



The Russian decision to withdraw from Syria between necessity and making deals



Situation
Assessment





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Introduction

The Russian announcement on 14th march 2106 pm. that Russia will withdraw a part from the Russian forces in Syria was not only surprised for many observers and audience, but also for most of international actors, because this announcement raised a wide discussion about the motives and real causes that lead to this decision by the president Vladimir Putin. A lot of sources reported that the decision was taken a few hours before the show announcement for it.

And there is an argument about if the Syrian regime or the America knew the decision before the announcement in spite of some statements and contradictory indicators proved that Moscow did not coordinate with any part to make this decision, so it is important to study this action, its causes and potential effects.

First: The situation features before the withdrawal

The Russian decision to withdrawal came after a series of political steps to resolve the Syrian crisis that Russia involved , within international efforts with the united states starting from Vienna and security council resolution no.2254 in December 2015 which came after more than a month from the Russian intervention ,to Geneva conference which the first round of negotiation failed on 29 January 2016 and Munich conference on 11 February which led to stop fighting and dual action between Moscow and Washington to stop fighting, ending with the announcement of withdrawal and starting a new round of negotiation.

The decision to withdraw came after months from the Saudi intervention in Yemen, after the Saudi-Qatari – and Turkish rapprochement regarding to Syria, came at the same time with the Saudi willingness to intervene in Syria and after a few days from Raad Al-Shamal maneuver which Saudi Arabia received 350 thousand of soldiers and 20 thousand of tanks and dozens of ships and about 2500 military aircraft. it was announced that this maneuver aims at preparing to fight the terrorist groups in the region but

maybe it aims at review the Saudi power and ability to create alliances against the Iranians.¹

In addition to the above the withdrawal came after a remarked improvement in oil prices and raising from 27\$ a barrel to 40 \$.

regarding the field situation, the estimates indicated that Russia had sent to Syria about 4 thousand personnel to facilitate the work of 35 bombers and 32 fighter aircrafts bombers and 8 fighter aircrafts ,12 attack helicopters and 4 helicopter, also kept a patrol consisting of 7 ships, submarine and 2 small warships. the Russian aircrafts had made more than 10 thousand sorties in the rate of 60 to 70 sort per day which is a relatively high rate.²

These forces contributed in effective supporting to the regime which succeeded to link its positions north of Aleppo with the Shiite villages (Nobbul and Al-Zahraa) and tried to cut the way of the opposition north of Aleppo, also its forces made a progress towards northern east of Lattakia and stopping the progress of opposition to Hama, controlled Al-Shaykh Maskin village in Daraa and kept its positions in Deir Al-Zour and did not lose any main lands since starting of the Russian intervene.³

On the other hand, Russian shelling helped the Democratic Union Party(PYD) to increase its influence areas, where the its units for protection dominated on the opposition areas directly and in organized way after Russian aviation shelling in the north of Syria which facilitated reach for the Kurdish cantons to the north of Syria.

Russian Defense Minister announced that Russian aviation killed d 2000 fighter who came from Russia during the airstrikes,

1 JAMES STAVRIDIS, Was a Fake War in the Saudi Desert a Dress Rehearsal for a Syrian Invasion? Foreign Policy, MARCH 15, 2016,

[HTTP://FOREIGNPOLICY.COM/2016/03/15/FAKE-WAR-SAUDI-DESERT-SYRIAN-INVASION-PUTIN-RUSSIA-ASSAD/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/15/FAKE-WAR-SAUDI-DESERT-SYRIAN-INVASION-PUTIN-RUSSIA-ASSAD/)

2 Steven Simon, Putin's Long-Term Strategy in Syria, Foreign Affairs, March 15, 2016 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-03-15/putins-long-term-strategy-syria>

3 Russia Leaves Syria with Loyalists on the Offensive, Stratfor, 15 March 2016 <https://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/russia-leaves-syria-loyalists-offensive>

also the Syrian authorities restored 400 villages and residential gatherings and freed 10 thousand kilometers as a total and destroyed 209 oil facility and 3000 tankers.⁴

Assad regime enabled to extend his controlled areas 1.3% as a ratio from the whole Syrian lands⁵ since starting the Russian intervene on 29th September until the end of January 2016 according to the international conflicts center, but according to the opposition sources, the new lands which regime controlled were about 1% from the lands of opposition and the rest were not controlled by the opposition.

