



## Russia's Strategic Interest in Syria

*Dr Indrani Talukdar\**

Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement of Russia's withdrawal from Syria on March 14 took most of the policymakers by surprise. However, it was a partial withdrawal and Russian President Vladimir Putin made it clear that his intervention was not open-ended.<sup>1</sup>

Before the withdrawal, Putin had a telephonic conversation with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. During their conversation, Putin said that "Russia will maintain an aviation support centre in Syria in order to monitor compliance with the ceasefire."<sup>2</sup>

Russia's interest in West Asia has been there since imperial times. During the Soviet Union's time, when the world was divided between the two ideologies of communism and capitalism, Moscow's relationship with Syria was well charted. Russia had close ties with Syria since Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, took power in a coup in 1970. Russia has been a major arms provider to the regime and maintains its only military base outside the former Soviet Union at Syria's Mediterranean port of Tartus.<sup>3</sup>

Although the ideology based division ceases to exist due to the evolution of a multipolar world order, however, it shows that the bloc system somewhere still exists. The bloc system exists due to the ambitions and national interests of each country and their equations with the two superpowers of the Cold War, the erstwhile Soviet Union (Russia) and the US. The 21<sup>st</sup> century, which gave birth to globalization and multilateralism, has also kept the rivalry between Russia and the US alive.

The rivalry between Russia, Soviet Union's successor, and the US still continues and is apparent in events that have taken place, such as the Ukrainian and the Syrian crises. The orange revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the military involvement in Georgia War in 2008 displayed the crevices of the Cold War in Europe. Meanwhile, the Arab Spring created a battleground for both the powers in West Asia region, which is apparent since the 2011 Syrian crisis. The Arab Spring of 2010, which engulfed Syria along with other countries in West Asia, saw the involvement of a re-emerging Russia and the US in opposite camps, a Cold War type set up. Countries of this region that have their own ambitions and national interests in the new world order have also helped in building up this environment. For example, Turkey, a NATO member, who was camped against the Soviet Union, was sharing a constructive relationship with Russia. The extent of the bonhomie was such that Ankara was more interested in joining Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and leaving its dream of becoming a member of the European Union (EU). But the involvement and siding of Russia in Syria and towards Assad regime including militarily that led to the downing of a Su-24 jet of Russia by Turkey has led to a restrained relationship between the two countries.

In this set up of a neo-bloc system (not based on ideologies but on ambitions to be hegemonic) has led Russia to maintain its footprint in the region. Given its relationship with Syria and the latter's geostrategic position in the region, which is important for Moscow, the involvement of Kremlin in the internal affairs of Syria can be seen.

For Russia, protecting Syria means protecting its own assets and access to the region and further. Moscow had one military (navy) base in Tartus, but its military involvement since September 2015 has led to the achievement of another base in Khmeimim, Latakia, which they are using for aviation purpose. Apart from the strategic considerations, Russia's relationship with Syria is also important due to its economic involvement and also because the Assad regime works as a bulwark against Islamic radicalism, a threat that has been looming large over Moscow since 1990s. With the IS reaching the North Caucasus and the insurgent groups of this area along with Chechnya supporting and giving their allegiance to the terrorist group, Russia is apprehensive of the threats the country and its neighbouring countries face.

Economically, Russia has invested in the sectors of energy, steel and aviation. It has substantial presence in the Syrian infrastructure, energy and tourism industries.<sup>4</sup> Russia has signed a number of contracts for the construction of gas processing plants, irrigation facilities and

power stations.<sup>5</sup> It also has a robust market for Russian arms in Syria. According to the SIPRI Yearbook 2013, Russia exported 48 per cent of arms to Syria between 2006-2010.<sup>6</sup> Russia's total world arms export from 2010 to 2014 is accounted at 27 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

### **Russia's Interest**

Russia's interest in Syria has been to maintain its foothold in West Asia through its presence in Tartus and at the Khmeimim airbase.<sup>8</sup> The military bases provide the necessary infrastructure to stay in West Asia, expanding its military access.<sup>9</sup> Russia has robust markets for its arms exports. In a meeting with the Commission for Military-Technical Cooperation of the Russian Federation and foreign states on March 29, Putin said that the export of arms in 2015 reached \$14.5 billion. Russian exports of major weapons increased by 28 per cent between 2006-10 and 2011-15.<sup>10</sup> It also has energy interests. Also, Russia wants to be treated as an equal partner by the West, including the US, in the international community.

