

Paper

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Background, Causes and Consequences

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ishtiaq Hossain



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Abstract

On September 30, 2015, Russian fighter aircraft based in Latakia, Syria, started bombing the forces opposed to President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian cities of Hama, Homs and the outskirts of Latakia. This is for the first time since the end of the Cold War that the Russian military have been in action anywhere in the Middle East. As reported in various media outlets if Russian troops are indeed deployed at a later date in Syria, then it would also be the first time since the 1970s that Russian military officers are stationed in the Middle East. The involvement of Russian military in the Syrian conflict is fraught with consequences for Syria itself, the region and the international arena. This paper purports to explain the causes, and consequences of Russian military involvement in Syria not only on the Syrian conflict, but also on the regional and international politics.

Background

President Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency of Syria in July 2000, one month after the death of his father President Hafez al-Assad who had ruled the country since 1970.² A British-trained ophthalmologist, Bashar al-Assad's assumption of power in Damascus was generally welcomed in the West and the region as well. However, his promises to reform the country's floundering economy and repressive political system never really took off the ground.

As the Arab Uprising, which began on 18 December, 2010, in Tunisia, and gradually swept through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), forcing out

¹ Dr. Ishtiaq Hossain is Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The following are his latest publications: (with Isiaka Adams Abidoun), "Human Security in a Globalised World: Concepts, and Issues for the Muslim World," in Samiul Hasan (ed.), *Philanthropy and Human Security in the Muslim World: Concepts, Characters, and Challenges*. New York: Springer, 2015, pp. 31–49; "Arab Spring," in Emad El-Din Shahin (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 98–102.

² For a good understanding of the challenges that President Bashar al-Assad faced in 2000, see Flynt Leverett, *Inheriting Syria: Bashar's Trial by Fire* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

of power one dictator after another in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, civil uprisings against Assad's regime erupted in Syria in March, 2011. One of the first such civilian protests was in the southern city of Deraa, sparked off when a group of school children was arrested after they had written anti-government revolutionary slogans on a wall. Like in other countries during the Arab Uprisings, the mass protests soon spread over to all other major cities of the country. The civilian uprising in Syria was met with brute force by Assad's regime and the opposition to Assad soon transformed into organised resistance and by June 2011 first reports began to appear of defections from the Syrian army as officers and soldiers refused to carry out orders to fire on civilians. At the end of July, 2011 the formation of a Free Syrian Army (FSA) was announced. The FSA and other armed resistance groups since then have been fighting to overthrow the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Given the religious, sectarian, and ethnic divisions in the country, it was not too long before Syria degenerated into a vicious conflict.³ As the brutality of the regime's forces grew so did the armed resistance to the Assad regime. Indiscriminate bombings of civilian areas, use of chemical weapons against civilians, and the targeting of civilians by "Barrel Bombs" forced hundreds of thousands of Syrians to escape the war in Syria. In 2015 it was estimated that there were three million Syrian refugees outside the country mostly in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Nearly 200 thousand Syrians have been killed in the civil conflict and an estimated six to seven million Syrians are now internally displaced. Syrians are thought to constitute about 70% of the refugees who fled to Europe in the summer of 2015, and they continue to flee. For all practical purposes, the Syrian conflict has been transformed into a proxy war involving regional and extra-regional powers. Among the armed resistance groups, the largely nationalist-minded FSA has gradually devolved into an amorphous gathering of locally focused militia units with minimal command links to a leadership in Turkey, while capabilities and influence of Salafist and Sunni jihadist groups expanded considerably.⁴

By early 2012, an expanding Syrian insurgency with a core Sunni jihadist group consisting of Jabhat al-Nusra, a number of al-Qaeda linked cells came into existence. The insurgents also included Salafist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, Liwa al-Islam, and Suqor al-Sham. According to one estimate, by mid-2013 the

³ For a comprehensive discussion on the ethnic and religious diversity of the Syrian society and how these have complicated the Syrian conflict, see the following: Ted Galen Carpenter, "Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implications," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Spring, 2013), pp. 1–11.