The following map clarifies the areas which controlled by the regime since Russian intervention in September 2015 until March 2016 (areas with dark blue) ⁶:

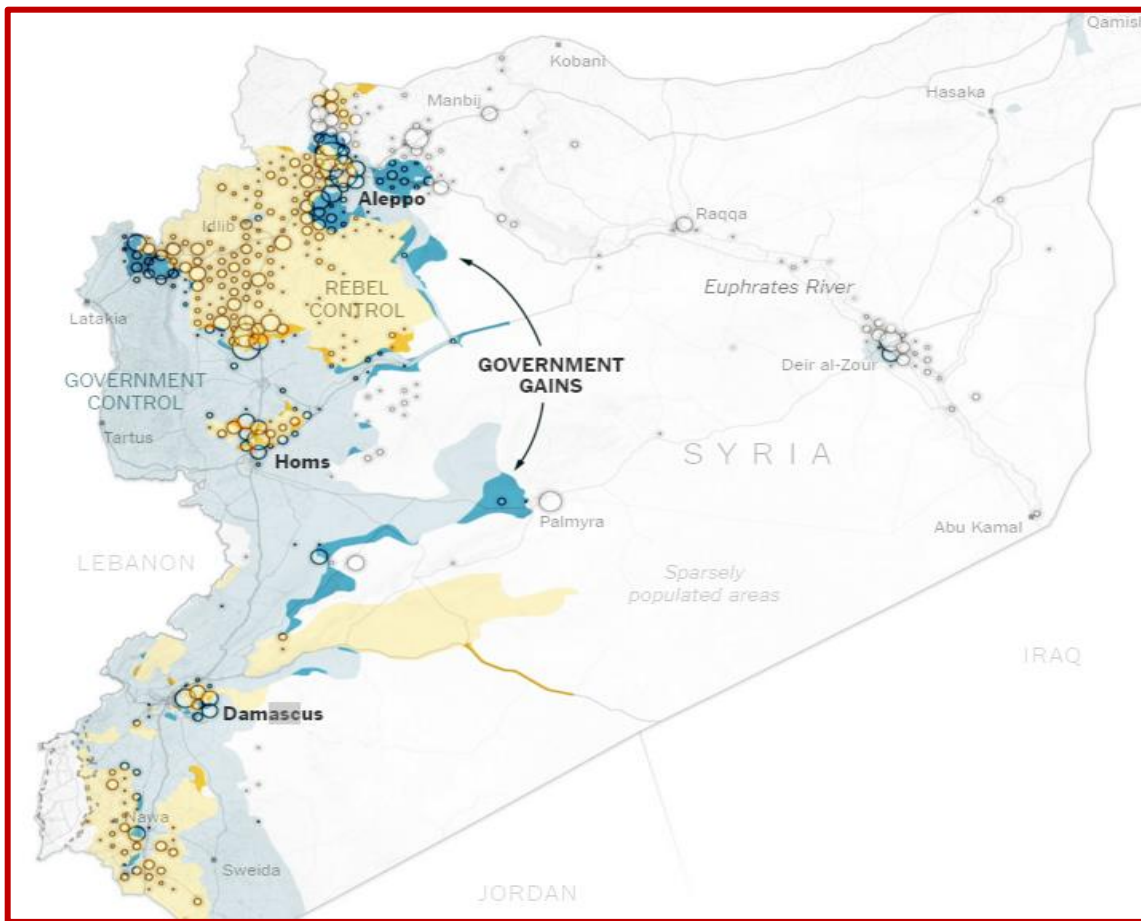
4 Russia complete the (partial) withdrawal from Syria (within days), the kremlin denies the pressure on Assad, Al-Hayat newspaper, 16 March, Raed Jabr.

<http://goo.gl/n2vJrZ>

5 Assad earns 3.1% from Syrian lands after Russian intervention for his interests, Madar website ,27th January 2016.

<http://goo.gl/pKJkm3>

6 The New York Times Source: IHS Conflict Monitor, 18 March 2016,
http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/03/18/world/middleeast/what-russia-accomplished-in-syria.html?_r=0



Regarding the sudden withdrawal decision, despite of a lot of parties were surprised by the decision but there were some indicators like the announcement that the intervention will end in December 2015 and the persuasion that USA was knew or expected the decision, also from some analyzes two days before withdrawal like middle east briefing website published an article titled: why Putin needs to plan for leaving Syria soon?

