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The Russian Intervention in Syria  
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**Keywords:** Syrian civil war, Russian military intervention, third-state intervention, Middle East, unipolarity, multipolarity, proxy war, security, energy, armaments.

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## Abstract

The Syrian civil war, from its onset, was converted into a proxy war. The third-parties' intervention in favor or against the Assad administration and the UN's peace efforts failed to end the war. The unstoppable spread of the Islamic State (IS) and the Syrian loss of its own territories led Russia to upgrade its military presence in favor of the Syrian government, from indirect involvement to a direct military intervention in 2015, the first one outside the borders of the former Soviet Union. Russia's offensive operation intended to challenge the US's unipolarity and to prevent the IS's spread in the Russian territory. For Russia, Syria was the foothold to become an indispensable actor in the Middle East and to expand into new markets in the region. Russia accomplished a military operation in favor of its ally by restoring sovereignty in a large part of Syria and by eliminating IS. Thus, it expanded its sphere of influence in the Middle East and gained a more substantial presence in the international community. The Russian intervention in Syria was a critical factor for the shift from unipolarity to multipolarity in the Middle East and in the international balance of power.

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## Introduction

Russia supported the Syrian government from the beginning of the civil war in 2011 and defended it in the UN Security Council against Western countries, which were instead promoting a regime change. In 2015, Russia intervened militarily in the conflict, with the dispatching of a formidable set of bombers and fighters of the Russian Air Force, engaging in a war outside the borders of the former Soviet Union for the first time since its dissolution.

The central research question of this study is: what were the main motivating factors behind Russia's military involvement in the Syrian civil war? More specifically, which were Russia's geopolitical, military and economic aims that led to the upgrading of its military intervention in 2015? What was the logic, the intentions and the desired outcomes of this decision? What were its facilitating factors? In conjunction with this primary goal, the essay examines the impact of the Russian intervention on its bilateral relations with Middle East and Western countries, and its broader footprint in the Middle East.

The essay analyses the reasons and the outcome of the Russian involvement in the Syrian war and especially the high-profile intervention in 2015. Moreover, the essay provides an overview of the impact of this engagement, in an attempt to confirm whether Russian foreign and defense policy was indeed successful in pursuing its proclaimed aspirations. The research focus on third-state interventions and content analysis has been utilized by comparing, combining, analyzing and synthesizing primary sources, such as formal announcements and statements, as well as academic papers and books, along with journalistic articles and official spokesmen's interviews.

The first chapter presents the literature on motives, type, duration and outcome of third-party interventions. The second chapter is an overview of the Syrian civil war and of how third-parties, and in particular Russia, got involved and affected the duration and the outcome of the war. The third chapter focuses on the reasons and aims of the Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war, in an effort to shed light upon its actual motives and expectations. The fourth chapter analyses the impact of the Russian intervention and the post-war new order in the Middle East.

Finally, the conclusions are presented in the final chapter, where the theoretical frame of third-party interventions and the study of the Russian foreign policy are utilized in order to point out that the Russian plan had been implemented and its initial aims had been fulfilled. Russia achieved to expand its sphere of influence in the Middle East and to secure its national interests.

The main difficulties during the preparation of this essay were the lack of knowledge of Russian language, which was a barrier for the in-depth understanding of the Russian foreign policy, and the absence of historical distance from the ongoing Russian intervention.

## 1. Third-State Interventions in Intrastate Wars

### 1.1 Civil wars and third-state interventions

Interstate wars are wars between states, whereas intrastate<sup>1</sup> or civil wars are usually between an established government and an opposition group within the same state. Since the end of World War II, intrastate conflicts have gradually become the dominant form of armed conflicts, while interstate wars are decreasing.<sup>2</sup> The rise of civil wars is related to the creation of weak states after WWII. Weak states are structurally vulnerable to civil wars, as they cannot effectively control their territory and their opposition is usually fragmented with divergent goals (Hironaka, 2005, pp.150-152). Intrastate wars are asymmetrical wars between two disparate adversaries; the established government has access to resources and information while the opposition does not (Gent, 2008), whereas despite the absence of state armed forces and infrastructure, opposition groups are usually more flexible with quicker responses than governments because of the states' bureaucratic inefficiencies (Thyne, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> Data based on the Correlates of War dataset that classifies civil wars as conflicts in which over a thousand war-related casualties occur annually, while UCPD classifies intrastate conflicts with over 25 war-related casualties annually.

<sup>2</sup> Graph of armed conflicts by conflict type and year (1946-2020): [https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/charts/graphs/pdf\\_21/armedconf\\_by\\_type.pdf](https://ucdp.uu.se/downloads/charts/graphs/pdf_21/armedconf_by_type.pdf), *Upsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)*, [Accessed 29 July 2021].

Although civil wars take place within the state, many of them have been internationalized through third states' involvement. 71% of civil wars since the end of WWII has been supported by an external power, while in almost half of all civil wars support has been given to both sides of the conflict (Hironaka, 2005, pp.130-131). Third states are not only superpowers, such as the US and Soviet Union until its collapse, but also former colonial powers (UK and France), regional powers (Russia, Iran, India, Turkey) and neighboring countries (Hironaka, p.131). Apart from third states, international organizations and non-state actors intervene in civil wars (UN, NATO, IS, private companies). Because of the large proportion of third parties' intervention in civil conflicts and the severe consequences of a civil war itself, recent scholarship focuses on various issues, such as motives, type of intervention, duration, and outcome, regarding third party intervention before the outbreak of a civil war and during it.

## 1.2 Time, motives and type of third-state intervention

A third party can intervene during an ongoing war but it can also affect the outbreak of the war itself (Thyne, 2006; Gleditsch, 2007). According to Thyne, during an intrastate dispute, both the government and the opposition group bargain their positions in order to find a peaceful equilibrium to settle their dispute as the armed conflict is costly. When a third state sends a non-verifiable and non-reliable signal (called "cheap signal" by the author, e.g., a statement of support), it may introduce uncertainty into the intrastate bargaining and therefore the likelihood of a war is increasing. This is because the government is better informed than the opposition (informational asymmetries) or the opposition is more flexible and efficient to respond than the government (bureaucratic inefficiencies) or the opposition leaders expect benefits from staging a rebellion even if the probability of winning is low. (Thyne, 2006). Likewise, according to Gleditsch (2007), transnational ethnic, political and economic linkages influence the risk of a civil war. The risk of a civil war is higher in countries with the following characteristics: ethnic groups with transnational linkages and potential external support, or neighboring authoritarian regimes with lower constraints to intervene, or neighboring countries with low trade interdependence.

During an ongoing war, some states are more likely than others to intervene (Carment and James, 2000) depending on domestic and external factors, such as their institutional arrangement (instrumental factor) and ethnic composition (affective factor), and their transnational, ethnic, cultural, post-colonial, economic and/or geopolitical ties. The more authoritarian and ethnically homogenous a state is, the more likely it is for it to intervene and vice versa (high levels of political institutionalization and ethnic diversity decrease the likelihood). The state's power and its capability for intervention also affect the likelihood of an intervention in a civil war.

Although third parties usually invoke humanitarian concerns, they more often than not intervene in a civil war in order to satisfy their own objectives, which are usually exogenous to the war itself (Cunningham, 2010, pp.115-116). An intervention is an opportunity for international and regional powers or alliances to either preserve their status or expand their sphere of influence. The politico-economic motives include control of energy and trade routes (or the deterrence of new ones), looting of valuable natural resources, arms trade profiteering and development of new markets. Neighboring states often enter into civil wars too, in order to control further externalities of the war such as fleeing of refugees, regional political disorder and economic instability. Moreover, a third-state may intervene in a neighboring civil war in order to control its own domestic insurgents who have resorted there (Hironaka, 2005, pp.140-142).

