

TUNISIA, 25.09.2017

11:45 Panel-2 “The Russian Presence in Syria and the Future of the Levant Region”

“Implications for Regional State and Non-state Actors”

Ercan Çitlioğlu

Mr Chairman and Distinguished Participants,

Very current and important, before emerged as a local problem, since then, both states and non-state actors have been able to draw in a global identity and to discuss a topic that has resulted in the realization of Russia's centuries-old dream, I would like to present my sincere thanks to KAS Regional Office South Mediterranean Director Dr. Canan Atılgan and her team.

In spite of the disagreements between Russia and Syria during the Gorbachev era it should be remembered that the two countries relations began on 1955 in the reign of the USSR. When we look at the history of the peak level of the military and political cooperation today, the question to answer, it is not whether the Russian Federation presence is permanent in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean or not. The reason why the permanence was basically registered with the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, which was signed in 1980, is now strengthened and changed dramatically.

Because, since the days of the Soviet Union to the today's Russia, Syria appeared to maintain its position in the geopolitical calculations of the Kremlin. Today, we do not find any political or military Russian support offered to any country in the world comparable to what is being offered to Syria.

Mr Abdul Jalil Al-Marhoun from Middle East Monitor explained the reasons of the Russia's interest to Syria from a different perspective as;

“It is necessary to point out the geopolitical environment of the Black Sea has changed fundamentally since Romania and Bulgaria became considered members of NATO and Ukraine and Georgia gained independence. Furthermore, NATO countries are now betting on the possibility that their troops will gain access to the AZOV and Black Seas, is now subject to Ukrainian control which represents a sharp conflict between Russia and the West. Within the same context, the United States signed an agreement with Romania, allowing the US to deploy 1.500 soldiers to American Naval Bases in the Black Sea. In short, the Black Sea has become a spot of Atlantic influence where Russia's historical standing has been damaged. This explains why Russia has been pursuing the Mediterranean and Syria in its new foreign policy.”¹

Anna Borshchevskaya's explanation from The Washington Institute for Near East Policy has a different angle as;

“Since 2000, Putin has sought to restore Russia as a Great Power, shaping its policy as an anti-American zero-sum game in order to position the country as a counterweight to the West in the Middle East. Syria is Russia's most important foothold in the region and a key to Putin's calculus. Syria's location—bordering the Mediterranean, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq—makes it too important to lose.”²

¹ The Story of Syrian-Russian Relations, Middle East Monitor.

² Anna Borshchevskaya, The Washington Institute, January 24,2013.

Mr Carlo Jose Vincente Caro explained the Russia's interest to Syria in his article published by Sputnik News only from the point of historical ties such as;

“There have been many objections to what is denominated as the Russian interference in Syria, more specifically in the Syrian Armed Conflict. Most of the objections coming from these analysts concentrate on one sided arguments and therefore ignore the historical relationship that Moscow has had with Damascus.. They paint an ingenious yet delusional picture of a foreign intruder coming out of nowhere to the aid of an internal despot, while ignoring the fact that the relations of cooperation between Syria and Russia were established literally as the former gained independence from the French and thereby became a modern nation-state.”

These selected comments concerning with the presence and interference of Russia's to Syria could be reflected the right answers from their point of views in spite of having different angles.

In order to be able to interpret the current situation of the relations between Russia and Syria, we need to remember four different dates. The first of this date is July 1, 1945.

As Mr Vicente Caro underlined in his article “when Syria became independent it asked for the withdrawal of foreign troops from its territories, something which was not simple an even caused a few skirmishes. Yet the Soviet Union supported Syria's request, where interests coincided with them; to preserve the security of their borders. In their note of the 1st of July of 1945 and the course of debates in the UN Security Council, the USSR insisted of the need to resolve this question, thereby giving legitimacy and weight to the Syrian requests. This posture was important, since it was the first

political action of scope from the USSR in the Arab world since the Second World War.”

The second date is in 1955, Syria, along with Egypt, was invited to Moscow to sign a “treaty of amity” by Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov. Followed this; by Soviet Premier Khrushchev's \$ 200 million military aid to Syria between 1955 and 1960.

The third date is the "Peace and Security Pact" signed between Moscow and Damascus in 1972 with the aim of increasing the defence capacity of Syria after the Air Force Commander Hafez al-Assad became the President of Syria with a military coup.

The fourth and final date is November 8, 1980.

On this date, the governments of the Soviet Union and the Syrian Arab Republic signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in Moscow. The treaty expressly stated that in the occurrence of situations jeopardizing peace or security for either party, the two parties would promptly contact each other to coordinate positions and cooperate to eliminate threats so that peace can be restored.

The treaty was originally to remain in force for a period of 20 years from the date of its enactment. The document would remain in force for an additional five years until one contracting party notified the other party in writing about its intention to terminate the treaty and the agreement remains in force to this day.

“We also should remember the visit of Syrian Prime minister Yusuf Zuayyin to Moscow in April 1966, during this visit both nations agreed on a strong opposition to imperialism and later an accord would be reached for the formation of Syrian political, technical and military cadres in USSR. Over 40 thousand Syrian citizens would be given titles in the Soviet Education system by 1990. Many of them

would occupy key posts in Syrian Governance and in the state as well as in the Syrian Armed Forces. According to an article written by Carlo Jose Vicente Caro “of the 8 members that made up the general direction of the Baath Party prior to 2011 half of them spoke Russian.”

The presence of people with education in the USSR such as Simferopol Military Academy is still prominent in the Syrian military especially in the Air and Air Defence Forces as well as in the staff officers.

