

# RETHINKING RUSSIAN MISSION IN SYRIA

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## Abstract:

Since the collapse of the USSR, Syria has remained to be center of Russian Middle East foreign policy regarding its economic and political ties. As a result of the Arab Spring, the Syrian regime and President Assad has shaken with the unrestrained uprisings and western sanctions and eventually crisis turned into a fierce civil war. From the inauguration of the crisis Russia has never altered its political view on Syria even though there were expectations to the contrary. Moscow officially remained calling for “No military intervention against Syria” and that’s why three times vetoed US resolutions concerning widening sanctions or allowing multilateral military operations. However, Russia claims that Moscow is not protective of Syrian regime or Assad instead prevents Syria to fall into a long-term civil war. On the other hand, Syria is one of the most crucial arms importer of Russia and hosting Russian naval base on its Mediterranean coast. In this paper it is aimed to analyze the Russian stable and consistent foreign policy on Syria and its reasons as well as latest Russian and US rising tensions.

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**Key Words:** Russian foreign policy, Syria, Middle East, Multipolarity

## Introduction

Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia paid attention not only on the former Soviet Union Republics and its diaspora, the Middle East has remained of substantial interest in Moscow. Russia has the largest Muslim population in Europe and wants to have good relations with the Islamic world.<sup>127</sup> Meanwhile for a long time Syria has remained one of the most independent countries from the West, particularly the US and has had close relations with Russia which was established during the Soviet Union. During the Cold War as a result of close relationship many Russians moved to Syria – intermarriages- and in return, many Syrian elites studied at top Russian schools such as Moscow State University and People’s Friendship University.”<sup>128</sup> Following the dissolution of the USSR, Chechen issue has emerged twice as a fundamentalist and a separatist movement in the southern border of Russia.<sup>129</sup> Thus, unremitting close relations with Islam world is crucial for Russia due to prevent the financial and political support for these fundamentalist Islamic movements in Russia as a whole.<sup>130</sup>

Ever since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Russia and the rest of the Western world has encountered many times in the international arena. Despite the fact that Russia has never changed its position from the beginning, the statements of Russian officials were occasionally acknowledged as compromising step, Moscow committed itself calling for single strategy: “No military intervention against Syria”. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has pointed out that Russia had many questions after the UN Security Council adopted the Libyan resolution which allowed military intervention to protect civilian lives and turned into Libya chaotic. Consequently Lavrov has described Russia’s position in the Syrian case as; “We are not protecting any regime” and opposed a Libya-style military

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<sup>127</sup> Kreutz, Andrej, “Syria: Russia’s Best Asset in the Middle East”, IFRI/NIS Center, Russie.Nei.Visions., No.55, November, p.5.

<sup>128</sup> Barshchevskaya, Anna, “Russia’s Many Interest in Syria”, Policy Watch 2023, 24 January 2013, p.1.

<sup>129</sup> Kreutz, *ibid*, p.5.

<sup>130</sup> Sharp, Jeremy, and Blanchard, Christopher M., “Armed Conflict in Syria: US and International Regime”, CRS RL33487, 21 August 2012, p.7; “In early 2012, US officials stated that the violence and disorder paralyzing Syria was creating opportunities for Al Qaeda operatives and other violent Islamist extremists to infiltrate the country and conduct or plan attack.”

intervention against the Syrian regime.<sup>131</sup> Syria was the most consistently pro-Soviet state in the Middle East until the mid 1990s and in the meantime it seems that still contains specialty for the Russian Federation.

### **Main Pillars of Russian Foreign Policy Towards Syria**

Afterwards Yeltsin inherited cold relations between Damascus and Moscow from the Gorbachev era and revived the close relationship that existed under Brezhnev. Russia always has separated its bilateral relations in the Middle East are regarding Israel and others. For instance Gorbachev refused to support Syria's objective of achieving strategic parity with Israel did not mean that Moscow was prepared to abandon its interests in the Middle East altogether. For this reason, the USSR continued to supply air defense systems to Syria.<sup>132</sup> Moreover in 1994 when Russian Federation was troubled with the transformation of its economy, Kremlin postponed Syria's 10 billion \$ debt and proposed import by some Syrian goods instead of paying.<sup>133</sup> Starting from 1998 Russia began to play more active role in the Middle East peace process. Primakov, then Russian Foreign Minister, remained pragmatic concerning the Israel and its neighbors.<sup>134</sup>

By coincidence, long time Syrian leader Hafez al-Assad died in the middle of 2000, during the first year of Putin's presidency and Vladimir Putin telephoned the new Syrian leader Bashar-al-Ashad, son of Hafez al-Assad and commemorated his father as "one of the most outstanding and distinguished leaders in the modern world", and "a friend of Russia who did so much for the development of Russian-Syrian cooperation."<sup>135</sup> At this point Kreutz describes Putin's Syria foreign policy as "preserving and if possible expanding Russian-Syrian relations in order to maintain positive aspects of previous Moscow-Middle Eastern involvement, and to promote Russia's image as a country friendly toward Islamic peoples".<sup>136</sup> In terms of economic ties, Syria is one of the significant market for Russia's arms sales and also shortly before the Syrian crisis, Gazprom prepared for the leading role in Syria's oil and gas industry.<sup>137</sup> Hence if Assad regime falls, Russia might lose its contracts as its was happened in Iraq and Libya before. Furthermore, former Russian President Medvedev made a noteworthy visit to Syria in May 2010 and also met with Hamas leader Khalid Mashaal. During the visit of President Medvedev, he stated that Hamas should be included in the Middle East process despite Israel's opposition to the Islamist movement and displayed Russian involvement in the Middle East crisis.<sup>138</sup>