Russia wants to showcase its global power and its capacity as an important player in resolving challenges, such as international terrorism that is affecting the region and the world. Russia's intervention did make the West interact with it and also cooperate towards a peaceful resolution for Syria. Moscow's intervention in Syria was also to "stop Damascus from falling in the hands of the IS."<sup>11</sup>

In the past decade, Russia lost erstwhile footholds in Libya and Iraq, failed in its attempt to regain Egypt as an ally after the fall of Hosni Mubarak,<sup>12</sup> and its position in Syria is fragile due to the current situation. Russia fears that the potential fall of the Assad regime may serve as a springboard for insurrection in the Caucasus and Central Asia<sup>13</sup> for regime change and democracy. Another problem for Russia with the overthrow of the Assad regime and its replacement by an Islamist regime is the export of terror and radicalisation to Chechnya, North Caucasus and also within the country.<sup>14</sup> Russia's relationship with other West Asian countries, such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar is not conducive at the moment because of Moscow's support to the Assad regime. However, diplomatic efforts, such as the arrangement of the peace talk on the ceasefire to be successful with the help of all these countries, were made, which has kept the channels of communication open with them.

On the commercial side, Russian companies have made investments worth roughly \$20

billion. In July 2015, Russia announced that it would seek to invest at least \$1.6 billion in the energy sector through contracts. In 2013, Syria signed a twenty-five year contract (2013-2038) with the Russian Soyuzneftegaz company for oil and gas drilling and exploration in an area off the Syrian coast, from Tartus to the city of Banyas, which covers 2,190 square kilometres.<sup>15</sup> The agreement also extends to about 45 miles into the Mediterranean.<sup>16</sup> In a 2010 report, the US Geological Survey estimated 1.7bn barrels of undiscovered oil and 122tn cubic feet of natural gas in the so-called Levant Basin along the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, the Assad regime is seeking to rehabilitate and operate oil fields and power plants in areas controlled currently by the rebels and the Islamic State group, respectively – areas that the regime forces began recapturing in northern and Western Syria backed by Russian airstrikes.<sup>18</sup> During a meeting between Syrian Foreign Minister, Walid Muallem and Russian Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitry Rogozin in November 2015, Mr. Muallem said that *"We have data that oil and gas deposits on a shelf off the coast of Syria have enormous potential. And we hope to see not only Russian warships in Syria, but also platforms for extracting oil."* He said that the Syrian authorities are hoping that Russian companies will develop the country's offshore oil deposits. He added during the meeting that one Russian firm has already signed a contract and Damascus is waiting for other companies to follow suit. Syria is ready to offer Russian companies *"all possible incentives."*<sup>19</sup> The lucrative opportunities offered to Russia will be hard to resist given its ambition of remaining an important player in the world.

In Libya, after the overthrow and killing of the Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi, Russia lost \$4 billion due to the loss of arms contracts with Libya as a result of the UN's arms shipments embargo.<sup>20</sup> Apart from loss in the defence trade, Russia also lost out in railways and energy sector. In 2008, the Russian company RZhD signed a deal with the Gaddafi regime to build a rail line along the Mediterranean from Sirte to Benghazi. The contract foresaw the construction of 30 rail flyovers, 23 bridges, four large rail stations and 24 smaller stations and was estimated to be worth € 2.2 billion. The project was stopped due to the unrest in Libya. RZhD lost around €104 million due to the stalling of these projects. Similarly, in the energy sector, Gazprom and Tatneft have been active in Libya. However, since the 2011 unrest, the energy companies were supposed to lose out on €240 million if the new governments did not honour the contracts.<sup>21</sup> Russia has lost a lot of investment in Libya and does not want to repeat the same in Syria.

