

## Russia's Middle Eastern Engagement – Two Years On

### Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł omawia cele rosyjskiego zaangażowania w Syrii w dwa lata po tym, jak przybrało ono formę bezpośredniej interwencji wojskowej. Argumentujemy, że polityka Rosji na Bliskim Wschodzie jest zorientowana na znacznie szerszy zakres celów niż tylko regionalne i dlatego nie można jej oceniać tylko poprzez tam zachodzące wydarzenia. Oceniając natomiast możliwy przyszły rozwój wypadków sądzimy, że Rosja preferuje możliwie niskokosztową drogę do osiągnięcia wielu szczegółowych celów, na ile są one możliwe w danym momencie. A zatem Kreml jest przede wszystkim nastawiony na reagowania na zmieniającą się sytuację w celu osiągnięcia taktycznych korzyści.

**Słowa kluczowe:** stosunki międzynarodowe • bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe • Bliski Wschód • Rosja • Syria

### Abstract

This article is supposed to explain the goals of the Moscow's involvement in Syria, two years after its engagement took form of direct military intervention of the Russian armed forces. We will argue that the Russian Federation's policy in the Middle East is oriented to much wider scope of goals than just regional ones, therefore it should not be judged only by the conduct of events there. Assessing the possible future, we hold that Russia appears to prefer a cost-effective way to achieve multitude of specific goals, if they are deemed possible to accomplish at the moment. So, the Kremlin is first of all prepared to react to the changing situation for tactical advantages.

**Keywords:** international relations • international security • Middle East • Russian Federation • Syria

### Introduction

By the end of September 2015 the Russian air force started executing combat sorties in Syria. Soon it appeared that it was a part of a well-prepared, complex operation encompassing also an extensive assistance to the Syrian armed forces and close co-operation with Iran. Now<sup>1</sup>, more than two years on, it looks like this effort has paid off – Moscow strengthened its Middle Eastern influence and positioned itself as a main arbiter of the conflict in Syria. Furthermore, since Russia's Levantine endeavour was apparently a part of wider strategy, its success has also translated into some achievements of the Russian Federation as a global player. With respect

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<sup>1</sup> This article was completed by the end of 2017.

to the latter, many observers maintain that the Kremlin is actually carrying on well-developed, comprehensive strategy poised to expand its leverage in the world. This plan, as the narrative goes, is more or less centered on exploiting weaknesses and cracks in the international system and domestic troubles of individual states. And so, Moscow moves everywhere it sees an opportunity to create some commotion, even if it does not always mean gaining direct advantage. From longtime involvement in U.S. politics<sup>2</sup>, through alleged hostile interference in many regions like Europe<sup>3</sup> or Middle East<sup>4</sup>, to the wars in Ukraine<sup>5</sup> and Syria<sup>6</sup>, Russia is successfully advancing its interests as the West's power and international sway simultaneously dwindle.

Other analysts agree with the above only to a certain extent. So it is true that as abundant crises have undermined the international order, Russia certainly has been able to exacerbate them. Thus, Moscow seems to be gaining ground in some regions either by adding up to the weakening of its perceived foes and competitors, or by directly benefiting from an open or clandestine involvement (or both). However, it must be stressed that in every instance of recent achievements the Kremlin was only dexterously catching opportunities as they came, instead of actively creating the overall conditions to alter regional balances in its favour. It is also often said that all those wins are rather short-lived and do not have clear potential for long-term decisive gains<sup>7</sup> - especially in light of Russia's difficult internal situation. In brief, Moscow does demonstrate to be highly proficient in setting tactical goals and in achieving them, but the broad strategy regarding the Russian Federation's place in the world is

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<sup>2</sup> A. Entous, E. Nakashima, G. Jaffe, *Kremlin trolls burned across the Internet as Washington debated options*, "The Washington Post", 25 December 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kremlin-trolls-burned-across-the-internet-as-washington-debated-options/2017/12/23/e7b9dc92-e403-11e7-ab50-621fe0588340\\_story.html?hpid=hp\\_hp-top-table-main\\_infowars-250pm%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm\\_term=.eab70a9905a5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kremlin-trolls-burned-across-the-internet-as-washington-debated-options/2017/12/23/e7b9dc92-e403-11e7-ab50-621fe0588340_story.html?hpid=hp_hp-top-table-main_infowars-250pm%3Ahomepage%2Fstory&utm_term=.eab70a9905a5) (accessed 26 December 2017).

<sup>3</sup> D. Priest, M. Birnbaum, *Europe has been working to expose Russian meddling for years*, "The Washington Post", 25 June 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/europe-has-been-working-to-expose-russian-meddling-for-years/2017/06/25/e42dcece-4a09-11e7-9669-250d0b15f83b\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.6638960f24d2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/europe-has-been-working-to-expose-russian-meddling-for-years/2017/06/25/e42dcece-4a09-11e7-9669-250d0b15f83b_story.html?utm_term=.6638960f24d2) (accessed 26 June 2017).