Some analyzes reported a group of causes related to some American military movements in Baltic region, and some causes related to decreasing the Russian's defense budget and the Russian economy situations, and also the possibilities of Russian involvements in Syria especially after failing of settlement. Russia leaves Syria because of all previous reasons and to gain the better negotiating situation.

Second: The fact of the withdrawal

Russia did not leave Syria completely, but announced start withdrawing some forces with keeping the ability to work from Hememem air base in the southeast of Lattakia and from the naval base in Tartuos which will provide protection for them from land, air and sea.

Some aircrafts arrived Russian lands but some reports doubted on the Russian withdrawal despite of some sources reported the completing withdrawal within a few days, the spokesman of the international alliance (Steve Warren) said that the alliance did not notice any evidence for a big Russian withdrawal, mentioning that 8 to 10 Russian military aircrafts left Syria until 16th March.

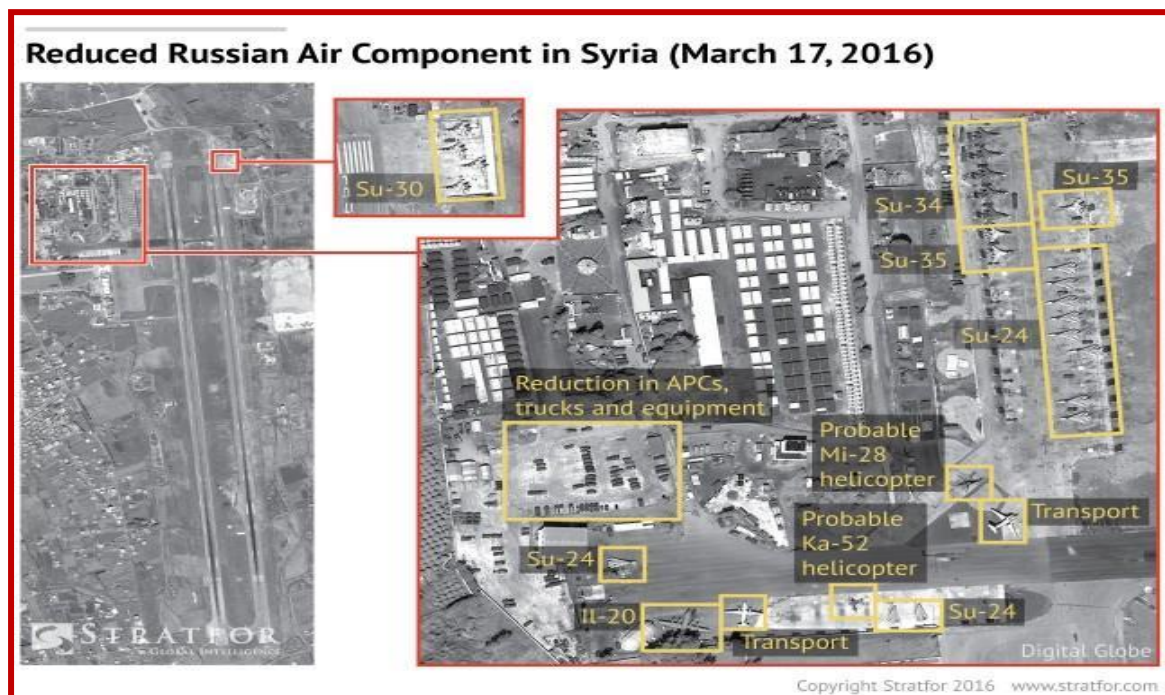
According to estimates published by Reuters news agency, Russia may be withdrawn 15 aircrafts from 36 bombers aircrafts and Sukhoi fighters (models: 24,25,30,35) which were in Hememem air base in Lattakia countryside in the western north of Syria and some estimates indicated that the number of Russian aircrafts in Syrian bases were about 60 aircraft.

Russia maybe will keep some of soldiers, trainers, military equipment and aircrafts the following table reviews some of them:

Table (1)
personnel and equipment that Russia did not withdrawn them from Syria:

number	type
12	Bomber Sukhoi aircraft 35, Sukhoi 30, Squadron of Sukhoi bombers 24
About 12	Helicopters models: KA-52, MI 24
1000	Soldiers and pilots ⁷
Several batteries	S 400 defense system
-----	Pantsir-S1 system
-----	Planes without pilots

On the other hand, there are images from industrial satellites indicates that Russians continue building their establishments in Basel Al-Assad air base and in the naval base in Tartuos port which indicate that Russia Intends to stay or return to Syria.⁸



⁷ 7 characteristics of Russian withdrawal from Syria and its effects, Al-Jazeera center for studies ,19 march 2016, page 6.

