



RUSSIA'S SYRIA POLICY:

FROM THE **Soviet Union**
TO THE **Russian Federation**



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Russia's Syria Policy: From the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation

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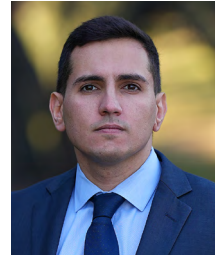
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About the Author

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Abstract

Since Peter the Great, Russia has aimed to become a global naval power by gaining access to the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean. However, British and American dominance in Southeast Asia impeded Russia's access to the Indian Ocean, leading it to focus on the Mediterranean Sea. During the Cold War, Russia leveraged anti-imperialist regimes in Egypt, Libya, and Syria, which provided Russia with Mediterranean access in exchange for Soviet support. By the 1970s, Russia had established naval ports in Syria and Egypt, but Egypt's shift toward the West in 1978 left Russia solely dependent on Syria for Mediterranean access, making Damascus Russia's "strategic partner."

Forged from shared Western threats, this partnership was bolstered by Russia's financial and military aid to Syria for access to naval facilities. However, the 1991 Soviet Union's collapse diminished Russia's capacity to further its ambitious Syrian plans, resulting in a "limited strategic friendship" for about two decades.

This relationship changed once more with the 2011 Syrian civil war. Russia's military intervention in 2015 in support of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad changed the dynamics of the conflict and Russia's relationship with Syria. Russia's pivotal role in preserving Assad's regime altered the "balance of dependency" in Russo-Syrian relations, transforming Russia from a "strategic partner" to a "savior." Consequently, Syria's total dependency on Russia has evolved it from a "strategic partner" to a "strategic piece" in Russia's grand strategy.

Part I: Rise

THE ROOTS OF RUSSO-SYRIAN RELATIONS

Introduction

The presence of Russians in Syria dates back to the 11th century during the golden age of Kievan Rus under the leadership of Yaroslav the Wise, the Grand Prince of Kiev and founder of the first written Russian law, the *Russkaya Pravda* (the Russian Truth). Yaroslav dedicated his political life to surpassing the Byzantine Empire in the race for leadership in Christian orthodoxy.¹ To achieve this, he needed to enhance Russia's material power and present himself as a faithful Orthodox leader. As a result, groups of Russian pilgrims, missionaries, and merchants were dispatched to explore the new world.² Given that the resource-rich and densely populated Levantine coasts were popular destinations for European merchants at the time, Russians followed suit and headed to Levant, leaving the first traces of Russia in present-day Syria.³ The constant power struggles among the Byzantines, Hamdanids, and Fatimids created a power vacuum in Syria⁴ that allowed Russian travelers to pursue their agenda without significant resistance. However, the decline of Kievan Rus following Yaroslav's death, a drastic shift in European trade patterns, and eventually the Mongol invasion prevented Yaroslav's orthodox mission in Syria from being fully realized.

A Long Pause in Russo-Syrian Relations

From the fall of Kievan Rus to the emergence of the Soviet Empire, Moscow did not have the opportunity to establish a new presence in Syria. This absence of Russian presence can be attributed to two major factors. First, the rise of the Ottoman Empire and subsequently the French Mandate, following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, prevented the creation of a power vacuum in Syria that would have allowed Russia to regain its previous foothold. Second, the political

instability within Russia, which culminated in the October Revolution of 1917, disoriented Russia's foreign policy to the extent that even the Russian Empire's sole attempt to establish a presence by opening a consular office in Damascus in 1893 was dissolved by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union or USSR) in 1922.⁵

An Imperialist French Mandate: The Revival of Russo-Syrian Relations over a Common Enemy

Although the Kremlin's decision to close the embassy in Damascus ended the physical presence of Russians in Syria, it did not end the USSR's involvement in the Syrian political spectrum. In fact, in 1924, the Syria Communist Party (SCP) was created,⁶ which gave birth to the Soviet Union's ideological influence over Syria. In a way, one can argue that similar to Yaroslav who sought influence in Levant with advocating Orthodox Christianity in the region, Communist Russia chose ideology as a major tool of influence. In this context, the Soviet figures started communication with Syrian Communists from the very beginning.⁷ The SCP quickly attracted the attention of the Soviet Union, which enabled it to join the Communist International (i.e., Comintern) in 1928.⁸ In light of SCP growth, in 1930, the Syrian elite Communists decided to form a joint front with Lebanese Communists and together established the Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party (SLCP).⁹ The outbreak of Communism in Syria was so unexpectedly quick that it forced the French intelligence service branch in Syria to choose counter-communism as its first priority.¹⁰

Given the rebellious nature of Communism, in 1925, the SLCP strongly supported the Great Syrian Revolt against the French Mandate in Syria.¹¹ The Communist connection went beyond simple communication, and in 1927, the SLCP started negotiations with the Soviet Consul in Jeddah, Karim Khakimov, to obtain support and supplies from Moscow.¹² According to French intelligence service reports, in one of these meetings between Khakimov and Muhammad Jamil Shakir, the representative of Amir Adil Arslan's rebellion's leader, Khakimov stated the USSR's desire to assist the Syrian revolt by providing them with equipment and money, and they even discussed what channels could be a proper line

to transfer these aids to Syrians.¹³ However, later, after a heated debate at the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), members of the committee who had been appointed by the central committee concluded that it was not feasible for the USSR to help the “Syrian Revolution,” and that the Soviet Union should focus on helping China.¹⁴ Apparently, the ECCI’s understanding was that the USSR did not have enough material power to help both China and Syria. Despite the impact of the ECCI decision on the Syrian revolt, the suggestion made by the USSR was very significant. The ECCI advised the Lebanese-Syrian Communist Party to collaborate more closely with the Syrian Nationalist movement.¹⁵

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Therefore, it seems naïve to consider the emergence of the Syrian Ba’ath party as a “nationalist-socialist” movement in 1947 unrelated to the ECCI suggestion. In fact, one can argue that the Syrian Ba’ath party is the outcome of a decade of cooperation between Syrian Communist movements and Syrian Nationalists.

In spite of all major changes of events that took place in the 1920s in Syria-USSR relations and the long-lasting impact of the Syrian Great Revolt, French colonial troops eventually suppressed the revolt in 1927 after two years of struggle. However, the SLCP gained a great reputation from it and stayed at the center of the USSR’s attention more than ever, to the extent that in 1928, the SLCP found the opportunity to present itself at the 6th summit of the Vladimir Lenin-founded Communist International Congress.¹⁶

It is hard to estimate to what extent the USSR’s decision not to help the Syrian revolt played a role in the failure of the revolt. Especially when considering that even if the USSR was willing to assist Syrians, the Russian aid could not be a game-changing event. This is particularly because the Soviet’s aid would either have to pass through the Turkish territory or the Red Sea, which was under the complete supervision of Anglo-French colonial troops. Therefore, the

chance of successfully deploying a mass amount of aid to Syria by the USSR was minimal.

Despite various factors contributing to the failure of the Syrian revolt, France successfully restored its dominance over the Levant. Both Russia and the Syrian independence movement had long sought a power vacuum to advance their political agendas. However, French domination did not completely prevent the growth of the Communist brotherhood between Syrian Communists and the USSR. Instead, the mode of communication changed, with Comintern agents focusing on bringing Syrian elites to Russia for education and training under Moscow's direct supervision, rather than spreading communism within Syria itself. In 1933, Khalid Bakdash, the founder of the SCP, moved to Moscow to enroll in the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, where he translated the first Arabic version of the Communist Manifesto.¹⁷ Bakdash believed that his and his comrades' efforts were not in vain. According to his speech at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern Report of the Arab Delegates, by 1935 the SCP was six times larger than in 1928 when the SLCP representatives delivered their first report at the Sixth Congress of the Comintern.¹⁸

Although calls for Syrian independence began immediately after the Occupied Enemy Territory Administration (OETA), a coalition of Anglo-French troops and armed Arab militants, successfully forced the Ottoman Empire to evacuate Syria, the well-equipped and heavily armed French military overwhelmingly outpowered local Arabs, leading to the failure of most Syrian attempts, such as the self-proclaimed Arab Kingdom of Syria.

Bakdash and his Syrian comrades who had moved to the USSR were awaiting a new window of chaos to restart their anti-imperialist actions in Syria. Eventually, in 1940, the power vacuum that both Russians and Syrians had sought emerged with Nazi Germany's invasion of France, which paralyzed French control over Syria. In 1941, the "Nation Bloc," the leading actor in the Syrian independence movement, took advantage of the struggle between the Vichy Government and the Anglo-Free French Coalition in Syria, and persuaded George Catroux, the high commissioner of Free France to the Levant, to declare Syria an independent state.¹⁹ Consequently,

in 1944, the proclamation of Syria's independence took place.²⁰ However, this did not mark the end of Syria's fight for independence, as the Franco-Syrian struggles continued for about a year, resulting in various bloodshed, including French colonial troops bombing Damascus and arresting many leaders of the Syrian independence movement in 1945.²¹ Eventually, in late 1945, Syria's independence received de jure recognition from the United Nations, leading to the evacuation of French colonial troops in 1946.

Despite Moscow's eagerness to return to Syria, the Kremlin did not wait for the French evacuation. In 1944, while Syria was still in the midst of its struggles with France, the Soviet Union recognized Syria's independence. On 1 February 1946, Moscow and Damascus signed their first "secret agreements," weeks before the French evacuation. Under these new secret agreements, the USSR promised Syria international and military support to enable the formation of its national army.²² Following the withdrawal of French troops from Syria, the USSR opened its embassy in Damascus,²³ marking the physical return of Russians to Syria. The nature of USSR-Syria relations began to materialize, and the USSR's military equipment became a major factor in their relations, breaking the monopoly of communism as the USSR's sole tool of influence. Consequently, in 1947, Syria purchased its first shipment of Russian-made weapons from Soviet proxies in Czechoslovakia.²⁴

Rise of Another Western Power in Syria Comes with Another Setback in Russo-Syrian Relations

Despite all the agreements and efforts of the SCP and USSR Comintern, the newly independent Syria, under the leadership of President Shukri al-Quwatli, did not become a Communist regime or even an anti-imperialist state.²⁵ In fact, Quwatli's government had a positive view toward the United States and sought a non-conflictual relationship with the United Kingdom.²⁶ Quwatli even rejected Syria's participation in the Trans-Arabia Pipeline project, which could have connected Saudi Arabia's oilfields to Lebanon via Syria, out of fear that it might threaten the British-owned Iraqi Petroleum Company.²⁷

However, Quwatli's interest in developing relations with the United States did not prevent him from warming relations with the SCP,

especially with Bakdash. Quwatli's relationship with Bakdash was not without consequences, as evidenced by the rejection of his request to purchase American-made weapons for Syria by the U.S. Congress in 1947 due to his ties with the SCP.²⁸ This decision by the U.S. Congress can be seen as the beginning of Syria's gradual pivot toward the Soviet Union, although it was not the only or most important factor. The major turning point in Syria-USSR relations occurred in 1948 with the first Arab-Israeli War. Israel's victory undermined Quwatli's position, and U.S. support for Israel during the war provided pro-Soviet forces in Syria with a strong propaganda tool.²⁹

As expected, the 1948 military disaster boosted the reputation of both the SCP and the Muslim Brotherhood,³⁰ both of which held hostile views toward the West, particularly the United States, which was forming a "special relationship" with Israel under President Harry S. Truman. In order to prevent Syria from falling into the hands of pro-Soviet forces, the CIA engineered a coup and assisted friendly military figures in taking over. Among the nominees, Colonel Husni

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al-Za'im, known for his anti-Soviet stance, caught the CIA's attention.³¹ With the help of Miles Copeland, a CIA Middle East specialist, Za'im staged a successful coup on

29 March 1949, removing Quwatli from the presidency and installing himself as the new president.³² Not surprisingly, Za'im sought further collaboration with the United States.

