

## Explaining Russian and Algerian Backing of the Syrian Government Hamid BOUDECHICHE<sup>(1)</sup> & Pr Mohamed MANAA<sup>(2)</sup>

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### Abstract:

*Russia and Algeria, almost alone, stood by the side of the "unpopular" Beshar El Assad's regime. The paper discloses the causes behind this stance. The study begins with a survey of the Russian and Algerian foreign policy. Next, follow separate statements of the causes that led Algeria and Russia to take the stand they did. Then, the paper argues that both countries reject foreign interference and support state sovereignty. Both countries suffered terribly from terrorism.*

**Key words:** *Russia, Algeria, political causes, backing, Syrian government.*

### أسباب مساندة روسيا والجزائر للحكومة السورية

### ملخص

كانت روسيا والجزائر تقريباً الوحيدين اللتين وقفنا إلى جانب نظام بشار الأسد "الذي لا يحظى بشعبية". وفي هذا الصدد، يهدف هذا البحث إلى كشف الأسباب التي أدت إلى اتخاذ مثل هذا القرار. نستهل الدراسة بعرض موجز للسياسة الخارجية الروسية والجزائرية ثم ننتقل إلى سرد الأسباب التي أدت بالبلدين لاتخاذ مثل هذا القرار وعلى حدة، والتأكيد على أن كلا البلدين يرفضان التدخل الأجنبي ويدعمان سيادة الدول، رغم معاناتها الشديدة من ويلات الإرهاب.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** روسيا، الجزائر، أسباب سياسية، مساندة، حكومة سورية.

### *Les raisons du soutien de la Russie et de l'Algérie au gouvernement syrien*

### Résumé

*La Russie et l'Algérie ont été presque seules à se tenir aux côtés du régime "impopulaire" de Bachar Al Assad. L'article souligne les raisons qui se cachent derrière cette décision. L'étude commence par un bref aperçu de la politique étrangère de la Russie et de l'Algérie. Ensuite, vient l'exposé séparé des causes des positions des deux pays. Le travail fait valoir le rejet des deux pays de toute ingérence étrangère, ainsi que leur soutien de la souveraineté nationale des états. A savoir que ces deux états ont souffert terriblement du terrorisme.*

**Mot-clés:** *Russie, Algérie, causes politiques, soutien, gouvernement syrien.*

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**Introduction:**

The Arab Spring was hailed in different ways around the world. While many countries including the US and European Union (EU) welcomed the domino effect of democratization in the Arab world, some others were skeptical about the likelihood of success of these mass uprisings. The humiliating departure of Tunisia's Benali, the reluctant stepping down of Mubarek of Egypt and the defeat and tragic murder of Qadhafi raised not only many hopes and rejoicing within the Arab world and outside, but also prompted the opposition and rejection from different parts too.

From the outset, only few states could back away of supporting the popular uprisings of the masses in search of justice and democratic aspirations. However, in 2011, as events began unfolding during the Syrian conflict, Russia and Algeria partly emboldened by their earlier voicing of NATO going beyond the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) authorized actions against Qadhafi's forces, stood against intervention in Syria<sup>(1)</sup>. Russia with China vetoed three resolutions passed by the UNSC. Algeria with Iraq and Lebanon voted against a unanimous support of intervention in Syria within the Arab League Organization.

For the exception of China, which adopted a discrete opposition by voting against the UN resolution without further actions or public criticism of Western positions, there were Iran and Iraq whose Shia-led governments' position is predominantly pro-Beshar El Assad's Alawite<sup>(2)</sup> regime. Russian and Algerian vocal support of the Syrian regime has no religious basis, the latter being Sunni and the former Christian. Russia and Algeria are countries of diverse caliber and weight in the international arena and belong to different geostrategic regions, with different global policies and not necessarily having the same political interests. It is very important to know the factors behind their shared position in the Syrian conflict. Are these factors numerous? Are they commonly shared by both countries? Are they partly common or entirely different for each country? These are the questionings this paper attempts to tackle.