⁸ Stratfor website, March 2016

and this matched what the director of Russian federal security commission (Alexander Bortnikov) declared that the withdrawal of Russian forces does not mean decreasing the effort against terrorism emphasizing that Russia itself will continue fighting terrorism and will enhance this fighting by cooperation with the partners, and what Putin said literally that Russian forces are ready to return when needed he said: "if necessary, within hours, Russian is ready to increase Russian forces in the region according to the developments there, and to use all available abilities there"⁹

Third: Motivations of the withdrawal

There is great persuasion that the withdrawal decision and its time were planned carefully, the analyzes is focusing on two trends, one of them: that the withdrawal was not real and it was a play and maneuver by Putin, and the second: that the withdrawal was a smart step in the period which Russia found great gains without great losses by direct and indirect deals, so we will present some various motives and goals for the withdrawal decision.

1-The economic field

There is a viewpoint believe that the economic motive and the fell of the Russian economy by 3.7% maybe the reasons of the withdrawal or maybe one of the pressure factors of thinking in withdrawal .this was due to several causes such as the expenses incurred by Russia since its intervention in Ukraine which estimated an=bout 27million dollars ,the accumulated effects of the western sanctions on Russia because of the aggression on Ukraine ,the drop in oil prices to more than 60% from its value ,the large decline in the investment rate in Russia ,the rise in inflation rate to 15.4% during 2015 ,the decline in ruble value to the half against dollar which obliged Putin to decrease the defense budget by 5% for the first time during his rule ,which is expected to reach 10\$ next year.

There are those who argue that the daily cost of Russian operations in Syria which is estimated in range 4-5 million dollars added to the above and the annual cost to 1-2 billion dollars a year but there are those who say that this

⁹ Russia can strongly return to Syria within hours, Reuters 0.17 / March 2016.
<http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKCN0WJ1NN?pageNumber=3&virtualBrandChannel=0>

cost is low comparing to the Russian defense budget which is 50 billion dollars. also, the motive behind this decision cannot be just to save money because Russia can continue covering these expenses but if it cannot provide these cost, this will be a good choice.

Regarding to the economic field also, the withdrawal came after a remarkable improvement in oil prices after the agreement between Saudi Arabia, Russia, Venezuela and Qatar to freeze oil production rate in the levels of January 2016 if the other producers join these agreements which is expected to be¹⁰, but the Russian-Saudi deal to raise oil prices is consider as a prediction especially after denying this deal by Saudi foreign minister Adel Al-Jubeir. This agreement to raise oil prices is an important factor to rebalance especially that many estimates indicate that the decline prices was an active factor for the Russian intervention.

2-Achieve the goals

Russian president Vladimir Putin said that the goal from intervention in Syria have been achieved although the announced goal is to fight terrorism and specifically to fight ISIS and other groups such as Al-Nusra front which are some Russian citizens joined them ,but it was obvious that the Russian goals were to improve the military situation of Syrian regime and enable it to extend its security position and to fight the moderate opposition and impose Assad presence in the negotiation in addition to other goals including:

- to show that Russia is not insignificant force, and to attract attention to Putin's personality who is able to surprise the world by his decisions and to coordinate with Washington directly
- to renew the Russians military facilities in Tartus and show the fighting capabilities and to promote weapons deals
- to coordinate with Kurds despite of their alliance with Washington

These goals do not need a long time to achieve under the intense air sorties and their low cost, compared to alliance sorties were started from far distances in the gulf. so, Russia maybe achieve goals greater than expected.

10 Venezuela, an expected meeting for ten Oil countries, Al Jazeera Net,24 February 2016.

3- Seeking at restructure the next round of negotiation

The decision of withdrawal came with starting a new round of negotiation which Moscow tried to put opposition delegations as it wants on its list. the withdrawal decision is considered a positive factor for success of negotiation but Russia wants to show through it that it presented large concession and it put the regime under pressure, so the opposition must give up some of their demands and show or be fixable in some topics.