Subsequently in the midst of the Arab Spring, starting from 2010, the uprising began to organize in some towns of Syria against the Assad regime. When protests reached Syria in March 2011, in the southern town of Deroa, the protesters called on Assad to reform not resign.<sup>139</sup> Nevertheless two years passed and unlike the Libyan, Egyptian or Tunisian case, the Syrian regime is still able to pay its military and civilian staff and it has also enough currency reserves<sup>140</sup> as well as an affiliation of Russian and Iranian aids. At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the US and EU have bolstered unilateral sanctions and tried to pass resolutions to deepen international pressures and have openly called for President Assad to step aside.<sup>141</sup> Moreover a multilateral intervention either led by NATO or by an Anglo-French-American-Turkish coalition appeared as an only solution<sup>142</sup> whereby Russia highly opposed to this option.

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<sup>131</sup> Middle East Online, "Russia Will Not Allow Libya-Style Military Intervention in Syria", 1 November 2011, <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=48833>

<sup>132</sup> Nizameddin, Tala, "Russia and the Middle East", C.Hurst & Co.Pub., 1999, p.160.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p.161.

<sup>134</sup> Ginat, Rami, "Syria and the Doctrine of Arab Nationalism: From Independence to Dependence", Sussex Academic Press, 2010, p.232.

<sup>135</sup> Kreutz, Andrej, "Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?", Greenwood Pub. Group, 2007, p.25.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, p.25.

<sup>137</sup> Barshchevskaya, ibid, p.2; "According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia accounted for 78% of Syria's weapons purchases between 2007-2012...Beyond weaponry, Russian companies have invested \$20 billion in Syria since 2009 according to the Moscow Times."

<sup>138</sup> Rawshandil, Jalil and Lean, Nathan Chapman, "Iran, Israel, and the US: Regime Security Vs. Political Legitimacy", ABC-CLIO, 2011, p.76.

<sup>139</sup> Phillips, Christopher, "Syria's Bloody Arab Spring", LSE IDEAS Special Report, May 2012, p.37.

<sup>140</sup> Chatham House, "The Political Outlook For Syria", MENA Programme: Meeting Sumamry, January 2012, p.4.

<sup>141</sup> Nerguizian, Aram, "Instability in Syria: Assessing the Risk of Military Intervention", CSIS, 13 December 2011, p.ii.

<sup>142</sup> Weiss, Micheal, "Safe Area For Syria: An Assessment of Legality, Logistics and Hazards", Strategic Research & Communication Centre, Transitional Period Policy Research, 2011, p.7.

Syria is Russia's last remaining robust Arab ally in the Middle East and Syria is hosting a Russian naval base that is located Syrian Mediterranean coast Tartus constructed in 1971. Russia's naval presence in Tartus might have three aims: Russian support for Assad; score of NATO or Western powers with encirclement of a regional ally; and a message of any campaign would return Western-Russian relations to Cold War lows.<sup>143</sup> Despite the central role that Syria played in Russia's foreign policy, Kremlin mostly concentrated on diplomacy instead of the use of force. Hence Russia provides Assad a diplomatic umbrella in the UN, protecting it from resolutions and preventing a possible international intervention.<sup>144</sup> Additionally in order to prevent fall of the Assad regime, Russia, together with China, vetoed three times –October 2011, February 2012 and July 2012- UN Security Council resolutions targeting multinational military intervention against Syria.<sup>145</sup> Although Russia has refused to back any UN Security Council resolution threatening sanctions or military force against the Assad regime, Moscow has supported a UN-led process to establish a political and diplomatic solution in Syria and received visiting representatives of Syrian opposition delegates over the two years.<sup>146</sup> In addition to that Russia worries that a post-Assad Syria will be dominated by Islamists, who would encourage Islamist movements in southern regions of Russia.<sup>147</sup> Currently on the one hand, Iran<sup>148</sup> and Russia actively support the Assad regime and provide aid; on the other hand, the US, Europe, regional countries such as Turkey and Qatar provides aid to opposition groups in Syria.<sup>149</sup>

In the middle of the 2012 the hopes of falling of Assad began to drop off because it was connoted that the regime will survive in the long-term and will fight for it. Despite opposition in Syria receives financial and arms aid, the Assad regime has the advantage of military capability and may be able to fight for a couple of years more unless there is a massive uprising in Damascus and Aleppo, or an intervention. Notwithstanding Russian support for the Syrian existing regime has been an obstacle to international action.<sup>150</sup> For this reason some claims that Russia should be persuaded that continuing support of the Assad regime is dangerous for Russia due to reason of collapse of the regime and create a political vacuum in Syria that would not serve Russia's foreign policy interests at all.<sup>151</sup> In other words, Russia's objections to regime change in third countries such as Syria are rooted not only in principles of state sovereignty and noninterference but also about what happens after the fall of the regime.<sup>152</sup>