Following Za'im's takeover, the Soviet Union's propaganda machine perceived him as a threat and feared that Za'im's regime would dismantle the efforts of the SCP and Russian Comintern in Syria. In light of Moscow's growing concern, Soviet Press Attaché Victor Nicolin, in a conversation with Emir Farid Chehab, the founder of Lebanon's intelligence service, claimed that Za'im intentionally destroyed all Syrian papers, except for those funded by the United States and France.³³ Vladimir Ivanov, a Soviet representative, expressed skepticism

about Za'im's intentions and alleged a "new plan" by Za'im to launch a massive attack against Communists and Russian allies in Syria.³⁴

Indeed, Ivanov's concerns were not unfounded. Immediately after seizing power, Za'im ordered the military and security forces to launch a mass arrest campaign against pro-Soviet communists in Syria. As a result, more than 400 leading figures of the SCP and other Communist groups were arrested.³⁵ The SCP was banned, and its leaders were imprisoned.³⁶ Za'im's anti-Soviet campaign posed a significant threat to the Soviet Union, making the Kremlin hesitant to recognize Za'im's government.³⁷ Although the USSR recognized his government a few days later, his actions prompted Moscow to launch an analytical campaign to understand his policies and the forces behind him.³⁸ However, five months later, on 14 August 1949, Za'im was removed from power and executed in another military coup led by Colonel Sami Hinnawi.³⁹

Syria's Balancing Act: Two Steps Toward the United States and One Step Closer to the Soviet Union

After the removal of Za'im, a new coalition government was formed by Hashim Atassi. However, Hinnawi, who was the man behind the scenes, was arrested during another coup d'état staged by Colonel Abib Shishakli in December 1949. Although Shishakli kept Atassi in his presidential post, it did not prevent political disputes from emerging. As a result, over the course of two years, six prime ministers were appointed under Atassi's leadership.⁴⁰

Despite the changes in the prime minister's office, the Shishakli-Atassi leadership brought a brief period of stability to Syria, which enabled Damascus to pursue a balanced foreign policy. In 1950, Syria signed a non-aggression pact with the USSR, further developing Moscow-Damascus relations.⁴¹ One could argue that the waves of political instability and suspicions about the CIA's involvement in previous coups,⁴² especially the Za'im-led coup, were major reasons behind Atassi and Shishakli's decision to balance against Western influence over Syria by drawing closer to the Soviet Union. However, it should be noted that Shishakli did not intend to align with the Soviet Union against the United States. In fact, he aimed to establish

a balance between the USSR and the United States. As part of this approach, while warming relations with the Soviet Union, he also sought aid from the United States to modernize the Syrian Army.⁴³

The improved relations with foreign powers gave Shishakli the confidence to consolidate power and put an end to power-sharing with Atassi. In essence, Shishakli desired the presidential office to have a ceremonial role, with himself being the one who actually governed the country.

New Political Development in Syria Threatened Soviet Union Major Tool of Influence over Syria

Shishakli's desire for a monopoly over Syria was not the sole factor that encouraged him to attempt a military dictatorship in Syria. Another motivator was the threat he faced from pro-Soviet forces in Syria, who were pressuring him to form an alliance with the Soviet Union. In 1951, Ahmad al-Haji Yunes, a prominent member of the Syrian Parliament, delivered a speech in parliament and officially proposed forming an alliance with the Soviet Union.⁴⁴ The situation between Shishakli and the parliament intensified on 10 November 1951, when the Syrian parliament elected Ma'aruf Dawalibi, a known pro-Soviet politician, to form a new collational government.⁴⁵

In response to Dawalibi's appointment, Shishakli launched another coup, dissolved the parliament, and issued mass arrest warrants for Syrian opposition figures, which led to President Atassi's resignation. Shishakli, who was waiting for an opportunity to take total control over Syria, appointed his right-hand man, General Fawzi Selu, as Syria's president and prime minister, although Shishakli maintained control over Syria. Feeling threatened by pro-Soviet Syrian communists, he started moving closer to the West. Shishakli renewed de-escalatory talks with Turkey to decrease tension with NATO, and he also signaled his willingness to make a peace treaty with Israel. However, his positive signals to the United States were left without reward, and in response, the United States convinced the World Bank to provide Syria with a \$200 million loan.⁴⁶ This development in Syria-United States relations led the United States to view Shishakli's regime as the best available option in Syria.⁴⁷

While the Soviet Union anxiously observed the changing events in Syria, Moscow decided to take further actions to empower its ideological tool of influence in Syria by strengthening ties with Syrian communists. The Russian Comintern extended an invitation for Syrian communists to attend the Soviet Committee Conference for Peace Defense and the Preparatory Committee of the World Economic Conference in Moscow in September 1952. Additionally, the Russian propaganda machine hosted a bilateral meeting between Syrian Communist and Lebanese Communist Parties at the Russian Press Attaché's office in Beirut, seeking to empower Syrian communists and enhance Russian influence over Syria.⁴⁸

As a result of Soviet propaganda and activities by the Islamic Brotherhood in Syria, anti-government and anti-American protests erupted in major cities such as Damascus and Aleppo in mid-December. These riots were followed by a failed coup attempt to remove Shishakli. These new developments signaled to Shishakli that it was time to maintain appearances and establish a sort of balance between the West and the East. He started criticizing the West in his public speeches and reminded the United States to respect Arab nationalist aspirations. By early 1953, Shishakli began distancing himself from the idea of creating the Middle East Defense Organization, a U.K.-proposed regional security system to contain Soviet Union expansion in the Middle East. Shishakli stated that Syria would participate in any regional defense pact under the condition of resolving major issues with Israel.⁴⁹ He hoped that by postponing further developments in Syria's relations with the West, he could ease pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood and Syrian communists and assure the USSR that Damascus had no intention of siding with the West against Moscow.

After balancing Syria's relations with both the West and the Soviet Union, Shishakli refocused on domestic politics. With a sense of peace from foreign powers, on 11 July 1953, Shishakli removed Colonel Selu from the presidential office and appointed himself as Syria's president. While he successfully avoided making enemies among global powers, Shishakli miscalculated the power of internal enemies, given the numerous coups he had carried out. In February 1954, a coalition

of Druze tribal leaders, members of the Ba'ath Party, and the Syrian Communist Party staged a coup and forced him to leave Syria, after which he fled to Brazil.

The 1954 Coup: The Beginning of the Soviet Union's Comeback

The 1954 coup, led by Colonel Adnan Malaki of the Syrian National Socialist Party, marked a significant turning point in Syrian politics. After removing Shishakli from power, Malaki returned the government to civilian hands and reinstated former President Atassi as the provisional president. A few months after the coup, President Atassi began to steer Syria toward closer ties with the Soviet Union by purchasing 44 tanks from East Germany.⁵⁰

While the arms deals were important, the timing of the coup itself was a crucial factor in Soviet-Syria relations. Just days before the coup, Pakistan and Turkey signed a pact of mutual cooperation, signaling a growing regional alliance against Soviet expansionist policies. Moscow recognized the potential threat posed by this new bilateral cooperation. This concern was justified, as a few months later, in May, the United States and Pakistan signed a mutual defense agreement, further solidifying the formation of a military alliance in the region. Subsequently, Turkey and Iraq signed a military agreement in Baghdad, establishing the foundation of the Baghdad Pact. This new military alliance was officially institutionalized with the membership of the United Kingdom in April 1955, followed by Pakistan.⁵¹

In the meantime, the Soviet Union anxiously observed the formation of a Middle Eastern NATO aimed at preventing the expansion of the USSR into the Middle East.⁵² Moscow was particularly concerned about the potential decision of Syria and Jordan to join the Baghdad Pact, which could effectively block Soviet Union's presence in the Levant. Therefore, it can be argued that the 1954 coup was a stroke of luck for the Soviet Union as it prevented Syria from joining the Baghdad Pact. However, it did not prevent the growth of the pact itself. In fact, in November 1955, Iran joined the pact, completing the southern belt against the Soviet Union.

Despite all the bad news that Moscow was receiving from the expansion of the Baghdad Pact, the new developments in Syria were signaling positive news to the Kremlin. Particularly, in August 1955, following a semi-democratic election, Atassi peacefully transferred power to Shukri al-Quwatli, making him the only three-time president of Syria. Quwatli initially sought military and financial assistance from the United States, but all of his efforts were blocked by the U.S. Congress.⁵³ As a result, he reinstated Atassi's pivot to the Soviet Union.⁵⁴

In addition to the arms sales, Quwatli adopted a "neutral" foreign policy⁵⁵ that gave peace of mind to the Soviet Union, which was anxious about Syria's previous friendly attitude toward the United States. Although Quwatli officially declared neutrality as Syria's position in the Cold War, in reality, he leaned toward boosting Syria's relations with Soviet-friendly nations such as Yugoslavia and India.⁵⁶

Syria's Participation in the First Middle Eastern Soviet-Friendly Alliance: The Egyptian-Syrian Mutual Defense Pact

With the new developments in Syria's foreign policy and rising tensions with Israel, Quwatli sought closer relations with Egypt, the Soviet Union's closest partner in the Middle East. In March 1955, both countries signed a "Defense Treaty" that bound them together with a "collective security" arrangement.⁵⁷ Although the Soviet Union was not a party to the Syria-Egypt defense pact, Moscow was pleased to observe the rise of a new regional alliance that aimed to counterbalance the U.S.-backed Baghdad Pact.⁵⁸ This announcement meant that the members of the Baghdad Pact, in addition to countering the expansion of the USSR into the region, now had to face a new military challenge within the region.

One could argue that it was not purely coincidental that just a few months after the formation of the Syria-Egypt Pact, in June 1955, Egypt and the Soviet Union started secret negotiations for a major arms sales deal. This deal resulted in the delivery of 100 T-34 tanks, 80 MiG-15 jet fighters, and 20 Ilyushin IL-28 strategic bombers to Egypt.⁵⁹ It is safe to say that the Soviet Union's agreement to sell such crucial

weaponry to Egypt significantly increased the offensive capability of the Baghdad Pact's competitor in the region.

However, these new developments were not without cost for the Soviet Union. In 1956, during the height of the Suez Crisis, Syria not only offered official military support to Egypt in the war against the Anglo-French-Israeli alliance but also deployed multiple units of its army to support Egypt.⁶⁰ Additionally, Quwatli made an emergency visit to Moscow to inform General Secretary Khrushchev that "Israel, Great Britain, and France want to destroy Egypt! It's a conspiracy!"⁶¹ and that the Soviet Union must "send in the large Red Army that defeated Hitler!"⁶² In response to Quwatli's request, Khrushchev called for Marshal Georgy Zhukov, who explained that "for our army to move into Egypt, it would have to pass through Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Syria. This, Mr. President, will ignite World War III."⁶³ However, the Soviet Union's negative response to Quwatli's request did not mean that Moscow desired to stay neutral in the new conflict. In fact, the Soviet Premier Nikolai Bulganin, in a letter to the French, British, and Israeli governments, declared that Moscow was "fully resolved to use force to crush the aggressors and to restore peace in the Middle East" and even contained a veiled threat to "use nuclear weapons against London and Paris if hostilities continued."⁶⁴

Ultimately, thanks to Khrushchev's support and U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower's warning to Great Britain that the U.S. would sell a significant portion of pound sterling bonds, which could lead to the collapse of the U.K. pound's value,⁶⁵ the Anglo-French-Israeli forces withdrew from their occupied positions in the Sinai Peninsula.

A Domestic Reward for the Loyal Ally

Despite the upheaval of the Suez Crisis, it is safe to argue that it strengthened Russo-Syrian relations. Khrushchev's threats against the Anglo-French-Israeli coalition proved the Soviet Union to be a reliable ally. As a result, the pro-Soviet forces gained greater influence in Syria's decision-making system. In August 1957, Quwatli appointed Colonel Afif al-Bizri as the new chief-of-staff of the Syrian Army.

The appointment of al-Bizri, known for being a "fellow traveler," for his sympathies toward the Soviet Union,⁶⁶ raised concerns among the

Western Bloc that Syria might become a “Soviet satellite.” Speculation grew to the point where the U.S. State Department, in a telegram to the U.S. Embassy in Saudi Arabia, warned: “In our view, as a result of accepting economic, financial, and military dependence upon the USSR and vast arms shipments from it, there has gradually taken place in Syria the elimination of true patriots and the concentration of power in the hands of those who accept guidance from Moscow.”⁶⁷

Despite President Quwatli’s statement emphasizing Syria’s policy of “positive neutralism” in the Cold War context, the growing speculation led to a new generation of regional crisis. Turkey, a staunch member of the Baghdad Pact, deployed heavily armed troops along the Turkish-Syrian border. In response, Khrushchev, known for his “pivot to the Middle East” policy,⁶⁸ threatened Turkey with a “military response” if Ankara decided to invade Syria.⁶⁹ Under pressure from President Eisenhower, Turkey ended its border operation in October. While the crisis did not yield favorable results for the United States and its allies, it strengthened Russo-Syrian relations and portrayed the Soviet Union as a reliable and loyal ally.

The Beginning of Economic Factors in Russo-Syrian Relations and their Impact on Syrian Domestic Politics

In light of the growing relations, less than a year after the Suez Crisis, Syria and the USSR signed their first long-term “financial and trade agreement” in October 1957. As per the agreement, the Soviet Union agreed to finance Syria’s major construction projects, including the Euphrates Dam and others, for approximately \$90 million (equivalent to about \$1 billion today).⁷⁰ While the Soviet Union’s support and financial aid to Syria during the crisis with Turkey came at a cost for President Quwatli, it further increased the growing influence of the pro-Soviet Ba’athist front, which had already made significant inroads in the Syrian Army and the country’s political spectrum, thanks to Colonel Bizri’s appointment.

Under pressure from Bizri and his allies, Quwatli appointed Akram al-Hawrani, the leader of the Arab Socialist Party, as the Speaker of the Syrian Parliament. Given that both Bizri and Hawrani were hardcore Pan-Arabists, the unity between Egypt and Syria appeared inevitable.

