

Syria-Russia Relations during the Syrian Crisis

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Abstract: *The outbreak of an armed conflict in Syria in 2011 sent shock waves not only throughout West Asia but around the world. This particular war engulfed not only domestic and regional forces but major world powers such as US and Russia also. This paper's main focus would be to explore and examine Syria's increasing closeness with Russia at the backdrop of the domestic crisis. The issue at hand seems important because although Syria shared favourable relations with the Soviet Union, the early 1990s did not help to forge robust relations with Russia but their relationship was rather ambivalent. Gradually, in 2000s closer relations were witnessed between them while Syria was facing increasing international isolation due to a variety of factors. The paper aims to understand deepening of relations between Syria and Russia at the backdrop of the Syrian crisis by taking into account the political, military and economic dimensions.*

1. Introduction

Syria has huge strategic significance in the West Asian region. It has been an important player in the regional issues. A spurt of debate arose worldwide as soon as the political upheaval took place in Syria in March 2011 regarding the future of the country. Much of the scholarship has thrown light on the causes of the Syrian unrest and Russia's unrelenting support towards the Bashar al-Assad's regime. Amidst this political unrest, the Syria-Russia relationship has reached new heights and is seemingly capable of affecting the future course of events. However, the war has dragged on for six years and still there is no solution in sight.

The spark of Arab Spring reached Syria's doorstep in March 2011 when peaceful protests were being organised against the Bashar al-Assad government with demands for some political and economic reforms. These protests took a different turn when government forces resorted to violent means to suppress the people. After that the law and order situation in the country soon became chaotic and a civil war gripped the entire country. The armed conflict in Syria is being waged between the Syrian government and opposition forces broadly comprising the Free Syrian Army, al-Qaeda affiliates, Sunni rebels, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, Islamic State and Syrian Democratic Forces. At present, the most pressing concern for the Syrian

government and its allies has been the issue to fight the Islamist rebels who are using brutal tactics to capture different areas. From the beginning of the conflict, the Bashar al-Assad regime has been declaring that the political unrest is the cause of terrorism perpetrated by the rebels opposed to the government and that they are receiving financial and military support from countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, US, Britain and France. The Western countries have labelled the opposition that they support as the 'moderate opposition' much to the chagrin of the Assad regime. Allies which are providing support to the Syrian government are Iran, Hezbollah, Russia and Shia militias (Barnard and Shoumali, 2015).

Syria is torn among various groups who are ruling different parts and the sovereignty of the country is highly threatened. There have been severe damage to the civil infrastructure and the economy is in shambles. The armed opposition groups, which have captured areas of vital economic interests, mainly oil refineries, are illegally using the natural resources to fund and sustain the conflict. There is a constant struggle among the various parties to the conflict to gain areas; killing and driving out civilians from their homes thereby creating a huge refugee crisis across West Asia and Europe (International Rescue Committee Report, 2015).

2. From an Ambivalent to a Robust Relationship

The disintegration of the Soviet Union proved to be a difficult phase for countries that had close relations with it during the Cold War. Initially, Syria was uncertain of its relations with Soviet Union's successor state, Russia. Hafez al-Assad considered the end of bi-polarity as a catastrophe which was to plague the Arab nations for years to come. US's unhindered hegemony and influence in world affairs in general and in the West Asian region in specific was a cause of grave concern for the Syrian leader. Assad realised that the need of the post-Cold War period was to make efforts to improve relations with the West as well as preserve close relations with Russia and erstwhile Soviet bloc countries (Hinnebusch, 2001:156).

Therefore, although Syria attempted to cooperate with US at the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and the Iraq-Kuwait War, its relations with Soviet

Union were never sidelined (Wallsh, 2013: 107-123). Syria was one of the first countries to officially recognise the Russian Federation in December 1991 and gradually mutual diplomatic visits took off between them from 1992. One common foreign policy shift both the countries had to undertake was to shed the anti-Western stance from their bilateral relations ((Kreutz, 2007: 27).

During the early 1990s, Russia was dealing with its domestic problems, mainly economic ones. It sought to formulate a balanced policy in its foreign relations with countries in West Asia and closer relations with Israel in the post-Cold War period was suggestive of this policy. Russia was aware of its rather weak position at the international level and that it could not afford confrontation with the US. Therefore, throughout the 1990s, Russia did not get actively involved in major issues of the West Asian region (Scheller, 2013: 201).

