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EGF Foreign Policy Briefing: Russian Relations with the Syrian Arab Republic
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Although Russia is now concentrating on its near abroad (the states and territories of the former Soviet Union), not global domination, for both geo-political and strategic reasons, the Arab and Muslim countries of the Middle East are of substantial and even growing interest to Moscow. Its bilateral relations with Syria are of particular importance for both parties and are not without impact on the whole region.

The recent bombing attack in Moscow reminded the world again that Russia is still threatened by large scale terrorist attacks and separatist movements in the Northern Caucasus. Although their causes can be disputed, the presence of almost 30 Million Muslims in the country requires an accommodating policy towards the world of Islam. Consequently the present Russian leaders want to preserve, and if possible expand, Russian-Syrian relations in order to maintain the positive aspects of previous Moscow-Arab world involvement and to promote Russia's image as a country friendly towards the Islamic people. At the same time they do not want to go too far, as they need to avoid possible major negative repercussions from Washington and Jerusalem - relations with whom they consider far more important.

The Syrian Baathist regime is the most secular regime in the region and has always supported and still supports Moscow's policy in Northern Caucasus, including the war with Georgia in August 2008. No less important for Russia are its needs for strategic access to the Mediterranean Sea which for largely land-locked Russia is still valuable opening the way to the warm seas and providing more security to its Southern neighborhood. Feeling surrounded by the members of pro-western alliances, Moscow has aimed to overcome this sense of increasing isolationism by strengthening Russia's borders courting potentially friendly allies in the South. For almost 50 years Syria was seen and it is still perceived as one of the most important of these friendly countries. Long isolation from the West and the American-imposed sanctions greatly influenced Syrian political perceptions. Damascus expects from Moscow both, at least some diplomatic protection against possible American and Israeli threats and weapons and other advanced technology supplies, which it cannot get from other sources. In return Syria

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provides the Russian Navy with its only overseas base in Tartus, which is the second largest city port in Syria after Latakia. The facility fell into disrepair during post-Soviet times, however, and was largely abandoned. In 2009 Russia started to renew and update a functioning logistics facility there, and in the summer 2009 a new floating dock structure was delivered to the port. The base is needed from the Russian Navy's presence in the Mediterranean and its access to the Indian Ocean, but it is too small for have any meaningful impact on the balance of power in the region.

Although Putin assured the Israelis that Moscow would not jeopardize Israel's security, and Russia has neither the means nor the intentions to seriously upset the regional balance of power, it is also not in its best interest that the traditionally friendly Arab state be left without any defensive power. Even before 2006, though no modern weapons were supplied, Russia continued to modernize and repair military hardware used by the Syrian Army, and continued to train its personnel at the senior officer level.

During 2006-2010, Russia delivered to Syria and number of defensive and mostly dated weapon systems but in August 2008 turned down Syrian President Bashar-Al-Assad's effort to acquire E-missiles, a single stage propellant system with a range of between 280-400 km, which is also capable of carrying nuclear or conventional warheads. The Syrian President, who visited Russia on 20-21 August 2008, offered to allow Moscow to deploy Iskander-E Missiles on Syrian soil, probably around the Syrian port of Tartus. According to the same sources the Russian government did not take up that offer.

The strategic aspects though quite modest in quantum, remain of vital importance for Syria. In December 2009, when European aerospace contractors were unable (due to American sanctions) to start the contracted delivery of Airbus aircraft to Syria, Damascus turned to Moscow in order to acquire two Russian Tupolev aircraft on a lease basis. The increasingly expanding Russian-Syrian trade relations are also of importance. In November 2009, the Russian corporation Stroytransgas launched its largest project in Syria since the Soviet era – a gas processing plant near Homs, a city in the western part of the country. The plant will assist in accounting up to 50% of the Syrian electric power industry's demand for gas fuel. Russian-



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Syrian trade relations are developing more dynamically than before, with a trade turnover of about two billion dollars in 2009.

Starting from the participation in the summit meeting in Annapolis in November 2007, at the invitation of the US, Syria's political situation started to improve and the country has come a long way since its quasi-pariah status of 2003-2008, particularly after the American invasion of Iraq. However, although Damascus is no longer as isolated as before, its relationship with Moscow will certainly not be neglected.

The Golan Heights remains under Israeli occupation and Israel is still seen as a main threat unilaterally supported by the US superpower. In marked contrast to 1970s and 1980s, Europe seems absent, being either unable or unwilling to play any active role in the Middle East. As China is a remote and apparently self-centered power, among the great powers of the day only Russia seems to be willing and able to provide some support and protection for Damascus. For Moscow, the continuity of relations with Syria correspond with its traditional and present interest in the Middle East and the world of Islam, which is close to the Russian borders, and in some ways even a part of Russian domestic politics.

In addition some forms of cooperation such as for instance, weapon supplies, maybe used as bargaining tools with the Americans or the Israelis. Assuming there is no major war or cataclysmic event in the Middle East, Russian-Syrian relations now seems stable and correspond to the needs of both parties.