In the case of an already internationalized civil war by a third-party intervention, the decision of another third-party to intervene is a response to similar or adversarial geopolitical interests. According to the actor-centric approach, the probability of a third-party intervention in favor of one side increases when a rival third-party has already supported the other side (Findley and Teo, 2006). As expected, the probability of a third-party intervention in favor of the government increases when an allied third-party has already supported the government. However, the expected positive correlation between allied third-parties is not confirmed when an allied third-party has already supported the opposition. In this case, the probability of a third-party intervention in favor of the government increases when an allied third-party has already supported the opposition.

When a third party decides in the first place to engage in an intrastate conflict, it can do so either directly, with its military forces, or indirectly. Direct military intervention is a visible aggressive action compared to indirect intervention that seems milder and more legitimate. Indirect intervention is divided into two categories: proxy war, defined as “directing the use of force by a politically motivated local actor to indirectly influence political affairs in the target state” (Grow 2019, pp. 2-3), and the provision of aid resources, such as diplomatic support and financial and military aid (e.g., weapons, bases, training). The main difference between the two categories of indirect intervention is not the means but the ability to control the use of the provided resources by the local agent. Consequently, a proxy war is more likely to control the outcome of the conflict, while providing aid resources is usually less effective. The decision among the three levels of involvement depends on the third-party’s power, its capability for cooperation with local actors, and the legitimacy and long-term costs of a full-scale military invasion in relation to the benefits.

### 1.3 How third-state interventions affect the duration and the outcome of a civil war

The next question that arises is whether an intervention prolongs or shortens an intrastate war. Third-party interventions and counter-interventions tend to prolong the expected duration of a civil war, regardless of the time and the type of intervention (military or economic), while an intervention in support of one of the intrastate parties (biased intervention) is more likely to shorten the expected duration of a civil war compared to an intervention that does not take sides (neutral intervention) (Regan, 2002). Interventions tend to extend the duration of a civil war because third-party states shoulder lower fighting costs and thus have less incentive to negotiate than intrastate actors. Even if they do negotiate, negotiation becomes more complicated as there is an additional set of demands on top of the two intrastate adversaries (Cunningham, 2010).

The outcome of a war is either a negotiated settlement or a victory on behalf of the government or the opposition group and usually depends on whether the interveners act in favor of one party or not. A third-party biased intervention increases the likelihood of a military victory and a negotiated settlement and, therefore, decreases the duration of the war, while a third-party balanced intervention decreases the likelihood of a negotiated

settlement and, therefore, increases the duration of the war (Balch-Lindsay et al. 2008). The outcome of a war is also affected by the determination of a third party to resolve the civil war. If a third party has an interest in securing peace settlement, its cooperation with a domestic actor can influence the cooperation of the intrastate adversaries. More specifically, consistent third-party strategies that signify determination are an effective condition for achieving changes in domestic cooperation (Gleditsch and Beardsley, 2004).

Lastly, a biased third-party intervention can have different outcomes from government-biased or opposition-biased interventions. An opposition-biased intervention increases the likelihood for the opposition group to win, while a government-biased intervention does not have such an effect (Gent, 2008), due to the asymmetry of power between the intrastate adversaries, provided that a government does not need external help to confront a weak or fragmented opposition group. However, a strong opposition group escalates and complicates the war and, therefore, a government-biased intervention cannot reverse the situation against a strong opposition. Sullivan and Karreth (2015) draw a different conclusion by separating strong opposition with an equal or superior military capacity from strong opposition with a weak military capacity. They argue that government-biased armed interventions can be effective only if the fighting capacity of the opposition forces are equal to or exceed that of the state. In this case, opposition forces, which have access to heavy weaponry, shift from unconventional military strategies (e.g., guerrilla warfare) to conventional military strategies and thus their military strength can be addressed by a government-biased military intervention.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, a government-biased intervention is not effective in the case where the government cannot defeat a military weak opposition.

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<sup>3</sup> Third-states' conventional military forces cannot confront a guerrilla war as they lack the local knowledge and contacts within the domestic population. On the contrary, when third-states' conventional military forces fight against an opposition with conventional warfare methods, which cannot hide out, their operations are more effective.

## 2. Syria: From proxy war to the Russian direct military intervention

### 2.1 The civil war in Syria

The Arab Spring started from Tunisia and spread throughout the Arab countries in 2011. Although the Tunisian and the Egyptian regimes collapsed within a few days, the Syrian one endured. On the one hand, the Syrian uprising reflected the anger against the authoritarianism of the Bashar Al Assad regime, the sectarian cleavage between the Alawite government and the Sunni majority, and the retreat of the welfare state. On the other, the Syrian government, backed by its loyal armed forces, confronted the uprising with a carrot and stick policy,<sup>4</sup> while its opposition was totally fragmented with divergent goals. As a result, the social unrest failed to overthrow Assad, while the moderate opposition (secular and moderate Islamist) failed to find a peaceful equilibrium with the Assad administration to settle their dispute. Thereafter, the condition in Syria became more complicated due to the state's structural vulnerabilities.

According to Hironaka, weak states, which have been created after the WWII, are structurally vulnerable to civil wars as they cannot effectively control their territory and their opposition is usually fragmented with divergent goals and, thus, these states are magnets for third-party intervention (2005, pp. 136, 150-152). In the case of Syria, although the Assad regime seemed to be robust, it had built-in vulnerabilities related to its formation by the Western imperial imposition after the WWI. Thus, the formation of an “artificial” state created a national identity that competes with trans-state identities (Hinnebusch, 2019). Syria was created neither by a nationalistic revolution (e.g., Turkey) nor by a socialist revolution (e.g., USSR), but as an arrangement between the Western powers for the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire<sup>5</sup>. This structural vulnerability came to

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<sup>4</sup> The Syrian regime had achieved national cohesion and legitimacy by diachronically endorsing the pan-Arabic identity and by maintaining a social protection net during economic liberalization, contrary to Egypt and Tunisia which had already moved to neoliberal models backed by International Financial Institutions' adjustment programs. The Syrian regime on the one hand used savage repression, while on the other, it lifted the emergency law in 2011 and made constitutional amendments to political pluralism (multi-party system) and religious freedom and, also, set a limit of terms for presidency in the constitution of 2012: The constitution of Syria in English: [http://sana.sy/en/?page\\_id=1489](http://sana.sy/en/?page_id=1489) [Accessed 27 July 2021]

<sup>5</sup> Syria and Lebanon (1923-1945) were under French Mandate, while Palestine (1923-1948) Transjordan (1921-1946) and Iraq (1922-1932) were under British Mandate.

the surface when the social contract broke.<sup>6</sup> Kurds struggled to build a unified Kurdish State, Salafists envisaged a Caliphate beyond state borders and the Muslim Brotherhood wanted to imitate its success in Egypt.

## 2.2 Third-party intervention in the Syrian war

At the beginning, the dispute was asymmetrical, as the government had the monopoly of violence. Later, however, the “cheap signal” of the West in defense of the democratic rights of the opposition, which encouraged the latter to expect foreign protection, introduced uncertainty into intrastate bargaining for a peaceful settlement (Thyne, 2006, Hinnebusch, 2019). Simultaneously, transnational groups were militarily supported by proximate states and non-state actors (Turkey, Gulf countries, jihadist groups). The Western encouragement of the opposition in combination with the military support due to transnational, ethnic and political linkages (Gleditsch, 2007) escalated the conflict into a proxy war. When the opposition was armed, the Syrian government lost its monopoly of military power and, thus, conducted a counter-insurgency, backed by its regional allies (Iran, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiites), the so-called “Axis of Resistance”.<sup>7</sup> Under the conditions of a civil war, the most powerful and radical powers emerged and prevailed. This was the case of the Jihadists (Ahrar Al-Sham, Al-Nusra) and particularly the Islamic State (IS) that envisioned a different model for society from the one that already existed (Brumberg, 2014, p.35). A further rise of violence from both sides and their proxies mobilized third parties beyond the Middle East.

