



# 6 Years on: Russia's Intervention in Syria

Prepared by: Abdel-Wahab Assi  
(Senior Researcher at Jusoor Center for Studies)

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### Introduction

On September 30, 2015, 6 years ago, Russia had intervened militarily in Syria. This date marked a milestone in the course of the ongoing conflict inside Syria, regarding the considerable change brought about at the political and military, economic and security levels.

In fact, through its intervention strategy in Syria, Russia relied on a number of factors, namely excessive force, diplomacy, energy security, counter-terrorism, regional cooperation, non-interference on the ground, and cost reduction.

However, Russia has been facing many challenges while implementing its strategy in Syria, because to establish fruitful relations between competing international and regional powers such as Turkey, Iran and Israel meant affecting its goal of being a reliable guarantor or mediator.

Despite Russia has had multiple strengths, but this does not mean that it has no defects that often hindered it; Like not having enough ground forces.

Russia not only did not care about the extent of the large human losses and violations of human rights it would commit during its intervention in Syria, instead this was often among its strategic goals. As of March 2021, the number of civilians killed by [Russian forces](#) reached 6,860, including about 2,000 children, 1,579 women, and 69 healthcare personnel, let alone the destruction of the infrastructure of medical and public facilities as a result of the scorched earth policy.

This report highlights the key stations of Russia's intervention in Syria, which have been distributed according to the time periods and the amount of attention to stages, which are linked to the security, military, political and economic outcomes. Hence, this very report briefs the most important strategic objectives of Russia's intervention in Syria after 6 years.

## First: Stations of Russia's Intervention in Syria

Russia's intervention in Syria can be divided into 4 major phases: security, military, political and economic.

Although each of them has its own characteristics, but, however, there have always been common ones between the whole stages, such as the use of excessive force and Russia's relentless pursuit of a political settlement with the end of each stage; for the purpose of converting achievements into actual gains, but to no avail.

### 1- Phase One (Security Outcomes)

This stage extends from 2015 to mid-2016. The most prominent features of Russia's intervention in Syria during that period were the following:

- **Excessive force:** where Russia was keen to use the scorched earth strategy against the armed opposition factions and the “ISIS” organization alike, with the almost complete involvement of the Russian military forces, especially the [Russian Aerospace](#) Forces. During that period, three-quarters of the long-range aviation, about 80% of the operational tactical aircraft, 88% of the military transport aircraft, and about 90% of the pilots participated.

Also, Russia's keenness stemmed from displaying its power in the Middle East in particular and the region in general as an international force capable of preventing the collapse of security system of the region,

particularly after establishing a some-how solid background in Syria that would make it ready for any emergency intervention, as it happened in Libya later on.

- **Fighting against terrorism:** This is the main task under which Russia intervened in Syria, where the combat operations against ISIS group were focused on after ensuring the disruption of the abilities of the Syrian opposition to launch effective and highly effective attacks by besieging it and cutting off the main supply routes the factions used to use.

Russia, also, has tried to demonstrate its ability to be a reliable partner in the war against terrorism and to provide an encouraging model for confronting threats from jihadist organizations such as ISIS, in contrast to the model of the US-led International Coalition. Therefore, it is possible to understand Russia's initiative to hold a Security Council session on settling conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa and [addressing the threat of terrorism](#) in the region, coinciding with the first day of its intervention in Syria.

Not only that. but it also bears the task of combating terrorism, in order to ensure that the activities of jihadist organizations do not move to its borders, especially since Syria was a destination for many individuals who hail from countries that posed a security challenge to Russia, such as Chechnya and the Caucasus.

- **Establishing safe defense lines** in the governorates of Latakia, Hama and Homs in the northwest of the country, including securing military bases, especially “Hmeimim”, from any possible attacks by opposition factions and ISIS, in addition to preventing an existing threat at the time to confine the Syrian regime to a very narrow geographical area limited to the Syrian coast and the capital city of Damascus only.