Relations began to show an upward trend when there was change in leadership in both the countries. Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin came to power around the same time in 2000. During that time both Syria and Russia were facing a troublesome relationship with the US. Syria was also experiencing a host of regional problems. Syria's international isolation due to its involvement in Lebanon and deadlock in the Syria-Israel track of peace process was putting huge pressure on its leadership. Russia under Putin was undergoing a foreign policy overhaul and charting out ways for a strong presence in West Asian region. This provided an opportunity for closer relations between Syria and Russia (Katz , 2006:53-62).

Bashar's 2005 visit to Russia cemented relations between both the countries. A number of agreements based on economy were also signed. One interesting fact during all these years was that political engagement between both the countries was minimal and not vigorous. Russia even forgave Syria 73 per cent of \$13.4 billion debt which the latter owed to the Soviet Union. Even military and economic relations received a huge boost during this visit. Since then, Syria-Russia relations have continued to get stronger over the years (Kreutz, 2007: 29).

3. Syria-Russia cooperation in the Political Sphere

The examination of Syria-Russia relations in the context of the civil war holds huge significance because of the fact that since the Cold War ended, Russia has not engaged in any conflict outside its

Soviet borders but this is the first time that such active involvement is being witnessed (Tsvetkova and Zverev, 2016).

Syria's trust on Russia that an outside intervention would not be preferred by its long-time friend was established strongly when the Arab league's Plan of Action of November 2011, one of the first resolutions charted out for the settlement of the crisis, received the support from Moscow. This resolution called for peaceful political transition in Syria through cooperation of all the parties to the domestic conflict. Another attempt for a settlement of political chaos in Syria was made by the Arab League which again ended unsuccessfully (Bridge, 2011). Russia has vetoed a few resolutions which seemed to send message regarding gross violations of human rights committed only on the part of the Syrian government. Russia's main concern has been to hold the opposition also responsible for bringing an end to the violence and armed attacks.

There have been at least three main negotiations round to resolve the conflicts-Action Group Conference, Geneva II and Geneva III under the aegis of the UN, US and Russia. At the Action Group Conference on Syria held in June 2012, it was agreed by all the parties to form a transitional government which would include Syrian government's members as well as member of opposition. During all these negotiations, stress was on all the parties to the conflict to abide by the Geneva Communiqué (UN News Centre ,2012).

The US has been severely criticizing the Bashar al-Assad regime and its allies throughout the crisis situation. In July 2012, after the first Geneva negotiations ended in a stalemate because of reports of renewed violence by the regime on rebel held city of Douma, US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton stated that the first precondition for peace talks should be Bashar's resignation from presidency. For Russia, Syrians themselves should exercise the right of choosing their political future and accordingly cooperate for the peace process to proceed towards a positive outcome. This supportive stance of Russia for the Syrian regime has invited criticism from many Western countries, especially US (Beaumont and Malik, 2012). Moscow in various instances from the beginning of the crisis made it clear that political transition cannot be imposed from outside thus making it clear that any external military intervention in Syria would lead to disastrous consequences, both domestic and regional.

Syria's alleged use of chemicals means to attack its rebels in August 2013 was hugely criticised. In response to the attack, the UNSC Resolution 2118 which was passed on 27 September 2013 urged Syria to implement the decision of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) for "expeditious and verifiable destruction of

Syria's chemical weapons". While emphasising the importance of the resolution, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov took the opportunity to point to the fact that the responsibility to get rid of such Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) was not the sole duty of Syria but also its neighbouring countries. He stated that chances of availability of such harmful weapons in the hands of non-state actors would be prevented only through cooperation among Syria and its neighbours (UN Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, 2013). The resolution was passed at such a time when Syria was suspecting the Western countries to take stringent measures against it because of the chemical attack which left hundreds dead. Russia soon entered into negotiations with US to put forward a framework for the destruction of chemical weapons stockpile in Syria (UN Report no.A/67/997-S/2013/553, 2013). Through this action of Russia, a possible armed intervention in Syria was evaded.

The Geneva II conference on Syria was held in January-February 2014. There were no positive outcome of the conference since both the government and the opposition could not come to equal terms to proceed with the agreements on Syria's political transition. Once again US Secretary of State, John Kerry resorted to anti-Assad stance. As a response to that, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov requested "all external players to encourage Syrians to reach an accord, to refrain – and to prevent the sides – from attempts to predetermine final agreements, from other steps capable of disrupting the negotiating process" before the conference was convened (Black, 2014).

