

# Russia's Interests in the Syrian Conflict: Power, Prestige, and Profit

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## **Abstract**

*Despite the crimes against humanity committed by Bashar Assad's regime in Syria and despite the growing international pressure, Russia provided steadfast international political support to the regime during the development of the conflict in Syria in March 2011-July 2012. The article examines Russia's position and analyzes the reasons behind its support for the regime, arguing that it was primarily motivated not by material interests but rather by the foreign policy doctrine of multipolarity and the wish to maintain influence and reputation in the region.*

**Keywords:** Syria, Russia, Foreign Policy, Multipolarity

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## **Introduction**

During the past year, largely peaceful demonstrations in Syria demanding political and economic reforms have grown into a full-scale civil war, becoming one of the major issues on the international agenda. The chief culprit for the violent turn of events is Syria's authoritarian regime, which attempted to quell demonstrations by resorting to increasingly violent measures and repressions. According to UN reports, the Syrian regime engaged in systematic and widespread human rights violations, including violations of the rights to food and health, excessive use of force against protesters, arbitrary detentions, summary executions, abductions, enforced disappearance, torture and rape as a matter of policy. These reports leave no doubt that some of the actions taken by regime constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes.

Members of the international community responded to the conflict by progressively, if somewhat sluggishly, building up pressure on the regime to stop gross human rights violations by smart sanctions, embargoes, recalling ambassadors and closing embassies, as well as setting up and funding camps for the increasing stream of refugees from Syria. However, while some countries went beyond that by providing support for the insurgents, the responses of the international community at large have not been able to force the Syrian regime to change its approach or its leadership to step down. While a number of factors contributed to this situation, the single most important was the position taken by Russia. Drawing on support from China, Russia has actively resisted most attempts to hike up international pressure on the regime at the United Nations by blocking no less than three Security Council resolutions on Syria, thereby preventing comprehensive sanctions and depriving of legitimacy any considerations of humanitarian intervention. In the context of the domestic problems of many Western states, these and other actions by Russia have effectively shielded the Syrian regime from facing full international consequences of its behavior and contributed to the extension of the conflict.

Why did Russia consider protecting a regime perpetrating crimes against humanity so important as to risk incurring diplomatic isolation and putting itself at odds with the entire international community? This article examines Russia's position on Syria and analyzes its interest in supporting the regime. In contrast to accounts that emphasize Russia's long-term economic and military (i.e. material) interests in Syria as the main determinant of Russia's support, the article argues that Russia was mainly driven by strategic considerations. In addition to concerns about the impact of the fall of the Syrian regime on the geopolitical and security situation in the region, Russia's

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position was shaped by the perceived need to reaffirm the state-centric values of the international system and to oppose the practice of humanitarian intervention. In other words, for Russia, the conflict Syria was primarily about the world order and Russia's place in it. In developing this argument, the article will first examine Russia's view on the conflict in Syria and the desirable ways of its resolution.

### **Russia's Position on the Syrian Conflict**

Russia's position on Syria, as formulated in the official statements of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the president, has remained essentially unchanged since the beginning of the conflict in March 2011. Russia called for the immediate suspension of the use of force on all sides and a peaceful resolution of the crisis through a broad-based national dialogue, without outside interference, undue pressure and preconditions. What changed in the course of the conflict was Russia's perception of its seriousness, the means proposed to further its resolution, as well as expectations regarding its outcomes. Judging by the number of items related to Syria on the agenda of meetings and conversations conducted by the Russian MFA, the issue was initially overshadowed by Russia's engagement with the developments in Libya and Yemen, receiving increasingly more attention since October 2011 and becoming a major preoccupation of the Russian diplomatic service since February 2012.

The initial perception of the situation in Syria was heavily influenced by the assessment of the events unfolding in Libya. Russian foreign policy decision-makers felt that Russia's abstention on UN Security Council's resolution 1973 authorizing a no-fly zone over Libya was grossly misinterpreted and abused by Western countries to oust Gaddafi and change Libya's regime, thereby undermining not only Russia's stance on the issue but also the authority of the Security Council and thus the very foundation of Russia's place in the international system. Russia saw Western moves to condemn Assad's regime's actions in the UN as an attempt to implement the Libyan scenario in Syria and was determined not to allow it. The Libyan experience shaped Russia's opposition to any requests by the international community for Assad to step down, demands for the unilateral removal of government forces from population centers, or UN-authorized sanctions.

