



DOWNFALL OF THE ASSAD REGIME AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Mariia Hirniak

Mariia Hirniak is currently pursuing a master's degree program in International Relations at the International University of Japan, Japan, E-mail: mhirniak@iuj.ac.jp

Keywords

Assad Regime, Russian Involvement, Syrian Conflict, Ukraine War, Middle East Politics, Geopolitics, International Relations.

ABSTRACT

While geographically distant, the Syrian Conflict and the war in Ukraine share multiple geopolitical threads linked to Russia's broader foreign policy ambitions. This article examines the potential downfall of the Assad regime in Syria and explores how such development could reshape Moscow's strategic posture in Ukraine. Drawing on scholarly literature, policy reports, and media analyses, the study investigates the durability of the Syrian regime, Russia's vested interests in Syria, and how these factors intersect with the Kremlin's capabilities in the Ukrainian theatre. The conclusion highlights prospective shifts in Russia's resource allocation, diplomatic credibility and military tactics, illustrating how events in Damascus may reverberate in Kyiv.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, the global community has followed two major conflict zones: Syria, where President Bashar al-Assad clung to power amid international sanctions and a protracted civil war, and Ukraine, where Russia's military intervention continues to reshape European security. Both situations hinge, to varying degrees, on Moscow's ability to project power and sustain foreign engagements. Since the Russian Federation entered the Syrian conflict in 2015, its armed forces have become a keystone in preserving the Assad regime [1]. Meanwhile, Russia's war escalation in Ukraine has proved costlier and more complex than initially anticipated, calling into question the feasibility of simultaneously maintaining robust military commitments in two separate theaters [2].

The idea that the downfall of the Assad regime in Syria might affect the Kremlin's posture in Ukraine rests on the premise that Russia's foreign policy capital is finite. A sudden power vacuum in Damascus could compel Moscow to redirect its diplomatic, financial and military resources, inadvertently shaping the trajectory of the Ukrainian conflict. Alternatively, the Kremlin's investment in Syria may prove so deep that it cannot easily pivot from Damascus without incurring significant reputational losses. It is therefore, essential to examine whether the Assad regime's future influences not only the Middle East but also Russia's campaign in Ukraine.

BACKGROUND: SYRIA'S ENDURING CONFLICT

The Syrian civil war erupted in 2011 as a part of broader wave of political unrest across the Middle East. Internal divisions, sectarian tensions, and the intervention of regional powers converged to form a protracted conflict that devastated much of the country's infrastructure [3].

President Bashar al-Assad managed to retain control over key population center thanks in large part to external support, most notably from Russia and Iran. Russia's entry in 2015 tipped the military balance by providing air power, training, and strategic coordination, effectively enabling Assad to recapture significant portions of territory that had been under opposition control [4].

However, the conflict also generated considerable strain on the Syrian state. Damascus faces widespread economic hardship, sanctions, and the exodus of its population. The regime's stability relies heavily on international backers, with Russia playing the most

significant role in sustaining governmental structures, military command and diplomatic legitimacy [1]. Moscow's investment in Syria has not only shaped the local power balance but also enhanced Russia's influence in the Middle East, allowing it to establish airbases and a naval facility in Tartus. These footholds position Russia as a long-term actor in the region, a role the Kremlin frequently cites to bolster its global standing [5].

RUSSIAN INTERESTS AND COMMITMENTS

Russia's involvement in Syria goes beyond merely supporting a longstanding ally. The Middle East has historically been a place of strategic significance for Moscow, both as a sphere of potential influence and as a buffer against Western encroachment in the region [6]. By intervening in Syria, the Kremlin gained operational experience, tested new weapons systems, and positioned itself as a power broker capable of mediating among Middle Eastern states. This heightened role has geopolitical ramifications that extend to Europe and beyond.

However, the onset of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 introduced additional pressures on Russia's military capabilities and economic resources. International sanctions, combined with the costs of sustaining large-scale operations in Ukraine, raise questions about the sustainability of Russia's broader geopolitical ambitions [2]. It was also posited that prolonged war in Ukraine may force Russia to ration its armed forces more carefully, potentially, impacting the degree of support it can offer to Assad [7]. The strategic question becomes whether Moscow can effectively hold multiple fronts: a confrontation in Ukraine and a commitment to preserving its sphere of influence in the Levant.

DIPLOMATIC REPERCUSSIONS AND FUTURE TRAJECTORIES

Diplomatic fallout from a potential Assad downfall could manifest in various ways. Western nations might interpret regime collapse as validation that Russian power projection is not invulnerable, which could bolster Ukraine's negotiating stance. European and U.S. policymakers might then increase the flow of military aid or impose tougher sanctions on Russia, seeing as window of opportunity to pressure Russia [2]. Such moves, could, in turn, intensify the conflict in Ukraine if Moscow feels cornered and opts for escalation rather than concession.