⁴ For an excellent discussion on Syria's extremist groups fighting the Bashar al-Assad regime, see the following: Charles Lister, "Assessing Syria's Jihad," *Survival*, Vol. 56, No. 6 (December 2014–January 2015), pp. 87–112.



Syrian opposition insurgents were divided into more than one thousand operational units.⁵ There are about 15 thousand foreign nationals from 90 countries taking part in the jihad in Syria thus making it a truly international jihadist fight.⁶ The rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS), also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and the Levant (ISIL) and *Da'esh* and its ability to occupy and hold on to territories in eastern Syria and Iraq sent alarm bells across the capitals of the regional and extra-regional countries. In August 2014, the United States (US) Air Force began bombing ISIS targets in Iraq. Fighter-aircraft from Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), Canada (the newly-elected Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is likely to withdraw them as part of his election pledge), Jordan, the UAE, Turkey and Saudi Arabia also joined the Americans. While the UK government is considering to seek parliamentary approval to expand the bombing to Syria, some of the just mentioned air forces are already operating inside Syria bombing the ISIS-held areas. In Iraq, the ISIS controls Mosul, Tikrit, Falluja and Ramadi. The eastern part of Syria including Raqqa, the self-declared capital of the so-called Islamic State is controlled by ISIS.

Armed opposition groups have been successful in gaining territories in cities like Aleppo, Hama, Homs, and Damascus. Despite the bombing of ISIS targets by foreign air forces, ISIS and other opposition armed groups are thought to be in control of nearly 82% of Syrian territory. As *Military Balance 2015* has pointed out:

The severe threat posed by the ISIS triggered military engagement and political alignment by regional and international states that had not been seen for quite some time. The expansion of territory under its control—which effectively merged western Iraq and eastern and north-eastern Syria—was followed, after the group's seizure of Mosul in June 2014, by its announcement of caliphate.⁷

Although no exact figures are available for the Syrian military's losses, it is estimated that they have suffered nearly 82 thousand casualties and lost armoured cars, weapons of different types, and even tanks (destroyed by recently supplied US-made anti-tank missiles by some Gulf States to their groups fighting the Assad forces). The loss of Syrian government control over a substantial part of the country and the casualties suffered by the Syrian military thought to have spooked Moscow to take military action in Syria. The main aim was to shore up a repressive Assad regime. But there are other reasons, as explained in the next section that led to the Russian military intervention in Syria.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 88.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *The Military Balance 2015* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2015), p. 303.

Reasons for Russian Military Intervention in Syria

Since the beginning of the Syrian Uprising in 2011, the Russians have not flinched from their continuous support to the one-time ally of the Soviet Union, and at present the only ally left for Russia in the Middle East. Since the Ukraine crisis and Moscow's phantom military intervention in Eastern Ukraine and ultimately the annexation of Crimea in March, 2014, President Vladimir Putin (a former KGB agent), and his security advisers are well-aware that "intervention in Syria is happening within a broader geopolitical competition between the Sunni Gulf States and Iran with its tacit support, or sometimes imagined support, for Shia and proxy forces in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and their coreligionists in the Gulf States."⁸ The following strategic, military and political factors explain Moscow's strong support for Syria's Assad regime: Russia's military assistance to the Syrian military, military-intelligence sharing, the desire to retain Russian naval facility at the Syrian port of Tartus, the fear that the downfall of the Assad regime will mean a geopolitical loss for Moscow; and a determination to prevent Syria from becoming another Libya.⁹ But as Samuel Cherap points out there are two other significant reasons for Russia's strong support for the Assad regime. These are: Russia's insistence on the Westphalian notion of sovereignty, and Russian anxieties about the displacement by Sunni Islamist governments of secular autocrats in Syria.¹⁰

Moscow's insistence to oppose any American-led attempt to change the Assad regime by force is a reflection of Russia's negative experience with the Western powers over NATO's action in Libya. Russia had agreed to the UN Security Council resolution authorising the setting up and enforcement of no-fly zones in Libya with the understanding that Moscow (as well as Beijing) would be kept informed of NATO's military action in Libya.¹¹ But that was not done by the NATO members taking part in the Libyan military action. The subsequent degeneration of Libya into a failed state with two rival governments, the rise of militias and the rampant use of Libyan territories by human traffickers to smuggle migrants into Europe convinced Russia's leaders that changing regime

⁸ Michael P. Noonan, "American Geostrategy in a Disordered World," *Orbis*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Fall, 2015), pp. 602–603.