In the beginning, the US and Western public discourse supported the democratic rights of the opposition against the authoritarian regime and tried to create an anti-Assad front, while the US provided political, diplomatic, and material support to the opposition forces (Rumer, 2019b, p.7). On the contrary, Russia defended the legitimacy of the government

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<sup>6</sup> The main factors that broke the social contract in Syria, were the government’s use of neoliberal tools upon workers and peasants, that created poverty, unemployment and social exclusion, in combination with the repression of civil rights, the overconcentration of power and the alienation of the Baath party from society.

<sup>7</sup> The US invasion in Iraq in 2003, which opened the door to the Iranian influence in Iraq, and the Hezbollah’s victory over Israel in 2006, backed by Iran, led to the formation of the “Axis of Resistance” (Mohseni and Kalout, 2017). The “Axis of Resistance” is still a political-security alliance mainly among Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiites against Israel, NATO and Saudi Arabia.

and blamed the opposition as being foreign-inspired (Rumer, 2019b, p.8). In the same way, Russia provided support to the Assad government. China was in favor of Syria's sovereignty and its territorial integrity. Both Russia and China vetoed Western-drafted UN Security Council resolutions in 2011 and 2012 and promoted a joint effort with the US to remove chemical weapons from Syria in 2013 in order to prevent a punishment of the Assad regime from the UN. Meanwhile, in March 2013, IS occupied Raqqa and since then its spread was unstoppable, occupying territories in Iraq and Syria, from Mosul to Aleppo. In response, the US raised their level of involvement and launched air-strikes against IS in September 2014.

The involvement of the US, regional powers, proximate states, non-state actors and the UN escalated and prolonged the Syrian war, as interventions and counter-interventions tend to prolong civil wars (Regan, 2002). In Syria, the counter-intervention by Iran, Hezbollah and Russia put pressure on the opposition while the opposition-biased intervention by the US, the West, Gulf countries and Turkey pressed the Assad government. Each side believed that it had the power to win the war without compromise. Therefore, the UN "balanced intervention" did not achieve to broker a compromise settlement and consequently prolonged the civil war (Hinnebusch, 2019; Balch-Lindsay et al. 2008). Moreover, third-actors had independent agendas from the intrastate actors in Syria and, thus, the war resolution became more complicated and prolonged (Cunningham, 2010). The multiple veto-players in Syria and the shifting nature of the Syrian conflict into an international war with divergent goals extended the duration of the Syrian war (Cunningham, 2013).

### 2.3 The Russian direct military intervention in Syria

In 2015, four years after its beginning, the war escalated. In May 2015, the IS seized Palmyra, some days later Al-Nusra Front massacred villages in North-West Syria, and at the same time the Assad government was losing ground. Meanwhile, at the diplomatic level all peace efforts had failed.<sup>8</sup> Under these circumstances, Russia was prepared to intensify its intervention: in August, Russia and Syria signed a treaty envisaging the creation of a Russian air-base in Latakia (Khmeimim) while in the end of September 2015, Russia, Iraq,

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<sup>8</sup> UN-led Geneva II International Conference on Syria, held in February 2014, and two Russian-led rounds of peace talks between the government and the opposition, held in Moscow in 2015.

Iran and Syria set up a 'joint intelligence center' in Baghdad. On 30 September 2015, Russia began its air campaign on the side of the Syrian government upon an official request of the latter. The direct military intervention of Russia, without a corresponding response on behalf of the US and its allies, was a turning point for the evolution of the war. What distinguished the Russian intervention from the opposition-biased one is that Russia was determined to intensify its intervention in order to prevail in the war, whereas the opposition-biased third-parties did not attempt a direct intervention. The combination of the Russian direct intervention and the pro-regime ground forces, facilitated by Iran, turned the scale in favor of the Syrian government.

After driving IS out from Palmyra, on 14 March 2016, Putin declared the withdrawal of most of the Russian forces from Syria (Guardian, 2016). During the first phase of the intervention (from 30 September 2015 until the ceasefire of 27 February 2016),<sup>9</sup> Russia accomplished two goals: it deterred a military Western-backed change of regime and reinforced its geopolitical role in Syria (Crisis Group, 2016). Although Putin made a withdrawal announcement, Russian military operations continued. On 11 December 2017, Putin announced to the Russian armed forces the beginning of their withdrawal to their permanent bases in Latakia and Tartus (Washington Post, 2017). Meanwhile, Russian and the pro-Assad forces captured Aleppo, Dayr-Az-Zawr, Homs and Mayadin, while Russia initiated the Astana Peace Process with Iran and Turkey in Kazakhstan. During the second phase of the Russian military intervention (03/2016 – 12/2017), Russia accomplished its declared goal to defeat terror groups operating in Syria and in particular IS, and also managed to establish a hegemonic diplomatic role in the area. By 2017, the Syrian government had reconsolidated its control over a large part of the country, as 73% of the Syrian population lived under Syrian government control and less than 1% under IS<sup>10</sup> (Hinnebusch, 2020).

According to Balch-Lindsay et al. (2008) a third-party biased intervention increases the likelihood of a military victory and a negotiated settlement whereas a third-party balanced intervention decreases the likelihood of a negotiated settlement. Indeed, the UN's balanced

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<sup>9</sup> The Security Council of the UN unanimously adopted Resolution 2268 (Cessation of Hostilities in Syria)

<sup>10</sup> 17% under Turkish control, 10% under Syrian Democratic Forces (Kurds).

intervention in Syria perpetuated the civil war, as it failed to broker a settlement. On the contrary, the Russian government biased intervention had a catalytic effect on the salvation of the Syrian government. Although the Syrian opposition was fragmented, it had already been backed by external forces with heavy weaponry. According to Sullivan and Karreth (2015) government-biased interventions are effective when the fighting capacity of the opposition forces are equal to or exceed that of the state. In Syria, the opposition forces were challenging the government armed forces since 2014. However, the counter-intervention of the government's allies reinforced the military capacity of the government. In particular, the Russian military intervention was the determinant factor to turn the scale in favor of the government. Without a government biased counter-intervention in Syria, opposition forces would probably have prevailed and without the Russian intervention the war would probably have further escalated beyond the Syrian borders.

Ten years after the beginning of the war, Syria has passed its main war-fighting phase, but there are still a lot of unresolvable issues. The stalemate in Idlib<sup>11</sup> and in the Syrian Kurdish-held areas,<sup>12</sup> the lack of progress for a new constitution under the UN's Syrian Constitutional Committee<sup>13</sup> and the question of the post-war reconstruction cost<sup>14</sup> and plan for Syria are the main challenges for the future of Syria (Khlebnikov, 2020).

### 3. The causes of the Russian military intervention in Syria

As described in the previous chapter, in 2015, Russia decided to upgrade its presence in the Syrian war from an indirect involvement to a direct military intervention. Russia's decision for a direct military intervention was the first one in a country outside the borders of the former-Soviet Union since its dissolution. There are multiple and interrelated

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<sup>11</sup> The province of Idlib is controlled by the Jihadist groups Tahrir al-Sham (former Al-Nusra), Huras al Din and Turkey. The Idlib demilitarization agreement between Russia and Turkey failed to create a buffer zone.

