



Centre for Air Power Studies (CAPS)

Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS)

# SYRIAN CRISIS: DISCORD OR COLLABORATION BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE US?

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On the 70<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly session held in New York City on September 28, 2015, the Syrian crisis made the headlines. The complex internal conflict, the spread of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) at a phenomenal pace in Syria and Iraq and the establishment of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Raqqa have threatened the very fabric of regional stability and global security at large. For almost two and half years, the developments in Syria have gained international attention but the approach towards resolving the conflict in Syria is a mixed bag. While making an assessment of Russia and the US involvement in Syrian crisis, preservation of interests, lack of tolerance and mutual hostility, one can conclude the existence of a political vendetta between the two powers in resolving the Syrian conflict. While actors like Russia and Iran have been vital defenders of Bashar al-Assad regime; the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have called for

regime change and removal of the authoritarian ruler.

As the conflict in Syria has reached a saturation point with huge death tolls and millions of Syrians seeking refuge in Europe, on September 28, 2015, US President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin met face-to-face after almost two years since the Ukraine crisis. The two leaders called for a collective action in resolving the Syrian crisis. Ironically, the effort for a combined initiative has certain obstacles as vehement opposition to each other's approach and interests may impact the complete defeat of the Islamic State and attempts at stabilising the region.

President Obama has stated that any solution to the conflict in Syria must not include support to the Assad regime. In other words, the Washington administration is clearly fighting a two-front war, i.e., a) removal of an

'authoritative' rule in Syria and b) to combat the rise of Islamic State and contain its spread into the neighbouring volatile region. In sharp contrast, Russian President Vladimir Putin has blamed the United States for the civil war in Syria as the Arab Spring was one of the key rationale behind the internal conflict and for the rise of terrorist threat in Syria which was the result of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003<sup>1</sup> and a catastrophic failure to establish a long term solution. President Putin has explicitly stated that any solution to the ongoing conflict in Syria must include a collaborative effort with the Assad regime.

Ostensibly, Russia has sent military support to Syria in a bid to help the controversial Syrian President Assad to defeat the Islamic State.<sup>2</sup> Kremlin's support and intentions continue to be under the scanner of the Western world as Russia for long has been a major factor in defending Assad and providing defence equipment to his army. However, display of strong bilateral ties between the two countries is not a new phenomenon as the partnership between Russia and Syria dates back to the Soviet times. Russia operates a small naval base at Tartus on the Mediterranean Sea and its only other warm water port apart from Sevastopol in Crimea. Russia absolved Syria of \$9.8 billion of its \$13.4 billion debt in exchange for making Tartus a permanent Russian military base.<sup>3</sup> Of late Russia has shown keen interest in preserving its maritime assets. The rationale behind Russia

showing keen interest in preserving warm water ports is evident from its recently released 'Maritime Doctrine 2015'. The current national maritime policy divides Russian naval policy between six regions: Atlantic, Arctic, Antarctic, Indian, Pacific Ocean and the Caspian Sea. Specifically, in all these regions, the naval strength is to be enforced by the navy's strategic and operational units of the Northern, Pacific, Baltic, and Black Sea fleets and the Caspian flotilla. Syria in this regard is a key strategic asset for Russia to defend. Russia's power projection from the maritime point of view remains exceptionally disadvantageous. Historic compulsions have thus increased the need for Russia to gain access to maritime routes in order to sustain its growth and influence in international affairs.

Russia also has strong defence ties with Syria since the Soviet period starting with the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. Between 2007 and 2011, Russia supplied 78 percent of Syria's weapons imports. Russia so far has sold Syria missile defence systems which include the Buk-M2E surface-to-air missile system, Bastion-P coastal defence missile systems, 36 Yakovlev Yak-130 light attack jets and MiG-31 'Foxhound' interceptor aircraft which is yet to be confirmed by Damascus.<sup>4</sup> Russia's mammoth defence industrial complex needs flow of funds to remain in the global defence market competition. Moscow would want to continue as Syria's strong defence partner as it has nearly \$2 billion worth

defence deals with Syria. However, Russia in its attempt to preserve its national interest in Syria should hold back its temptation to sell game changing weapons system to Syria which may tip the balance of power in any war theatre. Possession of a potent weapon will dramatically upset the regional security in the Middle East, especially if it falls into the hands of the Islamic State.

Syria is moreover seen by the Russian political elites as a conduit to 1) its attempt to renew its negative image in the world community post annexation of Crimea and Ukraine uprising by fighting the Islamic State 2) strengthen its engagement and influence in the Middle East as it sees Syria as a lever to gain access in the region 3) contain US and its allies from making inroads into the region and preserve its policy interest through a pro-Russian regime like Assad 4) combating the rise of the self proclaimed Islamic State and to put a check on its rise especially in Chechnya as the IS has been using Russia's troubled North Caucasus as fertile recruitment ground.

