

What is Russia doing in Syria?

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The conflict in Syria allows us to look very concretely at the role Russia plays in the world and whether Marxists should describe it as imperialist.

In her email of 24 February, Rox [Baker] paraphrases Tom [Riley] from a previous discussion ("A Response to Comrade Logan's 'Twenty Points'", 26 October 2013), saying that if there was evidence of "serious intervention by Russian capital in the direction of subordinating Syria **for the purpose of pumping value out of it** and/or the rest of the region" or evidence of "**foreign investment in Syria** and elsewhere are **in line with a Marxist understanding of finance capital**" (RB emphasis), he would have to change his view. Earlier in his reply to Bill [Logan], Tom asserts that Russia "is not attempting to seize the material wealth of the Middle East, which is at bottom what motivates the policy of the US and its allies".

Russia has significant economic interests in Syria, with several Russian financial institutions still operating despite the civil war. "Recent Russian arms sales to Syria are worth \$4 billion, including fighter jets and advanced missiles. Russian business investments in Syria encompassing infrastructure, energy and tourism amount to nearly \$20 billion. A natural gas processing plant about 200 kilometers east of Homs is being constructed by a Russian engineering company, Stroytransgaz." (http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/31/opinion/russias-syrian-power-play.html?_r=0). "Tatarstan-based oil producer Tatneft is the most significant Russian energy firm in Syria. The company began pumping Syrian oil in April 2010 through a joint venture with Syria's national oil company and said in January that it would spend \$12.8 million drilling exploratory wells near the Iraqi border." (<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/billions-of-dollars-of-russian-business-suffers-along-with-syria/443078.html>).

While these are only a tiny percentage of Russia's foreign investments, they are strategic insofar as they are aimed at securing Russian interests and influence in an important focal point of inter-imperialist rivalry.

Russia has a military installation in the Syrian port of Tartus, providing its only access to the Mediterranean, where several Russian navy vessels operate. In early 2012, CNN (<http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/02/opinion/treisman-russia-syria>) describes the port as being refurbished and set up for much more extensive use, extended to accommodate an aircraft carrier etc., although it seems that Tartus was temporarily evacuated, along with many Russian citizens in Syria, in mid 2013 (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/26/russia-withdraws-personnel-syria>). Reports on the evacuation are conflicting, but it seems unlikely that Moscow will easily give up this toehold in the Middle East.

The following two articles, worth reading in their entirety, are overviews of Russia's strategic interests in the eastern Mediterranean, highlighting a deal that was signed in December for Russia to extract oil from newly discovered sources in Syrian territorial waters:

<http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/russian-policy-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-and-the-implications-for-eu-external-action/>

<http://blogs.ft.com/nick-butler/2013/12/30/russia-advances-into-the-mediterranean/>

This deal is in Russia's area of strength in natural resources but here it is not a matter of making profits simply by selling commodities extracted from Russia itself but in using expertise in domestic extraction to invest capital in order to extract value from other regions of the world.

The first of these articles also discusses Russia's relationship with Cyprus in some detail. This has mainly come up in our discussion around the question of roundtripping, but this indicates that there is more to the economic relationship with Cyprus, the instability of Syria giving it considerable strategic importance. There is suggestion that Cyprus could provide an alternative port should Tartus become unavailable.

On the whole, and combined with what we know about Russia's standing in the global capitalist system, it seems to me that Russia's actions in Syria and the surrounding region add up quite clearly to the behaviour of an imperialist power - investing finance capital with the objective of extracting net value from the region back to Russia (literally, as Tom puts it, "pumping value out of it and/or the rest of the region"). This is backed up by military muscle in the form of the navy and by political diplomacy (eg, the deal struck to prevent a US attack on Syria). It should be noted that these interests are not in Russia's immediate backyard, but in a key region of the world for imperialist value extraction.

It should also be noted that US investment in Syria is currently far less than Russian investment, due to sanctions. Both Russia and the US are playing for the prize of future value extraction from Syria and the region, Russia by defending the relationship with a current ally, the US by seeking to aid the overthrow of that Russian ally, and both by extending their influence to other countries in the region.

On the question of our attitude should these two great powers come to blows, Rox cites Tom suggesting that a Russian military intervention into the Syrian conflict would not be imperialist because it "would be essentially defensive in character" and aimed at retaining the status quo. She asks whether those who consider Russia to be imperialist would agree. Whether an action is defensive or offensive has no bearing on whether the perpetrator is imperialist. In furthering their global interests, imperialist powers will defend existing positions and possessions as well as seeking out new ones. The British troops in the North of Ireland were sent to defend existing interests - that does not make them any less imperialist.

It is not clear in Tom's scenario why Russia is anxious to defend its ally, if not for financial advantage. He argues that "Russia's involvement in the Middle East is largely an inheritance from the USSR, as is its nuclear capacity". The indisputably imperialist powers also inherited their position from various accidents of history, natural resources, and geography, and use these to full advantage. The evidence here is that Russia, increasingly, uses and attempts to extend its position in the Middle East to back up the investment of finance capital for the purpose of value extraction - exactly the criteria that should lead Tom and others to re-evaluate their assessment of Russia.