

Explaining Russia's Intervention in the Syrian Crisis from a Geopolitical Perspective

Mohammad Reza Takhshid

Assistant Professor of International Relations, University of Tehran

Morteza Shoja*

PhD in International Relations, University of Tehran

(Date of Reception: 19 Sep. 2017 - Date of Acceptance: 15 Oct. 2017)

Abstract

Undoubtedly the Syrian crisis is one of the most important current issues in the international system. This has paved the way for the presence of regional and trans-regional powers in the territory of this country. One of these powers, Russia, has intervened in this crisis in the interest of the Syrian government. Russia's support in terms of political, economic and military-intelligence was carried out. Of course, the most important aspect of Russia's intervention in the Syrian crisis is direct military involvement in the crisis in the late summer of 2015. Under the influence of Russia's help and assistance, the positions of the Syrian army and its regional allies were strengthened and they were able to regain the control of a significant portion of the areas occupied by oppositions and extremists. In any case, Russia's actions in the Syrian crisis are of a special and unique nature. The question arisen here is "why Russia has intervened in the Syrian crisis, while it has not intervened in any of the Middle East crises so far?" The hypothesis is that "Geopolitical obligations have led Russia to intervene in the interests of the government in the Syrian crisis." The research was conducted in an exploratory and empirical way, and is thus loyal to the positivist tradition.

To measure the hypothesis, the research used a model of three concepts of "Geopolitical Feature", "Geopolitical Territorialization" and, finally, "Geopolitical transition". The geopolitical feature of the Middle East and Syria is so remarkable for Russia that Russia cannot be indifferent to their weight. Additionally, Syria was a part of Russia's influence in the Middle East since the 1970s. Therefore, Russia is interested in preserving this geopolitical condition as it faces the West and terrorism's geopolitical constraints.

From the geopolitical point of view, the Middle East has been in transition since the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the developments in this region have generally been against Russia's interests. The emergence of Arab revolutions in the countries of the region have led to the overthrow of authoritarian governments and the replacement of democratic regimes (pro-

* E-mail: m.shoja@ut.ac.ir (Corresponding author)

western) and sectarian ones (extremists). This situation has endangered the geopolitical interests of Russia in this region. In particular, the Middle East is located in the adjacent of the Central Asian and Caucasian lands and the instability caused by the Arab revolutions, as a result, could have caused a wave of instability in these areas as well. The aforementioned provisions required Russia to intervene in the Syrian crisis.

One of the most important requirements of Russia in the Syrian crisis was to compete with the United States and the West. The competition of two major powers is geostrategic so that in Eastern Europe the Balkans, Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Middle East, Afghanistan and the Far East are visible. Moscow has seen US policies in the Middle East diminishing its influence in the region. In line with this policy, the West has also intervened in the interest of the opposition in the Syrian crisis and for the benefit of extremist groups in secret. So, Syria became one of the geopolitical areas of competition for the two superpowers. Hence, Moscow did not have any choice except to intervene in the crisis of this country.

Confronting terrorism, extremism and separatism was also one of the most important requirements for Russia's intervention in the Syrian crisis. In documents of Russian foreign and security policy, terrorism has been described as one of the most important security problems of the Country. During the terrorist attacks, hundreds of Russian citizens died and more were injured. Terrorism, which grew up in the context of the Caucasus separatism, generally emerged in the form of an extremist ideology and evolved. Hence, the crisis of terrorism in Russia has coincided with extremism and separatism. Regarding the Russian government's serious policies, the terrorists were restrained and suppressed. But the atmosphere of insecurity from the civil war in Syria was a good environment for the growth of the terrorists. As a result, a significant number of citizens from Russia and Central Asia and the Caucasus regions participated in Syria. Getting power of the terrorists in this Country and their empowerment in their territory (in Russia, Central Asia and Caucasus) caused the emergence of a new wave of insecurity and assassination in the territory of the Soviet Union. This could re-ignite the controlled crisis of separatism in the Caucasus. Therefore, Russia's intervention in the Syrian crisis was necessary to confront them.

Syria has been a part of Russia's influence in the Middle East and the Mediterranean since the 1970s. This country, along with Iraq, ensured Russia's presence in the Middle East and therefore it has been important from the geopolitical point of view. In the context of competing with the United States, Russia developed its relations with Syria not only in terms of military and strategic dimensions, but also in economic terms in order to maintain its influence in this country. The Syrian government was a geopolitical asset for Russia; As it guarantees the access to the Russian military to strategic spots in the Middle East, North Africa, and eventually South and South-East Europe. So the overthrow of the Syrian government by

the opposition and extremists would have led to the loss of this geopolitical advantage.

Instability in the periphery of Russia was generally in line with the interests of the West and against the interests of Russia. The occupation of Iraq by the US-led coalition, colored revolutions in the Soviet Union, the implementation of the Great Middle East Plan, the NATO intervention in the Middle East security processes, and similar occurrences have made the atmosphere of turbulence and, hence, brought about changes that often put Russia's interests in jeopardy. Therefore, Russian leaders are worried about any instability in the areas. The most serious worries in the Middle East were the Arabian uprising or sectarian states prone to extremism. So, Russia's intervention in the Syrian crisis sought to control instability in the country and the Middle East. In particular, the Russian leaders were confident that due to the proximity of the land, these instabilities would be broadened to the Soviet area from the Middle East and they will endanger their country's interests in this area.

Keywords: Countering Terrorism, Geopolitical Feature, Geopolitical Obligation, Rivalry with America, Russia, Syria Civil War.