

# Syria: A Showroom for Russia Latest Generation of Military Equipment

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**Abstract.** In 2011, a series of protest in MENA (Middle East and North African) region demanding a change of regime to democracy due to their outgrowing rage over the dictatorship government, poor living condition, and high-rates of unemployment ultimately leading to the Syrian Civil War. This paper aims to discuss the correlation of Russian entrance in the Syrian Civil War whether the war affected Russia's defense industry through the 'marketing effect' it created in the battlefield. A Realist perspective is mainly used in this research paper to help uncover the benefits that Russia had gained in multiple spectrums since its entrance in the Syrian Civil War until the end of 2020, though, the discussion is mainly focuses on Russia's arms sale industry and its growing partners in MENA after Russia's entrance to the grand theatre.

**Keywords:** Syrian Civil War, Russia, MENA, Arms sale.

**Abstrak.** Pada tahun 2011, serangkaian protes di wilayah MENA (Timur Tengah dan Afrika Utara) menuntut perubahan rezim ke demokrasi karena kemarahan mereka yang semakin besar atas pemerintahan yang diktator, kondisi kehidupan yang buruk, dan tingkat pengangguran yang tinggi pada akhirnya mengarah pada Perang Sipil Suriah. Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk membahas korelasi masuknya Rusia dalam Perang Saudara Suriah, apakah perang tersebut mempengaruhi industri pertahanan Rusia melalui "marketing effect" yang ditimbulkannya di medan perang. Perspektif Realis terutamanya digunakan dalam penelitian ini untuk membantu mengungkap manfaat yang diperoleh Rusia dalam berbagai spektrum sejak masuknya dalam Perang Saudara Suriah hingga akhir tahun 2020. Meskipun demikian, diskusi ini terutama berfokus pada industri penjualan senjata Rusia dan mitra yang berkembang di MENA setelah masuknya Rusia ke teater besar.

**Kata Kunci:** Perang Saudara Suriah, Rusia, MENA, Penjualan Senjata.



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## INTRODUCTION

In 2011 a wave of protest as now commonly known as the Arab spring erupted in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in which many autocratic countries were swept under the same year (2011), such as the overthrow of Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt (Panayiotides, 2020) which were quickly replaced by a democratic form of government. Seeing the massive eruption of protest did not go away as quickly as hoped, it spread and thus began an uprising started in Syria in March of 2011 (Bhardwaj, 2018). While the protest started peacefully, Syria's dictator Bashar al-Assad perceives the Arab spring as a 'foreign conspiracy' to overthrow his regime to be replaced with a democratic government (Bhardwaj, 2018). Furthermore, as the protest grew larger in number Bashar al-Assad thought the use of excessive violence would end the protests quickly.

The first blood-shed of the 'Syrian Arab Spring' was drawn at the city of Daraa in which several students were arrested with the allegation of drawing anti-government graffiti on their school walls. The actions consequently generated a massive wave of protest in the city of Daraa which forced the security forces to utilize firearms to stop the violence killing four of the unarmed civilians participating in the protest (Sterling, 2012) marking the beginning of the prolonged Syrian Civil War.

Worse yet as the protest spread across Syria, Bashar al-Assad started a crack-down on Syrian civil protesters through the use of its military forces, casualties sky-rocketed and the country fell into an all-out civil war between government forces and civilian separatists that demand a change of regime and the fall of Assad's oppressive dynasty. As the war progressed, in its early years Assad's were not at all in favour of winning and staying in power due to the rise of Islamic state in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Human Rights Watch, 2016) and simultaneously fighting several separatist groups backed by foreign nations.

Add fuel to the fire, the involvement of several surrounding nations (Iran, Turkey), superpower nations (United States and Russia) (Deutsche Welle, 2017), United Nations (Deutsche Welle, 2013), other human rights institutions (Deutsche Welle, 2014) involvement in the war in hope to reinstall peace in the region had instead not only prolong the war but complicate it even more. With the outcome of the war had not been in favour to Assad, he seeks military assistance to Syria's old ally during the Soviet era which is Russian Federation.