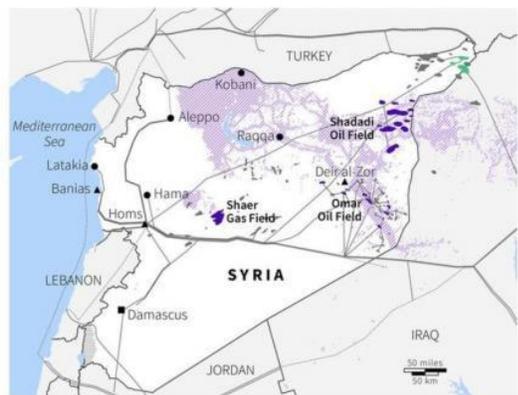
The energy sector is also another area where Russia does not want to lose out in Syria.

Russia understands the importance of Syria's location as a possible site for a network of oil and gas pipelines to Europe as well as Turkey. This threatens Russia's own hegemony over the export of gas to the European continent (Russia's share of total European gas imports exceeds 64 percent). Russia seems to be rushing towards investing in Syria's energy sector because it would rather have a share in its energy development than compete with it.<sup>22</sup>

Russia's help to stem out the IS from Palmyra has a lot to do with the latter's geographic location. Palmyra is positioned near the largest natural gas fields, Jabal Shaer. The IS' capture of Palmyra in May 2015 with the seizure of nearby gas fields deprived the regime of 45 percent of its gas and electricity resources. Palmyra also has many gas fields, such as Arak, Dubayat, Hail, Hayan, Jihar, al-Mahr, Najib, Sukhneh, and Abi Rabah, which, according to a former industry insider, have collectively been producing half of Syria's output of natural raw and liquid petroleum gas. Palmyra is also the transit point for pipelines carrying gas from important fields in Hasakah and Deir Ezzor provinces in north-eastern and eastern Syria, respectively. Palmyra is the hub between the extraction or transfer of virtually all of Syria's gas production and the processing and power plants. This city is also connected to the Tartus port and Iraq.<sup>23</sup>

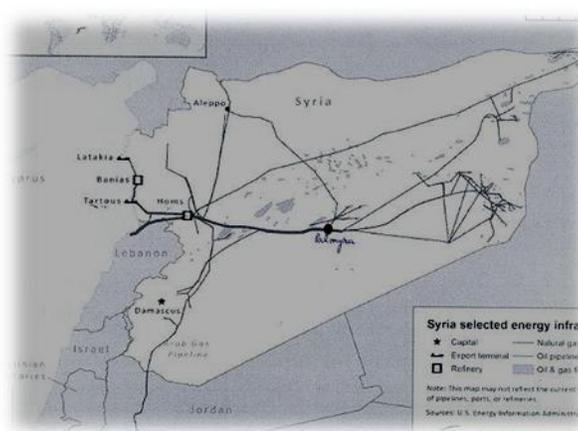
### Syrian oil and gas resources

— Oil/gas pipelines   ● Oil/gas fields   ▲ Refinery   ■ Islamic State (IS) controlled areas   ■ IS-controlled oil/gas field   ● Kurdish-controlled oil/gas field



Source: World Energy Atlas  
W. Foo, 31/10/2014

REUTERS



Syria selected energy infrastructure  
★ Capital   — Natural gas pipeline  
▲ Export terminal   — Oil pipeline  
□ Refinery   ■ Oil & gas field  
Note: This map may not reflect the current control of pipelines, ports, or refineries.  
Sources: U.S. Energy Information Administration

Sources: For Map 1: Reuters<sup>24</sup> and Map 2: Energy Fuse<sup>25</sup>

Russia has been feeling under pressure by the two proposed pipelines, which were tabled by Qatar, supported by the US and Iran. Qatar and Iran began to develop the South Pars/North Dome natural gas field in 1989. It was in 2009 when Qatar proposed to build a pipeline to send its gas towards northwest via Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria to Turkey, which Damascus refused.

Russia put pressure on the Assad regime as Moscow did not want any competition in its monopoly over the energy market. Meanwhile, given its relationship with Iran, Kremlin was fine with the other proposal of the Iran-Iraq-Syria pipeline of LPG, which Tehran proposed to the Assad government in 2011.<sup>26</sup>

By helping the Assad regime to stay in power and permanently placing its forces at Syrian bases, the Russians may be trying to blockade the development of the Qatar gas pipeline. Moscow is also trying to position itself as the nexus point of other new offshore gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean, including Israel, Cyprus, and Greece.<sup>27</sup> During a discussion with the Russian channel, *Sputnik*, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., attorney and nephew of former US President JF Kennedy, said that the US decided to remove Assad from power after he refused to back the Qatari gas pipeline.<sup>28</sup> Given the rivalry between Russia and the US, Kremlin will try to protect the Assad regime and Moscow's national interests in the region.

