



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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The West's Attack on the Military Objects of the Assad Regime

On April 14, 2018, the United States of America, France and the United Kingdom launched a joint attack against the Syrian government's positions in Damascus and Homs¹ as a result of which, apart from the damaged buildings, six Syrian soldiers were killed and three civilians were wounded.²

This was a response to the April 7 chemical attack conducted by the Assad regime in the city of Duma which took the lives of at least 70 people, including women and children.³

Russia assessed the attack conducted by the West as an act of terrorism, comparing it to the attack of Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union.⁴

On the same day, Moscow convened an emergency session of the United Nations Security Council, presenting a proposed resolution which was supposed to condemn the collective response of the West against the Syrian regime; however, the proposed resolution failed as it only had the support of Bolivia and China.⁵

It must be pointed out that according to the data of the Pentagon, the activities of Russian internet trolls in that period increased by about 2,000%⁶ while the UK National Cyber Security Centre, FBI and the US Department of Homeland Security published a joint warning regarding a global Russian cyber-attack.⁷

According to Syrian national television, the Assad regime's air forces shot down missiles heading towards the Shayrat airbase on April 16; however, information from the Pentagon indicates that US military forces were not taking any military action at that moment.⁸

¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/13/politics/trump-us-syria/index.html>

² <https://web.archive.org/web/20180415063443/https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/trump-approves-precision-strikes-in-syria-explosions-near-damascus-1.5995358>

³ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43686157>

⁴ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/04/13/u-s-attack-syria-creates-cold-war-style-tension-russia/516757002/>

⁵ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/04/1007341>

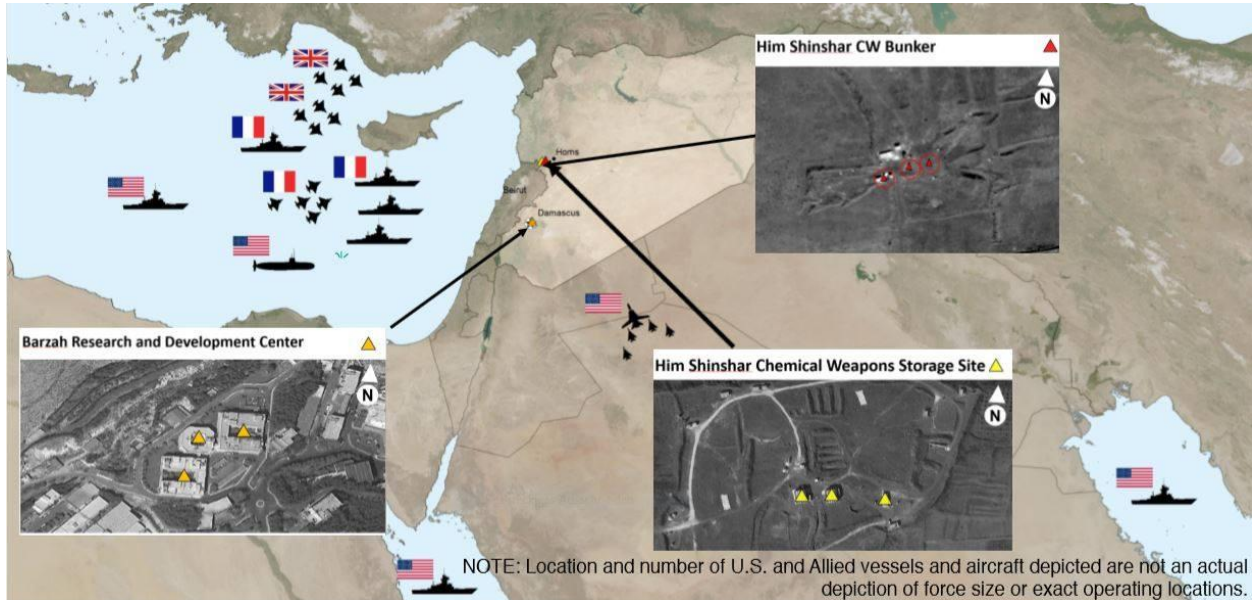
⁶ <https://edition.cnn.com/politics/live-news/us-trump-syria>

⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-43788338>

⁸ <https://www.yahoo.com/news/syrias-air-defenses-respond-missile-attack-over-homs-223533913.html>

According to Russian information, Syrian air forces managed to disable about 71 of the 103 missiles launched by the Western allies towards Syria⁹ although this has not been confirmed by independent sources.

