

23.00.00 Political sciences

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UDC 32

Historical Background and the Present State of the Russian-Syrian Relations¹ Elvin Aghayev² Filiz Katman

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Abstract. The political problems related to Syria is a matter which has been discussed from various points of view in the world press in the recent years and have never fallen off the foreign policy agenda of the countries in the world. In this study we shall try to examine the attitude of Russia towards Syria, the historical political, economic and military interests of Russia related to this country and the strategies that it had followed in relation thereto and take care to perceive and interpret the general strategy of this super power in the region.

Keywords: USSR-Syria; Russia-Syria Relations; Middle East; Hafez Assad; Tartus.

Introduction

Middle East and especially Syria is one of the fields of interest of the Russian foreign policy. When we have a look at the recent past we see that the policies of Moscow on the region have been sharpened in line with both ideological and economic – geopolitical reasons. Russia began new quests in its Middle East policies after the cold war. Russia exhibited variable approaches from time to time in its Middle East policy during that period as in other areas. The developments that were observed in the region and called the Arabic revolutions in the recent past has compelled Russia to update its political calculations related to the region. Its attitude against the riots that took place in Syria is one of the most important foots of that update.

A discussion of the relations between modern Russia and Syria without investigating how the relations between the two countries have been sharpened in the historical process within the framework of limitless quest for national interests and the networks that they, as geographically remote countries have developed would be incomplete. For that reason it would be useful to examine the relations that Syria had established with USSR which may be called the ancestor of modern Russia since it has gained its independence in the 20. Century and came to the fore in the political arena of the World as a national state.

Russian – Syrian relations since the independence

Syria has gained full independence from France but could not attain stability for a long period after the end of 2. World war. The political life of Syria which has been relatively calm during the years 1945-1949 has entered a stage of total turmoil and disorder beginning from 1949. Three coups d'etats have been made in Syria during 1949-1953 and military dictatorships have been established twice in that process. Finally Baas Party has come to the fore in the political life of Syria following the military coup d'etat of February 25, 1954 and USSR become an important country for Syria together with the predominance of Baas Party.

The relations of USSR, which have begun being interested in the Middle East, with Syria have been initiated with a secret agreement signed on February 10, 1946, just before the declaration of independence of Syria. That agreement prescribed the provision of diplomatic and political support of USSR to Syria in the international arena and the Soviet military help for the foundation of the national army of that country. The non-aggression pact signed on 10 April 1950 had carried the Soviet – Syrian relations to an advanced dimension. The rapprochement between the two countries has emerged as a natural outcome of the international conjuncture in that period. When we have a look at the cold war period we see that each conflict and war that broke out in the Middle East acted as a factor that had led Syria approach to USSR more closely.

The first event which reinforced the rapprochement between USSR – Syria has been the Suez crisis and the prestige of the Soviets has increased in the Middle East thanks to that crisis which broke out in 1956. The Soviet help to Syria has been accelerated as a result of the conflict of interests between the western countries led by USA and USSR in the Middle East. Cooperation between USSR and Syria has deepened further by means of military and economic strategic agreements.

Baghdad pact has been another development that led to the rapprochement between USSR and Syria. Syria has perceived that pact as a pact against itself and approached to the Soviets more closely. In deed the consequence of Baghdad pact was not only the approach of Syria to USSR but also the separation of the Middle Eastern countries as the satellites of the eastern and western blocs at the same time.

One of the reasons that led to the development of the USSR – Syrian relations was the accession to power by Hafez Assad in Syria in 1970.

The relations of the Soviets with the Syria of Hafez Assad

Hafez Assad has made his first visit to a foreign country after his accession to power by visiting Moscow on 1-3 February 1971. This visit was a indication of the importance that the Syrian government has attributed to the Soviets. Syria had already a military and economic relation with the Soviet Union for 15 years as of that date. However Hafez Assad has managed to raise those relations to a higher level. Hafez Assad has demanded more military and economic aid from USSR as soon as he came to power. It seemed that Hafez Assad could understand the intentions and priorities of USSR towards Middle East very well: A listening station and a naval and air base in the heart of the Middle East.

The reasons that led Hafez Assad to continue the alliance ties with the Soviets and engage in more cooperation with it are the following.

1. The non-existence of an alternative other than USSR in a bipolar World conjuncture
2. The fact that Syria has established its economic and military structure according to the Soviet model almost since gaining its independence
3. The closeness of the Hafez Assad government to the Soviet regime in ideological terms
4. Make use of the aids of the eastern block

We may say that the support extended by USSR to Syria in that period had two main reasons

1. The strategy which had as its target to use Syria, which exhibited anti-imperialist and anti-western attitudes and opposed the rival pole in the bipolar World system, and spread these thoughts in all Middle-Eastern countries and cause the loss of positions of the western bloc in the region in this way.

2. The necessity for the Soviet to have an influence zone in the eastern Mediterranean for the purpose of maintaining the nuclear balance. (USA could upset that balance by installing nuclear missile warheads in its submarines in the eastern Mediterranean. For that reason the geo-strategic position of Syria was quite important)

In the 1980's USSR begun covering all military and economic needs of Syria. The era of Hafez Assad corresponds to the highest phase in the relations between USSR and Syria. The treaty of amity and cooperation containing 15 articles and signed between Syria and Soviets on October 8, 1980 just after Camp David Treaty that has been signed on March 26, 1979 is the highest level document which has been signed between Russia and Syria. According to the article 5 of the said treaty the parties shall promptly contact each other in case the peace and security of one of the parties has been threatened for the purpose of eliminating that threat and reestablish the peace. As shall be understood from the article 5, that treaty was a guarantee treaty for Syria. According to the

secret protocol of the treaty USSR guaranteed to help Syria with all its power in case of an attack of Israel. Besides USSR gained important positions in the east Mediterranean region and Middle East with its submarine base in Tartus and air base in Tias.

