



The Eurasia Center – Middle East Program Russian Influence and Power Gained from the Syrian Civil War

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Russian soldiers in Syria Photo Credit-Delfi.com

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During the last two years of Trump's Presidency, plans were made to begin withdrawing troops from different parts of the Middle East. The Trump Administration first planned to remove 2,200 troops from Iraq and decrease the number of troops in Afghanistan from around 8,000 to 4,500 troops. Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, the commander of U.S. Central Command claimed that this decrease in American presence would not interrupt the core tasks the military wanted to accomplish.¹ However, the diminishing presence in the Middle East had left a huge power vacuum. Russia activity has become more apparent in the region and

¹ Robert Burns and Zeke Miller, "US Withdrawing Thousands of Troops from Iraq and Afghanistan," AP NEWS, September 9, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-middle-east-islamic-state-group-donald-trump-iraq-a6d9550ea12d041436dda09f30873f55>.

Russia has obtained a larger degree of influence. Russia had influenced the outcome of the Syrian war by supporting the Assad regime and assuring its survival.

To maintain an alliance with Russia, Syria has had to give up Western offers for assistance. For example,

America offered to freeze sanctions

to provide aid to the regime's

regions, to finance the mine

removal process in Syria, and to

help convince Jordan to provide

the southern part of Syria with

electricity. In return, Syria demanded cross-border humanitarian aid,

<https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/11/1052051>



and the activation of the political process by the formulation of the Constitutional Committee. This

Committee was facilitated by the UN and aims to reconcile the Assad regime and Syrian opposition.² In late

January this year, the Constitutional Committee ended its fifth round of negotiation has ended in a stalemate.

From a political and economic perspective, it seems that Russia used the peace process to gain time for its

support for Assad regime to survive. The Russians used the Constitutional Committee to advance its

objectives in Syria and ultimately help the Assad regime to prevail.

² Ibrahim Hamidi, "‘Secret Channel’ Between US, Russia in Vienna on Syria: Military Understandings, Political Disappointments," Asharq Al-awsat, March 7, 2021, <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2845691/%E2%80%98secret-channel%E2%80%99-between-us-russia-vienna-syria-military-understandings>.

After the 10th Anniversary of the Syrian uprising, the Syrian military tired, overstretched, and broke, Syria needs Russia to continue to fund the war. Russia has spent between one to two billion dollars per year on the war in Syria. Also, Russia has lost about 200 soldiers since it has joined the war.³ Syria's need for resources



has allowed Russia to field test more than 600 weapons. These weapons have clearly shown the destruction they could cause and attracts clients to purchase them. In other words, this war has been promoting Russian weaponry.⁴ See:

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/08/middleeast/syria-assad-coronavirus-intl/index.html>

Russia has recently shown off its Iskander Missile as it hit a hospital in Syria. The video has gone viral and has helped shown how effective the missile is, and now other countries are willing to purchase the missiles. In addition, two weeks ago, Syria approved the use of the Sputnik vaccine on its people. Perhaps it is just a coincidence that exactly two weeks later, Assad and his wife tested positive for the virus, but Russia will earn a great profit from the vaccine.⁵ Furthermore, Syria has allowed Russia to maintain military bases in Syria. This allows Russia to maintain influence in different parts of the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea.⁶

³ Barbara Bibbo, "Analysis: Syria's Peace Process and the Russian and US Roles," Aljazeera, February 28, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/28/analysis-syrias-peace-process-and-the-russian-and-us-role>.

⁴ Faysal Mohamad, "Could 2021 Be a Moment of Truth for the Russia-Syria Alliance?" TRTWorld, February 16, 2021, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/could-2021-be-a-moment-of-truth-for-the-russia-syria-alliance-44213>.

⁵ Eyad Kourdi, Mostafa Salem, and Qiblawi, "Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and His Wife Asma Test Positive for Covid," CNN, accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/03/08/middleeast/syria-assad-coronavirus-intl/index.html>.

⁶ "How Russia's Putin Became the Go-To Man on Syria," *BBC News*, March 5, 2020, sec. Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51733595>.

Moreover, Russia is showing its political power. In late February, a young Israeli woman wandered into Syria. Syria used the young woman as a bargaining chip to get two Syrian shepherds released and obtain about 60,000 doses of the COVID-19 from Israel. This situation not only helped Syria economically, but was a major power move for Russia. While being paid \$1.2 million for providing the vaccines, Russia showed America and other nations who Syria is willing to work with.⁷ Another major power gambit Russia has made is, its new relationship with Turkey. Turkey has invaded Syria three times to thwart a partnership between Syrian Democratic Forces and America and establish a buffer zone on its border.⁸ Although the US and Turkey relations remain difficult, Turkey has decided to receive Russia's help end in negotiating an end to the war.⁹ Turkey's choice of working with Russia instead of the US proves how much power and influence Russia has not only within Syria, but in the Middle East as a whole. Turkey has made a multi-billion-dollar purchase of Russian S-400 surface-to-air missiles incurring US sanctions. Turkey maybe now blacklisted from participating in the US F-35 air force program and now prove inoperable in terms of participating in NATO. Some F-35s have been sent to Turkey and now Russian trainers may be present to instruct how to use the S-400s raising security concerns.

⁷ Ben Hubbard and Hwaida Saad, "Having Won Syria's War, al-Assad Is Mired in Economic Woes," *The New York Times*, February 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/23/world/middleeast/syria-assad-economy-food.html>.

⁸ Aaron Stein, "Talking to Russia: A Plan for Syria - Foreign Policy Research Institute," Foreign Policy Research Institute, February 24, 2021, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2021/02/talking-to-russia-a-plan-for-syria/>.

⁹ Galip Dalay, "US-Turkey Relations Will Remain Crisis-Ridden for a Long Time to Come," *Brookings* (blog), January 29, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/29/us-turkey-relations-will-remain-crisis-ridden-for-a-long-time-to-come/>.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkey's President Tayyip Erdogan shake on Syrian Ceasefire, March 2020 Photo AP

Russia's influence is expanding, but it still does not support Syria in the way that would be more beneficial. A majority of Russian support to Syria is weaponry. Only a small amount, if not none, is towards humanitarian aid. Russia's role in the Syrian Civil War will continue to negatively impact civilians that want no interest in the war. Instead of focusing on war, Russia should focus on ending it.

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