The reason why I briefly shared this information for the Syrian and Russian relations, we can recall that in almost every area of administrative structure between these two countries deep-rooted and deep relations and have a history since last 70 years.

The presence of Russia’s in Tartus and Hmeymim will have serious future effects on the military power-zone balance with the Sha-irat military airport where the Russian’s begin to modernize it as a third base.

In Tartus Naval base 11 war ships and those including with nuclear power could be stationed and the runways of the Hmeymim Air base will be extended to allow all types of aircraft to be operated. The interpretation of Tartus and Hmeymim as an alternative to the US naval base in Spain and the Incirlik base in Turkey is considered by the specialists as a sign of the fact that Russia's game plans for the region are not limited with the Syria.

At this point I would like to examine the interactions of Russia's military presence and political power in Syria with regional states and non-state actors, especially Turkey, where we became neighbour with Russia over Syria.

The determinant factor for the future of Turkey-Russia relations is the PYD, which is undoubtedly the PKK's Syrian affiliation.

It is understood that; Russia does not accept the PKK and its affiliated PYD as a terrorist organization and gave permission to PYD open an office in Moscow, showed the flag through the Military Observation Posts in Afrin which is key importance in terms of Turkey's security, regarding a possible large scale military operation of Ankara's to YPG targets, taking into account the statements issued in Moscow that emphasized the sovereign rights of Syria, although Russia is not give an open support to the PYD, but it seems does not want to see the PYD and YPG as a close ally of the US both in the future of Syria and the region. Possibly for this reason Russia is avoiding to oppose against the PYD openly.

The division in Syria, the central, federative or confederative governance, will be the determining factor in Moscow-Ankara relations in case of the radical groups that came together under the umbrella of the IS and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham had a definite defeat and if an agreement reached between Assad and Hay'at Ahrar al-Sham and moderate groups of FSA.

At this point, the future projections of Tehran and Damascus together with Russia and the game plans of USA and Israel are included in the big picture.

In the case of the US and Israel pursuing a policy of autonomy at first then creating the necessary conditions for the independence of the PYD cantons formed in the regions adjacent to the Turkish borders, will Russia give indirect support to such a project and jeopardize its strengthening relations with Turkey?

The S-400 short range air defence systems, which seem to have come to the last stage of the sale negotiations to Turkey, have the potential to create a serious crisis between Ankara and the US and NATO. While Russia will achieve political gains from this agreement, is it rational to pursue a policy that will move Turkey away from itself, in terms of Moscow?

Contrary to the whole of these arguments, if a scenario is considered, will they (Moscow and Damascus) see more advantage in terms of regional and global interests in the middle and long term of the fact that a buffer zone between Turkey created by PYD and Ankara will focus all attention and energy on this structure, that the relations between the United States and Israel, which support this structure, could reach a stage which is not possible to repair Turkey moves away a stable position and drift in to a political and economic turbulences?

The obstacle to the realization of this scenario, whether the autonomous or independent Kurdish states that will emerge in the northern Iraq or in the northern part of Syria in support of the US and Israel will disturb Iran as much as Turkey and is the indispensability of Iran's relations with Damascus and Moscow.

In the past few weeks, the agreement where is reached in Astana for Russia-Iran-Turkey to prevent conflicts between opposition groups and regime forces in Idlib outside Tahrir al-Sham, it is important that Turkey's participation as an actor in the Syrian crisis shows that it is accepted by Damascus-Tehran and Moscow.

Turkey will have undertaken the duty to prevent conflicts between some groups affiliated with the FSA, which have been training and equipping them so far, with regime forces. When this agreement enters into the force it would not be a surprising development if the Astana agreement led Ankara and Damascus to a softening lane.

I consider that making a healthy assessment on the realizations of these options and scenarios, is not possible for at least the next six months, due to the uncertainty in Syria, the changing positions of existing actors because of unexpected developments and conditions as well as the variability in cyclical developments in future plans.

However, the situation is; as Russia's most powerful actor in Syria, it guarantees its existence until 2100 with the latest agreements and depending on the political effect will continue to strengthen. The most valid and appropriate card that the United States and Israel, which will not be satisfied with this situation, if there is no extraordinary change, it will be the Kurds in the countries of the region.

It seems to be; Reflection of Iran's presence in Syria along with Russia, the extreme reduction of the possibilities for the sustainability of the assets of the predominantly radical organizations in the region, losing of the influence the actions of Ihvan (Ihvan-i Muslim), Organizations like Al Qaeda-El Nusra are struggling to survive as they become fragmented and become more marginalized possibly under new identities and could be expected to alter some of

their actions out of the region with new tactics especially in European countries.

We need count in the continuation of the weight of Nusayri's in Syria and Iran's present position and cooperation with the regime, consolidating the Shiite centric over Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, also the countries where Russia's strong persistence in the region with Tehran will be most disturbing for Saudi Arabia and UAE-Kuwait.

Saudi Arabia, while relaxing regarding the “al-ikhwan al-muslimūn” movement loss of strength and impulse with the countries as Egypt, UAE, Kuwait which are strongly against the Muslim Brotherhood, but takes part on the side of losing countries in Yemen and Syria and seems to be a candidate to enter a distressing process due to Iran's growing influence in Syria and Iraq and its proxies in the countries of the region. The possibility of escalating the current struggle for power in Saudi Arabia is also seen as a separate image falling on the horizon line.

Every crisis has winners and losers. And the most lost and harmed of the hot conflicts is the people who live in those regions as we used to witness very frequently.

I would like to memorialize the hundreds of thousands who lost their lives in the war of proxy from 2011 till present and changed their lives, millions who lost their future hopes in Syria. I put an end to my presentation once more take note those who gained through this tragedy. Thank you for your attention and patience.