<sup>4</sup> E. Perez, S. Prokupecz, *CNN Exclusive: US suspects Russian hackers planted fake news behind Qatar crisis*, "CNN", 7 June 2017, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/06/politics/russian-hackers-planted-fake-news-qatar-crisis/index.html> (accessed 8 June 2017).

<sup>5</sup> R. F. Johnson, *Russian forces 'now 11,000 strong in the Donbass'*, "Jane's 360", 6 October 2017, <http://www.janes.com/article/74682/russian-forces-now-11-000-strong-in-the-donbass> (accessed 16 December 2017).

<sup>6</sup> В. Литовкин, *Победа близка как никогда*, "Независимое Военное Обозрение", 27 October 2017, [http://nvo.ng.ru/gpolit/2017-10-27/1\\_971\\_siria.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/gpolit/2017-10-27/1_971_siria.html) (accessed 16 December 2017).

<sup>7</sup> F. Wesslau, A. Wilson, *Russia 2030: A Story of Great Power Dreams and Small Victorious Wars*, European Council on Foreign Relations, London, May 2016.

highly vague, especially in terms of sustainable instruments and methods of achieving long-term objectives. We tend to concur with this line of argument.

This article is supposed to explain the goals of Moscow's involvement in Syria in a broad context of Russia's foreign strategy and offer a forecast regarding future developments. We will argue that Russian policy in the Middle East is oriented to a much wider scope of goals than just regional ones, therefore it should not be judged only by the conduct of events there.

### **The Goals of Russia's Involvement to Date – a Recap**

Since its onset the Russian military involvement in Syria has had multiple goals, from local, tactical to broad, long-term strategic ones; from those centered on the Middle East to the ones related to foreign policy as a whole and to Russia's internal situation. Since the very beginning it also has been visible that while specific short-term goals seemed precise and achievable, general perspectives were much more vague and elusive.

The first, immediate goal of the Russian intervention in the Levant, the one clearly declared and used to justify the whole adventure, was to keep Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in power. The Kremlin maintained that the legitimate authorities in Damascus were being overwhelmed by foreign-sponsored terrorist forces. Therefore, in compliance with international law, Moscow offered Syria assistance crucial to its very survival and sovereignty.

This task was achieved, al-Assad was rescued, but for the most part thanks to very favorable circumstances. Firstly, Russians did not have to employ large ground forces save mercenaries, special operation forces and artillery support units<sup>8</sup> – the greatest part of the fighting rested on the Syrian army and foreign fighters, such as the battle-hardened Hezbollah combat force and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) with its proxy militias. Secondly, Russian artillery and attack aircrafts operated freely without major constraint, which allowed them to level whole cities and literally bury enemy soldiers in rubble, together with the civilian population. Thirdly, the strongest enemy, the Islamic State (IS) has been defeated by the Americans, Iraqis and Kurds both on the ground and in terms of financial support – all the Syrian army's progress against the IS, especially during the last months of 2017, was possible due to an earlier rout of the Islamic State's forces and the demolition of its infrastructure, both in material and financial terms.

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<sup>8</sup> *War zone Syria: Russian and US interventions assessed*, "Jane's" 2017, p. 6, [http://www.janes.com/images/assets/815/75815/War\\_zone\\_Syria\\_Russian\\_and\\_US\\_interventions\\_assessed.pdf](http://www.janes.com/images/assets/815/75815/War_zone_Syria_Russian_and_US_interventions_assessed.pdf) (accessed 28 December 2017).

This success was obscured to an extent by the fact that large parts of Syria are still in hands of rebel forces. Furthermore, from the very beginning it was not exactly clear if the Kremlin was determined to “liberate” whole country in one big effort. We thought<sup>9</sup> that Russians were rather interested in cantonizing Syria, because the whole process of recapturing its territory would have been too expensive and too long, giving not much in return. Now, at the beginning of 2018, this prediction seems to be correct. Moscow has indeed brought anti-rebel operations to the point where al-Assad is able to govern over relatively unified territory that represents roughly two thirds of entire Syria. But it is noteworthy that the last phase of military operations, conducted in late Summer and Autumn of 2017, was directed almost exclusively against the Islamic State, leaving the remaining rebel-held enclaves in relative peace. Russia also strengthened its presence in Syria by enhancing formal partnership and expanding its military installations capable of stationing substantial combat forces on a permanent basis. This way the Syrian president is kept relatively weak and dependent, what further helps Russia to secure its own beachhead in Syria.

Thus, as the most violent phase of the Syrian conflict draws to an end, Moscow’s primary goals seem to be achieved – the country is weak and fragmented, its authorities dependent on Russia’s regular help<sup>10</sup> and the Kremlin has a lot of opportunities to divide and rule. Currently it seems to be focused rather on seeking a political accommodation with rebel factions than on trying to overwhelm them, at least for the time being.

