



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

## ASSESSMENT REPORT

# The Limits and Possibilities of Russian Military Intervention in Syria

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Sep 2015

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## Introduction

Russia has flip-flopped on its Syria agenda. After signaling its readiness to support efforts towards political resolution, Russia has recently reaffirmed its rejection of the Geneva 1 Conference proposal. The proposal called for the Syrian president to step aside in order to launch a transitional period of reform and rebuilding. Russia no longer insists that Assad step aside, and is instead giving military assistance to maintain his power.

This shift indicates that the flexibility Russia had shown over the past year was nothing more than political maneuvering to absorb the military success that the armed Syrian opposition factions were accomplishing on the ground. At the same time, Russia used openness toward the Syrian opposition as a cover for its hidden intentions: to raise its level of support for the regime. What was once simply an indication was confirmed earlier this month through Russia's direct military intervention in Syria, which will lead to serious political and military repercussions.

## The Limits of Russian military intervention

Russia has for a long time maintained a military presence in Syria; one that includes tens of soldiers at a base on the coast of Tartous, mostly used for occasional refueling and restocking. It also has a group of consultants and trainers stationed in Syria, spread across research, military, and military-industrial facilities. Reports estimate that these consultants number somewhere between 500 - 1000. Even though Moscow sees its current involvement as an extension of its old presence, readily available satellite images indicate that work has commenced on a new Russian military base at Hamimim (Bassel al-Assad) airport, 22 kilometers south of the Syrian city of Latakia. The landing strips at the airport are being expanded and prepared to receive large cargo planes, and pre-fabricated housing for soldiers is being set up.<sup>1</sup> Moscow also sent six modern T-90 tanks,

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<sup>1</sup> Satellite Image Leaves No Doubt that Russia is Throwing Troops and Aircraft into Syria," *Foreign Policy*, September, 142015:  
<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/14/this-satellite-image-leaves-no-doubt-that-russia-is-throwing-troops-and-aircraft-into-syria-latakia-airport-construction>

15 Howitzers, 35 Armored Personnel Vehicles, and 200 infantry soldiers from the Russian Navy to the new base in order to secure it.<sup>2</sup>

Moscow insists that the nature of its military presence in Syria has not changed. It claims that most of its presence is through “experts that are providing assistance to Syrians with regards to the Russian military supplies that aim to fight terrorism.”<sup>3</sup> However, Russian military cargo plane activity to Syria indicates that Moscow’s military intervention in Syria is growing in scope on a daily basis. It also indicates that Russia’s role is taking different forms. From the deployment of Russian Special Forces, to rapid deployment units, experts, trainers, and consultants in addition to supplying the Syrian regime with equipment and weapons with high destructive power (like the ones used in the bombing of Raqqa and Aleppo in the past few days), involvement goes well past Russian military interests.<sup>4</sup> Syrian opposition websites have recently published video clips that reveal Russian participation in the bombing of Syrian armed opposition military positions in the Latakia Mountains (though the opposition forces now tend to be referred to by Russia as Turkmen and Kurds).<sup>5</sup> Photos of Russian soldiers in zones of military confrontation on the coastal mountains (Salanfa) and the al-Ghab valley also began appearing on social media sites.

## Motives for Russian Intervention

Over the past five years—since the beginning of the revolution—Russia has provided the Syrian regime with an effective political and diplomatic cover. This has protected the regime from political and legal condemnation at the UN Security Council. For example, Russia participated in the drafting of the June 30, 2012 Geneva declaration, which stated the need for the formation of a transitional ruling council with full executive authority. This was declared a necessary and important step towards the political resolution of the

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<sup>2</sup> “Russian Moves in Syria Widen Role in Mideast,” *New York Times*, September 14, 2015: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/world/middleeast/russian-moves-in-syria-widen-role-in-mideast.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/world/middleeast/russian-moves-in-syria-widen-role-in-mideast.html?_r=0)

