

ELENE SVIANADZE
FREE UNIVERSITY OF TBILISI
esvia19@freeuni.edu.ge

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SYRIAN ISSUE FOR THE EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Abstract

The ongoing armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine has caused significant changes in the security environment of Europe. This affected not only the European continent but also those regions where the Kremlin is distributing its influence. Simultaneously, western decision-makers are more concentrated on the conflict within Europe and, thus, less involved in other regions.

In this context, the reception of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at the Arab League summit and the step towards the stabilization of relations with Syria is worth noting event. Generally, the Syrian conflict is a playground for the world's most influential political actors. While oppositional forces are mostly supported by Western states, engaged in an 11-year civil war and isolated from the West and the majority of the Middle East, the Assad regime is heavily dependent on Russian state funding and military aid. With that, a twist in the Syrian political direction that we see today in the form of an attempt to restore relations with the Arab states may indicate a decrease in Iranian-Russian influence in the region.

The present work is devoted to the analysis of the causes and possible consequences of these events. The article assesses the impact of the ongoing war in Ukraine on the Syrian issue. In addition, the paper discusses the importance of Syria for the Euro-Atlantic space in the context of security and the supply of energy resources and the extent to which it is necessary to put the issue of this region on the agenda for the West. The article also analyzes the results of the present actions and possible steps taken by the Euro-Atlantic states and evaluates the future perspectives. The work is an attempt to find an answer to the question: does the normalization of relations with Syria mean accepting Bashar al-Assad as a partner or legitimizing his regime, and what kind of opportunities does this situation give to the West to pursue its interests?

Keywords: Assad's regime, Euro-Atlantic security, war in Ukraine, Arab League, Syria's return to Arab League.

Introduction

The Syrian Civil War, an enduring and pivotal event in the Middle East, started in 2011 amidst widespread protests against President Bashar Al-Assad. Over time, it evolved into a complex playground involving various international stakeholders. The conflict's start can be attributed to internal religious and ethnic discord, socioeconomic disparities, and the broader context of the Arab Spring's revolutionary vague. However, as the conflict progressed, issues stemming from ineffective territorial control, arms proliferation, and the overall chaotic situation contributed to economic challenges, mass migrations, and the looming spread of terrorism (Cleveland and Bunton 2019, 57).

The dynamics of this situation were further complicated by the participation of multiple international actors on the Syrian ground, each pursuing their own distinct interests and motivations. For instance, Turkey deemed the Syrian conflict of paramount importance, with President Erdogan's primary objective being the guarding of Turkey's borders and the establishment of a buffer zone along them. In pursuit of this goal, Erdogan initially engaged in negotiations with Assad's government but eventually threw support behind the opposition (Erlich 2016, 68).

The regime of Bashar Al-Assad faced denunciation from Western states, notably the United States. However, U.S. involvement in the conflict materialized around 2014, coinciding with the emergence of the "Islamic State" in the region. Subsequently, the United States became a key backer of Kurdish forces, which continue to play an important role in Western counter-terrorism efforts.

From the earliest days of the conflict, Russia adopted a distinct approach, consistently supporting the government of Bashar Al-Assad. As announced by Vladimir Putin, “Russia’s stance emphasized non-interference in a state’s internal affairs”. For Putin, negotiations with established powers were deemed more conducive to maintaining stability (Larsen 2016, 72-73). The extent to which Russia adheres to this principle remains a subject of debate, but, in the Syrian case, Putin’s and, previously, Medvedev’s positions reflect a preference for such an approach.

Russian Involvement in the Syrian Civil War

To stabilize a strategic partner, regulate the situation in the region, and strengthen its position in the Middle East, Russia got involved in the Syrian civil war. It was also important for Vladimir Putin to reduce the influence of the US in the region before the Arab Spring and return to being a major player in the Middle East (Jones 2022, 68).

During the initial years of the conflict, the Kremlin’s support for the Syrian government was primarily channeled through diplomatic engagements at international conferences held in Vienna, Riyadh, and Geneva (RIA Novosti 2017). However, as the conflict progressed, the Russian armed forces emerged as a pivotal source of assistance for the Assad regime. This collaborative effort resulted in significant territorial gains, notably the capture of Aleppo and key regions in western Syria. Russia’s formidable advantage over opposition forces stemmed not only from the provision of substantial military hardware but also from its capacity to conduct airstrikes with precision and effectiveness (Jones 2022, 68). It is noteworthy that Russia deployed several newly manufactured weapons in the Syrian theater, including Su-35S fighter aircraft.