The latest conference, Geneva III was supposed to be held in January 2016 but was suspended by UN Secretary General, Ban ki-Moon. This conference was called after the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) which has 15 countries as its members, decided in Vienna talks to resolve the conflict. All the members of the ISSG agreed that a national ceasefire had to be enforced simultaneously with a political transition process keeping in line with the Geneva Communiqué 2012 (Statement of the International Syria Support Group, 2015).

Moscow hosted the Syria-Syria dialogue talks between the Syrian government and the opposition twice in 2015. The first round of talks was held in January 2015. At the first meeting, the Syrian government and the opposition agreed to abide by a set of principles called Moscow principles which stressed on maintaining "Syria's sovereignty and unity, fighting terrorism, settling the crisis peacefully and politically, and rejecting any foreign

interference." Another such meeting was held in April 2015 but no agreement was reached between the groups to the conflict (Temmo, 2015).

The Islamic State made its way into the Syrian scene in 2014 and quickly captured huge areas along the Syria-Iraq border. As Syria's situation began deteriorating and its army was facing huge losses on ground during mid-2015, Russian diplomats launched tours of various countries in order to avoid a further deepening of problems. Russian government's main aim was to bring together the countries of the region which were against the Assad regime and broker a peace process to resolve the crisis. Therefore, visits by Russian delegations were paid to Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Oman during this time (Barnard, 2015). The Syria-Turkish border has been in the limelight due to the alleged flow of terrorists from Turkey. In the recent past, Turkey had shot down a Russian aircraft and tensions were high between both the countries. Moscow has led an initiative to mend relations with Turkey and also negotiating closing of the Syrian-Turkish border. The joint Russian-Turkish commission has been working towards formulating a strategy to detect trafficking of terrorists and stop weapons flow to Syria (H M, 2016).

Diplomatic visits between Syria and Russia increased sharply following the crisis. One such visit by Russian diplomats warrants special mention due to its significance in outlining and clearly emphasising the Syria-Russia relations in the present scenario. In November 2016, the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, Dmitry Rogozin along with Deputy Ministers of Defense, Foreign Affairs, Economic Development, Energy and Agriculture were received by Assad in Damascus. During the talks, historic bilateral relations between both the countries were discussed. The coordination between both the countries in making efforts to resolve the crisis, fighting terrorism and increasing trade and economic activities were mentioned. The Syrian government took the opportunity to state Russia as a 'great power' exemplified by its policies taken in relation to the war on terrorism by aligning itself in line with international law and issue of state sovereignty and right to self-determination. Assad specifically mentioned and expressed gratitude towards Russia for extending economic support to Syria thereby alleviating hardships faced by the Syrian citizens during the war and a period of "unjust sanctions" imposed by Western countries (Abdo Al-Ibrahim, 2016).

Both Syria and Russia are being accused by the international community of committing gross

human rights violations in the process of recapturing areas occupied by rebels through military means. Amid such accusations, Russia's support for Syrian government has not weakened and indeed has even risked its seat at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) (Balibouse, 2016). In October 2016, Russia was unable to garner enough votes and lost its UNHRC seat, a prestigious panel on human rights, because of these allegations (Roth, 2016). This move of Russia has again helped to bolster relations with Syria.

Since the beginning of the conflict, Russia has been making efforts to engage the Kurds to fight the Islamic State militants. Even though historically speaking, the Kurds have always been opposed to the Syrian regime but during the crisis they have not been in any military confrontation with the government. Bouthina Shaaban, Political and Media Advisor to the Syrian President went on to announce in February 2016 that the Kurds have been cooperating with the Syrian government through an agreement mediated by Russia. This cooperation among Kurds, Syria and Russia might prove to be helpful to put an end to the alleged transfer of weapons and infiltration of militants into Syrian territory from Turkey. However, Russia has not declared any military cooperation with the Kurds and has extended political support only. This prompted the Syrian Kurdish forces (Democratic Union Party) to open an office in Moscow (Drwish, 2016). The Kurdish forces' victory in Kobane against the Islamist extremist showed that they had to be included in the peace talks. Russia has urged the UN to invite the Kurdish forces to the intra-Syrian peace dialogue in the coming future (Wilgenburg van, 2016).