<sup>3</sup> “Moscow: We have military experts in Syria and we do not rule out sending additional assistance,” *Russia Today*, September 9, 2015: <http://bit.ly/1UB4T1h>

<sup>4</sup> “Damascus starts using new Russian weapons as it launches an assault on Raqqa,” Al-Quds Al-Araby, September 17, 2015: <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=404922>

<sup>5</sup> “Video confirming the participation of Russian forces in the Latakia battles and its bombardment of opposition areas,” YouTube uploaded by *al-Souriyya Net*, September 19, 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=2&v=ejEr8pesKZY>

conflict. Russia, in the months following the declaration, has sought to impose its own interpretation, and insisted on considering Assad as part of the Syrian leadership during the transitional period. Russia says that his fate would be linked after the transition to the “popular will.”

As time passed and no political solution was implemented, Moscow took it upon itself to further divide the opposition. It also worked to undermine international recognition of the opposition’s National Coalition as a legitimate representative of opposition forces. Russia further undermined the opposition forces by calling for Moscow 1 and 2 conferences, which would bring opposition figures to Moscow, and create opposition forces closer to the Russian position. These efforts were largely unsuccessful, however, thanks to the military gains of the opposition accomplished in the first half of 2015. Instead, Russia was forced to diplomatically reach out to Saudi Arabia.

Under the auspices of fighting “ISIL Terrorism,” Moscow urged Saudi Arabia to back the formation of a wide coalition that includes in addition to the Syrian regime (enhanced with certain opposition forces) Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Jordan. It was under this pretext that Moscow succeeded in setting up a meeting between the top security official in Syria, General Ali Mamlouk, and Saudi Defense Minister Prince Mohammad bin Salman in Jeddah last July. However, Russian efforts failed on the Saudi front and were not able to convince officials to sign on to the Russian version of the Syrian solution. This is why Russia launched its direct intervention alongside the regime in order to prevent its sudden collapse. Indeed, Syrian government forces had reached an advanced stage of exhaustion. The fall of Assad would mean Moscow had lost all of its political investments in the Syrian crisis. Given indications that Russia has increasingly lost influence with Iran and Hezbollah in areas under regime control, support for Assad was the only way to sustain an active role in maintaining its interests.

Russia picked a convenient regional and international moment for its intervention. It justified the military action by citing the inability of coalition bombardment to weaken ISIL a year into its campaign, and America’s failure to train and equip an acceptable moderate opposition outfit to confront ISIL on the ground. In order to cover its intervention alongside the regime, Moscow offered to coordinate with Washington in its “War on Terror” in Syria. The Obama administration, obsessed with confronting ISIL,

could not refuse the offer. According to Israeli media, Putin coordinated his steps in Syria with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.<sup>6</sup> This coordination is a new indicator of the depth of the relationship and alliance between Moscow and Tel Aviv. It puts into perspective Putin's 2012 decision to make the city his first foreign visit after his reelection.<sup>7</sup>

The Russian move also coincided with the refugee surge in Europe, with hundreds of thousands (mostly Syrian) arriving on the northwestern shores of the Mediterranean. This surge created a new European stance towards the crisis in Germany, Austria, Spain, Britain, and Hungary calling for cooperation with Russia to find a quick solution that would stop the influx of refugees. Desperate European states were even ready to consider as an option opening up to Assad and shelving the demand for him to step away from the seat of power in the near future. Regionally, Russia took advantage of the fact that nations who support the Syrian opposition had more important issues to deal with, and with their eyes turned its intervention was able to go ahead with little noise. For example, the AKP government in Turkey was busy with its war against the PKK and pivotal early elections, and the Yemen file has been taking top priority for Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.