As of March 17, 2016, President Putin disclosed that Russia had allocated a substantial financial commitment of \$460 billion to its operations in Syria, emphasizing that this expenditure was deemed essential for securing future peace (TASS 2016). During the active phase of its involvement in the conflict, Russia incurred a daily expenditure averaging \$4 million (Ellyatt 2015).

However, in the present context, large-scale military confrontations within the Syrian conflict have become less frequent, and there is an observable reduction in Russia’s overt influence. This shift is accompanied by a proportional decrease in financial support to President Assad’s regime.

A Factor of Ongoing War in Ukraine

The military conflict initiated by Russia in Ukraine is a broad geopolitical event that has its influence 1,000 kilometers away in Syria. This influence is chiefly attributable to a redirection of Russian financial resources, which have been reallocated to sustain the ongoing conflict on the European continent.

The diminishing Russian military presence in Syria became evident during the initial phases of the Ukrainian conflict. Notably, the Russian military withdrew its Su-25 fighter jets from Syrian operations in these early months. Subsequently, there was a complete removal of S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems destined for shipment to Crimean ports (Al-Nofal 2022). Additionally, military units were withdrawn from Syrian territories, exemplified by Russia’s retreat from specific areas within the Latakia province. This vacuum created opportunities for the occupation of these regions by Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Lebanese Shia group (Al Mayadeen English 2023). This collective redeployment of Russian military assets underscores the interconnectedness of these two geopolitical grounds.

Syria’s Return to the Arab League

While Russia has not entirely abandoned its positions in Syria, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has resulted in a gradual erosion of its spheres of influence in the region. Consequently, other geopolitical actors are positioning themselves to fill the void left behind (Faulconbridge 2023). Notably, Iran appears to be seeking to capitalize on the Kremlin’s weakened positions. This is noticeable through Iran’s expressed interest in intervening in ongoing developments in Yemen and Sudan, as well as its renewed focus on Syria, a stance that is met with strong opposition from the Sunni-majority world. In this context, Syria’s return to the Arab League may be seen as an effort to realign Damascus within the Arab-Sunni orbit.

Syria, particularly in the aftermath of the earthquake that struck in February 2023, is facing a pressing need to secure new financial resources and investments. The backdrop of severe inflation and demonstrations led by the Druze community underscores the inability of the Putin regime to address

Syria's economic challenges (France 24 2023). Therefore, exploring new perspectives for economic stability and development has become crucial for the Assad government.

In addition to Iran, China is emerging as a contender to replace Russia's influence in the Middle East, marking a notable shift in the regional power dynamics. China's political aspirations are evident through its engagement in negotiations with Saudi Arabia and Iran on matters concerning Yemen and Syria. Nevertheless, in its initial phase, China's primary focus lies on attaining economic influence in the region. A significant manifestation of this ambition is China's substantial investment of \$135.7 billion in 2019 within the *Belt and Road Initiative*, particularly in the context of the Syrian reconstruction project (Liu and Shu 2023).

Considering these developments, the Middle East is experiencing an increasing influence from Iran and China, largely as a consequence of the Ukraine conflict. The readmission of Syria to the Arab League is primarily aimed at diminishing Iran's role in the region. Consequently, there is a possibility that these ongoing processes could lead to Syria once again falling under the hands of Arab countries, potentially restoring leverage over Damascus to the Sunni-majority centers of influence.

The Response from the West

Amidst these developments, the role of the West in the region remains somewhat ambiguous, with its positions largely unchanged. The U.S. Department of State, for instance, has expressed condemnation of the Arab League's decision to accept Syria and has called upon Arab states to isolate the Assad regime. Congress has articulated concerns that embracing Bashar al-Assad could set a precedent for dictators and normalize their actions (Gavlak 2023).

Conversely, the official statement from the European Union, as conveyed by its spokesperson Peter Stano, suggests that the EU currently refrains from warming relations with Syria until substantial political changes occur in alignment with UN resolutions. However, Stano also indicated that the EU's stance is not rigid and is subject to revision (Szucs 2023).

Against this backdrop, two key questions arise: First, what significance do current events in Syria hold for the Euro-Atlantic area? Second, what challenges and opportunities do these events present for the West? The answers to these questions will likely evolve as the situation in Syria and the broader geopolitical landscape continue to develop, making it a subject of ongoing analysis and consideration for Western policymakers and observers.

