Russia’s Support for al-Asad’s Syria: Reasons Old and New

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The Syrian mass protests, which began in March 2011, have passed the one-year mark, with the country not being any closer to peace. In light of the international condemnation of the human rights violations committed by the Syrian regime, Russia’s stance on the issue is noteworthy. Russia vetoed two Western-backed UN Security Council resolutions authorizing sanctions against Syria on 5 October 2011 and 4 February 2012. Not only did Moscow continue to support the Syrian regime, but it also developed its own rhetoric regarding the Syrian conflict, which is very different from the Western discourse. Why does Russia support the Syrian regime? I argue that in addition to the ‘old’ economic and military reasons for Russia to ally with Syria, the Syrian protests, or rather the international community’s interest in them, identified new political motives for the Kremlin to stand by Damascus.

Economic motives are chief among the commonly cited explanations for Russia’s adamant support of Syria. Syria has been increasing Russian arms imports since 2005, when Russia wrote off 73% of Syria’s 13.4 billion USD Soviet-era debt, and by 2011 was Russia’s fifth biggest weapons buyer with contracts up to 3.5 - 3.8 billion dollars.¹ According to the recent report of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Syrian arms acquisition increased by 580 percent from the 2002-06 period to the 2007-11 period, with Russia supplying 78 percent of Syria’s arms imports in the last five years.² Another economic reason to support Bashar al-Asad’s regime is the large presence of Russian business in Syria, also since the 2005 breakthrough. In 2009, Russia’s investments in the country reached 19.4 billion USD. As the instability within the country halts production and threatens future contracts, Russia seeks to protect its economic interests by endorsing the system, which opened up new economic opportunities for its companies in the first place.³

The Tartus naval station forms the backbone of Russia’s military rationale for supporting Syria. In 2008, Syria offered Russia the Soviet-era port in Tartus, which Russia accepted, triggering speculations about the relocation of Russia’s mighty Black Sea fleet to Tartus. It must be pointed out that the Tartus port is the naval maintenance and supply station, and not a naval base. In 2008, it only had one fully operational dock, yet reconstruction has been in progress ever since.⁴ Although three Russian ships, led by the military cruiser Admiral Kuznetsov, briefly visited Tartus in December 2011, as of March 2012 no Russian warships were present in the Syrian waters, and Russia’s designs for the Tartus station remain unclear.⁵

The military and economic benefits from the cooperation with Syria were evident to the Kremlin long before 2011, and they are doubtlessly important in explaining Russia’s support for Syria today. The Syrian conflict, however, added further political incentives for Moscow to back Damascus.

Firstly, Russia’s demonstrable resistance to the European and the U.S. pressure is aimed at the domestic audience. The protests against United Russia, the ruling party, that erupted following the legislative elections in December 2011 and presidential elections in March 2012 demonstrated the fragility of the party’s public appeal. Nationalist, anti-Western rhetoric is an excellent way to appeal to the agitated public. Russia’s rhetoric about the Syrian opposition is telling in this respect. Since August 2011, Russia has been urging the Syrian opposition to

¹ Oleg Nekhai, ‘Russia Will Continue Arms Sales to Syria’, The Voice of Russia (6 December 2011).
⁴ Bassel Oudat, ‘A Place under the Sun’, Al-Ahram Weekly, Issue No. 915 (September 2008).
⁵ Ministry of Defence, ‘Nikakikh rossiiskikh boevykh korablei, vypolniaiushchikh zadachi u beregov Sirii, net’ (19 March 2012).
‘distance themselves from the extremist elements’, and Dmitry Medvedev openly called some of the anti-government forces in Syria ‘terrorists’. Such marginalization of the Syrian opposition is aimed at the Russian public: firstly, to embed the negative connotation of the term ‘opposition’ in the public discourse, in light of Russia’s own oppositional protests; and secondly, to remind the domestic audience of the alleged threat of terrorism, a threat that secured the Russian President-elect’s early political legitimacy back in 1999.

Secondly, the Syrian crisis is Russia’s chance to come out as an ardent supporter of the non-intervention principle. The idea of Western governments authorizing a military embargo and then invading a sovereign country is unacceptable to Moscow. Russia does not want to see any of its big arms buyers and allies fall. Russia was too weak to shield Milosevic’s Serbia in 2000, and not invested enough to protect Saddam’s Iraq in 2003 and Qaddafi’s Libya in 2011, but al-Asad’s Syria, which in the eyes of the international community is already seen as Russia’s ally, is another case. Moscow may see it as a final test to prevent the entrenchment of the ‘Libyan scenario’ in the international practice. More importantly, each intervention sets up a dangerous precedent. Russia is surrounded by former Soviet republics, some of which are hardly democratic, or popular at home. The prospect of Western military interference in the ‘near abroad’, or, perhaps, one day in Russia itself, is daunting. Therefore, the Russian non-interventionist stance on Syria, above all else, is an investment into the future.

Thirdly, Russia’s stance on Syria, as unpopular as it may be among some in the West, bolsters the image that Russia cultivates for itself. It wants to be seen as a great Eurasian power, which although associated with the West, makes its own political calls. By pointing at the ambiguity of military interventions in international law, Russia stresses that, unlike others, it plays ‘by the rules’, preferring regional and multilateral ‘soft power’ mechanisms to interventions. In the Syrian situation, Russia endorsed a greater regional involvement by voicing support for expanding the mandate of the monitoring mission of the League of Arab States. It also supported multilateral and non-coercive efforts to end the crisis by strongly backing Kofi Annan’s mission to Syria. In a further bid to improve its image as a benevolent global power, Russia is emphasizing its humanitarianism. It donated a million Swiss francs to the Syrian mission of the Red Cross and dispatched 80 tons of tents, blankets and food to the afflicted areas, calling itself the ‘first country to deliver humanitarian aid to Syria’.

Finally, Russia’s outspoken support for al-Asad’s regime elevated its own perceived importance as a great power. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia’s influence in the Middle East was circumscribed. The close working relationship with Syria was one of its few assets, which gained Russia a place in the Diplomatic Quartet but failed to translate into diplomatic victories or broader regional influence. The Syrian protests finally put the Russian-Syrian connection in the international spotlight. In January 2012, Russia’s Foreign Ministry promoted Moscow as the place for negotiations between the two sides. The offer was not accepted but it may have revealed Russia’s ambitions: if it were to persuade the Syrian regime to negotiate, or even resolve the crisis, it would greatly boost its own international position. Moscow stands by Damascus partially because by supporting Syria, Russia matters again.

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7 Russian President’s Office, ‘Dmitry Medvedev’s Interview to the Euronews TV Channel’ (9 September 2011).
11 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ‘O dobrovol’nom vznose Rossiiskoi Federatsii v biudzhet Mezhdunarodnogo Komiteta Krasnogo Kresta (MKKK) v sviazhi s situatsiei v Sirii’ (5 March 2012).
Russia’s support for the current regime in Damascus is multilayered. Some reasons are old, and the others crystallized during the Arab Spring. It seems though that Russia’s stance on the Syrian uprisings may have less to do with the actual situation in Syria than with Russia itself.

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