## 2- Phase Two (Military Outcomes)

This phase extends from mid-2016 to mid-2018. The most prominent features of Russia's intervention in Syria during that period were the following:

- **Redrawing the map of control and influence:** whereby the Syrian regime forces were able to regain control of many cities and strategic sites, where the percentage of their control increased to nearly [60%](#) after it was limited to 30% only.

Meanwhile, after the failure of its efforts to transform the cessation of hostilities agreement with the United States into a political settlement, Russia worked hard to make the Syrian regime doing whatever it takes in order to expand its influence on one hand, and undermine the control of the opposition factions on the other, which means improving the terms of negotiation. Accordingly, Russia, backing the regime and the Iranian proxies launched large-scale operations under which it took control of the cities of Aleppo and Daraa, those are the most prominent opposition strongholds in the north and south of the country.

- **Cordon off of the areas of military operations:** [The memorandum of de-escalation](#) was signed on May 5, 2017, after taking advantage of the siege that was imposed on the opposition-controlled areas and cutting the supply lines link them to each other, which, consequently made the approach of excessive force much more effective and helped to capture the areas one by one.

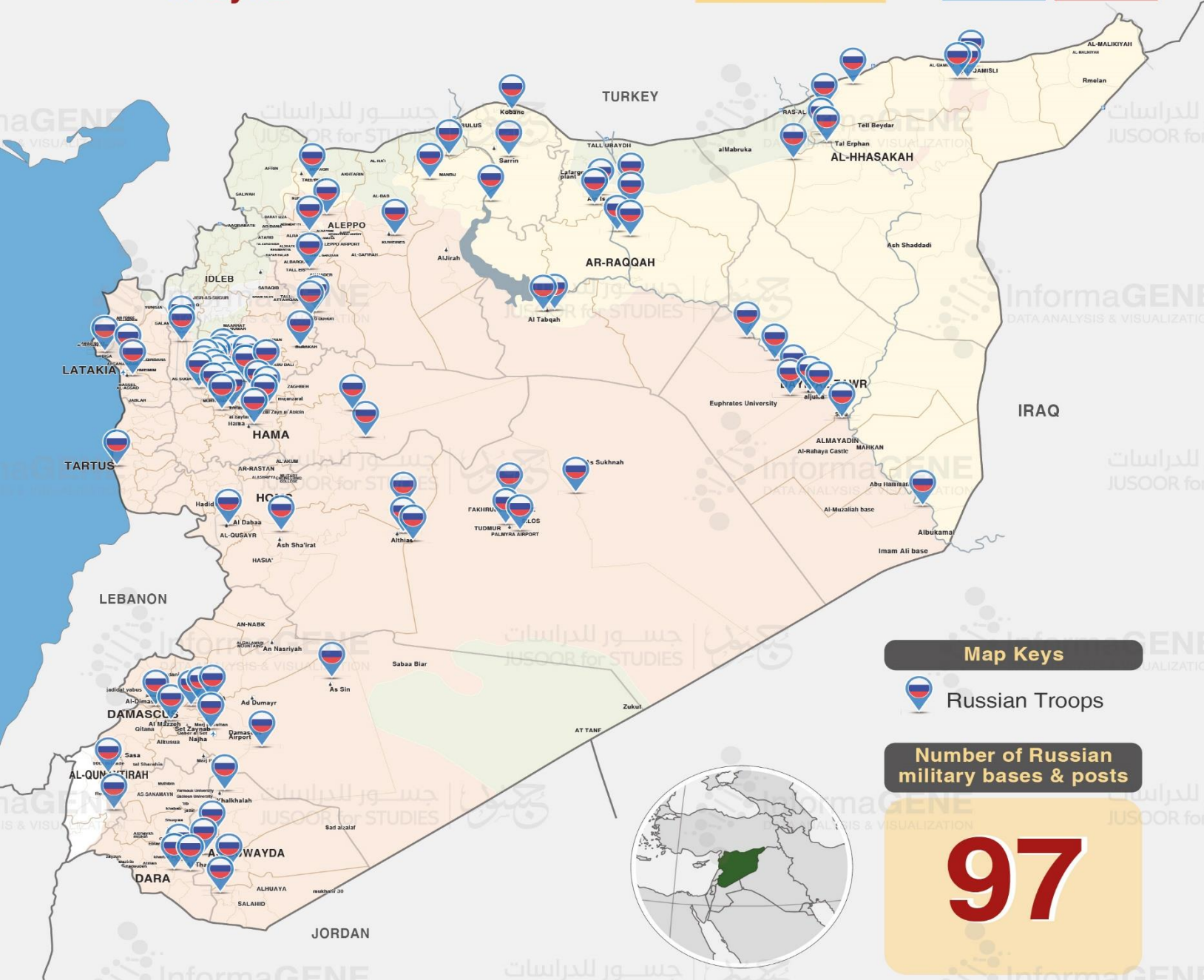
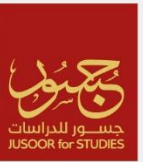
- Russia increased its focus **on building up and training auxiliary and special forces** to operate under its supervision, establishing the 25th Storm Division as well as the "Fifth Corps", the "ISIS Hunters", the "Al-Quds Brigade" and others. These forces had a decisive role in combat operations through support and control, and, in fact, it helped Russia not to fully rely on the ground force provided by Iran to cover large areas in the battles against the opposition factions and ISIS group.

