

COUNTERINTERVENTION SUCCESS: ANALYZING RUSSIAN AND US INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIAN CRISIS

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Abstract: The Arab Spring that began in Tunisia in 2010 quickly spread throughout the Middle East, fueling protests in many countries of the region, including Libya and Syria. While in Libya the UN Security Council supported NATO's military intervention against the Gaddafi regime, the Syrian case caused disparity in views, with Russia and China vetoing the Western countries' attempt to intervene in the conflict and topple Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. The US intention to intervene directly in the Syrian civil war, triggered by the 2013 chemical weapons crisis, was successfully halted by Russian diplomatic efforts. Yet, the rising threat of terrorism in Syria and Iraq prompted the establishment of the US-led Global coalition against Daesh / ISIS¹, which conducted airstrikes in 2014, forcing Assad, who at that time had lost control over a significant part of Syria's territory, to appeal to Russian President Vladimir Putin for assistance. As a result, Russia began its counterintervention in Syria to support Assad's struggle to remain in power, fight terrorism and regain control of the country. This article discusses US and Russian objectives in the Syrian crisis, the limited results of the US-led military intervention and the success of the Russian counterintervention.

¹ Daesh/ISIS/ISIL is a terrorist organization prohibited in the Russian Federation.

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On December 18, 2010, Tunisian street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire, purportedly because of his dissatisfaction with bureaucratic indifference. This incident sparked massive protests against the incumbent leaders of Middle Eastern countries, leading to what became known as the Arab Spring. Countries such as Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria witnessed large-scale protests against their regimes. These events took the world by surprise. Russia did not fully share the Western narrative of the Arab Spring, but it did not veto the UN Security Council resolution legitimizing the Western intervention in Libya. However, NATO's intervention in Libya went beyond the original aim of the UN Security Council resolution² to protect civilians. Instead, the intervention decapitated the regime and resulted in a more chaotic situation in the country. The flawed intervention by NATO in Libya coupled with the overall degradation of Russia-US relations (Safranchuk, 2018) ultimately determined Russia's approach to the crisis in Syria.

The Syrian civil war has been in the spotlight of academic attention with topics ranging from deep structural and societal causes of conflict (Zvyagelskaya, 2017) to negotiation dynamics (Isaev, 2018; Cengiz, 2020) and post-conflict resolution (Bartenev, 2018). Naumkin (2015) refers to the concept of deeply divided societies to uncover the root causes of the civil conflict. In a similar approach, Kuznetsov (2018) refers to Douglass North's theory of social orders emphasizing the need to nurture statehood in the unstable countries of the region. Moreover, there are several analytical³ and research papers (Sukhov, 2020) approaching the conflict as a series of analytical puzzles. Some papers deal with the strategies of particular countries in Syria (Khodynskaya-Golenischeva, 2015; Zvyagelskaya, 2016; Suchkov & Khodynskaya-Golenischeva, 2021; Mason & Suchkov, 2021), mostly the US⁴

² United Nations Security Council. Resolution 1973 (2011). New York, March 17. Available at: <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/s/res/1973-%282011%29> (accessed 2 March 2023).

³ Ford R.S. (2019) The Syrian Civil War: A New Stage, But Is it the Final One? *MEI Policy Paper*, 2019-8. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/syrian-civil-war-new-stage-it-final-one> (accessed 17 March 2023); Naumkin V.V. (2017) What Awaits Syria? *Russia in Global Affairs*. Available at: <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/what-awaits-syria/> (accessed 25 March 2023).