The second set of Russian goals was related to the wider problem of Moscow’s influence in the Middle East as a whole. First of all, al-Assad was the last Russia’s ally there, so Moscow certainly could not afford to lose him. Syrian president’s fall would have been a disastrous blow to the Kremlin’s credibility in the region and would have meant more or less a final farewell to the Levant. Therefore, in light of al-Assad’s apparent demise, Russia had little choice but to act, even if it meant a problematic military involvement in a distant overseas territory. Thus, “[b]y propping up one of the region’s most vilified leaders, Moscow [was] sending a powerful message about its willingness to act aggressively in a region where many of America’s closest allies [were] feeling insecure”<sup>11</sup>. Rescuing al-Assad from an imminent

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<sup>9</sup> M. Czajkowski, *Rosja (nie) wycofuje się z Syrii*, “Komentarze ZBN” 2016, no. 7 (16) (16 March).

<sup>10</sup> *Rosyjscy doradcy w każdej jednostce syryjskich sił rządowych*, “Defence24.pl”, 27 December 2017, <http://www.defence24.pl/719218,rosyjscy-doradcy-w-kazdej-jednostce-syryjskich-sil-rzadowych> (accessed 28 December 2017).

<sup>11</sup> C. Lynch, *Why Putin Is So Committed to Keeping Assad in Power*, “Foreign Policy”, October 7, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/07/putins-russia-is-wedded-to-bashar-al-assad-syria-moscow/> (accessed 21 December 2017).

catastrophe was therefore a clear signal to regional leaders that Russia was ready to seek their friendship in an exchange for assistance if needed. Owing to chaos spreading in the Middle East and the American relative disengagement from regional affairs, such an offer could have been considered tempting by many beleaguered governments or some ambitious sub-state actors.

By creating a stable foothold in the Middle East, Russia indeed has become one of the regional powers but its real weight is yet to be measured. Right now it has demonstrated some military capabilities and organizational skills, but on the other hand the success in Syria is still relative – the country remains divided. That is why Moscow’s influence in the Middle East is still unsettled and it is unclear what kind of regional sway Russia will be able to hammer out in the coming years – controlling the greater part of Syria does not automatically give it a region-wide leverage. It might even be argued that the relative success in Syria was possible just because the real goals were limited. Russian meddling in the Libyan civil war or the Egyptian<sup>12</sup>, Saudi<sup>13</sup> or other diplomatic overtures do not change this picture. Regional leaders have approached Russia with great caution because it is widely considered an unreliable partner and the one whose hand might be too heavy to bear, and in fact less potent than the United States. Hence, a lot depends on the abilities of the Russian diplomacy to tackle with deep-seated interests of ambitious regional powers and this is not an easy thing to do.

The third dimension of Russia’s Middle Eastern policy reflected the Kremlin’s general goals within the international realm. The most profound of them was a vehemently expressed claim, based on many historical, ideological, political and economic motives, that Russia actually was the global superpower and should have been treated accordingly. Furthermore, there was a generally agreed assessment that the country was endangered in its very existence by the ongoing Western encroachment which climaxed in the crossing of the last fault lines in Ukraine – developments there were considered as a genuine aggression against Russia.

From this point of view, a successful re-emergence in the Middle Eastern arena was supposed to make Russia an indispensable partner and a power to be reckoned with. In turn, it was expected to compel Western countries to come to terms with Moscow in other places, such as Europe. In that sense the Syrian gambit was a part of a broader counteroffensive aimed

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<sup>12</sup> W. Rodkiewicz, *Rosja: umacnianie wpływów w Egipcie*, “Analizy OSW”, 13 December 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2017-12-13/rosja-umacnianie-wplywow-w-egipcie> (accessed 14 December 2017).

<sup>13</sup> S. Kardaś, W. Rodkiewicz, *Szczyt rosyjsko-saudyjski*, “Analizy OSW”, 11 October 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2017-10-11/szczyt-rosyjsko-saudyjski> (accessed 24 December 2017).

against the West which also encompassed an increased interference in internal affairs of many countries, including the United States<sup>14</sup>, along with belligerent rhetoric<sup>15</sup>, aggressive military actions<sup>16</sup>, sudden exercises of massive armed forces<sup>17</sup> and hostile cyber operations<sup>18</sup>. Currently it looks like this goal has been achieved to a certain extent, although not entirely the way Russia wanted it to. The West was indeed forced to accommodate with Russia in the Middle East, but on the other hand it got scared by the scope and bluntness of the Russian aggression. Currently it appears that the main Western powers are not going to step back too much under Russian pressure. On the contrary, the West seemingly finds itself in a phase of consolidation against Moscow (which of course may not<sup>19</sup> be accomplished), because it recognizes that Russia moved too far in questioning the basics of the world order. In a generally shared opinion, the Kremlin became not just a competitor but it rather achieved the status of an adversary.

In short, the Syrian operation understood as a sort of offensive defense<sup>20</sup> bound to repel Western trespassing surely worked, along with other means that the Kremlin undertook. So, the West is now generally in a defensive mode, but this is also due to internal problems that include above all European economic woes and self-destruction of the U.S. foreign policy.

