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SYRIA: PRESERVING THE OUTPOSTS OF RUSSIA'S POWER

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Exercise Solo Flight

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SYRIA: PRESERVING THE OUTPOSTS OF RUSSIA'S POWER

According to the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for Syria, Panos Moumtzis, 2018 marks the seventh year of the civil war and the “dramatic deterioration, massive displacement, disrespect of protection of civilians and people’s lives” is the worse year yet.¹ Although the instability may have escalated since the Arab Spring in 2011, the underpinnings of the unrest had been percolating for nearly 100 years. In recent years, President Bashar al Assad’s own economic policies in combination with a severe, multi-year drought and interference from multiple stakeholders exacerbated the disorder and broke the Arab Spring mould. With two Russian bases in Syria, Assad had no fear of being overturned, despite international calls to do so. With confidence, Assad continued to fight enemies against the state, be they combatants, non-state actors or his own citizens, sparking one of the largest refugee crises in modern times.² Despite the atrocities carried out by President Bashar al Assad, this paper will show that Syria’s bilateral relationship with Russia has contributed to the delay of the intrastate conflict resolution, ultimately protecting his regime from being replaced.

Although there are many internal and external influences effecting the Syrian civil war, it is the Russian influence that has had the most significant impact impeding conflict resolution. While the modern construct of Syria is a by-product of colonial legacies, international agreement and regional influences of the 20th century, their recent history of violent oppression was exploited by Russia to allow them to maintain a foothold in the Mediterranean. Even though the conflict between the many extremist, rebellious and pro-Assad factions attempting to dominate

¹ Reuters. “2018 worst year in Syria’s humanitarian crisis: U.N. official” Beirut, 18 May 18.

² BBC. “Why is there a war in Syria?” London, 15 Mar 18.

the state have created a humanitarian crisis, it was the political and military influence from Russia which limited international intervention in the conflict. On the heels of the US invasion into Iraq, and the Russian invasion into Crimea, the re-emergence of the bipolar system protects Assad's regime from meeting the Arab Spring fate of his peers.

UNDERPINNINGS OF UNREST – COLONIAL LEGACY BREEDS NATIONALISM

A holdover from many conquests, Syria had historically been a sanctuary for different religious and ethnic cohorts which existed along side one another for centuries. Inhabitants of what is now Syria, predominantly Muslim since the 7th century, identified themselves with the self-governing community where they paid taxes. The concept of the nation state was cemented with the division of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, when Syria was placed under French rule. France did not adhere to the terms of the League of Nations mandate to create the conditions for an independent Syria. Now separated from Lebanon, the French imperial regime in Syria had used violence to maintain control over the newly formed territory to serve its own interests.³ France sabotaged the Syrian Congress to establish a constitution, create an independent army and empower the president. After decades of French imperial rule with the power to veto, "Syria remained without independence, without institutions of self-government . . . without territorial unity . . . [and without] proper instruction in responsible self-government."⁴ All that remained when independence was finally granted in 1946, was a fragile unity bathed in nationalism. Overcoming disunity was perceived as the number one challenge to a stable Syria.

³ Polk, William. "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad: How drought, foreign meddling, and long-festering religious tensions created the tragically splintered Syria we know today." *The Atlantic*. 10 Dec 2013.

⁴ Fildis, Ayse Tekdal. "The Troubles in Syria: Spawned by French Divide and Rule." *Middle East Policy Council*. Vol XVII, No. 4, Winter.

