

Russian-Syrian Relations: Past and Present

Luke Bartz

Abstract

Drawing heavily on Andrej Kreutz's *Russia in the Middle East* and Robert Freedman's "Russia and the Arab Spring: A Preliminary Appraisal" along with numerous news sources, this essay serves a two-fold purpose of sketching out a broad history of Russian-Syrian relations and of analyzing in depth Russia's response to the recent conflict in Syria. The purpose of this essay is to update and synthesize a broad-but-scattered literature on Russian-Syrian relations and to combine it with recent works examining the influence of Russia on the Syrian Civil War. The author ultimately asserts that for better or for worse Putin's Russia has decided to risk significantly damaging the relationships it has built with the broader Arab world, Israel, and the West in order to maintain its strategic and historic ties to Iran and Syria, protect its economic interests in the Middle East, and hamper Western efforts to orchestrate Middle-Eastern politics.

Pre-Soviet and Soviet Relations with Syria

Russian-Syrian relations stretch back far before the creation of the modern Russian and Syrian states. In fact, interactions have been recorded as far back as the tenth and eleventh centuries as Russian merchants and pilgrims traveled to the Levant for reasons of religion and trade.¹ The Russian Orthodox Church in particular devoted a considerable amount of time and resources to influencing the region and protecting its pilgrims traveling there.² Though this long history of cross-cultural interactions created indelible social ties, political relations between the two areas were drastically changed in 1917 with the October Revolution and the creation of the Soviet Union (USSR).

As a militantly atheist state, the USSR had little interest in the religious ties its Christian and Muslim populations had established through their pilgrimages to their historic holy lands. What the Soviet government was interested in, however, was the development of communist movements in the Arab East.³ Ideologically, the Soviets identified with and supported whom they saw as peoples colonized and suppressed by capitalist, bourgeoisie forces.⁴ To this end, they worked to influence the region with the hopes of inspiring Bolshevik-style uprisings and supporting the development of friendly

¹ Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East Friend or Foe?* 12 (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2007).

² Denis Vovchenko, "Creating Arab Nationalism? Russia and Greece in Ottoman Syria and Palestine (1840–1909)," *Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 6 (2013), 901-918.

³ Kreutz, 13.

⁴ Robert Freedman, "Russian Policy Toward the Middle East: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Putin Challenge," in *The Middle East's Relations with Asia and Russia*. (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 59.

communist governments.⁵ Chief among the relations they developed in the Middle East was the one they fostered with Syria.

At first, the Bolshevik government's relationship with Damascus was inconsistent. Seeking to gain influence on the Syrian state soon after its establishment, "Moscow established its diplomatic links with Syria in 1944, even before the country was formally recognized as an independent state on April 17, 1946."⁶ Thanks to the efforts of the Syrian Communist Party and its allies, Moscow already had acquired some political presence in the area before this happened, and this overt display of political support positively affected their relationship.⁷ In spite of these friendly moves, however, "[d]uring the first decade after World War II, [...] Moscow's relations with Damascus were cold and Soviet leaders often condemned Syrian rulers for oppressing their people and acting as tools of Western Imperialism."⁸ As time went on, relations improved and normalized as the Soviet and the Syrian governments realized the potential benefits that could arise from mutual cooperation.

From the Soviet point of view, a partnership with Syria had many possible advantages. Andreij Kreutz asserts in his book *Russia in the Middle East* that "Syria was probably more important to the USSR than [any] other Arab nation."⁹ In part, this was due to its geopolitical location. Located on the Mediterranean Sea, Syria offers Russia not only a foothold in the Middle East and the heart of the Arab world, but also a port on the coast of the Mediterranean. This position saves Russian ships from traveling all the way back through the narrow straits controlled by Turkey to its eastern Black Sea ports. Further, at the time both Turkey and Iraq were firmly in the Western camp and Syria provided an opportunity to outflank these countries.¹⁰ Syria also offered great economic promise to the Soviet Union as a buyer of both civilian and military products. A Soviet-Syrian trade agreement concluded in November of 1954 was only the first of many to come: "In addition to extensive military supplies, the Soviet bloc offered Syria its help in large-scale construction of hydroelectric plants and irrigation projects."¹¹ This not only served as a revenue stream for the USSR, but also helped the communist government to assert its role as a global superpower by allowing it to flex its economic, technological, and military muscles in a less-developed region of the world.