### **Russia's Military Involvement: Combat Form**

Russia was involved by supplying military equipment, providing logistical support<sup>29</sup> and training to the Syrian regime, and in mid September 2015, it tied up with Iraq and Iran for an intelligence sharing arrangement<sup>30</sup> to contain the extremist groups. Since 30 September 2015, Russia got itself militarily involved in combat form. The military intervention of Russia has been criticized by the opposition parties of Syria and the West including the NGOs' dealing with human rights. But Putin said that the military intervention had its basis in international law and has been conducted "in accordance with an official request" from Assad.<sup>31</sup> After six months of involvement, Russia announced its withdrawal from the conflict-ridden country.

Russia's intervention was to 'assist'<sup>32</sup> Assad to fight the IS and "accelerate the peace process between the conflicting parties in Damascus."<sup>33</sup>

During a meeting on March 14 with the Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov and Defence Minister, Sergey Shoygu, Putin assessed Russia's military role in Syria. He said that Russia intervened with a small military group, but it proved to be effective. The military group consisted of different types of forces and diverse capabilities—space reconnaissance, drones, combat missile strike systems in fighter aircrafts and assault aircrafts. The military group also included Navy forces using the modern weaponry from two seas – the Mediterranean and the Caspian – while

working from surface ships and submarines. According to him, the country created a powerful air defence system.<sup>34</sup> Russia has deployed the upgraded versions and technologies of fighter jets, such as Su-35, helicopters, such as Ka-52 or “Hokum-B” Mi-8P, Mi-24, Mi-35M and Mi-28N,<sup>35</sup> and Ka-52s.<sup>36</sup>

The Khmeimim base is well covered by anti-aircraft missile and gun units, such as Carapace-C1 as well as air defence systems, such as Buk-M2 and S-400 Triumph. On land equipments, T-90 tanks and armoured personnel carriers BTR-82A were deployed. The bombs used included FAB-250 or OFAB-500, KAB-500S as well as cruise missiles, such as X-101 and X-555. Calibre-NK missiles used were deployed from the waters of the Mediterranean and Caspian seas.<sup>37</sup> Russia is also using Israeli drones known as Searcher drones. These high-tech surveillance drones help the Russian warplanes find and strike their targets on the ground.<sup>38</sup> These defence facilities are well equipped to protect Russia’s interests in Syria and also give cover to the Assad regime. The unmanned aerial vehicles are used for attack and other purposes, such as gathering intelligence, including electronic intelligence and satellite constellation.<sup>39</sup>

## **Results Achieved**

In Kremlin’s observation, the intervention by Russia has helped the Syrian crisis move towards a resolution. Lavrov, during the meeting with Putin and the Defence Minister, said that Russia consistently advocated establishing an intra-Syrian dialogue in accordance with the decisions made in 2012.<sup>40</sup> He said that, however, Kremlin’s suggestions were met with a lack of will on the part of all the partners working on this process. Lavrov said that since the airstrikes, the situation has changed<sup>41</sup> as the peace talks have resumed and there is coordination between Russia and the US.

The European leaders (Germany, France, UK and Italy) said that Syrian ceasefire and its continued backing from Russia will help build a momentum behind peace talks in the war-torn country. The spokesperson to UK Prime Minister David Cameron said that during a conference call between the European leaders and Putin on March 5, 2016 the leaders welcomed Putin’s commitment to the ceasefire.<sup>42</sup> The UN envoy for Syria appealed to Russia and the US to intervene to help revive Syrian peace talks which had come to a stalemate due to the fighting between the Assad regime and the rebels in the month of April.<sup>43</sup>

Meanwhile, Putin like his foreign minister too, believes that the military intervention by Russia has been able to create a conducive atmosphere for the peace talks between the Assad government and the opposition groups. The talks are to push for a nationwide ceasefire for all parties involved. Russia sought to expand the opposition delegation to include the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).<sup>44</sup> The ceasefire was not successful as the conflicting parties violated the rules. Russia helped the Assad regime militarily in Palmyra and Aleppo. The decisions made by Russia including the partial withdrawal have been well thought, keeping Russia's interest in the front. Kremlin is trying to balance its support to the Assad regime and also break the country's isolation from the West.

