

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RUSSIA-SYRIA**

The Syrian Civil War has entangled a lot of group and countries with the different interests in this war and has lasted for almost 6 years since 2011. The involvement of Russia in this civil war has an important role due to its big efforts in supporting the Syrian government. Russian role in this civil war makes the political world questioning the reason why Russia would like to involve in this conflict deeply. Moreover, the involvement of Russia considered as the worsening factor of this conflict since it has caused a lot of people died and made Syria as the big producer of refugees fleeing out of the country.

Moreover, to know and understand the alliance of two countries or more, it is important to have an assessment to understand the history between those countries who involved in a treaty or agreement. Thus, History could help to analyze and explain the behavior and treatment of a country towards the others, and give the time-ranging toward the dynamic of the relationships itself. Furthermore, the other important aspect of understanding a relationship two countries or more is from the similar background they share with each other.

## **A. The History of Relationships between Russia and Syria**

The relationship of Russia and Syria was formally established since the Post-Cold War began when the Soviet Union was collapsed. Russia has gone through an instability period of time, politically, economically, and also socially. For example, since the collapse of Soviet Union, the military of Russia was struggling to face a lot of problems regarding the shortage equipment and lack of training and discipline. Moreover, in the Post-Cold War, Russia was also suffering from the proliferation of corruption, also they became fragile and even lost its allies. Since then, Russia focuses to put their main interest on the former of Soviet Union.

Yet, as one of European Countries that has the largest Muslim population, it is important for Russia to have a good relation with the Middle East countries since Muslims are also a part of Russian and its future, and also to get support for the anti – Russian terrorism and Separatism. Moreover, the relationship of Russia and Syria established because of the similar problems that they have which are the issue of radical Islam movement and also Russian desires to have an access to the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, Syria appeared to support Russia to rise up again from the fall and they become a “support-system” until now. It is also proved with the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation which signed on 8<sup>th</sup> October 1980 by Leonid Brezhnev, the Head of the Soviet Union and Hafez Al-Assad, the leader of Syria.

Historically, their relationship existed since 1944 by diplomatic links. Since 1950 until 1980 they were often to do multi-faced bilateral relations, specifically in the military trading. Furthermore, this relationship escalated since Egypt decided to separate from the Soviet Union and became allies with the United States. It makes Syria become the country that got a lot of Soviet attentions in weaponry systems in the Middle East. Russia also wants to restore its importance in

the international view and to get the prominent position in the Arab – Muslims world.<sup>1</sup>

## **B. The Similar Background of Russia and Syria**

### **1. Against Separatism**

The Long-standing relationship between Syria and Russia is not only because of the weapon and oil trading, yet it is also due to the each country's trauma toward the separatism. Since 1991, after the Soviet Union fell down, it lost some important part of its members like South Caucasus countries and Central Asia which are Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, etc. Moreover, Russia needs to face the current issue of separatism which is the insurgency of North Caucasus. It led by the Extremist Sunni Muslims who wanted to be independent of Soviet Union due to the different interests that they have. There are more than 20 million Russian Muslims living in North Caucasus and had 2 wars with Russia. Besides that, Caucasus emirates also funded by the Arabian Gulf countries to support them to be free from Russia and also who funding the rebellions in Syrian Civil War to fight Bashar Al-Assad.<sup>2</sup>

The other issue is about Ukraine and Crimea, Ukraine was a part of USSR or Soviet Union until 1991. As the fall of Soviet Union, Ukraine declared to follow the rules of Ukrainians laws rather than Soviet Union's and took Crimea along with them. Before 2014, Crimea did not belong to Russia because it was under Ukraine's authority yet Ukraine made it became an independent state. However, there was an issue that the citizen of