One has also to take into account the broadest conceptual context of all Russian international activities which we label as the “realist-futurist” mindset, that has apparently been present in Moscow’s worldview for some time and echoed in a rationale behind the Syrian intervention. This narrative stemmed primarily from a conclusion that the Western-centric world order was crumbling, and the rule-based international environment was swiftly deteriorating. Power politics made a spectacular comeback and yet another reshuffle in the global system commenced. Those actors who got to understand it and would be ready to throw away constraints soon enough would take part in the shaping of a new world order

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<sup>14</sup> See for example: L. Rosenberger, J. Fly, *Shining More Light Every Day on Russia’s Political Interference*, “War on the Rocks”, 13 November 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/shining-light-every-day-russias-political-interference/> (accessed 28 December 2017).

<sup>15</sup> M. Kaprāns, *Russia ratchets up rhetoric in the Baltics*, <http://infowar.cepa.org/Briefs/Lv/Russia-ratchets-up-rhetoric-in-the-Baltics> (accessed 24 December 2017).

<sup>16</sup> B. Jones, *Aerial confrontation increases over the Baltic Sea*, “Jane’s 360”, 26 June 2017, <http://www.janes.com/article/71756/aerial-confrontation-increases-over-the-baltic-sea> (accessed 27 June 2017).

<sup>17</sup> L. Litzenberger, *Beyond Zapad 2017: Russia’s Destabilizing Approach to Military Exercises*, “War on the Rocks”, 28 November 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/beyond-zapad-2017-russias-destabilizing-approach-military-exercises/> (accessed 29 November 2017).

<sup>18</sup> S. Sukhanin, *Russian ‘Cyber Troops’: A Weapon of Aggression*, “Eurasia Daily Monitor” 2017, vol. 14, no. 63, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-cyber-troops-weapon-aggression/> (accessed 12 December 2017).

<sup>19</sup> G. Gressel, F. Wesslau, *The Great Unraveling: Four Doomsday Scenarios for Europe’s Russia Policy*, “Policy Brief” no. ECFR/221, European Council on Foreign Relations, London, June 2017.

<sup>20</sup> P. Felgenhauer, *NATO and US: Enemies of Choice for Russia’s Military*, “Eurasia Daily Monitor” 2017, vol. 14, no. 72, <https://jamestown.org/program/nato-us-enemies-choice-russias-military/> (accessed 25 May 2017).

and benefit greatly from it. If this narrative is correct, the Russian strategy as a whole, and the Syrian gambit specifically, has been paying off, but it is rather difficult to appraise it in full at the moment.

Moreover, Syria was supposed to become a live-fire proving ground<sup>21</sup> for armaments and tactics of the resurgent Russian army in its newly appointed role of a long-range instrument of foreign policy. Beside the long-standing conventional military presence in the post-Soviet area, Moscow wanted to create a new tool of intervention in more remote regions in order to emulate American capacity to do just that. The military in its expeditionary function was supposed to become Russia's indispensable instrument in the unstable world, capable to be effectively used when and where necessary. This goal is rather long-term in nature, but there is no doubt that the Syrian operation has already yielded many positive gains with respect to that<sup>22</sup>. By all means, the Russian chain of command and the logistic systems have matured, together with innovative tactics and effectiveness of the use of various weaponry.

The fourth, and probably most important, goal of the intervention in Syria may be found in the internal politics of Russia. We argued on many occasions<sup>23</sup> that an essential task of the entire Russian foreign policy was to create and maintain a limited conflict with the West in order to rally society around the authorities. It was necessary since the previous legitimization mechanism, so-called "Putin's consensus", started to wane by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. It had been based on a relative economic success of the 2000s that allowed society to get enriched, but sources of this development were finally depleted, and something else was needed. The external threat seemed to be a good tool of legitimization of the government<sup>24</sup>, and the Syrian gambit had its role in this strategy – it was very important for a rally-under-the-flag strategy to prove that those in charge were really capable to defend the frightened people. Hence, a successful military operation was to serve as a demonstration of power of the country, of strength and proficiency of its military, and of resolve and skills of the authorities. So far it has worked very well, Russian society has responded very well to this storyline, for it also satisfies the Russians' national pride. Of course, this success has been

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<sup>21</sup> О. Владыкин, *Stratfor оценил Сирию как полигон РФ*, "Независимое Военное Обозрение", 27 October 2017, [http://nvo.ng.ru/nvoevents/2017-10-27/2\\_971\\_news3.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/nvoevents/2017-10-27/2_971_news3.html) (accessed 28 October 2017).

<sup>22</sup> R. McDermott, *High-Technology Set to Dominate Russia's Rearmament Program*, "Eurasia Daily Monitor" 2017, vol. 14, no. 154, <https://jamestown.org/program/high-technology-set-dominate-russias-rearmament-program/> (accessed 30 November 2017).

