

RUSSIA-UKRAINIAN WAR IMPACT ON RUSSIA-SYRIA RELATIONS

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Abstract

The current Russia-Ukrainian war had a great impact not only on the mentioned states but also went beyond their territorial scope. The political chaos has particularly affected Russia's strategic partner, in particular Syria. The states of the Middle East are characterized by a politically unstable environment, which is facilitated by the unfavorable economic situation within the country, on the basis of which a large part of the population is impoverished. That is why the political representatives of the states of the mentioned region are looking for an important strategic partner/partners to rely on and thus maintain a dominant position in their country. Syria is no exception, in this case, its ally in the region is Iran, and the position of an external actor has been occupied by the Russian state in recent years. Of course, all three states have their own interests, on the basis of which they establish relations, for example, the presence of Assad in power and the neutralization of his opponents in the country depends on the power of Iran and the Russians. At the same time, Syria imports food products from Russia. In 2021, Russia undertook to supply wheat to Syria, however, the Russian-Ukrainian war stopped this process, because the area of its attention became Ukraine as a whole, therefore it tries to use all the resources produced by it to help this war. Against the background of the ongoing war, the supply of food resources in Syria slowed down and almost fell to a minimum from Russia, which contributed to further impoverishment of the population and, of course, an increase in prices was inevitable. According to experts in the field, Iran has been given the greatest chance to take full power in Syria in its own hands, due to the fact that the epicenter of Russia's attention is another state. It is important to note that Russia's influence has not weakened from a political point of view.

Key words: political chaos, economic factor, relations, strategic partner, own interests.

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had a major impact on world politics, with a number of countries stepping in to help Ukraine, both in terms of providing humanitarian and military resources and equipment. The current war had a great impact on the international system, especially the tense environment that was created for the European states. Of course, the mentioned war will have an impact from the political-economic point of view, because it has already created a threat to the operation of the international market. Additionally, warring states' strategic partners or nations with whom they had economic trade would suffer.

The results of the current war have had a clear impact on the economic policy of Syria. The war has worsened the already dire humanitarian situation for the low-income population, bringing Syria to the brink of an economic crisis, as the cutoff in wheat supplies exacerbated bread shortages. Although the Syrian economy is not completely dependent on Russian imports, it still has a significant impact on the economic factor, as wheat resources are very important for the impoverished country. In addition, overcoming Covid-19 was a fundamental challenge for the country, especially for a country on the brink of war, it was very difficult to maintain certain sanitary norms, which contributed to the spread of the

pandemic. Accordingly, in the current background, the Syrian economy is impoverished, which is facilitated by the economic collapse within the country.

The long-term war between Russia and Ukraine may lead to a change in the dynamics of the political conflict in Syria, which is manifested by the following factors¹:

- Iran's attempt to become a completely dominant state;
- possible increased pressure from Turkey and the Syrian opposition on the Syrian government and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF);
- It is possible that due to the social background, the Syrian opposition forces will try to remove the supporters of the Assad government and bring the issue of poverty to the fore;
- If Syria left without a supporter, may again become a victim of attacks by "Islamic State" units.

At the beginning of the Russia-Ukrainian war, Russia announced that it would not fulfill its December 2021 commitment, which meant bringing wheat resources into Syrian regime-controlled territory, which in turn meant providing new resources and replenishing some stocks. Northwestern Syria is particularly short, having been directly dependent on buying wheat from Russia and Ukraine, while also importing little from Turkey, where drought has hit production. Consequently, the Syrian government has to cut back on vital food aid, despite the regime taking strict measures such as price controls, rationing, and export restrictions, but it is very difficult for a low-ranking state to adopt and implement measures in the face of ongoing economic challenges.

1. Russia-Syria relations

Relations between Syria and Russia date back to the time of the Soviet Union, in particular, in the 1970s, when the Soviet Union gained influence on the territory of Syria, provided humanitarian aid and military equipment, and in return received the only Russian military base in the Middle East. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian-Syrian relations did not develop at such a favorable pace, due to the economic, social, and political problems existing within Russia. Since the 2000s, when Vladimir Putin came to power, the situation has changed radically. In Russia's geostrategy, the Middle East moved to the forefront, and Syria, with which it had a long friendship, became one of the main partners.