⁴ See also: Gadalla P. (2019) 8 years into Syria's civil war, Brookings experts explain the US position and regional context. *The Brookings Institution*. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/8-years-into-syrias-civil-war-brookings-experts-explain-the-u-s-position-and-regional-context/> (accessed 5 April 2023); Daniels L. & Shapiro J. (2015) The U.S. plan to counter Russia in Syria. *The Brookings Institution*. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-u-s-plan-to-counter-russia-in-syria/> (accessed 5 April 2023); Yacoubian M. (2018) U.S. Policy Towards Syria: Part I. *United States Institute of Peace*. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2018/09/us-policy-toward-syria-part-i> (accessed 6 April 2023); Haass R. (2018) Missile Strikes Are Not a Syria Strategy. *Council on Foreign Relations*. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/article/missile-strikes-are-not-syria-strategy> (accessed 6 April 2023); Cook S.A. (2019) The United States Is Done Caring About Syria. *Council on Foreign Relations*. Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/article/united-states-done-caring-about-syria> (accessed 6 April 2023).

and Russia⁵. Notably, for Russian scholars the crisis in Syria and the dynamics of Russia-US relations over the conflict became indispensable cases of reference for studies on the wider topic of world order (Simonia & Torkunov, 2015; Baranovsky, 2019; Karaganov, 2019; Istomin & Baykov, 2019; Safranchuk & Lukyanov, 2021a; Safranchuk & Lukyanov, 2021b).

Taking on a comparative perspective, this paper aims to contribute to this vein of thought by taking into consideration the dynamics of *intervention vs counterintervention*.

The Analytical Framework of Counterintervention

The US started meddling in the Syrian civil war around 2012 by supplying weapons and ammunition to the opposition. The US took a major role in fueling the conflict, trying to oust Assad. The US had avoided direct involvement until 2014, when ISIS struck in Iraq endangering American interests in the country. The Western ideational and material support to the opposition was in fact a form of indirect intervention, critically contributing to the balance of power, shifting it in favor of the armed opposition.

Towards the latter half of 2015, the Assad regime began losing control over its territories to opposition forces. The loss of Idlib to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) caused concern in Iran and Russia regarding the potential downfall of the Assad regime. In August 2015, Syria and Iran appealed to Russia to intervene in the conflict on behalf of the government forces. Following the official invitation from the Assad regime, which Russia recognized as the legitimate authority, Russia intervened in Syria, leading to a quick shift in the balance of power in favor of the regime and its supporters.

Russian engagement in Syria provides an interesting case of a phenomenon we call counterintervention. To explain this phenomenon as well as to provide a theoretical background to our work, we refer to the empirical literature on interventions. In this field, many factors have been reviewed as potential determinants of third-party military involvement in ongoing civil conflicts. Findley and Teo offer a distinction between phenomenon- and actor-centric approaches to explaining the onset of intervention (Findley & Teo, 2006). The first approach mainly deals with characteristics of civil conflict as determinants of foreign

⁵ See also: Russia's intervention in Syria: Protracting an already endless conflict. *The Brookings Institution*, 2015. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russias-intervention-in-syria-protracting-an-already-endless-conflict/> (accessed 10 April 2023); Charap S. & Shapiro J. (2015) The danger of Russian and Turkish competitive machismo in Syria. *The Brookings Institution*. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-danger-of-russian-and-turkish-competitive-machismo-in-syria/> (accessed 10 April 2023); Abouaoun E. & Ratnam G. (2015) Q&A: Russia's Intervention in Syria. *United States Institute of Peace*. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/10/qa-russias-intervention-syria> (accessed 11 April 2023); Will Russian Peace Efforts Pay Off in Syria? *United States Institute of Peace*, 2017. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2017/11/will-russian-peace-efforts-pay-syria> (accessed 11 April 2023); Naumkin V. (2014) Russia banks on Syrian unity. *Al-Monitor*. Available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2014/07/russia-iraq-syria-new-middle-east-isis.html> (accessed 11 April 2023).

intervention, while the second is built around features of actors involved in armed struggle (Findley & Teo, 2006). We formulate our theory in the framework of the second approach.