Two young students studying abroad created the Baath party (Arabic word for “Resurrection”) which aimed to create a modified version of socialism and religion under an Arab nation banner started to gained popularity.⁵ The majority of Syrian’s identified as Arab Muslims and promoted this as a national identity, lamentably this excluded the minorities living in small religious and ethnic cohorts throughout the rural country side. Worse still, this diversity was viewed as a weakness that should be assimilated into a single political and social structure. As evidenced in many developing countries, the “ethnic state is a product of the political imagination; it does not exist in reality . . . The idea of . . . [a single] ethnic nation . . . is a permanent provocation to war” where ethnic cleavages are bound to disrupt any attempted stability.⁶ Further complicating the issue were competing views on how the amalgamation should be instituted: along an Arab Sunni tradition (with protected minorities (i.e. Jewish) – promoted by the Muslim Brotherhood) or along a territorial line (regionally aligned with other Arab states as a “secular and . . . partly Westernized state” promoted by the Baath Party) which resulted in heightened tensions. These tensions were compounded by the regional conflicts with Israel, Jordon and Iraq.⁷

In 1955, Syria found a mutually beneficial relationship with the Soviet Union: both wanted to obstruct the US’s growing influence in the Middle East; the USSR needed to gain a foot hold in the Mediterranean (including access to oil and gas) and Syria needed to gain military imports to strengthen their parity against Israel.⁸ Having “great-power [US and USSR] involvement in the domestic and regional conflicts afflicting postcolonial states have . . .

⁵ Polk, William. “Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad.” *The Atlantic*. 10 Dec 2013.

⁶ Ayoob, Mohammed. “State Making, State Breaking, and State Failure.” In *Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World*, edited by Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2007, 103-104.

⁷ Polk, William. “Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad.” *The Atlantic*. 10 Dec 2013.

⁸ Sharnoff, Michael. “Why Russia will prevail in Syria.” *The Washington Post*. 27 Feb 2018.

deleterious consequences for state-building efforts . . . [which] contributed to the intensification of the security predicament faced” by countries like Syria.⁹

A member of the Alawi minority, Hafez al Assad became president in 1971. He promoted the secular model of the Baath Party and believed it would unify all the diverse groups in Syria.¹⁰

Hafez al Assad was a proud Arab patriot who promoted regional unity. His involvement in regional conflicts, numerous negotiations with Israel and combat with the Muslim Brotherhood was fierce but showed he had political foresight and a desire to ensure Syria’s interests were protected.¹¹ However he did so without awarding concessions or allowing compromise.¹²

Aligned with the Soviet Union and then Russia, peace remained elusory: repelling subversion from other states and interference from non-state actors, he maintained a police state rule, where the military and spy agencies ensured no one could oppose him. Although the violence was widespread it was often followed with reconstruction projects, he doubled the agricultural sector and set sights on becoming a food export powerhouse. Hafez al Assad’s leadership philosophy was to “help the Syrian people to live better provided . . . [so long as] they [did] not challenge his rule.”¹³ Surrounding himself with the same advisors, Bashar al Assad continued in his father’s footsteps.¹⁴

⁹ Ayoob, Mohammed. “State Making, State Breaking, and State Failure.” 2007, 108.

¹⁰ Polk, William. “Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad.” *The Atlantic*. 10 Dec 2013.

¹¹ The Guardian. “Hafez al-Assad: Obituary” 15 Jun 2000.

¹² The Guardian. “Like dictator, like son: how the Assad’s maintain a tight grip on power.” 14 Mar 2012.

¹³ Polk, William. “Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad.” *The Atlantic*. 10 Dec 2013.

¹⁴ The Guardian. “Like dictator, like son: how the Assad’s maintain a tight grip on power.” 14 Mar 2012.

ASSAD'S ECONOMIC POLICY IMPACT ON DROUGHT

Educated and trained abroad as an ophthalmologist, Bashar Assad left his London practice to ascend to the Syrian Presidency after his father's death in June 2000.¹⁵ A diminished relationship with Russia at the start of Assad's term, fostered optimism as he attempted to liberalize and strengthen Syria albeit with a strict caveat to maintain control. Under Assad's openness, a "Syrian Glasnost," meant the release of 600 political prisoners, non-state newspapers, public gatherings and discussion of genuine political reform:

In the first six months of his quest for a Syrian version of the "China model," Asad has sought to build regime legitimacy through carefully-calibrated political reform; to revive the economy with a limited dose of free-market principles; and to ease tensions with previously hostile neighbors Turkey and Iraq in order to focus on bread-and-butter issues - control of Lebanon and hostility to Israel.¹⁶

After 9/11, the optimism did not last, as the 'Glasnost' started to fade with censorship, arrests and ruthless suppression which marked the beginning of the unrest.¹⁷ The US accused Syria of supporting terrorism, who labeled them as part of the "Axis of Evil" bringing to bear overt and covert attacks inside Syrian borders. The US implemented inconsistent economic policies against Syria which affected their revenues to try an influence public support of the regime.¹⁸

Many of the economic policies started by Hafez al Assad to "increase agricultural production, including land redistribution and irrigation projects, quota systems, and subsidies for diesel fuel to garner support of rural constituents." In an attempt to liberalize the economy,

¹⁵ Srivastava, Ranjana. "Bashar al Assad trained as a doctor. How did he become a mass murderer?" *The Guardian*. 18 April 2017.

¹⁶ Makovsky, Alan. "Syria under Bashar al-Asad: The Domestic Scene and the 'Chinese Model' of Reform." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. Policy #512, 17 Jan 2001, 1.

¹⁷ Muir, Jim. "Bashar al-Assad's tightening grip on Syria 10 years on." *BBC*. 17 July 2010, 1.

¹⁸ Polk, William. "Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad." *The Atlantic*. 10 Dec 2013

Bashar al Assad cut the subsidies to farmers.¹⁹ When a severe anthropogenic drought hit in 2006-2011, the subsidy cuts were devastating for the farmers. Two-thirds of Syrian agriculture (wheat and cotton crops) rely on precipitation, the remainder use irrigation canals and pumped groundwater. The increase of irrigation for farmland unintentionally put the aquifer in jeopardy as the water draw was beyond what the replenishment rate was, increasing the risk to the farmers livelihood. Lack of water created the conditions for “botanical diseases . . . [such as] wheat stripe rust, which shunts plant growth and shrivels wheat grains” further compounding the problem.²⁰ Intermediate and small farmers and herders “suffered from zero or near-zero production, and nearly all of their livestock herds were lost.”²¹ As the drought continued over multiple-seasons, the result was destabilization of lives and ultimately collapsed the industry. The follow-on effect was 1.5 million displaced people over the three-year drought and a lack of food security for the nation.²² During this time Russia quietly supplied arms to Assad thereby assuring, “Russia’s most important foothold in the region.”²³

ARAB SPRING – DESCENT INTO VIOLENCE

In 2011, there were other tensions brewing regionally. In an act of desperation, a young fruit vendor set himself on fire to protest Tunisian government policies; the incident was filmed

¹⁹ Kelley, Colin P, et al. "Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* (2015), 3241.

²⁰ Schwartzstein, Peter. “Inside the Syrian Dust Bowl: The Assad family’s favorite international development organization tried to turn Syria into an agricultural powerhouse. Its failure sparked a civil war” *Foreign Policy*. 5 Sep 2016.

²¹ Kelley, Colin P, et al. "Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought." 3241-3242.

²² Kelley, Colin P, et al. "Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought." 3242.

²³ Borschchevskaya, Anna. “Russia’s Many Interests in Syria.” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. 24 January 2013. Accessed 25 May 2018.

by bystanders and shared on social media. The subsequent results could not have been predicted, that one act of desperation triggered a cascade of further protests throughout Northern Africa and the Middle East. Empowered youth and the disenfranchised organized protests against oppressive governments, calling for reform. Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen all saw a forced change in leadership. The results for Syria however took a very different turn.²⁴