<sup>23</sup> See for example: M. Czajkowski, *Kremlin's Survival Strategy – The International Dimension*, in: A. Podraza (ed.), *A Transatlantic or European Perspective of World Affairs: NATO and the European Union Towards the Problems of International Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Madrid 2017, pp. 141-157.

<sup>24</sup> E. Rumer, R. Sokolsky, A.S. Weiss, *Trump and Russia*, "Foreign Policy", March/April 2017, p. 13.

achieved to a great extent due to a well-crafted message broadcasted by the Russian state-controlled media<sup>25</sup>, carefully managed by skilled propagandists.

And finally, there were also some goals regarding international and internal image of Russia. In the external dimension, the Syrian operation was supposed to rise the country's overall prestige by showing its military might and efficiency in the execution of a complex strategy in a difficult area. This worked well, especially with regard to undemocratic governments that might seek some rapprochement with Russia as it proved to be able to staunchly oppose Washington on its allegedly own turf. The successful intervention in Syria was also supposed to distract internal and external public from real problems of Russia – a weakening and vulnerable country unable to become a real superpower, but desperately willing to look like one. This goal has also been partially achieved, as expected, especially with regard to the domestic public; but in the global information sphere a lot of comments that seem to take the notion that Russia did renew its superpower status as face value appeared as well. On the other hand, there is of course strong anti-Russian alarmism and frequent experts' and politicians' remarks on the Russian full-fledged expansionism. This tone for the most part is set to mobilize public support for defensive efforts, but also to heat up political atmosphere in order to induce gains for persons or organizations interested in ongoing securitization of the relations with Russia. It was also expected that well-televised advertising showcases of effectiveness of the Russian weaponry facilitated by the Syrian operation would prove advantageous for arms exports<sup>26</sup>. Russia did demonstrate to be able to do things which were until now reserved almost solely for the U.S. military, but we will have to wait until it is translated into actual contracts.

### **The Future of Russia's Syrian Policy – A Broad Perspective**

A distinguished Russian scholar Dmitri Trenin has recently observed that:

“[b]ringing peace to Syria will be no less difficult than winning a war there. Russia faces another uphill task, one where its assets are less compelling, and where its competitors have more resources, and its situational allies—in Damascus, Tehran, and Ankara—will

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<sup>25</sup> A. Ferris-Rotman, *Primetime Politics*, “Foreign Affairs”, 12 October 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2017-10-12/primetime-politics?cid=int-lea&pgtype=hpg> (accessed 14 October 2017).

<sup>26</sup> *Demonstracja siły czy "reklama"? Kalibry przeciwko IS z powierzchni i spod wody*, “Defence24.pl”, 31 May 2017, <http://www.defence24.pl/603306,demonstracja-sily-czy-reklama-kalibry-przeciwko-is-z-powierzchni-i-spod-wody> (accessed 1 June 2017).

seek to promote their own agendas, which are sometimes at odds with Moscow's.

Succeeding on the diplomatic front will be even harder than winning on the battlefield.”<sup>27</sup>

We tend to concur with this appraisal. Russia is by no means a winner that takes all or a nascent hegemon in the Middle East. The future is not so bright, although it will probably bring Russia some gains but rather not decisive ones from the point of view of core interests of the state. On the other hand the engagement in Syria will probably induce a lot of nuisance and will result in many setbacks, as it will likely turn into an long-term and complicated entanglement.

Looking from the most general perspective, we maintain that Russia's goals and aims in Syria are manifold, and if accomplished they are supposed to positively impact many fields of Russian interests. However, as there is no single reason of this involvement, the most immediate tactical gains are easier to identify than the strategic ones. They are also more achievable because the short-term planning is apparently one of the Russians' best assets. We will try to assess the future of Russian policy in Syria and beyond, referring to the list of goals presented in the paragraph above.

The first perspective relates to Syria itself, and here we uphold the view that Moscow is ready to “cantonize” Syria, at least *de facto* and at least for the time being. It is rather not in its interest to promote any lasting or final solution – there are four reasons to think so. Firstly, the experience gained in the post-Soviet area demonstrates that conflicts deliberately left unresolved (or frozen) allow maintaining long-term influence at a relatively low cost. This is mainly because such a solution means leaving local authorities weak and dependent on military and/or political help. Furthermore, a partition of the state gives many opportunities to exploit it politically by distributing assistance to parties to the conflict. Therefore, a divided country or countries immersed in a perpetuated struggle remain under Russian influence, which would otherwise be much weaker. A good example is the Armenian-Azeri conflict in which Russia openly supports Erevan but also supplies weapons to Baku; Moscow also provides virtually no effort to promote a lasting political solution that would enable resuming normal relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In effect we can see that both of them are unable to live without Russia or leave its sphere of influence.