After the start of the Arab Spring in 2011, Russia's interests in the Middle East grew even more. Apart from Syria, Russia saw Libyan President Muammar Gaddafi as a strategic partner, and killing Gaddafi was unprofitable for Russia. Based on the above, Syria took a central place in Russia's geopolitical interests, it received full support from Russia, both in terms of military infrastructure, and Russian soldiers appeared on the territory of Syria, aiming to maintain/strengthen Assad's government.

On September 30, 2015, the Russian Federation officially entered the Syrian Arab Republic and became involved in the civil war to keep President Bashar al-Assad in power. Intense fighting and acts of terrorism since 2011 have greatly weakened the Syrian army. Even the Syrian regular army, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, Russian military units, and mercenaries were not enough to stop the advance of the opposition and radical groups at the beginning of the war.

In March 2015, the Syrian government lost its second provincial capital, Idlib, when Jaish al-Fatah, along with a coalition of various armed groups, launched a successful attack on the city in the northwest of the country. A year earlier, they captured the provincial capital of Raqqa, with its strategic oil and water resources, which had become the main stronghold of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

¹ Rahman-Jones, I., Why does Russia support Syria and President Assad? <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-39554171>[L. s. 7.11.2022];

(ISIL). In addition, the Syrian government has lost control of several provinces - Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor, Hasakeh, Deraa, and large parts of Quneitra - and has struggled to control Hama, Homs, and rural Damascus.

With the support of Russia and Iran, the Assad government was able to stop the intervention of the opposition forces. Having strengthened their strategic military positions, and gaining full influence and control over the territory of Syria, both states have placed their own military bases on the territory of Syria, which they will use at any time if necessary.

By 2022, it must be said that the Syrian opposition army is no longer the same force as it was at the beginning of the Arab Spring. Assad's government is in almost complete control of the territory of Syria, and the strategic partnership between Russia and Syria is at its zenith. Putin's government constantly reminds Assad that he would not be able to maintain power without him, and grateful Assad, on the other hand, supports Russia on the diplomatic front, imports food products and military infrastructure from Russia, and deploys Russian soldiers to his territory "to ensure peace".

2. Food insecurity in Syria

Today, Syria remains one of the most urgent cases of the World Food Program, requiring more resources/assistance than any other country. In addition, a quarter of the world's refugees are Syrian, and they are seeking refuge, or a safe environment, in 130 countries². The Russia-Ukrainian war had a certain impact on humanitarian aid and put the already impoverished state in a more extreme situation.

Through strict US and EU sanctions, Syria is heavily dependent on Russian wheat imports. Ukraine is an important supplier of wheat to the global market, but in this particular case, it cannot export its grain, which is why the global supply is reduced, which is actually reflected in the increase in prices and the shortage of wheat, which is directly related to the production of bread. Other states in the Middle East turned to other major wheat exporters, such as India, for insurance during the outbreak of war. It was initially speculated that there would be some steps taken by India to help alleviate Syria's food shortages of wheat and rice, but due to drought, Syria has lost an exporting nation in that direction for the time being. I would like to point out here that if the Russia-Ukrainian conflict continues for a long time, Syria will face a more severe food shortage, which will ultimately affect the political agenda.

Wheat is one of the essential food resources for the Syrian population. Syria's annual wheat supply needs are estimated at around 4.3 million tons. In 2021³, Syria imported about 1.2 million tons from Russia and produced only 1.05 tons, causing bread lines in regime-held areas and unprecedented price increases.

The worsening of Syria's food shortages is not the direct fault of Russia's annexation of Ukraine, although it is certainly directly related, as access to Russian food products has been cut off to this day.

In addition, finding alternative food supplies for Syria is not really easy, as imports from countries are compromised by sanctions, making it difficult for it to establish economic relations with states.

The prices of basic imported goods also increased. Access to nearby markets has also become more difficult as several countries, including Turkey, have begun imposing bans on the export of grain, cooking oil and other agricultural products to Syria.

