

The Fall of Bashar al-Assad's Regime: A Strategic Blow to Russia

Nona Mikhelidze

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime marks a pivotal moment in Syria's history, one that Middle East experts will undoubtedly scrutinise for its broader implications. Yet, for those studying Russia, the situation holds a clear message: the downfall of Syria's dictator is a strategic blow for Moscow.

Fears of popular uprisings

First and foremost, the fall of any dictator through a popular uprising, especially in an allied nation, is perceived by the Kremlin as a direct threat to its own grip on power within Russia. This is why every revolution – whether the so-called colour revolutions or the Euromaidan uprising, as well as the upheavals of the Arab Spring, including the ouster and killing of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi – has been met with hostility and anxiety in Moscow. In the case of Ukraine, these fears escalated into military intervention, culminating in Russia's annexation of Crimea and the initiation of the war in Donbas back in 2014 and the ongoing full-scale invasion in 2022.

As Russian expert Alexander Baunov notes, had Assad fallen during the Arab Spring alongside Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gaddafi, it would have signalled the inherent weakness of his regime. Instead, his eventual downfall occurred despite significant support from the Kremlin, which inevitably casts Russia's influence in a weaker light.¹

An unlikely saviour

Second, in 2016, Russian propaganda actively framed the Kremlin as Syria's saviour. A government-issued calendar depicted smiling Syrian women expressing gratitude for Russia's intervention, accompanied by captions like: "I am calm when my land is under your control" and "The

¹ Alexander Baunov, "Damascus in Three Days: What the Loss of Syria Means for Russia" [in Russian], in *Carnegie Politika*, 9 December 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/12/russia-syria-assad-failure>; "A Personal Defeat for Putin'. What the Failure to Protect Assad Could Mean for Russia's Future", in *Meduza*, 10 December 2024, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2024/12/10/a-personal-defeat-for-putin>.

Nona Mikhelidze is a Senior Fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

fate of my Palmyra is in your hands.”² The following year, Vladimir Putin visited Damascus to reaffirm Russia's dominance in the region, delivering stern warnings: “If the terrorists raise their heads again”, the Russian military, from its bases in Tartus and Hmeimim, “will deal unprecedented strikes unlike anything they have seen.”³

Today, however, the failure to preserve Assad's regime turns such imagery into bitter irony. The Russian military failed to defend Assad and even to counter the so-called “terrorists” Putin once claimed to be able to defeat. In the end, Moscow was forced to abandon one of its longstanding allies.

A regional power in decline

In 2014, Barack Obama infamously referred to Russia as a “regional power”⁴ – a remark that deeply irked the Kremlin. And now yet, after embarking on a disastrous war in Ukraine, Moscow risks losing even its status as a regional player. The debacle in Syria fits into a broader pattern of geopolitical decline in its immediate neighbourhood. This loss comes on the heels of Russia's failure to support Armenia in its conflict with Azerbaijan.

² Damien Sharkov, “Risqué Russian ‘Propaganda’ Calendar of Syrian Women Sparks Outrage”, in *Newsweek*, 26 December 2016, <https://www.newsweek.com/russian-calendar-troops-under-fire-syrian-woman-it-534764>; “‘From Syria with Love’ Calendar Gifted to Putin”, in *Al Arabiya*, 16 December 2016, <https://ara.tv/yq3ma>.

³ Russian Presidency, *Vladimir Putin Visited Khmeimim Air Base in Syria*, 11 December 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56351>.

⁴ Julian Borger, “Barack Obama: Russia Is a Regional Power Showing Weakness over Ukraine”, in *The Guardian*, 25 March 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/3np96>.

In 2023, the alliance between Baku and Ankara faced a Kremlin unable to respond, allowing Azerbaijan to reclaim Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions, ending decades of stalemate. Meanwhile, in Central Asia, Russia's influence is declining as China steadily strengthens its foothold. Georgia, too, may soon join the list of Putin's defeats, underscoring the decline of a power that once aspired to global dominance.