### **Is Russia Giving Up on Syria?**

For Moscow, Syria events portrayals different meanings than Tunisia, Libya or Egypt due to reason of Damascus close relationship with Moscow in last six decades. Both countries have depth historical relations and mutual benefits which are important in terms of continuity and durability. Therefore Syria has been considered as an ally of Moscow in the Middle East since the days of the Cold War and in return until the collapse of the USSR, Damascus had kept its loyalty to Moscow. After the recovery of administration in Moscow with by Putin's authoritarian presidency, Russia's primary connection option was again Syria among the other Middle Eastern countries. The place of the Middle East in the foreign policy of the Kremlin had remained similarly even during the President Medvedev and then the same approach continues with the coming of President Putin for the third time. When we look at the importance of Syria in Moscow detailed:

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Geifman, Anna and Teper, Yuri, "Russia's Declining Influence in the Middle East", BESA Center Perspectives, Paper No.194, 24 December 2012, p.2.

<sup>145</sup> Committri, Camilla, "When Domestic Factors Prevail Uoqn Foreign Ambitions: Russia's Strategic Game in Syria", IAI Working Papers 12, 16 October 2012, p.7.

<sup>146</sup> IISS Strategic Comments, "Russia's Syrian Stance: Principles Self-Interest", Vol.18, Comment 31, September 2012, p.1.

<sup>147</sup> Byman, D., Doran, M., Pollak, K., and Shaikh, S., "Saving Syria: Assessing Options For Regime Change", Brookings Institute, MEMO No.21, March 2012, p.3.

<sup>148</sup> Clawson, Patrick, "Post-Assad Syria: Opportunity or Quagmine?", Naitonal Defense university, Strategic Forum, SF No.276, Febuary 2012, p.6.

<sup>149</sup> Byman, Doran, Pollak, and Shaikh, *ibid*, p.5.

<sup>150</sup> Chatham House, "The Political Outlook For Syria", MENA Programme: Meeting Sumamry, January 2012, p.2.

<sup>151</sup> Bellin, Eva and Krause, Peter, "Intervetnion in Syria: Reconciling Moral Premises and Realistic Outcomes", Brandeis University, Middle East Brief No.64, June 2012, p.5.

<sup>152</sup> Trenin, Dmitri, "The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy", The Carnegie Papers, February 2013, p.6.

- Russia's Syria policy is linked with that Syria that is positioned in the strategic heart of the Middle East, and that Moscow's links to the Assad family go back to four decades.<sup>153</sup>
- Russia has a commercial supremacy in the region in terms of arms trade and in consequence Moscow does not want to lose this supremacy. Syria is among the largest purchasers of Russian weapons and currently two countries have ongoing contracts that amount of \$3.5 billion.<sup>154</sup> Alternatively foreign arms supplies to the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad had increased dramatically over the period 2007-2011, compared to the five previous years. In March 2012 the SIPRI report indicated that Syria's imports of major weapons were increased by 580% between 2002 to 2006 and 2007 to 2011 which 78% of arms were Russian supply.<sup>155</sup>
- In the post- Cold War era Russia commenced to follow a new concept of foreign policy which is called "multipolar world order" policy in order to regain a global power status and balance US unipolar actions mostly by diplomatic efforts. Russia was opposed both the Iraqi war and also military intervention in Libya and made efforts to prevent US military operations in the region by perpetrating diplomatic tools in international organizations. In this sense preventing a foreign military intervention in Syria by diplomatic efforts serves for Russian multipolar foreign policy approach.
- Another reason is a population of Circassians that are living in Syria who still hold direct ties to their relatives in the Northern Caucasus. Syria is home to approximately 150,000 Circassians about half of whom live in Hama province who retain their linguistic characters from Adyge in the Northern Caucasus. The Circassians are considered as a warrior class and participated in many Syrian military campaigns and police actions over the decades. They are secular and supporters of the Assad regime and generally before the outbreak of violence in Syria, fared well with the other faiths found in the country.<sup>156</sup> Consequently the security of Circassians in the region has crucial importance for Russia. In this respect, the main problem for the Circassians in Syria is post-Assad era.
- After the "color revolutions" in the former Soviet region, Russia was alarmed that Moscow was losing its influence area and/or revolutions were spreading in Russia. From the Moscow point of view Arab Spring events were similar to "color revolutions" in 2005-2006 and incited by foreign forces instead of local society. Therefore Russia took the position in support of the status quo in order to prevent civil wars."<sup>157</sup>
- Finally Russia focused on its fight against Islamists in its southern underbelly in Chechnya and Dagestan, also worries that a post-Asad Syria will be dominated by Islamists, who would be hostile to Moscow.<sup>158</sup> Hence according to the UN Refugee Agency that "Chechens Are Among Foreigners Fighting to Overthrow Bashar al-Assad". In addition according to an AFP source in Riyadh, there are at least 6,000 foreign militants fighting in Syria, under the flag of al-Qaeda. The most important point is most of the fighters comes from some Arab countries but there are also some from Chechnya.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>153</sup> Trenin, Dmitri, "Why Russia Supports Assad", Carnegie Endowment, 9 February 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/02/09/why-russia-supports-assad/9j2x>