Putin vowed to protect Russia's bases from "land, air and sea."<sup>45</sup> The advanced air-defence systems are still deployed<sup>46</sup> and the defence infrastructure including the naval base in Tartus and Khmeimim, which gives a ready base for redeployment if needed, is also intact. At the same time, it has cooperated with the US to see the ceasefire being implemented. On 4 May, a 48-hour ceasefire between the conflicting parties was agreed upon after calls from Russia and the US.<sup>47</sup>

### **Capacity to Redeploy**

During the meeting with Lavrov and Sogu, Putin made it clear that the Russian military bases would function to monitor the ceasefire and create conditions for the peace process. This is an important statement by the President to keep the bases to create appropriate conditions for the peace process. If the situation deteriorates in Syria and hampers Russia's national interest, then Kremlin would not waste time to re-issue orders to re-intervene in the conflict ridden country.

Putin on March 17 said that Moscow could relocate its military contingent back to the country "within a few hours," if needed.<sup>48</sup> On March 30, Russian combat engineers arrived in Syria on a mine-clearing mission in the ancient town of Palmyra after it was recaptured from IS. The Russian Defence Ministry said that sapper units were airlifted to Syria with equipment including state-of-the-art robotic devices to defuse mines at the 2,000-year-old archaeological site.<sup>49</sup> The sappers cleared the roads of Palmyra from mines. They detected and defused improvised explosive devices, which had been put on roads, crossroads, in roadside constructions and objects of life sustainment (electrical substations, bakeries, hospitals). The specialists also detected parts of water pipe filled with explosive devices as well as improvised high-explosive and anti-tank

mines with electric detonator. In total, Russian engineers have detected and defused more than 120 explosive devices and cleared 1.1 km of roads from mines.<sup>50</sup>

On Palmyra, Putin, during a meeting with the Commission for Military-Technical Cooperation of the Russian Federation and Foreign States on March 29, said that the intervention in this area was purely humanitarian in nature. He said that in a telephone conversation with the Director-General of UNESCO, and then with Assad, it was agreed that Russia would support demining Palmyra and restore the historical value of the place.<sup>51</sup> The liberation of Palmyra showed the capacity of Russia's small contingent that is deployed in Syria after the partial withdrawal and also the capability to redeploy forces, such as sappers or mine specialists. Latest intervention of Russia was in the city of Aleppo.

### **Conclusion**

A partial withdrawal took place; one of the reasons could be the coming up of Duma elections in September as Russian people are struggling with sanctions and a weak economy. A poll conducted by the independent Levada Centre pollster indicated that majority of the Russian people, 81 percent, have supported the partial withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria.<sup>52</sup> The people have not shown any dissent towards the Russian government on its intervention in Syria that is costing \$4 million per day,<sup>53</sup> but it might have a reaction. The Russian airline crash in October 2015 near the borders of Egypt helped Kremlin to garner support from the citizens in the name of nationalism and protecting Russia by fighting against Islamic radicals such as IS. However, Russia's Finance Minister, Anton Siluanov, stated that Russia's economic troubles are serious and will be sticking around due to low oil prices.<sup>54</sup>

Putin's popularity stands at 82 percent which has fallen 8 points since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>55</sup> The growing unemployment and poverty might have weighed on Putin's decisions of withdrawal. However, Russia was able to achieve certain goals, such as coming back to the centre stage as a global power and preventing (on principle) regime change by outside powers, particularly Western ones.<sup>56</sup> It was able to actively resist most attempts to hike up international pressure on the Syrian regime. In other words, the conflict in Syria was primarily about the world order and Russia's place in it.<sup>57</sup> It was able to showcase its state-of-art weapons systems in Syria, demonstrating to the world its military capabilities.<sup>58</sup>