As the Syrian state developed politically, the Soviets kept stride: "when Syria seceded from the UAR [United Arab Republic] on September 29, 1961, the USSR was the first great power to recognize the reestablishment of the Syrian state [doing so] only nine days after the coup."¹² Though the Soviet and Syrian communists did not match well with the Ba'ath Party, they were willing to work together.¹³ After two more coups occurred and despite the fact that the rise of Hafez Al-Assad meant more focus on Damascus's autonomy from foreign influence, Soviet support nevertheless increased; "between 1970 and the advent of Gorbachev's perestroika in the late 1980's, Syria greatly benefited from an uninterrupted stream of Soviet military equipment and a tremendous variety of civil goods

⁵ Kreutz, 13; Walter Laqueur, "Russia Enters the Middle East," 297. *Foreign Affairs* 47, no. 2 (1969): 296-308.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Tareq Y Ismael and Jacqueline S. Ismael, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 12-13.

⁸ Kreutz, 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Harry N. Howard, "The Soviet Union in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan," in *The Soviet Union and the Middle East: The Post-World War II Era* (Stanford: Stanford University Hoover Institution Press, 1974), 134.

¹¹ Kreutz, 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³ *Ibid.*

and services.”¹⁴ Indeed, this support was so great, about 90 percent of Syria arms imported between 1974 and 1985 came from the USSR.¹⁵ As relations reached a historic peak, however, disagreement flared up suddenly between the states.

Kreutz offers two related explanations for the abrupt tension: “The first was the Syrian quest for military parity with Israel and the heated debate with Moscow over the quality and quantity of its arm supply, and the second was the noticeable improvement in Soviet-Israeli relations and mass scale Soviet-Jewish immigration to Israel.”¹⁶ With Israel firmly backed by the United States, Syria sought to achieve military equality with its rival through support from the Soviet Union. Hoping to improve relations with Israel and avoid increasing tensions with the West, Moscow was loath to cooperate, however. Indeed, Moscow refused to arm Syria “to the degree that the US armed Israel,” stating that “Syria should pursue a political strategy to solving its problems with Israel and that in the nuclear age, resorting to force was unwise.”¹⁷ As Soviet-Israeli relations improved, Damascus grew more worried, as it saw one of its biggest allies cozying up to one of its biggest enemies. With arms supplies from Russia decreasing and Assad searching for new allies, relations took their biggest hit yet as the USSR collapsed and the political dimensions of Russia’s government and economy were fundamentally redefined and reoriented.¹⁸

Syrian Relations with Yeltsin’s Russia

Syrian-Russian relations took a three-fold hit with the collapse of the USSR. First, though the Russian Federation inherited the majority of the military and economic legacy of the Soviet Union, its capabilities were drastically diminished by the loss of nearly a quarter of its landmass and almost half of its population.¹⁹ While Russia rebuilt its domestic infrastructure in the 1990s, it lacked the political or economic influence to participate significantly in the Middle East. Second, after the Fall, Russia suddenly found itself with fourteen new neighbors closer and strategically more worrisome than the now-further-off Middle East.²⁰ This change was made even worse by the fact that the previous Soviet border fortifications now largely resided within the breakaway territories and made those states’ proximity to Russia much more worrisome as Russia did not have solid military defenses in place. Beyond even this, with the death of the USSR went the hopes of a global communist revolution. The new Russian government simply did not have the ideological motivation that propelled much of the Soviet Union’s foreign policy.²¹ Temporarily conceding to the United States in the war of cultures, the new Russian bear was a much more self-interested and pragmatic creature.

As with any great political change, the political transformations Russia saw brought many great disagreements. For Russian-Syrian relations, the largest point of tensions were “disputes concerning Syria’s repayment of former USSR credits to Russia and the continuity of the Russian arms supply to Syria.”²² For example, when Syria threatened to withhold from Yeltsin’s government repayment of the Syrian debt to the

¹⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹ Roland Dannreuther, "Russia and the Middle East," in *The Middle East's Relations with Asia and Russia*. (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 22.

²⁰ Freedman, "Russian Policy Toward the Middle East," 59.

²¹ Dannreuther, "Russia and the Middle East," 34.

²² Kreutz, 18.

