



# RUSSIA: THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IS YET TO COME

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Five years of Islamic State (IS) rule across Iraq and Syria have wrecked the shared border between the two countries and created a fragile security situation in the area commonly known as “Syraq”<sup>1</sup>. The terrorist group led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi brought a substantially homogeneous area, in terms of population, under its control<sup>2</sup>, raising its black flag over a vast zone that quickly catalysed the fears and interests of the international community. Old and new players involved in Middle Eastern affairs have repositioned themselves on the “Syraq chessboard”; while some have preferred to move a step back, others have not hesitated to penetrate the region, all being motivated by different reasons and with different geo-strategic objectives in mind.

In this context, the United States’ choice to move towards a gradual disengagement from the broader Middle East has reflected on Syraq as well. On the one hand, the American choices have allowed a number of regional actors – Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, to name a few – to emerge as crucial actors in the Syraqi arena and project their influence over it. On the other, most importantly, the United States’ disengagement has paved the way for Russia’s return to a region where it had been absent for over a decade, potentially becoming a major player capable of replacing the United States’ role.

For Russia, a country with limited economic resources but ambitious plans, Syraq provided – and still provides – a fertile ground for this change to occur. The decision of former US President Barack Obama not to intervene in the Syrian conflict in 2015 marked a watershed moment between the American “step-back” and the Russian “step-in” policies. In late September 2015, Moscow launched its first air strikes from the Khmeimim air base in Latakia, in western Syria

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(which later become a permanent base for the Russian contingent in the Arab country). The Syrian campaign was portrayed by Moscow as being both a matter of global security and a crucial domestic issue; the fight against Sunni radical Islam in the area, the containment of transnational terrorist flows, and the defence of Moscow's security interests in its southern neighbourhood have all been presented as top priorities in the Duma's foreign policy agenda.

Since then, moving from the Syrian campaign, Moscow was able to carve itself the role of a leading power not only in the Syraqi context but also far beyond it. A complex diplomatic machine, aimed at interacting with every state and non-state actor in the region and maintaining good relations with all of them, was basically put in place with the purpose of making Russia emerge as the only possible mediator of all Middle Eastern crises. In a handful of years, the Kremlin was able to acquire a diplomatic standing in the region, which hardly appears to have any rival at the moment, to the point that Moscow can effectively aspire to pursue a "Russian pax" for the Middle East, to be alternative to the western one.

This acquires even more relevance today, in light of the announced US withdrawal from Syria, where the situation remains fragile. From a military point of view, the "post-US" new strategic environment has already led Russia to take further steps on the ground. In late December 2018, the Russian military mobilized additional troops<sup>3</sup> to the Euphrates river valley (eastern Syria), in proximity of Deir el-Zor and al-Mayadeen, to fight alongside forces backed by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (the Syrian Arab Army) and Iran (Syrian militias). The Russian goal here would be to seize control of oil-rich territories that are currently held by the US troops and the Syrian Democratic Forces

(SDF). Russian forces have also been deployed in northern Syria, where Moscow now seeks to contain Turkey's ambitions in the area in light of the US withdrawal. Similar concerns over border security have arisen in Iraq as well, and pushed Baghdad to establish closer relations to the Russians in the field of military cooperation.

Militarily therefore, a deep, historical knowledge of the region, combined with over three years of boots on the ground in Syria, have granted Moscow a remarkable strategic capacity. The Kremlin has proven to be smart, reactive and able to quickly adapt to changing equilibria on the ground, showing no intention to abandon the Syrian battlefield any soon.

Beyond the military aspect, however, the Syraqi context may also be rich of opportunities for Russia in terms of economic gains. In Syria, even if the war is still not over, Russia must now focus on the country's reconstruction. While Moscow is likely not capable of sustaining the Syrian reconstruction effort, it may profit from its position as the main player in the country, as foreign investments in Syria and foreign capital influx in the country's economy could provide vital hard currency<sup>4</sup> for the Russian economy. Over the last few months, Russia has been lobbying various governments across the world – from the US to Germany, from Saudi Arabia to China – to invest in the Syrian reconstruction efforts. At the same time, Iraq, a leader in the world's oil production and a traditional customer of Russian weapons, is also of great interest to the Kremlin. New investments from the three main Russian energy companies (Lukoil, Rosneft and Gazprom) have been made in the past few months, alongside Moscow's promises to engage in reconstruction in Iraq. It seems clear that Russia will not leave Iraq – a crucial country in the Middle East's security



architecture – in a secondary position in its foreign policy agenda.

Therefore, today, as the war in Syria is entering its final stage, the Kremlin's own "battle" is not over. On the contrary, the final challenge has yet to come. On the one hand, Russia now needs to reap the fruits of its Syrian campaign and demonstrate its capacity – and will – to win the peace and overcome the challenges of Syria's economic recovery. On the other, and despite the United States' distancing from the region, Russia will have to carve its role and define its stance in relation to Washington, which, willingly or not, remains one of the main actors capable of affecting the course of events in the Middle East.

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1. Al-Marashi, "Iraq in turmoil: The rise of 'Syria'", Aljazeera, 17 June 2014.
  2. A. Plebani, *La terra dei due fiumi allo specchio*, Rubbettino, 2018.
  3. D. Regio, "Russia's Influence Grows After Moldovan Elections", Institute for the study of war, 6 March 2019.
  4. S. Ramani, "Russia's Eye on Syrian Reconstruction", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 January 2019.