Framing the events in Syria in this way also influenced how the Russian leadership interpreted the transformation of largely peaceful protests to a civil war. Incoming reports about the brutalities perpetrated by the Syrian government forces were often seen as Western propaganda preparing their domestic public opinion for an armed intervention. According to the Russian MFA, Western media reports

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were usually biased and in some cases involved outright acts of information warfare being waged “to maximally tarnish the image of Syria and its leadership in the eyes of the world and thus achieve the creation of conditions to justify outside intervention in the affairs of Syria to overthrow the existing regime there” (Russian MFA 2012). Daily newspapers and respectable policy journals, such as the International Affairs published by the Russian MFA, picked up and developed this view to full-blown conspiracy theories. For example, a well-known public figure Sergei Filatov argued that the Houla massacre on May 25, 2012 was a provocation, carefully staged by Western special services to create a media event and prepare for invasion, as it had been done before in Yugoslavia, Iraq, and Libya (Filatov 2012). In short, what was seen in the West as a growing armed reaction to crimes against humanity perpetrated by a brutal regime, in Russia appeared as a concerted effort by Western states and their Arab clients to sabotage any chances for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and to overturn the government that still enjoyed the support of the majority of Syrians. Although Russia from the very start consistently emphasized that the protesters share equal responsibility for the violence, since October 2011, when attempts were made to introduce a resolution at the Security Council condemning Syria’s authorities, the Russian MFA began branding the armed opposition as terrorists. As late as June 2012, some experts related to the MFA maintained that the majority of armed resistance to Assad’s regime consisted of foreign fighters and that talking about a civil war is premature or altogether inaccurate (Dolgov 2012).

### **Diplomatic Efforts by Russia**

Russia’s views on what to do about the Syrian conflict went through several stages. Initially, it was evidently hoped that Assad was capable of dealing with the crisis by appeasing the protesters with political reforms. In June, for example, Russia was still refusing to discuss the issue in the Security Council because, as Lavrov argued at the time, “the situation doesn’t present a threat to international peace and security” and “it is not in the interests of anyone to send messages to the opposition in Syria or elsewhere that if you reject all reasonable offers, we will come and help you as we do in Libya” (Lavrov 2011a). Russia lauded the cursory reform steps taken by Assad (e.g. ending the state of emergency, dissolving the Supreme State Security Court, approving multiparty and general election laws etc.) and asked the international community for patience. According to Lavrov in July, “we are now witnessing attempts to implement the same [*Libyan*] scenario in Syria <...> where all his promises of reform, even if belated, and again, the first steps, even if defective, to fulfill

those promises by lifting the state of emergency, through declaring amnesty, are not accepted and are only met with statements like: “Now come on, either you swiftly carry out all the reforms overnight, or you will be illegitimate” (Vorobev 2011). In this regard, the August 3 presidential statement of the UN Security Council, which was initiated by Russia and, among other things, condemned the use of force against civilians by the Syrian authorities, should be viewed as Russia’s attempt to placate the West and buy Assad some time, rather than as a sign of Russia’s malleability.

By September 2011, with protests turning into an uprising, with Western governments imposing sanctions and calling for Assad to resign, and with Syria’s relations with Saudi Arabia and, crucially, Turkey in tatters, it was clear that the situation would not resolve by itself. In October, having coordinated with China and blocked the October 4 UN SC resolution, Russia staked its hopes on the Arab League. At a first glance, the Arab League was an odd choice: due to ongoing turmoil in Egypt, it was under disproportionate influence of Saudi Arabia, which had an interest to see Assad’s regime fall, if only to weaken Iran’s power in the region. However, the Arab League’s support for the no-fly zone had been essential in legitimizing the toppling of the Libyan regime, and therefore Russia saw advantages in getting the League involved in a positive and controlled way. Russia hoped to influence the League’s decisions by balancing Saudi Arabia and Qatar with Lebanon, Egypt or Russia’s arms trade partner Algeria. Furthermore, given the League’s composition and history, Russia was not unreasonable to expect that the League would be sensitive to the prospect of a humanitarian intervention in Syria. After all, even the charter of the league contained a pledge to “abstain from any action calculated to change established systems of government” (League of Arab States 1945).

Thus, between October 2011 and January 2012 Russia’s diplomatic efforts to get the Syrian regime out of its predicament focused on shaping the Arab League’s activities. Russia supported the League’s November 2 peace plan, which called for Assad’s regime to withdraw armored vehicles from the streets, stop violence against protesters, release all political prisoners and begin a dialogue with the opposition. Russia convinced Assad to allow the League’s observers into Syria, and worked to limit their mission (e.g. Syria was to decide which cities can be visited and which opposition groups can be met by the observers) (Küçükkeleş 2012). When the League’s initiative predictably failed and the League not only withdrew its observers from Syria but also took the issue to the Security Council, Russia’s only regret was that it failed too fast.

After having to block the February 4 UN SC resolution as “one-sided”, suffering

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a setback through the UN General Assembly's February 16 resolution, which strongly condemned the "continued widespread and systematic human rights violations by the Syrian authorities" (i.e. crimes against humanity), as well as the UN Human Rights Council's March 1 resolution, which deplored "the Syrian regime's brutal actions over the past 11 months", Russia focused its attention on the United Nations and put its full support behind UN-Arab League Special Envoy Kofi Annan. Annan, who was praised by Lavrov as "the optimum person" who "perfectly knows how to negotiate with hostile sides" (Lavrov 2012b), proceeded to carry out the peace plan agreed upon between Russia and the Arab League. The plan, which soon came to be regarded by Russia as the "key instrument without any alternatives" for the political resolution of the conflict, proposed to cease violence and begin negotiations without any preconditions or sanctions in case of violations, i.e. represented an airbrushed version of Russia's initial position. The only significant change was the deadline of April 10 for the withdrawal of government security forces and heavy weaponry from major population centers, which was soon violated by both sides, thus ending any hopes anyone may have entertained about the viability of Annan's peace plan, which was effectively suspended in June.