⁹ Mark N. Katz, "Russia and Syria: Four Myths," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer, 2013), p. 38.

¹⁰ Samuel Cherap, "Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention," *Survival*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (February–March, 2013), pp. 35–36.

¹¹ Since the Western military intervention in Libya, Russia has developed its own views on the principle of Responsibility-to-Protect or R2P as is commonly known. For details see Derek Averre and Lance Davies, "Russia, Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: The Case of Syria," *International Affairs*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (2015), pp. 813–834. Also see Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis," *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (2013), pp. 35–41.



by external force is not to be repeated. Therefore, they insist that sovereignty of a state is sacrosanct and it must be respected under any circumstances. By the same logic, Syria's sovereignty must be respected, and it is up to the people of Syria to change their government. As a result, Russia has consistently opposed any proposal for a peaceful settlement of the Syrian imbroglio that calls for the removal of President Assad as a precondition.

Another issue of concern to Russia revolves around Moscow's fear about the impact of a possible victory by the rebels over Assad's forces on Russia's immediate neighbourhood. Russia's neighbourhood in Central Asia and North Caucasus is inhabited by more than 20 million Sunni Muslims. Decision-makers in Moscow are of the opinion that the Caucasus Emirate and its predecessors were directly supported by entities in some of the Arab countries now leading the call for Assad's departure.¹² A possible victory of the rebel forces, the argument goes on, could embolden the Gulf States in stirring up troubles in Russia's neighbourhood by providing their support to the Caucasus Emirate. From Moscow's perspective, this is a credible concern considering the reports of about 1,700 Russian citizens participating in the Syrian conflict.¹³ Russian elites fear that if these Russian citizens return home, they can, in fact play a leading role in wreaking havoc in the Northern Caucasus region, where a faction of the Emirate have already sworn allegiance to the Islamic State. Given this situation both the rebel groups and the Islamic State have become enemies of the Russian State in Syria.

Russia has been using its top of the line Sukhoi-30 and Sukhoi-34 along with Sukhoi-24 and Sukhoi-25 fighter aircraft based in Latakia in Syria.¹⁴ These jets have been pounding rebel forces in Western Syria since September 30, 2015. The cities hit are the outskirts of Latakia, Homs, Aleppo and Damascus, and also Raqqa in Eastern Syria. Although Moscow claims to be hitting ISIS bases, training and command centres, arms dumps these cities are not controlled by the ISIS forces. So why are the Russian fighter aircraft hitting rebel-held territories? It is worth pointing out that Russia intervened in Syria at the request of the Assad regime. Therefore, Moscow is most likely to work for the interest of the Assad regime. As such, Russian airstrikes would try to relieve the pressure on the Syrian military by stopping the rebel forces. This may be linked to the preparation for a ground offensive by the Syrian military, aided by Hezbollah and

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Katarina Petrtylova, "Russia's Policy toward the Islamic State," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Fall, 2015), p. 69.

¹⁴ Russia has a total of 28 fighter aircraft based in Latakia. Four are believed to be SU-30 Flankers, while the rest are SU-24 Fencers and SU-25 Frogfoots—a dozen each. The SU-24 Fencers and SU-25 Frogfoots are designed to provide close air support. Additionally, there are 14 helicopters—Mi-24 Hind gunships, Mi-17 Hip transport helicopters based in Latakia. A number of SA-22 surface-to-air missiles have reportedly been moved to Syria.