The research undertaken in this field so far has dealt separately with each country. Dmitri Trenin in the case of Russia emphasized the Libyan factor - where UN authorized intervention was diverted from its intended objective- as essential in the consistency of the Kremlin position in the Syrian conflict. He also states four additional reasons in the Russian management of the Syrian case which are: "[the] changing international order, the effects of the Arab Spring, the material interests in Syria, and the role of religion"<sup>(3)</sup>. Andrej Kreutz however, believes that Russia's interest in Syria is justified by the former's desire to secure an access to the Mediterranean<sup>(4)</sup>. Besides, a number of scholars pointed to Moscow's wish to distract the West of the Ukraine crisis, while others considered Russian moves both in Ukraine and in Syria as a soft balancing towards the US and thereby targeting the establishment of a multi-polar world system. It was even contended that the leadership feared a Russian Spring.

As far as Algeria is concerned, Alexis Arieff, focused mainly on the rejection of intervention by the Algerian authorities in Syria as in Libya and overlooked the factors driving the authorities to a rather contentious stand. For Boukhars, Algeria rejects intervention in Syria according to its own principles and because of the "regime's own nervousness about the creation of another potentially dangerous precedent for Western imposed regime change in the Arab world." Finally, the two countries experienced Islamist terrorism and still suffer from residual Jihadism, and for both, this amply explains the support manifested to the Syrian government.

The paper analyzes the factors leading each of the two countries -Russia and Algeria- to adopt such a strategy of supporting Beshar El Assad's regime when almost everyone seemed to disapprove his policies. The approach used will be mainly comparative and analytical, but the descriptive and historical method will be equally necessitated by the nature of the work.

**1- Foreign Policy :****1-1- Russia:**

After being considered as a negligible state by the end of the Cold War, Russian leadership passively watched the world being fashioned by the hegemony of one single superpower<sup>(5)</sup>. The post-Cold War years saw Russia stand powerless as America with its allies invaded Iraq. The subsequent events that shook the Middle East during the events of the Arab Spring also came as Russia unconvincingly acquiesced to the course taken by these events, which started with violent uprisings and ended by foreign intervention and eventually regime change.

The collapse of the Soviet Union put the Russian leadership and public in a bewildering situation as to how to reformulate a fresh foreign policy. Indeed, the Russian strategy after the Cold War had to be devised nearly from scratch<sup>(6)</sup>. If Russians seemed to agree about the necessity of building a strong economy, they had different views as how the country's foreign policy should be conducted. Against supporters of Western leaning, there stood proponents of continuity and demarcation from the US spearheaded Western bloc.

Since the days of Gorbachev's Perestroika there appeared a split between Westernizers (zapadniki) and Eurasianists, both in geopolitical theories and in the nature of Russian civil society and social organization as a whole. The zapadniki support the thought that Russia should become a "European democracy because Western values of pluralism and democracy are universal"<sup>(7)</sup> and can apply to Russia. Eurasianists however, usually influenced by nationalist-patriotic leanings believe Russia to be an amalgamation of "a particularist geographical, psychological, historical and cultural independence [that] has shaped its continental identity and territorial being, rendering it neither East nor West"<sup>(8)</sup>. The shift away from a Western foreign policy orientation in the early 1990s was rather a success of those who defend Eurasianist geopolitical views; primarily, Communists and the far right.

The post Soviet foreign policy in Russia went through three different stages. At the beginning, from 1991 to 1994, Moscow observed a cooperative policy with the West, particularly at the level of multinational organizations like the United Nations. Then, there was the phase extending from 1995 to 2000 when Russians became more cautious and distant from the Western positions<sup>(9)</sup>. The final stage covers the Putin era, especially the years in which he served as a Prime Minister and his third term as a president. In this phase, Russia became openly assertive through a series of actions like Georgia, Crimea, Ukraine and Syria, though it continued to be cooperative with the West on several matters like the Iranian nuclear crisis<sup>(10)</sup>. Hence, Russia ultimately sent signals challenging the West and pundits began speaking of a revisionist Russia.

The assertive conduct of the Kremlin can be perceived in the fact that it has moved from vetoing undesirable Security Council measures to drafting ones that serve its interests. The return of Putin to the presidency and the rising oil prices that boosted the Russian economy were major factors behind the revisionist policies of Moscow. Again, with what is increasingly being perceived by Russians and many observers around the world as America's waning global hegemony, Russia is set to play a more active role in the region in general and in Syria in particular. It is believed that the shift in Russian policy does not equate to a return to the Cold War hostility between Moscow and the West<sup>(11)</sup>.

