



Analysing the Russian Role in the Syrian Conflict since the Arab Spring Protests

Suhail Qamar

Liyaqat Nazir

It has been more than a decade since the Arab Spring protests erupted in many countries across the region in quick succession, reminiscing the domino effect. In December of 2010, the spark was lit in Tunisia, and by March of 2011, the protests had spread throughout the broader West Asia and North Africa region.¹ The demonstrations engulfed not just authoritarian-republican regimes like Egypt and Syria and monarchies like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Jordan etc., but also didn't leave out constitutional republics like Lebanon or Algeria. In essence, these protests had a broad appeal as the popular slogan "The people want the downfall of the regime", and the cries of "*Thawra!*, *Thawra!*" (Revolution!, Revolution) reverberated across many Arab capitals that year.

Prelude to the Arab Spring Protests:

There were many underlying causes and unique aspects to the widespread protests, which started at the start of 2011. People in the region were fed up with the overarching security state, and thus the ensuing protests helped bring down the wall of fear. Widespread political repression; neoliberal policies that had gutted many of the region's economies; the long legacy of western imperialism in the region the meek submission of the ruling dictators and monarchs to it were a few of the causes. And finally, even climate change (as was particularly the case in Syria- four successive years of droughts and large-scale migration towards the cities)² were a few of the underlying causes of these protests.

Coming to the political economy aspect, these large-scale protests also shattered the long-standing myth in the western world about the aversion of the people in the region towards democratic ideals of freedom, liberty, liberalism and so on. Many of such simplistic explanations trace the persistence of authoritarianism in the region even to the religious scriptures and paint the "Exceptional" aversion-to-democracy character of Islamic societies in general and West Asia.³

As per these troupes, authoritarianism in the region persists only because Capitalism has been hindered in the region, and markets have not got the free hand they would

have liked.⁴ In this understanding, a causal relationship between an open economy and open socio-political freedom is made out. They are implying that as much as the country's economy is liberalised, globalised and integrated with the world economy, that much more the free environment in that country would be. This argument considers that the region maintains vestiges of the feudal system while trying to catch up with the Capitalism of the present era. And thus, it argues that this region is an anomaly as far as Capitalism and democracy is concerned.

This is a very superficial understanding as far as the question of the persistence of authoritarianism is concerned. We understand how free-market Capitalism and authoritarianism



in the region have a cosy relationship with each other. And it is not the absence of a free market that has stopped these countries from having open democracies. But on the contrary, it is precise because Capitalism in the region thrives on such a restricted political environment. Free market capitalism has consistently joined hands with the authoritarian despotic power structures within a given country to thrive in the region. And this is not just limited to monarchical countries but also republican ones like Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia. And the western powers like the US and their lending institutions like the World Bank, IMF have had a considerable role in it. These lending institutions had commended the neoliberal turn in the economies of such countries like Egypt and Tunisia, even when increasingly the domestic environment was turning more repressive.⁵

To give an example to push this point, it is well known that Egypt's neoliberal turn towards the west after the Camp David Accords of 1978 was accompanied by a hardening of the domestic environment and repression, which was to take even greater proportion under Hosni Mubarak's long reign. So is the case with even countries like Lebanon, when after the civil war ended, the country took a sharp neoliberal turn under Prime minister Hariri, which was accompanied not by free environment and liberal policies but by further advancement of illiberal social policies.⁶

Arab spring protests punched a big hole in such narratives and explanations by showcasing how the dreams, aspirations and demands of people and especially those of young who make up a large part of the societies here, aren't very different from people elsewhere in the world. Secured jobs, housing, healthcare, free and open socio-political environment are the concerns of the young in this part of the world as well.

Now looking back after more than a decade, the Arab Spring has turned into a long, dark Arab winter of despair. Barring some minute exceptions like Tunisia, which saw successful democratic transition, most Arab spring protests degenerated into civil wars (Syria), outright foreign interventions (Libya, Syria). And monarchies like Morocco and Jordan had to give slight political concessions in the face of this protests. The only silver lining in the case of Syria and Iraq was the reduction in conflict and violence as the decade of 2020 winded down. In the case of Egypt, reassertion of the same old ruling security establishment which was back at the helm within a year.