In late October, Anwar Sadat, the Speaker of the Egyptian Parliament, made a trip to Syria to observe the Syrian Parliament's voting session on unity with Egypt. Following unanimous support from the Syrian Parliament and a series of negotiations, Syria and Egypt merged on 22 February 1958, to establish the United Arab Republic (UAR) under the leadership of President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

Soviet Union and United Arab Republic Relations: Not a Drama-Free Relationship

Despite the rhetoric of solidarity between the two Arab nations, Syria's role in the UAR was reduced to being the "Northern Province" of the United Arab Republic,⁷¹ rather than an equal partner, after Syrian delegations accepted Nasser's request for Syria's adoption of Egyptian socio-political institutions.

Even though Nasser's Egypt was the major ally of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, it did not turn the UAR into a satellite state of Moscow. Immediately after the formation of the UAR, Nasser signed an order banning the Syrian Communist Party, which was something the former Syrian administration could not have imagined. Nasser went even further and accused the Syrian Communist Party of attempting to separate Arab nations,⁷² making it clear that the UAR's formation was owed to the Pan-Arabist movement alone. Despite the UAR's displeasing signal, the Soviet Union remained determined to expand ties with the new Arab Republic. In line with this, the USSR loaned the UAR about \$100 million for the development of the High Aswan Dam and \$178 million for industrial infrastructure.⁷³

Meanwhile, the United States, concerned about Moscow's growing influence over the new mega-Arab nation in the region, increased its financial aid to the UAR. From 1959 to 1961, the United States provided the UAR with approximately \$257 million.⁷⁴

As expected, similar to the USSR loans, most of the U.S. economic assistance was spent on construction projects in Egypt. The central role of Egypt in the UAR exacerbated grievances among Syrians. As a result, 28 September 1961, a group of Syrian army officers led by Colonel Hayder al-Kuzbari and Colonel Abdol Karim al-Nahlawi staged a coup, announcing Syria's withdrawal from the UAR and restoring the

Syrian Arab Republic. The coupists appointed Maamun al-Kuzbari to form the new Syrian government, which peacefully held parliamentary and presidential elections in December 1961 and transferred power to Dr. Nazim al-Qudsi. The power shift in Syria had significant implications for the Soviet Union. Shortly after the election, Syria's foreign policy shifted from closer ties with the Soviet Union to a closer relationship with West Germany. Damascus quickly replaced its financial relations with Moscow with economic collaboration with Bonn.⁷⁵

However, on 22 April 1962, Syria's newly appointed Prime Minister, Bashir al-Azm, sought to prevent further escalations with the USSR by emphasizing Syria's positive neutrality in the Cold War on Radio Damascus. Unfortunately, al-Azm's claim was not given a chance to be tested, as another military coup brought an end to the Qudsi-Azam government.

Part II: Growth

The Ba'athists' Takeover: Time for the Soviet Union to Harvest

Finally, after five decades of the adventure, the Syrian Ba'ath Party, which owed its existence to the cooperation of Soviet allies in the Syrian Communist movement and Syrian nationalists, seized power through a coup. The leading members of the military wing of the Syrian Ba'ath Party had been planning to forcefully take over Syria for about a year but were held back by the fear of failure. However, in February 1963, the Iraqi Ba'athist Party orchestrated a coup and installed the Ba'ath regime in Iraq, giving the Syrian Ba'ath Party the courage to enforce their long overdue plan.

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The coup makers announced the formation of the National Council for the Revolutionary Command (NCRC) as the supreme body of the government and appointed General Amin al-Hafez as the new president of Syria. Although Hafez was known as a person with no ideological dedication, his statesmanship, including the nationalization of Syria's major banks, financial institutions, and oil resources, aligned more with the USSR.

Hafez centralized Syria's foreign policy around the Palestinian issue and strengthened ties with the Soviet Union in exchange for Moscow's support. Thanks to the change of events in Iraq and Syria and Hafez's

friendly attitude toward the USSR, one could argue that March 1963 was truly the highlight of Moscow's Middle East policy.⁷⁶

The Ba'athists' takeover in Iraq led to Iraq's withdrawal from the Baghdad Pact and significantly undermined this anti-Soviet military bloc. Moreover, the Syrian March coup not only deterred the threat of Syria joining any U.S.-backed coalition but also allowed Moscow to expand its footprint across the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Rise of Neo-Ba'athism and the Ideological Brotherhood with the Soviet Union

The Soviet Union's emerging influence over Syria and the region was not entirely "stress-free," as in February 1966, when younger factions of the Syrian Ba'ath party (aka Neo-Ba'athists) staged a coup against General Hafez and removed him from the office. The coup was led by former allies of Hafez and key plotters of the 1963 coup, General Saleh Jadid and General Hafez al-Assad. Right after overthrowing Hafez, the coup makers appointed Nureddin al-Atassi, a relative of former President Hashim Atassi, to play the ceremonial role of president, but in fact, it was General Jadid who took control of Syria.⁷⁷

Shortly after the Neo-Ba'athists' takeover, it appeared that as far Soviet's interest was concerned, there was no cause for alarm. In fact, thanks to the new coup, Soviet's good ally, Amin Hafez, was replaced by a better ally. Jadid's Neo-Ba'ath was even more aligned with the Soviet Union than Hafez's Ba'ath establishment. Unlike traditional Ba'athism, which placed its emphasis on Pan-Arabism and considered socialism as a "means" to unify Arab societies, Neo-Ba'athism saw socialism as the true "end."⁷⁸

Simply put, in Jadid's Neo-Ba'ath view, pan-Arabism was simply a way to construct a mega-Arab socialist society, a shift of paradigm that created a semi-ideological brotherhood between Syria and the Soviet Union. In this context, Jadid entirely aligned Syria with the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc without making the slightest attempt to keep the previous "neutral appearance."⁷⁹ Jadid's pro-Soviet reforms were not without reward, however, because shortly after his takeover, the Soviet Union agreed to provide Syria with \$150 million for developing the hydroelectric station on the Euphrates River.⁸⁰

In addition to the change of ideological paradigm, Jadid moved forward to de-escalation with Egypt's Nasser, which relieved the Soviet Union from one of its major concerns, division among the anti-imperialist Arab States. To the Soviet Union, Arab unity was a matter of strategic importance, since only a united Arab front was truly capable of undermining the West's influence over the region.⁸¹

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Although the re-formation of a united socialist Arab front was not cost-free for the Soviet Union, thanks to the de-escalation between Egypt and Syria and the growth of cooperation between Nasser and Jadid to counter Israel, the Soviet Union was forced to take sides against Israel in the region.⁸² The Soviet Union, in light of its support of Jadid, opened its defense industry to Syria, providing Damascus with the chance to purchase seven Il-28 bomber aircraft, 20 air search radar, MiG-17 and MiG-21 air fighters, 20 Mi-4A helicopters, and hundreds of M-30, ML-20, BS-3, A-19 towed guns.⁸³

The Soviet Union's support and generous arms sales boosted Jadid's confidence, but it did not help escalate the situation between Syria and Israel. Jadid considered Syria and Arab nations' conflict with Israel as a matter of "peoples/nations' war of liberation," leading him to reject all offers of mediation and negotiations with Tel Aviv. Jadid made various tense decisions such as arming Palestinian refugees in Syria, expediting the construction of dam projects on rivers to reduce the flow of water to Israel, and instructing Syrian troops across the border with Israel to take more offensive stands.⁸⁴

The 1967 War: Risky Soviet Game That Changed the Future of Syria

Tension between Israel and pro-Soviet Arab states grew when the Soviet intelligence community handed a report to Nasser claiming that Israel was massing troops close to the Syrian border. The Russians

obtained this information from their rising spy within the Israeli Labor Party, an asset known by the code name “Boy” within the KGB. However, the Russians were unaware that the Boy was a double agent working for Israeli Shin Bet, passing on information that Israel wanted the Russians to know.

In June 1967, Shin Bet instructed Boy and other double agents to inform Moscow of Israel's efforts to mobilize its troops to attack Syria and Egypt, even though Israel had no such plans. The goal was to give Moscow a false alarm, hoping that the USSR would encourage Egypt and Syria to de-escalate the situation with Israel.⁸⁵ The Russians viewed this information as a strategic asset that could demonstrate Moscow's loyalty and increase Arab dependence on the Kremlin.⁸⁶

However, Russia did not anticipate an actual war; they were hoping for a “manageable crisis” where the fear of war would serve Moscow's interests, and they could mediate between the Arabs and Israelis to prevent an escalation.⁸⁷ Despite the efforts of Israel's double agents, Egypt's intelligence service quickly realized that the Soviet information was not valid.⁸⁸ However, Nasser continued to foster anti-Israeli suspicions among Arab leaders, creating a psychological and political willingness among Jordanian and Syrian leaders to go to war against Israel.

As a result, Nasser expelled all UN Peacekeepers from the Suez Canal (who had been stationed in the Sinai Peninsula since the 1957 war) and instructed the Egyptian Army to block Israel's access to the Red Sea via the Suez Strait. These events eventually convinced Israel to launch a surprise attack, known as Operation Focus, aimed at dismantling the Egyptian Air Force. The attack triggered retaliatory strikes from Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, marking the start of the Six-Day War on 5 June 1967. Following Syria's attack, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) targeted Syria and destroyed approximately 100 Syrian aircraft under the command of Hafez al-Assad.

The humiliating defeat severely damaged Jadid's reputation and his attempt to portray himself as the strongman of Syria. However, the 1967 failure did not deter Jadid from rebuilding the reputation of his government. He initiated the rebuilding of the Syrian Army by

purchasing hundreds of T-54 and T-55 tanks, 40 Su-7B fighter aircraft, and other equipment.⁸⁹

Additionally, Syria's economy was in need of a boost, and Jadid sought assistance from the Soviet Union. After negotiations, the Soviet Union concluded a broad economic and technological aid agreement with Syria in 1969, providing loans of \$120 million to help Syria develop its oil industry and other projects.⁹⁰ Despite Jadid's efforts, his rivals, including his former ally Hafez al-Assad, continued to blame him for the 1967 defeat.⁹¹ Meanwhile, in 1970, Jadid, in need of a victory to restore his reputation, ordered the Syrian Army to intervene in the Jordanian conflict with the Palestinian Liberation Army. The Syrian Army was instructed to assist the Palestinians in capturing the city of Irbid. However, the Jordanians, having learned from the 1967 war that the Syrian Army was vulnerable to airstrikes, launched a massive offensive aerial operation that resulted in the destruction of 75 Syrian tanks and the death of hundreds of Syrian soldiers.⁹² This catastrophe made it clear that Jadid's days in power were numbered.

Eventually, on 12 November 1970, Assad ordered his officers to raid the National Congress and arrest Jadid and his loyalists, which marked the beginning of the rise of Assad's dynasty in Syria.

The Emergence of the Assad Dynasty's Influence on the Soviet Union's Syria Policy

Assad announced the beginning of the "Corrective Movement" aimed at reforming Syria's domestic and foreign policies. Although Assad's domestic reforms, such as distancing from radical socialization of the national economy and giving more attention to religious factions,⁹³ did not align perfectly with Soviet Communist ideology, his emergence was not considered a disastrous change for the Soviet Union. Unlike his predecessors, Hafez Assad was not an unknown politician to the Russians. He had spent most of his youth working with the SCP, which was the Soviet Union's main ally in the region. Additionally, he had undergone flight training for the MiG-17 for about 10 months in the USSR in 1957,⁹⁴ which provided the Soviet Union with a decent psychological profile and reassurance that he was not an unknown individual with unpredictable behavior.

To further assure the Soviet comrades, Assad visited Moscow in February 1971, just 10 weeks after his takeover.⁹⁵ However, the visit did not yield the results the Soviets expected. Moscow had hoped for Assad to sign a friendship treaty as a political gesture signaling Soviet stability and influence in the region. However, Assad, who was not interested in taking a stance against the United States, politely declined the Soviet offer, stating, “friendship needs no agreement.”⁹⁶

Despite Assad's refusal to sign the friendship treaty, it did not create a notable dispute in Russo-Syrian relations. Shortly after Assad's visit, in May 1971, the two countries concluded an agreement allowing Soviet surface combatants, submarines, and cargo ships to use port facilities at Syria's Tartus.⁹⁷ This agreement marked the first official accord enabling the USSR's navy to utilize bases and naval facilities along the southern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. Prior to this, in 1967, the USSR had reached a covert deal with Egypt's Nasser, granting Soviet military access to the naval bases at Port Said and Mersa Matruh, a fishing port 140 miles west of Alexandria.⁹⁸ In addition, the Soviet Union was allowed to establish air base and station squadrons of its Air Force, accompanying Egyptian fighter aircraft.⁹⁹ Despite Nasser's official denial of such events, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat confirmed the agreement in a speech in January 1971.¹⁰⁰

The naval facility in Syria held significant importance for the Soviet Union. It provided General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev with an opportunity to make a grand political gesture by flying the Soviet Union's flag across the Mediterranean. The establishment of military bases in Egypt and Syria allowed the USSR to open a new front against NATO in the southern waters of the Mediterranean Sea and granted Moscow influence over the Suez Canal. Thus, by 1971, Syria had shown itself as becoming a strategic zone and ally for the Soviet Union.