Favourably to Syria, in accordance with the 2014 translation of Russian Federation Military Doctrine Article I paragraph 2 and 5. Russian Federation intends to ensure the national integrity

and interests including their allies from both internal and/or external threats through the use of military force after all other aspects (diplomatic, economic, etc.) had been used (Russian Embassy, n.d.). Syria, as one of Russia's closest allies in the Middle East had asked for military assistance in late 2014. Nonetheless, the realization of the intervention finally materialized in 2015 (Andrew Osborn, 2015). With the vivid threat of Syria being democratized, Russia sees the Arab spring as an 'American-made' threat against Russia (Mämmäöv, 2018).

Thus, the writer wants to offer a new perspective and open new discussion that had not been looked at from the Syrian Civil War conflict: does the Syrian Civil War affects its arms sale industry? The time period in this paper is focused on two different time periods which are 2011-2015 and 2015-2020 that differently describes the condition of the battlefield in Syria where as in 2011-15 Russia was not directly involved until the second time period.

Although, there are many journals related or that had already discussed the intervention of Russia in the Syrian Civil War or rather the war itself, but most of them are focusing on the impact of the war, strategic interests of Russia in Syria and MENA, and the involvement of major western countries participating in the war. This paper expands the discussion even further by discussing the indirect economic benefit Russia gained through its military operations in Syria through the lenses of a realist point of view.

There are 3 (three) main bodies or discussion in this paper by which all three are individually different but interconnected. The first body, the writer would like to discuss the 'Drivers and Challenges of the Russian Arms Industry in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region' that focuses on as to why Russia is considered to be a growing arms exporter in MENA and challenges that it faces. Second, 'Sales of Russian Arms Industry between 2011-2015 (Pre-Syrian War) and 2015-2020 (Syrian Civil War)' the writer analyses two data sets of Russia's arms transfers in the period of 2011-15 and 2015-20 to see whether there are any differences that support the argument in this paper in terms of globally, regionally, and by country. And lastly, 'Key interests of Russian Federation in the intervention of Syrian Civil War'; in this body the writer would like to discuss the strategic benefits and interests of Russia that it had gotten from its intervention in the Syrian Civil War.

## METHOD

For this research, the methods used is qualitative with the aim to better provide and

describe the topic to meet a fruitful end. The paper aims to describe how the war affected Russia's arms sales, the driver and challenges it faces in the global arms market, and what other interests does Russia has in the MENA region. Primary sources are provided to better describe the statistic of Russia's arms sales industry in international and regional market, the data include government documents collected from government websites, statistics from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) that provides statistical value of conventional international arms transfers in volume. Secondary sources were also used in this paper, that include related journal article, academic books, and other related-reports. Related news articles are also used as sources in this paper to further support arguments and statements provided by the writer and also acts as references for non-disclosed information from state-actors that are mentioned in this paper.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### **Drivers and Challenges of the Russian Arms Industry in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region**

For the past decades MENA had been known to be a hostile and politically unstable region engulfed in perpetual wars and regime changes from the beginning of the 21st century starting with the occupation of Afghanistan by the United States of America (USA) to the Syrian Civil War that involves multiple western states intervening the conflict that lasted up until now (Cordesman, 2018). The most recent conflict, the Syrian Civil War that involved numerous state and non-state actors primarily Russia, US, Turkey, and other European countries had costed hundreds of thousands of lives lost and millions displaced (cfr, 2021), and not mentioning the financial values of the conflict mainly Russian government as they are the main supporter of Assad's regime. While the intervention was not cheap, the Syrian Civil War serves as a showroom for Russia's military equipment that delivers 'marketing effect' to boost Russian arms sale industry globally (Schaffner, 2021). Not wasting the opportunity, Russian wants to impress the rest of the world with its latest military equipment that is not yet for sale that seems to be unnecessary to be use during the war. For instance, on Putin's 63rd birthday, four Russian warships launched long-range missiles to targets in Syria from over 1,500 km, and in December a Russian submarine launched the same cruise missiles against targets in Raqqa province, Syria while being submerged in the Mediterranean Sea (Mirovalev, 2016).