The Strategic Importance of Syria for the Euro-Atlantic Space

The West's stance on Syria under President Assad's leadership remains one of isolation, with negotiations with the dictator widely considered unacceptable. The stringent sanctions imposed by Western nations, while primarily aimed at the regime, do affect the population, although essential goods are not explicitly restricted. However, the supply chain for these necessities in Syria has been severely disrupted. This situation has created a dilemma, as reduced economic ties have limited access to healthcare, which President Assad exploits in his rhetoric against Europe and America, further fueling negative sentiments among the population. Over time, this isolationist strategy for conflict reduction is proving to be less effective, prompting a reassessment of its outcomes (AL24news 2023). Nevertheless, any alternative approach to dealing with Bashar al-Assad's regime is viewed by Western rhetoric as a departure from their core values and principles.

When faced with the choice between principles and security, the weight given to each can be decisive, especially concerning the future of Europe.

The Supply of Energy Resources

The geostrategic significance of Syria for the Euro-Atlantic space stems from its location on the eastern Mediterranean coast, which allows the country to play a role in regional dynamics and global issues. Energy security is of primary concern, given Syria's role as a conduit for energy resources. With the conflict in Ukraine, finding new sources of energy has become paramount for Europe's energy security. One option is tapping into gas and oil reserves from the Middle East that cross the Levant region. The Levant, with its complex dynamics, including the threat of Hezbollah in Lebanon and conflicts in Iraq and Syria, makes it essential to stabilize the situation in Syria to ensure the reliability of these energy routes (Gavlak 2023). For instance, the Syria-Qatar gas pipeline to the Mediterranean Sea could facilitate the supply of Southern Europe and the Balkans. The extension of the Trans-Arab gas

pipeline to the Mediterranean Sea, involving Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, offers an alternative route for energy resources in Europe (Temizer 2022).

The stabilization of Syria would simplify the process of transporting oil and gas from the Persian Gulf to Europe, either through Turkey or the Mediterranean Sea. However, if Iranian influence over the Assad regime increases, it could once again raise concerns about energy security (Gavlak 2023).

Furthermore, the influx of funding from China makes the Euro-Atlantic space a less appealing partner for Middle Eastern countries, including Syria, after over a decade of isolation. This is particularly true in circumstances where Beijing is investing in infrastructure development and may reduce Syria's interest in cooperation with the West if more demanding conditions are imposed.

In conclusion, the growing influence of Tehran and Beijing in the Middle East is likely to hinder cooperation between Western countries and the region, a trend already evident in the Arab states' refusal to increase oil production for the United States last year (Helmore 2022). These complex dynamics pose significant challenges and considerations for the Euro-Atlantic space in shaping its policies toward Syria and the broader Middle East.

The Threat of Terrorism

In addition to its considerable economic significance, Syria assumes a crucial role within Europe's security order. It is important to acknowledge that Syria, in conjunction with Iraq, continues to be the focal point of the international terrorist organization known as the "Islamic State". Given the global focus on events in Ukraine and the volatile security landscape in the Middle East, the prospect of extremism spilling over into Western nations cannot be dismissed (Kieh and Kalu 2023, 98).

On one hand, the unstable environment, dire social conditions, and vast uncontrolled territories in Syria provide fertile ground for extremist factions. These groups adeptly employ modern technologies to amass and manage funds, recruit individuals, train them for combat, and strategize and execute acts of terrorism. In recent years, online recruitment and training of individuals, often conducted through social networks, pose a particularly menacing threat. For instance, radical groups in Syria may recruit and train individuals residing in Europe (Kieh and Kalu 2023, 98).

Simultaneously, the migration of refugees presents a significant challenge to Europe's security environment, as it may facilitate the infiltration of radical elements who disguise themselves as refugees. This process is especially concerning, given the potential for hostile nations to artificially channel waves of migrants towards Europe, as witnessed during the events along the Belarusian-Polish border prior to the Ukrainian conflict.

To avert the threats, Europe necessitates a stable and secure Middle East and North Africa to establish a protective buffer zone between Europe and unstable or adversarial nations, including Iran, Afghanistan, and the Central African region. Currently, Libya and Syria are paramount in the creation of this vital buffer zone. With the situation in Libya relatively stabilized and a diminishing influence from the Kremlin, the severity of threats originating from Africa has decreased (United States Institute of Peace 2022). Consequently, at this juncture, Syria remains a pivotal focal point within Europe's security order as the unstable security environment and the influence of Russia and Iran persist (Gavlak 2023).