<sup>12</sup> The stalemate between the Syrian Government and Kurd-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces is reinforced by the Turkish occupation in the North-East Syria and US presence.

<sup>13</sup> The Syrian Constitutional Committee was established in 2019 with the goal of forming a new constitution for Syria. The last session that took place in Geneva in January of 2021 failed to start drafting a new charter (Reuters, 29/01/2021)

<sup>14</sup> The reconstruction cost of Syria is estimated at more than \$388 billion according to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia in 2018 (France24, 2018)

geostrategic, sociopolitical, historical, security and economic factors for this upgraded engagement in Syria, which will be examined in this chapter.

### 3.1 The public policy context of the Russian intervention

On 28 September 2015, two days before the first series of the Russian air strikes in Syria, Vladimir Putin spoke in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly.<sup>15</sup> His speech was a call for cooperation with the government of Syria against the Islamic State (IS). He drew a parallel between the patriotic war against Nazis and the need for a common front against terrorism and IS in particular, seventy years after the creation of the UN. Contrary to the United States (US) and the rest of Western powers, the Russian President supported the legitimacy of the Assad administration for two main reasons. The first was the fight against ISIS and the second was the avoidance of further dissolution of the Syrian state's institutions, as it happened in Iraq and Libya with incalculable consequences.<sup>16</sup> Although Russia supported the Syrian government, it proclaimed cooperation with the so-called rational and patriotic opposition in Syria, which also fought against IS.<sup>17</sup> Russia distinguished not only the rational opposition from the terrorist one, but also Muslim people from terrorist organizations. In order to symbolize the respect for the Islamic religion, one week before the UN speech, Putin, accompanied by the Turkish president and the Palestinian president, inaugurated a huge new Mosque in Moscow, "the Moscow Cathedral Mosque" (New York Times, 2015). In short, Russia proclaimed that the enemy for humanity is neither Assad nor Muslims but the IS, as Nazis were seven decades ago. For Russia, the dividing line was between order and chaos, contrary to the western narrative that involved a distinction between democracy and authoritarianism (Kortunov, 2018) or between secularism and fundamentalism. The military intervention of Russia that followed on 30 September 2015 was upon request of the Syrian government, in line with the international law and the charter of the UN, as Russia stated.

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<sup>15</sup> Putin's speech in the General assembly of the UN on 28 September 2015 (Washington Post, 2015)

<sup>16</sup> Putin's interview with Charlie Rose for CBS before the UN assembly on the 28<sup>th</sup> September of 2015 (CBS, 2015) and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview at Voskresnoye Vremya TV program on September 13, 2015 (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

### 3.2 From unipolarity to multipolarity

The first reason for the Russian military interventions has its roots in the Russian politician Yevgeny Primakov. Primakov, who served as a Minister of Foreign Affairs (1996-1998) and Prime Minister of Russia (1999), shifted the Russian foreign policy from the West (Gorbachev era) to the East. According to him, Russia should work for a multipolar world that would counterbalance the US unipolarity. In order to fulfill this goal, Russia should, on the one hand, oppose NATO expansion and, on the other, regain its hegemony in the post-Soviet Union and cooperate with China and India (Rumer, 2019a). For these reasons he supported Slobodan Milosevic during the Yugoslav Wars and opposed the NATO bombing in 1999. The so called ‘Primakov doctrine’ continued under Putin’s presidency from 2000 onwards. Russia also opposed the Iraqi invasion in 2003, defeated West-oriented Georgia<sup>18</sup>, recognized the breakaway states<sup>19</sup> of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 and intervened in Ukraine, resulting in the annexation of Crimea and the creation of the breakaway entities of Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014.

Following the ‘Primakov Doctrine’, Russia started to expand its sphere of influence in post-Soviet states and continued with the Middle East. Russia was already cooperating with the “Axis of resistance” in the Syrian war, as they were more credible partners and their common interests converged in challenging the US’s primacy in the Middle East. Out of all Shia-led countries, Syria is the most stable ally of Russia. Russia has had unbreakable ties with Syria since the presidency of Hafez al Assad, Bashar’s father, in the 1970s, maintaining a naval facility in Tartus since 1971, the only Russian facility in the Mediterranean, which was upgraded after the write-off of the Syrian external public debt to Russia.<sup>20</sup> Russian and Iranian interests are simultaneously convergent and divergent in the Middle East, as both of them are regional powers, but their common front against US dominance has remained principal until now. Hezbollah is also a part of the common front as a stable non-state actor ally of Iran. Finally, Russia opposed the US invasion in Iraq

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<sup>18</sup> Georgia is a part of the Eastern Partnership of the European Union since 2009 with an Associate Agreement (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) since 2014. It has submitted to become a NATO member since 2004.

<sup>19</sup> De facto States with limited or without recognition.

<sup>20</sup> In 2005, Russia wrote-off the 73% of Syrian debt to Moscow from the Soviet Era (\$9,8 billion).

and, especially after the beginning of the Syrian war, has been providing Iraq with military assistance and intelligence services (Aljazeera, 2015).

A more hegemonic role for Russia in the Middle East implied a balance between Shiites and Sunnis. Being already in a *de facto* alliance with Shia-led countries and actors (Syria, Iran, Hezbollah, Iraq), the next step was to improve its relations with Sunnis (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt) as well as with Israel (Trenin, 2015). Russia had not only already restored its diplomatic relations with both the Sunni powers of the region and Israel, but also started to cooperate with them, mainly in the economic level (with Turkey from the 1990's and with Egypt after the coup of El Sisi in 2013), Regarding Israel, the two countries restored their diplomatic relations and resolved the issue of the Russian Jews (Rumer, 2019b) and, in order to satisfy Israel, Russia cancelled the sale of S-300 air defense system to Syria in 2014 (Trenin, 2015). The key factors that further facilitated cooperation with the Sunnis were the gradual withdrawal of the US from the region and the consequent power vacuum together with regional instability after the Arab Spring.

Thus, Russia not only has achieved viable ties with all Middle East countries but also has been holding the observer status in the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) since 2005 (Blank, 2017). Russia's respectful rhetoric towards Muslims in combination with its significant Muslim population (almost 10%; Pew Research Center, 2017), provided reliability to Russia. Its more active role in the Middle East reinforced the Russian position as an indispensable actor in the region, counterbalancing its isolation by the West, which had imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions to Russia after the annexation of Crimea (Charap et al. 2019). Therefore, a direct Russian intervention in the Middle East would upgrade its position and make it an equal interlocutor with the US and the West in the region.

### 3.3 State's security threats

Although Muslims can be seen as a foreign policy tool for Russia, they simultaneously constitute an internal security issue. After the end of the first Chechen War (1994-1996), in North Caucasus there was a gradual shift from nationalism to Islamic fundamentalism and then to Salafism during the early 2000s, due to poverty, political instability and

external funding from Sunni countries (Ter, 2015). During the second Chechen War (1999-2009), Russia had been offering trade deals to the Arab countries in return for their support against Chechens (Blank, 2017). In 2009, Russia ended its military operation and terminated the *de facto* declaration of independence of the Chechen Republic. Meanwhile, the Caucasus Emirate<sup>21</sup> was proclaimed in North Caucasus in 2007 and after the beginning of the war in Syria, North Caucasian Jihadists started to move to Iraq and Syria in order to join the IS. This movement of the Caucasian Jihadist to the IS weakened the Caucasus Emirate, as implied by the drastically reduced attacks in North Caucasus (Dagestan and Chechnya) (Ter, 2015). Out of approximately 30.000 foreign fighters of the IS, 8.700 came from former-Soviet countries and 3.400 from Russia, mainly from North Caucasus (Barrett, 2017). As Hironaka mentioned, Russia had a motive to intervene in Syria in order to control its own foreign fighters who had moved to Syria (Hironaka, 2005, pp.140-142).