The President of Russia called the attack on Syria an “act of aggression.”¹⁰ Moscow harshly condemned the Western coalition’s attack on the Assad regime and threatened that this action will “have consequences.”¹¹



Despite a clear hostile rhetoric, the communication channels between the US and Russian militaries still remained open in order to avoid bombing Russian positions¹² which could lead to numerous complications, both regionally as well as globally.

The military operation itself was not very different from the April 7, 2017 action when the US bombed the Shayrat airbase,¹³ also in response to the chemical attack conducted by the Assad regime.

The main difference is the political situation: if the US accused the Syrian regime of conducting the chemical attack last year, now they also expressed their doubts about Russian participation¹⁴ which added more intrigue to the crisis.

⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/14/russia-claims-syria-air-defences-shot-down-majority-missiles>
¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2018/apr/14/syria-donald-trump-announcement-chemical-attack-live>
¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2018/apr/14/syria-donald-trump-announcement-chemical-attack-live>
¹² http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3172318
¹³ <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Releases/News-Release-View/Article/1144598/statement-from-pentagon-spokesman-capt-jeff-davis-on-us-strike-in-syria>

It should also be noted here that the US military operation has not changed the balance of power on the ground. The military-political situation in Syria, as well as the interests of the parties to the conflict, remains unchanged.

Moscow also met these one-time actions of the United States with certain “tolerance” as it was clear that these actions could not alter the course of the Syrian conflict. This is exactly why Russia did not make a military response towards the West.

Russia-Turkey-Iran Trilateral Summit

In the long-term perspective, Moscow hopes to resolve the Syrian conflict with help from Tehran and Ankara. A presidential level Russia-Turkey-Iran trilateral summit was held in Ankara on April 4 where the parties discussed various possible ways for resolving the Syrian conflict, agreeing to strengthen the peace process.¹⁵

Before this, a similar trilateral meeting was held in November 2017 in Sochi. Parallel to these meetings, the so-called Astana Process¹⁶ has been actively taking place for about a year with the sponsorship of the aforementioned three powers and with the involvement of a certain part of the participants of the Syrian conflict. In addition, the Geneva format of peace negotiations for the Syrian conflict, initiated by the United Nations in 2012, continues to exist.