The actor-centric approach stems from the social nature of international relations. States do not make their decisions about military actions in a vacuum. Structural and geopolitical factors are as crucial as civil war dynamics in forming a third party's decision to intervene. The actor-oriented approach implies that all states are embedded in a network of ties and interactions with all other participants of the international system (Corbetta & Melin, 2018). Corbetta and Melin refer to this structure as the "international social space" which partially determines states' reactions to major events such as occurrences of civil conflict (Corbetta & Melin, 2018). The centrality of other actors' actions and characteristics in a states' decision to get involved in a civil conflict has been confirmed by several studies, some of which have already been mentioned (Findley & Teo, 2006; Aydin, 2010). Some of the classic literature on interstate warfare and alignment is also shaped by this actor-centric or social approach (Altfeld & Bueno de Mesquita, 1979; Kaw, 1990).

In our study, we propose to view Russian intervention as a consequence of relations with and actions of other actors. Russia's response is tied to its relations with the Syrian regime as well as the involvement of the Western coalition. Russia's relations with Syria are that of allies and responsiveness to such incentives is one of the primary determinants of third-party involvement in civil conflicts. Furthermore, Russian-Western relations prior to the intervention in Syria became increasingly hostile. NATO's aggressive policy in the Middle East, which was described earlier, was one of the factors shaping Moscow's reactions to the intervention of the coalition in Syria.

In the following sections, we will review the sequence of events leading to Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war as well as the planning of the decision and its justification. This description will allow us to substantiate our understanding of the Russian intervention as a countereffort against a hostile coalition of actors, which simultaneously allowed Moscow to support an allied regime. We also provide a comparative perspective by introducing a section on Western intervention with Syria.

Intervention vs. Counterintervention Political Maneuvering Amidst Crisis in Syria

The protests in Syria initially began in Daraa with small-scale demonstrations against the government in the first quarter of 2011. Although insignificant at first, the protests quickly gained momentum. Western countries, with the United States at the forefront, condemned Assad for a harsh response to the protests. Barack Obama stated that the Assad family had completed its mission in Syria and called

for Bashar Assad to step down in order to foster the development of democracy in the country⁶. A number of regional countries also put pressure on Damascus, urging it to make concessions to protestors.

Russia firmly opposed the idea of a foreign intervention in Syria. Vladimir Putin attempted to garner support from China and other BRICS countries to form a united countercoalition (Denisov et al., 2019). Initially, Western countries sought condemnation of Assad's tough stance towards the opposition through the United Nations Security Council, but these efforts were vetoed by Russia and China. Russia and China vetoed several drafts of resolutions against the Assad regime in the UN Security Council, including proposals for sanctions against the regime for its continued oppression of protestors on 4 October 2011, 4 February 2012, and 19 July 2012 (Eminue & Dickson, 2013).

Russia kept a decisive stance to prevent any foreign military intervention against the Syrian regime and continued to support Damascus. Obama repeatedly criticized Assad's violations of human rights in Syria and targeted Putin for his support of Assad. Russia argued for a diplomatic resolution to the Syrian conflict and attempted to establish communication between the opposing sides. In October 2011, the Russian Foreign Minister met with Qadri Jamil, a representative of the opposition forces, in Moscow⁷. Additionally, the president of the National Coordination Committee, Hassan Abdul Azim, had meetings with Russian authorities in April and November 2012. Several opposition groups also had contact with Russia in 2012. Russia sought to become a key figure in the resolution process of the Syrian crisis through mediation attempts.

However, despite Russian efforts to prevent foreign intervention in Syria, a significant crisis emerged when chemical weapons were used against the opposition forces and civilians in the city of Ghouta on 21 August 2013⁸. Some regional countries and Western powers accused the Assad regime of orchestrating the chemical attacks against the opposition. President Obama declared that the use of chemical weapons crossed a "red line" for the United States. On the other hand, Russia and Syrian government blamed the opposition forces for the use of chemical weapons. They claimed that this event was staged by the opposition to garner support from Western powers in the form of a direct intervention against the Assad regime. The Russian call was expressed in an article published by The New York Times. It stated: "No one doubts that poison gas was used in Syria.

⁶ Obama Says Syrian Leader Bashar al-Assad Must Go. *The Wall Street Journal*, 2015, 19 November. Available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-says-syrian-leader-bashar-al-assad-must-go-1447925671> (accessed 7 March 2023).