Soviet Union, Moscow saw this as a plot to manipulate their relationship and coerce Russia to continue to provide weapons to Syria.²³ Rejecting this manipulation, Yeltsin applied political pressure to Assad's government, marking "an end to the era when Syria had been able to use Moscow as an effective counterbalance against American and Israeli powers."²⁴ Positive relations, nevertheless, still had the potential to be mutually beneficial and were thus maintained.

Kreutz notes four motivational factors that encouraged continued cooperation. First, possibly the most important factor for the Syrians, was the fact that "the Syrian army, still largely equipped with Russian weapons, needed a continuous supply of spare parts and repairs by Russian experts. Due to political and logistical reasons Syria also found it difficult to buy new weapons in the West or Far East."²⁵ In this regard, a positive relationship with Russia was a direct security issue. Second, more importantly to Russia, Syria still carried an estimated debt of \$7-\$11 billion USD.²⁶ Naturally, Russia desired continued cooperation to ensure its payment. Kreutz also notes Russia's desire to influence the Arab-Israeli peace process and deep-seated ties between Syrian and Russian leaders.²⁷ That said, the need for Syria to maintain its military infrastructure and Moscow's desire to collect on Syria's debt were reason enough to maintain ties.

Proof of positive relations can be seen most easily in the two states' economic interactions. For example, Moscow wrote off \$2 billion of Syrian debt in 1994 in an effort to improve relations: "Comments made by Minister Kozyrev and officials in the Russian Foreign Ministry's Middle East Department indicated that Moscow hoped Syria would become Russia's main partner in the region at the time when cooperation with other former Soviet allies, such as Libya and Iraq, had been greatly diminished or even made impossible."²⁸ Despite a few disagreements because of Russia's continued efforts to work with both the Israelis and the Syrians, arms deals continued and Syrian-Russian relations steadily improved over the course of the nineties.²⁹ The election of Vladimir Putin to presidency only accelerated this trend.

Putin and Syria

Overall, Putin has maintained a positive foreign policy in his dealings with Syria. Kreutz argues that this is because "Putin wants to preserve and if possible expand Russian-Syrian relations in order to maintain positive aspects from previous Moscow-Middle Eastern involvement, and to promote Russia's image as a country friendly toward Islamic peoples."³⁰ One clear aspect of this friendly relationship can be seen by examining Syria's military: "Russia has continued to modernize and repair military hardware, and the weapons used by the Syrian army are 90 percent Soviet or Russian in origin."³¹ Though Israel and the US have continually reproached Russia for these deals, the sales have continued unabated (though Moscow has limited which weapons it they will sell to Syria, withholding many of the most technologically advanced in an effort to placate the West).³²

²³ Ibid., 18.

²⁴ Ibid., 19.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 20.

²⁹ Ibid., 23.

³⁰ Ibid., 26.

³¹ Ibid., 27.

³² Ibid., 28.

Not only does this benefit Russia economically, but it is also a calculated foreign policy decision.

The foreign policy benefits of this relationship are two-fold. First, like many of Putin's foreign policy choices, it serves "to balance US world hegemony and to promote the prospect of a future multipolar world order."³³ With the fall of the USSR, many scholars have noted a relative global rise in the influence of the United States. Because Russia views the US as an economic and political competitor, Putin believes that one of the key roles of his country is to balance American influence and provide an alternative source of global power.³⁴ Beyond this, good relations with Syria are vital to preserving Russia's influence on the Arab world.³⁵ "This enables Russia to claim the role of an Arab-Israeli mediator and cosponsor of the Middle Eastern 'Peace Process,'" alongside helping it to maintain cultural legitimacy in regards to "the ongoing civil war in Chechnya and the growing Muslim population in Russia itself."³⁶ In order to maintain cultural credibility with its populace, the Russian government must prove that it is involved in and respected in the broader Arab world. Already a challenging feat in times of political stability, the events of the Arab Spring made this task more difficult than ever.