The need for countries in the region to further modernize their armaments and military equipment

for the survival and security of their sovereignty grows drastically. However, MENA lacking in resources and the capacity to develop military equipment of their own is far from reality, thus their reliance from external arms suppliers to satisfy their needs is a major factor in the succession of the modernization of their military equipment (Malmlöf, 2017). As an example, Saudi Arabia, as a major arms importer in MENA relies heavily of USA's assistance in the modernization of Saudi's military equipment, accounting to 24% of USA's arms export within the period of 2016-20 (Pieter D. Wezeman, 2021).

Nonetheless, certain requirements and criteria need to be fulfilled in order to purchase military equipment from United States of America. The Office of Regional Security and Arms Transfers (RSAT) in the department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/RSAT) directly manages the partnership request for countries to purchase military equipment in close partnership with the Department of Defense's Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), furthermore, before the US Government accepted the Letter of Request (LOR) certain criteria need to be met first and is carefully observed by the US Government such are the political, military, economic, arms control, and human rights condition of the subjected country. After a formal Letter of Request is given to the US Government that include the desirability of the country of a certain military capability that need to be met or a rough estimation of the country's economic capability. If the request is accepted after being carefully reviewed by the US Government a Letter of Acceptance is issued that specifies the defense articles, training, and logistic support for delivery, a major Foreign Military Sales (FMS) are publicly announced on the DSCA website for everyone to access (Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2021). Moreover, before the equipment are delivered the acceptant country or entities must agree to; 1. Not to retransfer the equipment to third parties without receiving a written authorization from the US Government, 2. Not to dispose of or use the equipment other than what the equipment is meant to be use for without first receiving a written authorization from the US Government, and 3. Maintaining the security of the items with the same fashion and degree of the US Government. With MENA as an unstable region and many of the countries fails to meet the criteria in order to import military equipment from US and other western countries or do not have the financial capability to purchase western weapons, Russia acts as an alternative in MENA (Kuimova, 2019).

Russian Federation as the second largest arms exporter globally and a growing arms exporter in MENA, offers an alternative to countries unable to

purchase modern military equipment comparable to western's equipment in combat effectiveness. Furthermore, considering Russia's fairly broad customer base when it comes to arms export miniscule to that of US arms industry, Russia does not concern or impose strong regulation of its buyer political condition or stand-point, and is known to supply both side of the conflict (Malmlöf, 2017); for example, the relationship between India - Pakistan that is known to be an opposite from each other with various conflict that had happened between the two (Shakoor, 1992), does not hinder Russia's export to the two countries, considering that Russia supplied up to 60% of India's military equipment (Pandit, 2021), and Pakistan with 6.6% of its military equipment is of Russian-origin (Reuters, 2021). Russia also supplies both Armenia and Azerbaijan with Armenia had its first arms import from Russia decades ago from the First Karabakh War up until the Second Karabakh War and Azerbaijan that recently had a surge of Russian-origin weaponry from 2009-13 accounted up to 80% of Azerbaijan arms import but later decreased to 31% in the period of 2015-2019 (Nazaretyan, 2021).

Adding more to this, Russia supplies weapons to countries that are unable to purchase weaponries of US origin, in a conflict, in an unstable region, or countries that are not interested to buy US military equipment such as Syria, Venezuela, and Iran (Malmlöf, 2017).

However, even with the aforementioned advantages of Russia's arms sale industry how come Russia still comes in second as the global arms exporter? Russia's portfolio is not as diverse as that of US industry with only handful of regular buyers and the shifting landscape of arms sales becoming a concerning problem for the Russian arms sale industry for the future. India as Russia's primary arms importer also plans to cut off its dependence on Russian-origin weaponries and plans to further diversify its military armaments from other suppliers (US, France, and Israel), between the period of 2011-15 and 2016-20 India already cut off 33% of its arms imports from Russia. Though, Russia suffers the most from India's policy, India's arms imports from US also fell by 46%. However, US would not be as affected as Russia as US' customer base is more diverse than Russia's (Pandit, 2021). More to this, sanctions given by the US and EU after Russia's invasion and occupation of Crimea in 2014 further damages and hinder Russia's arms industry sector, US sanctioned 735 individuals that are related to the invasion in 2014 the sanctions also include the Russian government officials and individuals who operates in the arms sectors, key sectors of Russian economy, or occupied Crimea this sanction also applies to the defense sectors and