**1-2- Algeria:**

As soon as it accessed to independence, Algeria began advocating a policy upholding the sovereignty of states and the right to decolonization. Thus, it became a leading supporter of revolutionaries in Africa and the Arab world and a staunch promoter of the developing world rights. It also rejected bipolarity and sought to establish a world based on multilateral forums suited to her preferences of self-determination, respect of borders, non-intervention and state sovereignty. Algerian President Boumedienne called for the establishment of a new world order to protect the rights of poor states. The old world system, he believed, promoted the rights of the rich world and perpetuated global inequalities<sup>(12)</sup>.

The battle for a more equitable world began waning as the country entered in a rivalry with neighboring Morocco about the Western Sahara issue in late 1975. This conflict divided the global South between moderate states supporting Morocco's right to annex the Western Sahara and progressive ones supporting the Western Saharan right to self-determination defended by Algeria. The cleavage grew further as Morocco withdrew from the Organization of African States (OAU) in 1984 when the latter accepted the membership of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1982. The death of Boumedienne did not put an end to the rivalry of the two neighbors, it did, however, diminish the fight for a vision of an international egalitarian political and economic order<sup>(13)</sup>.

The Algerian foreign policy is known by the following features; first, Algeria and America more often than not do not see eye to eye on many world political and economic issues. Second, tensions with Morocco continue to spoil the relationship between the two countries because of the stalemated crisis in the Western Sahara and a rivalry for regional leadership. Third, relations with France cannot be consistently improved. Fourth, the country plays a leading role in the Non-Aligned Movement despite the government leftist leanings and close ties with Soviet Union in the early days of the republic. The war with France contributed to the Algerian leaders' inheriting the rejection of direct foreign intervention with an ongoing cynicism of French and NATO intentions<sup>(14)</sup>.

During the Algerian tragedy, the international community avoided Algeria and its officials for their alleged non-acceptable handling of the Islamist insurgency. The cancelling of the electoral process and the all-tough security approach in fighting terrorism used by the government upset the Westerners. However, "in the post-9/11 world," Mesdoua notes, "Algeria's methods were vindicated as foreign security agencies looked to their Algerian counterparts for counterterrorism assistance and intelligence sharing". Thus, the country's world status was recovered when the United States, the UK and France began looking for regional allies in their fight against terrorism.

The coming of Bouteflika to the presidency in 1999 helped the country regain its world position, as it became a leading regional actor. He made a rapprochement with America and attempted to boost the clumsy relations with France and Europe. Under his stewardship, the government's foreign policy was articulated to render Algeria diplomatically leading in the Arab World, Africa and among developing countries. In spite of the overwhelming changes that took place in international relations, Algerian policy under Bouteflika towards the west did not get any marked revision for suspicion continued to characterize diplomatic, military, and financial relations between the two sides<sup>(15)</sup>.

Hence, Algerians continue to champion state sovereignty, viewed as a vital basis for international stability. This position conflicts with the new widely promoted international human rights of the "responsibility to protect." The events that shook Libya, Syria and Mali revealed the serious challenges facing Algerian foreign policy. Undoubtedly, a consistent belief in non-intervention policy has crippled the country in dealing with imminent threats in its immediate neighborhood<sup>(16)</sup>.

It is clear then, that the tide of Arab Spring and the massive street support of the democratic aspirations of the peoples that ensued rendered Algeria's old foreign policy paradigm that stressed sovereignty of states and non-interference in their internal affairs, outdated and colliding with the fresh concept of international humanitarian intervention. Many people could not understand Algerian opposition to foreign intervention in Libya and Syria, which they viewed as an attempt to forestall democratic expansion. Whatever may be the feelings of people, Mesdoua believes that Algerian fears were not spurred by democratic expansion as they were by "domestic considerations, security policy and geostrategic imperative".

Successive Algerian governments have regularly renounced from having their country play an overly assertive leadership role in their usual areas of influence. Algerians have usually

held a strong approach towards the doctrines of national sovereignty and nonintervention in the internal affairs of other states inherited from an unfaltering anti-colonial and nonaligned tradition<sup>(17)</sup>. Furthermore, the country's traditional competition with neighboring Morocco and its focus on ongoing internal Jihadist militancy distracts its attention away from the Sahel issue despite the latter's urgency and gravity<sup>(18)</sup>.