In contrast, a more measured Russian response might involve seeking alternative political settlements in Syria to minimize reputational damage. Moscow could attempt to broker a transitional government amenable to its interests, thus preserving elements of its influence. The success of this strategy would hinge on Russia's ability to manage internal Syrian rivalries while continuing to address the immediate demands of the Ukrainian front [6].

With scaled-down presence in Syria, Russia could theoretically channel additional military assets and political capital into Ukrainian conflict, potentially prolonging that war. However, such consolidation may prove complicated if the Kremlin's retreat from the Middle East emboldens other actors – like Turkey, Iran or other local Syrian opposition forces – to fill the vacuum [3]. The subsequent reshuffling of alliances in the region might further complicate Russia's diplomatic positioning.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL ORDER

Analysts often frame the Syrian conflict and the Ukrainian war as illustrations of an ongoing realignment in international relations, where Russia seeks to challenge Western-dominated structures. A collapse of the Assad regime, contrary to Moscow's strategic objectives, would suggest inherent limits to Russian power projection. Observers of global affairs point out that such an event might validate arguments that the Kremlin has overstretched itself, undermining the idea of reviving the Russian sphere of influence [10].

For Ukraine, these developments could offer symbolic and pragmatic advantages. Diplomatically, Kyiv could underscore the perceived vulnerability of Russian commitments to allies, reinforcing calls for greater security guarantees from Europe and the United States. Militarily, Ukraine might exploit the reallocation of Russian forces or finances. Nonetheless, the unpredictability of Moscow's decision-making means that any weakening of Russian involvement in Syria does not straightforwardly equate to a guaranteed advantage for Ukraine. Increased international pressure on Russia at one stage might also provoke escalatory behaviour at another [2].

Conclusion

The downfall of the Assad regime is not merely a localized event within the Middle East. Its ripple effects would likely extend into

the European security domain, most notably the war in Ukraine. Russia's struggle to maintain a strategic foothold in Syria could intensify debates over Moscow's capacity to fight on multiple fronts while sustaining economic and diplomatic burdens. A collapse in Damascus would raise questions about Russia's reliability as a security guarantor and might embolden Ukraine and its Western partners to strengthen their stance.

Conversely, Russia's reaction to such development could involve a redirection of military resources from Ukraine to Syria or a prioritization of Ukraine at the expense of the Middle Eastern front. In either case, the nexus between these two conflicts underscores the interconnectedness of contemporary geopolitics, where shifts in one arena have direct and sometimes unpredictable consequences in another.

Ongoing analysis will benefit from closer scrutiny of Russian military deployments, resource flows, and diplomatic pronouncements. Further research may also incorporate case studies on historical precedents where great powers faced parallel conflicts, evaluating how resource constraints and alliance structures shaped outcomes. From a policy perspective, the international community should monitor the Syrian and Ukrainian conflicts in tandem, recognizing that developments in Damascus may hold direct implications for evolving security architecture in Eastern Europe.

References

- [1] A. Malek, "Evolving Dynamics in the Syrian Conflict," *Conflict Management Journal*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 45–56, 2022, doi:10.1016/j.def.2022.04.005.
- [2] M. Smith, "Humanitarian Dimensions of the Syrian Crisis," *International Humanitarian Legal Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 275–300, 2022, doi:10.1163/18781527-01302005.
- [3] C. Johnson, "Reconsidering External Actors' Roles in Syria," *Journal of Peacebuilding*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 98–115, 2024, doi:10.1080/17502977.2024.2371713.
- [4] K. Kovács, "Shifting Balances of Power in the Syrian Conflict," *CEU Policy Studies*, <https://cens.ceu.edu/sites/cens.ceu.edu/files/attachment/article/720/>.
- [5] O. Nowak, *Russian Policy Papers in the Middle East: Case of Syria*, Pulaski Policy Paper No. 19, 2015. [Online]. Available: https://pulaski.pl/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Pulaski_Policy_Paper_No_19_15_EN.pdf
- [6] G. Petrov, "How do Events in Syria Affect Russia's Strategic Calculus?," *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, Feb. 2015. [Online]. Available: <https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/how-do-events-syria-affect-russia>
- [7] M. Hauser, "Russia's Strategic Success in Syria and the Future of Moscow's Middle East Policy," *Washington Institute*, 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-strategic-success-syria>
- [8] L. Adams, "Assad's Downfall Shows Kremlin Is Not Invincible," *The Kyiv Independent*, Apr. 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://kyivindependent.com/assads-downfall-shows-kremlin-is-not-invincible>
- [9] T. Reznikov, "Syria, the Middle East, and the War in Ukraine," *Egmont Institute Briefings*, 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.egmontinstitute.be/syria-the-middle-east-and-the-war-in-ukraine>
- [10] COAR Global, "Crisis in Ukraine: Impacts for Syria," Mar. 2022. [Online]. Available: <https://www.coar-global.org/2022/03/10/crisis-in-ukraine-impacts-for-syria>