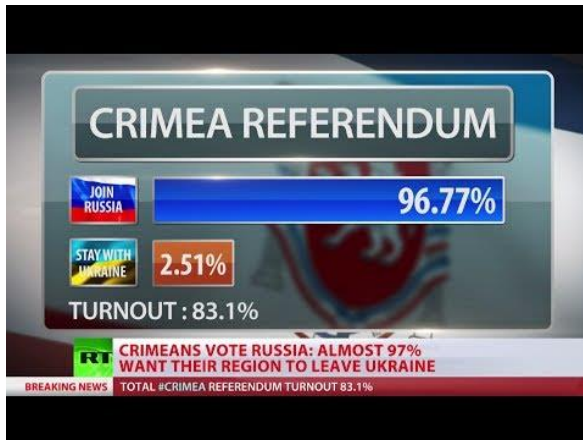
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<sup>1</sup>Kreutz, Andrej (2010). Syria: Russia's Best Assets in the Middle East. IFRI (Paris,2010), p.5-7

<sup>2</sup>Charap, Samuel (2013). *Russia, Syria, and Doctrine of Intervention*. Survival (London, 2013), p.36

Crimea wanted to rejoin Russia. Recognizing this good news, Vladimir Putin was welcoming Crimea to come back home. In the Crimea Referendum in 2014, it declares that Crimea wants to be with Russia which proved by the result of the Referendum itself.<sup>3</sup>

*Figure 1 2.1 The Result of Crimea Referendum*



Source: Retrieved From  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9SdBZamyCE> on April, 6<sup>th</sup>  
2018

Moreover, the result of this Referendum is unacceptable for Ukraine, Crimean Ethnic (Tartar) and the Western countries. They think this referendum is illegitimate, therefore Ukraine responded in an aggressive way toward it and put its military on the border of Ukraine-Crimea. Seeing this response, Russia who has full authority of Crimea also put his troops on the border of Crimea to maintain the military occupation of Ukraine in the

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<sup>3</sup>Draxhev Viktor (2014). Crimea Declares Independence, Seeks UN Recognition. RT Question More. Retrieved on April, 6<sup>th</sup> 2018 from <https://www.rt.com/news/crimea-referendum-results-official-250/>

area.<sup>4</sup> Since then, these two countries still have a high tension among them. In addition, Russia also facing the rebellions from the Crimea, the Tatar Crimean people who are known as the Muslim minority that lives in Crimea for centuries.

Moreover, Syria also faced the similar problems with Russia. In March 1920, the Arab Kingdom of Syria which was consists of Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan collapsed. However, in the same year, Arab Kingdom of Syria had to face its destruction age as well. It was happened because of the loss from a war with France which has resulted in a mandate from France divided this kingdom into some parts, which are Lebanon and Syria.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, Syria also needs to struggle to fight against most of his citizen, Sunni Muslims who asked for freedom from Syria government. They wanted to topple down their president because of their prejudices toward Assad practicing bad governance like corruption, so on and so forth.

On the other side, during the Syrian Civil War, there were a lot of groups came from neighborhood Muslim states tried to divide and take over Syria from Bashar Al-Assad such as ISIS, Al-Nusra Front and Free Syrian Army who also consider as the group of extremist Muslim.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in 2012 there were several countries, especially the western countries that illegally involved in this war and supported those rebellion groups to be

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<sup>4</sup> Curran, John (2015). Russian-Ukrainian Conflict Explained. HuffPost. Retrieved on April, 6<sup>th</sup> 2018 from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-currant2/russian-ukrainian-conflict-explained\\_b\\_4909192.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/john-currant2/russian-ukrainian-conflict-explained_b_4909192.html)

<sup>5</sup> Mark J. Joshua (2014). Ancient Syria. Ancient History Encyclopedia. Retrieved on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2018 from <https://www.ancient.eu/syria/>

<sup>6</sup> Cafarella, Jennifer (2016). Why The Most Dangerous Group in Syria isn't ISIS. CNN. Retrieved on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2018 from <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/26/opinions/syria-isis-al-qaeda-nusra/index.html>

free from a dictator leader, Bashar Al-Assad. Those countries are the alliance that supports the separatism between the former of Soviet Union countries and Russia.<sup>7</sup>

## **2. Anti – Western**

The Falling of the Soviet Union caused by several reasons and one of them is because of the influence of United States who support the destruction of USSR itself. The strategy of Democracy which known as the American system also shaped the tactics for the main actors in the destructing Soviet Union, for example, by influencing Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Nikolayevich Yeltsin to practice Pro-western such as Democracy in his regime. Mikhail Gorbachev is the former of Soviet Union leader who stimulated the drama of the falling of Soviet Union. He is a close friend of United State's former president, Ronald Reagan. Many people see that the end of Cold War could come up because of their warm relationship.