<sup>154</sup> St. Petersburg Times, "Lavrov In Syria To Strongly Back Assad", 10 February 2012, Issue 1964, [http://www.sptimes.ru/index.php?story\\_id=35142&action\\_id=2](http://www.sptimes.ru/index.php?story_id=35142&action_id=2)

<sup>155</sup> Parfitt, Tom, "Syria: Dramatic Increase Reported In Foreign Arms Supplies to Assad Regime Between 2007-2011," The Telegraph, 19 March 2012,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9153514/Syria-dramatic-increase-reported-in-foreign-arms-supplies-to-Assad-regime-between-2007-2011.html>

<sup>156</sup> Karasik, Theodore, "Explaining Russia's Policy Towards Syria", Eurasia Review, 9 December 2012, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/09122011-explaining-russias-policy-towards-syria-analysis/>

<sup>157</sup> Trenin, Dmitri, "Why Russia Supports Assad", Carnegie Endowment, 9 February 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/02/09/why-russia-supports-assad/9j2x>

<sup>158</sup> Byman, D., Doran, M., Pollak, K., and Shaikh, S., *ibid*, p.3

<sup>159</sup> Fernandez, Yusuf, "Is the Syrian conflict a danger for Northern Caucasus?", Press TV, 8 January 2013,

<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/01/07/282288/syria-militants-endanger-russia-security/>, Vatchagaev, Mairbek, "Chechens Are Among Foreigners Fighting to Overthrow Bashar al-Assad", Eurasia Daily Monitor, VOL.9, Issue 219, 30 November 2012,

[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_ttnews%5Bttnews%5D=40185&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=3d9a50dff6161d2dbbc6f101bf94d5db](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Bttnews%5D=40185&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=7&cHash=3d9a50dff6161d2dbbc6f101bf94d5db)

After Houla events on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012 in which 108 persons were killed, the US hoped that it would be a “turning point” in Russia’s reluctance to act against ambiguity of Syria. Despite the fact that Kremlin supported a UN Security Council resolution condemning Syria for using artillery in the massacre in Houla but this was most probably because Russia did not want to be seen as defending an atrocity.<sup>160</sup> Based on Russian experience in Chechnya and Beslan, Kremlin strongly believes that radical Islamists and outraged rebels, including Al-Qaeda militants, are more capable of carrying out such atrocities than the regimes’s security services or the army.<sup>161</sup>

Russia is giving an important examination to become a global power in Syria Crisis. In this context, while the Kremlin supports the Assad regime in Syria, ideally it looks like Russia is against the West and policy of West. Meanwhile, Russia aims to protect its own interests in Syria by conducting talks with the key actors for the post-Assad period. For instance Mordechai Kedar who has connection with Russia pointed out that the division of Syria is necessary including 14 administrative districts that reflect the demographic distribution of the population.<sup>162</sup> According to Kedar the partition of Syria can only be completed by a historic alliance with Russia and Syria. Another important point is the Russian naval existence in the Mediterranean Sea by the way Tartus naval base in Syria. For this reason, Russia wants to use every opportunity about the Syrian crisis in order to keep its both diplomatic, economic and military existence. Thus Russia negotiates with opposition members (the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces) and calls for a agreement between the opposition groups and Assad regime.<sup>163</sup> Consequently Russia spearheads the idea that the Syrian people must be allowed to choose their destiny without foreign pressure or interference which means “Syria's future belongs to its people”.<sup>164</sup>

#### **Analysis of Four Months In Order to Understand Russian Foreign Policy**

**October 2012:** On the night of the 10th of October on suspicion of carrying military cargo, Turkey forced to land a civilian aircraft to Esenboga Airport in Ankara –capital city of Turkey- by the force of the military jets, which was flying from Moscow to Damascus. In Russia it was averred that the passengers on board of the aircraft were forced to sign a paper to say that “the aircraft wasn't landed by Turkish warplanes but did an emergency landing” and it was also claimed that four passengers were beaten.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore Russia asserted that the cargoes of the aircraft which were seized during the search of Turkish teams were not weapons, rocket and similar munitions. It was stated in the Russian Kommersant Newspaper that technical devices carried on the plane were taken for the anti-aircraft radar system, belonging to the armed forces of Syria and they had no need for a special report.<sup>166</sup> As a result, albeit relations were stressed because of the aircraft crisis, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov reduced the strenuous tension and made a statement that “Syrian aircraft which was landed in Ankara that Turkey in this case behaved according to Chicago Convention.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Satter, David, “Russia and Syria”, Foreign Policy Research Institute, E-notes, June 2012, <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2012/06/russia-and-syria>

<sup>161</sup> Kozhanov, Nikolay, “Russia’s Response to the Massacres in Syria”, Policy Watch 1951, 13 June 2012, p.2.