For Boukhars, Algerian leaders' aloofness may cost the country to forgo the opportunity of weighing in an advantageous way on the changes occurring in the neighboring world and in shaping the debate over the desired legal limits on the emerging concept of the "responsibility to protect". The different assets enjoyed by the country entitle it to be leading in the region. According to Ammour the Country boasts the first defense budget in Africa (\$10.3 billion in 2012), great military power projection capabilities due to a large fleet, and a largely acknowledged counterterrorism experience<sup>(19)</sup>. It is also a leading member in many terrorism-oriented forums.

As a consequence of the collapse of the Libyan government, Algeria became a refuge for Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and affiliated militia groups, such as Ansar Al Sharia which were a real menace on the security of the country. Additional threats came from the presence of terrorist groups in the mountainous areas on the borders with Tunisia and Mali that caused the concern of the Algerian security circles about the gravity of the situation especially after the discovery of weapon caches<sup>(20)</sup>.

However, it was indisputably the attack on In Amenas gas facility in 2013 executed by the terrorist group, the al-Mua'qi'oon Biddam Brigade led by Mokhtar Belmokhtar, which shocked the Algerian government and raised the alarm of the security milieu<sup>(21)</sup>. The oil and gas installations in the Algerian southern areas -- impregnable citadels even at the height of the civil war-- easily succumbed to terrorist assault. The security deficiency prompted a serious debate over Algerian foreign policy within the regime. The press and civil society questioned the wisdom and the benefit of noninterventionist policies belonging to bygone times. They argued that a proper security of these sensitive places would have prevented a small number of terrorists from reaching them. They contended too that suitable preemptive actions would have predicted these attacks<sup>(22)</sup>.

## **2- Factors for the Support of the Syrian Government:**

### **2-1- Russia:**

The thirst for independence from Moscow immediately after the demise of the Soviet Union, prompted many countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or what Russians call "Near Abroad"<sup>(23)</sup> to engage in hasty and probably reckless alliances and treaties with neighboring countries such as Iran, Turkey and China and even countries of the "Far Abroad" like Japan, Europe and America. Undoubtedly, these alliances when supported with financial ties to organization like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) do undermine CIS integration and constitute a threat to an area deemed by Russia as naturally and historically a part of its necessarily expanding interests<sup>(24)</sup>.

Some analysts of Western policy towards Russia became concerned when moves were made in the Caucasus/Caspian Sea region and predicted a response from Moscow. Michael McFaul, a leading commentator warned:

States such as Azerbaijan, Ukraine and Georgia have encouraged American involvement in the region to balance the hegemonic presence of Russia. Supporting the autonomy of these states without threatening Russia's strategic interests in Eurasia will require a balancing act – but it may be the most important issue on the US-Russian agenda in the coming decade<sup>(25)</sup>.

In this context, Robert Hunter, also advised that; "due regard should be given to Russian interests, including along its southern periphery... Neither the (NATO) alliance nor any of its members should seize upon Russia's weakness to develop challenges in these regions (Transcaucasia and Central Asia) that could become sources of long-term instabilities and possible conflicts<sup>(26)</sup>". Notwithstanding such warnings both, the European Union and the

NATO alliance, hurriedly sought to expand their respective spaces to the new fledgling states leaving the Soviet nest in search of adoption.

In Libya, Russia paid a high price -its companies' loss amounted to 20 billion dollars<sup>(27)</sup>-, for yielding to the will of the Western fierce campaign to launch UN raids to protect civilians from the bombings of Qadhafi's planes. Russia abstained from the vote in the UNSC and unsurprisingly, the initially humanitarian UN mission left its course to become a NATO led coalition to topple the Libyan leader. The raids tracked and targeted the Qadhafi forces instead of being limited to protecting the opposition in Benghazi<sup>(28)</sup>, which was a manifest shift in the course of operations as intended by the UN resolution.

The Kremlin's policy in Syria like the ones in Crimea and Ukraine are driving a wedge between Russia and the West. However, the former's determination is unswerving because Moscow decided that it can no longer be ignored and Westerners have to deal with it on terms that are not usually theirs. The US and Europe should envisage cooperating with Russia and consider its interests in a win-win relationship<sup>(29)</sup>.