Additionally, according to his interview with BBC, Mikhail Gorbachev stated that "A split in society and a struggle in a country like ours, overflowing with weapons, including nuclear ones, could have left so many people dead and caused such destruction. I could not let that happen just to cling on to power. Stepping down was my victory." It means he tried to avoid the civil war that will happen just because to protect his position and power as a leader. Therefore, in December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1991, Soviet Union is officially collapsed and for the West, they see Mikhail as the hero for

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<sup>7</sup> O'Connor, Tom. How The U.S Lost The War in Syria to Russia and Iran. Newsweek. Retrieved on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2018 from <http://www.newsweek.com/us-lost-war-syria-iran-russia-winning-final-battle-674833>

the Soviet Union due to its effort to bring freedom there, yet for some ex-Soviet Union people, Gorbachev is a betrayer.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, after the fall of Mikhail Gorbachev and the Soviet Union, Yeltsin came up as the first president for Russia in 1991. As the supporter of the return of Mikhail Gorbachev, during Yeltsin presidency, he supported the implementation of greater autonomy to the Soviet Union as well as the Russian Republics. Equally important, Yeltsin is also in favor with the market-oriented economy and multiparty political system. However, at the end of his first term of presidency, his system did not work well for Russia because of the failure of the free-market economy and the loss of fighting against rebellions in Chechnya. Reacting to this, the Duma, a legislative body of Russian assembly, finally fired Yeltsin in 1998 and his cabinet due to his involvement in the break-up of Soviet Union.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the establishment of NATO considered as the action to prevent and keep the balance of the United States and the other European countries toward the rising of the Soviet Union and its allies after the World War II or at the beginning of Cold War. Certainly, for western leaders, Soviet Union was spreading a threat to Europe by influencing East Europe with the ideology of Soviet Union in order to join USSR as one of its allies. Moreover, The aim of NATO is to protect the freedom and security of its member countries, especially about democracy, individual

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<sup>8</sup> Rosenberg, Steve (2016). *Mikhael Gorbachev: The Man who Lost an Empire*. BBC News. Retrieved on January, 6<sup>th</sup> 2018 from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38289333>

<sup>9</sup>N.A (2017). *Boris Yeltsin: President of Russia*. Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved on January, 8<sup>th</sup> 2018 from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Boris-Yeltsin>

liberty, rule of law, peaceful resolutions of disputes in politically and militarily.<sup>10</sup>

As the Soviets earned power by controlling over the countries [of Eastern Europe](#) that they occupied during the World War II, the Western allies such as United States, United Kingdom, and France reacted by tying Western Europe more closely together, including the western part of Germany. However, the political and economic conditions in Western Europe were not stable and some still worried about communist would take over the power of governments in countries like Italy and [France](#).<sup>11</sup>

The insecurities that western leader had, led them to find the weakness of Soviet Union as the new way of. This support led them to find USSR weakness in the economic sector. Therefore, Marshall Plan was created in order to rebuild and stabilize the European situation. Nevertheless, Russian leaders saw the same thing as the menace to their influence and prosperity. Russia believed the west integration through military or non-military intervention that nurtured the “Revolution” in several Russian occupation countries spread a chaos in the region.<sup>12</sup>

Russia clearly saw the appearance of NATO as a threat due to the intervention that has run for 20 years by

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<sup>10</sup>Gedjošová, Iva (2015). *Nato: What is Nato?*. Asosiace Pro Mezinárodní Otázky (AMO), (Praha, 2015), p.3