<sup>162</sup> Kedar, Mordechai, “Mordechai Kedar: The Division of Syria”, The Jewish Press, 21 February 2012, <http://www.jewishpress.com/indepth/analysis/dr-mordechai-keidar/mordechai-keidar-the-division-of-syria/2012/02/21/>

<sup>163</sup> INTERFAX, “Russia Confirms It Wants Regular Contacts With Syria Opposition Coalition”, 2 February 2013, <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=392977>, Barry, Ellen and Fahim, Kareem, “Russia Calls for Meeting With Syrian Opposition”, New York Times, 28 December 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/29/world/europe/russia-urges-assad-to-negotiate-with-his-opponents.html>, 28.1.2012, Al-Arabiya, “Russia 'Actively' Persuading Assad Regime to Talk to Opposition: Lavrov,” 28 December 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/28/257452.html>

<sup>164</sup> RIA NOVOSTI, “Russia Rules Out Libyan Scenario in Syria”, 9 December 2012, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20121209/178024186.html>, RT, “Syria's Future Belongs to Its People - Russian Premier”, 6 November 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/syria-russia-medvedev-conflict-047/>

<sup>165</sup> RT, “Turks Force Syrian Crew to Sign 'Emergency Landing, No F-16s' Statement –Witnesses, 11 October 2012, <http://rt.com/news/plane-passenger-reaction-140/>, INTERFAX, “Moscow Demands Turkish Explanations of Incident With Syrian Plane Carrying Russians”, 11 October 2012,

<http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?pg=6&id=367227>, RT, “Syria Accuses Turkey of 'Air Piracy', Demands Return of Seized Cargo”, 12 October 2012, <http://rt.com/news/syria-accuse-turkey-cargo-195/>

<sup>166</sup> RIA NOVOSTI, “Russian Press at a Glance, Friday, October 12, 2012”, <http://en.rian.ru/papers/20121012/176570910.html>

<sup>167</sup> Cumhuriyet, “Rusya: Türkiye'nin Buna Hakkı Var”, 25 October 2012, <http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/?hn=371772>

**November 2012:** After the meeting in Cairo about Syria with Lakhdar Brahimi, the special envoy of the United Nations and the Arab Countries, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that “the West has achieved success in making decisions at the UN Security Council for further aggravation of the situation in Syria and the creation of conditions for the exchange of power.”<sup>168</sup> Afterwards Lavrov, during the meeting with the Egyptian Foreign Minister Mohamed Kamel Amr also announced at the press conference, that about Syria, “Russia doesn’t focus on specific person, only cares about the people in Syria”.<sup>169</sup> Lavrov also said that Russia would continue cooperation in military and technical field with Damascus but they are not in an effort to support any power in Syria.<sup>170</sup> During this period, upon the issue of arms sales between Russia and Syria on the agenda again, Lavrov announced that “we provide weapons to Syria does not mean that we support President Bashar Al-Assad, but for our commitments in Soviet period”.<sup>171</sup> However, Russia organized meeting with Syrian opposition leaders as well as supplying military aids to President Bashar Al-Assad. Then Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov met in Turkey with representatives of Syria Opponents Outside Syria to discuss ways to the resolution of the situation in Syria.<sup>172</sup>

**December 2012:** On 3 December 2012, after President Putin's visit to Turkey, in the national press and the Western news sources have taken place some news that Turkey and Russia agreed to Assad’s leaving from Syria.<sup>173</sup> However, the news, based on a report released in the New York Times suggested that Turkey and Russia have agreed to Assad’s going, are starting to take place quickly.<sup>174</sup> Following this news, Russian press did not receive a confirmation of the reports and did not come an official statement from the Kremlin. In the meant time, Russian Pravda published an article of Lyuba Lulko of “Has Putin yielded Assad to the West of Turkey?” Lulko stated in the article that Russian interests, which Turkey is threatening to destroy are arms agreements, military base and the Russian nationals, who are located in Syria. Moreover Lulko emphasized that instead of establishing a patriot defense system against Syria, Turkey exceedingly needs to establish this system against Kurdish guerillas.<sup>175</sup> After Putin's visit it was also claimed in the western press that Russia will give asylum to Assad. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov responded to these claims by stating that “such a right has not been granted to Assad” and added that he cannot say to Assad that Russia has been withdrawn, it’s not because of Assad is indispensable, it’s because Syria is as long as a democratic and free country, it is not very important, who manage it.<sup>176</sup>

**January 2013:** Russia sent three warships led by Admiral Kuznetsov to the Mediterranean Sea in order to send the message that the Russian Navy after twenty-year break, was back into international waters.<sup>177</sup> In order to explain the arrival of Russian warships Damascus made a statement

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<sup>168</sup> Rusya'nın Sesi, “Lavrov Batıyı Suriye Hükümetini Devirmeye Çalışmakla Suçladı”, 5 November 2012, [http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2012\\_11\\_05/Lavrov-batiji-Suriye-hukümetini-devirmeye-chalishmakla-suchladi/](http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2012_11_05/Lavrov-batiji-Suriye-hukümetini-devirmeye-chalishmakla-suchladi/)