⁷ Press Release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Meeting with Representatives of the Syrian Opposition - Министерство Иностранных Дел Российской Федерации, 2017. Available at: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/1541215/?lang=en (accessed 23 April 2023).

⁸ More than 1,400 killed in Syrian chemical weapons attack, U.S. says. *The Washington Post*, 2013, 30 August. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/nearly-1500-killed-in-syrian-chemical-weapons-attack-us-says/2013/08/30/b2864662-1196-11e3-85b6-d27422650fd5_story.html (accessed 10 March 2023).

But there is every reason to believe it was used not by the Syrian Army, but by opposition forces, to provoke intervention by their powerful foreign patrons, who would be siding with the fundamentalists"⁹.

Furthermore, Putin issued warnings to the USA and Western powers about the potentially disastrous consequences of any intervention in Syria. Obama rejected any negotiation offers from Putin and appeared determined to intervene in Syria.

Putin proposed a solution to address the issue of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict. He suggested that all chemical weapons and stockpiles belonging to the Syrian regime be eliminated, under the supervision of Russia and the United States. This proposal by Putin received support from some Western countries and BRICS nations. Putin repeatedly emphasized that any potential intervention could only be authorized by the United Nations Security Council. In the aforementioned article in the New York Times, he warned that the United Nations should not suffer the same fate as the League of Nations¹⁰. Putin also referenced the example of Libya as a cautionary tale against interventionist practices. Following Russia's warnings about the disastrous consequences of intervention in Syria and Putin's proposal for the elimination of Syrian regime's chemical weapons, US Secretary of State John Kerry visited Moscow. The meeting between John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov resulted in an agreement between the United States and Russia for the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons, signed in September 2013. The agreement stipulated that Syrian chemical weapon would be destroyed by mid-2014. John Kerry stated, "If Mr. Assad fails to comply with the agreement, the issue will be referred to the United Nations Security Council, where the violations would be taken up under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which authorizes punitive action."¹¹ However, despite alleged subsequent chemical attacks occurring in Syria in 2016 and 2017, the responsible party remained unclear.

That agreement marked a significant victory for Russian diplomacy in its dealings with Western powers. It effectively averted a direct military intervention by the United States and other Western nations against the Syrian regime forces. Russia successfully protected its partner and safeguarded its national interests by securing Assad's regime in Syria. Two decades ago, Russia had been blamed both domestically and internationally for its inability to help Serbia, Russia's ally in the Balkans, against the Western powers. Its image of a reliable ally and great power status diminished dramatically in this period. However, Russian robust reaction to the Syrian crisis contributed to the restoration of its status (Nesmeshnyi, Zhornist & Safranchuk, 2022). In addition, the international community credited Russia as a peacemaker for its role in this agreement, which involved certain risks but was successfully managed by President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

⁹ A Plea for Caution From Russia. *The New York Times*, 2013, 11 September. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/12/opinion/putin-plea-for-caution-from-russia-on-syria.html> (accessed 11 September 2022).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ U.S. and Russia Reach Deal to Destroy Syria's Chemical Arms. *The New York Times*, 2013, 14 September. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/15/world/middleeast/syria-talks.html> (accessed 13 September 2022).

Russian Military Intervention in Syria: Sustained Goal

Western powers, and some regional countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Jordan, provided direct support to opposition forces. Despite the fragmented structure of these forces, moderate factions and radical groups joined forces in their fight against the Assad regime, while Iranian and Hezbollah militias were supporting the regime. As a result, opposition forces were able to capture Idlib after Aleppo, which marked a significant loss for the regime.

In July 2015, the opposition forces gained several advantages in their war against the regime, and this momentum continued into August 2015. Eventually, the official Damascus lost control of more than half of the country. It was during this period that Assad called for a direct Russian intervention to help him put an end to the Syrian conflict. Additionally, according to some sources, Iranian General Qassem Soleimani reached out to Russia to ask for its direct intervention as the Assad regime would certainly fall without it¹². In these conditions, Russia started its military intervention in Syria, with the invitation of President Bashar Assad. The stated objective of the Russian intervention was to fight terrorism and support the Assad regime. The primary target identified by Russian authorities was the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) or ISIS / DAESH¹³.