With over a million unemployed Syrians already displaced, the Arab Spring began to inspire protests against the Assad regime. Syrians expected that Assad would follow the path of his peers, to exile or into Allah's judgement. The Assad's regime response was to break the Arab Spring mould with a, "highly visible . . . protracted violence, divisive identity politics, focus[ed] on international intervention, crushing of expectations, fragmentation of the media landscape, state failure, and strategic proxy warfare." When Assad used all his available resources to hold onto power, the air of positivity that surrounded the protests of other nations turned into an overwhelming escalation of force.²⁵ The reciprocated response from the internally displaced, minority groups, splinter organizations and non-state actors, oppressed under the Assad regime was equally vicious. The catalyst of the Arab Spring had been usurped by individual groups who had competing ideologies about what Syria should look like, how it should be organized, forcing a spiral beyond the post-colonial disunity of the mid-1940s, creating a failing state which nearly erased Assad's Syria from the map.

²⁴ NPR Staff. "The Arab Spring: A Year Of Revolution." *NPR*. 17 Dec 2011.

²⁵ Lynch, Marc. "How Syria Ruined the Arab Spring: Hopes for peaceful change have been replaced by sectarian animosity and unending bloodshed." *Foreign Policy*. 3 May 2013.

RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE AND POWER

With two major bases in Syria, Russia watched the unrest closely as the Arab Spring rolled across North Africa into the Middle East. Initially, Putin “stated publicly that Moscow [was] not wedded to Assad, or to protecting the Syrian government,” leaving the West to consider resolution strategies. With a full fledged civil war raging in 2012, the splintered anti-Assad opposition groups were dug in and the “bottomless pit of humanitarian needs” and “appalling heights of brutality” made it difficult for the West to determine the best course of action to intervene.²⁶ Putin’s stance on Assad was evidently reversed as it became apparent that a “military intervention in Syria was prepared carefully, apparently in coordination with Iran, [and] accompanied [with] an element of surprise.”²⁷

Syria is important to Russia for several reasons, said Andrew Parasiliti, Director of the Center for Global Risk and Security at the Rand Corporation. These include the country's strategic geographic location in the heart of the Middle East; Russia's naval base in the Syrian port city of Tartus, which allows access to the Mediterranean; the Hmeimim Air Base currently operated by the Russians; and the Assad regime's role in helping to counter terrorism from jihadists who could inspire Islamist extremists on Russia's doorstep in Central Asia, Parasiliti said.²⁸

Russia saw international intervention in Syria as a direct threat to their influence in the Arab world. Russia had relationships with many of the nations impacted by the Arab Spring uprisings

²⁶ Welsh, Jennifer. “The ‘Wicked Problem’ in Syria.” *OpenCanada.org*. 4 Dec 2012.

²⁷ Dekel, Udi. Zvi Magen. “Russian Involvement in Syria: What has Changed, and the Significance for Israel.” *INSS Insight*. No 752, 7 Oct 2015.

²⁸ Simmons, Ann M. “Russia has been Assad’s greatest ally – as it was to his father before him” *Los Angeles Times* 06 April, 2017.

and in the case of Libya, lost billions in arms sales, they could not afford to lose its Mediterranean foothold as well.²⁹

By 2013, the US had been unable to find a solution to end the violence, “Moscow [had] firmly opposed international intervention to remove Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from power, arguing that the conflict must be resolved through negotiations and that Assad must be included in any transitional arrangement leading to a new government.”³⁰ Putin was not going to allow the West to have a perceived victory over a Russian territory, nor allow a failed state (similar to Chechnya in 1999-2009) or Islamic extremists to have any negative impact on Russia.³¹ Putin had to intervene to support Syria, which enabled Assad to regain his footing and reclaim territory lost in the first year of the war.³² “Since the start of the war, more than 465,000 Syrians have been killed, 1 million have been injured and 12 million — more than half the country's population — have been forced to flee their homes. Of the 12 million displaced, more than 5.5 million have moved abroad and registered as refugees.”³³ In the face of atrocities against humanity, including chemical weapons, has left a toll, millions displaced, and millions in reconstruction costs.³⁴

With a former super power as a long-term ally, Syria benefits from Russia's protection at the UN. Twelve times, Russia exercised its veto power to protect Syria: to protect Assad from being overthrown; to prevent condemnation of the alleged chemical attacks; to allow UN investigators access the alleged chemical attack sites; to impose economic sanctions; and to prevent an arms embargo against Syria.³⁵ Numerous times that Russia prevented an intervention and Syria did not have to compromise, secure in the belief that her most important ally would not

²⁹ Simmons, Ann M. “Russia has been Assad's greatest ally – as it was to his father before him” 1.