Russia, Syria, and the Arab Spring

Russia has faced a difficult situation in responding to the Arab Spring and the ensuing civil war in Syria. On one hand, Putin has devoted considerable time and political capital into developing positive relations between Russia and Syria. Alongside Iran, Syria is Russia's closest ally in the Middle East and extremely important economically. Further, some scholars suggest that the Arab Spring set off a dangerous trend of regime change that put Putin at risk of falling victim to the same fates as Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak.³⁷ On the other hand, Bashar al-Assad's blatant disregard for human rights and international law puts anyone who offers him support at risk of international condemnation. In particular, Russia risks damaging the relations it has built up with Israel and the Arab League. Beyond this, after the UN-sanctioned civilian-protection-based intervention in Libya turned into NATO pushing regime change, Moscow feared that any external intervention in Syria might warp into an effort to put a Western-backed leader in power. Though it at first tried to toe the line, supporting Assad overall while nominally criticizing his crackdown on political protests, this strategy has proved ultimately untenable and Moscow has committed to backing Assad, consistently vetoing UN resolutions, continuing to supply arms, and sparking much international anger in the process.

The Syrian Civil War began in 2011 during the broader Arab Spring as Syrians fed up with corruption, despotism, and widespread human rights violations felt emboldened by successful demonstrations occurring in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, and took to the streets to protest. Seeking to suppress dissent and maintain a firm grasp on power, Assad cracked down violently, sanctioning the use of deadly force from the police and military against civilians. After the initial attacks, some of the protesters responded in kind, and soon the protests morphed from mild demonstrations into a full-on civil war. The fighting has seen hundreds of thousands of casualties, millions of refugees, and an extensive violations of

³³ Ibid., 28.

³⁴ Vladimir Putin, "Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy," *Washington Post* (2007), accessed November 24, 2014, <http://goo.gl/1o3bjN>.

³⁵ Kreutz, 28.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Robert Freedman, "Russia and the Arab Spring: A Preliminary Appraisal," in *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013), 208.

international law.³⁸ The international response has been varied, with much talk and little action from the West. Numerous rebel groups have appeared, and though many have been armed and advised by external sources, little progress has been made by any group. Over five years after the start of the conflict, hope for a quick or clean resolution is nearly nonexistent.

To understand Russia's behavior during the Syrian conflict, it is helpful to first examine its relationship to the Libyan conflict. Like Syria, when protests began in Libya during the Arab Spring, the reigning dictator, Muammar Qaddafi, responded with violence and the situation quickly descended into armed conflict. Unlike Syria, however, the international response was quick and fairly unified. Though there was some disagreement in the Russian political sphere, Russia agreed to sanctions, including an arms embargo, and joined "a unanimous Security Council Resolution (No. 1970) that also called for Qaddafi's actions to be referred to the International Criminal Court."³⁹ When Qaddafi ignored these demands and commanded his military to advance on rebel-held Benghazi, the US, the EU, and the Arab League responded by collectively calling for the implementation of a No-Fly Zone over Libya. Despite considerable internal debate, Russia eventually decided to abstain from voting in the UN Security Council (implicitly conferring its approval) and the resolution was approved. Not long after the vote, however, NATO took control of the No-Fly Zone and its implementation strayed drastically from the ideas debated in the UN: "Soon what was billed as protection of innocent civilians from a massacre in Benghazi turned into NATO's offshore war against the Libyan government, which finally resulted in the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime and the killing of the dictator along with many of his supporters and probably a number of civilians."⁴⁰ This greatly distressed Moscow, not only because "Russia had signed \$2 billion in arms contracts with Libya and had another \$1.8 billion in contracts under negotiation,"⁴¹ but also because one of its historic allies in the Middle East was deposed with the aid of Western militaries, who, in the eyes of Moscow, "went way beyond the terms of the U.N. resolution."⁴² Though attempted preserve both its investments and its markets in Libya no matter the outcome the civil war, its efforts proved ultimately unsuccessful and, in the words of Robert Freedman, "Russia turned out to be the major loser, diplomatically, economically, and militarily."⁴³ Beyond having earned great dislike and distrust from the new Libyan government for its support of Qaddafi, Moscow was forced to wait to see if the new government would honor an estimated \$10 billion worth of business contracts that had been agreed upon between the two countries before the fighting started.⁴⁴ Because of the damage done from this scenario, Moscow has since been adamantly opposed to any UN Security Resolutions or foreign action that could potentially lead to regime change.

