



Russia's Military Intervention in Syria: Motives, Objectives and Implications

Background Paper

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) convenes this academic workshop to examine Russia's recent military intervention in Syria. The workshop aims to better understand the impact of Moscow's latest move, its effect on the progress of events in Syria and the Arab world, as well as the prospect it holds in turning Syria into a theater of operations for wider global conflict.

Troubled by the most recent military advances by the Syrian opposition, Russia opted to militarily intervene in Syria following five years of unconditional support for the Syrian regime. Earlier signs of direct intervention were first seen in July of 2015, when Russian military tank-carrying supply ships began arriving in Syrian ports. These carried the equipment and materials needed to construct and supply a large Russian forward operating base built near a Syrian regime airfield in the Latakia district. Direct Russian military action, including aircraft sorties, began on September 30, following the completion of the base and immediately after a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama at the opening of the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

While Moscow insists that Russian airstrikes and cruise missiles fired from the Russian fleet in the Caspian Sea were part of the efforts of a multinational coalition formed and led by Russia to attack the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), most reports from on-the-ground sources in Syria indicate that Russian activity indiscriminately targets Syrian political forces opposed to the rule of Bashar al Assad. Putin's own press announcements have supported these assertions, the Russian President having himself declared that the airstrikes will provide aerial cover for ground assaults by the Assad regime's forces against "terrorist groups", a label which Moscow and Damascus indiscriminately apply to all groups within the Syrian opposition.



Russia's decision to militarily intervene has taken many observers by surprise, especially in view of the increased contact and deliberations between Russia and Saudi Arabia over the Syrian crisis in the preceding months. Indications of Russian flexibility in finding a solution to the Syrian crisis had even led Barack Obama and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to welcome what they believed to be growing Russian acceptance of the need to remove Bashar al Assad from power as part of the solution to the Syrian crisis, but these were quickly shown to be illusory. Bizarrely, Russia's direct military action in Syria came in parallel with preparations in Moscow for a multilateral conference bringing together parties to the Syrian conflict and forming the third in the series of the Geneva conferences which seek to resolve the conflict in Syria. These parallel sets of developments have left many confused as to Russia's true objectives in the conflict.

Regional and global reactions to Moscow's military campaign in the meantime have been varied, and have sharpened existing disagreements over the Syrian question. Unsurprisingly, the Syrian regime welcomed the move just as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey were adamantly opposed to it, while Egypt's support of Russian intervention has left many puzzled. Israel, on the other hand, was quick to rush and coordinate its efforts with the Russian military, even announcing a joint military committee to avoid "misunderstandings" in Syrian skies. Reactions from Europe and the United States, meanwhile, have remained more ambivalent.