The Russian military intervention in Syria provided a significant boost to the Assad regime's forces. As a result, the regime began gaining advantages against both opposition forces and ISIS. Expectations of the Assad regime's downfall were once again hindered.

Importantly, since the onset of the Syrian civil war, Russia has been committed to a single objective, that of supporting Assad, engaging with moderate opposition, and helping crush the radical opposition, ISIS included. There have been no shifts in that policy. However, Russian policy instruments changed significantly: from diplomatic mediation to airstrikes and special operations.

Russia successfully managed the conflict process and presented itself as the most important actor in the resolution of the Syrian crisis. In contrast to the perceived precarious policy of the United States during Obama's presidency, Russia improved its image as a reliable and powerful partner.

Now that we have reviewed key milestones in the Russian approach to the Syrian crisis, we can study major shifts in the U.S. policy towards this conflict.

¹² Iranian General Secretly Met with Putin in August, Urging Russia to Launch Airstrikes in Syria, Officials Say. *National Post*, 2015, 8 October. Available at: <https://nationalpost.com/news/world/iranian-general-secretly-met-with-putin-in-august-and-urged-russia-to-launch-airstrikes-in-syria-officials-say> (accessed 6 April 2023).

¹³ Russia begins Syria air strikes in its biggest Mideast intervention in decades. *Reuters*, 2015, 30 September. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-idUSKCN0RU0MG20151001> (accessed 7 April 2023).

U.S. Policy Towards Syria: Major Shifts

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the U.S. declared a negotiated political transition in Syria as its key objective¹⁴. The United States insisted that President Bashar al-Assad's regime failed to efficiently govern the country and committed war crimes against Syrian civilians, forcing them to flee the country¹⁵. Political mismanagement claims escalated to the highest point when the White House called Syria a 'failed state'¹⁶. However, besides the political transition, the U.S. has pursued a number of other objectives throughout a decade of involvement in the Syrian conflict, which included: conducting counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS/ISIL) and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly called Jabhat al-Nusra)¹⁷; competing with pro-Assad Russia and Iran over influence and control in the region¹⁸; providing assistance to the opposition forces and rebels, including the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces and its "spearhead" – the People's Defense Units (YPG), a Kurdish militant group¹⁹.

In 2011, with the rise of the Arab Spring, the Obama administration imposed unilateral sanctions aimed at impairing the financial capability of the Syrian government and putting pressure on President Bashar al-Assad to step down²⁰. Simultaneously, the U.S. offered diplomatic support to the Syrian opposition, later providing rebel forces with non-lethal aid and humanitarian assistance, including body armor, communications equipment, intelligence data, and high-resolution satellite imagery²¹. The U.S. also recognized the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (SNC) as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people²². Yet, this approach did not yield the desired result as Assad managed to hold onto power with the support of Russia and Iran.

¹⁴ Secretary Kerry Delivers a Statement on Syrian Negotiations. U.S. Embassy in Uzbekistan, 2016, 1 February. Available at: <https://uz.usembassy.gov/secretary-kerry-delivers-a-statement-on-syrian-negotiations> (accessed 15 August 2023).

¹⁵ Human rights lawyers attempt to bring Syria war crimes cases to ICC. *The Guardian*, 2022, 16 February. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/16/human-rights-lawyers-attempt-to-bring-syria-war-crimes-cases-to-icc> (accessed 20 August 2023).

¹⁶ White House says Russia increasingly isolated over Syria. *Reuters*, 2017, 11 April. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-whitehouse-idUSKBN17D25Q> (accessed 20 August 2023).

¹⁷ Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly called Jabhat al-Nusra) is a terrorist organization prohibited in the Russian Federation.

¹⁸ Dalton M. What options do we have in Syria? *CSIS*, 2016, 15 December. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/what-options-do-we-have-syria> (accessed 18 September 2023).