This resulted in Russian support of Assad's brutal attempts to suppress dissent in his country: "[a]lthough the crackdown by the Bashar al-Assad regime on its citizens has been every bit as brutal as that by Gaddafi, not only has Moscow opposed Libya-type

³⁸ Megan Price, Anita Gohdes, and Patrick Ball, "Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic," Human Rights Data Analysis Group, August 1, 2014, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://goo.gl/MlfF6t>; "Statistics for the Number of Martyrs," Violations Documentation Center in Syria, Accessed November 24, 2014, <http://goo.gl/DSxBKj>.

³⁹ Freedman, "Russia and the Arab Spring," 202.

⁴⁰ Dmitri Trenin, "Why Russia Supports Assad," *The New York Times*, February 9, 2012, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://goo.gl/YeldKX>.

⁴¹ Freedman, "Russia and the Arab Spring," 202.

⁴² Trenin, "Why Russia Supports Assad."

⁴³ Freedman, "Russia and the Arab Spring," 202-204.

⁴⁴ Howard Amos, "Billions of Dollars of Russian Business Suffers Along with Syria," *The Moscow Times*, September 2, 2011, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://goo.gl/xPI9JI>.

military intervention in Syria, it has also opposed sanctions against the Assad regime.”⁴⁵ Alongside China, Russia has vetoed four separate attempts by the other members of the UN Security Council to pass resolutions against Assad’s regime and in support of the rebels. These resolutions have included sections condemning “the widespread violations of human rights and international humanitarian law by the Syrian authorities and pro-government militias,”⁴⁶ attempts to refer the situation in Syria to the International Criminal Court, and various plans designed at facilitating political transformations.⁴⁷ In response to the most recent resolution in May 2014 (which Russia vetoed) Vitaly Churkin, Russia’s representative in the Security Council asserted that “pursuing regime change by force in Syria at all costs will prolong the crisis and undermine the Geneva negotiations.”⁴⁸ In rebuffing the resolution, Churkin not only accused the equivalent resolution for the Libyan conflict as “adding fuel to the flames of conflict,” but also accused the West of pursuing a “futile, dead-end policy of endlessly escalating the Syrian crisis.”⁴⁹ Indeed, the only UN actions that have been possible have been those which Russia cannot block, such as a UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Syrian crackdown (yet without an action) which Russia nevertheless stubbornly voted against.⁵⁰

Besides preventing UN-sanctioned foreign intervention, the main support Russia has provided the Syrian government during the conflict has been through arms supplies: “According to data from the Moscow Defense Brief, the capital has more than \$4 billion in active arms contracts with Syria, including MiG-29 fighters, Pantsir surface-to-air missiles, artillery systems and anti-tank weaponry.”⁵¹ In 2013 alone Russia sold over \$1.2 billion.⁵² Because, as mentioned earlier, 90 percent of the weapons used by the Syrian army are Soviet or Russian in origin, Syria must rely on Russian engineers to maintain its army.⁵³ This has led to a sizable, largely covert Russian military presence in Syria: “Russia has military officers in Syria under the auspices of its embassy and civilian technical advisers working irregularly on Russian-made air defense systems and repairing airplanes and helicopters in Syria.”⁵⁴ It also maintains a small garrison at Tartus, a Syrian city that contains Russia’s only Mediterranean seaport. Though this port is little more than a naval resupply facility, Russia has nevertheless used it to deliver weapons and ammunition to the Assad regime and to flex its military muscles by visiting it with naval flotillas.⁵⁵ Despite the fact that “[d]elivering arms into a country going through civil war is damaging, both politically and morally,”⁵⁶ Russia has persisted in order to preserve its economic and political investments. This stance has caused considerable anger and frustration among other nations.

Chief among the relations strained by Russia’s backing of Assad are those between Russia and Israel. As explained before, Russia and Israel have a complicated

⁴⁵ Freedman, "Russia and the Arab Spring," 204.

⁴⁶ "United Nations Official Document," UN News Center, May 22, 2014, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://goo.gl/7hhW3U>.

⁴⁷ "Security Council—Veto List," Dag Hammarskjöld Library, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://goo.gl/yBGpNh>.

⁴⁸ "United Nations Official Document," <http://goo.gl/7hhW3U>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Freedman, "Russia and the Arab Spring," 210.

⁵¹ Amos, "Billions of Dollars of Russian Business."

⁵² Allan Gould and Skye Gould, "US/Russia Arms Sales Race," *Business Insider*, August 13, 2014, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://goo.gl/McrJyA>.