² Hatahet, S., What the Russian Invasion Means for Syria. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/what-russian-invasion-means-syria> [L. s. 13.11.2022];

³ Hatahet, S., What the Russian Invasion Means for Syria. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/what-russian-invasion-means-syria> [L. s. 13.11.2022];

2.1 Availability problem

The increase in product prices also affected humanitarian aid. In March, the national average value of the World Food Program's standard basket increased by about 24 percent over the course of the month. In addition, the situation in the health sector is dire. A number of medical facilities in the opposition-controlled territory are completely dependent on international funding to provide essential services and medicines.

In addition to supply chain disruptions and increased costs, funding for the sector has fallen by more than 40 percent in the past ten months, forcing hospitals and vital services to close.

The current war did not cause the crisis of the mentioned issues, although it certainly contributed to its aggravation. In the future, the duration of the war will further complicate the political negotiations on the transition, which will actually worsen the humanitarian conditions in the country.

According to experts in the field, in order to avoid the impending disaster of food security, humanitarian and donor countries and non-governmental organizations should ensure the continuous flow of humanitarian aid to Syria.

3. Geopolitical dynamics

Bashar al-Assad's main goal is to gain complete control over Syria, which actually depends on the allies he supports, namely Russia and Iran. Against the backdrop of US and EU sanctions and seriously damaged infrastructure, Syria is constantly threatened with the collapse of state institutions, therefore it is vital for Syria to have the support of Iran and especially Russia on its side.

In general, Iran ensures the supply of certain funds of oil and gas to Syria, at the same time its bases are planted in the territory of Syria, and Russia ensures the export of food resources to Syria. Therefore, the Russia-Ukrainian war will have a certain impact on the security of Syria, since the main responsible person for this, from a strategic point of view, is Russia.

Despite the fact that Russia is trying as much as possible to lose its influence on Syria, its focus is still on the war in Ukraine. Accordingly, based on this, Turkey and Iran will try to influence Syria regionally, especially Iran, and do this as much as possible with the help of its proxy forces.

The political process is hampered by the difficult economic situation. According to the Carter Center/ACLED, Russia's military activity in Syria has decreased sharply, despite the fact that it remains the most reliable partner to this day. At the start of the Russia-Ukrainian war, there were some unconfirmed facts about Russia withdrawing its troops from southern Syria, but things went back to normal in April. According to researchers in the field, Russia is certainly focused entirely on Ukraine, although it does not spare efforts in relation to Syria.⁴

Although Russia is not giving up its positions in Syria, and this is of course due to its interest to have the main base in Syria, according to recent reports, Iran is gaining more foothold in the border region, which actually complicates the approaches of Jordan and Israel against Iran. In Syria, the conflict between the opposition and the Assad government is still going on, in many cases, it was able to de-escalate it together with Russia, however, in the background of the ongoing Russia-Ukrainian war, Russia is less involved in the domestic politics of the country.

⁴ Prasad H., Blog | Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Complicates the Situation in Syria.
<https://www.cartercenter.org/news/features/blogs/2022/russias-invasion-of-ukraine-complicates-the-situation-in-syria.html>
[L. s. 14.11.2022].

Jordan's relations with the Syrian government are strained day by day, and this is due to the sponsorship of drugs and smugglers. In particular, Jordan is trying to crack down on the border region, as it directly accuses the Syrian government and Iran of sponsoring the amphetamine trade. Russia was once a mediator in Jordan and Syria to solve the security issues of the government movement, and at this stage, Russia's positions have been reduced, on the basis of which the Jordanian government has been activated to ensure the solution of the said problem alone.

In addition to the situation in southern Syria, the issue of northern Syria is important. In particular, discussion of the position of the Kurds and Turkey. Based on this, it is important for Syria to maintain the border of northern Syria in the background that most of the Kurds are settled in the said part. Russia is active in this direction and appears as a conflict-solving party, it can be said that Russia is active in this direction because Turkey is also one of the involved parties.