In light of growing cooperation, Assad re-legalized the activity of the Syrian Communist Party, which had been strongly criminalized and suppressed during Jadid's presidency. Additionally, Assad permitted the Communist Party to have eight seats out of 173 seats in Syria's People Council, as a symbolic gesture of ideological solidarity with communist nations.¹⁰¹ However, Assad made it clear from the beginning that the influence of the Communist Party was solely

ceremonial and that he would not tolerate any Soviet interference in Syria's domestic politics.¹⁰²

This development shattered Assad's neutral position in the Cold War, and it became evident from the outset of his rule that Assad's Syria was leaning toward the USSR. Farouk Al Sharaa, the deputy of Syria's foreign minister at the time, claimed in his memorandum (The Missing Account) that Assad, against his initial intention of not siding with the USSR against the U.S., agreed to grant the Soviet Navy access to Tartus and Latakia naval facilities. He did so because he wanted to use this access as leverage over Moscow to ensure the continuous supply of Soviet military support to Syria.¹⁰³ Assad was determined to retake all the territories lost to Israel in the 1967 war and believed that the territorial dispute would only be resolved through military action. Therefore, he sought to expand ties with Moscow to equip his army with advanced Soviet-made weapons.

Despite speculations about Assad's true intentions, it can be argued that his agreement with Moscow significantly boosted Russo-Syrian military cooperation. In 1972, in response to Assad's positive actions, the USSR approved Syria's request to purchase over \$700 million worth of weapons,¹⁰⁴ including 500 T-62 tanks, 30 Su-20 FGA aircraft, 1100 surface-to-air missiles (SAM-2/-3), 400 ZSU-23/4 self-propelled anti-aircraft guns (SPAAG),¹⁰⁵ and more.

In exchange for the advanced arms deal, Assad authorized the Soviets to expand their use of Tartus and Latakia ports for their naval units. Unlike the previous agreement, which limited the USSR's naval units to using Syrian ports as "clients/visitors," the new agreement allowed the Soviets to establish two naval facilities of their own in Tartus and Latakia.¹⁰⁶

However, establishing a foothold in Syria was not the only motivation for the USSR to approve these arms sales. Their ultimate goal was to finalize the friendship treaty that Assad had refused to sign during his 1971 visit to Moscow, in order to secure the legitimacy of their presence in the region. Despite persistent requests from the Soviet Ambassador for Assad to sign the treaty, Assad remained firm

in his refusal, even restricting the movement of Soviet advisers in Syria as a response.¹⁰⁷

Even though Assad's tone may have sounded harsh and unorthodox during his "friendly" discussion with the Soviet Union, it did not provoke Moscow to take any immediate action. In fact, Assad's timing was advantageous. Just two months prior, in July 1972, President Sadat of Egypt expelled almost all of the 20,000 Soviet advisers and weapon experts from the country,¹⁰⁸ alleging that the Soviet Union was prioritizing a détente with the United States at the expense of Arab interests.¹⁰⁹ As a result, the Soviet Union became increasingly reliant on Syria to maintain its foothold in the Middle East and the East Coast of the Mediterranean Sea. In response, the USSR significantly increased its military supplies to both Egypt and Syria, and in May 1973, Marshal Pavel Kutakhov, commander of the Soviet Air Force, was sent to Syria to evaluate their air force and its needs.¹¹⁰ This led to Syria acquiring various advanced weapons, including MiG-21MF/PFM combat aircraft, Su-7B FGA aircraft, SAM batteries, air-to-air missiles, T-34 tanks, and T-54/T-55 tanks.¹¹¹

The significant flow of weapons from the USSR to the Syrian-Egyptian front bolstered their confidence and led to the belief that they could defeat Israel on the battleground, eventually sparking the beginning of the Yom Kippur War on 6 October 1973.

The Yom Kippur War: Soviet Union's Second Cuban Crisis

In the afternoon of 6 October, Syria, with Soviet-made MiGs, began bombing IDF positions in the Golan Heights. They officially joined the Egyptian Army, which was advancing in the Sinai Peninsula in their war against Israel.¹¹² The Soviet Union's involvement in the war began even before the actual hostilities commenced. At 6 a.m., hours before the war, Henry Kissinger, the U.S. Secretary of State at the time, contacted Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet Ambassador to Washington, to warn him about the suspicious movements of Syrian and Egyptian forces near Israeli positions. It is possible that Kissinger believed the Soviets were already aware of their Arab allies' actions, especially considering that the Soviet Union had evacuated all its citizens and civilian staff from both countries before the war.¹¹³ The extent of Israeli and US officials'

understanding of the Soviet Union's decision regarding its involvement in the war remains unclear. However, Israel's Mossad received information from its spy, Ashraf Marwan, who was President Nasser's son-in-law and President Sadat's close ally, indicating that the Soviets would not be involved in the Syrian-Egyptian adventure.¹¹⁴

The initial reaction of the USSR to the war was an attempt to convince both Syria and Egypt to accept a ceasefire. The Kremlin assigned its ambassador to Moscow, Vladimir Vinogradov, to negotiate with Sadat and persuade him to accept the ceasefire and also convince Assad to do the same.¹¹⁵ This attempt resulted in a negative response from both leaders.

It seems that the early signs of victory had convinced Assad and Sadat that continuing the war would bring them even greater success. However, on early 8 October, the IDF launched its first counterattacks, which alerted Moscow and prompted Brezhnev to personally call Sadat and inform him that the airlift of Soviet military aid to Syria and Egypt had begun.¹¹⁶ Although Israel's counterattack ultimately failed, the Soviet attempt to maintain the war in favor of the Arabs, combined with domestic pressure, led US President Nixon to promise Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir that the U.S. would replace all Israeli aircraft and tank losses.¹¹⁷ This promise was authorized and resulted in waves of U.S. airlifts to Israel.

Nixon's decision was not the only piece of good news for Meir's office. On the morning of 11 October, the IDF successfully launched an offensive campaign against Syria and began advancing in the Golan Heights. Now, there was approximately 70 kilometers (50 miles) between the IDF and Damascus, a significant change of events that caused panic in both Syria and the USSR. A few hours after Israel's progress, Ambassador Dobrynin warned Secretary Kissinger that the USSR had put its airborne forces on alert to counter any Israeli units heading toward Damascus. Kissinger responded by stating that if the Soviets sent troops, the U.S. would do the same.¹¹⁸

In response to concerns over the fall of Damascus, the USSR expedited its military aid shipments to Syria. Israel, in turn, sank the Soviet merchant ship Ilya Mechnikov.¹¹⁹ As a countermeasure, the USSR

deployed two destroyers to Tartus to protect the flow of Soviet cargo to Syria. Additionally, Soviet leadership sent a message to Nixon, notifying him that Moscow had taken measures to protect its ships and warning against any further Israeli attacks.¹²⁰

Despite Soviet threats, the IDF continued its march into Syrian territory, to the extent that on 20 October, IDF troops reached within 10 miles of Damascus. In response, on 24 October, Brezhnev sent an urgent ultimatum to Nixon, threatening that if the US did not join the Soviet Union in forcing Israel to comply, Moscow would unilaterally take necessary actions to do so.¹²¹ As a result, for the second time, the United States increased the DEFCON level from four to three due to tensions with the USSR and put its nuclear forces on alert.¹²² This escalation brought both the USSR and the U.S. to the brink of nuclear war over Syria. The US response was so surprising to Soviet officials that during a meeting among high-ranking Soviet leadership, Alexei Kosygin, the Soviet premier, expressed his belief that it was unreasonable to engage in a war with the United States over Egypt and Syria.¹²³

The escalating tension eventually led to a second ceasefire being implemented on 25 October, as all sides recognized the need to put an end to the war before it spiraled completely out of control. The 1973 war was an absolute disaster for Syria, as Israel successfully occupied the remaining Golan Heights and reduced the distance to Damascus to 30 kilometers (20 miles). The war also represented a political defeat for the USSR, especially since the victorious side was equipped with Western-made weapons while the defeated party was armed with Soviet-made weapons.

Despite the outcome of the war, Moscow's persistent support for Syria solidified the USSR as a reliable ally for Assad. However, the feeling was not mutual. In fact, the unexpected failure of Syria and Egypt in the war made Brezhnev doubt the cost-effectiveness of the alliance with these countries for the Soviet Union. On 4 November 1973, when Brezhnev suggested reconciliation with Israel, he responded to Andrey Gromyko, the Minister of Soviet Foreign Affairs, who expressed concerns about Syria and Egypt's negative reaction, by saying,

“They can go to hell! We have offered them a sensible way for so many years. But no, they wanted to fight. Fine! We gave them technology, the latest, the kind even Vietnam didn’t have. They had double superiority in tanks and aircraft, triple in artillery, and in air defense and anti-tank weapons, they had absolute supremacy. And what? Once again, they were beaten. Once again, they scrambled.”¹²⁴

Despite Brezhnev’s disappointment with Assad, further events left him with no choice but to prioritize Syria in the Kremlin’s Middle East policy, especially after Egypt’s gradual shift toward the United States following the 1973 war. From Moscow’s perspective, any Arab-Israeli agreement without Soviet participation was seen as anti-Soviet. Thus, when Sadat unilaterally concluded a ceasefire with Israel in 1973 without prior consultation with Moscow, Russo-Egyptian relations took a devastating blow. Eventually, when Sadat terminated the 1971 Friendship Treaty with the Soviet Union in 1976, Egypt officially departed from the pro-Soviet and anti-American bloc. As a result, Syria became the top client state of the Soviet Union in the Middle East by the mid-1970s. One could argue that although Syria lost the 1973 war, it gained the position of being the Soviet Union’s top priority in the region.¹²⁵

Lebanon: A Troubling Factor in Russo-Syrian Relations

In 1976, while Egypt was absent from the Soviet Middle East team, the Russo-Syrian relationship was rapidly growing. However, the political chaos in Lebanon jeopardized their relationship. The conflict between the pro-Soviet Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and the leftist Lebanese National Movement (LNM) against the pro-Western Lebanese Maronite political bloc drew international attention to Lebanon. Although Assad initially attempted to mediate between the involved groups, the fear of Lebanon becoming a base for anti-Assad Islamist militias forced Assad to deploy units of the Syrian Army to Lebanon on 1 June, siding with the Lebanese Maronites against the LNM and the PLO, which had received Soviet support.¹²⁶

Assad’s decision triggered negative reactions from the Arab world and the Soviet Union, particularly when it was revealed that Assad

had reached a deal with US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, known as the “Red-line Agreement,” in which Syria agreed not to deploy SAMs, aircraft, or helicopters to Lebanon and to remain in the northern regions of Beirut.¹²⁷ Assad’s behind-the-scenes deal with the US to attack Soviet clients in Lebanon alerted Moscow to the possibility that Syria was aligning itself with the Western bloc, similar to Egypt.¹²⁸

Assad’s attack on pro-Soviet forces using Soviet-made weapons put Brezhnev in a very uncomfortable position, leading him to send a letter to Assad requesting the withdrawal of Syrian troops.¹²⁹ As expected, Assad refused to comply with Brezhnev’s response. Tensions between the two nations rapidly escalated to the point where Moscow froze all arms supplies to Syria, and Damascus restricted Russian access to Syrian ports.¹³⁰ Eventually, in April 1977, tensions began to decline when Assad visited Moscow to meet with Brezhnev and other high-ranking Soviet officials.

Egypt’s Renewed Balancing Act in Russo-Syrian Relations

In 1978, Egypt’s Sadat’s signing of the Camp David Accord with Israel once again shook the Soviet position in the region. The Soviet Union viewed the accord as a U.S. attempt to replace itself with the role of mediator between the Arab world and Israel, thus depriving Moscow of further opportunities for cooperation with the Arab world. Soviet official media outlets quickly labeled the Israeli-Egyptian agreement as a “collusion of imperialism, Zionism, and reaction against the Arab liberation movement.”¹³¹

The implementation of the Camp David Accord was a negative development for the USSR, but it was even more devastating for Syria, especially since Egypt distanced itself not only from the Soviet Union but also from Syria. With Jordan weakened, Syria remained the only Arab stronghold against Israel, making Assad increasingly reliant on Moscow’s support. Therefore, on 8 October 1980, Hafez Assad visited Moscow to give the Russians what they had long demanded: the signing of the “Friendship Treaty” with the USSR, a treaty that Assad had long refused to sign, arguing that friendship does not require a treaty.

A New Chapter in Russo-Syrian Relations: A Day of Transition

The friendship treaty between Syria and the Soviet Union made Syria the top recipient of Soviet-made arms in the Middle East. From 1980 to 1983, approximately 29 percent of Soviet exports to the region were directly sent to Syria.¹³² During this period, the Soviet Union generously supplied Syria with various military equipment, including tanks, anti-tank missiles, aircraft, combat helicopters, UAVs, SAM systems, artillery,¹³³ and other weapons.