Iranian troops to regain lost territories. This may yet be a tactic to force the opposition forces into negotiations with the Assad regime, which these forces and their backers have so far refused to do.

The International and Regional Responses to the Russian Military Intervention in Syria

In this section an attempt would be made to analyse the responses of the major international and regional states to the Russian military strikes against what Moscow has described as “terrorist” forces and their bases in Syria. “Pouring gasoline on the fire” of the Syrian conflict, was how the US Secretary of Defence, Ashton Carter, described the Russian airstrikes. He continued:

Russia states an intent to fight ISIL on the one hand, and to support Bashar al-Assad regime on the other. Fighting ISIL without pursuing a parallel political transition only risks escalating conflict in Syria—and with it, the very extremism and instability that Moscow claims to be concerned about and aspire to fighting.¹⁵

In his first comments on the Russian airstrikes in Syria, President Barack Obama opined that Moscow was not acting out of strength but out of weakness.¹⁶ “An attempt by Russia and Iran to prop up Assad and try to pacify the population is just going to get them stuck in a quagmire and it won’t work,”¹⁷ said Obama at a press conference in the White House two days following the Russian warplane struck their targets in Syria. In the US President Obama has come under fire from some quarters for not using force against the Assad regime.¹⁸

The American officials were upset with the Russian airstrikes for the following reasons: Washington viewed the strikes as affront since these were carried out only two days following the meeting between President Obama and President Putin to try to bridge their differences over the conflict in Syria; despite the Russian claims, the US has pointed out, the airstrikes did not target the ISIS forces rather their focus of attacks were the moderate forces opposed to Assad; the airstrikes also targeted CIA-armed groups; the introduction of Russian air

¹⁵ “US Accuses Russia of ‘Throwing Gasoline on Fire’ of Syrian Civil War,” *The Guardian* (September 30, 2015). Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/30/russia-launches-first-airstrikes-against-targets-in-syria-says-us>. Accessed on October 24, 2015.

¹⁶ “Obama Sees Russia Failing in Syria Effort,” *The New York Times*, 3 October, 2015. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/03/world/middleeast/syria-russia-airstrikes.html?_r=0. Accessed on 24 October, 2015.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ President Obama, however, has always maintained that the US must not get directly involved in another war in the Middle East. For a forceful defence of Obama’s policy, see Marc Lynch, “Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role,” *Foreign Affairs* (September–October, 2015), pp. 18–27.



power in Syria seemed to upend the American strategy in Syria; Washington was given only one hour notice by the Russians of the impending airstrikes; and the US feels that the airstrikes also raise stakes over two very different and competing views of ending the conflict in Syria (President Putin believes the Bashar al-Assad government is the key to stability in Syria while President Obama is of the opinion that the status quo in Syria cannot hold).

As a response to the Russian airstrikes in Syria and the violation of Turkish airspace by Russian aircraft, the NATO expressed its readiness to send troops to Turkey to defend the alliance's southern flanks. Turkey was angered by the escalation of the military conflict in Syria with the Russian airstrikes, and the violation of its airspace by Russian aircraft, and drones. There were also reports of harassment of Turkish F-16s patrolling its borders with Syria by Russian jets. In direct response to the Russian military action in Syria, Ankara has threatened to cancel gas deals with Russia although 60% of Turkey's gas supply comes from Russia. It also threatened to stop the building of a nuclear power plant with the help of the Russians. The Russian ambassador to Turkey was summoned a number of times by its Ministry of Foreign Affairs to explain violations of Turkish airspace by Russian jets and drones.