In a recent move, Putin sought to build a coalition against the Islamic State that would include Mr. Assad's government. According to Aleksandr Golts a military analyst in Moscow, Putin "hopes that the process of forming such a coalition would free Russia from its international isolation caused by its annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern and southern Ukraine and also make it a respected member of the world community again<sup>(30)</sup>".

The Russians seem to have learned so much from the Chechen war, for they came to the conclusion that the Arab world is the hotbed of Islamist extremism that threatened Russia and its Near Abroad in Central Asia and the South Caucasus<sup>(31)</sup>.

The severe crackdown on the uprising in Chechnya helped shape Russian position on turbulences at home and abroad. The rejection of foreign concern and voicing of harsh handling of the Chechen rebellion led Russia to consider meddling with internal state matters very unacceptable. According to Lavrov, no one can claim that the so-called concept of the responsibility to protect must be universally applied in all cases when peoples begin to show displeasure and when the authorities use force against the various protest manifestations to restore order because freedom is not without limitations and these limitations are clearly stated in all international legal instruments relating to the protection of human rights and freedoms<sup>(32)</sup>.

For Russia, to return to the forefront of the international scene is of a vital import for the tarnished reputation of the country after the Cold War. Tony Brenton, UK ambassador in the Kremlin from 2004 to 2008, noted that Russians, "will be hoping fervently that this leads to some kind of peaceful resolution between Assad and the opposition in Syria," and added, "If you think that not so long ago, after the collapse of communism, Russia became a completely negligible international factor, to be back out there at the table brokering international policy is a big thing for them<sup>(33)</sup>".

According to Russian analyst Lilit Gevorgyan, Russian resupply base in Syrian port of Tartus, dating from Soviet days, pressures Moscow to seek to keep its influence in the country by all means. He argues, "Russia's opposition to regime change in Syria is not so much driven out of loyalty to Assad's regime, but more out of Moscow's efforts to force the US to give it a say" on the Syrian conflict. "Instead of having the US as an adversary, Russia would rather like to have a pragmatic partnership with the US. It would prefer being a member of the same club<sup>(34)</sup>".

To some Republicans like Jeb Bush and John McCain, Putin's resolve and decisiveness in Syria is made easy, according to Throor by "American fecklessness and dithering." The Russian campaign "is a dramatic example of the diminution of . . . American influence in the region," points out Senator John McCain, a leading advocate of the primacy of American military might abroad and the role it ought to play at the global level<sup>(35)</sup>.

Syrian President Beshar El-Assad's failure to defeat his opponents, particularly his rapid loss of territory near the port of Latakia, alarmed Kremlin advisers. Therefore, Moscow made the resolve to engage much more in the conflict to stop further advances of the Islamic State fighters. "The Islamic State is the mortal enemy of Russia, and it is so much better to engage them outside of Russia," Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center noted<sup>(36)</sup>.

The lack of a clear and firm policy from the US and the EU left strategic opportunities for Russia in Syria. Gearan and Wilson believe that Russia succeeded in "outmaneuver[ing] the US diplomatically when it moved to broker an agreement with Assad and the US for the removal of chemical weapons from Syria<sup>(37)</sup>". The provision of Russian military equipment and cooperation with Assad, besides assistance for Syria's air defense program, argues Nizameddin showed Russia's commitment to supporting the Assad regime despite his wide unpopularity in the region<sup>(38)</sup>.

For Russia, the use of force in international relations should be not only authorized but also tightly monitored by the Security Council throughout the operation. Westerners' decision to accommodate Islamists who were behind all of the Arab Spring uprisings was a bad signal to the Kremlin. While Europeans and Americans saw in the Arab world a replication of Europe's democratic upheavals of 1848 or 1989, for Russians, they were a reminder of their own revolution of 1917, which was but a huge massacre<sup>(39)</sup>. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, noted that linking Arab Spring and democracy is "baby talk" for the Arab revolts, despite the violence, destruction, chaos, and bloodshed that went along, they failed to deliver any real democratic regimes<sup>(40)</sup>.

When Russians dissatisfied by the allegedly flawed parliamentary elections of December 2011, took to the streets, some home and foreign critics began speaking of a "Russian Spring<sup>(41)</sup>". Then, Russians were not so much worried by the "huddled masses" that would cause destructive chaos as they were of Western meddling through instigation or foreign intervention. Former deputy prime minister, Igor Sechin noted that the Arab Spring was a "Western-inspired, Western-led regime change<sup>(42)</sup>".