However, the new Russo-Syrian honeymoon encountered a dealbreaker earlier than expected. In early June 1982, following armed confrontations between the PLO and the IDF, Israel decided to invade Lebanon to establish a

Maronite-led Free State of Lebanon. Unlike in 1976 when Syria sided with the Maronites against the PLO, this time Assad aligned with the PLO and Shia militias against Israel and the Maronite militias known as the Lebanese Forces (LF).

Israel, aware of Assad's intentions, deployed a large division of IDF forces toward Syrian military installations in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon to prevent Syrian forces from assisting or joining the PLO. On the third day of the war, on 9 June, Israel launched Operation Mole Cricket 19 and successfully destroyed almost all of Syria's SAM systems and shot down 85 Syrian aircraft that were sent to protect the SAM system.¹³⁴ Additionally, IDF forces removed Syrian installations in the Bekaa Valley and took control of the Damascus-Beirut highway, cutting off Syria's access to the battlefield and besieging the Syrian-PLO joint forces.

The Soviet Union responded to these developments by deploying additional warships to the Eastern Mediterranean Sea and putting

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its southern army on high alert. Essentially, the USSR signaled that it had no intention of getting directly involved in the conflict, although an escalation of the conflict into Syrian territory might force Moscow to intervene. The passive-aggressive reaction from the Soviet Union

Yuri Andropov's assumption of power brought a window of hope for Russo-Syrian relations. Both Andropov and Syria shared a mutual hatred of Zionism, which laid the foundation for their cooperation.

to Syria's failure in the war made Assad's regime skeptical about the nature of the friendship treaty with the Soviet Union.¹³⁵ The tension between the two countries grew as Assad took advantage of the political chaos in Lebanon and the weakened Lebanese Army to expand Syrian army presence in Lebanon. In an unorthodox move, the Soviet Union condemned Syria's actions and issued a statement during the Soviet

Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee summits in September 1982, stating that "Syrian troops on Lebanese territory harms not only the Lebanese people but the entire struggle of the Arab peoples."¹³⁶

Brezhnev seemed weary of Syria's constant unsuccessful adventures, particularly as the Soviet Union was heavily engaged in the war in Afghanistan and dealing with political unrest in Poland at that time. Additionally, a rising factor in the Middle East, the Islamic Republic of Iran, was beginning to impact Russo-Syrian relations.

Syria Replaces Iran with Egypt

Since the rise of Nasser in Egypt until the implementation of the Camp David Accord, Egypt played a crucial role in Syria's foreign policy. Egypt was Syria's strongest regional ally and shared a great deal of hostility toward Israel. Syria, in its relations with other countries, especially the Soviet Union, was always mindful of Egypt's position. However, the paradigm shifted with the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran. The new regime in Iran, like Egypt, saw Israel as a threat that should be met with a united and forceful response from Islamic nations. Iran also advocated for the formation of a Shia brotherhood and emphasized the importance of Shia identity and Islamic fate

over ethnic-national identity. This shift in Iran's politics presented a promising opportunity for Hafez Assad, who belonged to the Alawite community with Shia origins.

Additionally, the revolutionary government in Iran sought to export the Islamic revolution to Iraq to remove Saddam, an enemy of Hafez Assad. The dispute between Syria and Iraq began in 1979 when Saddam forcefully took over and halted previous talks between Assad and former President Bakr regarding the unification of Syria and Iraq. Saddam later conditioned the unity on the deployment of Iraqi troops throughout Syria, leading Assad to reject the proposal. In November 1979, Saddam purged the Iraqi Ba'ath Party, claiming that elements within the party, with support and guidance from Syria, were plotting a coup against him.¹³⁷ This accusation completely severed the official relations between the two countries. Consequently, when the Iran-Iraq war broke out, Assad wasted no time in supporting Iran's Persian Shias against Saddam's Ba'athist regime.

Assad's support of Iran in the war created a growing gap in Russo-Syrian relations. Iraq, which had concluded a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union in 1972, was considered the Soviet Union's traditional client in the region. Despite Saddam's disputes with the Iraqi Communist Party, his regime remained the only pro-Soviet country across the Persian Gulf. Moreover, Iran's support of the Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet Red Army and the suppression of Iran's Communist Party, the Tudeh, by revolutionary forces, did not make Iran one of the Soviet Union's favored countries. As the Iran-Iraq war began, the Soviet Union gradually increased its support to Iraq, providing intelligence, arms, financial aid, and political/diplomatic assistance. Initially, Brezhnev took an indirect approach by allowing other members of the Warsaw Pact, including Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany, to supply Iraq with arms.¹³⁸ However, when Iran launched its offensive campaign against Iraq in 1982, Brezhnev changed the policy and granted direct arms shipments, making the Soviet Union the chief supplier of arms to Iraq.¹³⁹

In contrast to the Soviet Union, Syria supplied Iran with Soviet-made weapons and sabotaged Iraq's oil pipeline that passed through Syrian territory, significantly reducing Iraq's oil export revenue.¹⁴⁰ Due

to the conflicting interests between Syria and the Soviet Union in the Iraq-Iran war, as well as their disagreement over Syrian presence in Lebanon, tensions arose. When Assad paid a secret visit to Moscow to discuss the bilateral relation, he found Brezhnev and other high-ranking Soviets “very mad,” particularly regarding Syria’s military presence in Lebanon.¹⁴¹ However, luck was on Assad’s side, and shortly after his visit, Leonid Brezhnev passed away on 7 November 1982. He was succeeded by Yuri Andropov, a staunch supporter of Assad’s Syria.

Yuri Andropov’s Role: A Beacon of Hope for Russo-Syrian Relations

Yuri Andropov’s assumption of power brought a window of hope for Russo-Syrian relations. Both Andropov and Syria shared a mutual hatred of Zionism, which laid the foundation for their cooperation. Andropov, known for his anti-Israel stance, had a reputation as an anti-Jewish comrade during his time leading the KGB. Under his leadership, the KGB launched “Operation TN,” which aimed to send active illegals and sleeper agents to Israel to infiltrate the decision-making system.¹⁴² Countering Zionism was of “utmost importance” to Andropov.¹⁴³

As expected, Andropov, upon assuming power, increased the flow of weapons and arms to Syria. He prioritized strengthening Syria against the Israeli Air Force (IAF). Andropov ordered the provision of the SAM-5 anti-aircraft system to Syria, even if it meant taking them from the Red Army when there were none available.¹⁴⁴ Consequently, Syria became the only country armed with the SAM-5 system, with installations in Homs and Damascus.¹⁴⁵ But the SAM systems were not Andropov’s only generous gift. In October 1982, he ordered the airlift of SS-21 advanced surface-to-surface missiles to Syria, making the Syrian Arab Army the only force equipped with such weapons.¹⁴⁶ However, Andropov made it clear that these deliveries should not be considered a green light for a new war with Israel. Syria could use these weapons only with Moscow’s permission. To ensure their maintenance and protection, Andropov deployed a unit of Russian soldiers and technicians.

Andropov’s assistance allowed Assad to rebuild his army and expand its military presence in Lebanon. By late 1982, Assad had over 1,200

tanks deployed across Lebanon,¹⁴⁷ giving him a significant advantage over armed factions in the country. Assad's newfound confidence and power led him to shut down peace talks between Lebanon and Israel coordinated by the United States. This was a victory for the Soviet Union, as it perceived any political settlement in the Middle East without Kremlin's involvement as a U.S. attempt to sideline the Soviet Union from the region.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, in 1984, Assad allowed the Soviet Union to upgrade its naval bases in Tartus to provide Soviet aircraft carriers with logistic support,¹⁴⁹ enabling Moscow to project greater naval power in the Mediterranean Sea.

Despite some disagreements, such as Syria's hostile position toward Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian group al-Fatah¹⁵⁰ and Syria's support of Iran in the war with Iraq, these disputes did not significantly alter the course of Russo-Syrian relations. During Andropov's reign, Russo-Syrian relations reached a new high. However, as every dawn promises a new sunset, the death of Yuri Andropov in February 1984 marked the end of this era of improved relations.

The Chairmanship of Konstantin Chernenko, and the Growth of Iranian Dilemma in Russo-Syrian Relations

With the appointment of Konstantin Chernenko as the Soviet Union's leader in February 1984, Russo-Syrian relations began to decline. Chernenko's short tenure of 13 months, which was marked by declining health and a lack of discipline within the leadership, is often seen as a transitional period for the Soviet Union. Despite debates on Chernenko's role in the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is evident that his chairmanship initiated the deterioration of Soviet-Syrian relations.

Chernenko shifted the focus of Soviet foreign policy from Syria to Jordan. This shift was motivated by the Israeli Labor Party's victory in parliamentary elections, which raised hopes for Israeli-Jordanian peace negotiations. By mid-1984, Soviet leadership decided to place "special focus" on Jordan,¹⁵¹ as they traditionally feared that any political negotiations in the Middle East without Moscow's involvement would undermine Soviet influence in the region. As arms deals were a major tool for political influence, the Soviet Union initiated arm negotiations

with Jordan in October 1984,¹⁵² which led to delivery of \$875 million worth of weapons from USSR to Jordan, from 1984 to 1988.¹⁵³

Naturally, arms deals were not welcomed by Assad, especially as Syria and Jordan were engaged in a cold war over Jordan's decision to resume relations with Egypt.¹⁵⁴ In addition, for the first after the Arafat-Assad split, on 7 October, a meeting between Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and Arafat took place in East Berlin, which further strained Russo-Syrian relations.¹⁵⁵ Chernenko's policy of balancing between Arab capitals earned him the reputation of a "restraining influencer" rather than a "spoiler ally."¹⁵⁶

Concerned about Chernenko's policy, Assad sent his brother Rifat Assad to seek assurance that the Soviet Union would continue its political and military support for Syria.¹⁵⁷ However, Rifat returned empty-handed, and Soviet flattery toward moderate Arab states further agitated Assad. He even threatened to diversify Syria's arms suppliers by purchasing weapons from Western countries, including France.¹⁵⁸ While Assad was unable to enforce his threat, a major development occurred in February 1985 when Arafat, whom Chernenko favored as a revolutionary leader, concluded an agreement with Jordan to pursue a peace settlement with Israel based on the Reagan-backed UN resolution,¹⁵⁹ known as the "Reagan Plan."¹⁶⁰ The joint Arafat-Hussein announcement suggested that they might be prepared to recognize Israel,¹⁶¹ which was part of Reagan's proposal. This development led the Soviet Union to perceive that the United States was gaining an advantage over the Kremlin in the Middle East once again.

This move indicated that the United States was outpacing the Soviet Union in the Middle East. As expected, Chernenko adjusted Soviet policy in favor of Assad in his dispute with Arafat and recognized Syria's interests in Lebanon,¹⁶² a significant departure from the previous position established under Brezhnev.

Although Assad and Chernenko reached a reconciliation regarding Moscow's unsuccessful attempts to woo other Arab players, one issue remained unresolved between them: Iran and Syria's support of Iran. While Chernenko gradually increased Soviet support for Saddam's

regime by supplying new weapons, including advanced air-to-surface missiles that enabled Iraq to launch multiple attacks on Iranian civilian areas known as the “war of the cities,”¹⁶³ Assad took a different approach and increased his support for Iran. He permitted the Syrian Defense Ministry to sell Scud-B missiles to Iran.¹⁶⁴ Assad’s decision marked the beginning of Iran’s ballistic missile program and elicited negative reactions from the USSR.

Therefore, it is safe to argue that the ongoing disagreement between the Soviet Union and Syria over Iran indicates that the dynamics of Russo-Syrian relations and Perso-Syrian relations are strongly interrelated.

The Rise of Gorbachev: The Soviet Union’s Deteriorating Relations with Syria

The rise of Mikhail Gorbachev, who advocated for a “new thinking”¹⁶⁵ and expressed frustration with the Soviet Union’s struggles in the Middle East, was not welcomed by Damascus. In May 1985, only two months after Gorbachev took over, Assad visited Moscow to reaffirm the Russo-Syrian partnership, but the outcome was far from what he expected. Gorbachev did not hesitate to denounce Assad’s hostile position toward both the PLO and Iraq’s Saddam Hussein.¹⁶⁶ Disagreements between Assad and Gorbachev extended to every regional issue,¹⁶⁷ including Israel.

Gorbachev strongly emphasized “defense sufficiency”¹⁶⁸ and urged Syria to focus on defensive rather than offensive military capabilities, while Assad emphasized what he called “strategic parity,”¹⁶⁹ implying the necessity of empowering the military might of Arab nations to establish a balance of power with Israel. Gorbachev rejected Assad’s request for advanced MiG-29 aircraft for the Syrian Air Force,¹⁷⁰ shattering Assad’s hopes of maintaining the former status quo in Russo-Syrian relations. The disagreements between Assad and Gorbachev on various regional issues strained their relationship and marked a deep decline in Soviet-Syrian relations.