prohibited to engage in trade relation with the Russian government (Dianne E. Rennack, 2021). Adding salt to the wound, US also imposed sanctions to Russia's biggest arms exporter Rosoboronexport and other four-major defense firms that include MiG aircraft corporation for violating the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Non-proliferation Act (INKSNA) (Bodner, 2015). The looming threat of newly rising competitors such as China is not out of the equation since many of China's design copies Russia's through reverse engineering from the equipment that had been previously bought by China, just a few years after China bought Russian Su-27 fighter jet, China released its J-11 fighter jet that has many similarities to the Su-27 and not just fighter jets China also copied Russia's S-300 surface-to-air-missile (SAM) (Wezeman, 2017). As part from its growing manufacturing capability China is also trying to shift away from its dependency of Russian weaponries further threatening Russian arms sale industry.

### **Sales of Russian Arms Industry between 2011-2015 and 2015-2020**

In this paragraph, the writer further analyses Russian arms sale exports from two specific periods which are the exports from before Russia's military intervention in the Syrian Civil War (2011-2015) and after Russia intervened in the conflict from 2015 until the end of 2020. The goal of this discussion is to see whether there are any correlations from Russia's intervention in the Syrian Civil War that directly or even indirectly affected Russian arms industry in the global market, regional, or per country. The data that the writer analyses is collected from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's (SIPRI) fact sheets of international arms transfers from both periods.

#### **2011-2015**

During this period, Russia had not officially directly intervened the Syrian Civil War with hard power (military) until September of 2015 (Michael Kofman, 2018). However, this does not necessarily mean that Russia had not aided Syria during its first years of crisis. During the defining and critical years leading to the conflict, Russia indirectly aided Syrian government through arms transfers that was crucially needed for the modernization of the Syrian government military armaments from the previous five-year investment (2007-2011) that surged up to 600% while Syria was under arms embargoes from United States, and European Union (Reuters, 2012). The main discussion however is not Syria's arms imports from Russia but rather does the involvement of Russia in Syria affected the sales of

Russian arms industry whether in the global market, regional, or country.

**Global Market.** In both periods, Russia came as the second largest exporter of military equipment following United States as the major arms exporter globally (Aude Fleurant, 2016) (Pieter D. Wezeman, 2021). In 2011-2015, before Russia enters Syrian Civil War conflict it accounts 25% of arms exports globally following United States with 33%. Russia exported to 50 countries and also rebel forces in Ukraine, of the 25% that Russia has, India is the first Russian arms importer accounting 39%, followed by China and Vietnam 11%.

**Regional.** In regional level, Asia and Oceania is the leading arms importer globally with 46%, followed by Middle East with 25% an increase from the previous period (2006-2010) which was 18%, Europe with 11% a 10% decrease from the previous period, Americas 9.6%, and lastly Africa with 8%, while the data presented by SIPRI also accounts for rebel forces that imported arms the writer would not include them in this analysis as it only accounts 0.02% of the global shares in arms transfers. In terms of Russia's arms transfers regionally, Asia and Oceania accounted for 68% of Russia's overall arms transfers, Africa with 11%, the Middle East with 8,2% and lastly Europe with 6.4% (Aude Fleurant, 2016).