This also depended a lot on which side of the divide a particular country was on when it comes to the fault lines in the region. So, most of the countries, notably almost all monarchies under the western camp, were able to beat back, repress the protests, and reassert themselves within no time. For example, after protests sit-ins of long duration in Panama's main Pearl square in Bahrain, the reactionary monarchical block intervened as the Saudi tanks rolled from the only causeway linking the two monarchies. And they repressed the protests and dispersed the protestors who were from diverse backgrounds and who were not just from the Shia community who form the majority of the Bahraini population. The Bahraini authorities went as far as to demolish the main architectural installation in the main square, which had become the site of the protests. All this happened as the Western world turned a blind eye. Thus, the Arab Spring protests in the countries in the western camp were nipped in the bud before they could go out of control.



Only the project couldn't go as smoothly in Egypt. The initial reaction of the US to the large-scale protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square was a confused and ambivalent response.⁷ The US even condemned the sporadic violence which was occurring from the side of the protestors. And it abandoned Hosni Mubarak only when it realised that the mass protests were too big to placate without the ouster of the Mubarak regime. And secondly, it had become clear to the US that Mubarak had even lost support from many of the leading members of the Egyptian security establishment. Thus, Mubarak regimes ouster was imminent, and a matter of fact. After these twin pillars of support from the US and the security establishment collapsed under the sheer weight of people's power. After a chaotic phase that saw the election of Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammad Morsi as the President, the reactionary block led by Saudi and UAE had to wait out for another year before it could reassert itself in the form of a coup led by Sisi. And again, this was not without a blessing from the western world, particularly the US.⁸ Thus, the trajectory which the Arab spring protest took in any given country depends a lot on which side of the geopolitical alignments a particular country was on.

So, it was not surprising that those on the wrong side of the Western interests, like Syria, Libya, Yemen, spiralled into civil wars exacerbated by the foreign interventions.

Thus, it becomes essential to look at the role of the US and countries like Russia and China in the Arab spring protests in this context. And suppose we are to analyse the trajectory of Arab spring protests in Syria; in that case, the role of both Russia and the US is critical in shaping this long-standing conflict in this pivotal Arab country. This has been significant because Russia's role in the Syrian conflict marked its re-emergence

in the region.⁹ While the US is concerned, its programme to fund and arm a wide variety of rebel groups turned out to be one of the most extensive and one of the most expensive covert programmes in the history of its intelligence agencies.¹⁰ Apart from the wanton destruction of Syria, the US and its motley of Gulf allies could not achieve many of their geopolitical objective's vis-a-vis Syria, most notably the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad, who survived to fight for another day. However, this paper will limit itself to analyse the role played by Russia in the Syrian conflict since the Arab spring protests.

The role played by Russia in the Syrian conflict:

Historical Overview:

West Asia was one of the crucial arenas for the great power politics during the Cold war, and the then Soviet Union was an important actor in the region. It was the principal sponsor of anti-western aligned radical republican regimes like Nasser's Egypt, Syria and Iraq. The 1956 Suez Crisis provided the turning point to the Soviet entrenchment in the region. USSR played a pivotal role in diffusing the conflict by directly threatening the warring parties, mainly the UK and France. This helped USSR in straight jumping over Western client states at its peripheries like Turkey and Iran and found a firm foothold in the core Arab region for many more years to come.



During those early decades of the 1950s and 1960s, it aligned with the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles of the region, spearheaded by the then leader of the Arab world- Egypt. After the capture of power by the Baath party in 1963, which was symbolic of the Arab Socialist project, it developed extensive relations with Syria. Later, Camp David Accords of 1978 and Anwar Sadat's embrace of the US considerably weakened the influence of Soviet Russia in the region. It relied on its influence on Syria to remain relevant in the centrepiece issue of the Arab world, i.e. the Israel-Palestine issue. However, before that, the 1973 October War and riches brought by the Oil shock shifted the centre of power from Egypt-Syria towards the Arab Gulf region. The proximity of the Gulf monarchies with the Western world did not help matters either. And Soviet influence in the region gradually waned as the Afghan intervention proved to be the final straw.

Coming to non-Arab states, Soviet Russia had maintained extensive relations with Israel during its founding years and was among the first to recognise it. However, It completely turned away from it after the 1967 war. While Turkey and Iran -two other prominent non-Arab states- remained away from Soviet influence for much of the Cold War as both of them were in the Western Allied camp. Iran maintained a certain distance from Soviet Russia even after the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

But as the Cold War wended down, Soviet Russia had far fewer friends in the region and limited influence at best,¹¹ as it turned inwards during that chaotic decade of the 1990s in Russia's history. Along its periphery, Russia had lost its influence, and Western-aligned or Western-sponsored coloured revolutions were eating into its former sphere of influence, especially in Eastern Europe, the Baltic region, and the Caucasus region.