After Assad’s visit, Gorbachev ordered a significant withdrawal of Soviet advisers and personnel from Syria. The number of Soviet and Eastern European personnel in Syria was reduced from 13,000 to

2,500 by 1986.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, Soviet arms deliveries to Syria severely declined. During the first year of Gorbachev's leadership, Syria received fewer than half of the arms exports it had previously received, representing only 6 percent of Soviet exports.¹⁷²

The decline in arms deals and disagreements over regional issues were not the only sources of conflict between Gorbachev and Assad. Another point of dispute was Gorbachev's intention to diversify Moscow's list of Arab friends. Gorbachev sought to develop relations with moderate Arab countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Jordan, and Egypt.¹⁷³ He strengthened ties with Egypt by concluding new arms deals and rescheduling Egypt's debts from previous arms sales¹⁷⁴ while pressuring Assad to pay off Syria's debt to the Soviet Union.¹⁷⁵

In April 1986, Gorbachev and Assad's relationship entered a new stage when a bomb traced back to the Syrian government was discovered on an El-Al airplane. Syria found itself on the brink of war with both Britain and Israel. Assad needed to secure Soviet support and made a secret visit to Moscow to discuss bilateral relations with Gorbachev.¹⁷⁶ During the meeting, Gorbachev informed Assad of his intention to reform the Soviet Union by democratizing the system. Gorbachev's announcement was followed by Assad asking Gorbachev, "Do you intend to destroy the Communist Party of the Soviet Union?" Naturally, Gorbachev denied such intention, but his response did not prevent Assad from telling his team that "We must look for other options."¹⁷⁷

The change in the Soviet media approach also raised concerns among Syrian officials. The media no longer mentioned the Friendship Treaty with Syria and only emphasized that "Syria is strong enough to defend itself."¹⁷⁸ Assad sent his Vice President, Abdel Halim Khaddam, to discuss the situation with the Soviets.¹⁷⁹ Gorbachev realized that the situation could lead to "losing Syria." Hence, to rebuild trust, Gorbachev reversed his decision and ordered the preparation of airlifts to supply Syria with MiG-29s.¹⁸⁰ However, Gorbachev made it clear to Khaddam that if Syria engaged in a war with the UK and Israel, the responsibility of protecting Syria would lie solely on the shoulders of Syrians.¹⁸¹

Fortunately for Assad, no war took place, but the delivery of the MiG-29s did not happen as quickly as expected. Assad's fortunes were once again influenced by a stroke of luck.

Assad's realization of Israel's aerial supremacy and the near outbreak of war in 1986 led him to seek advanced SS-23 short-range ballistic missiles from the Soviet Union to counter Israeli anti-missile/aircraft systems.¹⁸² However, Gorbachev rejected the request due to Syria's massive debt to the USSR and the potential for further escalation in the region. These developments prompted Assad to modify Syria's policy in order to secure Gorbachev's support.

As part of this modification, Assad restored diplomatic relations with Jordan and initiated communication with Saddam via Jordanian intermediaries. This was seen as a gesture of goodwill by the USSR, as it aligned with some of Gorbachev's demands.¹⁸³

Furthermore, since Syria's stance on Iraq and the Iran-Iraq war starkly contrasted with the Kremlin's position, Assad initiated communication with Saddam through Jordanian intermediaries. This eventually led to their meeting at the Arab Summit in November 1987 to discuss a political solution to the Iraqi-Syrian dispute.¹⁸⁴ Although the meeting between Assad and Saddam did not result in any tangible differences, it was considered by the USSR as an expression of Assad's goodwill.¹⁸⁵

Assad's diplomatic maneuvers in favor of peace and cooperation modified the environment in the Kremlin in favor of Syria. Ergo, during Assad's second visit to Moscow in April 1987, multiple agreements were concluded between the Soviet Union and Syria, including the development of Syria's oil and phosphate industry, the construction of a hydro-electric dam on the Euphrates River,¹⁸⁶ and the rescheduling of Syria's \$25 billion debt to the Soviet Union.¹⁸⁷ Additionally, the Soviet Union immediately delivered the first unit of MiG-29s to Syria, providing Assad with a sense of security regarding continued Soviet military support.¹⁸⁸ However, Gorbachev's emphasis was on finding a political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, stating that finding a military solution to settle it had "completely lost its credibility."¹⁸⁹

Assad's Persistent Support for Iran and Gorbachev's Rapprochement with Israel Deepen Regional Disagreements

Despite all the positive developments in the Assad-Gorbachev meeting, one issue remained a source of disagreement: Syria's support of Iran.¹⁹⁰ Gorbachev made it clear to Assad that the Soviet Union's position on the Iraq-Iran war remained unchanged. Assad's support of Iran posed a challenge for the Soviet Union. In 1986, after a series of military successes by Iran, Gorbachev initiated what became known as the Soviet Union's "active support" of Iraq in the war.¹⁹¹ At the same time, Assad increased his support for Iran by supplying them with missiles, tanks, aircraft parts, and more—making Syria Iran's main arms supplier.¹⁹² This divergence in support for Iraq and Iran deepened the distance between the Soviet Union and Syria.

Iran was not the only country that Gorbachev and Syria had disagreements over. By 1988, Gorbachev's new Middle East policy added another country to the list of Syria-Gorbachev disputes: Israel. Gorbachev began restoring diplomatic relations with Israel in 1987, and both countries established consulates in each other's capitals.¹⁹³ Gorbachev used the Soviet Union's influence over Syria as leverage in its dealings with Israel,¹⁹⁴ marking a significant change in Russo-Syrian relations. Russo-Israeli relations rapidly advanced through expanded terrorism, cultural, social, and academic exchanges.¹⁹⁵ Eventually, in 1988, Gorbachev, urging Arafat to recognize Israel and arguing that peace should not be paid for by Israel alone, allowed Syria's worst nightmare to come true.¹⁹⁶

In essence, as of 1988, Syria—which had previously been a "strategic battlefield" between the West and the USSR, where Moscow secured its sympathy through arms deals, political support, and financial aid—gradually began turning into Moscow's "strategic leverage." However, the beginning of the parade of sovereignties in late 1988 and the subsequent domestic instability within the Soviet Union hindered Gorbachev from further advancing or reconsidering his new thinking on Syria. Finally, in 1991, after two years of political turmoil, the Red Empire collapsed, leaving Syria without a superpower ally.

The New Russia Under Yeltsin's Leadership: The Second Pause in Russo-Syrian Relations

On 10 July 1991, Boris Yeltsin took an oath to lead Russia toward a better future by implementing productive reforms to improve the country's domestic and international standing. However, the outbreak of the Chechen War, political disputes, and the severe economic consequences of Yeltsin's radical reforms plunged Russia into one of its darkest periods. With growing instability, the Kremlin was forced to prioritize domestic issues, and as far as foreign policy was concerned, Russia could not afford any adventures beyond its immediate surroundings. Consequently, the Middle East became one of the least important priorities for Moscow, and in the eyes of Russia, Syria lost its value.¹⁹⁷ This situation was particularly unfavorable for Assad because, from the perspective of the new Russia, Syria owed them approximately \$12 billion.¹⁹⁸ The debt feud escalated when Assad decided to suspend payments to Russia in mid-1992 in order to negotiate a new settlement,¹⁹⁹ and he refused to acknowledge Russia as the rightful inheritor of Soviet credits to Syria.²⁰⁰ Assad's move turned the debt issue into a sensitive matter that overshadowed the remaining years of Russia-Syria relations during Yeltsin's presidency.

Finally, in 1991, after two years of political turmoil, the Red Empire collapsed, leaving Syria without a superpower ally.

The debt feud and Russia's limited capability and interest in maintaining the Soviet Union's influence in Syria resulted in a prolonged pause in Russo-Syrian relations. However, in 1994, both countries took a few steps toward restoring their partnership. Assad agreed to acknowledge \$10 billion of Syria's debt to Moscow, and in return, Yeltsin agreed to sign the first post-Soviet military agreement with Syria, which allowed for renewed arms exports.²⁰¹ Unlike the Soviet Union, the New Russia was mindful of Israel's concerns regarding arms sales to Syria. During Israeli Prime Minister Rabin's visit to Moscow in May 1994, Yeltsin promised that Russia would only sell "defensive arms" to Syria.²⁰² This was a significant position taken by

the Russians, assuring the continuation of Gorbachev's innovation, the "Israeli variant" in Russia-Syria relations.

Ultimately, the 1994 agreement was significant enough to convince Assad, who visited Moscow at least biannually (14 times from his inauguration until the collapse of the Soviet Union), to continue visiting Moscow for about eight years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.²⁰³ However, in 1999, Russo-Syrian relations began to experience a new strain due to a rising threat from Turkey. In the early days of the post-Soviet era, Turkey began expanding its influence over Central Asia and the Caucasus, which were traditionally seen as Russia's backyard. Turkey relied on elements of Turkish culture in countries such as Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan to form a "Turkish Alliance" and establish a new regional order.²⁰⁴ Turkey extended credits and financial assistance to these countries, and Turkish businessmen started to venture into these regions. The incompatible regional policies were not the only factors fueling tension in Russo-Turkish relations, as the escalation grew further when the Kurdish separatists' party, the PKK, held the "History of Kurdistan Conference" in Moscow.²⁰⁵ The situation worsened as there were growing speculations, which later turned out to be unofficially confirmed, that "private groups" in Turkey were assisting Chechen rebels.²⁰⁶ Additionally, Russia's arms deal with Cyprus, which included the sale of advanced anti-aircraft/missile S-300 systems²⁰⁷ while Cyprus was in a tense standoff with Turkey, further escalated tensions between the two countries.

The escalating tensions with Turkey, along with NATO's involvement in the Bosnian War and its new policy of expanding NATO, created an environment in Moscow that led to the development of a new policy known as the "Primakov Doctrine." Yevgeny Primakov, Russia's foreign minister at the time, was a staunch advocate of countering the Turkey-U.S. coalition by forming an alliance with Iran, Armenia, Greece, and Syria.²⁰⁸ As a result, Syria began to reintegrate itself into Russian foreign policy.

In July 1999, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad made his first post-Soviet trip to Moscow, where he was warmly welcomed by Russian President Yeltsin as an "old friend of Russia."²⁰⁹ This marked the

beginning of a new era in Russia–Syria relations. The approach taken by Russia at the time was reminiscent of traditional methods, focusing on arm deals as a means of cooperation. Russia expressed its willingness to supply Syria with MiG-29 aircraft,²¹⁰ and the two countries concluded a significant deal worth \$2 billion for the export of weapons to Syria over a period of five years.²¹¹ During their meetings, both presidents discussed the future of military cooperation, signifying a “restart” in relations between the Russian Federation and Syria.

However, neither Assad nor Yeltsin had the opportunity to witness the full outcome of their initiatives. Yeltsin resigned in December 1999, and shortly after, on 10 June 2000, President Hafez al-Assad passed away.

New Men, New Era: Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad

The turn of the millennium brought new leaders to both Russia and Syria. Bashar al-Assad, an ophthalmologist, assumed the presidency in Syria, while Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, a former KGB officer, took the reins in Russia. These two leaders were destined to shape the future of their countries and Russo–Syrian relations. Despite their different backgrounds, they shared a common need for reform.

In Russia, Putin faced the task of reforming the radical policies of his predecessor Yeltsin and stabilizing the country’s economy and financial affairs. In

Syria, Assad inherited a frustrated and heavily indebted national economy that required significant attention and reform.

Both leaders also

faced domestic and

foreign security threats. Putin had to address the unrest in Chechnya and the expansion of NATO, while Assad dealt with challenges posed by Kurdish factions, the Islamic Brotherhood, and older Syrian officials who questioned his suitability for the presidency. Additionally, both

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leaders faced ongoing struggles with Israel and the United States on the international stage.

Assad, fluent in English and to a lesser extent French, had a unique exposure to Western societies and their technological advancements.²¹² This exposure may have influenced his somewhat pro-Western inclinations, leading him to advocate for the establishment of internet connectivity during his father's leadership.²¹³ As president, Assad implemented reforms within Syria known as the Damascus Spring. These reforms included political openness through the declaration of amnesty for hundreds of political prisoners, the closure of the notorious Mezzeh prison, and the establishment of national dialogue forums that allowed non-revolutionary intellectuals to debate current issues.²¹⁴ Assad also actively promoted the rapid integration of Western technology into Syria.²¹⁵

To enhance international relations, Assad embarked on foreign trips, initially visiting pro-Western Middle Eastern nations such as Jordan and Egypt. These visits set the stage for his first presidential visit to a Western country, France.²¹⁶

U.S. Invasion of Iraq: Assad's Shift Toward Russia

In 2003, a coalition led by the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Poland invaded Iraq to overthrow Saddam's regime.

In order to secure his regime, Assad decided to de-escalate tensions with the United States and the West.