Russia declared that the IS was a threat to regional security and global stability. Indeed, since its formation in 2013, the IS had rapidly expanded in Syria and had created a network of affiliates in other countries. The first half of 2015 was crucial for the Syrian war; in May 2015, the IS seized Palmyra and few days later the Al-Nusra Front massacred villages in North-West Syria and at the same time Assad government had been losing ground. According to the Russian General Gerasimov, just 10% of the Syrian territory remained under governmental control in 2015 and by the end of 2015 Syria would have been completely under the control of IS and IS would have further expanded to other countries (Charap et al. 2019); thus, a threat for Russia was emerging. The geographical proximity of the North Caucasian Sunni Muslim population with the Middle East and the return of the Russian foreign fighters were factors of anxiety for Russia. Therefore, Russia allied with the Syrian government to eliminate the IS in Syria, in order for it not to spread in the Russian territory (Charap et al. 2019).

### 3.4 Energy and armaments

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the economic crisis that followed in the 1990's, Russia was not a superpower anymore; its GDP was \$ 2 trillion in 2014 compared

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<sup>21</sup> Jihadist organization in North Caucasus that intended to found an Islamic state in the region.

to the US's \$17 trillion,<sup>22</sup> its population has been stable in the last decades (approximately 140 million) and it was lagging behind technologically. However, the growth rate of the Russian economy increased at a much faster pace than that of the US between 2000 and 2014.<sup>23</sup> Although Russian economic and human resources are limited, it still has the world's biggest energy reserves and significant deposits of various minerals. The biggest share of Russian exports are natural resources (mainly natural gas, crude oil and oil products), exceeding 60% of its total exports and providing 30% of the country's GDP (Bradshaw & Connolly, 2016, figure 3). Therefore, the Russian economy is highly depended on the sale prices and the volume of its natural resources, which explains why its economy faced a financial crisis in 2014 and 2015,<sup>24</sup> due to a 70% drop of oil price and the sanctions imposed by the West. The price drop was the outcome of the booming of US shale oil production, geopolitical instability (Stocker et al, 2018) and the engagement of OPEC in a price war with the US. The restoration of political stability in Syria was a critical factor that enabled Russia to cooperate with OPEC in order to regulate the oil market by reducing the production.

Syria is also important for Russia for its position and its natural reserves. Syria holds offshore natural gas reserves in the Levant Basin and in Homs. In 2013, it signed a 25-year contract with Russia that granted exploration rights to Russia in the Mediterranean coast (Abdi, 2021). These fields were not of great importance for Russia, as Syria is not a big energy producer and it is a rather small energy consumer (with a population of less than 20 million). However, Syria is a very important transit energy hub that links all the energy producers of the Middle East with Turkey and, mainly, with Europe through the Mediterranean. In 2009, Syria rejected the project of a 1.500-mile pipeline from Qatar to Turkey, through its terrain, and signed instead a 3.500-mile pipeline agreement ("Friendship" or "Islamic pipeline") with Iraq and Iran in July 2011 (Stergiou &

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<sup>22</sup> GDP (current \$): <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=RU-US> [accessed 12 August 2021]

<sup>23</sup> GDP (Current \$) Russian: \$ 0,25 trillion/ US: \$ 10 trillion in 2000. 2000 is base year as Russia overcame its economic crisis and held Presidential Election where Putin succeed Yeltsin  
Growth rate chart: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=RU-US>  
[accessed 12 August 2021]

<sup>24</sup>(Current \$) Russian exports chart: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.EXP.GNFS.CD?locations=RU>

Karagianni, 2019), which was interrupted during the Syrian war. In any pipeline project, a more powerful role in Syria enables Russia to become a regulator of the energy lines between suppliers and consumers (Abdi, 2021). For the European Union, the role of Russia as its major supplier is an obstacle to the EU diversification policy of gas supply routes (European Commission, 2014), as its potential alternative suppliers from the Middle East will have to engage with Russia. In other words, the EU is trying to avoid Russia but might find it in front of it again. Russia, apart from being a regulator, also becomes an investor in Syria, by rebuilding and operating infrastructure that might open new markets in energy and other fields in the region.

Another significant sector of the Russian economy is the arms industry, being the world's second largest arms exporter following the US with a remarkable share of 27% between 2010 and 2014 (SIPRI, 2020). Since the 1970's, Syria has been a stable buyer of Russian arms and has also facilitated Russian military presence in its territory. Apart from the naval facility in Tartus, in August 2015 Russia and Syria signed an agreement to establish an airbase in Latakia. The Russian military operation in Syria functions as a demonstration of Russia's military capabilities and weapon systems (Abdi, 2021), and as a call to potential clients in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries to buy new equipment or upgrade existing one. MENA region is the second largest market of Russia after Asia (mainly China and India), with an upward trend (SIPRI, 2020). Obviously, arms trade is not strictly aiming at economic benefits, but it also creates military dependence, military technical cooperation and further trade relations. In other words, economic motives are once again interrelated with geopolitics and security.

### 3.5 Facilitating factors

A state has several reasons to intervene in an intrastate conflict and, as shown above, Russia had multiple motives to intervene in Syria. Until September 2015, Russia intervened in the Syrian war indirectly, but this engagement had not achieved the expected goals. Soviet Union's defeat in the decade-long military intervention in Afghanistan left a heavy imprint on Russia. Therefore, Russia had to estimate all the potential risks in order not to face another defeat. It only intervened when it had the international legitimacy (official request from the Syrian government) and when it had already created the appropriate conditions

internationally and on the ground (cooperation, tolerance and military access) for the operation (Charap et al. 2019). Of course, these are necessary but not sufficient conditions to conduct a direct military intervention. A direct military intervention requires specific state characteristics, domestic acceptance and military capability.

According to Carment and James (2000), some states are more likely to intervene than others depending on their state's institutional arrangement and ethnic composition. The authors conclude that the more authoritarian and ethnically dominant a state is, the more likely it is for a potential intervention to occur. They refer to the Russian involvement in the post-Soviet states in the 1990s and have classified it as moderate because of its "high institutional constraints" and dominant ethnic composition. Indeed, although there are more than 185 ethnic groups in Russia, 81% of its population is ethnic Russians and the percentage of any of the other ethnic groups does not exceed 4%. They also classified Russia as a country with "high institutional constraints" because of its democratization process after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. However, since 2000, when the article was published, Russia is being governed by Putin without substantial alteration.<sup>25</sup> In the 2018 presidential elections, Putin was elected with 77% of the vote, notably above his 64% in 2012. Although Russia is not an authoritarian state, its opposition is weak and unable to claim power, as the latter is concentrated in the dominant "United Russia" party, led by Putin. Therefore, Russia is classified as a country with a maximum tendency to intervene.