- Controlling the largest area of the **airspace over Syria**, according to the memorandum of understanding, that Russia and US signed on air safety in Syria in October 2015, which provided for the sharing of airspace between the west and east of the Euphrates to prevent clashes, which allowed Russia to place noticeable restrictions on the activities of all foreign powers in addition to the significant contribution to monitoring and control operations.
- **Establishing stability** in the areas that Russia has already militarily controlled over through the involvement of the multi-tasking military police, since late 2016. However, it often focused on individuals of the Sunni Muslims, most of whom hail from Chechnya, which, in turn would be socially accepted in Russia.
- It **has engaged** as a major actor in local mediation between the parties to the conflict in Syria, through the establishment of the Hmeimim Center for Reconciliation in February, which played a key role in reaching a local settlement as a result of military operations in the de-escalation zones. Russia has also worked to take advantage of its role as a mediator in ensuring acceptance by the local population and broader access to social bases.
- **Enhancing geographical accessibility**, especially in the east of the Euphrates, where Russia was able to deploy military or police forces in the governorates of Aleppo, Raqqa and al-Hasakah, after these areas were of the US-led International Coalition only.
- Work to **reform the military institution** in Syria, especially in terms of the integration of non-official units into the ranks of the armed forces, and the restructuring of official units according to the Russian mode. Although Russia has not been able to achieve a major breakthrough in institutional reform as a result of Iran and the Syrian regime obstructing its efforts, it still has the ability to complete the reform process regardless of the challenges.