It is clear that Russia's diplomatic activities between March 2011 and June 2012 ultimately served more to shield Assad's regime from international pressure, rather than contributed to any kind of resolution of the conflict. In tandem with China, Russia resisted and, when it could, blocked unfavorable developments in the United Nations, stalling and delegitimizing collective efforts to build pressure on the Syrian government, and not only prevented UN sanctions but also openly supplied weapons. Furthermore, Russia encouraged splits between the different factions of the Syrian opposition by, for example, meeting with the delegation of the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change or the Popular Front for Change and Liberation, while denouncing and excluding the Syrian National Council as "notorious". The intensity of the diplomatic activity with which Russia pursued its aims is truly impressive: for example, in just one year Russia held no less than twelve high-level meetings and consultations with China during which the Syrian issue was discussed. Russia managed to meet or exchange opinions with practically all Arab League members, and held almost daily consultations with Syria.

Whether or not this was done to support Assad personally remains an open question. Russia has repeatedly and insistently stated that it was not taking sides in the conflict and that it was not protecting Assad, whose fate must be decided by the Syrian people, but was only upholding principles of international law. In the Rus-

sian-organized Action Group for Syria, which convened on 30 June 2012, with the explicit aim to revive the Annan plan and the likely aim to derail the intensely disliked Friends of Syria Group, Russia for the first time conceded to a transitional governing body, composed of members of the present government and the opposition, which indicated that Russia was prepared to sacrifice Assad to save his regime.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Russia's position that both sides should simply lay down weapons and talk without any preconditions, deadlines, sanctions or external pressure clearly favored the government and would have immediately left the opposition at a serious disadvantage or, worse, at the mercy of Assad's "capable" security apparatus. The following sections will examine both material and strategic reasons underlying this bias in Russia's position.

### **Military Interests**

Russia's naval facility in Syria is often mentioned in the media and policy-oriented writings as one of the main reasons why Russia so adamantly protected Assad's regime. The Syrian port of Tartus hosts Russia's naval supply and maintenance station, which allows Russian warships to refuel in the Mediterranean without returning to their Black Sea bases. The station was established in 1971 to provide for the activities of the Soviet Mediterranean squadron and since 1991, when the squadron was disbanded, was used to resupply occasional warships. Until recently, the station reportedly consisted of three floating docks, a floating workshop, storage facilities, and barracks, housing about fifty servicemen.

Given Russia's involvement, it is almost certain that a regime change in Syria would result in the eventual termination of the agreement and the closing of the station in Tartus. While it is not clear whether the station is as important to Russia as depicted in the international media, Russia evidently wants to foster this belief. For example, on June 25, 2012, Russian Navy Commander-in-Chief Vice Admiral Viktor Chirkov stated that "as long as Russian Navy performs missions in the Gulf of Aden and the Mediterranean Sea, this base is critical for us" (Central Navy Portal 2012). Earlier that month news were circulated (and later denied) in the media that two landing ships were getting ready to sail to Tartus to protect Russian citizens and the maintenance station (Interfax 2012a). On 10 July, 2012, it was again reported that

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2 For example, the Final Communiqué of the meeting in Geneva, which was hailed in Russia as a diplomatic victory over the United States, posits that the public services, including the military forces and security services, must be preserved or restored. Under such conditions, the regime would have fairly good chances to emerge from the "transitional period" unscathed, even if without Assad.

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Russia sent a destroyer, three landing ships and a frigate to the Mediterranean Sea for exercises (Interfax 2012b). In short, Russia has been signaling that it considers the station important.

In 2008, talks were conducted with Syria to expand the base and plans were made to upgrade it to a fully-fledged naval base where the Black Sea fleet ships could be deployed. However, these plans, which included probing the possibility of naval bases in Libya and Yemen, have to be viewed in the larger context of deteriorating relations with Ukraine. Since the “Orange Revolution” in 2005, Ukraine had been moving away from Russia, becoming a candidate to join the NATO Membership Action Plan in 2008, and announcing that the lease of Russian naval base in Sevastopol would not be extended beyond 2017, which forced Russia to accelerate the construction of the Novorossiysk base on the Russian coast of the Black Sea, as well as look for other alternatives. Since Ukraine’s Western orientation was effectively reversed by 2010 and the Russian lease on naval facilities in Crimea was soon extended to 2047, thus solving the Black Sea fleet problem, the upgrading of the Tartus station did not proceed.<sup>3</sup>

There are good reasons to suspect that the military importance of the naval facilities in Tartus is greatly exaggerated, either deliberately or inadvertently. In terms of material investments, the loss of the facilities would be negligible - most of it can be simply towed away. In terms of the freedom of military action, the loss would be somewhat more palpable but this too needs to be seen in perspective. Given that Russia’s Black Sea fleet is bottlenecked by the Turkish Straits and severely constrained by the unique provisions of the Montreux Convention, the station may have a function during extended operations in the Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean.<sup>4</sup> However, in the context of the general state of the Russian navy and the balance of power at sea, currently both the Russian activities in the Mediterranean and the importance of the ramshackle station are of purely symbolic, rather than strategic value.