Secondly, any final solution including re-unification of Syria would have to permanently involve some important players, such as Iran or Turkey, and probably Israel as well. All of these

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<sup>27</sup> D. Trenin, *Putin's Plan for Syria*; “Foreign Affairs”, 13 December 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-12-13/putins-plan-syria?cid=int-lea&pgtype=hpg> (accessed 14 December 2017).

actors have their own agendas and none could be either accommodated or outmaneuvered easily. For example, Iran has its long-standing policy of establishing its domination in the Middle East. Therefore it uses the Syrian involvement as an opportunity to create enduring presence of the IRGC there<sup>28</sup>. This is rather irreconcilable with security interests of Israel<sup>29</sup> and opposite to the very notion of sovereign unity of Syria. Even if a permanent power-sharing agreement were promoted by Moscow, the problem of institutionalizing Iranian influence would be difficult to solve. It is because Tehran's government and IRGC would surely tend to use influence gained on Syrian soil for their own purposes, not necessarily consistent with Russian goals and the principle of future Syria's lasting stability. Negotiating the way Iranians would use their presence in Syria, and sustaining agreement if reached, would pose enormous challenges to Russian diplomacy. It is worth noting that the Iranian problem is just one piece of the Syrian puzzle, others are similarly difficult, but there is no place to describe them here in detail.

Thirdly, de-escalation of the confrontation between pro-Assad forces and the most of rebel groups in Syria allowed them to strengthen and entrench – especially the Kurds gained ground and regional weight at the expense of the IS. To break them now, even one by one, would require a great deal of effort and probably would be very difficult in foreseeable circumstances. It would require either an enormous increase of Russian involvement, despite the December 2017 announcement of the end of combat operations, or relying more and more on the above-mentioned alliances – both perspectives are rather not attractive in terms of possible gains.

And fourthly, there is no need that Russia force a permanent settlement of the conflict and this is the key point. A partial solution that would stabilize situation at least for the time being seems to serve other goals that transcend regional perspective well enough at a reasonable price. As we have written above, Moscow looks beyond Syria in the Middle East and elsewhere – the involvement there is just one of the instruments of the Kremlin's general strategy. Thus, what Russia wants now is merely relative stability in Syria that will provide a solid base for the further expansion of its influence in the Middle East. Cessation of hostilities and well-televised rebuilding efforts will also add up to Russia's international prestige and

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<sup>28</sup> A. Vatanka, *Iran and Russia, Growing Apart*, "Foreign Affairs", 29 November 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-11-29/iran-and-russia-growing-apart?cid=int-lea&pgtype=hpg> (accessed 30 November 2017).

<sup>29</sup> P. K. Baev, *Declaring Victory in Syria, Putin Stands to Lose the Elusive Peace*; "Eurasia Daily Monitor" 2017, vol. 14, no. 152, <https://jamestown.org/program/declaring-victory-syria-putin-stands-lose-elusive-peace/> (accessed 28 November 2017).

furthermore show effectiveness of Moscow's foreign policy, especially *vis-à-vis* the alleged U.S. ineffectiveness.

In short, we think that the state of relative flux in Syria is probably what the Russians consider to be in their best interest. That is why they currently concentrate efforts on strengthening their own position by seeking a political solution that would ensure relative stability in divided Syria without delivering anything close to the final resolution of the conflict.

A question remains whether such favourable conditions that Russians want to create are achievable. Will "cantonization" of Syria work in a way it is supposed to do? Now, in fact, when full-fledged military operations are over, the developments seem to depend less on Russia and more on local players. Such actors as Iran or Turkey may have more instruments of influence since the air superiority, elite special operations forces or sophisticated means of reconnaissance are not so much in need any more. Especially Iran might prove to be less manageable as it will pursue its own goals, of which the creation of land corridors to the Mediterranean is of paramount importance<sup>30</sup>. Future developments in Syria may also yield a lot of events unforeseeable at the moment. Therefore, the Syrian foundations of the Russian Middle Eastern influence may prove much less solid than expected and much more demanding in terms of allocation of political as well as military resources, which are by the way not in abundance while the country's budget dwindles<sup>31</sup>.

The second, regional, perspective refers to the further widening of Russian influence in the Middle East. Achieving this goal would need more instruments and would be much more difficult than a limited military intervention in tactically advantageous circumstances. While hammering its military action into the long-term and comprehensive region-wide political influence, Russia will have to prove its ability to produce lasting outcomes, not only to exploit opportunities with short-term gains in sight. To build a network of relations is not easy, especially if it would need to accommodate many partners and address many difficult and intertwined problems. Such a process would also be long and costly, and would bring rather vague outcomes. It is therefore possible that Russia will still seek a greater influence in the Middle East yet only by exploiting emerging opportunities, not through a concentrated

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<sup>30</sup> E. Yarri, *Iran's Ambitions in the Levant*, "Foreign Affairs", 1 May 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-05-01/irans-ambitions-levant> (accessed 2 May 2017).