In this context also, the attitude of Assad regime in the last round of negotiation and continuing of the military operations during the negotiation, despite of the opposition's commitment to stop fighting which Moscow was one of its supporters as well as the declaration of regime's readiness for elections which was a challenge to Russia, contradiction with its diplomacy or a threat to its rapprochement with Washington to solve the crises.

In this context also.it was clear that Putin told Assad by telephone and in the same day of withdrawal which indicates that there is a crisis and attempts to pressure on the regime but it does not mean that Russia abandoned the regime and this will be clear in the next rounds of negotiations.

4-Mitigating the effects of Ukraine crisis

There is who saying that Russia has entered Syria not for Assad to stay ,but for maneuver for gains in other areas ,and the most important areas is Ukraine ,and the withdrawal was after an agreement between Washington and Moscow to bilateral support for stop fighting and an agreement with Washington to get rid of Russian sanctions because of Ukraine in exchange for gradual withdrawal from Syria ,but this is not an easy task because of European confirmation that these files are separated which obliged Russia to link them through intense shelling to make more refugees and obliged Europeans to review the file.

Despite the fact that European officials have insisted that there was not any link between the sanctions imposed on Russia because of Ukraine and the intervention of the kremlin in Syria and announcing the withdrawal ,but the flow of Syrian refugees to Europe increases the political upheaval in Europe and the threat of traveling system without passports among their countries ,the features of the Britain argument to exit from the European

union ,all these above make the Russian withdrawal an active topic for European leaders and an important step to study.

The European governments welcomed Putin's announcement that Russia will withdraw its forces from Syria but they did not estimate the results of this announcement because there is still time to 31 July for voting on the European sanctions on Russia to continue or to stop but before this meeting, there will be several meetings in Brussels and the meeting of the group of seven in Japan next July which the European will meet American and there will be a chance for consultation.¹¹

It seems that the opportunities are to stop sanctions, because the renewal decision requires consensus of all European union countries, and if there is one country does not approve the renewal, the sanctions will not renew and Russia will gain this because Italy and Hungary do not want to renew.

5-Leaving before getting involved in Syria

This reason supposed that Russia had a persuasion that the military solution would not give more results and the continuing in Syria will be more dangerous and expensive and keeping the diplomatic achievements can be enough, no need to repeat the Afghanistan experience again especially with the possibility of failing the negotiation efforts ,and in this context there is certain information that Saudi Arabia delivered the anti-aircrafts weapons to Syrian opposition ,and also the common will of Turkish -Saudi to provide the opposition with sophisticated weapons.

6-leaving to find more important places

It not excluded that maybe there are other reasons for the Russian withdrawal were not related to Syria and the middle east. maybe Russia see a need to keep their air forces in Syria for other tasks in the near future but in other areas and this because NATO intent to spread fighting brigades in Baltic and eastern Europe along the Russian borders.

¹¹ Gregory Viscusi, Jonathan Sterenz and John Volian, Russian withdrawal from Syria, results and implications, 17th March 2016, Union newspaper.
<http://www.alittihad.ae/details.php?id=10678&y=2016>

Fourth: The effects of withdrawal

1-influence on the Syria regime

Assad supporters were surprised by the Russian withdrawal decision but not as the others surprised, and some comments raised that Assad lives in fear situation because of the Russian withdrawal but the truth is Assad is in a better situation than before Russian intervention in Syria and his forces are in good standing and also Russians do not stop providing support and equipment to the regime and participate in the important operations.

But the withdrawal will reduce Assad's demands and will lose much support because of the accurate Russian shelling, Assad will much affect if there are disputes between the regime and Russia and the time of withdrawal maybe a punitive step to Assad.

So, it is not true that Russia abandoned Assad regime but it wants to manage the crisis according to its interests, and not according to interests of Syrian regime.

2-Iran

Iran welcomed the Russian withdrawal and some officials claimed the advance knowledge of the decision, but it is not easy to make sure that Iran welcomed the withdrawal because it was upset from some Russian attitudes which do not allow Iran to impose its attitudes, or Iran also is one of the comprehensive deal parties especially with regarding to oil prices.

Iran still refuses to reduce production in this stage at the levels of January which OPEC sources estimated it about 2,93 million barrel a day because it wants to offset the losses that were imposed during the period of sanctions.

If Iran wants to continue supporting Assad with Russian disputes, this obliged it to fill the space of Russian withdrawal, and some sources mentioned that Iran will send 2500 Iranian fighters from Al-Quds corps and some members from Basij forces.