Russia's defence equipments used during the Syrian war are also a display to the world of its capabilities, thereby attracting potential buyers.<sup>59</sup> Countries such as Algeria, China, Indonesia, Iran, Vietnam and Pakistan have signed contracts with Russia for arms export. Orders include the popular Su-35 and 35s fighter jets, Su-32 bombers and the new Mi-28N Night Hunter attack helicopters, which have displayed their capabilities in Syria.<sup>60</sup> Putin, during a meeting with the Commission for Military-Technical Cooperation of the Russian Federation and Foreign States on March 29 added that new markets were being developed in Africa, Latin America, South Asia and West Asia.<sup>61</sup> Russia's military capabilities must have sent signals to the NATO. The Syrian tryst also helped Russia as a cost-effective training ground to train its forces.<sup>62</sup>

Russia's military involvement in Syria and also in Ukraine has shown that hard power still matters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century despite the push for soft power. It also showed Russia's capability to handle many players at one time in Syria, both internal and external, such as the Syrian rebel groups, the terrorist groups as well as outside powers, such as Turkey. Ankara and the other countries in West Asia had the support of the US and Europe, but Russia had none. However, Moscow needs to be careful in showcasing its hard power because it is creating a dent in its reserves. Russia has a Stabilization Fund,<sup>63</sup> which was established in 2004. From 1 February 2008, the Stabilization Fund was divided into the Reserve Fund and the National Welfare Fund. Currently, Russia is using both the funds. The Nation Welfare Fund stands almost at \$74 billion as on April 1, 2016.<sup>64</sup> The economy is weak and people are having a hard time with high inflation rate, unemployment and poverty. It won't take much time for the opposition parties in Russia to garner support amongst the people and demonstrate agitations that might not be healthy for Putin's rule.

Putin's announcement on April 6 on the formation of the National Guard—a new paramilitary unit charged with combating terrorism and organized crime and maintaining social order might not be a healthy move towards the positive development of the country. It might have a repercussion on Kremlin, opening up a way for the radical extremists groups in taking advantage of the situation. The way the Russian armed forces have been trained in the Syrian battlefield, in a similar manner, the extremist groups too have been trained in an asymmetrical warfare in the same battleground.

On the Syrian side, the non-inclusion of the PYD and the continuation of airstrikes by Russia and plans of coordinated military strikes between Moscow and the US against the ISIS do

not give a conducive picture on the outcome of the peace talks. However, Russia and the US are pushing ahead for a successful ceasefire.

The US secretary of state John Kerry met Saudi Arabia's foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, and the UN envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, on May 2 towards finding a way to restore at least a partial truce in Syria. He said the US and Russia have agreed that there would be additional personnel dedicated to making sure there was more accountability and ability to enforce the cessation of hostilities on a day-to-day basis.<sup>65</sup> Plans for a joint US-Russian Syria ceasefire monitoring operation, to include the US and Russian military, intelligence and diplomatic personnel is being worked out. The office to this monitoring operation is based at the UN-provided offices in Geneva.<sup>66</sup>

For Russia, the joint monitoring operation with the US with its office at Geneva is important because it is an accomplishment of its foreign policy objective of being treated equally by the West. It is an important victory for Russia especially after the isolation it faced from the West because of its involvement in Ukraine.

Russia's involvement in Syria would continue, given its strategic ambitions. It will try its level best to have a balanced outcome in Syria. If Assad loses power, Kremlin will negotiate with the opposition party in power. It might be a similar scenario that took place between Russia and Egypt when Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi came to power. If the Russian plane would not have crashed in the Egyptian borders which have pulled back the enthusiasm between the two countries, Russia and Egypt would have strengthened the relationship further whose impact may have been felt in Syria too.

Meanwhile, the Tartus and Khmeimim bases will continue to provide Russia access to the region. To push its economy, it will try to optimise arms export, as inflow from the energy sector for the time being will remain low. It will also do its best to contain the extremist groups from taking over Syria. Moscow will use its tactics to protect its country as well its neighbours from being influenced by the IS and their home-grown terrorist groups.

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\*Dr. Indrani Talukdar is a Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi. The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

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- <sup>8</sup>Russia understands that if Syria comes under the Syrian opposition parties supported by the West, Saudi Arabia and Turkey or the armed groups, then Moscow might lose the bases it has in Syria.
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