<sup>31</sup> M. Pyadushkin, *Russian Spending Cuts Limit Military Procurement*, "Aviation Week and Space Technology", 11 December 2017, [http://aviationweek.com/defense/russian-spending-cuts-limit-military-procurement?NL=AW-19&Issue=AW-19\\_20171211\\_AW-19\\_779&sfvc4enews=42&cl=article\\_3&utm\\_rid=CPEN1000001539178&utm\\_campaign=12935&utm\\_medium=email&elq2=206ddd2a5cbf4abd86c82cb9fa530a94](http://aviationweek.com/defense/russian-spending-cuts-limit-military-procurement?NL=AW-19&Issue=AW-19_20171211_AW-19_779&sfvc4enews=42&cl=article_3&utm_rid=CPEN1000001539178&utm_campaign=12935&utm_medium=email&elq2=206ddd2a5cbf4abd86c82cb9fa530a94) (accessed 12 December 2017).

long-term effort based on a comprehensive and detailed strategy. This is consistent with what we have referred to as the “realist-futurist” thinking. If this narrative is correct, and we strongly believe so, Moscow believes that the Middle Eastern order, or what is left of it, is crumbling. This would mean that the Kremlin considers any lasting outcome impossible even to devise at the moment, as it is hard to predict all the developments in such a liquid situation. That is why Russia, figuratively, sits and waits, ready to use up opportunities as they appear to gain as much influence as they can at the lowest possible cost.

The third, worldwide, context of the Syrian operation does not change as Russia’s permanent objective is to take a position of the world-class superpower<sup>32</sup>. This is the centuries-old tradition and the basic policy imperative that stems from long-established conviction that Russia does occupy a unique position in the world, therefore it is not subject to substantial fluctuations.

More specifically it is clear now that Russian leaders notice the grave and existential threat from outside that is projected also onto the whole country. First of all, and it is clearly articulated in Russia, Moscow considers the West as a hostile entity with the strategic goal of destroying the country or at least subduing it<sup>33</sup>. The developments in Ukraine, understood in Moscow as the crossing of the last fault lines, are quoted as a clear evidence of this aggression, along with NATO’s expansion and other similar events. However bizarre it would look like, many within Russia’s elites, and a wider part of society, actually believe that the West prepares for military action along with other means of destruction of Russia. Such thinking is not only a remnant of the Cold-War mindset but it is also deeply rooted in the nation’s culture that cultivates centuries-old and propaganda-hardened distrust of the West. This view is also being carefully managed and intensified by the state’s disinformation apparatus.

Deeper and in fact more rational origins of fear of the West refer to the Russian authorities themselves. An eastbound advance of the European and American political and economic influence meant above all a promotion of the Western patterns of organization of the state and society which were completely contrary to the Eastern traditional notion of the government as a sort of owner of the country it rules over. In that sense Ukraine’s fast forwarded rapprochement with the West was actually the last flash of the warning sign that

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<sup>32</sup> I. Daalder, *Responding to Russia’s Resurgence*, “Foreign Affairs”, November/December 2017, p. 30.

<sup>33</sup> See for example a compelling analysis of president Putin’s beliefs: F. Hill, *Putin: The one-man show the West doesn’t understand*. “Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists” 2016, vol. 72, no. 3, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00963402.2016.1170361?platform=hootsuite&> (accessed 29 December 2017).

demanded an immediate response. That is why Russia, as we have already noticed, embarked on the strategy of limited confrontation with the West. Right now, however, it gradually looks less limited and more confrontational<sup>34</sup>. It is very probable that the initial goal of warning opponents and bringing them to cooperation under Russian conditions has been effectively abandoned. Thus, Moscow does not seek long-term accommodation anymore but is rather gearing up for a prolonged conflict with the frequent use of military instruments of its foreign policy<sup>35</sup>.

That is why we will witness more and more Russian anti-Western activities, especially as the understanding of Moscow's motives will grow in the West, along with a firmer stance against Russia. But we also believe that the Kremlin is not going to go into a full-scale conflict anytime soon, because it would be too costly and difficult to sustain. Russia's in fact defensive posture<sup>36</sup>, even if it manifests itself very offensively, will dictate rather careful application of assets at its disposal. The Kremlin will therefore seek to take opportunities as they come, instead of undertaking a risky total confrontation, especially in light of Russia's economic dependence on the global market.

A careful wait-and-see attitude with no clear vision of long-term solutions is being executed not only because of the defensive nature of Russia's resurgence, but it stems also from the "realist-futurist" mindset, as we have argued above. However, it is not necessarily a correct strategy, for we still do not know if the current world order really crumbles completely or it is only changing somehow its shape. Most probably, it rather transforms from a western-centric to a polycentric system, but it is not entirely obvious this new form will be based on the utter force alone. It is quite likely that crucial players, especially the new world-class powers like China and India will prefer a stable, rule-based environment for their own development. That is why it is possible that the Russian strategy of betting on destruction will finally not pay off well. Additionally, Moscow's new model of warfare<sup>37</sup> apparently is an increasingly important tool of foreign relations, thereby testing the latest weapons, tactics and operational concepts in Syria. On the other hand, it will expose this evolution to external

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<sup>34</sup> P. Felgenhauer, *'Party of War' Triumphs in Moscow*, "Eurasia Daily Monitor" 2017, vol. 14, no. 137, <https://jamestown.org/program/party-war-triumphs-moscow/> (accessed 28 October 2017).