Coming to Syria under President Hafez Assad, both of them maintained close but sometimes complicated relations. Syria was one of the closest allies of Soviet Russia in the region during the cold war, and both maintained extensive politico-diplomatic and military ties. The Soviet Union maintained its military presence in the Syrian port of Tartus on the Eastern Mediterranean coast. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, ties loosened fast once the Cold War ended. It was only when Moscow and Damascus separately began to drift back into conflict with the United States in the mid-00s that the relationship was revived.¹²

For around a decade, Syria tried to normalise its relations with the west. It cooperated with it on many levels, as seen in the Gulf War Coalition against Iraq in 1991, as Syria stood with Western powers. However, this Syrian bonhomie with the west did not last long as the differences between them over regions geopolitical issues were too staggering to be bridged. After his father's death, Bashar al-Assad took power in Syria in 2000, the period which coincided with Putin's rise. The short period of Syrian overtures towards the west ended with the rising tensions over the Lebanon issue and the Iraq invasion. We will briefly look at this in the section on the role of the US.



Russia's Re-emergence in West Asia After the Syrian intervention:

After the collapse of the 2011 'Aran Spring' and Syria's descent into civil war, the direct Russian intervention in the Syrian conflict on Bashar al-Assad government forces in September 2015 thus marked a spectacular re-entry in the affairs of the region. When Russia intervened on the Syrian government forces, more than 70% of the country was under the control of various armed rebel groups aligned with one or the other powers. The Syrian Arab Army was depleted and was in bad shape and was pushed thin by disintegration, poor morale of the conscript Army, and significant reversals across many theatres of the conflict.¹³ The Syrian government forces had all but withdrawn from the Eastern part of the country. They had concentrated their energy on the population centres of capital Damascus and Homs even if its second-biggest city Aleppo was under the control of armed rebels. Along with its Iranian and Hezbollah supporters, the Syrian regime did hold on to its main support bases in the Alawite heartland in Latakia. It could barely manage to keep the link between Damascus and its coastal province via Homs and Hama region open under its control.

It was in this context that Russia intervened on the side of the Syrian government forces.¹⁴ Although Iran and Hezbollah aligned, Lebanese Shia fighters did the heavy lifting on the side of the Syrian government forces, extensive Russian air support and specialised troops on the ground proved decisive and turned the tide of the conflict in favour of the Syrian government. Russian support was vital militarily and was also present diplomatically (along with China) at the UN. After a swift Military campaign, Russia declared victory in 2018 and returned almost half of its forces home.¹⁵ Thus September 2015, Russian intervention was therefore different in many aspects as it succeeded in not getting entangled like the Western powers have gotten itself into myriad conflicts of the region.

There were several underlying factors for the Russian intervention. First and foremost, Russia was wary of what it called "regime change wars" of the west.¹⁶ It had the experience of various colour revolutions within its sphere of influence and NATO's encroachments eastwards. For Putin's Russia, many of the west's democracy promotion operations were plain naivete and were nothing but regime toppling operations in reality. To reverse this trend and secure its foothold in the critical West Asian region, Syria was a make-or-break case for Russia. It already had a bitter experience of its naivete in not objecting to and not vetoing western sponsored resolutions on Libya, which had cost it significantly when it came to its geopolitical interests in the region. It wanted to avoid this scenario in any way possible or risk losing its foothold in the region.

Secondly, although Assad was problematic in its own right, Russia feared that post Assad Syria would descend into chaos a-la Libya and would be the antithesis of the

present secular regime of Assad. This was because the Gulf, the West and Turkey sponsored opposition and the so-called "moderate rebels" had all the shades of Islamists within its rank. This would have been detrimental to its interest. The fear of extremism in its minority populated regions of the Caucasus and its influence in the Central Asian region was concerned. As far as its geopolitical interests were concerned, Russia feared a post-Assad Islamist regime would have undoubtedly been under the influence of Gulf regimes and the west. And it would have seriously



hindered its power projection in the Eastern Mediterranean region was concerned with its Syrian bases as the focal point of this operations. The rise of IS added further weight to Russia's and Putin's central political argument – that Assad was a lesser evil and a necessary partner against terrorist groups.¹⁷ And how futile it was to help the Islamist rebel groups in the hope of overthrowing the Assad regime. During its campaign, Russia simply went after any group that stood in Assad's way, be it IS or be it Western Gulf sponsored different rebel factions.