Unlike the first Gulf War in 1991, where both Syria and the Soviet Union supported the United States, both Assad and the new Russian leadership under Putin opposed the invasion. Assad was the first Arab leader to publicly condemn the invasion, expressing his desire for the coalition

forces to fail.²¹⁷ Putin also criticized the invasion, describing it as an "unjustifiable and unnecessary" war with severe consequences.²¹⁸

Both Assad and Putin had their own reasons to be angered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq. For Putin, the invasion threatened Russia's recent achievements and agreements with Iraq. In the months leading up to the invasion, Russia and Iraq had established numerous trade and oil agreements.²¹⁹ Saddam's regime also committed to paying off

Iraq's \$10 billion debt to Russia.²²⁰ Moreover, Russia had a significant engagement in the oil-for-food program, receiving 30 percent of Iraqi oil among all participating countries.²²¹ The deep involvement even extended to the Russian Orthodox Church, which profited from the program through vouchers for Iraqi oil.²²²

Aside from the material gains, Russia had political concerns as well. Among the Arab states in the Persian Gulf, Saddam's regime was the only one with a Moscow-friendly position. The U.S. invasion, despite objections from Russia, Germany, and France, revealed Russia's subservience to a U.S.-dominated international order. These political and material losses prompted Russia to shift away from the United States and move toward a multipolar approach, as suggested by Primakov.²²³

Similarly, Assad had reasons to be alarmed by the invasion due to Syria's proximity to Iraq and the presence of a dominant military power pursuing regime change. Syrian regime suspicions were heightened when reports emerged, just a month after the invasion, that the U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had ordered a review of a war plan for Syria.²²⁴ Syria responded by setting up support systems for anti-American forces. U.S. officials, including Rumsfeld, claimed that Syrian security forces provided protection for Saddam loyalists and allowed them to establish headquarters to fight against the coalition forces.²²⁵ Additionally, Syria did not prevent the flow of foreign jihadists to Iraq to join the insurgency against the coalition. Syria gained a reputation as a safe haven for al-Qaeda terrorists and other extremist groups.²²⁶

The speculation surrounding Syria's support for the insurgency in Iraq further escalated tensions with the United States. The situation reached a new peak on 11 May 2004, when President George W. Bush issued an executive order imposing severe sanctions on Syria. These sanctions banned the export of American products, except for food and medicine, to Syria and imposed significant restrictions on relations with the Syrian banking system.²²⁷

The Step-by-Step Restoration of the Russo-Syrian Partnership

The growing friction between Syria and the United States once again isolated Syria on the international stage. In response, Assad sought to

restore old alliances, leading to his first visit to Moscow on 25 January 2005 to meet with Putin.²²⁸ This meeting marked a significant turning point in Russo-Syrian relations.

The timing of the meeting was crucial, as Russia perceived the U.S.'s military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as its increasing presence in the Persian Gulf region, as a threat to its influence in the Middle East. Putin recognized the importance of restoring the friendship with Syria, and as a gesture of goodwill, he decided to resolve the long-standing debt dispute. Putin generously wrote off 73 percent of Syria's debt to Russia,²²⁹ providing a fresh start for their relationship. However, the events in Lebanon played a crucial role in accelerating the restoration of Russo-Syrian partnership.

Step One: The Return of Diplomatic Support

On 14 February 2005, Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri was assassinated by a suicide truck bomb. Following the assassination, the United Nations formed a committee to investigate the incident. In October 2005, the committee presented its report to the UN Security Council, which highlighted the involvement of Syria's Military Intelligence, its director Assef Shawkat (Assad's brother-in-law), and President Bashar al-Assad himself.²³⁰

The speculation and validation of Syria's role in the assassination put significant international pressure on Syria, particularly from Bush, leading to further isolation. In order to secure his regime, Assad decided to de-escalate tensions with the United States and the West. On 30 April 2005, he ordered the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon, which had been a contentious issue between Syria, the West, and Russia.

To further ease tensions with the United States, Syrian security forces conducted raids on dozens of jihadist cells in Syria in May 2005, resulting in the arrest of approximately 1,200 individuals who were planning to join the fight against U.S. coalitions in Iraq.²³¹ As allegations of Syria's involvement in Hariri's assassination circulated, the United States pushed for a UN resolution threatening sanctions against Syria if it failed to cooperate with the UN committee. In response, Syrian diplomats sought assistance in blocking the draft,

receiving a positive response from Moscow. Russia threatened to veto the proposal,²³² effectively blocking it. Moscow's handling of the draft resolution signaled the re-emergence of "diplomatic support" as a factor in Russo-Syrian relations.

Step Two: The Return of Defense and Security Cooperation

In 2006, following in his father's footsteps of frequent trips to Russia, Assad made another visit to Moscow. This visit proved to be significant as Assad successfully negotiated a major arms deal worth billions of dollars. The deal included the delivery of 900 anti-aircraft SAM missiles and 36 area-denial Mobile AD Systems to Syria.²³³ This acquisition of advanced anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities was crucial for Assad, who was eager to rebuild Syria's military, particularly after Israel's airstrike near Damascus in 2003,²³⁴ which had highlighted Israel's aerial supremacy.

During this period, Russia and Syria also agreed to establish a joint intelligence and spy base, known as Center C, in southern Syria near the Israeli border.²³⁵ The base operated under the cooperation of Russia's Military Intelligence Agency (GRU) and the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate, with the primary objective of gathering intelligence on Israel's military activities.²³⁶ While the establishment of Center C marked a resumption of security collaboration between the two nations, its level of cooperation and effectiveness did not prove sufficient to warn the Syrian government of Israel's subsequent operation "Outside the Box" in 2007, which resulted in the destruction of a Syrian nuclear reactor in Deir ez-Zor.

Step Three: The Return of Russkiyes to the Mediterranean Sea

By 2006, Russia had become a friendly power to Syria, providing financial relief through debt write-offs, diplomatic support, arms deliveries, and intelligence cooperation. Similar to the Soviet era, the Russo-Syrian relationship had a reciprocal nature, with Syria offering its strategic location as its most valuable asset to Moscow.

In 2006, as negotiations for arms sales took place, the Kremlin obtained Assad's permission to rehabilitate its naval base in Tartus. Russia was allowed to deploy a small group of personnel for authorized maintenance, repair, and overhaul operations, with the aim

of making the base functional once again.²³⁷ In December 2007, the Tartus base became operational, and the Russian Navy conducted its first post-Soviet sorties in the Mediterranean Sea,²³⁸ deploying the aircraft carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov* with 47 aircraft on board, accompanied by 10 ships, to the Tartus port.²³⁹

The strategic value of the Tartus port increased in 2008 following the Russo-Georgian War. In response to Russia's territorial ambitions, the United States began the process of installing an advanced anti-missile system in Poland, which could intercept missile attacks launched by Russia. Western sources reported that Russia was considering stationing its advanced Iskander missiles in new regions, including Syria,²⁴⁰ as a means to bypass the U.S. aerial defense line. Russian diplomats denied such plans, stating that Moscow had no intention of upsetting balance in Middle East,²⁴¹ but this did not stop Assad from seeking to capitalize on the growing conflict between Russia and the West. During his third visit to Moscow in August 2008, Assad expressed solidarity with Russia, stating that Russia's invasion of Georgia was a response to Georgian provocation.²⁴² Assad also attempted to strain the ties between Israel and Russia, suggesting that Israeli consultants had played a significant role in the crisis and advising Russia not to rely on Israel's friendship.²⁴³

Furthermore, Assad aimed to purchase new weapons, including the Pantsyr Air Defense Missile and the BUK-M1 surface-to-air medium-range missile systems.²⁴⁴ He hoped that by demonstrating solidarity with Russia and driving a wedge between Tel Aviv and Moscow, Russia would be more willing to sell advanced arms to Syria. However, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov shattered Assad's hopes by stating that they were prepared to sell only defensive weapons that would not disrupt the regional balance of power.²⁴⁵

In 2010, the Russian Navy announced its plan to modernize the Tartus port and transform it into a naval power base,²⁴⁶ further highlighting the growing cooperation between Russia and Syria. The worsening tension with the West and Russia's foreign policy clashes led Syrian leadership to believe that a new Cold War was on the horizon, which would enhance Syria's strategic value and its friendship with Moscow. In May 2010, when Russian President Dmitry Medvedev

made his first official visit to Syria, Assad's regime was optimistic about the promising future of Russo-Syrian relations. Assad successfully convinced Medvedev to allow Syria to purchase advanced military equipment, including MiG-29 fighter jets, Pantsyr short-range air defense systems, armored vehicles,²⁴⁷ and the S-300 advanced anti-aircraft missile system.²⁴⁸

However, Assad's hopes of establishing an equal strategic alliance were soon dashed by the onset of the Syrian Civil War.

Part III: Transformation

THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

While this piece has focused on the dynamics and development of Russo-Syrian relations throughout history, rather than delving into the timeline of the Syrian Civil War and Russia's involvement, it is important to understand how this conflict changed the nature of the relationship between the two nations.

The Syrian unrest, which began with mass protests in March 2011, particularly in cities like Damascus and Aleppo, marked the onset of the Syrian Civil War and altered the dynamics of Russo-Syrian relations. The Kremlin, fearing that its efforts to rebuild the relationship with Syria after the Soviet era would be jeopardized by revolutionary forces, positioned itself to support Syria from the very beginning of the protests. Russian support for Assad can be categorized into two approaches: "Active Support" and "Active Engagement." The former refers to Russia's immediate response to the outbreak of chaos and continues to this day. The latter is Russia's reaction to the warning signs of a potential collapse of the Syrian regime in 2015. These interrelated approaches ultimately shaped Assad's fate and the course of the Syrian Civil War.

Active Support, but without Engagement (2011–Present)

The Kremlin's immediate strategy in supporting its ally in Damascus was to provide active support without direct engagement. Russia aimed for a "low-cost" victory in Syria and began its efforts by deploying soft elements of power, including political and diplomatic support, as well as material aid in the form of financial and military assistance. This support package has continued to the present day, albeit expanding over time.

Political and Diplomatic Support

One aspect of Russia's support for Assad's regime was its diplomatic campaign, which started in the early months of the Syrian

crisis. In October 2011, Russia vetoed the first UN Security Council draft resolution that condemned Syrian authorities and called for arms restrictions on Syria. The Russian representative to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, vetoed the draft due to its “accusatory tone against Damascus.”²⁴⁹ In January 2012, when a new draft resolution calling for Assad’s resignation was about to be submitted, Russia threatened to veto it, effectively blocking its passage.²⁵⁰ Since 2011, Russia has vetoed a total of 16 resolutions against Assad’s regime.²⁵¹

The diplomatic support provided by Russia was crucial for Syrian leadership, particularly in 2013–2014 when rebel forces gained significant territories in Aleppo, Raqqa, Daraa, and Deir ez-Zour. Assad’s military was suffering losses in equipment and manpower during this time. Any UN Security Council resolution, similar to Resolution 1973 in Libya, could have been a decisive blow to Assad’s regime, especially after the chemical attacks in Ghouta in 2013, which brought Syria to the brink of international military intervention. Russian diplomatic support shielded Assad politically and legally from such interventions. However, as Churkin emphasized, Russia was not against resolutions that did not impose pressure or sanctions on Syria.²⁵² Russia supported resolutions such as 2139 and 2165, which established a framework for sending humanitarian aid to Syria.

In addition to diplomatic support, Russia engaged in political propaganda to undermine the willingness of Western nations to support the rebels or take action against the Syrian regime.²⁵³ The Russian state-owned news agency Sputnik and the RT Arabic TV channel played a significant role in acting as headquarters for the Kremlin’s “information warfare” in support of Assad’s regime, promoting the narrative that Syria, under Assad’s leadership, was a peaceful and thriving nation disrupted by anti-Assad forces.²⁵⁴

Overall, Russia’s political and diplomatic support, coupled with its propaganda efforts, aimed to provide Assad’s regime with a political shield and shape international perceptions in favor of the Syrian government.

Alongside political and diplomatic support, Russia launched a covert disinformation campaign across various social networks such

as Twitter, Reddit, Quora, Medium, and Facebook. The aim was to circulate pro-Assad materials produced by Russian media and target civilians in Western countries to villainize the rebels and garner support for Assad's regime.²⁵⁵

Material Aids

In terms of material aid, similar to the Soviet era, Russia took charge of supplying Syria's war machine with new and advanced military equipment through expedited arm deliveries. Russia strengthened Syria's anti-aircraft/missile defense system by airlifting 12 SAM systems (Buk-M2 and S-125 Perchona systems), 1,700 SAM missiles, 36 advanced Pantsyr-S1 mobile systems, and six MiG-29 aircraft.²⁵⁶ To enhance Syria's coastal defense, Russia delivered two K-300P Bastion-P systems with 72 Yakhont anti-ship missiles.²⁵⁷ Additionally, Russia repaired Syria's damaged military equipment, including Mi-25 attack helicopters.²⁵⁸ From 2015 onward, Russia empowered Syria's offensive capabilities on the ground by delivering T-90 and T-62 tanks and BPM-1 and BPM-97 ambushed armed vehicles.²⁵⁹ The delivery route of armed cargo to Syria expanded, earning the nickname "Syria Express."²⁶⁰ However, Russia delayed the delivery of advanced S-300 anti-missile systems citing technical excuses. Eventually, in 2018, Russia delivered seven divisions of the S-300 system to Syria to upgrade its air defense.²⁶¹

Despite its political and material support, Russia initially refrained from direct engagement in the battlefield. It was willing to replace Syria's damaged military equipment but not willing to replace manpower losses with Russian troops.