First, by most estimates, Russia’s navy has shrunk to approximately one-fourth of the Soviet Union’s navy at its peak (Fedyszyn 2012). The Black Sea fleet was particularly adversely affected. If in 1991 the Black Sea Fleet was comprised of 86 surface ships, 64 boats, 12 submarines, 384 airplanes, and 162 helicopters, during the

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3 Russian journalists who went to inspect the station in June 2012 found two officers in empty, decrepit buildings (Steshin and Kots, 2012).

4 It should be noted that Russia has access to other ports (e.g. basing rights in Djibouti) which are more important than the station in Tartus for sustained deployment in the Indian Ocean.



subsequent nine years it was reduced to 32 surface ships, 2 submarines, 10 boats, and 30 aircraft, most of which were supposed to be decommissioned by 2010 (Perepelytsya 2004, 202). The isolation and the obsolescence of the Black Sea fleet means that, in most hypothetical scenarios of armed conflict, the maintenance and supply station in Tartus would be more of a liability than a military asset.

Second, the importance of operations in the Mediterranean is itself a dubious proposition. It could perhaps be argued that the Tartus station is treasured not for its current but future value. Rising global fuel prices lay strong foundations for Russia's comeback to its former power and it is just a matter of time before Russia will be able to utilize its dormant assets, such as the said station. However, while the Russian government has announced highly ambitious plans to restore its former naval power, the main strategic planning documents place clear emphasis on Northern and Pacific fleet regions.<sup>5</sup> Thus, even assuming that these plans will come through in their entirety, the naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea will be more of a matter of prestige than an issue of strategic importance. It should be noted that even at the peak of the Soviet power the Soviet navy's deployment in the Mediterranean served "not as a force to be reckoned with but as a symbolic force in being, to win friends, influence people, and intimidate its enemies" (McCormick 1987), i.e. primarily as an instrument of political signaling.

### **Economic Interests**

Another widespread explanation of Russia's support for Assad's regime is that Russia has important long-standing economic interests in Syria, dating back to the Soviet Union times. These interests are primarily centered on supposedly lucrative arms sales but are said to also include other trade relations, investments by Russian companies, and cooperation in the energy sector. Russia's economic interests provide a much more plausible reason for Russia's support for Syria but it remains to be examined whether they can be considered an important determining factor. The Russia's foreign policy leaders' view on this matter is difficult to distill. On the one hand, V. Putin bemoaned the fact that "as earlier in Iraq, in countries that directly experienced "the Arab Spring" Russian companies are losing market positions that have taken decades to achieve and are being deprived of rather large commercial contracts" (Putin 2012b). President D. Medvedev stated that "Russia is <...> a great

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5 The principal documents are the Basic Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Naval Activities for 2010, which was approved in 2000, and the Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation for the Period Up to 2020, which was approved in 2010. For a discussion, see Bosbotinis 2012.

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friend of Syria, a country with which we have numerous economic and political ties” (Medvedev 2011). On the other hand, Foreign Minister S. Lavrov claimed that Russia has “never been a major trade and economic partner of that country” (Lavrov 2012e). A closer look will reveal that both the nature of trade relations between Russia and Syria, and their role in shaping political relations has also been more ambiguous than what is usually depicted in the media.

Trade relations between Russia and Syria are fairly well-developed, although they have been growing by leaps and bounds only since around 2003 and are decidedly tilted in favor of Russian exports. In terms of trade volume, it is currently comparable to Russia’s trade with Egypt or Israel, although it is surpassed by far by Russia’s trade with Turkey, not to mention the trade with key European Union partners (see table 1). Trade cooperation has generally been focused on large government contracts, on the basis of which Russia supplies oil products and machinery. Several Russian companies have done work on large projects in Syria. For example, former Gazprom’s subsidiary Stroytransgaz built the 319 km-long El Rehab–Homs section of the Arab Gas Pipeline in 2008 and a gas processing plant in 2009, while Tatneft, Russia’s sixth biggest crude oil producer has a joint venture with Syria’s General Petroleum Company for the exploration and development of oil fields since 2005.