The loss of the Alawite regime would affect Iran in many ways: weakening Shia militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon, that both Iran and Syria use as a proxy, would lead to the wane of other Shia groups in the region that are allied with Iran. Instead of leading from behind, to Russian Middle East analysts, the United States "is largely following Saudi policy, which is informed by Riyadh's regional agenda, centered on the Sunni-Shia rivalry<sup>(43)</sup>".

Russia's Syrian policy is not primarily motivated by material interests but by the doctrine of multipolarity and the wish to maintain influence and reputation in the region. Most importantly, Russia seeks a multipolar world, where the United States would not be one-sidedly dominating and in which Russia would have an appreciably influential role. In mid-1990s, Yevgeny Primakov, the mastermind of Russian foreign policy developed this line of thinking; it has now become the established policy in all strategic planning. Russian strategy relies on upholding multilateral decision making based on international law, and a great articulation of "fundamental role" played by the UN and the UNSC in particular<sup>(44)</sup>.

## **2-2- Algeria:**

The Algerian position on the Syrian crisis was a subject of reproach by Arab diplomats especially the Gulf States. From the beginning, Algeria did not share the position of the Gulf states which supported the opposition. The Algerian stand stemmed from the fact that what started as a simple rebellion against Assad's authoritarian rule with democratic aspirations was diverted into an armed uprising led by the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The Algerian authorities believed that the citizens' rebellion had been corrupted by Islamists and their sponsors to spread instability in Syria<sup>(45)</sup>.

When the Organization of Islamic Cooperation members voted in 2012 to suppress Syria's membership, only Algeria and few Arab and Islamic states opposed the move. Again, when the Arab League decided in 2013 to provide military support to the Syrian opposition and to

accept the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, only Algeria opposed both measures with Iraq and Lebanon. In spite of strong suspicions of Algerian involvement in arming the Syrian regime, there has been no concrete evidence of such undertaking<sup>(46)</sup>.

Algeria usually rejects interference of other countries in its domestic policy and did the same with Syria as it had done before with Tunisia and Libya. Mostly, this attitude was due to the fact the population was uninterested in the Syrian crisis as it was primarily focused on the explosive events in Libya and the evolution of the Tunisian democratic experience in its infant days. In the second place, the Algerian attitude was fashioned by the rise of fundamentalist movements. The fear of contagion from neighboring uprisings caused great concern to the government in particular as the international community adopted a favorable stance vis à vis Islamist parties which became accepted as an alternative to the contested regimes in the Arab World.

In addition to Algerian opposition to intervention as a matter of principle, it is undoubtedly- especially in the case of Syria- caused by the “regime’s own nervousness about the creation of another potentially dangerous precedent for Western imposed regime change in the Arab world<sup>(47)</sup>”. The leadership feared newer cases of foreign interference going along with the sweeping wave of democratic protests in the Arab world. Should Algeria fall in a whirlpool of popular contest, the regime would have to face the same fate of foreign intervention. In Tunisia and Egypt, Islamists were able to outdo the “old guard generals” which was a prelude to the Islamization of both societies with great security consequences on the area as a whole. Surprisingly, as the Syrian conflict reached a critical point, there appeared a consistent misinformation deftly conveyed by satellite channels spreading the message that Algeria’s turn will be after Syria<sup>(48)</sup>. There were many repeated warnings that Algeria’s turn is coming “soon”, in reference to successive Arab Spring uprisings. Diplomatically, however, President Bouteflika has exceptional relations with the Emir of Qatar who, with Saudi king, were the key sponsors of the rebellion against the regime of Beshar El Assad. Further, Algeria has very good relations with Iran, which uses Algiers as a means of communication with the West in its nuclear issue and which supports the Syrian government<sup>(49)</sup>.

Algerian primary concern, nevertheless, was the fear of Syrian partition, which would send the whole region of the Near East into an unprecedented turmoil with unpredictable consequences. After five years of conflict in Syria, with thousands of dead and missing, millions of displaced, the grave responsibilities of Assad’s brutal regime are unquestionable and so are the responsibilities of the Syrian opposition, which was behind countless atrocities too.