Thirdly, Syria has been historically an important recipient of weapons from the Soviet Union. In addition to this, Russia used its intervention in Syria as a test of its weapons.¹⁸ And also, to showcase its arrival on the world stage as far as its modern weaponry was concerned. Russia tested many of its state-of-the-art modern weapon's technology in the Syrian conflict, including fighter jets, air defence systems, drones, armoured vehicles, etc. During the operations, Russian fighter jets reigned supreme over Syrian skies. At the same time, it also launched missiles from the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea to truly showcase its arrival in the West Asian region to the west.

And lastly, and although understudied, an important reason for this intervention was the influence of the Russian Orthodox church as far as Syria was concerned. Syria itself has a significant Orthodox Christian population and is also the site of two religiously important locations- Palmyra and Maaloula. Historically Russia had played the role of protector of Eastern Orthodox Christians in Lebanon and Syria. Thus this 2015 intervention was also a revival of this aspect in one or the other way.¹⁹

Not to overblow the role of the Russian Orthodox Church, but it highlighted Russia's traditional role as protector of persecuted Christians. Secondly, it highlighted the centrality of the Syrian community to Orthodox believers as the cradle of Christianity. And lastly, Russia's great power status, in counterbalance to American unilateralism.²⁰

As a result of its successful intervention, Russia transformed the battlefield, saved its allies, and established itself as the driving force in international diplomacy on Syria, as the Astana process showcases. Its fortune and standing in the region have increased significantly after its swift military campaign. Russia is now engaged in huge arms deals with countries from Algeria to Egypt. The flooding of oil markets by Shale Oil from the US starting around 2014 also necessitated both Saudi Arabia and Russia to coordinate oil production to manage the oil prices. This was done through the OPEC+ arrangement under which both of them came together. Russia is also working closely with Iran, Turkey, and Israel so far as the Syrian conflict is concerned and maintains relations with Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and a host of other nations – many of which are hostile to each other but friendly to Russia.²¹

Although not consistently successful,²² Russia has managed to accommodate contrasting objectives, competing interests and policies of the various actors in the

region. For example, between Iran and Saudi Arabia; between Turkey and Qatar on one side and Saudi Arabia and UAE on the other; also, between Turkey and Syria; and significantly enough between Iran and Israel²³; This intervention has also helped the bonhomie between Iranian-



Russian rapprochement and has impacted regional security scenarios. The emergence of the Astana Process (Russia, Turkey and Iran) has greatly influenced the standing and role of all three parties involved, namely Russia, Turkey, and Iran. It also impacted the Russian foreign policy and influence in not just regional context but also in a broader global context. The growing American detachment from the region also contributed to Russia's involvement. It will be interesting to look at what room it leaves for Russia to exert its influence in the region in the future. The Syrian conflict also saw Russian cooperation between other great powers like China at international diplomatic forums and geopolitically and economically.

Conclusion: We started with analysing the background of Arab Spring protests and then moved on its trajectory in Syria towards degenerating into civil war. We analysed how the protests in Syria played at two levels. At one level, people were protesting for legitimate grievances. While at the other level, these protests were hijacked by imperial interests. Russia's intervention on the side of Syrian government forces in 2015 when it was at its weakest and then turning the tide of the conflict proved decisive. It didn't get stuck in the quagmire of the conflict, didn't deploy too many ground forces, which it left to Syrian Government forces, and Iranian and other militias.

Thus, Russia saved the day for its ally, announced its spectacular arrival in the region, and emerged as an essential player in the international diplomatic arena by playing a leading role in engaging and interacting with various regional actors.

In the end it will be pertinent to note that despite all these apparent failures of Arab Spring, all was not lost. Social movements of this magnitude push the prevailing status quo to its rupture. And even if they don't succeed in breaking it apart, the revolutionary fervours' zeitgeist thus advances the narratives. It raises the masses' consciousness to yearnings for values like freedom, liberty, equality, etc. Therefore, it moves human society towards further progress, which cannot necessarily be reversed. And this has undoubtedly happened with the Arab Spring protests.

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