Since government contracts account for the larger part of the trade volume, it is likely that the regime change would result in its reduction and Russia’s loss. Furthermore, there have been reports that Russian companies are moving in to take advantage of the suspension of other foreign companies’ activities. For example, in March 2012, it was announced that Russia’s Gazprom would take over Croatian company’s INA’s oil and gas operations in Syria (Sharp and Blanchard 2012). In short, the Syrian crisis represents both an opportunity for and a threat to the economic interests of Russian businesses, which in the energy sector tend to have extensive direct and indirect links with the government and often function as an arm of the state. This being said, there is nothing in the available data to indicate that Russian-Syrian trade relations are special in a way that would account for Russia’s support to the regime. Had the support been motivated primarily by the wish to preserve existing and develop new areas of cooperation, it would have varied as the opposition gained in power. Furthermore, if a direct relation between trade and foreign policy decisions is posited, Russia would have been far more sensitive to Turkey’s and Arab states’ rather than Syria’s position, as well as more accommodating to the US pressure.

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### Arms Trade

In addition to Russia's exports and investments in the energy sector, the long-standing Russian arms trade with Syria is often given as an important reason for Russia's backing. According to a simplistic version of this view, Russia supports Syria because it does not want to lose a lucrative market, as it happened in the aftermath of the "revolution" in Libya.<sup>6</sup> More nuanced analyses take into account the special nature of the arms trade. As the U.S. ambassador to Moscow summarized, Russia "attaches importance to the volume of the arms export trade, to the diplomatic doors that weapon sales open, to the ill-gotten gains that these sales reap for corrupt senior officials, and to the lever it provides the Russian government in stymieing American interests" ("US embassy cables" 2010). It will be argued here that in the case of Syria profit is secondary to considerations of power and prestige.

In 1950-1990, arms trade between the Soviet Union and Syria totaled at least \$34 billion, and the Soviet Union was Syria's principle source for both weapons and training. The collapse of the Soviet Union seriously undermined Syria's ability to acquire modern military equipment, which could not be remedied by imports from North Korea or Iran.<sup>7</sup> Thus, when Putin made a political (rather than economic) decision to resume trade with Syria in 2005, Russia had no difficulty in establishing its position as a leading arms seller in the Syrian market. In 2007-2011, 78 percent of all the arms transfers to Syria came from Russia (17% from Belarus and 5% from Iran) (Bromley and Wezeman 2012, 276). Although unaccounted supplies from North Korea and China may substantially deflate Russia's share, it is clear that arms trade with Russia is critical to Syria.

For Russia, the value of the Syrian market is dubious. First of all, given that Syria's share of official global arms transfers was 0.81 percent in 2007-2011, it is not a very large market (Bromley and Wezeman 2012, 276). From a longer perspective, the volume of official weapon transfers in 1991 and 2011 shows that Syria has actually been relatively unimportant to Russia (see table 1). For the entire twenty-year period, Syria does not even cut it to the list of the top ten destinations of Russia's weapons, accounting for approximately one percent of the total arms exports volume. Russia's arms sales to Syria increased in volume to about 2.6 percent of the total exports volume since 2007 but even for this shorter period of time Russia's exports to Vene-

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6 See, for example, Weir 2012. According to one authoritative estimate, as a consequence of the war in Libya, Russia lost finalized arms contracts worth \$1.7 billion and another \$3.9 billion in contracts that were being prepared (Pukhov 2012).

7 See for example, Cordesman 2008, detailing the Syrian military's modernization and recapitalization crisis.

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zuela, Algeria or Vietnam, not to mention China or India, by far exceeded exports to Syria. Second, Syria has reportedly had difficulties in producing the cash required for weapons deliveries. Syria's defense budget increased from \$1.62 billion in 1990 (*The Military Balance* 1991, 120) to \$1.87 billion in 2009 (*The Military Balance* 2010, 272), while the GDP grew \$17 billion to \$53 billion in the same period. While these official figures do not accurately represent the actual defense expenditures, which are probably much higher, they do indicate a trend of stagnation in terms of investments into the military. With a modest defense budget by Middle Eastern standards and most of it apparently going to cover the yearly operational costs and personnel expenditures, it is not surprising that the Syrians would be hard pressed to pay for the weapons they wanted.<sup>8</sup> Third, while Russia's decision to write off 9.8 billion of the total of 13.4 billion Syrian debt accrued during the Cold War indicated its wish to resume arms trade and, more generally, restore relations, Russia has not been willing or able to sell some of the weapons systems that the Syrians wanted.<sup>9</sup> For example, either because of the intense U.S. and Israeli pressure or out of strategic considerations, Russia refused to supply mobile theatre ballistic missile system Iskander in 2007, which could be used offensively against Israel, as well as withheld until 2011 and, later, suspended the sale of the long-range surface-to-air missile system S-300 (Kreutz 2007, 25-32). All things taken into account, Syria could at best be considered an emerging but limited market for Russia's arms trade, valuable primarily because Russia does not need to compete over it with other arms-sellers.