Russia, also domestically, is the main moderating force between the opposition and the Syrian government, which presented itself as one of the guarantors of the cease-fire in March 2020. Accordingly, we can say that Russia appears to be one of the issues of regulating the security of the country's domestic policy, but it is relatively less involved in this direction because as we have already mentioned, Ukraine appears to be the main source of its focus.

Against the background of the current war, Russia is sanctioned from an economic point of view, which actually hinders the financial and diplomatic support of the Syrian government. At the same time as the war, Syria cut off trade relations with Ukraine, although Ukraine was one of the exporters of food for Syria.

As mentioned earlier, Russia has a strategic interest in maintaining its air and naval bases in Syria. Accordingly, Assad also has a certain interest in leaving Russia in his own territory, in particular, he is trying to strengthen his position with the help of Russia. Based on a report published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Russia's ground forces will number around 4,000 in 2022, so Russia is concentrating on its aerospace defense forces in Syria. It is because of this that he has the opportunity to change the political influence on Syria to a lesser extent.⁵

I would also like to point out that a particularly tense background is being created in terms of humanitarian aid. Syria needs humanitarian assistance more and more every day. The US is one of the major aid powers in this direction, therefore, humanitarian aid to Syria should be stable depending on the poverty line of the population, although the lack of international funding may be reflected in the scale of the response to the crisis in Ukraine.

If we consider Turkey's politics, its involvement in the current war is less, however, due to the fact that Russia and Turkey have economic cooperation, the Russia-Ukrainian war would have a certain impact on their relations. Turkey is one of the largest trading partners in terms of imports and one of the main suppliers of gas. Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Turkey's deepening economic crisis made it difficult to sustain the economic costs of its Syria policy. Moreover, the humanitarian consequences of the war in Ukraine will add to Turkey's economic burden in northwestern Syria. Thus, continued cross-border aid is an urgent priority for Turkey, now more than ever.

Iran, on the other hand, has made a significant contribution to the survival of the Assad regime. In Syria, the two powerful allies share influence with each other and try their best to strengthen their positions. Therefore, Russia and Iran had to balance territorial control through political interaction in order to maintain Assad's rule. However, it should be noted that Russia was still promoted because, in addition

⁵ Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. The War in Ukraine and Its Impact on Syria. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/the-war-in-ukraine-and-its-impact-on-syria> [L. s. 11.11.2022].

to political affairs, it was also led by the economic factor. The Russia-Ukrainian war, it can be said, changed some dynamics, on the basis of which Iran was given some opportunity to increase its influence in Syria. A clear example of this is its expansion in North-Eastern Syria, against the background that the said part was mostly controlled by Russia. According to the military balance of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Iran's troops in the region this year numbered 1,500. Accordingly, they have increased their presence in Al-Hasakah by this figure. Before the Russia-Ukrainian war, Russia restricted Iran's activities in Al-Hasakah. Of particular note is the fact that al-Hassaq is close to territory controlled by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

According to experts in the field, Iran has always wanted to put pressure on Washington, and it can be said that it has a chance to do so through Syria. Additionally, Iran has equipped its proxy forces in various areas of Syria with weapons, including anti-armor machine guns. Iran justifies this behavior by saying that they have to answer in the future in order to combat the renewed activities of ISIS. In addition, Iran did not rely only on the territory of Al-Hasakah but also intensified its efforts by using proxy forces in the provinces of Homs and Deir Ez-Zor. Finally, in early April, Iranian forces, along with Lebanese Hezbollah and the pro-Iranian Fourth Division of the Syrian army, stepped up their presence at the Mahin military depot in eastern Homs following the withdrawal of Russian-backed forces.

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine war had a severe impact on Syria. The already existing poverty, hunger, and economic crisis further encouraged it. Until today, actors outside the region have tried their best to avoid all the negative effects caused by the Ukraine-Russia war for Syria, but to no avail. Due to the fact that Russian exports play a big role in the economy of Syria, it was not possible to avoid the negative impact. It should be noted here that for the West, the reduction of Russia's influence in Syria did not necessarily bring positive results. Along with the decline of Russian influence, the influence and role of Iran have increased. The growth of Iran's influence has caused serious concern in Israel, which, due to such a situation, feels a direct threat from the Iranian military bases located on the territory of Syria.

