Russia's Strategic Success in Syria and the Future of Moscow's Middle East Policy

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Articles & Testimony

Washington's tacit acquiescence to normalization with a war criminal has shown the world who won the Syria war—and, by extension, what can be gained from challenging U.S. policy.

Six years after Russia intervened in Syria to save Bashar al-Assad from an imminent demise, Moscow has largely prevailed. Far from getting stuck in an Afghanistan-like "**quagmire (https://warontherocks.com/2016/02/the-russian-quagmire-in-syria-and-other-washington-fairy-tales/)**" that many observers had predicted, President Vladimir Putin has achieved his key objectives without incurring crippling costs. What were those objectives, what did Moscow gain, and what does it mean for future crises in the region?

The Syria intervention was about many things, but at its core it was about pushing back against the U.S.-led liberal international order. Putin could not let the United States overthrow **(https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-us-libya-intervention-hillary-clinton-2017-2)** another authoritarian regime because, by **his logic (https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/putin-in-fear-being-killed-23444292)**, such an act would portend future attempts to do the same to him. Putin is convinced that the United States gave political and material support to popular protests in the post-Soviet space **(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-security/putin-says-russia-must-prevent-color-revolution-idUSKCN0J41J620141120)**, Middle East **(https://regnum.ru/news/polit/2213257.html)** and Russia itself **(https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/world/europe/putin-accuses-clinton-of-instigating-russian-protests.html)**. Russian state-controlled press described the Arab Spring—including the uprising against Assad in Syria—as being orchestrated or supported by the United States and promoted a narrative that "foreign interference" or professed U.S. support for Arab activists' democratic aspirations **(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-mideast/clinton-says-u-s-must-embrace-arab-spring-despite-dangers-idUSBRE89B19Z20121012)** helped

create chaos, repression and terrorism. And so, when Assad unleashed a massive chemical attack on Ghouta (https://www.state.gov/syria-eighth-anniversary-of-the-ghouta-chemical-weapons-attack/) in September 2013, Putin had every reason to expect an intervention from the United States and its partners to remove Assad. President Obama told reporters the previous year that Assad's use of chemical weapons would cross a "red line (https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps)," and after the Ghouta attack the French government was also ready to act (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-job-syria-crisis-france/france-says-ready-to-act-over-syria-despite-british-refusal-idUSBRE97T0DF20130830). Putin warned (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/04/putin-warns-military-action-syria) against U.S. military action in Syria in an interview with the Associated Press and Russia's Channel 1 state TV channel, telling them, "We have our plans."

Putin has a dim view of rhetoric about political independence, and has spoken clearly and publicly about where he thinks power in the international system truly lies. "Worldwide, there are not so many countries that have the privilege of true sovereignty," he said (https://rg.ru/2017/06/02/reg-szfo/o-chem-rasskazal-vladimir-putin-na-plenarnom-zasedanii-pmef.html) in June 2017 at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, in the context of a discussion in which he implied that Europe is subordinate to the United States. Russia, in his view, is one of the few countries that possesses true sovereignty, and puts a premium on defending it—as it sees fit. Putin's comment illustrates the incompatibility between the West's and the Kremlin's view of the "rules-based order (https://russiaun.ru/en/news/unga25092021)."

In Syria, like nowhere else, Moscow took a stand against years of perceived American unilateralism. Russia finally acted as the great power that it is. And although for years Russian officials routinely said they were committed to a "legitimate (https://russiaun.ru/en/news/syria23062021)" government in Damascus, implying that it might not necessarily include Assad, in practice, they never saw any alternative to him.

Key to the operation's success was its limited aims (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shifting-landscape-russias-military-role-middle-east), which were focused to avoid the Soviet Union's Afghanistan-like scenario of overextension. Moscow's military campaign provided primarily air support but also included a naval component and a small number of elite ground troops; this narrow scope made it financially affordable. Moscow relied on other actors, chiefly Iran and Iran-backed proxies, to do the heavy lifting. This approach entailed working with all the major players in the region, including those that were in conflict in the Syrian theater—which positioned Russia as a mediator and bolstered Moscow's leverage.

The cost was low in terms of blood, not only treasure. The only public high-casualty incident was a brief and murky (https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html) battle (https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/the-puzzle-of-russian-behavior-in-deir-al-zour/) in February 2018 that occurred when several hundred pro-Assad forces, including members of the infamous Russian paramilitary Wagner Group, violated the 2015 deconfliction agreement between the United States and Russia. U.S. forces acting in self-defense killed a number of Russian contractors—it is still unclear exactly how many, but the general consensus is that several hundred (https://tsargrad.tv/articles/arabskaja-vesna-provalilas-ssha-priznali-porazhenie_304826) were killed or injured. But Wagner contractors chose to go to Syria and were paid to do so; they were not conscripts, and the incident did not inspire a large or sustained domestic backlash.

The intervention was a low-cost strategic success. Moscow established control of western and central Syrian airspace and an agreement granting it a permanent military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean for at least the next 49 years (https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/russia-signs-deal-to-use-syria-air-base-for-49-years-117072701238_1.html), realizing a strategic aspiration that eluded Russian czars and Soviet

leaders. Moscow has retained the Tartus facility in Syria since the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, but the Syria intervention afforded Moscow the opportunity to modernize and expand Tartus and establish a new air base in Khmeimim. Russia has never had a military position this deep and broad on the Eastern Mediterranean before, and it has now secured long-term guarantees for sustaining this presence.