### **Strategic Considerations**

The explanations that interpret Russia's stance in the Syrian conflict from the perspective of material interests are not entirely incorrect. Relatively limited as they are, military and economic interests do matter. In general, seeking profit has replaced ideology and become an important factor in Russia's foreign policy decisions, and this could be regarded as one of the main differences between the foreign policies of the Soviet Union and Russia, which otherwise show a degree of continuity (Nizameddin 1999). However, the weakness of focusing on material interests is that it misses

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8 A rare attempt to estimate Syria's opaque military expenditure can be found in Tsiddon-Chatto 2000. Some reports emerged about Iran financing Syria's weapons acquisitions. For example, in 2007, a \$1 billion deal regarding the delivery of Russian fighter aircraft to Syria was allegedly financed by Iran (Lantratov *et al.* 2007).

9 On the debt issue and various discussions between Syria and Russia regarding prospective arms deals, see Weitz 2010, 28-31.

the larger picture of strategic calculations. To put it metaphorically, it is not about catching a particular fish; it is about access to fishing. Since the realization of Russia's material interests in the Middle East largely depends on the global and regional power balance, profit as a motive in foreign policy decision-making is secondary to power and prestige, at least in this particular case.

Two broad areas of Russia's strategic interests can be distinguished in explaining Russia's support for the Syrian regime. First, Russia is interested in reestablishing itself as a global actor, a great power whose concerns and interests have to be accommodated or at least taken into account. This inevitably involves some sort of balancing of U.S. world hegemony, primarily in the form of resistance to attempts to utilize or bypass the Security Council, where Russia exercises power beyond its means. Furthermore, Russia does not want to legitimize the model of regime change, which could set a precedent for undesirable developments in regions that are of more importance to Russia or even in Russia itself. Second, Russia is interested in expanding or at least preserving its influence in the Middle East. What is potentially at stake in Syria and, relatedly, Iran, is the elimination of Russia's last remaining footholds in this geopolitically vital region. In addition to this, Russia is concerned about its security because instability and sectarian politics could not only limit its influence in the Middle East but also spread closer to home. All these concerns have consistently, if not always explicitly, figured in the official statements and animated domestic foreign policy debates on Syria.

Firstly and most importantly, the global dimension of Russia's Syrian policy consists of a distinctive vision of the world order, which can be roughly summarized by answers to two questions: who makes decisions on the international arena and how these decisions are made. Russia wants to see a multipolar world, which would not be one-sidedly dominated by the US and in which Russia would be one of the influential centers. This line of strategic thinking was articulated by the master of Russian foreign policy Yevgeny Primakov in mid-1990s, and has by now become established as one of the central foreign policy goals, clearly expressed in all strategic planning documents.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, Russia promotes multilateral decision making on the basis of international law, and places particular emphasis on "fundamental role" played by the UN as an intergovernmental forum in general and the Security Council in particular.

Lavrov's insistence that Russia's stance on Syria is a matter of principle cannot

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<sup>10</sup> For example, multipolarity is emphasized in the foreign policy concepts approved in 2000 and 2008.

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be dismissed as merely a rhetoric providing a fig leaf for the pursuit of narrowly defined material interests. In the absence of sufficient economic and military resources, Russia's standing as a great power and Russia's ability to influence developments in various regions currently depends to a large extent on the preservation of the international system that emerged in a different era and under a different configuration of power that was more favorable to Russia. Therefore, conserving and reinvigorating the foundations and the essential features of that system is Russia's true long-term interest, far more important than the profit that can be extracted from deals with an outcast regime. Indeed, during Putin's second term the pursuit of multipolar international structure has been embraced and promoted to such an extent that it can now be considered the guiding foreign policy doctrine (Newton 2010).

In this context, Russia feels threatened by the transformation of the international system brought by the Western interpretation of human rights in general and the practices of humanitarian intervention and regime change in particular. The differences between Russian and Western understandings of the role of human rights in international relations are both conceptual and contingent in their nature. Insofar as the Russian understanding is shaped by the intellectual heritage of the Soviet human rights concept, in which the state was the source of human rights and thus determined their scope, human rights simply cannot be more important than the viability of the state, the strength of its institutions or its territorial integrity.<sup>11</sup> According to Lavrov, it is unacceptable to claim that "the so-called 'concept of the responsibility to protect' must be universally applied in all cases when peoples begin to show displeasure and when the authorities use force against the various protest manifestations to restore order" because "freedom is not without limitations and these limitations are clearly stated in all international legal instruments relating to the protection of human rights and freedoms" (Lavrov 2011b). According to Putin, the most outspoken critic of the new humanitarianism:

*It is often said that human rights are superior to state sovereignty. Doubtless-ly, it is so – crimes against humanity must be punished by an international court. However, when this position is used to violate state sovereignty at ease, when human rights are protected from the outside and selectively, and when, in the course of "protection", these same rights of a multitude of people are trampled on, including the most basic and holy right of all – the right to life, then we are dealing not with noble deeds but plain demagoguery. It is important that the UN and*

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11 On the distinctive features of the Soviet concept of human rights, see Dean 1980.

*its Security Council are able to effectively resist the dictate of some countries and highhandedness on the international arena (Putin 2012b).*

In Russia's view, the role of international actors in case of internal conflicts should generally be limited to helping the different sides of the conflict to sit down at the negotiating table, unless the Security Council decides otherwise.