# Mapping Russian Military Bases and Points in Syria

September, 2021



### Map Keys

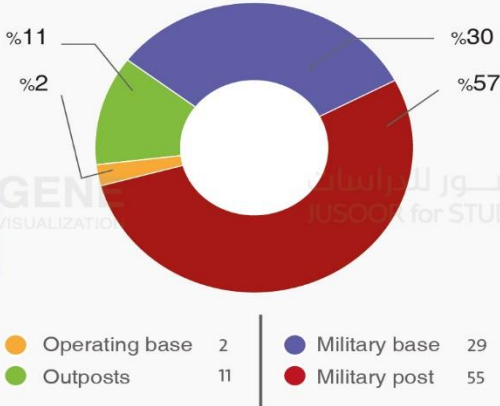
Russian Troops

### Number of Russian military bases & posts

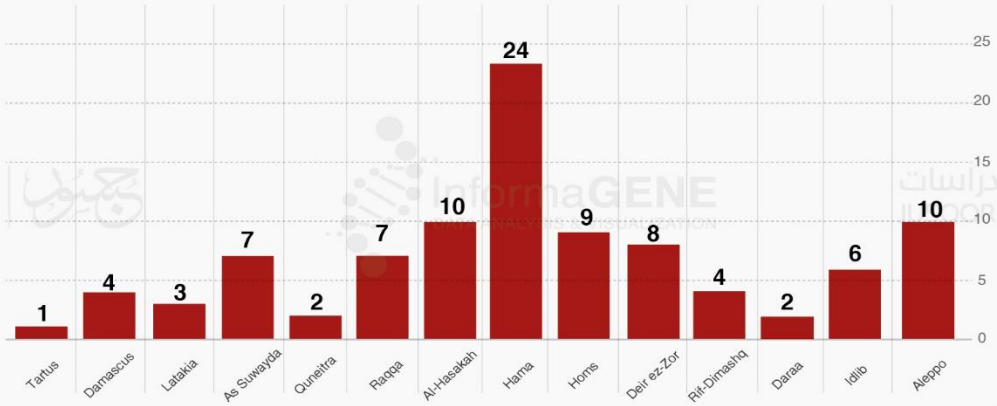
**97**



### Russian military bases & posts by type



### Russian military bases and posts by Governorate



Designed by BEYOND



### 3- Phase Three (Political Outcomes)

The political outcomes phase began at the beginning of 2018, with Russia and Turkey sponsoring the National Dialogue Conference in Sochi between the Syrian regime and the opposition factions on January 30 and 31, which concluded with an agreement to form a constitutional committee consisting of representatives of the regime and the opposition for the purpose of reforming the constitution, according to UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (2015).

Apparently, the major features of Russia's intervention in Syria during the political outcomes phase were the following:

- **Strengthening the role of international mediation;** where Russia was able to be the sole sponsor and influencer regarding the political process after it was limited to the role of the United Nations since the launch of the “Geneva-1” round in mid-2012. Ultimately, Russia totally failed to achieve a key breakthrough towards any kind of understanding between the parties in the conflict, with the exception of the announcement in spring 2017, when de Mistura boiled the document down to four “baskets” of issues, which would frame the discussions in Geneva.

Nevertheless, regardless of Russia's success or not in the course of constitutional reform, it is very keen not to undermine this matter.

Also, such a mediation role included Russia's offering itself as a reliable guarantor before international actors, which began with the formation of the “Astana” track in early 2017, but it was not able to activate it more until 2018 by expanding the tasks and responsibilities of international actors.

On paper, Russia has shouldered the responsibility for the Syrian regime and the Syrian Democratic Forces' failure to abide by the joint understandings with Turkey, and the burdens of Iran's non-compliance with the joint understandings with the United States and Israel. However, it practically did not have neither the ability nor the willingness to

implement this, which led to the erosion of its entire reputation as an international guarantor in Syria. On any case, Russia still has sufficient tools to maintain this role in proportion to its priorities.

- **Strengthening a cooperation path with Turkey;** As Russia was able to move from competing with the latter to cooperating field in Syria, accordingly, it ensured its role has been improved as an international mediator and achieving a breakthrough at the military level by reaching the east of the Euphrates region after signing the Sochi Memorandum (2019), and working to alleviate the burden of the economic crisis resulting from Western sanctions.

Although Russia has not been able to obtain significant gains or values from this cooperation due to the large-scale ongoing disputes with Turkey on many issues. But, however, the continuation of bilateral cooperation still guarantees leaves a lower cost and more sustainable results at the political and economic level to Russia.

- Working to end the Syrian regime's isolation, which Russia started in January 2018, by coordinating and facilitating the visit of former Sudanese President, Omar al-Bashir to Damascus, and then reopening the embassies of the UAE and Bahrain at the end of the same year, and trying to expand channels of communication and coordination between the regime and Jordan.