¹⁹ What is the Syrian Kurdish YPG? *Reuters*, 2022, 14 November. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/what-is-syrian-kurdish-ypg-2022-11-14/> (accessed 18 September 2023).

²⁰ U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Syrian Leader and 6 Aides. *The New York Times*, 2011, 18 May. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/world/middleeast/19syria.html#:~:text=The%20sanctions%20freeze%20any%20assets,according%20to%20the%20Treasury%20Department> (accessed 19 September 2023).

²¹ What's non-lethal about aid to the Syrian opposition? *Foreign Policy*, 2012, 20 September. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/20/whats-non-lethal-about-aid-to-the-syrian-opposition/> (accessed 20 September 2023).

²² Obama recognizes Syrian opposition coalition. *CNN*, 2012, 12 December. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/12/11/world/us-syria-opposition/index.html> (accessed 20 September 2023).

On August 31, 2013, tensions arose, with the U.S. announcing its willingness to directly intervene in the conflict after it accused Assad's regime of using chemical weapons in opposition-controlled areas of Damascus, which resulted in a number of civilian casualties – from 300 to 1700, according to different estimates²³. The Syrian government denied the accusations, attributing the use of chemical weapons to the opposition, with Russia supporting this claim and providing the U.S. with evidence, which proved that the use of chemical weapons has been a provocation²⁴. Yet, concessions had to be made to avoid direct U.S. involvement in the conflict. Russian mediation and Assad's intention to accede to the Chemical Weapons Convention de-escalated the situation and, consequently, caused the U.S. to refrain from direct intervention. Various demands and deadlines were imposed on the Syrian government to eliminate all stockpiles and chemical weapons facilities, yet they were never fully met (Abratt, 2017). After failing to conduct a military intervention, the U.S. started carefully arming rebels, providing them with weapons, ammunition, transport, while at the same time trying to prevent those weapons from getting into the hands of terrorist groups.

A serious shift in the U.S. stance on the Syrian conflict emerged in 2014, when the Islamic State militants began their invasion in Iraq and Syria, not long before proclaiming an "Islamic Caliphate" in the captured region (Kofman, 2017). The U.S. had to reassess its priorities in the region, now focusing on fighting terrorism instead of toppling Assad's regime. The September 2014 NATO summit resulted in the establishment of an international coalition to defeat ISIS, with the U.S. ordering airstrikes and dispatching its military to support local forces on the ground. The Global Coalition against Daesh brought together 68 states, including Western and Arabic countries. The coalition sought to eliminate the Islamic State and terrorist groups with a close connection to Al-Qaeda²⁵ from Syria and Iraq²⁶. Today the coalition consists of 86 members, 11 of which participate in airstrikes, and only 4 contribute ground troops (US, UK, France, Australia), while others' participation is formal and symbolic.

²³ Как Сирию обвиняли в применении химического оружия. *TASS*, 2018, 9 April. Available at: <https://tass.ru/info/5108148> (accessed 22 September 2023).

²⁴ Syria hands Russia new gas attack 'evidence'. *Al Jazeera*, 2013, 18 September. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/9/18/syria-hands-russia-new-gas-attack-evidence> (accessed 22 September 2023).

²⁵ Al-Qaeda is a terrorist organization prohibited in the Russian Federation.

²⁶ Борьба с ИГ и поддержка оппозиции. Роль США в сирийском кризисе. *TASS*, 2019, 8 October. Available at: <https://tass.ru/info/6975373?ysclid=lko46nvndm856585537> (accessed 26 September 2023).