It is worth noting that Syria's return to the Arab League does not signify a shift towards a pro-Western orientation or a transition to a democratic governance system. Instead, it is poised to further diminish Russian influence while disrupting Iran's domestic corridor towards the Mediterranean Sea. Additionally, it will weaken China's influence in the region, as it will no longer be able to engage with Damascus bypassing other Arab nations. Thus, in the current context, Syria, alongside Ukraine, retains a significant role in shaping the stability of Europe's economic and security environment. The reintegration of Damascus into the Arab League is poised to positively impact Europe's security architecture.

A Possible Solution to the Issue

The normalization of relations with Syria does not imply an endorsement of Bashar al-Assad as a new partner or an endorsement of his dictatorial rule. Rather, it underscores the importance of fostering economic stability within Syria, which in turn may confer legitimacy upon its sitting president. The key consideration should revolve around the formulation of Euro-Atlantic objectives: should the primary focus be on assisting the Syrian people in escaping their ongoing crisis while safeguarding one's geopolitical interests, or should it entail an immediate overthrow of the Syrian government to establish a

democratic regime? History has shown that displacing the Assad administration is a complex task (Jenne and Popovic 2017, 3).

Nevertheless, recent developments indicate that regional powers are already granting legitimacy to the Syrian president. Consequently, the Euro-Atlantic community must adapt to the current reality and collaborate with Arab nations to stabilize the situation in Syria, thereby mitigating threats and enhancing their own security. Increased cooperation may yield greater influence over the incumbent government in the future. Furthermore, greater economic interdependence and recognition of Europe's reliance on Syria can compel the Assad regime to take measures to alter the political landscape or, at the very least, engage in the Syrian Constitutional Committee jointly established with the opposition (Jenne and Popovic 2017, 6).

The establishment of a "sovereign wealth fund" holds promising potential for Syria, as it has proven effective in revitalizing economies in various countries, including South Korea, Singapore, Colombia, Peru, Jordan, and others. Such a fund could be financed through a collaborative effort involving the United States, the European Union, and the World Bank, operating under a joint agreement. This approach stands in contrast to China's proposed reconstruction plan and is likely to yield more sustainable economic benefits in the long term, as opposed to relying on funding from a single state. Notably, this multifaceted approach necessitates a focus on engaging national political leaders and public servants while simultaneously fostering a culture of the rule of law (Lockhart 2018, 94).

In order to implement the aforementioned economic reforms successfully, international support is indispensable for developing effective governance structures. Given the ongoing Astana negotiation process addressing the Syrian issue and the participation of various stakeholders, including Iran and Russia, this process can be expanded by inviting additional members on a similar principle. A model akin to the European Union's "Building Better Governance" (BGB) program, which was applied in the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia in the Western Balkans, offers a valuable framework for such endeavors (Börzel and Grimm 2018, 123).

While the immediate overthrow of the Assad regime may appear as the quickest route to resolving the Syrian conflict, it carries substantial demographic and financial costs and often results in only a temporary cessation of hostilities. Such abrupt regime changes tend to leave room for retaliatory actions, as evidenced in Libya with the resurgence of civil conflict in 2014 (Center for Preventive Actions 2022). Therefore, prioritizing a long-term strategy is of paramount importance, particularly as Syria's decision to rejoin the Arab League presents a timely window of opportunity for coordinated and strategic actions by the Euro-Atlantic community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine armed conflict presents the Euro-Atlantic space with a multitude of new challenges beyond the European region. Among these challenges, active engagement in ongoing developments in the Middle East is of paramount importance, particularly when considering energy resources and security implications. Syria, situated as a geopolitical epicenter, assumes a pivotal role in this evolving landscape. The stabilization of Syria's situation represents a gateway of opportunities, although the way external forces engage in conflict resolution will wield substantial influence over the broader regional dynamics.

Within this context, the Euro-Atlantic community faces the imperative of leveraging the current geopolitical landscape to actively manage the situation in Syria, working through diplomatic channels and collaborating with Arab states. Such efforts can potentially serve to supplant waning Russian influence with Euro-Atlantic initiatives. It is through these strategic actions that the Euro-Atlantic region can assert its presence and objectives in the broader Middle East, serving its interests and fostering stability in a region of global significance.

References:

- Al Mayadeen English*. 2023. "First Hezbollah Aid Convoy Arrives in Latakia, Syria." February 13, 2023. <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/first-hezbollah-aid-convoy-arrives-in-latakia-syria>.