³⁰ Hill, Fiona. “The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad.” *Brookings Institute*. 25 Mar 2013.

³¹ Hill, Fiona. “The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad.” 1.

³² Simmons, Ann M. “Russia has been Assad's greatest ally – as it was to his father before him” 1.

³³ Ericson, Amanda. “6 basic questions about the war in Syria.” *The Washington Post*. 15 April 2018.

³⁴ Polk, William. “Understanding Syria: From Pre-Civil War to Post-Assad.” 1.

³⁵ RTE. “Russia's 12 UN vetoes on Syria.” *RTE*. 11 Apr 2018.

allow it to fall.³⁶ Numerous times that the United States influence in the Middle East was weakened, conversely strengthening Russia's stance.³⁷ In the end, it is the Syrian people who carry the burden of inflexibility and concession as the many stakeholders try to carve their version of Syria into the landscape while they flee the violence.

CONCLUSION

Peace solutions to the Syrian quagmire have been hotly debated. There were several factors that contributed to the civil war that now envelop Syria. Like many conflicts before it, the colonial legacy barely managed to unify the multiple religions, ethnicities and culture into a unified country. "The numerous divisions and re-divisions of Syria over a quarter century obstructed the development of a unified administrative elite." The result was an inexperienced Syria pushed together in a fragile unity, born from the hard-fought independence, the only learned proficiency was political radicalization which inherently fostered future instability.³⁸ Under a nationalist banner, the foundations of violence have perpetuated a dictatorship leaving the security of the Syrian people in jeopardy. Firmly in the USSR sphere of influence during the Cold War brought economic stability and security.

At the end of the Cold War left the new Assad regime to create new economic policies to strengthen their situation. These economic policies were drafted to tighten the government budget; however, they had an adverse impact on farmers. Economic policies would strip farmers of much needed subsidies causing the internal displacement of thousands of people out of

³⁶ Hill, Fiona. "The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad." 1.

³⁷ Sharnoff, Michael. "Why Russia will prevail in Syria." 1.

³⁸ Fildis, Ayse Tekdal. "The Troubles in Syria: Spawned by French Divide and Rule." 1.

destitution.³⁹ When the Arab Spring erupted in Tunisia and spread East, the loss of internal government subsidies compounded with the impact of a multi-year drought set the conditions for revolt.

The Syrian Arab Spring was met with severe violence that ultimately splintered the country. Multiple stakeholders, internal and external began to influence the situation however none had a greater claim over another as to what Syria could be/should be. With the end of the Cold War's sphere of influence and proxy conflicts, here Russia was re-establishing itself as a World Power and needed Syria to bolster that image. Learning from Gorbachev to not allow an ally to falter, Putin was determined to re-establish the bi-polar system, Putin was not going to let Assad's regime to fall. Russia needed Syria's alliance as much as Assad needed military support.⁴⁰ Here the two allies would stand in its outpost against the world, where the international, regional and local circumstances have set the conditions for their success-without compromise.

³⁹ Muir, Jim. "Bashar al-Assad's tightening grip on Syria 10 years on." *BBC*. 17 July 2010.

⁴⁰ Covington, S.R. "The Meaning of Russia's Campaign in Syria." *The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*. Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, Dec 2015, 2.

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<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-humanitarian/2018-worst-year-in-syrias-humanitarian-crisis-u-n-official-idUSKCN1IJ256>

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