Aside from conceptual disagreements, Russia has developed strong aversion to Western human rights discourse, viewing it as a thinly veiled pretext for humanitarian interventions and regime change in pursuit of geopolitical goals. According to Putin, Western countries are seeking a solution to their economic problems by artificially fuelling conflicts, creating "controlled chaos", and then pursuing armed interventions (Putin 2012a). In the context of regular criticisms and initiatives from the West regarding the human rights situation in Russia, Russian elites are concerned that, after Kosovo, Iraq, Libya, Syria, it may be the turn of authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, or even Russia itself. Admittedly, much of the fearmongering in the media, with running headlines comparing Syria to Stalingrad and journalists asking Lavrov questions about the impending third world war, can be attributed to the public relations campaign for the reelection of Putin in May 2012. Either way, these concerns further strengthened Russia's determination not to repeat the same mistake as in Libya's case by giving in to Western diplomatic pressure.

Secondly, the regional dimension of Russia's Syrian policy is underwritten by a particular interpretation of the meaning and the consequences of the events taking place. Russian foreign policy elites see the conflict as deliberately fuelled by external injections of financial support and armaments, and they do not like the broader regional consequences of the fall of Assad's regime. According to the MFA, Syria "is one of the pillars of the Middle Eastern architecture" and "its destabilization would have the most severe consequences for the entire region" (Russian MFA 2011). According to Lavrov,

*There is no doubt that if the current regime in Syria collapses, there will be a strong temptation and a strong pressure on the part of some countries of the region towards the establishment of a Sunnite regime in the Syrian Arab Republic. In this situation, we are concerned about the future of Christians and other religious minorities like the Kurds, Alawis, Druze, etc. What may happen in Lebanon I cannot even foresee. <...> I suggest Iraq will not remain unaffected by these processes either, since at present all top leadership posts are dominated by Shi-  
as. A particular problem is Kurdistan. <...> All this is indeed very explosive and requires acting in an extremely careful manner (Lavrov 2012c).*



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In the aftermath of the Houla massacre, Lavrov fairly explicitly accused Saudi Arabia of attempting to turn Syria into a “polygon of war for supremacy within the Islamic world” (Lavrov 2012d). In Russia’s view, the existing regime in Syria is highly preferable to the arch of instability stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf and creating spawning grounds for religious extremists and terrorists (Bogdanov 2012). Given Russia’s experience with Islamic fundamentalists in the North Caucasus since 1996, Russia’s concerns regarding the plunging of the region into the protracted chaos of sectarian violence should not be discarded as a smoke-screen for the pursuit of material interests.<sup>12</sup>

The second major regional consequence of the fall of Assad’ regime for Russia would be the further isolation of its key ally in the Middle East Iran. Some experts in the US claim that Iran, and not Syria, is the real target of the building Western pressure. According to them, upon the withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq, there is bound to be a further increase in Iranian influence there and Iran may come to dominate a vast area stretching from Afghanistan to the Mediterranean – a disagreeable prospect for both the US and Saudi Arabia (Friedman 2011). In addition to checking Iran’s hegemonic ambitions, a change of regime in Syria would cut off Iran from Hezbollah, since Syria is seen as a transit point for Iranian training, assistance, and weapons transfers (Rubin 2012). Furthermore, ousting Assad would terminate Syria’s alleged role as a site for illicit nuclear exchanges between Iran and North Korea (Bolton 2012). In short, a change of regime could alter the geopolitical landscape in a way that benefits the US and other major regional actors at the expense of Iran.

It is evident that Russian foreign policy elites are acutely aware of these discussions and view “attempts to bring about regime change in Damascus as an element of a larger regional geopolitical game” (Lavrov 2012e). Iran is far more important to Russia than Syria due to political, economic, and strategic reasons. Viewed in the context of the writings of the Russian geopolitical school of neo-Eurasianism, which is said to have influence on Putin’s foreign policy, Iran appears even more important as a strategic partner for frustrating Turkey’s pan-Turanian impulses, limiting the sway of Saudi Arabia’s fundamentalism, providing Russia with access to the warm waters of the Persian Gulf, as well as fighting Atlanticist influence throughout the entire region (Dugin 1997, 135-140).<sup>13</sup> Syria may thus be viewed as a frontline for resistance to putative US and Arab designs for the region.

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12 For a good overview of these experiences, see Schaefer 2010.