Russia has not achieved actual results in re-normalizing relations with the Syrian regime regarding the Arab League attempts for many reasons, foremost of which are US and European sanctions, but it seems that Russia is still relying on this path.

Show more challenge to the United States by supporting the Syrian regime in holding parliamentary and presidential elections on time in 2020 and 2021, and thus preparing to bear more burdens resulting from Western political sanctions against the regime.

## 4- Phase Four (Economic Outcomes)

Since Russia's military intervention in Syria, most Russian companies have begun to return to Syria, after they had withdrawn from it between 2011 and 2015 as a result of hostilities.

However, the economic outcomes have actually come, not with the return of Russian companies' activity, but with the entry of new Russian investors and companies to work in Syria since the beginning of 2018. The most prominent features of Russia's intervention in that phase were the following:

- Having **investments in new sectors** such as phosphates, oil, railways, industries and economic public utilities, specifically ports, airports and mills.
- **To get access to Western reconstruction funds**, whether through humanitarian diplomacy, as Russia worked to convince the European Union states of the possibility of returning refugees in exchange for having access to reconstruction funds, and worked to allow funding for early recovery projects as part of the humanitarian aid mechanism to Syria under Resolution 2585 (2021).
- **Attempting to shrink the size of the economic sanctions** on Syria, by negotiating with the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum to pressure the United States for obtaining an exception for the Arab Gas Pipeline from the sanctions of Caesar's Law, and as a result the World Bank would have the approval to finance the repair of the pipeline that passing the Syrian territory.
- **Working to give effect to the international trade and transport** movement through the M4 and M5 roads by putting pressure on Turkey militarily and politically, as stipulated in the memoranda of understanding in Sochi (2018) and Moscow (2020). Furthermore, seeking to further negotiations with Jordan in order to pressure the United States to obtain



an exception allowing it to trade with the Syrian regime through the Nassib-Jaber crossing.

- **Working to get both of China and India involved in supporting stability**, by providing aid from basic materials that the Syrian regime is no longer able to provide government support for, such as rice, sugar, medicine, vaccines, and others. However, such a move not only for the support likely to be provided by the aforementioned two Asian states, but also for more states of Asia those would contribute to the reconstruction phase.

## Second: Key Objectives of Russia's Intervention in Syria:

The main objectives of Russia's intervention in Syria can be divided into military, political, economic and cultural ones, regardless of priority, as shown below:

### 1) Politically

- **Russia seeks to bring about an alternative model of change different from the Western one** regarding the conflicts in the region, which relies on overthrowing regimes militarily, and concludes with a fragile state and a disintegrated army, which, in turn makes such a fragile state is unable to impose control over the security environment.
- Russia attempts to show itself as **a reliable international mediator** after activating traditional diplomatic tools or developing others such as a guarantee in the implementation of agreements or understandings between international actors, which contributes to relying on the Russians in resolving international disputes and conflicts, and rebranding its image from a state aiming for hegemony to a one that works to impose political and security stability.

- **Disrupting the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)** as Russia strives to undermine confidence among its members. Therefore, it is possible to understand Russia's keenness to enhance cooperation with Turkey in Syria, after it showed high flexibility regarding the transition from competition to cooperation.
- **Strengthening its own diplomatic influence in the Middle East region**, provided that Russia's role in Syria contributes to redrawing the relationship with the countries of the region such as Israel, Jordan and Saudi Arabia to be a reliable force as an alternative or a peer or a near-peer competitor challenging the United States of America.
- **Normalization of violations of international law** in an attempt apparently aimed at reconstructing the authority's right to use violence and its international standards, such as the right to use chemical weapons by the Syrian regime and violent bombing against civilian and medical facilities under the pretext of preserving state sovereignty.

Russia has not hesitated to [veto](#) 12 times in the UN-Security Council since its intervention in Syria in 2015, while its veto was limited to only 4 times before this date, many of which were aimed at preventing any condemnation of the Syrian regime.