Russia also provided assistance to Syria's struggling economy, which was hindered by international sanctions. In 2012, Russia entered into a "barter" agreement whereby it supplied Syria with refined oil products, including fuel,²⁶² in exchange for Syrian crude oil. Moscow also helped the isolated Central Bank of Syria by printing Syrian banknotes and delivering them along with plane loads of cash.²⁶³ As Russia's military

presence in Syria grew, Moscow distributed aid such as food and medicines to improve its image in the region.²⁶⁴

The Lack of Engagement Dilemma

Despite its political and material support, Russia initially refrained from direct engagement in the battlefield. It was willing to replace Syria's damaged military equipment but not willing to replace

By building alliances with local actors, Russia aims to establish proxy forces that can act on its behalf in the post-civil war era.

manpower losses with Russian troops. Russia adopted a “buck-passing” approach,²⁶⁵ allowing the coalition of Hezbollah, Iran-backed Shia militias, and Iranian forces to confront the rebel forces in the battlefield. However, by 2015, as Assad's territorial losses continued

and more than two-thirds of Syrian territory slipped from his control, the Kremlin realized that a more active stance was necessary. This led to an escalation of Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War, transitioning from active support to active engagement.

Active Engagement (2015–Present)

Since 30 September 2015, Russia, under Putin's orders, transitioned from active support to active engagement in the Syrian Civil War. The goal of this military campaign was to stabilize the legitimate state of Syria and create conditions for a political compromise.²⁶⁶ Russia framed its involvement as a fight against terrorism.²⁶⁷ Unlike the Soviet Union's experience in Afghanistan, Russia avoided engaging in ground battles and focused on aerial attacks.

Russian air forces carried out massive aerial bombings, conducting more than 39,000 air raids²⁶⁸ and targeting 122,000 locations.²⁶⁹ These airstrikes led to significant losses for anti-Assad forces, resulting in around 12,000 casualties.²⁷⁰ However, civilian casualties also occurred, with estimates ranging from 4,000 to 6,000 deaths.²⁷¹ Russia used this military campaign as an opportunity to test its post-Soviet-made weaponry,²⁷² including the strategic SU-34 airplane.²⁷³

Return of Soviet-style Presence

In addition to the airstrikes, Russia reinstated a Soviet-style presence by deploying a significant number of troops to Syria. Approximately 63,000 troops, including ranking officers, generals, artillery specialists, and rocket specialists,²⁷⁴ were deployed. While the initial justification was to protect Russian bases, pilots, peacekeepers, trainers, and combat forces,²⁷⁵ one major achievement was the formation of a new military division known as the Fifth Corps.²⁷⁶ This division operates under the direct command of the Russian headquarters at the Khmeimim airbase and has earned the title of the “Russian Proxy.”²⁷⁷

Finding Local Allies: Guarantying the Sustainability of the Russian Influence in the Future

Russia also established semi-patron-client relationships with local actors to ensure the sustainability of its influence in the future. This includes supporting the expansion of the Palestinian Quds Brigade²⁷⁸ in Aleppo province and militias led by the Jaber brothers in the southern provinces of Syria.²⁷⁹ Russia provided these pro-Assad militias with arms and logistical support.²⁸⁰ By building alliances with local actors, Russia aims to establish proxy forces that can act on its behalf in the post-civil war era.

In summary, Russia’s active engagement in the Syrian Civil War involved significant aerial bombardments, the deployment of troops, and the formation of proxy forces to secure its influence in the region.

Continued Rewards of Active Engagement

In exchange for its military campaign in Syria, Russia has advanced its presence across Syria and in the Mediterranean Sea. Moscow began reaping the benefits right from the start. Naturally, the Kremlin set its sights on Syria’s coast. Consequently, Russia and Syria implemented a treaty allowing Russia to add approximately 11 naval vessels,²⁸¹ and more importantly, to station its nuclear-powered vessels at its naval bases in Syria.²⁸² This can be seen as a significant achievement for Moscow, particularly given the expansion of NATO into the Balkan region, the flattery of Gaddafi with the West, and the collapse of his historically Moscow-friendly regime at the hands of the West. Russia

was relatively marginalized from the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, Russian officials did not hesitate to signal their return to the region by conducting drills in February 2022. The drills involved 15 Russian warships accompanied by Tu-22M3 strategic bombers and MiG-31K fighters armed with hypersonic missiles.²⁸³ In a way, one can argue that Russia not only rebuilt its military presence in Syria from the Soviet era but also expanded it. In October 2016, Moscow obtained authorization from Damascus to establish a permanent airbase in the Khmeimim region for 49 years.²⁸⁴ Currently, Russia has already stationed at least 33 aircraft, including two Su-57 stealth fighters,²⁸⁵ there.

In addition to military gains, Russia has been able to establish a strong foothold in the Syrian economy. In 2016, at the height of the Russian military campaign in Syria, Damascus agreed to give Russia priority in reconstruction contracts. Syria also guaranteed that all contracts would have favorable terms.²⁸⁶ Furthermore, in 2018, Russia and Syria signed an agreement granting Russia the exclusive right to produce gas and oil in Syria. Later, in 2019, Syria handed over oil exploration in the country to Russian companies Mercury LLC and Valeda LLC. Simply put, this agreement gave Russia a monopoly over Syrian energy resources.²⁸⁷

The financial gains Russia has obtained from its campaign can be considered the most significant difference between the Soviet-Syria and Russia-Syria military cooperation. During the Soviet era, the Kremlin had to secure Syria's consent through loans and investments. However, thanks to the Syrian Civil War, which altered the dynamics of the Russo-Syrian relationship, it is now Syria that must appease the Russians by making financial concessions.

The Grand Aftermath of Russia's Military Campaign in Syria

The Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War might have many regional and international implications, but as far as Syria and Russo-Syrian relations are concerned, the Russian intervention has two major implications. First, it secured the political survival of Assad, who, prior to the Russian intervention, was barely controlling a diminishing part of eastern Syria. With the help of the Russians, Assad has regained

control over most of Syria, except for northern regions and al-Tanf in the southeast of the country.

The second implication of the Russian intervention is the change in the nature of Russo-Syrian relations. Prior to the SCW, Russia was a respected partner of Syria, but even during the peak of their relationship during the Soviet era, Moscow couldn't change Damascus's decisions. In fact, not long ago, senior Assad even restricted the movement of Soviet personnel in Syria without minding the repercussions. However, this paradigm has now changed. In Assad's 2019 meeting with Putin, he thanked him and Russia for "saving Syria." Russia is no longer just a partner of Syria; it has become the savior of the Syrian regime.²⁸⁸

Conclusion

Syria's position in Russia's foreign policy has always been associated with the Kremlin's competition with other great powers. The historical ties between Russia and Syria can be traced back to the Orthodox rivalry between Kievan Rus and Byzantium in the 11th century. Similarly, during the Soviet era, Moscow supported the Syrian independence movement against French colonists in the 1940s due to ideological disputes with Western capitalist nations. The emergence of the Cold War and the spread of great power rivalry in the Middle East further solidified Syria as a strategic zone, prompting the Soviet Union to establish a presence to secure access to the Mediterranean Sea.

The pattern of Russian involvement in Syria continued with the Russian Federation. While the collapse of the Soviet Union briefly interrupted Russo-Syrian relations, disputes with the West over NATO enlargement, the Kosovo conflict, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (which toppled the last pro-Russia Arab states in the Persian Gulf), and Russia's invasion of Georgia revived a mini-Cold War environment. This renewed focus on securing access to the Mediterranean Sea and influence in the Middle East became strategically important for Russia.

Therefore, it is safe to argue that one common theme between Soviet-era Russia and the Russian Federation's Syria policy is their attraction to Syria due to geopolitical competition with the West and Syria's strategic features, such as its accessibility to the Mediterranean Sea and its position in the region. However, one distinguishing feature is ideology. During the Soviet era, Syria's socialist solidarity with Moscow, as evidenced by the role of communists in Syrian politics and the treatment of communists by the central government, played a significant role in Russo-Syrian relations. As the role of Syrian Communists grew, Moscow developed closer relations with Damascus. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, socialist solidarity was replaced by political solidarity. Syria's socio-economic policies are no longer of primary interest to Russia. As long as Damascus

shares Russia's opposition to U.S. global hegemony and supports the rebalancing of power from West to East, both nations have a common political ground for cooperation.

Despite the political and ideological factors that have influenced Moscow-Damascus relations during the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, the links between Russia and Syria have always been interconnected with the Kremlin's connections with other Arab states. The departure of Egypt from Moscow's sphere of influence in the 1970s made the Soviet Union more reliant on Syria, while the détente between Qaddafi and the West made the Russian Federation more dependent on Syria. In both cases, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation sought to establish close relations with Syria through political and material support. Similar to the Soviet Union, which provided Syria with arms, financial aid, and political support, the Russian Federation has provided Damascus with weapons, diplomatic backing, investments, and economic relief, including debt write-offs.

However, the Russian Federation's support for Syria has a notable limit, and that is Israel. Unlike the Soviet Union, which supplied Syria with advanced weaponry to challenge Israel's military superiority, the Russian Federation has refrained from equipping Syria with even defensive weapons that could threaten Israel. For instance, the delivery of S-300 SAM systems to Syria was delayed until the Israeli Air Force had developed countermeasures.

The divergence between the USSR and the Russian Federation's Syria policy regarding Israel is a fundamental difference between them. During the Soviet era, Moscow strongly sided with Syria against Israel, going as far as threatening the West and Israel with military actions when Syria's survival was at risk. However, the Russian Federation has distanced itself from Syria's challenges with Israel. Moscow's reactions to Israel's airstrikes against Palestinian camps in Damascus in 2003 and the bombing of the Syrian nuclear site in 2007 were purely diplomatic and mild. Additionally, during the peak of Russian military intervention in Syria in 2017-2018, Israel conducted more than 200 airstrikes inside Syrian territory, which Russia tolerated. This indicates that Russia does not intend to expand its ties with Syria at the cost of conflicts with other countries, particularly Israel.

Therefore, we can argue that during the Russian Federation, the Russo-Syrian “strategic partnership” established by the Soviet Union has declined to a “limited strategic friendship.”

However, even this limited strategic friendship between Syria and Russia has proven to be unsustainable due to the Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War, which shifted the balance of contribution in their relationship. Prior to the civil war, the Kremlin provided financial, military, and political assistance to Damascus in exchange for maintaining naval facilities in Syria. However, the Syrian Civil War reversed this dynamic, and now it is Syria who must provide economic and political concessions to secure Russia’s military support.

While the most significant impact of the Russian intervention in the war has been on the balance of influence in Russo-Syrian relations, prior to the civil war, Russia was more of a partner to Syria rather than an influencer. However, the Syrian Civil War changed this paradigm. Russia’s crucial role in turning the tide of the war has been vital to Syria to the extent that in 2019, Assad, in his meeting with Putin, thanked Russia for “saving Syria.” Consequently, we can safely argue that Russia is no longer just a partner to Syria but the “savior” of the Syrian regime. Syria’s reliance on Russia has not only provided Moscow with a strategic advantage, including a monopoly over Syria’s gas and oil sector, favorable reconstruction contracts, and the expansion of naval facilities in Tartus, but it has also made Syria an indispensable piece of Moscow’s foreign strategy, where Russia holds the upper hand. ♠

Acronyms

A2AD - anti-access/area denial

ECCI - Executive Committee of the Communist International

GRU - Glavnoe razvedyvatel'noe upravlenie, Russian Military Intelligence

IAF - Israeli Air Force

LF - Lebanese Forces

LNM - Lebanese National Movement

OETA - Occupied Enemy Territory Administration

NCRC - National Council for the Revolutionary Command

PLO - Palestinian Liberation Organization

SCP - Syria Communist Party

SLCP - Syrian-Lebanese Communist Party

SPAAG - self-propelled anti-aircraft guns

SAM - surface-to-air (missile)

UAR - United Arab Republic

USSR - Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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Syria's position in Russia's foreign policy has always been intertwined with the Kremlin's strategic chess game against other great powers. This narrative can be stretched back to the 11th century, when the Orthodox rivalry between Kievan Rus and Byzantium set the stage for future alliances. This historical bond between Russia and Syria weaves through the centuries, evolving from ancient ties into the complex, multi-faceted relationship we see today. This monograph examines how the relationship between Russia and Syria has evolved—from its roots through the cold war and rise of the Assad dynasty to the Syrian civil war and beyond.

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