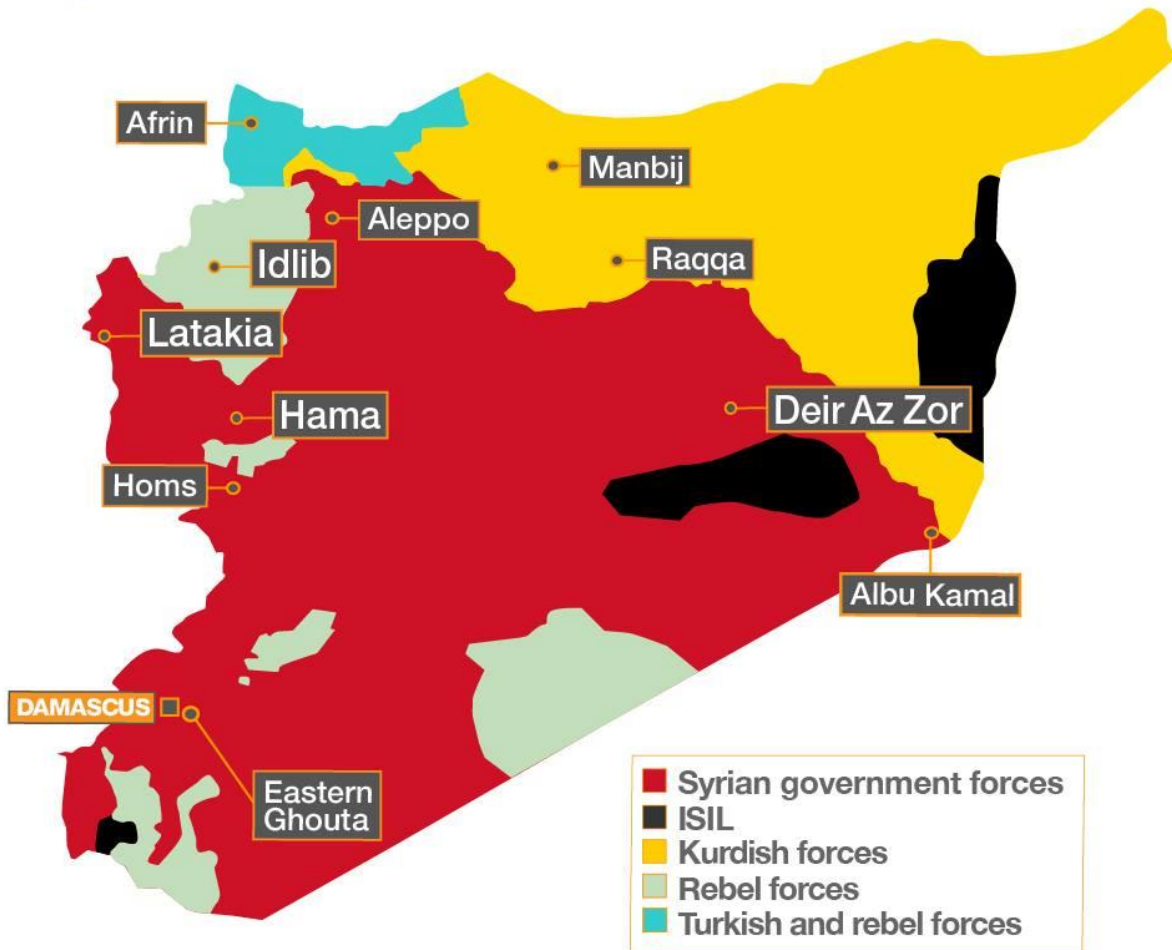
It must be pointed out that despite the publicly declared peaceful intentions of the parties, the situation in Syria is far from normalization and, in fact, on the contrary – the level of confrontation on the ground has not decreased in 2018 but increased. If the interested states fought against each other through proxies before, they are now more closely involved in the conflict which means that the risk of direct confrontation between them (Israel-Iran, Russia-Turkey, Turkey-US) has also increased. The threats coming from Daesh and other jihadi organizations in the country have not been fully eradicated. Russia continues to intensively bomb the rebels which, apart from the fighters, also takes the lives of women, children and the elderly. The Assad regime refuses to stop using chemical weapons against its opponents (including the civilian population).

¹⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/russia-respond-strikes-syria-180415130802748.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/next-syria-ankara-summit-turkey-russia-iran.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/syrian-war-astana-talks-171029160554816.html>;

Syria: Who controls what?



Source: Al Jazeera
Updated: April 14, 2018



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Interests of the Parties

Despite their declared friendship, Russia, Turkey and Iran have differing goals and objectives in the long-term perspective in both Syria as well as in the Middle East in general. This is also compounded by the completely different and often mutually exclusive long-term goals of the United States, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Israel – countries that do not participate in the peace talks initiated by the aforementioned three powers.

Additionally, despite the Assad regime and its supporters obtaining additional territories in Syria, the main reasons leading to the conflict in the first place – a Sunni

majority governed by an Alawi minority, the non-democratic and clannish nature of the regime, large-scale corruption, inhuman treatment against people with differing opinion and a high protest spirit in the population¹⁷ – have not been eradicated.

Russia

With aerial interventions launched in 2015, Russia managed to turn the situation in favor of Assad; however, it failed to achieve its main goal – it did not manage to become a superpower in the eyes of the West – a power that can resolve global-scale problems and strike deals.