According to Tamani, the Syrian conflict is actually following the path of Yugoslav war, which had nearly settled the boundaries between the various protagonists - the Serbs, Muslims, Croats and Slovenians- before the intervention of the international community to impose a peace according to the balance of powers on the ground. The Syrian field battles reflect the Yugoslav image precisely; all warring groups seeking an expansion of territory under their control. The larger the territory being controlled, the more negotiating assets will be held by the contender. It is such a partition scenario, which dictated the Algerian attitude toward the ongoing crisis in Syria by supporting the standing regime to prevent violence and turmoil that characterize other countries that witnessed an Arab Spring uprising.

### **3- Explaining the Shared Position:**

The Syrian and Russian relationships go back to Soviet days and have been most of the time rather strong ones, because the Syrian regime has been very close to the Soviets and one of the West’s usual opponents. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these relations became rather lukewarm to be revived during the Arab Spring events. On the other hand, Algeria and Syria have regularly held strong ties. As early as 1979 Algeria and Syria with Libya stood



against Sadat's Egypt peace treaty with Israel and set an alliance -The Steadfastness and Resistance Front<sup>(50)</sup> - rejecting peace with Israel.

At this stage, it is appropriate to analyze these factors according to their relevance and applicability to each country. First, among the factors typically relevant to Russia, there is the EU and NATO expansion of their influence to the immediately neighboring areas, which Russians consider as their zone of influence. Moscow's retaliation came in the actions of Crimea, Ukraine, and the support of the Syrian regime. Another reason motivating Russian position and closely related with the first one, lies in the Kremlin policies seeking the establishment of a multi-polar world to offset the hegemonic US policies after the end of the Cold War<sup>(51)</sup>.

The belief that America is on the retreat under Obama is due to Putin's success in striking a deal for the removal of Syrian chemical weapons. This accomplishment encouraged him to get further involved in the conflict. Putin's success boosted Russian reputation and put its image in the forefront of the international relations. Finally, Russian base in the Syrian port of Tartus justifies Moscow's interest in the incumbent government to keep an access to the Mediterranean<sup>(52)</sup>.

Second and insofar as factors behind Algerian authorities backing of Beshar El Assad government are concerned, they all stem from a long tradition in the country's foreign policy of non-intervention and veneration of state sovereignty coupled with the view of settling crises through negotiations. One of the serious reasons leading the Algerian leadership to reject interference is the favorable stance adopted by the international community towards Islamist political movements as substitutes to the unpopular Arab regimes.

The acceptance of Islamists when combined with many instances of regime change, which was either advocated or tolerated in the Arab World by the Western world, constituted a real threat to the standing regime in Algeria. Another factor that came as a consequence of the Arab Spring is the rumored message that circulated on TV channels ranking Algeria's turn of upheaval just after the Syrian one. The government, which feared a contagion, rejected intervention in Syria and backed a negotiated settlement because, in addition to the fear of contagion, they genuinely feared a partition of the country.

Thirdly, the fear of contagion is among the factors shared by the two countries, for Russia as well felt the danger of unrest when protests broke in the wake of legislative elections. Putin blamed these contests as a Western plot to start a Russian Spring, though it was less probable than an Arab Spring in Algeria. Again, both countries stood against foreigners poking their nose in the domestic affairs of other countries. While Algeria stood against foreign interference even for humanitarian reasons - the doctrine of "right to protect" - and the respect of state sovereignty and rejected the idea of regime change from the early Arab Spring uprising in Tunisia, Moscow however, became convinced and concerned only when the case of Syria erupted.

The catastrophic outcome of earlier Arab Spring upheavals, which ended up in more violence, bloodshed and turmoil rather than democracy, reassured both countries to see their position vindicated. The last common factor but probably the most important is the experience both countries had in fighting Islamist terrorism and the ongoing concern with the residual presence of terrorists on their respective lands. The common enemy of Russia, Algeria, and Syria is terrorism and that explains why the former two stood by the side of the latter one.

Consequently, there comes out of the above classification and analysis the existence of some common views and policies shared by both Russia and Algeria. The two countries stand against human rights intervention, the breach of state sovereignty and regime change. They also oppose the abuse in the implementation of "the responsibility to protect" which is used to cripple governments in handling uprisings common in many countries due to ethnic, religious or ideological destabilizing factors.