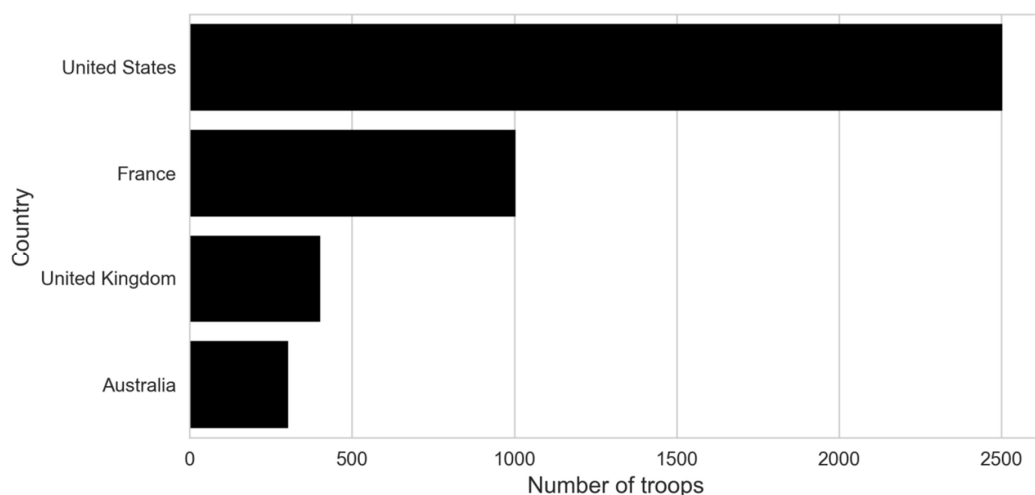


Figure 1. Distribution of troop burden between participants of Western coalition in Syria²⁷

During the Trump administration, one of the major issues was whether the U.S. should stay in Syria, increase its military presence and pressure the Assad regime to step down, or completely withdraw from the conflict, letting Russia and the Syrian government enjoy their "victory" (Hof, 2019). A key milestone in the process of making this decision was the defeat of ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliate groups in 2017. By the end of 2017, ISIS lost 95% of its territory in Syria and Iraq. In November, with the Iraqi forces capturing the town of Rawa, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi announced the collapse of the Islamic Caliphate²⁸. Although less than 1000 IS fighters still remained in the region, their significant loss of territory was enough to declare victory over ISIS.

A serious challenge that the United States faced while fighting ISIS in Iraq was its competition with Iran in Iraq and the issue of Iran-backed militias - Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The latter conducted a number of attacks on the Global Coalition convoys in Baghdad, as well as on American troops and facilities, including the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad, with the aim of pressuring the Iraqis to stop their cooperation with the U.S. and reducing American influence in the country²⁹. The situation worsened after the United States retaliated by launching airstrikes that killed Qassem Soleimani, head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards'

²⁷ Source: Database of Military Interventions by CEAS.

²⁸ Iraq announces 'victory' over Islamic State in Mosul. *The Guardian*, 2017, 9 July. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/09/iraq-announces-victory-over-islamic-state-mosul> (accessed 3 October 2023).

²⁹ Cordesman A.H. (2020) America's Failed Strategy in the Middle East: Losing Iraq and the Gulf. *CSIS*, 2020, 2 January. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/americas-failed-strategy-middle-east-losing-iraq-and-gulf> (accessed 5 October 2023).

Quds Force, and Jamal Jaafar Mohammed Ali Ebrahimi (more widely known as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis), deputy chief of the Iraqi PMF³⁰. Thus, the competition between Iran and the U.S. over their influence in the region has created more security risks and has undermined both parties' efforts to fight terrorism in Iraq and Syria.

Conclusion

At the onset of the Arab Spring, Russia, alongside Iran, became a key partner for Syria. At the same time, the West increased pressure on Damascus pushing for regime change in the country. Having lamented its previous decision to greenlight NATO intervention in Libya, Russia displayed unwavering determination to support and maintain Bashar Assad's regime in Syria. The situation in Syria was viewed as distinct from other cases. Despite the interventionist ideas put forth by the US, Turkey, and Western powers regarding the Syrian crisis, Russia positioned itself firmly against any such interventions and provided military and economic assistance to the Assad regime.

Several turning points impacted the course of the crisis in this period. One crucial issue was the use of chemical weapons in Ghouta on August 21, 2013, which evolved into a cornerstone in Russia's increased role in the Syrian crisis. Russia's policy aimed at resolving the crisis through diplomatic means earned it a reputation of a peacekeeper in the eyes of the international community at that time. This stance also enhanced the image of Russia as a reliable and powerful actor on the regional and global scale.