<sup>35</sup> See for example: J. Sherr, *The Militarization of Russia's Policy*, "Paper Series", Transatlantic Academy, Washington, D.C., August 2017.

<sup>36</sup> S. M. Walt, *Why Arming Kiev Is a Really, Really Bad Idea*, "Foreign Policy", 9 February 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/09/how-not-to-save-ukraine-arming-kiev-is-a-bad-idea/> (accessed 10 February 2015).

<sup>37</sup> See for example: F. S. Hansen, *Russian Hybrid Warfare*, "DIIS Report" 2017, no. 6, Danish Institute for International Studies, Copenhagen 2017.

scrutiny and assessment – this will give the West a chance to get prepared against possible Russian actions in the future.

The fourth dimension of the Syrian adventure, closely related to the one mentioned above, explains it as a component of an internal power conservation strategy. As we have mentioned above, the creation of a limited confrontation with the West that could be televised as an existential threat is more and more important given that the Russian economy stagnates and the authorities apparently have no clue how to put the country back on track of economic growth<sup>38</sup>. The external threat is the last source of legitimization of the Kremlin's current tenants, and if it fails, only sheer force of repression will remain. Within this strategy, the Syrian operation will have its place as long as it is a limited war for a limited price. What counts in that perspective is only a positive appraisal of the government's strength and ability by the Russian public. It will surely play this role in the future, but there is some potential to lessen its actual influence on the audience. As the Russian presence in Syria will become more and more a common thing, this trump card will wear off in a measure. Such positive impact may even completely evaporate if some of the key circumstances change; there may be many unexpected events of that sort, such as an increase in casualties in Syria or quick deterioration of the situation in Russia.

Finally, there is a question of international prestige that comes out of the successful employment of some newest military technologies and a well-advertised unwavering stance against threats that are attributed to the Muslim world. Russia definitely enhanced its image in many countries of the world and this will continue at least to a certain extent. It also draws and will continue to draw an envious look from the Western right, as it is broadcasting the narrative of being tough and effective against disruptive forces of Islam – contrary to soft and weak liberal governments of the West. On the other hand, constant warmongering and interference will contribute to the negative image of Russia in the eyes of the mainstream Western public – though this is probably what Moscow does not care about. What is more important is that the strategy of destabilization could also bring discontent of some relevant counterparts, especially China. Whatever are Beijing's long-term goals, probably it does not seek a rapid deterioration of the world order – the current one fitting China's ambitions relatively well.

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<sup>38</sup> M. Domańska, *Putin po raz czwarty. Bez pomysłu, bez nadziei*, "Komentarze OSW", 13 December 2017, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2017-12-13/putin-po-raz-czwarty-bez-pomyslu-bez-nadziei> (accessed 14 December 2017).

## Conclusions

The most intrusive assessment related to the Russian's adventure in Syria is that they are there to stay. On the other hand, it seems that this involvement will remain limited, as its goals are in fact limited in the region itself, paying off in the other perspectives. Russia seems to prefer a cost-effective way to achieve multitude of specific goals, if they are deemed possible to accomplish at the moment. Hence, the Kremlin is prepared most of all to react to the changing situation for tactical advantages. More specifically, our main conclusions are as follows.

1. Russia seeks to "cantonize" Syria via the promotion of a kind of political solution that would partially accommodate all the sides but none in full – this is supposed to grant Russia a role of the main arbiter in the "frozen" conflict. Such a solution is achievable but extremely difficult to reach and sustain.
2. If the above-mentioned goal is achieved, Russia will gain strong influence and prestige in the Middle East, but it will also depend on the U.S. policy there – it is very hard to predict whether it will be as passive and reactive as currently is.
3. If a relative political stabilization of Syria is not achieved, Russia will be unable to significantly expand its influence beyond Syria. Moscow will remain preoccupied by local problems and will lose its image of an effective player.
4. In the broadest international dimension Russia and the West will remain the opposing sides of the conflict which will more and more resemble the Cold War<sup>39</sup>, although with many specific features. But both sides will make every effort not to let the situation spin out of control, hence the conflict will be limited.
5. The latter perfectly fits the internal goals of the Kremlin's strategy, as power preservation is in fact the main driver of its foreign policy. But small victorious wars will not solve inherent problems of the Russian political system and will not yield economic growth. Conversely, uncertainties of active engagement in the most unstable region

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<sup>39</sup> D. Trenin, *Welcome to the Cold War II*, "Foreign Policy", 4 March 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/04/welcome-to-cold-war-ii/> (accessed 5 March 2014).

of the world have the potential to confront Russia with many unpleasant consequences that would aggravate its internal problems.