⁵³ Kreutz, 28.

⁵⁴ Trenin, "Why Russia Supports Assad."

⁵⁵ Freedman, "Russia and the Arab Spring," 207; Trenin, "Why Russia Supports Assad."

⁵⁶ Trenin, "Why Russia Supports Assad."

history. Though Stalin initially supported the creation of the state in the late forties, anti-Semitism in Soviet Union was strong and Moscow cut diplomatic ties after the Six-Day War in 1967. It then went on to train and arm Arab forces, much to the displeasure of Israel.⁵⁷ Conflict continued until ties were re-established in October 1991, weeks before the collapse of the USSR, and relations have slowly improved ever since.⁵⁸ Despite the fact that the trade ties between the two countries started from scratch twenty years ago, they now exceed \$1 billion.⁵⁹ Though Jerusalem remains upset with Moscow's continuing support for Iran's nuclear program and for Palestinian independence, there have been signs of improvement.⁶⁰ Putin is the first Russian leader to visit Israel (he has done so twice), and one analyst has commented that he "seems to admire Israel's ruthlessness in dealing with its enemies and particularly its tough stance when talking to its biggest friend, America."⁶¹ Though Putin's government has tried to frame Russia's support for Syria as advantageous for Israel by arguing that Assad's "fall would almost certainly result in the rise of Islamic fundamentalists in Syria,"⁶² Israel has refused to buy into this argument and has twice carried out airstrikes on shipments of Russian military equipment in Syria.⁶³ Incidents like these have angered Russians and anti-Israeli sentiment in the military and media has been growing. Needless to say, none of this has served to improve Russian-Israeli relations.

Examining how Russian-Israeli relations have changed in the face of the Syrian conflict broadly reflects the changes that have occurred between Russia and much of the rest of the world: "as the Syrian regime intensified its crackdown on anti-regime protesters, the Syrian opposition and much of the Sunni Arab world, led by Saudi Arabia, became highly critical of Russia, thereby threatening Russia's current position in the Arab world, which Putin had tried so hard to rebuild."⁶⁴ These actions have also angered both the Gulf Cooperation Council (led by Saudi Arabia) and the Arab League (whom Russia criticized after they ejected Syria from their ranks).⁶⁵ Naturally, Russia's policies have also worsened Russian-US and Russian-EU relations.⁶⁶ Some scholars have speculated that Moscow in part behaves favorably toward Syria because Syria and Iran are closely tied, and Putin doesn't want to alienate Tehran any more than he already has in the past few years.⁶⁷ Some Russians even "suspect that the real reason for the West's pressure on Damascus is to rob Tehran of its only ally in the region."⁶⁸ Indeed, one Russian commentator has been quoted describing "the civil war in Syria as a proxy conflict between NATO and Saudi Arabia on one side and Russia and Iran on the other."⁶⁹ No matter how true this statement actually is, as matters stand now, Russia's support for Iran and Syria have remained strong, despite international pressure.

⁵⁷ "Vladimir Putin and the Holy Land," *The Economist*, March 16, 2013, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://goo.gl/MX3pA4>.

⁵⁸ Mark N. Katz, "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy," *The Middle East Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 51-59.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Katz, "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy.," "Vladimir Putin and the Holy Land."

⁶¹ "Vladimir Putin and the Holy Land."

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Michael Gordon, "Israel Airstrike Targeted Advanced Missiles That Russia Sold to Syria, U.S. Says," *The New York Times*, July 13, 2013, accessed November 24, 2014, <http://goo.gl/XOD9S2>.

⁶⁴ Freedman, "Russia and the Arab Spring," 205-206.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁶⁶ Trenin, "Why Russia Supports Assad."

⁶⁷ Freedman, "Russia and the Arab Spring," 204.

⁶⁸ Trenin, "Why Russia Supports Assad."

⁶⁹ "Vladimir Putin and the Holy Land."