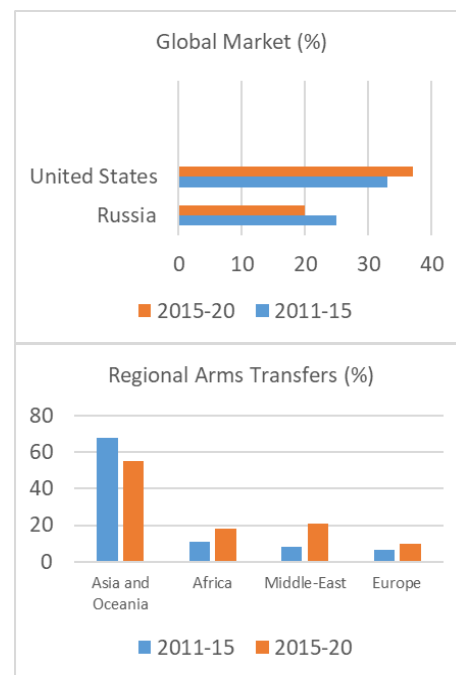
**2015-2020**

The period of 2015-20 lies the results of Russia's intervention in the Syrian Civil War on how it affects its international arms sale industry. The data collected in this period is the same the previous period, by going through analysing the international arms transfers in volume provided by SIPRI data, the regional arms transfers volume, and specific countries that Russia primarily exported its military equipment to, to see whether there are any changes in trends in the market.

**Global Market.** In the period of 2015-20, there is a decrease of Russian arms export industry globally to 20% from the previous period which was 25%. The decrease was mainly attributed to the drop of arms exports to India as being the largest Russia's arms importer that dropped to a staggering 53%. Adding more to this, the sanctions imposed on Russia after its invasion of Crimea and their involvement in supplying Assad's regime definitely harmed their arms sales in the period of 2015-20. Although, India still comes first as Russia's leading importer globally. Furthermore, new deals that had been made in the year of 2019-20 between India and Russia will definitely increase Russia's arms sale volume within the next five years period.

**Regional Market.** In the regional market on the other hand, Russia experienced a decrease in

Asia and Oceania region with 55% a big decrease of arms export from the previous period, though, Russia's export significantly increased in Africa and Middle-East region with 18% and 21%. The increase is mostly attributed to Russia's growing partnership in MENA region due to the marketing effect created by Russia's intervention in the Syrian Civil War and its showcases of military equipment in the battlefield. In African region, Algeria is Russia's promising partner as its imports were 64% higher than that of the previous period becoming the sixth largest arms importer globally and Russia still remains Algeria's major arms supplier that include variety of military equipment (combat aircrafts, combat helicopters, and also submarines). While in the Middle-east, Russia's influence is not as strong as that of United States and many countries in the region still prefer USA's, Russia's undeniably has a growing market since Russia's arms export to Egypt surged 430%.



**Key Interests of Russian Federation in the Intervention of Syrian Civil War**

Undeniably, the intervention of Russia in Syrian civil war serves a great deal of benefits for Russia in multiple spectrums. Since Russia's involvement in the civil war from 2015, Syrian government has signed several deals with Russian Federation that grants them a permanent military presence in Syria. In 2017, Damascus signed a deal with Moscow, allowing them to further modernize their naval base in Tartus and renewed their lease to the Russian Federation for 49 years free of charge that even can be extended if both parties are in agreement. The deal would grant Russia an absolute control over the area granting them a status of total

naval sovereignty in Tartus (TASS Russian News Agency, 2017). Furthermore, Russia's nuclear-powered cruisers would be allowed to enter Syria's waters and ports along with other warships that the Russian Navy willing to send to Syria. All the crew members aboard the vessel and also other crews operating the naval base in Tartus would enjoy immunity from the Syrian government and the area is under Russia's jurisdiction, meaning that Syria does not has authority over the naval base to conduct inspection or even enter the base without permission from the commander (TASS Russian News Agency, 2017). Moreover, the Tartus naval base would have direct access to the Mediterranean Sea, playing as an important strategic base to ensure Russia's military presence in the Mediterranean alongside NATO member states to even the playing field (TASS Russian News Agency, 2017).

In a similar vein, Khmeimim air base that was built in 2015 through a secret agreement between Assad and Putin (Звезда, 2017) for a 49-year lease also free of charge to use the available infrastructure that was already provided by the Syrian government. Furthermore, Syrian forces are responsible for the perimeter or outer security of the air base while the interior security are under the responsibility of Russian forces (TASS Russian News Agency, 2017) (TASS, 2017). In 2017, Syria agreed to Russia expansion of adding a second runway instalment in Khmeimim airbase which enables Russia's air squadron to conduct more air strikes on separatists that threatens Syria's sovereignty, despite Russia's statement of withdrawal from Syria (Nordland, 2017). Through the aforementioned deals between Syria – Russia, it would further cement Russia's military presence in Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea.