Moscow actively supports the Assad regime.¹⁸ At this stage, it is in the interest of Russia to maintain the Assad regime in such a way that it becomes dependent on the Kremlin as much as possible. Parallel to this, Moscow also wants to maintain its military bases in Syria and create new ones upon necessity.

United States

After the beginning of the Syrian conflict, Washington changed its strategy towards the country several times. At this stage, the interest of the US is to destroy Daesh, on the one hand, and not allow the strengthening of Iran on the ground, on the other, as it would threaten Israel – the main US ally in the region.¹⁹ The main allies of the US on the ground for achieving these goals are the pro-Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) within the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) considered by Turkey as a terrorist organization.

In addition to this, the United States cannot ignore the Assad regime's use of weapons of mass destruction (chemical) and will always have a strict reaction to such cases.

Turkey

If at the beginning of the Syrian conflict (2011) Ankara's main goal was to topple the Assad regime and bring the Sunnis to power, Turkey's plans were sequestered after Russia turned the situation around in favor of Assad – at this stage, Turkey is doing everything possible not to allow the creation of a Kurdish entity on the territory of Syria as it considers such a development to be an existential threat to itself.

¹⁷ <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/723>

¹⁸ <http://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604>

¹⁹ <http://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604>

The military operations undertaken by Turkey – the Euphrates Shield (2016-2017) and the Olive Branch (2018) are closely connected with the aforementioned plans. In this regard, Turkey is going against its main NATO ally, the United States, which relies on the pro-Kurdish forces in Syria.

At this stage, it is in the plans of Ankara to expand its successfully implemented operations in the Manbij region and on the eastern side of the Euphrates River which is considered an unofficial zone of US influence.²⁰

In addition, it should also be pointed out that Ankara supported the April 14 military operation conducted by the West against the Assad regime by which it came to odds with the Russia-Iran-Syria position.²¹

Iran

Maintaining the Assad regime is among the goals of both Iran as well as Russia. The difference is that Tehran is involved in the battle through manpower on the ground as well and considers that it can create land bases there. By strengthening its positions first in Iraq and now in Syria, Iran managed for the first time to be in a territory in proximity to its main opponent in the region – Israel.²²

This situation causes sharp responses from Israel which periodically bombs Iran's attempts to create its military bases on Syrian territory. It is worth noting that Russia, which controls Syrian airspace, does not harm Israeli military fighter jets that bomb Tehran's positions – the supposed ally of Moscow. It is not in Russia's interests for Iran to become too powerful in Syria as Russia wants the Assad regime to be exclusively dependent on it.

Conclusions

- Ultimately, we have a prolonged and large-scale conflict of “all against all” in Syria whose ways of resolution are perceived differently by each party as they all have differing interests.
- Russia did manage to turn the situation around in Syria in favor of the Assad regime; however, due to the differences between the views of local and foreign powers, the conflict is far from being resolved. The differences between the positions of the parties have not vanished. On the contrary, in some cases they have even deepened.

²⁰ <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/blog/view/797>

²¹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/turkey-russia-syria-eyes-turn-ankara-moscow-ties.html>

²² <http://www.dw.com/en/syria-conflict-what-do-the-us-russia-turkey-and-iran-want/a-41211604>

- Due to differing views, the Russia-Turkey-Iran cooperation is far from a strategic partnership. It is more of a tactical cooperation. In addition, the trio acts without the United States and its Sunni Arab allies as well as the local forces involved in the war which, in the long-term perspective, makes the possibility of establishing peace in the region even more vague.
- Military successes in Syria are important for Ankara's security which greatly increases its level of dependence on Moscow. This is not in the interests of our country.
- As the cases of Chataev and Machalikashvili illustrated, prolonged conflicts near the territory of Georgia negatively influence our country's security. There are noticeable cases of both recruiting and transporting fighters linked to international terrorist organizations as well as cases of the imports of finances and ideologies of suspicious origins.
- Georgia is a small country and hence its ability to have influence on the development of events in Syria is quite limited. Consequently, the only thing that our country can do at this moment is to carefully observe the developments in the Middle East so as to immediately react to threats should the necessity arise.