The Russian airstrikes in Syria have evinced strong response from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These airstrikes came at a time when:

the campaign against ISIS, intended to push the group back first in Iraq and then in Syria, had a mixed record. While ISIS suffered significant setbacks against Kurdish and Iraqi security forces, backed by mostly American airpower, it demonstrated endurance and sustained appeal, seizing the Iraqi city of Ramadi, expanding within Syria and conducting operations in other countries across the Middle East. ISIS also gained important footholds across North Africa.¹⁹

The GCC states believe that the Russian airstrikes in Syria and the involvement of the Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria will lead to further destabilisation of the region and spill more blood in the region. Undoubtedly, the Russian military intervention in Syria is a setback for the regional states supporting the anti-Assad forces in Syria. But rather than pushed, as the Russians expect, into supporting a political solution with the Assad government as a partner, it is most likely that they will remain steadfast on their position of non-cooperation with the Assad regime and increase their support for the moderate forces in Syria. From the very beginning of the Syrian uprising, Saudi Arabia has been clear about its position on

¹⁹ "Middle East and North Africa," *Strategic Survey 2015* (London: Institute of Strategic and International Studies, 2015), p. 190.

Syria—President Bashar al-Assad must go. There are no signs yet that Riyadh is ready to make any compromise on its position on Assad. In fact, all the indications are that the Saudis are likely to increase its support to the groups in the south of Syria.

Turkey and Qatar have continued to support the rebels in the north including conservative Islamist militia like Ahrar al Sham. There is a very high level cooperation and coordination among Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Both Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have the financial strength and the determination to match the Russian escalation in Syria. However, it should be pointed out that Saudi Arabia is heavily involved in Yemen. But King Salman has shown strong determination to continue with the past Saudi policy in Syria. In fact, during his meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry in Riyadh on October 25, the Saudis reiterated their demands that Assad must go, and both have agreed to step up their support to the moderate groups fighting the Assad regime.

Pros and Cons of Russian Military Intervention in Syria

Like all other external interventions in a very complicated and complex conflict like that of the Syrian conflict, there are no clear advantages and disadvantages of such an external intervention like that of the Russian airstrikes. These airstrikes are not likely to force the rebel forces to the negotiating table for a political settlement. Neither are the airstrikes likely to stop the ISIS. It would take a full-fledged military campaign involving international air and ground offensive to defeat the ISIS. While the Iranian and Hezbollah forces may already have joined the Syrian troops in making ground offensive, it is too early to predict the outcomes. Despite Russian expectations that there soon would be major victories against the anti-Assad forces, no such victories have been claimed by Syria's military. The Western powers, particularly the US, are reluctant to place "boots on ground" in Syria or elsewhere in the Middle East.

If there is to be a peaceful settlement of the Syrian conflict, the external actors must be on the same level. So far we do not see that clearly happening although on October 24 the Russians have indicated their willingness to "help" the FSA, provided they fight the ISIS. Moscow can state that because it knows very well that the FSA is the only American-armed group and also the weakest. If the Russians had hoped that the airstrikes would convince the external supporters of the anti-Assad forces to accept Assad as part of the any future government, it did not materialise. The Russian airstrikes are likely to prolong, not stop the sufferings of the Syrian people. The international media have been reporting civilian casualties as a result of the Russian bombing raids. These are likely to lead to further outflow of Syrian refugees.



Future Scenarios of the Russian Military Intervention in Syria

It is indeed very difficult to point out precisely the future of Russian military intervention in Syria due to the complex local, regional and international situation. Although the following future scenarios of Russian military intervention is suggested here, it should be kept in mind these are tentative in nature.

First, at the beginning of the airstrikes, Moscow had announced that these airstrikes were directed against the so-called ISIS forces but it quickly became clear that actually their main targets were the moderate and extremist forces fighting the Assad regime. This strengthened the suspicion that the Russians were more interested to stabilise the Assad regime by destroying/curtailing the capabilities of rebel forces than destroying the ISIS forces. The Russian airstrikes seem to have given some confidence to the Assad regime to try to hang on to power. President Bashar al-Assad's secret trip to Moscow on October 21, the first ever by the president since the beginning of the mass civil uprisings in Syria in 2011, was an indication of that feeling in the Assad regime. But it needs to be pointed out here that this confidence is temporary. The Syrian anti-Assad forces and their external backers have made it very clear that they will not accept any role of Assad in any future Syrian government.

