, indicated, “beneath the veneer of the military campaign against terrorism, the geopolitical struggle in Syria is surging. The fact of the matter is that Russia-US ties are deteriorating,”[\[150\]](#) and the recent NATO massive military manoeuvres, “Anaconda”, on the Polish-Russian borders openly simulated a possible large scale conflict with



Russia. At almost the same time and in spite of all diplomatic efforts and favourable economic incentives, the European Union extended the economic sanctions against Russia for another six month period until the end of January 2017. The decision was motivated by the lack of implementation of the Minsk agreement and totally disregarded the much more negative role of the Ukrainian government.

[151] As Ambassador Badhrakumar has indicated, “on one hand, it is a singular success of US diplomacy that Russia-EU ties remain frozen and in quasi adversarial mode for the remaining period of the Obama presidency, which in turn, creates the backdrop for NATO to press ahead with more forward deployment closer to the Russian borders, while at the same time selectively engaging the Kremlin on issues of critical interest to Washington, such as the war against the Islamic State in Syria.”

[152] It is true that “Obama has proved to be hard as nails in his [anti] Russian policies” [153] but it is by no means certain that it has been either necessary or promised security and economic gains to the European nations associated with Washington, and the stability of the international system. Whatever the future of Russia might be, and this country might be even completely destroyed, conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen and a number of other places will continue. Multiple militia groups complicate attempts to end the violence in these countries, while young affiliates of the Islamic state in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) and Al Qaeda and other similar organizations who are devoid of better life perspectives spread insurgency and terror across the Middle East Africa and cities of Europe. There are now few agreed principles on which to build a comprehensive peace agreement, but negotiations may lessen the intensity of the conflicts. [154] The terrorist organizations with all their deeply-rooted and perhaps historically understandable hatred of the West could not be likely to play a positive role in the negotiations, and a possible fruitful cooperation with Russia on the present crucial problems would be not only possible but relatively easy to be achieved. The present existing Russian Federation is not the Soviet Union and it has certainly many common features and interests with the Western nations. Unfortunately, during the Obama presidency this old country has for a long time been submitted to the unprecedented campaign of threat and insult, the impact of which would not be easy to predict. The future of the old continent will certainly not be any better and a number of possible threats and challenges might be difficult to avoid. [155]

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[15] Op. cit., p. 153.

[16] Op. cit., p. 159.

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