If we want to make a short definition of the foreign policy strategies of Syria during the cold war we see that the great part of those strategies have been sharpened within the framework of close relations with USSR. In deed the designation of Syria as the “Shadow of the Soviet in the Middle East” during the cold war by the politicians and academicians is no random.

Russian – Syrian relations in the post cold war period

The Middle East strategy of the Soviets has underwent changes together with the introduction of the concepts of “glasnost” and “perestroika” which have been introduced after Gorbachev took power in the USSR. The economic concerns of the Soviets begun to increase in the mid 1980’s and the ideological concerns no more came to the fore as intensively as in the past. The priority for USSR in the Middle East was no more finding allies but significant economic partners. In 1985 when Syrian president Hafez Assad had become aware of the fact that a turning point has come during his short visit to the Soviets, Gorbachev gave Assad the message that Syria was no more the only ally of USSR in the Middle East. Soviets s begun to withdraw its military experts from Syria following that meeting.

Towards the end of 1980’s USSR under the rule of Gorbachev has established diplomatic relations with Israel which is the sworn enemy of Syria and has taken a number of steps that would make Syria angry. In 1991 Syria has understood that Soviets breathed its last decided to attack Iraq by joining the international alliance led by USA during the Gulf crisis.

Russian – Syrian relations has begun following a low profile as a consequence of the new conjuncture after the collapse of the Soviets and Boris Yeltsin’s accession to power. The relations with the Soviets were now only a matter of formality. The military and economic aid provided by the former USSR was no more provided by its successor, i.e. Russia. However the Russian submarine base Tartus still maintained its existence and Russian generals continued to be the military and strategic consultants of the Syrian army.

We may say that the relations between the two countries revived together with Vladimir Putin’s accession to power in Russia and Basher Assad’s accession to power in Syria. Putin begun attributing an importance to Syria when he uncluttered Russia and began a strategy of return to the old days.

Generally we may list the leading factors that determine the importance of the Middle-east in the foreign policy of modern Russia as follows:

1. Rich oil and natural gas sources of the region attract the attention of Russia just as other big Powers. The idea that the dimensions and production capacity of those sources do not only feed the World economy, but they are also so important that the World economy would not exist at all without them .

2. The fact that trade routes that unite Europe with the South, southeastern and east Asian countries, which have caught a successful development trend pass through the Middle-eastern region.

3. This region is a region that may have an influence on the internal security of Russia. In deed radical Islamic currents and the attacks in the Northern Caucasia are supported by the sources in the Middle-East to a great extent both in material as well as spiritual terms.

4. Russia worries about the activities of USA and its allies in this region. It is concerned about the possibility of the dissemination of the field of conflict in this region, which included the countries like Iran and Syria that have been evaluated to be within the scope of the so-called “evil triangle” by USA, to the Middle Asia and Caucuses.

5. Middle Eastern countries are also important for Russia from the economic point of view. Russia attributes big importance to the region not only from the point of view developing economic relations but also from the point of view export of arms.

Syria has a more special meaning for Russia within the scope of this general evaluation. In deed Syria has been an important anchor point for Russia during the process of expanding its influence zone throughout the historical development process. For that reason Russia has continuously extended military, economic and social aid to Syria. Syria has in turn become a trustworthy ally for Moscow from the point of view of Middle Eastern policies. The importance of the relations between the two countries is predominated by political and strategic concerns. Russia

considered Syria as an opening point to Mediterranean and Syria became the Arabic country that extended the biggest support to Russia. Syria has a definite importance for Russia in economic terms but its political and strategic importance for Russia is even greater in comparison to other Middle Eastern countries.

Despite this fact however we observe that Russia rather follows a reactionary policy when we have a look at its strategy of Middle-East. Russia has naturally become worried as colorful revolutions were taking place in neighboring countries like Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan with the provocation of the western countries. Russia gave some messages to the Western bloc by drawing its only big military vessel used to carry soldiers, i.e. "Admiral Kuznetsov" to the east mediterranean region while the tension increased in Syria. This time Russia shall not surrender easily and bargain for a low price as it had done in Libya. For that reason a) Russia shall either maintain its strategy of descending to warm seas which it dreamed of realizing since the 17th century during which it had begun becoming an imperialist power, and consequently extend support Syria b) or use Syria as a means of bargaining and obtaining a zone of influence without any foreign partner covering Ukraine, Moldavia and White Russia in the West, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia in the South and all middle asian countries in the east. Let's underline that these two strategical targets are also very important for the western World.

For this and other reasons the attitude of Russia regarding the Syrian crisis shall be a very important factor in the coming days. For that reason the strategy that will be followed by Turkey about Syria in order to prevent the violations of the human rights and slaughtering of the civilian population by the Syrian government may give rise to conflicts with the interests of Iran as well as Russia and such a conflict is very risky and it shall be of no use to anybody.

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Исторический фон и текущее состояние Российско-Сирийских отношений

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Аннотация. Политические проблемы, связанные с Сирией является вопросом, который последние годы был обсужден с различных точек зрения в мировом прессе и никогда не уменьшался важность у внешней политики стран мира. В данном исследовании мы попытаемся рассмотреть отношение России к Сирии. Исторические, политические, экономические и военные интересы России связаны с этой страной и стратегии, что он следовал по отношению к ней, чтобы воспринимать и интерпретировать общую стратегию в регионе.

Ключевые слова: СССР-Сирия; Российско-Сирийские отношения; Ближний Восток; Хафез Асад; Тартус.