The Syrian president's secret trip to Moscow should not be regarded as the strengthening of Assad's role in any future Syrian government. As the recently concluded talks in Vienna among the external supporters (including Iran) of various groups involved in the Syrian conflict showed there is still a wide gap among the external powers about Assad's future role in Syria. The US, UK, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar still maintain that President Assad should not be a party to any peace deal on Syria. Russia and Iran, on the other hand, maintain that while President Assad cannot remain Syria's president forever, his participation in any future transitional government is imperative.

Second, in terms of fighting the anti-Assad forces, the results of the Russian airstrikes have been mixed. For example, the Syrian government forces have gained some ground in south and east of Aleppo. This is part of their attempt to build strategic depth around their stronghold in Al-Safira and push closer to Rasin al-Aboud, a Syrian air force base, which has been under the siege of ISIS for the past one year. ISIS forces, however, launched a counter attack to the north of Aleppo to draw away the Syrian government forces from the airbase and succeeded in gaining some territory. The ISIS forces have also gained a long stretch of road north of Ithriya. This road remains highly contested because it is the only overland route for supplying Syrian government forces around Aleppo.

Rebel and government forces continue to fight for territory along the front lines between Hama and Idlib. Small areas changed hands recently but the government forces have not been able to make any significant gains.

Third, if the Russian airstrikes in Syria continue for a long time, there is the real possibility that the Russians might just get stuck in a Syrian quagmire like they did in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The Russian aim to bring about a quick defeat of the anti-Assad forces, by airstrikes, have not succeeded. In fact, exactly the opposite seems to be happening. It seems that as a result of Russian resolve to destroy the anti-Assad moderate and extremist forces, ISIS forces have increased their manoeuvrability. Also, there are growing signs of resolve among the countries supporting the anti-Assad forces to increase their military support to the rebel forces. For example, despite their earlier promise not to place boots on ground in Syria, the US has decided to deploy about two dozen Special Forces in Northern Syria. Ostensibly, these forces are to “train” and “advise” local anti-Assad forces but they are also likely to get involved in local military operations as they did recently in rescuing hostages held by ISIS in northern Iraq. The US has also stepped up supply of arms to what it calls moderate anti-Assad forces like the FSA.

The deployment of American Special Forces increases the dangers of accidental bombings of American forces by Russian airstrikes. These airstrikes have also scuttled any possibility of setting up of a no-fly zone over Syria as demanded by Turkey. It is worthwhile to mention here that just before the Russian airstrike had begun, the US and Turkey did agree to set up such a zone over Syria. There are also talks among some quarters in the Gulf States of supporting “jihad” against the Russians in Syria.

Conclusion

The Russian airstrikes have opened a new phase of the vicious conflict in Syria. Although the Russians seem to have convinced themselves that they would be able to defeat the “terrorists,” meaning anyone or groups that are opposed to President Bashar al-Assad, the developments so far on ground do not seem to be encouraging for Moscow. In the immediate past, a super power—the US—tried to do exactly that in neighbouring Iraq and in Afghanistan. Decades long fighting have been unable to bring peace to these troubled lands. In fact, as Tony Blair has admitted recently that the Americans and the British are indirectly responsible for creating ISIS by taking their military actions in Iraq.

Most of the domestic conflicts in the twentieth century had ended in military victories of one group over the other. For example, the Biafran crisis, which started in 1967 and ended in 1970 when the secessionists surrendered to the



federal Nigerian forces; and the Bangladesh conflict, which ended with the surrender of Pakistani troops to India on December 16, 1971. History teaches us to take lessons from it and not to repeat our past mistakes. Unfortunately, leaders do not take lessons from the past and end up repeating mistakes. Instead of building a society based on laws, justice for all, the leaders fall victims to the lure of power and personality cults. As a result, most of the times, the people like those in Syria have to pay for their mistakes and suffer.

ورقة بحثية

التدخل الروسي في سورية خلفياته، وأسبابه، ونتائجه

د. اشتياق حسين