<sup>11</sup>Rice, J. Mark (2016). *NATO's New Order: The Alliance after The Cold War*. ORIGINS. Retrieved on January, 14<sup>th</sup> 2018 from <http://origins.osu.edu/article/natos-new-order-alliance-after-cold-war>

<sup>12</sup>Strategy Bridges (2016). *The Myth of Russian Aggression and NATO Expansion*. Real Clear Defense. Retrieved on January, 14<sup>th</sup> 2018 from [https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/12/16/the\\_myth\\_of\\_russian\\_aggression\\_and\\_nato\\_expansion\\_110505.html](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/12/16/the_myth_of_russian_aggression_and_nato_expansion_110505.html)



NATO. In the current issues, NATO tried to support Ukraine for its revolutions. However, Russia reacted by using military forces to those who threaten their interest and improved the Ukraine – European Union economic relationship to influence European countries in favor with Russia.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the United States and NATO retaliated Russian aggression by expanding their policies to Europe, and one of NATO's policies toward Europe is European Reassurance Initiative. By this policy, NATO would like to increase the risk and cost of Russian Aggression.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, Bashar Al-Assad is anti-western, anti-Israel and Pro-Palestinian policies. Bashar Al-Assad has a skeptical view toward the west and Israel, and it was increased when the Syrian Civil War began. Syria has a tension with Israel due to its conflicting border since a few years ago. The government of Syria also has increased its military service toward the conflict and tried to utilize its military to give Palestine freedom. In September 2011, Assad sent Palestine people to live in Syria, especially to the Israeli's border in order to show the strength of Syria and the resistance toward Israel.<sup>15</sup> This thing is one of the reasons that made Syria become anti-western, due to the relationship and the support that the United States gives to Israel, it makes Syria become more skeptic to the west.

Basically, the political system of Syria is considered as a unitary-republic with the semi-democracy style of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> 5Pillars (2016). Why Present Pro-Assad Propaganda as “Anti-Western, Anti-Zionist” truths?. 5Pillars. Retrieved on January, 15<sup>th</sup> 2018 from <https://5pillarsuk.com/2016/12/11/why-present-pro-assad-propaganda-as-anti-western-anti-zionist-truths/>

leadership.<sup>16</sup> However, since the crisis happened, Bashar Al-Assad considered as the authoritarian and totalitarian leader. He knew that his citizen wanted perfect democracy and freedom to be implemented in the country, and wanted Assad to step down from the governmental system and give his authoritarian leadership up. However, he declined his citizen desire and using military force to face them in order to hold his position on.<sup>17</sup> Syria has a cynical view of the western especially United States because of the involvement of U.S in Syrian Civil War.

He admitted in his interview with the Australian SBS TV in 2016, The West has a misinterpretation, misconception, or probably kind of propaganda toward Russia and Iran who supported Syria government in The Civil War. Assad blamed the warmongers on the American administration who provoked the situation in Syria. Different from Bush's administration, Obama's administration did not send any troops but mercenaries in the Syrian crisis. Moreover, he stated that the American administrations since 50's are very popular with creating chaos in another country regardless solving the problem itself. American power in invading other countries was a big deal, especially when the US invaded Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen, they have not achieved anything. Again, Assad stressed that America and its allies only good at creating a problem but never really solving it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>GraphicMaps (2018). What Type of Government Does Syria Have?.GraphicMaps. Retrieved from <https://www.graphicmaps.com/syria/government> on April, 13<sup>th</sup> 2018

<sup>17</sup> Haran, VP (2016). Roots of The Syrian Crisis. Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies

<sup>18</sup> Al-Assad, Bashar (2016). *Bashar Al Assad Interview: Western Nations are Supporting the Terrorists. US*