Paradoxically, the involvement of Russia may not yield the above mentioned expected outcome as a) US is determined to bring a regime change in Syria much against the Russian interest and is in no mood to accept Russia's efforts of image building post-Ukraine uprising b) Syria is only a part of the Middle East Muslim world and Russia's support to the Alawite leader can backfire as the sectarian divide in the region

may aggravate anti-Russian sentiments c) Russia has been a 'soft target' of radical Islamic activities and Chechnya's support to the establishment of Islamic State and allegiance to the Caliphate is evident and hence possibility of its penetration into Russian territory for its alleged involvement will only aggravate Russia's security concerns d) compared to Russia, US has stronger support base in the Middle East including in Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and many other countries.

As for the US and its Western partners, Washington remains dangerously disconnected from Syria's realities. In its efforts at a regime change in Syria, the US has provided financial and military aid to the moderate opposition supporters. Arming, recruiting and training of these anti-Assad followers failed to yield the expected result. In fact many scholars opine that one of the key reasons for the ISIS to thrive in Syria is the failure of the moderate opposition forces to stem the tide of radical extremism. The political vacuum created in the northern part of Syria was increasingly tied to the Syrian Opposition Coalition. Hundreds of millions of dollars of U.S financed "stabilization assistance" kept them afloat. Given the time and resources at their disposal, it has revealed the failure of the Gulf- and Western-backed Syrian opposition and its allies to institute credible systems of governance and local rule that could withstand or repel ISIS control.<sup>5</sup>

Ignorance of the more complex social and political dynamics of the country is another key reason for the US policy on Syria to have fallen to an all-time low. It is also a clear sign that the US has no potential alternative to replace Assad even if it succeeds in removing him from his position. Hence, the US stand on removal of Assad will only create a political vacuum in Syria which may in turn lead the ISIS to take control of political affairs similar to the Taliban emerging as a political power in Afghanistan. Another key argument is that the US has failed to prioritise between its immediate priorities - regime change or combat ISIS? Curbing the growth of ISIS is the need of the hour as its spread will not remain confined to Syria. Countries like Turkey which is a NATO ally could be the next potential target. Turkey has been a strong critic of the emergence of the concept of Islamic State. In this direction, Turkey has stopped the supply and access to Euphrates River which is the main supply of water and power threatening primarily Syria but also Iraq with a major water crisis. Raqqa which is the strong hold of the IS in Syria, is currently out of water and electricity.<sup>6</sup> This move by Turkey and compromising with international norms, Ankara may face serious repercussions for its involvement in curbing the spread of the IS, which in turn means that the US should be prepared to defend its NATO ally from future impact of the IS. Fall of Turkey- an ardent supporter of Western allies will be a major blow to NATO. Nonetheless, unlike President Putin whose popularity has skyrocketed in Russia and

his actions are endorsed by the Duma, President Obama has largely been criticised for his policy and involvement in the Iraq and Syrian crisis. Republicans criticized the president for not having a successful strategy. The “Democratic Domino Theory” model to overthrow authoritarian regime hostile to US interests failed in Syria as the Assad regime continues to stay in power, backed strongly by Russia.

The biggest threat at hand is the phenomenal rise of the ISIS which has found volunteers and recruits from across the world thus threatening the global security architecture. Rather than containing the expansion of each other's growth and influence, both Russia and the United States should aim to contain the rise of radical fundamentalism, as a movement like this needs no boundaries, no rules, no accountability and no rationale to carry out its actions. Hence, international actors like Russia and the US should find this an opportune moment to shed their hostilities and rivalry and collaborate closer to combat threats like the ISIS. Syria should not become another region of discord between the US and Russia but rather become a territory for peaceful co-existence of interests and confidence building measures between the two countries.

*(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])*

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Oren Dorell, "President Obama, Russia's Putin Clash at United Nations over Syria", *USA Today*, September 28, 2015.

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/09/28/obama-putin-iran-rouhani-debate-syria-plans/72948136/> accessed on September 30, 2015

<sup>2</sup> Holly Ellyott, "What has Russia got Invested in Syria?", *CNBC*, September 17, 2015.

<http://www.cnbc.com/2015/09/17/what-has-russia-got-invested-in-syria.html> accessed on September 25, 2015

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Tovrov, "Russia's Arms Deals with Syria: A Timeline", *International Business Times*, May 30, 2012.

<http://www.ibtimes.com/russias-arms-deals-syria-timeline-705522> accessed on September 10, 2015

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Hisham Shafi, "How Western Aid Bungled Syria's Opposition & Paved the Way for ISIS", *Foreign Policy In Focus*, August 04, 2015. <http://fpif.org/western-aid-bungled-syrias-opposition-paved-way-isis/> accessed on September 10, 2015

<sup>6</sup> Shuaib Anjarini, "A New Turkish Aggression against Syria: Ankara Suspends Pumping Euphrates' Water", *Al Akhbar*, May 30, 2014. <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/19970> accessed on September 24, 2015