There also ensues from elements stated above that while both countries share these views, they act in different arenas. Russia, as a member of the UNSC, blocked undesirable resolutions against Syria within the UN and Algeria, as an Arab country, hindered unanimous action against the Syrian regime within the Arab League. If Russia has stakes in Syria, which is the resupply base in the Syrian port of Tartus, Algeria has no immediate gains strategic or whatever. Both countries, nonetheless, have a similar repulsion of terrorism, which they wish to see defeated in Syria and worldwide.

The investigation of the motivating factors in the policy of Algeria and Russia towards the Syrian crisis and which revealed the fact that they shared chiefly the upholding of state rights closely linked to the opposition of regime change and the experience and suffering from anti-terrorist threat. It would be very interesting for future research to investigate if these two factors when combined in any country can lead to the same outcome or should other reasons be involved and political or geopolitical considerations be examined.

**Conclusion:**

In accordance with a more assertive world role, Russia has embarked on a new approach to the Syrian conflict where it sought to curb America's hegemonic policies in the post Cold War world. Various factors dictated this new Russian outlook. First, the Kremlin felt its interests threatened by Western --NATO and European--expanding strategies whose reach went as far as to incorporate countries within Russia's Near Abroad. The second reason behind the shift in Russian policy is to halt Islamist Jihadist swelling world power because Western efforts were ineffective in Moscow's appraisal. Islamist militancy is a domestic problem Russia is fighting in the Caucasus region and therefore strongly opposes abroad too. The third reason is the loss of Russian economic privileges as what happened in Libya. Moreover, Russia rejects the Western policy of regime change and the human right of the "responsibility to protect".

Algeria too opposed NATO's intervention and regime change in Libya, and is an outstanding opponent of the interventionist policy promoted by the Arab League to the situation in Syria. Many Algerian officials denounced revolutionary changes as a way of destabilizing the Middle East by increasing turmoil and fanning the flames of Islamist extremism. Although this is the oft-used strategy by Algerian authorities to frighten away foreigners thinking of moderate Islamists as an alternative to the dictatorial regimes in the Arab world, yet this is the official stance. They also explained the democratic-driven movements as a ploy orchestrated by Western powers and their Gulf allies, especially Qatar.

Russian and Algerian common stance towards the Syrian conflict was widely contested. The leadership in both countries had to show great resolve to adopt such a stand because of the overwhelming Western and Gulf pressure and propaganda. Whereas Russian move was the first of its kind, where the Kremlin had to face the will of the West in actual diplomatic action, Algerian position was a continuation of a previously contested policy in relation to the Arab Spring since the first case of Tunisia.

The Russian action is an implementation of a more assertive policy unlike the one conducted since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In contrast, the Algerian policy is a continuance of old policies in a completely changed world conjuncture. Paradoxically, the backing of Moscow and Algiers to the Syrian government is not rooted in the same foreign policy ambition. For the former, the Syrian strategy aims at achieving an international reach and imposing a world role. Algerian position in Syria however, is deeply embedded in her traditional non-interventionist policy and the defense of state rights.

Algiers had to stand against the Gulf-oriented Arab League, an action whose scope, though significant, is regional. Moscow, on the other hand, challenged the US because the Russian veto invalidated the UNSC resolution and was thereby a bending of American will besides provoking the wrath of the Gulf States. Consequently, it is safe to consider that the result of Russian position is international in its scope whereas Algerian reaction to the Syrian conflict

had regional reach only. Nevertheless, the cumulative effect of the two countries' position combined to additional international --China-- and regional --Iran, Iraq and Lebanon-- backing was vital in imposing the ongoing status for the Syrian crisis.

The protracted Syrian conflict caused so many human sufferings in death toll, and displaced populations; it also reflected a success of Russian and Algerian opposition to regime change. The survival of Beshar El Assad's government for so long a period meant America and her European allies were incapable of having their way in Syria. A negotiated settlement with the standing regime is much safer for all actors implicated in the conflict than any unpredictable chaotic consequences of a regime change. The change of the Iraqi and Libyan regimes, which resulted in atrocious sectarian infighting between the various factions, can be a good lesson to heedless adventurers or promoters of such policies.

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