13 On the ideas influencing Putin’s foreign policy, see chapter 9 in Sakwa 2004.

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Finally, abandoning the Syrian regime would be a blow to Russia's international prestige by not only sending a wrong message to its other authoritarian clients but also by eliminating Russia's last foothold for engagement in the Middle Eastern politics. During the decade since 1991, when the Soviet Union tacitly accepted American predominance in the Middle East, Russia's presence in the region has been fairly limited and politically passive, despite Primakov's attempts to promote an independent and strategically oriented policy (Kreutz 2007, 3; Gresh 1998). While this situation changed during the Second Gulf War, when Russia moved to reassert its presence, its economic and strategic interests remain focused primarily on the northern tier countries (Iran, Iraq, Turkey), while the rest of the Middle East is of far less significance (Dannreuther 2004, 23). It could be argued that, with the exception of the above-mentioned countries, the Middle Eastern policy for Russia is more a matter of reestablishing its great power credentials than of strategic or economic value. Syria was instrumental in this regard and played a role in, for example, Russia's efforts to regain the lost Soviet position as a co-manager of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Conversely, increasing international prestige was a factor in shaping Russia's position on Syria. Given the initial unwillingness of the US and NATO to pursue armed solution in yet another Middle Eastern country, the Syrian crisis not only presented Russia with an opportunity to rehabilitate from the Libyan disaster but also put it in a position where, at least initially, it held an unusual degree of influence on the course of events. Apart from the obvious value for Putin's election campaign, Russia apparently hoped that its position against the interventionism and arbitrariness of the West would receive support from the majority of non-Western countries, positing it as a leader of an anti-Western block (Smolensky 2012). Lavrov repeatedly emphasized that Russia has never had any colonies or made wars in the Middle East and should thus be considered a true friend of the Arab countries (Lavrov 2012a). In this regard, the UN General Assembly vote on February 16, 2012 showed that Russia had miscalculated: with the absolute majority of countries voting to condemn the Syrian regime, Russia once again ended up on the "wrong side of history" at the helm of the usual suspects, including North Korea, Venezuela, Zimbabwe and Belarus.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the development of the conflict, with reports on the brutalities of the Syrian regime piling up and the crisis growing into a full-blown civil war, many experts in the West expected Russia to switch its position and join the international community in condemning Assad's regime. This expectation was partly born out of

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the misinterpretation of Russia's reasons for support by focusing on its material interests in Syria. Russia under Putin is supposed to be pursuing pragmatic, non-ideological, flexible policies in accordance with its national interests, where a confrontational course can be reversed or replaced by cooperation if only a sufficiently enticing bargain is offered. However, this interpretation ignores the basic goal of the last decade of Russia's foreign policy: creating a multipolar system on the basis of statist values and norms, with Russia as an indispensable pole. In the pursuit of this goal, profit is only the means to power and prestige, and not an end in itself.

It is not surprising then that, as this article has shown, Russia's position regarding the resolution of the Syrian conflict essentially has not changed between March 2011 and July 2012, regardless of the turn of events on the ground in Syria or the mounting diplomatic pressure. Influenced by the Western actions and the endgame in Libya, Russia took a principled stance regarding Syria, resisting and blocking any initiatives that could lead to foreign intervention and externally imposed regime change. When it became clear that the Syrian problem will not go away by itself, Russia's diplomatic campaigns to shape the developments on the international arena focused on garnering support at bilateral and regional levels, finally moving to the UN, where it has most control. It was argued here that Russia's strategic concerns should be considered as more important than the narrowly defined material interests. Russia's chief aim has been to prevent the further legitimization of the practice of regime change and the ideas that underlie it, as well as defend its position and reputation in the Greater Middle East.

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**APPENDIX**

Country		1995	2000	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Syria	Export	75,4	95,5	440	605	1023	1940	1142
	Import	11,2	11,2	26,0	30,0	38,0	39,0	38,7
Egypt	Export	394	449	1048	1241	1952	1856	1824
	Import	37,2	4,9	77,4	132	173	206	212
Iran	Export	249	633	1922	1905	2965	3289	2846
	Import	27,0	53,6	125	240	349	402	214
Israel	Export	624	1045	1538	1544	2049	2034	1046
	Import	243	109	332	408	531	736	636
Turkey	Export	1644	3098	10841	14290	18534	27655	16395
	Import	542	349	1732	2753	4179	6146	3222
China	Export	3371	5248	13048	15758	15895	21142	16669
	Import	865	949	7265	12910	24424	34780	22864
USA	Export	4315	4644	6324	8638	8335	13357	9214
	Import	2648	2694	4563	6405	9471	13790	9181
Italy	Export	3376	7254	19053	25090	27530	41999	25058
	Import	1851	1212	4416	5726	8537	11002	7887
Germany	Export	6208	9232	19736	24498	26346	33164	18712
	Import	6483	3898	13272	18464	26534	34115	21200

**Source:** Russian Federation Federal State Statistics Service, 2010

**Table 2.** Trend Indicator Values of arms exports from Russia, 1991-2011, expressed in USD millions at constant (1990) prices

Recipient		Total
1.	China	29143
2.	India	23870
3.	Algeria	6170
4.	Iran	3442
5.	Vietnam	2942
6.	Venezuela	2430
7.	Malaysia	1938
8.	UAE	1622
9.	Yemen	1208
10.	Greece	1180
11.	Egypt	1178
12.	Hungary	1124
13.	Syria	928

**Source:** SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, 2012