The other reason why Syria has a greater tension with America and its allies is that of the different way of fighting against terrorism. Syria supported the idea of US Geopolitics in fighting together against terrorism because there are a lot of terrorist groups tried to take over northern Syria, yet the US and its allies such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and French were funding the terrorist group to topple down the government. Assad confessed that Syria welcome those countries who want to fight against terrorism in a genuine way and also through the Syrian legitimate government. he will not permit, the country who just intervene another country illegally.<sup>19</sup>

#### **D. The Dynamic of Russia-Syria Relationship**

The relationship between Russia and Syria has been tied since the era of Hafez Al-Assad, the father of Bashar Al-Assad. In that era, Russia was still known as the Soviet Union or USSR who had a war about the ideology against the United States. However, from that war, Soviet Union was collapsed and had a big loss and needed to reconstruct their infrastructure and position in the international world. Thus, Russia saw Syria as one of an important country in the Middle East.<sup>20</sup>

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*Counter-Terrorism Campaign is Bogus*. Global Research. Retrieved on January, 16<sup>th</sup> 2018 from <https://www.globalresearch.ca/bashar-al-assad-interview-western-nations-are-supporting-the-terrorists-us-counter-terrorism-campaign-is-bogus/5533940>

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>Rahaman, ShafiqurMd (2016). *Syrian Civil War: A Historical Study from The Russian Perspective*. Arcjournals (Bangladesh, 2016), p.2

In that time, Middle East was a vital part of the world due to its richness of the natural resources, strategic world politics, and oil. Geopolitically, Syria has a great importance in the Arab side, and historically Syria has been a the-most-wanted natural partner by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq in order to balance the power. In addition, it is important to know that if someone wants to create peace in the Middle East, it needs Syria cooperation. Thus, in 1953 – 1964 (Nikita Khrushchev era), Soviet Union started to cooperate with Syria and provided them military aid about more than 200 million dollars to prevent the influence of the United States and Israel in the Middle East.<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, in 1967, during the Israeli-Arab War, Leonid Brezhnev, the second general secretary of Communist Party of the Soviet Union was on the Arab side and emboldened them to against US – Israel aggression. It was proved by his statement that Russia has helped and will always to continue to help the Arab States. The Soviet Union provided 2.5 billion dollars for military aid in 1967-1968. In addition, Syria was one of the Russian recipients who got a lot of military values in Arabian countries that received 19.1 million dollars under the Brezhnev government.<sup>22</sup>

On the contrary, under the Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin regime, it had a stretch relationship with Syria. Both of them did not interest to be a supporter of military aid for third world country. Also, Gorbachev opened its diplomatic relationship with Israel which somehow made Syria upset. Subsequently, in that time Syria considered its relationship with Russia only the matter of formality. Yet, Yeltsin and Gorbachev still gave support for Syria even though not as much as the Russian leaders before them. It proved by the Gorbachev approval of several arms and military advisors

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

for the Syrian government, and even after the collapse of Soviet Union, the relationship is still developing.<sup>23</sup>

Afterward, in 2005 the new Syrian President, Bashar Al-Assad came to Syria to meet Vladimir Putin for the bilateral relations purpose and for some projects in the future. In those future projects, Vladimir Putin provided mutual cooperation such as arms, aid, technologies to Syria in order to improve their relationship. This relationship that was remained less-strength under Gorbachev has revived again under Putin era. He considered the importance of Syria is crucial by predominating its political and strategic interests. The brotherhood of these countries well-maintained until Arab Spring arrived in Syria, and Russia showed full support for the Syrian government in fighting terrorist and rebellions in the crisis itself and also in the international politics.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid*

<sup>24</sup> Aghayev, Elvin; Katman, Filiz (2012). *Historical Background and The Present State of The Russia – Syria Relation*. European Researcher. Retrieved on January, 22<sup>nd</sup> 2018 from [https://www.academia.edu/3492823/Historical\\_Background\\_and\\_the\\_Present\\_State\\_of\\_the\\_Russian-Syrian\\_Relations](https://www.academia.edu/3492823/Historical_Background_and_the_Present_State_of_the_Russian-Syrian_Relations)