A direct military intervention requires public acceptance, while unsuccessful interventions can have a significant political cost that may lead to political instability and the fall of a government or a regime. According to Hobsbawm (2010, p.609), Afghanistan was the Vietnam of the Soviet Union and thus Russia should have been prepared for a politically successful intervention. In Russia, nowadays, three key elements can justify an intervention: a defensive, triumphant and preventive war, a war linked with the Great Patriotic War, and a war against a threat (Kolesnikov, 2016). In his speech at the UN before the intervention, Putin linked the imminent intervention with WWII, as a duty of humanity, named terrorism and IS in particular as the common threat, and also claimed that it was

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<sup>25</sup> The only exception was the period 2008-2012, when due to constitutional restrictions Dimitri Medvedev served as a President, while Putin was Prime Minister

essential to prevent people from being recruited in IS. According to a survey in September 2015 the majority of the Russian public opinion was in favor of an indirect involvement and against a direct military support, whereas some days later (early October 2015), the vast majority was in favor of the air strikes against IS positions due to a powerful information campaign (Kolesnikov, 2016). It is interesting that the terrorist bombing of the Russian passenger airplane in Egypt on 31/10/2015 did not alter the public perception.<sup>26</sup>

Last but not least, a direct military intervention requires military capability. During the 1980s, the Soviet Union was spending around 15% of GDP for its armed forces, but since its dissolution, the Russian share fell sharply to less than 3% of GDP (Cooper, 2016, pp. 130-133). Although Russia remained a nuclear power, its conventional military forces were obsolete. After the war in Georgia,<sup>27</sup> in October 2008, Russia launched a radical transformation of its military forces, the so-called “New Look” Defense Policy. Russia decided to reorganize and modernize its aging armed forces in order to enhance efficiency and combat readiness. The new military architecture contained the replacement of conscript with professional soldiers, the improvement of the speed and the efficiency of military decision-making, and the radical organizational changes in ground, naval and, mainly, air forces (Dermott, 2021; Lavrov, 2021). The most expensive and long-term part of the reform was the State Armaments Program 2020 (SAP-2020) which covered the 2011-2020 period. SAP-2020, the cost of which was estimated at \$680 billion,<sup>28</sup> aimed at increasing the share of modern armaments to 70% in 2020. Between 2011 and 2015 Russia obtained new state-of-the-art missiles, aircrafts, helicopters, air-defense systems, radars, military vehicles, submarines and ships<sup>29</sup> (Cooper, 2016, pp.133-134). Before the direct intervention in Syria, Russia had become more militant and had already tested to some degree its military reforms in the Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

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<sup>26</sup> According to a later poll by Levada Center (23/11/2015), 55% were in favor of the Russian air strikes in November 2015 while 54% were positive in a similar question one month earlier.

<sup>27</sup> Although Russia defeated Georgia, it faced “ineffective command and control, deficiencies with the military personnel, and technological challenges” (Bryce-Rogers, 2013, pp.350-351)

<sup>28</sup> \$ 680 bn was the exchange rate of 20,7 trillion rubles the date that was adopted (Cooper, 2016, p.131)

<sup>29</sup> The armament program included 70 Intercontinental ballistic missiles, 330 new fixed wing aircrafts, 500 helicopters, 15-20 division sets of advance S-400, 3 new “Borei” class strategic submarines, 3 to 4 new corvettes and 2 frigates.

## 4. The impact of the Russian intervention in Syria

The preservation of the Syrian regime and the elimination of the IS were the two main proclaimed goals of the Russian operation. There is no question that the Russian military intervention affected the outcome of the Syrian war in favor of the Assad government and against IS. The questions that arise are what the impact of the Russian intervention was on Russia's geopolitical, security and economic interests and on the Middle East more broadly.

### 4.1 Russia: Regional power and mediator in the Middle East

The Russian intervention of 2015 in Syria was the first offensive operation outside the borders of the former Soviet Union since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Until then, Russia had not challenged NATO dominance and the Western military invasions in Serbia (1999), Iraq (2003) and Libya (2011), although it opposed them.<sup>30</sup> One the other, Georgia and Ukraine, which are pro-NATO states and Eastern Partnership members, were not militarily supported by NATO during their wars with Russia in 2008 and 2014 respectively. The Russian military intervention in a Middle East country, beyond the borders of what the West would tolerate as Russia's sphere of influence, was an imperialistic operation to enhance its status in international affairs as a regional power. Indeed, Russia expanded its sphere of influence in the MENA region and gained a more substantial presence in the international community.

Before its engagement in Syria, Russia was not an impactful political actor in MENA, although it had already upgraded its relations in the region. It could also not become the main actor in the region due to its limited resources. However, it achieved to become an indispensable actor at military and diplomatic level. At the military level, it managed to consolidate its power as a reliable military force in the international community. Russia accomplished a military operation in favor of its ally by restoring "order" in a large part of Syria and by eliminating "terrorism". On the contrary, Western forces failed to achieve their proclaimed goal of "exporting" democracy in their operations in Iraq, Libya and

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<sup>30</sup> In the case of Serbia, Russia opposed to the request of the NATO states in the UNSC for military intervention. In Iraq, Russia opposed to a UN military intervention in the UNSC to overthrow the Iraqi government and in Libya did not veto the UN resolution but abstained from voting in the UNSC.

Afghanistan. Therefore, the successful intervention reinforced its geopolitical position in the region and generated further economic opportunities, as Syria served as a showcase for Russian weaponry. Moreover, the Russian geopolitical position has been strengthened by its two permanent military bases in Syria: the naval facility of Tartus in the Mediterranean Coast, built in 1971, and the air base in Latakia which has been in operation since mid-2015. In 2017, Russia established a permanent presence at both bases as it signed a 49-year lease for the naval base and the right of indefinite use for the airbase (Reuters, 26/12/2017). Evidently, the bases in Syria consolidate Russia's military presence in the Middle East.

At the diplomatic level, Russia's successful military operation designated its role as a mediator and key actor in the Syrian war. Throughout the war, the UN had not succeeded in brokering a resolution: the UN-backed Geneva conferences on Syria (Geneva I in 2012 and Geneva II in 2014) failed to bring peace in Syria and the Geneva peace talks (Geneva III) led to a partial ceasefire in February 2016 that did not last, whereas the Geneva rounds of 2017 had no results. Meanwhile, another attempt took place in Vienna<sup>31</sup> at the end of 2015 without success (Collin, 2018). The UN's failed peace processes and Russia's successful operation in Syria led Russia to initiate a parallel process to the one of Geneva IV peace resolution at the end of 2016. Russia, together with Iran and Turkey, the two main powers which were involved in the Syrian war, launched peace talks in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. In September of 2017 the tripartite agreed on the implementation of four de-escalation zones in Syria (Collin, 2018). Regardless of the results of the ongoing Astana process, Russia has achieved two goals: On the one hand, since 2016, it has cooperated within an uninterrupted diplomatic initiative with two non-Arab powers with divergent interests in the region, namely with a NATO member (Turkey) and a member of the Axis of resistance (Iran). On the other, the US had already recognized Russia as a mediator at the Syrian conflict. In the November 2017 meeting in Vietnam, Trump and Putin confirmed that the US and Russia had joined efforts to defeat IS (Reuters, 11/11/2017) and supported the de-escalation zones that Russia had initiated in Astana. A few months later, in Helsinki, the two leaders agreed on the post-conflict reconstruction of Syria, without

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<sup>31</sup> Vienna talks were held under the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), which consists of 17 countries (US, Russia, Iran) and the UN, EU and the Arab League.

conditionality on behalf of Trump (Guardian 2018). Russia cooperated with all the involved actors of the region, while it “has broken the monopoly of the Geneva process and of U.S. diplomatic leadership” (Kofman and Rojansky, 2018). Since 2016, along with Syria, Russia has participated in other conflict settlements; specifically, it has tried to broker the settlement of the Israel-Palestine and Qatar-Saudi Arabia conflicts, as well as of the wars in Libya and Yemen (Khlebnikov, 2020).