The Assad regime has been critical of the group called 'Friends of Syria' which is headed by US and its allies to coordinate with the opposition in Syria. It has been claimed numerous times by the Assad regime that the failure of cessation of hostilities should be attributed to the Syrian soil (Abdo Al-Ibrahim and Mustafa, 2016). The Obama administration's incoherent policy towards the Syrian crisis has drawn criticism from the Syrian government. Syria is aware of the fact that US could play a more assertive and a positive role in the civil war by bringing about a successful cessation of hostilities. The Obama administration's reluctance to get deeply involved in the war due to its past experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, has prompted Assad regime to think of US as an incompetent world power. The Syrian government has been pointing out the fact that US has failed to deliver its promise of separating the terrorists from moderate opposition (Heydemann, 2016).

Most importantly, in order to halt the illegal trading of oil and selling of cultural antiquities from Syria and Iraq by terrorists, Russia drafted UNSC resolution 2199 which was unanimously passed in February 2015. This was one of the most important steps taken by any country to cut off the financing sources of the terrorists creating havoc in Syria and Iraq. The resolution emphasizes the obligation of member states to take measures to prevent terrorist groups such as the Islamic State militants, al-Qaeda affiliated groups and the Jabhat Fateh al-Sham from indulging in any kind of illegal trade of oil, antiquities, donations etc. This is a binding resolution and the violation would lead to economic sanctions being imposed (UN Meetings and Press Releases, 2015).

4. Syria-Russia Military Cooperation

While addressing a Syrian delegation in Moscow in July 2013, Foreign Minister Lavrov categorically mentioned that the main objective of both the Syrian government and the opposition should be to cooperate and consolidate efforts to "remove terrorists and extremists from the country". He went on to state that even the international conferences held on the Syrian crisis should mainly focus on the problem of terrorism and develop measures to help implement the 2012 Geneva Communiqué (Introductory speech of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, 2013).

The US's constant demand for Bashar to step down from power has led the Syrian leader to compare the Syrian crisis with that of Ukraine. According to Assad, as he stated in an interview given to the TASS News Agency in March 2015, the Russian support against a military solution for the crisis has been held in high regards. Assad criticised the Western countries, specifically mentioning US, France and Britain of arming different parties to the conflict in Ukraine and pointed out that the same was happening in Syria. Assad is of the view that the Western governments are influencing the decisions of the opposition groups which are participants in the peace dialogue for the crisis (President al-Assad's Interview with the Russian Media, 2015).

Keeping in mind the inviolability of Syrian sovereignty and international law, Moscow announced its decision to carry out airstrikes against ground targets held by Islamic State militants in September 2015 after accepting Assad's formal request to do so (Astapkovich, 2015). It has been claimed by the Russian government that till mid-2016, they were able to destroy around 30,000 Islamic militant targets. They gave an estimate that as many as 500 cities and villages were liberated from the terrorists since

the beginning of airstrikes. Most importantly, many oil refineries which were held up by the terrorists were successfully liberated from militants (Guneev, 2016). Places that hold huge significance for the Syrian regime such as Latakia and Palmyra were recaptured through Syria-Russia military cooperation from the rebels. Palmyra's recovery from the rebels though Syria-Russia cooperation was hailed as a big achievement (Shaheen, 2016).

The post-Cold War created an imbalance in the West Asian region with the US having utmost influence there. The Tartous Port, a Russian naval facility in Syria is a remnant of the Cold War era which also signifies Russia's presence in the Mediterranean. The port holds huge significance for both the countries. After the Syrian crisis erupted, there have been reports of Russia planning to upgrade the port. Assad has welcomed the Russian government to expand and upgrade the facility (President al-Assad's Interview with the Russian Media, 2015). The media is rife with news that Russia has been supplying arms to Syria in huge amounts but according to the SIPRI Fact Sheet of March 2015, Syria's import of heavy weapons and military equipment decreased significantly in 2014. The data in the Fact Sheet shows that from 2010-2014, Syria is not among the top clients of Russian made military products (Wezeman and Wezeman, 2015). In October 2016, Admiral Kuznetsov, Russia's Soviet-era warship carrying 15 aircrafts was deployed at Syria's Mediterranean coast which might prove to be a significant addition to Assad government's strength to intimidate and challenge the opposition groups. The deployment of Soviet era warship is symbolic of a new confrontation emerging between Russia and US due to the Syrian crisis (MacFarquhar, 2016).