It is very important for the European Union and partner countries such as the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and Norway to play their role in reducing regional conflicts. They must be able to contribute to long-term humanitarian goals, which at the same time can and will guarantee an inclusive system of regional security. From this point of view, it is necessary for them to work in the direction of reducing local conflicts. Their role is also important in balancing the "cold conflicts" between the internal conflicting parties in the region, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Also in solving the issue of Syrian Kurds and balancing the positions of Turkey.

A healthy investment policy plays an important role in the Syrian economy, it clearly has challenges in this direction. The cost of reconstruction of the existing enterprises in Syria, damaged by the civil war, ranges from 250 to 400 billion US dollars. There is a theoretical possibility on the part of the Arab states, although there are many challenges in this direction. One of the factors is Iran, whose influence in Syria is very large. It is possible that this will have a positive effect, and it is precisely to reduce the growth of Iran's influence that the Arab countries will invest, although the risks of losing the investment are quite large. At the same time, the revival of the economy takes a long time, and Syria, which is still potentially on the brink of civil war, is not considered a very desirable investment country. Another reason is the state of the country itself. A broken-down country, whose political regime is unstable, and allied with two aggressor states, will not create a healthy investment environment for either country.

The Russia-Ukraine war poses an additional potential threat to the Assad regime. The Russian Federation is adding military personnel to the territory of Ukraine day by day, depending on the fact that they do not succeed and require more military assistance, there is a possibility that the military units in Syria will be sent to Ukraine. It is also possible that Russia will ask Assad to send Syrian troops as a sign of friendship. Such a situation is definitely not desirable for the Assad regime. The sending of Syrian troops will not happen in a wide range by itself, even a small number is a threat substitute for Assad due to the strengthening of ISIS and the activation of opposition forces, and in case of withdrawal of Russian troops, Assad will need more support from Iran, which is the main ally and supporter after Russia. Such a move, in turn, would anger Israel, which would increase Israel's future attacks on Syria. For Israel, the Russian-Syrian alliance is undesirable, but even more undesirable, of course, is its main supporter, Iran, which openly threatens Israel with destruction.

In December 2021, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations warned Syria that due to the impending drought, the wheat harvest would decline and the risk of famine would be high. As a result of the war, Syria, already damaged, destroyed and below the poverty line, this information would not be useful. Added to this are the consequences of the war in Ukraine, which has further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Syria, which is already below the poverty line. Even before the war, 90% of the Syrian population lived in poverty, 2/3 depended on humanitarian aid, and 55% were food insecure. The Syrian crisis was compounded by sanctions imposed as a result of bad governance, and the covid pandemic and all these factors put Syria in an unprecedented crisis as of today.

At the very beginning of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russia announced that it was not going to fulfill the commitment made in early December 2021, which was related to the supply of wheat to the territories controlled by the Assad regime. Northwestern Syria is also experiencing shortages at the same time, due to the fact that it buys wheat from Ukraine and Russia, and/or Turkey, which has also been affected by the drought. In addition to all this, the world food program, which is largely dependent on production in Ukraine, is not in a very favorable position due to the loss of suppliers, rising food prices, and the increased number of people in global poverty. From May 2022, the program will have to cut life support to 1.35 million people in northwestern Syria. Although the Syrian regime has taken strict measures, such as rationing, price controls, and export restrictions, it is still not enough to stabilize the situation.

Finally, to summarize Russia's position in relation to Syria, the main trajectory will be highlighted, which will have an impact if the Russia-Ukrainian war continues for a long time. First, it certainly refers to the loss of Russia's positions, which is manifested by the loss of its military presence or directly focusing a large force on Ukraine. Therefore, it is possible that Russia will no longer block the expansion of Iran's influence. Because of this, Iran has a chance to turn Syria into its sphere of influence, which in turn will not be very favorable for Western countries. On the other hand, the situation in Syria will become more and more difficult in terms of the need for humanitarian aid, in particular, if Syria does not find a state that provides food resources in the near term, it will ultimately make it difficult to provide minimum food resources to the population.

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