#### 4.2 Russia’s relations with the West

The Russian intervention has had a positive impact on bilateral relations with the MENA region and Asian countries, whereas the relations between Russia and Western countries have been further alienated. Since the second half of the first decade of 2000s, Russia has increasingly challenged the primacy of the US and the NATO. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, both the US and the EU attempted to isolate Russia on the political and economic level through sanctions, which until now have not been suspended. The Russian intervention further aggravated its relation with the West and with the US in particular. The more Russia challenges the US supremacy, the tougher the US attitude towards Russia will be. According to the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (March 2021), Russia is classified as the main rival of the US, next to China, as it “plays a disruptive role on the world stage”.

Regarding the EU, the impact of the Russian intervention in their bilateral relations is more complicated, because of the proximity and the ties with each other, their proximity and ties with Syria and the externalities of the war. Among the negative externalities of the Syrian war (e.g. regional instability, security threats), the return of refugees to Syria remains unresolved. Its resolution requires the implementation of a costly reconstruction plan. Thus, both the EU and Russia seek political and economic stability in Syria even though it is difficult to strike a compromise. On the one hand, the EU has financial tools and resources but limited foreign policy tools;<sup>32</sup> namely, the imposed sanctions and the humanitarian aid to Syria. On the other hand, Russia has foreign policy tools but is seeking

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<sup>32</sup> The EU cannot exert hard power due to its structure and its internal antagonisms. One of its main foreign policy tools is conditionality. Conditionality is a soft power strategy of rewards (e.g., financial aid) or punishment (e.g., sanctions)

EU's political and financial support for Syria due to its limited economic resources and political power (Barnes-Dacey, 2019). Although Europe has already accepted that Assad will remain in power, it proclaims that it will re-engage in the post-war reconciliation "conditional on progress towards a negotiated resolution of the conflict and a political opening in Syria" (Barnes-Dacey, 2019; Kortunov and Perthes, 2020). EU and Russia have reached a stalemate about the post-war Syria. Recently, several EU states have started a discussion to loosen EU's foreign policy conditions regarding Syria (Kortunov and Perthes, 2020).

#### 4.3 Bilateral relations and further cooperation in the MENA region

Russian and Iranian ties are not limited to their common goal against the US dominance. For Russia, Iran has been an entry point in the Middle East, while for Iran, Russia is a shield, as it is a veto player in the UNSC (Rumer, 2019b, p.18). Throughout the war, the two countries were militarily and diplomatically in synch. Their relation has been consolidated by their joint success in the Syrian war. Russia has invested in oil and gas projects and nuclear plants, and has been the main arms supplier of Iran. Moreover, Iran is a part of the International North–South Transport Corridor that connects Russia with India (Russel, 2018). However, Israel, with which Russia maintains relations, is considered a thorn in their bilateral relations. Another trigger point in their relations is how each country perceives its presence in Syria. For Russia, Syria is an opportunity to become a mediator in the Middle East, whereas for Iran, Syria is an opportunity to strengthen its power against bordering Israel (Rumer, 2019b, p.18). The other Shia-led country with which Russia has improved its ties is Iraq. The alliance with Iraq Shiites in the Syrian war and the domestic political instability enabled Russia to counterbalance the US hegemony. Russia, apart from being an arms supplier, has purchased stakes in the rich Iraqi oil fields (Dali, 2020).

At the beginning of the Syrian war, Turkey, which had been affected by the prospect of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, had strongly supported the Syrian opposition.<sup>33</sup> Later,

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<sup>33</sup> Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda Movement in Tunisia took power in 2011 Constituent Assembly elections and in 2012 presidential elections accordingly

domestic regime pressure, unfavorable changes in the Middle East<sup>34</sup> and Kurdish autonomy in Northern Syria<sup>35</sup> complicated Turkey's position. In November 2015, a Turkish airplane shot down a Russian one. Russia reacted by imposing severe economic sanctions and political pressure upon Turkey. In 2016, their relations began to normalize, when Erdogan expressed its regret for the Russian airplane. The turning point for the improvement of their relations, was the Russian response in favor of Erdogan at the night of the coup against him in July 2016 (Rumer, 2019b, p.23). The purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system in 2017, which will be deployed in the territory of a NATO country, and the Turkish participation in the Astana process have changed the regional balance in the Middle East in favor of Russia. Since 2016, Turkey and Russia have further improved their trade relations and energy ties.<sup>36</sup> Turkey cannot be characterized as an ally of Russia due to their historic rivalry and their competing interests (Northern Syria, Kurdish issue, Nagorno Karabakh, Libya) but it serves the Russian geostrategic interests, as a valuable partner. Notably, Russia was invited by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) to act as a mediator between the Kurds and Turkey, when the US abandoned the Northeast Syria (Hinnebusch, 2020).

Apart from Turkey, the Gulf countries and Israel are pro-Western and the main adversaries of Iran in the region. Most of the Gulf monarchies are OPEC members<sup>37</sup> and backers of the opposition in the Syrian war. One of the causes of the Russian intervention was its aspiration for a deal with the OPEC countries in order to regulate the oil market. The Russian presence in Syria reinforced its status in the Middle East and thus enabled it to sign an agreement with OPEC and Saudi Arabia to limit the oil production. The agreements were renewed until 2020 (Abdi, 2021, p.47) and a new one was signed by OPEC+<sup>38</sup> in July

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<sup>34</sup> The domestic pressure derived from Gezi-park protests and Gulenists. Unfavorable changes in the Middle East derived from the coup against Morsi in Egypt in 2013 and the fall of Ennahda in the elections of 2014

<sup>35</sup> In 2012, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military forces contributed to the creation of the autonomous administration in North-East Syria (Rojava)

<sup>36</sup> In 2019, Russia was Turkey's second biggest trade partner after the EU. Russia exports hydrocarbons and metal, while Turkey exports agricultural products and textile. The first destination for Russian tourists was Turkey in 2019. The Turk stream pipeline, which is in operation since 2020, along with the Blue Stream connect the two countries through Black Sea. Russian state company Rosatom is building a nuclear plant in Akkuyu. (Russel, 2021)

<sup>37</sup> Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirate, Kuwait are Gulf OPEC members and Qatar until 2019

<sup>38</sup> Opec+ includes Russia and other Gulf and former-Soviet Union countries (Reuters, 19/07/2021)

of 2021 to boost the oil production. The decrease of US dependence on Gulf oil, the nuclear deal with Iran<sup>39</sup> and the Russian intervention in Syria were the factors that improved the Gulf-Russian relations (Rumer, 2019b, p.27). In fear of Iranian hegemony in Syria, both Gulf countries and Israel preferred Russia to be the leading power in the region (Rumer, 2019b, pp.15-17, 29). Apart from political relations, Russia has developed military relations with Gulf monarchies by signing a military and technical agreement with Qatar in 2017 (Tass, 2017) and a military agreement with Saudi Arabia in August 2021 (Tass, 2021). Regarding Israel, Russia maintains balanced diplomatic relations, without any remarkable economic cooperation (Rumer, 2019b, pp.12-17).