Putin announced in March 2016 that Russian contingent in Syria was being pulled out as its major objectives of fighting the terrorists had been largely met. This decisiveness of the Russian government to an extent impressed Syria for fulfilling its obligations within a given time period. This also reinstilled in Syria the belief that Russia was abiding with international norms and values while countering terrorism and avoiding meddling in internal affairs in another country to a great extent (H M, 2016).

A centre for intelligence sharing regarding the Islamic State terrorists has been set up in Baghdad. This centre has been set up by a coalition of countries namely Russia, Syria, Iran and Iraq who are cooperating towards defeating the plans of the Islamic State and to prevent its expansion. According to Assad, if this coalition fails to

achieve success, then West Asian region would experience further security related problems. Assad has been consistently criticizing the funding of moderate rebels by the Western countries, which according to him would eventually be destroyed by the coalition (R I Staff, 2015).

5. Economic Dimension

In war torn Syria, the economy is being badly hit. During the course of the six year conflict, Syria has called for closer economic ties with Russia. Syrian government has invited the Russian companies such as Gazprom and Lukoil to help rebuild and develop Syrian infrastructure, oil and gas pipelines. In order to cooperate in areas such as trade, energy and commerce, agreements worth billions of dollars have been signed since the beginning of the war (Khatib, 2016). As the airstrikes are beginning to show positive results and the Syrian army is gaining lost areas, the Assad regime is planning to reconstruct and operationalize power plants and oil fields destroyed in the conflict. A law has been passed at the parliament in 2016 allowing Russian companies to run the Syrian energy sector. The war has left Syria with a shortage of electricity for which fuel and oil is needed. Therefore, Russia is also likely to explore possibility of oil extraction in the Baniyas city located in the Tartous province which is known to be rich in natural resources and in other areas also (*The New Arab*, 2016). Syria had applied to be inducted as a member of a Free Trade Zone with Russia and negotiations were going on for almost two years. In November 2016, the proposal was accepted and a customs corridor has been signed for the trade of agricultural outputs between Syria and Russia (Ashawi, 2016). Syrian trade with Russia is witnessing a major increase in 2016. The Syrian government is planning to be able to be an industrial centre for Russian products in West Asian region. Russian companies are investing in the telecommunications and technologies sectors in Syria in a huge manner (Ammar, 2016).

The sanctions which have been imposed on Syria during the crisis by the Western countries have restricted certain business transactions and trade of Syrian products. At such a time a Russia-based bank, Tempbank has been accused of providing financial support to the Assad regime and hence, the US Treasury announced imposing sanctions on the bank. The Russian bank has also been accused of carrying out financial transactions with Syrian state oil company SYTROL (I S H , 2014). Most important of all, Syria has made a deal with Russia to buy one million tonnes of wheat to feed its citizens in the areas that are under government control. Due to the continued fighting and shortage of rainfall, wheat produce saw a major decline in 2016 (El Dahan, 2016).

6. Conclusion:

The domestic crisis has strengthened Syria-Russia relations to a huge extent. Russia's involvement in the negotiations at multilevel and bilateral platforms to initiate a constructive negotiation process to resolve the Syrian crisis has contributed in emboldening relations between the two countries. Moreover, territorial integrity, which is an issue of utmost importance at the moment for Syria, has received extensive support from Russia. Both the countries have the common objective of preventing any kind of threat from the Western countries which are allegedly trying to bring down the Syrian government and are calling for the ouster of Assad. Russia has not been explicit about Assad's future in the transitional government but has made it clear that Syria's political future has to be decided by Syrians themselves and intervention of outside powers would worsen the situation. The US's failure to distinguish between moderate rebels and other extremists has led Syria and Russia to cooperate and deal with the terrorism issue emanating from the armed opposition forces. The Obama administration's incompetency to put forth a concrete policy towards resolving the conflict and unwillingness to coordinate with Russia to strike terrorist targets have been the cause for deepening of Syria-Russia relations. The UNSC resolution drafted by Russia to cut the illegal funding of terrorist groups will prove to be beneficial for Syria.

In the post-Cold War period, this is the first time that Russia is actively getting involved in the affairs of West Asia. On various occasions, Syria's top government officials have acknowledged the cooperation that Russia is offering in order to put an end to the crisis. Throughout the crisis, Russia has challenged the US's policies towards Syria in various occasions and has been providing a security net for the Assad regime. Though Syria-Russia military relations date back to the Cold War era, Russia has refrained from providing heavy military weapons to Syria for the fear of those ending up in the hands of the terrorists. In the economic sector, Syria's engagement with Russian companies in different areas has increased over the years.

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