<sup>169</sup> CNNTURK, “Rusya: "Suriye'de Bir İsme Odaklanmıyoruz", 5 November 2012, <http://www.cnntrk.com/2012/dunya/11/05/rusya.suriyede.bir.isme.odaklanmıyoruz/683320.0>,

<sup>170</sup> Star Gazetesi, “Rusya: Suriye’de Silahlı Çatışmanın Tarafı Olmayız, 28 November 2012, <http://haber.stargazete.com/dunya/rusya-suriyede-silahlı-catismanın-tarafı-olmayız/haber-707584>

<sup>171</sup> RIA NOVOSTI, “Russian Weapons Supply To Syria Fulfills Old Contract – Lavrov”, 5 November 2012, [http://en.rian.ru/mlitary\\_news/20121105/177201574.html](http://en.rian.ru/mlitary_news/20121105/177201574.html)

<sup>172</sup> Rusya'nın Sesi, “Rusya Dışişleri Bakan Yardımcısı İstanbul’da Suriyeli Muhaliflerle Biraraya Geldi, 20 November 2012, [http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2012\\_11\\_20/Rusya-Dishishleri-Bakan-Yardimcisi-istanbulda-Suriyeli-muhaliflerle-biraraya-geldi](http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2012_11_20/Rusya-Dishishleri-Bakan-Yardimcisi-istanbulda-Suriyeli-muhaliflerle-biraraya-geldi)

<sup>173</sup> T24, “Putin'den Erdoğan'a: Esad Kalmakta Kararlı, Gitmeye Kim İkna Edecek?, 4 December 2012, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/putinden-erdogana-esad-kalmakta-kararlı-gitmeye-kim-ikna-edecek/218867>

<sup>174</sup> Türkrus, “NYT'nin İddiası: "Türkiye ve Rusya Anlaştı, Moskova Esad'ı İkna Etmeye Çalışacak”, 6 December 2012, <http://www.turkrus.com/haber-hatti/58745/nytnin-iddiasi->, HaberTürk, “Putin Esad'a 'Git' Diyecek”, 5 December 2012, <http://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/800721-putin-esada-git-diyecek>, Dünya Bülteni,

“Putin'nin Ziyaretiyle İlgili Yapılan Yorumlar, 4 December 2012, <http://www.dunyabulteni.net/?aType=haber&ArticleID=237446,4.12.2012>, Forbes, “Is Russia About To Ditch Syria? The Truth Is That It May Not Matter”, 4 December 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/markadomanis/2012/12/04/is-russia-about-to-ditch-syria-the-truth-is-that-it-may-not-matter/>

<sup>175</sup> Lulko, Lyuba “Has Putin Yielded Assad to the West in Turkey?”, Pravda, 4 December 2012, [http://english.pravda.ru/russia/politics/04-12-2012/123023-putin\\_turkey-0/](http://english.pravda.ru/russia/politics/04-12-2012/123023-putin_turkey-0/), Любовь Люлько, Путин в Турции: Запад и Катар не у дел, <http://www.pravda.ru/world/asia/middleeast/04-12-2012/1137074-visit-0/>

<sup>176</sup> RT, “Russia Will Not Grant Asylum to Syrian President – Lavrov”, 27 September 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/russia-syria-lavrov-rose-assad-115/>

<sup>177</sup> Trenin, Dmitri, “The Mythical Alliance: Russia’s Syria Policy”, The Carnegie Papers, February 2013, p.12.

that “the Russian navy will patrol to protect the waters of Syria.”<sup>178</sup> On the other hand, Moscow announced that they are ready to help starting a dialogue between the management of Syria and the opposition. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich highlighted that Russia's position has not changed, to put an end to conflicts in Syria speeches about the importance of the Declaration of Geneva should be converted into practical measures as soon as possible.<sup>179</sup> One of the most important developments in the month of January is the news that Russia evacuated its citizens, located in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov announced about the issue that Moscow does not think to reduce the number of personnel at the Russian Embassy in Damascus and did not evacuate its citizens in Syria.<sup>180</sup> Lavrov, on the other hand, drew attention to that the opponents of Syria to topple Assad follows the wrong way and to continue in this manner in the event of incidents more and more people will die.<sup>181</sup> Finally in January 2013, Russia has performed the largest exercise in the last twenty years in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea<sup>182</sup> in order to give a message that the Russians are in the Mediterranean again.

It is known that, from time to time Russia comes together with the opponents not only in Moscow but also in Syria and the aim is not to foment Assad regime but to prepare for the future. Not to mention that Russia benefited from the student exchange agreements between the two countries since 1960. Within the scope of the exchange programs, Russia welcomes many Syrian students in Moscow. Among these students there are also young people from Committee of National Cooperation. These young people were interviewed with Lavrov on November 29 in 2012 and during the meeting they stated that Russia should not be next to the regime.<sup>183</sup> Indeed, the committee, with the aim of achieving reconciliation with Assad in Russia, is working to obtain a place in Moscow in the post-Assad term. This initiative made by Moscow in the field of education in the post-Assad term will be useful in terms of location in the region of Moscow.