The outcome of the Russian military intervention affected its political relations with other MENA countries and expanded its trade. According to SIPRI (2021), between 2016 and 2020 Russian arms exports increased by 64% in the Middle East and by 23% in Africa (mainly North Africa). Moreover, Russia has increased its exports in agricultural products<sup>40</sup> and in the promising market of grain<sup>41</sup> in particular, which accounts for a third of MENA imports.<sup>42</sup> In North Africa, apart from Algeria, which is among the larger importers and stable customers of Russian arms, and Libya before the war, Egypt has upgraded its economic relations with Russia. Since the coup of El Sisi, Egypt has signed agreements with Russia to procure missile systems (S-300), aircrafts and helicopters in 2014 and 2015, to share each other's airspace and airbases in 2017, to develop a nuclear plant in Egypt in 2018 (Kuimova, 2021), to co-exploit Egyptian gas fields (Stergiou & Karagianni, 2019) and to cooperate in other fields.<sup>43</sup> Another country that has improved its relations with Russia is Jordan: trade between the two countries has increased and a special industrial

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<sup>39</sup> The Joint Comprehensive Plan for Action was signed in 14/07/2015 between Iran and the five permanent members of the UNSC

<sup>40</sup> Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia are among the ten most important importers of Russian agricultural products (Russian Today, 11/09/2021)

<sup>41</sup> Russia is recently the world largest producer of grain. Its advantageous climate conditions, the rise of the population in Asia and the proximity with all Asian countries will probably make it the world dominant producer (Financial Times, 2021).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Other bilateral agreements include: A fifty-year industrial zone agreement in 2018 (Reuters, 23/05/2018), the production of Sputnik vaccine in Egypt in 2021 (Reuters, 24/02/2021), boost of tourism in Egypt (Reuters, 23/04/2021)

zone in Jordan will facilitate Russian enterprises. Their relation is not strictly economic but also political. Jordan has participated as an observer in the Astana process and both countries cooperate on issues of counterterrorism (Ramani, 2021). To sum up, apart from its alliance with Shia-led countries (Iran, Iraq and Syria), which still remains stable, Russia has managed to upgrade the interrelated political and economic relations with pro-Western Middle East countries.

#### 4.4 The impact of the Russian intervention in the Middle East

Before the Russian military intervention IS, Al-Qaeda and other militant Salafist organizations had gained a foothold in the Middle East at the expense of more moderate Muslim organizations (Muslim Brotherhood). Gulf states not only saved other monarchies in the MENA region from Arab uprisings (Jordan, Marocco, Bahrein), but also destabilized other Middle Eastern countries through proxy wars (Yemen, Syria). In parallel, Western powers invaded Libya and were engaged in the Syrian war. Since the 2003 invasion in Iraq, another pole has emerged. Iran, as the leading power of the front with Syria and Hezbollah resisted US unipolarity. The outcome of the Arab spring had favored pro-western Gulf monarchies, while the proxy war in Syria between the two poles seemed to harden the position of the Iranian front in the battlefield.

The Russian direct engagement in Syria and the avoidance of a similar Western aggressive response have changed the regional balance in favor of Russia, whose intervention became a catalyst for the regional order in the Middle East. Apart from Russia, Iran and Turkey have improved their position as regional powers: Iran improved its position against its rivals (Israel and Gulf monarchies) through its presence in Syria and Iraq.

Turkey, despite its domestic difficulties, has managed to expand its role in the Middle East, particularly in northern Syria. Moreover, its agreement with the EU to stop the refugee flows in 2016 has strengthened its bargaining power towards Europe, while the Idlib demilitarization agreement with Russia is used by Turkey to further suppress the Kurds. Finally, the pro-western regional powers, Israel and Saudi Arabia, have resorted to the Russian mediation role, which mitigates their rivalry with Iran.

Regarding the non-regional powers, the US failed to preserve its supremacy in the Greater Middle East and to achieve its proclaimed goals (if it were not just to boost its defense industry) in its deployments of military force in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria. Contrary to the US, which has shifted its focus to the Indo-Pacific region, Europe still has geopolitical interests in Syria, related to energy, refugees and security; however, its structural contradictions and its rivalry with Russia have limited its role. Its position becomes even more difficult due to the transatlantic rivalry between the US and the EU over the Joint and Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran and the Israel-Palestine conflict (Kausch, 2019). Finally, thanks to its diplomatic support to the Syrian government and despite its military absence in Syria, China has already expanded its markets in the Middle East, as a strategic part of the Belt and Road Initiative.

## Conclusions

The Syrian civil war, from its onset, turned into a proxy war between government-biased and opposition-biased forces. The literature on third-party interventions, which suggests that they prolong intrastate conflicts, is confirmed in the case of Syria. It is also confirmed that the balanced intervention of the UN failed, as it did not end up in a negotiated settlement. The turning point for the outcome of the Syrian war was the Russian direct, government-biased, military operation. Russia's intervention reinforced the military capacity of the Syrian government to reconquer its territory and deterred a further escalation of the war beyond the Syrian borders. This outcome was a result of Russia's military capability and comprehensive strategy.

When Western states intervene in civil wars, they usually invoke fundamentalism and the democratic deficit, both of which are abstract invocations that cannot be imposed against the will of the people. Moreover, their interventions in the Greater Middle East (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria) failed to end the wars and, obviously, to consolidate democracy and secularism. On the contrary, Russia invoked the restoration of order and stability in Syria, in order not to repeat in this case the stalemate in Iraq and Libya, and the defeat of the IS. Although Russia is a secular state and an ally of the Shiite "Axis of resistance", it pursued to demonstrate respect for all moderate Muslims without getting

involved in the dispute between Shiites and Sunnis. Despite its plethora of motives to intervene in favor of the Syrian government, Russia's publicly declared goals were aligned with its real aims as well as with its ally's aspirations. The geographical proximity of the North Caucasian Sunni Muslim population with the Middle East and the potential return of the Russian foreign fighters were factors of anxiety. Russia's invocations were of great importance for its national security and the regional stability.

Apart from security reasons, Russia, following the "Primakov Doctrine", aimed at expanding its sphere of influence from the post-Soviet states to the Middle East and, thus, at challenging US primacy in the region, in order to counterbalance the isolation by the West. Syria was not only a foothold for the Russian geopolitical ambitions, but also a transit energy hub that links all the energy producers of the Middle East with Europe through the Mediterranean and Turkey. As the Syrian war was escalating and threatening the wider regional stability, Russia, as an energy superpower, pursued political stability so as to regulate the oil prices with OPEC. Moreover, Russia is also the world's second largest arms exporter and, therefore, a military intervention functions as a demonstration of its military capabilities and its weapon systems and as a call to new contracts. For all these reasons, Russia was determined to achieve its goals by all available means, and finally managed to do so.

Obviously, the Russian military intervention achieved its two main proclaimed goals: the preservation of the Assad administration and the elimination of the IS. The Russian intervention has reinforced its bilateral relations with Middle East countries and has left its footprint in the region, whereas its relations with the West have been further deteriorated. Apart from the stable alliance with the "axis of resistance", Russia has managed to improve its position regarding pro-Western Middle East countries: Israel and the Gulf countries, in fear of the Iranian hegemony, preferred Russia to be the leading power in Syria, while Turkey, although a militarily powerful NATO-member, reinforced Russia's position, by participating in the Russian-designed Astana peace process and by having already ordered the Russian S-400 missile system. Finally, Russia has achieved an agreement with OPEC in order to regulate oil production.

The Russian military intervention in a Middle East country, beyond the limits of a tolerable by the West sphere of influence, was an offensive operation to enhance its military, diplomatic and economic status as a regional power and to challenge US unipolarity. Russia has managed to consolidate its power, as a reliable military force in the international community, and its presence in the Middle East, due to its two permanent military bases in Syria, to cooperate with all the involved actors of the region and to launch the Astana peace process, breaking this way the monopoly of the UN Geneva process. Finally, it has achieved to increase arms sales, to participate in energy -oil and nuclear- projects and to further expand its sales in agricultural products in the Middle East.

This impact of the Russian military engagement and the avoidance of a similar aggressive response by the West have changed the regional balance in favor of Russia. In conclusion, the Russian intervention in Syria was a critical factor for the shift from unipolarity to multipolarity in the Middle East and, consequently, in the international balance of power.

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