Backing a regime despised in the West has also had a significant impact on Russian businesses. In particular, the various sanctions and tariffs the West have implemented in response to the Syrian Civil War have hurt Russian businesses, as it has become inconvenient, undesirable, or even illegal for European and American companies to work with companies connected to Syria (as many Russian companies are).⁷⁰ Issues detailed by one Russian business owner include “European suppliers who failed to deliver the equipment they were obligated to provide, transport companies who raised their tariffs, and breakdowns in the banking sector.”⁷¹ Still, these are minor inconveniences compared to the great economic and security troubles these business would face if Assad’s regime fell. “As well as lucrative arms contracts, Russian firms have a substantial presence in the Syrian infrastructure, energy and tourism industries. And with exports to Syria worth \$1.1 billion in 2010 and investment in the country valued at \$19.4 billion in 2009, there is a lot at stake.” The ensuing turmoil would certainly put this investment at risk, significantly decreasing Syria’s viability as a market for Russian goods, military and otherwise. This fact may explain to a degree why there is so much domestic support in Russia for backing Assad’s regime.

Conclusion

For better or for worse, Putin’s Russia has decided to risk significantly damaging the relationships it has built with the broader Arab world, Israel, and the West in order to maintain its strategic and historic ties to Iran and Syria, protect its economic interests in the Middle East, and hamper Western efforts to orchestrate Middle-Eastern politics. However, the Syrian Civil War plays out, Russia is committed to Assad’s regime for the long haul and nothing it does now can change the decisions it has made thus far.

.....

Works Cited

- Amos, Howard. "Billions of Dollars of Russian Business Suffers Along with Syria." *The Moscow Times*. September 2, 2011. Accessed November 24, 2014. <http://goo.gl/xP19JI>.
- Dannreuther, Roland. "Russia and the Middle East." In *The Middle East's Relations with Asia and Russia*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2004.
- Freedman, Robert. "Russia and the Arab Spring: A Preliminary Appraisal." In *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013.
- ---. "Russian Policy Toward the Middle East: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Putin Challenge." *The Middle East Journal* 55, no. 1 (Winter, 2001): 58-90.
- Gordon, Michael. "Israel Airstrike Targeted Advanced Missiles That Russia Sold to Syria, U.S. Says." *The New York Times*. July 13, 2013. Accessed November 24, 2014. <http://goo.gl/XOD9S2>.
- Gould, Allan, and Skye Gould. "US/Russia Arms Sales Race." *Business Insider*. August 13, 2014. Accessed November 24, 2014. <http://goo.gl/McrJyA>.

⁷⁰ Amos, "Billions of Dollars of Russian Business."

⁷¹ *Ibid*.

- Howard, Harry N. "The Soviet Union in Lebanon, Syria and Jordan." In *The Soviet Union and the Middle East: The Post-World War II Era*. Stanford: Stanford University Hoover Institution Press, 1974.
- Ismael, Tareq Y., and Jacqueline S. Ismael. *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998.
- Katz, Mark N. "Putin's Pro-Israel Policy." *The Middle East Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (Winter, 2005): 51-59.
- Kreutz, Andrej. *Russia in the Middle East Friend or Foe?* Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2007.
- Laqueur, Walter. "Russia Enters the Middle East." *Foreign Affairs* 47, no. 2 (1969): 296-308.
- Price, Megan, Anita Gohdes, and Patrick Ball. "Updated Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic." Human Rights Data Analysis Group. August 1, 2014. Accessed November 24, 2014. <http://goo.gl/MlfF6t>.
- Putin, Vladimir. "Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy." *Washington Post*. February 12, 2007. Accessed November 24, 2014. <http://goo.gl/1o3bjN>.
- "Security Council—Veto List." Dag Hammarskjold Library. Accessed November 24, 2014. <http://goo.gl/yBGpNh>.
- "Statistics for the Number of Martyrs." Violations Documentation Center in Syria. Accessed November 24, 2014. <http://goo.gl/DSxBKj>.
- Trenin, Dmitri. "Why Russia Supports Assad." *The New York Times*. February 9, 2012. Accessed November 24, 2014. <http://goo.gl/YeldKX>.
- "United Nations Official Document." UN News Center. May 22, 2014. Accessed November 24, 2014. <http://goo.gl/7hhW3U>.
- --- UN News Center. May 22, 2014. Accessed November 24, 2014. <http://goo.gl/QeBHro>.
- "Vladimir Putin and the Holy Land." *The Economist*. March 16, 2013. Accessed November 24, 2014. <http://goo.gl/MX3pA4>.
- Vovchenko, Denis. "Creating Arab Nationalism? Russia and Greece in Ottoman Syria and Palestine (1840–1909)." *Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 6 (2013): 901-18.