### **Moscow-Washington Tension: A New Cold War or a Partnership in Syria?**

There has been a tension between Moscow and Washington that has been on the ascent since 2012. Upon the increased tension after the issuance of the Magnitsky Decision by the US Senate in December 2012, the Russian authorities announced that they will respond to the USA in all their announcements and recognized Magnitsky Act as exigent issue. Russian President Putin has pointed that the US does not have the right to make ethical decisions that would affect the legal system of Russia since the US also has human rights violations problems such as Guantanamo and Abu Ghaib.<sup>184</sup>

Russia responded to the “Magnitsky Act” as a reprisal by accepting the “Dmitriy Yakovlev Act” which banned the US citizens to adopt orphaned children in Russia in 21<sup>st</sup> of December 2012. While Dmitriy Yakovlev Act does not only predict the banning of adopting orphaned children in Russia by the US citizens but also the citizens of countries that violate the rights of Russians and prohibits the activities of the NGOs that are financed by the USA and constitute a threat to the Russian interests within the country. Within this framework, this act envisions the prohibition of the entry of those in Russia who violated the rights of Russians or got involved in crimes against the Russian

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<sup>178</sup> TRT, “3 Rus Savaş Gemisi Akdeniz’de”, 23 November 2011, <http://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/3-rus-savas-gemisi-akdenizde-17330.html>

<sup>179</sup> Rusya’nın Sesi, “Rusya, Suriye Diyaloguna Yardım Etmeye Hazır”, [http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2013\\_01\\_10/Rusya-Suriye-diyaloguna-yardim/](http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2013_01_10/Rusya-Suriye-diyaloguna-yardim/)

<sup>180</sup> Rusya’nın Sesi, “Lavrov: Suriye’deki Vatandaşlarımızın Tahliyesine Henüz Başlamadık”, 23 January 2013, [http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2013\\_01\\_23/Lavrov-Suriyedeki-vatandaslarimizin-tahliyesi/](http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2013_01_23/Lavrov-Suriyedeki-vatandaslarimizin-tahliyesi/)

<sup>181</sup> Rusya’nın Sesi, “Lavrov Suriye Muhaliflerinin Esad’ı Devirmek İçin Yanlış Bir Yol Katettiklerini Düşünüyor”, 23 January 2013, [http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2013\\_01\\_23/Lavrov-Suriye-muhaliflerinin-Esadi-devirmek-yanlis-yol/](http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2013_01_23/Lavrov-Suriye-muhaliflerinin-Esadi-devirmek-yanlis-yol/), Karpukhin, Sergei, “Russia Denies Plans For Mass Evacuation From Syria, Defends U.S. Adoptions Ban”, 23 January 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russia-defends-adoption-ban-denies-plans-for-mass-evacuation-from-syria/2013/01/23/6d2436e0-6559-11e2-85f5-a8a9228e55e7\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russia-defends-adoption-ban-denies-plans-for-mass-evacuation-from-syria/2013/01/23/6d2436e0-6559-11e2-85f5-a8a9228e55e7_story.html)

<sup>182</sup> RIA NOVOSTI, “Russia ‘Flexes Muscles’ in Mediterranean Amid Syrian Crisis”, 20 January 2013, [http://en.rian.ru/military\\_news/20130120/178894932/Russia-Flexes-Muscles-in-Mediterranean-Amid-Syrian-Crisis-----html](http://en.rian.ru/military_news/20130120/178894932/Russia-Flexes-Muscles-in-Mediterranean-Amid-Syrian-Crisis-----html)

<sup>183</sup> World Time, “Russia and Its Syrian Debacle: When the Enemy of My Friend Becomes My Friend”, 14 December 2012, <http://world.time.com/2012/12/14/russia-and-its-syrian-debacle-when-the-enemy-of-my-friend-becomes-my-friend/>

<sup>184</sup> Telegraph, “Vladimir Putin Backs Plan to Make US Adoptions From Russia Illegal”, 20 December 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/9758327/Vladimir-Putin-backs-plan-to-make-US-adoptions-from-Russia-illegal.html>

citizens and closing down their companies in Russia.<sup>185</sup> After the act Russia classified the NGOs that receive foreign aid as “foreign agents”<sup>186</sup> asked USAID which had been operating in Russia for 20 years and which accused of intervening in the politics and trying to affect the election results to stop its activities in Russia in September 2012 as of 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2012.<sup>187</sup> Therefore Russia liaised USAID activities with US intelligence services. On the other hand there are other events that raised the tensions between Russia and the US in January 2013:

1. The Jewish Chabad-Lubavitch Hassidic movement whose center is in the US has sued the Russian government for the relocation of the “Schneerson Library” which was moved to Russia during the World War I and kept in the Lenin Library since 1918, and the Federal court that oversaw the issue in the USA decided that the Russian Government should pay 50 thousand dollars for each day that it does not relocate the library and Moscow announced that its response will be very harsh.<sup>188</sup>
2. Russian Premier Dimitriy Medvedev signed the decree that ends the Security and Drug Traffic Control treaty signed between the US and Russia in 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2002.<sup>189</sup>
3. Russia’s UN Permanent Representative Vitaly Churkin announced that Russia demands the explanation of the information concerning the supply of 20 tons of weapons to Libya from Qatar with the aid of the US during the peak of the Libyan crisis from Washington.<sup>190</sup>
4. Russia announced that it will stop the import of meat from the US as of 11<sup>th</sup> of February 2013 and this sanction will be for the long term.<sup>191</sup>