Back in 2015 Russia's military intervention in Syria marked the beginning of a more assertive foreign policy. Putin sought to signal Russia's return as a global actor. However, maintaining this status and safeguarding its Middle Eastern presence has come at significant costs. In human terms, Russian soldiers have paid the price, losing their lives to prop up Assad. Economically, supporting the Syrian regime has been a drain on Russian taxpayers: in 2015, Moscow spent an estimated 4 million US dollars per day on the intervention,⁵ with costs doubling as troop deployments increased. By 2020, Russia allocated an additional 1 billion US dollars for “humanitarian” purposes.⁶

Now, the future of Russia's military bases in Syria hangs in the balance. Some reports suggest that Russia may be withdrawing its key installations, including the Khmeimim airbase and

⁵ Holly Ellyatt, “This Is How Much Russia's ‘War’ in Syria Costs”, in *CNBC*, 21 October 2015, <https://www.cnbc.com/2015/10/21/this-is-how-much-russias-war-in-syria-costs.html>.

⁶ “Russia Grants Assad \$1bn, Opens Trade Mission in Damascus”, in *Middle East Monitor*, 13 November 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/?p=434569>.

the naval facility at Tartus, while others indicate that Moscow is attempting to negotiate an agreement with Damascus's new government – and possibly with Turkey – to secure its continued presence. Regardless of the outcome, Russia's setbacks appear to grant Ankara a significant advantage. Since the invasion of Ukraine, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has steadily expanded his leverage over the Kremlin, both in the Caucasus and increasingly in the Middle East. This growing influence positions him to play a decisive role in shaping Russia's future in Syria. Yet, no matter how events unfold, the political blow to Moscow is undeniable.

Russian invincibility's myth debunked

The Syrian debacle underscores not merely a lack of political will but a stark inability on Russia's part to project power effectively across multiple fronts. Russia's failure to sustain Assad is largely due to the war in Ukraine. Moscow's so-called "special military operation", initially envisioned as a quick campaign, has devolved into a gruelling three-year conflict. Of late, Russia has resorted to recruiting North Korean soldiers and has even lost control of parts of its own territory, as evidenced by Ukraine's occupation of the Kursk region. If Moscow cannot defend Kursk, it is hardly in a position to save Assad once more.

In Russia, analysts have dubbed the Syrian debacle "Putin's Afghanistan", with some arguing that Moscow lacks the military power, resources, influence and authority needed for effective interventions beyond the

borders of the former USSR. Its actions in such regions, they contend, are largely contingent on the tacit approval of other major powers and persist only as long as that consent is granted.⁷ Others liken Russia's defeat in Syria to the "Kremlin's Vietnam" because, unlike the planned albeit disastrous US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 or the Soviet retreat in 1989, Russia's failure in Syria was unforeseen.⁸

Sure, the defeat is not about the survival of the Russian state, which can endure without a Middle Eastern presence. Instead, it strikes at the heart of the Kremlin's geopolitical narrative. Syria had been turned into a symbol of Russia's resurgence as a global power. Propaganda had portrayed its military successes there as proof that Moscow was reclaiming its stature. Today, explaining Russia's impotence in Syria poses a daunting challenge to the Kremlin's propagandists.

With Assad's regime in ruins, so too crumbles the myth of Russia's invincibility. Does this signify the beginning of the end for Putin's regime? Perhaps, perhaps not. But the Syrian case imparts a vital lesson: making predictions about the longevity of dictators is often a futile endeavour.

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⁷ Ruslan Pukhov, "Lessons from Syria" [in Russian], in *Kommersant*, 8 December 2024, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7362241>.

⁸ Vladimir Pastukhov and Dmitry Elovsky, "Damascus Has Fallen, 'Little Assad' Remains. Syria: Putin Lost" [in Russian], in *Khodorkovsky Live*, 8 December 2024, <https://youtu.be/fokJZ2srxx8>.

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Via dei Montecatini, 17
I-00186 Rome, Italy
Tel. +39 066976831
iai@iai.it
www.iai.it

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