The Russian military intervention, or rather counterintervention, in Syria had a game-changing impact on the conflict dynamics. The regime swiftly gained ground against opposition forces and ISIS, allowing Russia to preserve its crucial partnership and interests in the region.

Russian intervention in Syria was significantly shaped by its perceptions of some major structural shifts as well as its relations with other actors involved in the Syrian crisis and Middle Eastern politics in general. As we stated earlier, states do not exist in a vacuum, as they are embedded in a tight structure of social relations with other states. Intervention in civil conflict, as well as any foreign policy action, could be understood not only as a consequence of conflict dynamics but rather of a broader set of social and structural factors. Russia's successful and effective response to the Syrian crisis was in part based on a precise understanding of the nature of its relations with actors involved in it. We have proposed to view Russian involvement in Syria as a counterintervention directed against hostile actions of the Western coalition.

³⁰ Iran's Qassem Soleimani killed in US air raid at Baghdad airport. *Al Jazeera*, 2020, 3 January. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/3/irans-qassem-soleimani-killed-in-us-air-raid-at-baghdad-airport> (accessed 6 October 2023).

There are three major aspects that essentially prompted the Russian counterintervention effort. First, its positive relations with Syria as Russia's valuable and long-standing ally in the Middle East. Several events described earlier made Russia believe that its ally was in danger. Second, the cumulative history of hostile relations with the West pushed Russia to counterbalance the coalition's efforts to topple Assad's regime and reshape Middle Eastern politics. Western proactive interventionism in the Middle East as well as the imposition of sanctions following the Ukraine crisis shaped Russian perception of the West as mainly a hostile group of actors. Finally, Russia also reacted to a direct hostility emanating from a non-state actor, the Islamic State. The latter not only proved to be a disruptive force in the Middle East, but also had the potential to spread its malignant influence to Muslim countries bordering Russia.

The key difference between American and Russian Syrian strategy was consistency of goals. While Russia continuously pursued the aim of supporting Assad, the Western coalition had to respond to new challenges and Russian initiatives by changing their strategy. As a result, while Russia ended up being successful and establishing a firm foothold in the country, the U.S. failed to achieve most of its objectives, despite higher expenses.

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УСПЕХ КОНТРИНТЕРВЕНЦИИ: РОССИЙСКОЕ И АМЕРИКАНСКОЕ ВМЕШАТЕЛЬСТВО В СИРИЙСКИЙ КРИЗИС

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Аннотация: Арабская весна, начавшаяся в Тунисе в 2010 году, быстро распространилась по всему Ближнему Востоку, спровоцировав протесты во многих странах региона, включая Ливию и Сирию. В то время как в Ливии Совет Безопасности ООН одобрил военное вмешательство НАТО против режима Каддафи, в случае с Сирией мнения разделились: Россия и Китай наложили вето на попытку западных стран вмешаться в конфликт и свергнуть президента Сирии Башара Асада. Намерение США напрямую вмешаться в сирийскую гражданскую войну, вызванное применением в Сирии химического оружия в 2013 году, было пресечено российскими дипломатическими усилиями. В то же время рост террористической угрозы в Сирии и Ираке привел к созданию возглавляемой США Глобальной коалиции против ИГИЛ, осуществившей в 2014 году авиаудары и тем самым вынудившей Асада, потерявшего контроль над значительной частью территории страны, обратиться за помощью к президенту России Владимиру Путину. В связи с этим Россия приступила к осуществлению ответного вмешательства в Сирию, стремясь оказать поддержку Асаду в его борьбе за сохранение власти, противодействию терроризму и восстановлению контроля над страной. В данной статье рассматриваются американские и российские задачи в Сирии, ограниченные результаты военного вмешательства под руководством США и успехи ответного вмешательства России в конфликт.

Ключевые слова: Россия, США, Сирия, Арабская весна, вооруженное вмешательство, гражданская война, терроризм, операция российских ВКС в Сирии