- AL24news. 2023. “La Syrie réintègre la ligue arabe: quels enjeux?” May 7, 2023. Video, 23:53. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cmsAq5emTFg>.
- Al-Nofal, W. 2022. “Amid War in Ukraine, Russia Withdraws and Iran Expands in Syria.” *Syria Direct*, May 4, 2022. <https://syriadirect.org/amid-war-in-ukraine-russia-withdraws-and-iran-expands-in-syria/>.
- Börzel, T. A., and S. Grimm. 2018. “Building Good (Enough) Governance in Postconflict Societies & Areas of Limited Statehood: The European Union & the Western Balkans.” *Daedalus*, 147 (1): 116–127. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_00478.
- Center for Preventive Actions. 2022. “Instability in Libya.” *Global Conflict Tracker*, August 3, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-libya> (accessed December 1, 2022).
- Cleveland, W. L., and M. Bunton. 2016. *A History of the Modern Middle East*. New York: Routledge.
- Erllich, R. 2016. *Inside Syria: The Backstory of Their Civil War and What the World Can Expect*. Prometheus Books.
- Ellyatt, H. 2015. “This is How Much Russia’s ‘War’ in Syria Costs.” *CNBC*, October 21, 2015. <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/10/21/this-is-how-much-russias-war-in-syria-costs.html>.
- Faulconbridge, G. 2023. “Syria’s Assad Would Like More Russian Bases and Troops.” *Reuters*, March 16, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-assad-says-would-welcome-more-russian-troops-2023-03-16/>.
- France 24*. 2023. Actualité en direct. September 2, 2023, 08:23 PM.
- Gavlak, D. 2023. “Syria’s Readmission to Arab League Just One Step in Long Process.” *VOA*, May 11, 2023. <https://www.voanews.com/a/syria-s-readmission-to-arab-league-just-one-step-in-long-process-/7088651.html>.
- Helmore, E. 2022. “Saudi Arabia and UAE Leaders ‘Decline Calls with Biden’ Amid Fears of Oil Price Spike.” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/mar/09/saudi-arabia-and-uae-leaders-decline-calls-with-biden-amid-fears-of-oil-price-spike>.
- Jenne, E. K., and M. Popovic. 2017. “Managing Internationalized Civil Wars.” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Researchgate (September): 1-14. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Milos-Popovic-4/publication/320077641_Managing_Internationalized_Civil_Wars_in_Oxford_Research_Encyclopedia_of_Politics/links/59ccd327aca272dcd17d20b6/Managing-Internationalized-Civil-Wars-in-Oxford-Research-Encyclopedia-of-Politics.pdf.
- Jones, S. G. 2020. *Moscow’s War in Syria*. Center for Strategic & International Studies.
- Kieh, G. K., and K. A. Kalu. 2023. *Insurgency, Terrorism, and Counterterrorism in Africa*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Larssen, A. K. 2016. “Russia: The Principle of Non-Intervention and the Libya Case.” In *Political Rationale and International Consequences of the War in Libya*, 67-85. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198767480.003.0004>.
- Liu, Z., and M. Shu. 2023. “The Russia-Ukraine Conflict and the Changing Geopolitical Landscape in the Middle East.” *China International Strategy Review*, 5: 99-112. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-023-00134-5>.
- Lockhart, C. 2018. “In Sovereignty Strategies: Enhancing Core Governance Functions as a Postconflict & Conflict-Prevention Measure.” *Daedalus*. “Ending Civil Wars: Constraints & Possibilities”, 147 (1) (Winter): 90-103. https://www.amacad.org/sites/default/files/daedalus/downloads/Wi2018_Ending-Civil-Wars.pdf.
- RIA Novosti. 2020. “Peregovory v Astane po uregulirovaniyu konflikta v Sirii.” March 3, 2020. <https://ria.ru/20171221/1511385990.html>.

- Szucs, A. 2023. "EU to Assess Position on Syria after Arab League's Readmission." *Anadolu Agency*, May 8, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/eu-to-assess-position-on-syria-after-arab-league-s-readmission/2892035>.
- TASS. 2016. "Russia's Syria Operation Cost over \$460 Million – Putin." March 17, 2016. <https://tass.com/politics/863079>.
- Temizer, M. 2022. "Lebanon, Egypt, Syria Sign Gas Flow Deal on "Arab Gas Pipeline". *Anadolu Agency*, June 21, 2022. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/lebanon-egypt-syria-sign-gas-flow-deal-on-arab-gas-pipeline/2619106> (accessed June 3, 2023).
- United States Institute of Peace. 2020. "The Current Situation in Libya." December 30, 2020. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/12/current-situation-libya> (accessed June 5, 2023).