## The Repercussions of the Russian Intervention and its Results

The Syrian regime has exhibited a false sense of security since news spread about the Russian military intervention on its behalf. Regime officials have said the event marks a "turning the tables," and will change the military and political equation in the country. However, the Russian intervention will do little to change the current balance of powers. This is because the goal of the intervention is limited to propping up the regime and does not extend to regaining what the regime had lost in terms of territory and cities. Indeed, this latter goal has been one that Iran and all the sectarian militias that have been sponsored inside Syria have failed to accomplish. Furthermore, the Russian intervention will most probably be limited to Damascus and the coastal region. This is because it is

<sup>6</sup> "Putin reaffirms Netanyahu: Assad won't open a second front in the Golan," *Al-Araby Al-Jadid*, September 21, 2015: <http://bit.ly/1NOBlsm>

<sup>7</sup> "During Putin's Visit to Israel: Unveiling a Memorial to the Victory of the Soviet Army over Nazism", *Russia Today*, June 24, 2012: <http://bit.ly/1V7aixt>

this region that is of interest to Russia, since it not only provides Moscow access to the Mediterranean Sea, but it is also the region that Russia gained exploration rights to following a deal with the government in 2013.<sup>8</sup> The deal sees Syrian regional waters available for Russian exploration for 25 years. Russian intervention may help in fortifying the regime positions and prevent it from collapsing, but the only real impact may be in raising the deflated morale of the regime forces and its public supporters. It also may deter opposition efforts to control the Syrian coast and the mountain range that lies alongside the al-Ghab valley. What the military intervention will fail at, however, is bringing back the regime to areas where it has lost control. It is also difficult to imagine a Russian incursion on the ground into areas under opposition control.

Russian intervention will only prolong of the fight in Syria and increase the suffering of Syrians on all sides. Beyond any on-the-ground implications for the military intervention, Russia's involvement seeks to undermine the Geneva 1 declaration, and instead impose its own vision for an end to the conflict. According to the latest statements by Russia's President Putin, it wants to tie the solution in Syria to early parliamentary elections and the formation of a government that includes what Putin called the rational opposition under the leadership of Assad.<sup>9</sup> There is some fear by Syrian opposition forces that Russia's intransigence over the issue will force the West, and particularly the United States, to accept the Russian vision. Recent statements by US Secretary of State John Kerry certainly seemed to indicate this was a possibility.<sup>10</sup> Beyond the maintenance of Assad in his seat of power, bowing to Russia's aims would also mean participating in the impossible mission of rehabilitating the regime and looking at it as a battlefield partner in the fight against ISIL.

Exacerbating fears, the Syrian opposition faces political and military developments that are not in its favor. This is its moment of truth and in order to overcome the current impasse the opposition needs to unify its political and military efforts and create a single

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<sup>8</sup> "Damascus signs a deal with a Russian company to explore for oil in Syrian waters" *An-Nahar* (Lebanese Daily), December 27, 2013: <http://bit.ly/1dccf3h>

<sup>9</sup> "Putin: The Syrians are escaping from ISIL and Assad is prepared to have early elections and the government participation by the rational opposition," CNN Arabic, September 4, 2015: <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2015/09/04/putin-syria-assad-isis>

<sup>10</sup> "Kerry: It's to look at ways to end the Syrian battles," Reuters, September 18, 2015: <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKCNORI2FE20150918>



body with coordinated military, political, and media wings. The opposition must deal with Russian and Iranian military presence in Syria as a direct and clear foreign occupation. To confront this occupation the opposition must launch a national liberation movement with a democratic program to preempt the efforts to nullify the struggles and sacrifices of the Syrian people. The opposition should also reject partial solutions that do not meet the aspirations of the Syrian people and the goals of their revolution. The movement should resist Russian military presence with all methods available to it. Russian public opinion is highly sensitive when it comes to losses and military adventures in regions and crises that the Russian people do not see as a priority. Military intervention in the Middle East brings back bitter memories of Russia's involvement in Afghanistan, so pressure from the opposition and the Syrian people themselves could well help turn the tide on the country's military intervention, and shift the political landscape more in its favor.