In this context, many studies about the Russian withdrawal inflated the Russian role which provided great support for the Syrian regime and added strategic depth but these studies ignored the Iranian role and Lebanese, Iraqi, Afghan Shiite militias because the number of military personnel sent

by Iran to Syria is more than double Russian forces as well as a lot of senior Iranian officers were killed or injured in the advanced fronts.

3-Saudi Arabia

The time of withdrawal was the same time of Raad Al-Shamal maneuver led by Saudi Arabia maybe by chance, and after Saudi announcement of its willingness to enter Syria and the its classification for Hezbollah as a terrorist organization but the Saudi intervention in Syria still linked to the negotiation, the federal solution and the possibility to Arabic intervention to achieve common agreements but this is not available in this stage.

It has proved that there are understandings about oil prices between Riyadh and Moscow, and this will have effects on the negotiation process in Geneva and it needs more flexibility from the interlocutors.

4-Turkey

The withdrawal decreases the chances of collision between turkey and Russia which led in the past to strained relations reaching to threats due to drop the Russian aircraft by turkey, and there were some Russian facilitated after withdrawal related to Turkish companies in Russia.

On the other hand, we cannot ignore two facts, one that Russia did not withdrawn completely and its aviation and radar system still exist. Second, Russia helped Kurds in north of Syria to establish their own entity which rejected by turkey, represent Kurds in Moscow and try to communicate with Kurds in turkey making turkey in uncomfortable situation. this will lead to coordinate between turkey and Iran together to reject this Kurdish entity but nobody knows if Iran will cooperate which itself has good relations with PKK.

5- Kurds

When Russia announced the withdrawal, democratic union party announced the federalism on controlled areas, and despite Russia rejected this unilateral step but it spoke about the idea of federalism before to establish an Alawites triangle to keep Tartus and Hememem bases, besides to the rights of Russian companies in invest Oil and Gas in the Syrian coast. Russia coordinated with Kurds and facilitate reach to their goals. Kurds were a convergence point between Washington and Moscow.

Turkish rejecting for the Kurdish entity caused Turkish shelling for Kurdish protection units who seem ready to do their best to prevent establishment of any entity or linking the cantons.

The project of Kurdish entity, and the disputes between Assad and Russia and not to exclude Russia to leave Assad will stay a great challenge, and here we have an open question about the time which Russia will stop using the Kurdish issue.

Also, we must mention that several Kurdish parties in Syria rejected what democratic union party did.

6- the influence on the opposition and negotiation

Syrian opposition considered the Russian withdrawal would have positive effects on the negotiations if it applied in real way or if the withdrawal was complete¹².

The withdrawal also can enhance the opportunities to continue stop fighting, but this withdrawal will increase the American -Russian coordination which make the way of opposition very difficult especially if the both parties agree on applying the federalism.

Conclusion

It has been dealing with the withdrawal decision in two trends: one of them that it is not a real withdrawal and just a tactical deception, and the other that the withdrawal is real and divided into two parts: first that it is a result for large pressure and an attempt to escape from involvement in Syria, while the second is considered the withdrawal as a comprehensive, economic and military deal.

We can say that Russia tried across this decision and in this smart time to form a behavior combines all of the above ,so it speaks about the withdrawal as a very large withdrawal while keeping sub-static presence which enable it to return whenever it wants .Also, the difficult military victory in Syria, the conditions lives in other places ,and the economic pressures which maybe the reason in the intervention from the beginning make Russia to use its presence and withdrawal from Syria as bargaining chip in deals to stop sanctions because of Ukraine ,and in order to raise Oli

12 Salem Al-Masllat statement,15th march 2016.

prices to solve its economic problems so, it worked with Washington to reach some understandings about NATO actions in the strategic environment.

Russia achieved some goals to impose itself on the international scene, make its presence and role in Syria as opportunity to re-negotiate with new basis in various files.

But Russia has been damaged so it cannot hide its bad actions in Syria when shelled the moderate opposition and a number of hospitals, and the disputes with Assad and the withdrawal without coordination with him destroyed Russia speech that it will not leave its alliances as Washington does.

Russian gains are not clear yet, but the measuring of these gains will stay connected to Geneva results and the European decision about sanctions and the attitudes of NATO and Washington from expand to Russian areas.



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