- **Russia's imposing itself as a reliable international partner** in the fight against terrorism, which leads to attracting the United States to establish further relationships, based on cooperation within the framework of integration, and the consequent change in the structure of the international system.

## 2) Militarily

- **Ensuring strategic security**; by turning Syria into a Russian-controlled warm-water base, via which Russia could restrict US military access toward the Black Sea, as well as restricting the movement of Turkey and Europe in the Mediterranean.

- **Rebuilding the military force**; by developing the Russian armed forces, after testing more than 300 types of weapons in Syria and the effectiveness of the military education system by involving all commanders of regiments, divisions, armies, military districts, chiefs of staff and services of the armed forces in military operations in Syria.

### 3) Economically

- **Controlling global energy supplies** that pass from Syria as a transit point for the region's oil and gas towards Europe, after acquiring a large part of pipelines, liquefaction facilities, refineries and ports. This does not mean that Russia has ambitions to benefit from Syrian energy revenues because it does not constitute anything of the global share.

- **Expanding access to markets in the Middle East and the world** for the purpose of marketing arms sales and others. After its intervention in Syria, Russia, in fact was able to [sell military equipment](#) worth more than \$15 billion until the end of 2019.

### 4) Culturally:

- Spreading Russian language schools, as they are the main carrier of Russian culture, which it is likely to create, over time, a kind of social environment in Syria that is compatible or not inconsistent with Syrians' societal norms, which resulting in enhancing Russia's ability to reshape its image in Middle Eastern societies.

Capitalizing on the role of the Orthodox Christian Church within the framework of religious diplomacy as a tool for communication and rapprochement across Syria with the Orthodox Christian community in the Middle East, in a way that portrays Russia as the heir of the Orthodox Church, ie the Third Rome.

- Protecting the Syrian heritage by taking care of the antiquities sector and sending special [Russian missions](#) to sites such as Palmyra, the coastal area, Hama and others.



## Conclusion

All right, obviously Russia is here to stay, and also it plans to achieve its strategic interests in the region as a whole, but it has not yet been able to achieve the desired political returns, such as ensuring the presentation of an alternative model for change through the political process and reforms, the Syrian regime's normalization, and turning understandings with Turkey to sustainable agreements, and presenting itself as a reliable mediator before international actors, especially the United States and Israel.

To achieve its strategic interests, Russia will seek in the long term to establish a friendly political system in Syria, provided that such a system of government is to enjoy political and societal stability, ensuring that it will not be exposed to major shocks in the future that affect Russian interests.

Absolutely, this very new political system should have very good relations with neighboring countries, or at least unable to threaten them militarily; because this situation would provide external stability and allow the return of economic activity necessary to achieve Russian interests.

On the other hand, the military outcome shows that Russia was able to prevent the imminent fall of the regime, and was able to significantly increase its area of control. Also, when the Russian intervention began at the end of September 2015, the regime controlled only about a quarter of the Syrian territory, while by the end of September 2020, about two-thirds of the land had been occupied by the regime.

Nonetheless, its efforts to reform the Syrian regime's military and security institution did not achieve much success, in addition to its failure to control Iranian penetration within these institutions, and to control Iranian forces and auxiliary militias, which constitute a real challenge to the Russian scheme of controlling the military and security scene.

Moreover, Russia is still facing real challenges in dealing with ISIS, which is active in the desert, despite more than a year has passed since it launched a large-scale military operation to end the presence of the organization, and despite its involvement of all its allied military forces.

Economically, it can be said that Russia is about to achieve a breakthrough in reducing the size of the economic sanctions against the Syrian regime, and in activating the movement of trade and transport traffic, but this could be enough to give the Syrian regime the minimum economic resources it strongly needed, but it will not be enough to achieve the economic returns that Russia expects to be able to operate the projects in which it has invested, such as ports. Overall, Russia is still unable to launch the reconstruction process, which may affect its strategy in Syria, which is already based on reducing the cost of intervention; which seems to have taken more time than Russia had expected.