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«RUSSIA'S MILITARY OPERATION IN SYRIA» (2015)

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Abstract. The Russian military intervention in Syria, conducted between September 2015 and March 2016, was one of the crucial moments in the Middle East conflict which has evolved since 2011. It not only prevented the collapse of the regime of Bashar al-Assad but also enabled the initiative to be taken by the Syrian Arab Army. The simultaneous conducting of two military operations by the Russian army, i.e. the Russian involvement in both Ukraine and the Middle East, requires thorough investigations into the course of these operations.

Key words: Russia, military intervention, war in Syria.

Introduction

The civil war in Syria, which has continued since 2011, is one of the bloodiest military conflicts in the contemporary world. Based on data for February 2016, the war has resulted in over 470 thousand deaths, and over 5 million people were forced to leave their homes. Life expectancy shortened from 70 to 56 years, and the overall damage was estimated at \$255 billion. In 2015, due to numerous failures and depleting resources, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and government militia were facing ultimate defeat. However, the military support provided to the Bashar al-Assad regime by the Russian Federation, which between September 2015 and March 2016 conducted intense air and missile operations, and supplied military equipment to government troops, proved to be crucial. The direct and as it later turned out - efficient involvement of the Kremlin in the Middle East conflict, enabling the government forces to retake the initiative, came as a big surprise to western commentators. Such terms as geopolitical tsunami and Moscow's strategic gambit have appeared in the press and several publications.

Material and Methods

The following Polish researchers have commented on the Russian involvement in Syria: Tomasz Otłowski – in texts published by the Amicus Europe Foundation, Aleksandra Dzisiow-Szuszczykiewicz – in studies released by the National Security Bureau, and Anna Maria Dynier – in reports by the Polish Institute of International Affairs. Western publishing houses have also released several books devoted to the war in Syria, including the Syrian Rebellion and Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant.

Despite the numerous studies being published on the war in Syria, authors claim that this subject matter, given the dynamically-changing situation, still requires intensive investigations and analyses of facts. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to outline the



Date: 27th June-2025



Russian involvement and its impact on the war in Syria, and to provide answers to several specific questions, such as the causes of the Russian intervention, the situation on the Syrian war fronts before Moscow's involvement, the forces and resources provided by the Russian military authorities for deployment in the Middle East, as well as the consequences of Russia's involvement. Among research methods, the analysis and comparison method was used at the first stage of developing this study. It enabled obtaining an array of useful information based on documents and articles, both in Polish and foreign (English and Russian) languages. Compilations by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, the Kazimierz Puławski Foundation, the National Interest magazine and Valdai Discussion Club proved particularly useful. Synthesis and generalisation were used as supplementary methods.

Results

The political decision on the Russian military intervention in Syria was influenced by a variety of factors, including external factors and those connected with the strategic culture and perception of threats. One of the most general (underlying) causes was the awareness of the evolving distribution of global powers. As stressed by Jacek Bartosiak in «Pacific and Eurasia. About the war», following the period of absolute U.S. domination in 1992-2008, we are now experiencing a return to multi-polarity and polycentrism, mainly in economic and financial terms, and partially also in military terms.

Discussion

In the context of the changing distribution of global powers, the notions of «New Yalta» or «Yalta 2.06» have appeared several times in the press. These describe Russia's efforts to establish a new division of impact zones in the world, in consideration of the Kremlin's interests, also taking into account the current weaknesses of the western world. The military operation against the Islamic State was meant to give rise to the establishment of a wide coalition in the Middle East, operating under the authority of the UN Security Council. The cooperation between Russia, on the one hand, and the U.S. and NATO, on the other hand, was intended to improve the relationship between those parties, and to ultimately cause the abolition of economic sanctions and a reduction in western support to Ukraine.

Another reason for the geopolitical changes was put forward by Aleksandra Dzisiow-Szuszczykiewicz in «Regional revolution in Syria». She stressed that through its Middle East-oriented policy, Russia does not want to lose the Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad as one of its allies. Along with the economic and political interests, aimed at keeping western influence out of the Middle East, Syria is also one of the key recipients of Russian weapons. In annual terms, factories operating in the Russian defence industry have been sending 7% of their entire military equipment intended for export to Damascus.

Conclusion

Leaving aside the crude oil price regulation perspective, Syria is viewed by the Russian policy-makers as a significant venue on the Middle East map when it comes to the transfer of strategic resources. This results from the fact that two competitive gas supply

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lines are to run through the territory of Syria in the nearest future. One is being constructed by Qatar, running through Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, to Turkey. The other one, designed by Iran, is to run from Iraq to Syria, and then to the west, thus by passing the U.S. allies, i.e. Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The target recipient for both lines is Europe. In this event, the non-Russian gas supplies to EU Member States will depend on Bashar al-Assad's decisions, and Moscow certainly hopes for his gratitude in this domain.

Acknowledgement

Other reasons for the Russian intervention in Syria can also be sought in the energy business and opportunities for exporting natural resources. In 2015, which is when the Russian involvement began, the Russian economy recorded the sharpest GDP drop since 2009. It was caused by sanctions imposed on the Kremlin in 2014 by western authorities, inter alia, in response to Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine. Sudden drops in the crude oil price were another major factor. At the turn of 2015 and 2016, an oil barrel cost \$30.00, whereas the government administration assumed it would cost \$50.00. This triggered the need to adjust the Russian budget expenditure. As in the case of sanctions, the Russian party perceived the sudden drop in oil prices as wilful monetary policy management by the USA, in cooperation with Saudi Arabia regulating the pace of crude oil extraction. Considering the above, it was the Kremlin's aim to reverse the downward trend or at least curtail it. The military operation in Syria proved to constitute a very effective response. As stressed by Hüseyin Bağcı, a Turkish researcher, in Strategic Depth in Syria – «From the Beginning to Russian Intervention», it made the crude oil price soar to \$50.00, which was eventually set at \$46.0011.

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