As a matter of fact, there are also developments that constitute a contradiction with these tensions in the bilateral relations between the US and Russia. On November 2012, before the US elections, the name of John Kerry passed as a preferred candidate in the Kommersant Newspaper for the Minister of foreign affairs and there were expressions by an anonymous ministry staff concerning Hillary Clinton as “over-ambitious and aggressive”.<sup>192</sup> In consequence, Moscow announced that Russia hope to enter more friendly relations with the US and to improve the relations that had been going sour in the recent years after the appointment of John Kerry as the minister of foreign affairs. The fact that a candidate supported by Russia despite the tension might be regarded as an important development for Syria, Iran, and even the Asia Pacific region.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is obvious that Russia considers the post-Assad period in order not to be excluded in the process as in the case of Libya. Although it seems as if Moscow did not change its stance concerning Syria, Russia also continues talks with the key actors for the post-Essad period. In this respect, it can be assumed that the tension between Moscow and Washington is a distraction policy for the agreement of two countries on Syrian crisis. Trenin rightly underlines the fact the main disagreement between Russia and the rest, including United States, Turkey and Arab countries was that Russia insists that Syria is up to the Syrians themselves and outsiders should abstain from interfering or from sanctioning Damascus.<sup>193</sup> Still, Russia has a range of interests in Syria itself: a

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<sup>185</sup> Rusya’nın Sesi, “Rusya’yı Korkutmayın, Rusya Hiçbir Şeyden Korkmaz”, 23 December 2012, [http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2012\\_12\\_23/Rusyayi-korkutmayin-Rusya-hichbir-sheyden-korkmaz/](http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2012_12_23/Rusyayi-korkutmayin-Rusya-hichbir-sheyden-korkmaz/)

<sup>186</sup> RIA NOVOSTI, “NGO Law Comes into Force in Russia”, 20 November 2012, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20121120/177597400.html>

<sup>187</sup> HaberTürk, “Rusya USAID’e Kapıyı Gösterdi”, 20 September 2012, <http://www.haberturk.com/dunya/haber/777950-rusya-usaida-kapiyi-gosterdi,20.09.2012>

<sup>188</sup> INTERFAX, “Schneerson Collection Cannot be Handed Over to Private Hands, Outside Russia - Culture Ministry”, 17 January 2013, <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=10207>, Türkürs, “Yahudiler ABD’de Dava kazandı, Rusya’ya Her Gün 50 Bin Dolar Kutsal Kitap Cezası”, 18 January 2013, <http://www.turkrus.com/haber-hatti/59309/yahudiler-abdde-dava-kazandirusyaya-her-gun-50-bin-dolar->

<sup>189</sup> RIA NOVOSTI, “Russia Scraps Deal on US Crime-Fighting Aid”, 30 January 2013, <http://en.rian.ru/politics/20130130/179117712/Russia-Terminates-Anti-Crime-Cooperation-Deal-With-US-----.html>

<sup>190</sup> Türkürs, “Rusya, ABD’den Libya’ya Silah Satışı Konusunda Açıklama Bekliyor”, 30 January 2013, [http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2013\\_01\\_30/Rusya-ABDden-Libyaya-silah-satisi-aciklama/](http://turkish.ruvr.ru/2013_01_30/Rusya-ABDden-Libyaya-silah-satisi-aciklama/)

<sup>191</sup> Food Safety News, “Russia to Ban U.S. Meat Over Ractopamine Residues This Month”, 1 February 2013, <http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2013/02/russia-to-ban-u-s-meat-over-ractopamine-residues-this-month/#.UQ6-sx02nkZ>

<sup>192</sup> Telegraph, “Russia Wants John Kerry, Not Susan Rice as US Secretary of State”, 8 November 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/us-election/9663613/Russia-wants-John-Kerry-not-Susan-Rice-as-US-Secretary-of-State.html>

<sup>193</sup> Trenin, Dmitri, *ibid*, February 2013, p.19.



naval base located in Tartous, large arms market; commercial activities such energy contracts; an ally government; and a large number of Russian nationals.<sup>194</sup> Russian unobstructed foreign policy approach commenced in June 2011 with the statement of Russian Deputy Ambassador to the UN, Alexander Pankin as; “the current situation in Syria, despite an increase in tension and confrontation, does not present a threat to international peace and security...A real threat to regional security, in our view, could arise from outside interference in Syria’s domestic situation”<sup>195</sup> and did not alter until today.

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<sup>194</sup> IISS Strategic Comments, “Russia’s Syrian Stance: Principles Self-Interest”, Vol.18, Comment 31, September 2012, p.3.

<sup>195</sup> Khlebnikov, Alexander, “Why is Russia Standing by Syria?”, Telaviv Notes, Vol.5, No.18, 26 September 2011, p. 4.

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