In light of the aforementioned Russia's naval and air base in Syria, they would serve as a strategic outpost in the Middle east more specifically Syria and other Russia's allies protection and include them into Russia's sphere of influence through diplomatic engagement, arms trade, and to some extent military actions if needed. The two bases would cement Russia's power in terms of Naval and Air for the MENA region, especially accounting the fact that Russia's biggest naval ports that has access to the black is in Sevastopol, and for Russia to have reach beyond the Black Sea its warship has to go through Bosphorus strait which currently is under control of Turkey, and they (Turkey) have the right to close and open the strait in peace or war time (Panayiotides, 2020). From the given fact before, it is now clear how Tartus naval base serves as a strategic location for the Russian Federation Navy to expand its sphere of influence and reach both to the Mediterranean Sea and MENA region. Nonetheless, the Syrian war theatre presents Russia with

tremendous economic benefits through its arms sale industry (Rosoboronexport), through the utilization of the battlefield as a 'showroom' as well as a 'shooting range' for Russia's latest generation of military equipment for the whole world to see in real-time and in a combat environment. Nevertheless, before getting further into the discussion the writer would like to discuss brief history of Rosoboronexport and why it would matter to the Russian economy.

In November 2000, the President of Russian Federation issued a decree to officially merge the two state-own intermediaries of defense equipment exporter to a single state-controlled agency now known as Rosoboronexport Federal State Unitary Enterprise (FSUE), later in 2011 the company was converted into an Open Joint-Stock-Company (OJSC) or for short JSC Rosoboronexport (Rosoboronexport, n.d.). Russia is currently the second largest arms exporter in the world after the United States of America, with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region becoming one of Moscow's growing interests in arms export other than Asia (Borshchevskaya A. , 2018). With the grand display of Russian armed forces capability to the Syrian theatre serves the Russian arms industry to showcase their new generation of military equipment to the world and capabilities through unnecessary show of force (Mirovalev, 2016). Within less than a year, of Russia's entrance to the war, its arms sale industry experienced significant surge up to \$14.5 billion (Mirovalev, 2016). In the subsequent year (2016), Russia's arms sale industry grew larger up to \$15 Billion, from its \$14.5 billion initial profit in 2015. Russia stated its entrance to the Syrian war had significantly increased its profit worldwide, with a promising \$50 billion profit by the end of 2016 from its arms sale industry alone (Villasanta, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

To conclude the discussion, from the data that had been presented above it seems that the Syrian Civil War does has its effects towards Russia's arms sale industry from both periods. During the first years of Russia's intervention in the Syrian Civil War, its arms export industry significantly increased from new buyers that were interested after the showcase of its military equipment in the Syrian Civil War, however, the sales later on decreases at the end of the second period as seen by the decrease of Russia's overall international arms transfers.

Nevertheless, Russia still comes in second as the biggest arms supplier internationally following United States of America, and not to forget the sanctions imposed on Russia's defense industry

after its invasion on Crimea and the involvement in the Syrian Civil War and supporting Assad's regime.

Though, the volume of international arms export decreases for Russia mainly attributed to the decrease of arms import from India (Russia's main arms importer), the regional market still has its hopes for Russia's defense industry mainly MENA region. In both periods, MENA region increases overtime promising new prospects for new partners to Russia as many of the countries in the region are unable to purchase USA military equipment for several reasons (either financial or political). Moreover, the involvement of Russia in the Syrian Civil War definitely benefited Russia in multiple spectrums apart from its defense industry, as an example the development of Khmeimim airbase and Tartus port in Syria will further cement Russia's influence in MENA region and the Mediterranean Sea and they will serve as a long-term investment for Russia to counter the influence of NATO in the Mediterranean Sea and also in the Middle-east.

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