Moscow considers this foothold critical for deterring the West and projecting power into NATO's southern flank and amplifying Moscow's intelligence-gathering opportunities against the United States and its partners in favor of Russia's interests. Russia's secure position in Syria also bolsters its presence in the Black Sea **(https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2021-08-16/russias-battle-black-sea)** ; indeed Crimea played an important role in Moscow's plans for Syria. Russia's Black Sea fleet in Sevastopol, a key to Russia's annexation of Crimea, has supported **(https://www.france24.com/en/20190320-focus-crimea-sevastopol-port-naval-base-russia-navy-syria-war-operations-trade-tartus)** Russia's Syria intervention since the beginning. Russia's stronger military position on the Eastern Mediterranean bolsters Russia's military power projection options in the Black Sea. It also creates commercial opportunities; starting in approximately 2017 **(https://jamestown.org/program/russian-proxy-diplomacy-in-syria-crimea-and-sevastopol/)** , activities between Crimea and Syria increased, including a visit by a Syrian trade delegation to Crimea. Russia's position in Syria also facilitated its operations in Libya **(https://warontherocks.com/2021/01/the-pendulum-how-russia-sways-its-way-to-more-influence-in-libya/)** , and the Kremlin sees other opportunities farther south in Africa and the Red Sea **(https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/russia-s-red-star-red-sea)** . Russia has secured its access to a warm water port in the Mediterranean and now is looking to capitalize on it.

Tens of thousands of Russian military personnel have rotated through Syria over the years and received valuable training and experience, which will bolster the Russian military's performance globally. The intervention has also demonstrated the effectiveness of Russian weaponry, which has bolstered Russia's arms sales. After the interventions in Georgia in 2008 **(https://www.history.com/news/russia-georgia-war-military-nato)** and Crimea in 2014 **(https://www.politico.eu/article/summit-crimea-highlights-wests-failure-reverse-russian-annexation/)** , Syria provided a third live military training opportunity to test out, improve and illustrate the strength of the Russian military after a series of recent military reforms **(https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/11/02/russian-military-forces-dazzle-after-a-decade-of-reform)** . Moreover, the Syria intervention will serve as a guide for future Russian defense decision-making. Valery Gerasimov, chief of staff of the Russian armed forces, said **(https://www.militarynews.ru/story.asp?rid=1&nid=503181&lang=RU&lang=RU)** in early 2019 that lessons from Syria will serve to defend and promote Russia's "national interests" outside Russia's borders. The Syria intervention, according to Gerasimov, demonstrated the utility of self-sufficient and highly mobile military formations (groupings) that will likely be more important to future missions. The success of this approach, according to Gerasimov, depends on "winning and holding information superiority, preemptive readiness of command-and-control and comprehensive support systems, and covert deployment of the necessary [military] grouping."

As the Syrian civil war unfolded, Russia's competition with the West was one-sided. Commentators have characterized Putin over the years as a reckless **(https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/putin-is-reckless-because-we-allow-him-to-be/2020/08/11/2e89b79c-dc17-11ea-b205-ff838e15a9a6_story.html)** gambler, but he read his adversary correctly—the West did not push back decisively. Indeed, Putin never paid a serious price for supporting Assad, and in fact Western officials continued to see Moscow as part of a political solution **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/triangular-diplomacy-unpacking-russias-syria-strategy)** , a perception Moscow bolstered. Putin understood that the West was risk-averse and had little appetite to get involved in Syria. Perhaps nothing illustrates the United States' calculus as clearly as the Obama administration's choice to go with a Russia-brokered **(https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-happened-to-russias-agreement-to-**

eliminate-syrias-chemical-weapons/) deal to remove Syrian chemical weapons rather than enforce the **2013 red line (https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-president-blinked-why-obama-changed-course-on-the-red-line-in-syria/)**. Moscow has also served as the **guarantor (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-expect-us-russia-meeting-jerusalem)** in a number of cease-fires in Syria, all of which have ultimately broken down. But Moscow's position as mediator remains.

The fact of the matter is that, with its intervention in Syria, Moscow won a degree of begrudging respect from U.S. partners and adversaries. Western leaders talked a lot—about values, freedom, dignity, the Assad regime's loss of legitimacy and the need for regime change. But when push came to shove, they preferred to limit involvement. Putin said little but did what he said he would do—he saved Assad.

Appetite comes with eating, and success in Syria can only bolster Moscow's self-confidence. The Middle East, for its part, has come to see Russia's regional policy as a reality they have to deal with, while U.S. commitment to the region has been characterized by ambivalence for the past decade. In recent years, **Turkey (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/26/erdogan-turkey-could-buy-more-russian-s-400s-despite-us-warnings)**, Egypt **(https://www.mei.edu/publications/sochi-summit-highlights-growing-russia-egypt-ties)**, the United Arab Emirates **(https://agsiw.org/russia-and-the-uae-monetization-economization-and-militarization-in-the-gulf-and-red-sea/)**, Saudi Arabia **(https://breakingdefense.com/2021/09/russia-ksa-strengthen-military-ties-in-signal-to-washington-uavs-helos-potentially-on-table/)** and others have begun expanding their military relationships with Russia, and increased purchases of Russian military equipment and systems will increase Moscow's leverage. Moscow, for its part, has focused on **soft power (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russias-soft-power-projection-middle-east)** and other tools of influence—arms deals, trade, diplomacy and provision of nuclear reactors. As **James Sherr has written (https://www.brookings.edu/book/hard-diplomacy-and-soft-coercion/)**, in the ***chekist* (https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/putin-the-chekist-a-sacred-calling/)** mindset guiding the Kremlin, diplomatic pragmatism is about a cold, cynical calculation of national interest and a utilitarian approach to ends and means. Moscow remains committed to building pragmatic relationships in the region that play to Russia's strengths vis-a-vis other partners to ensure Moscow retains advantages.

Looking into the near future, Russia will work to preserve and reinforce its presence in Syria and elsewhere in the region. But it will be cautious of overextension and will continue to pursue a strategy of limited means.

Syria is poised to become a frozen conflict. Russia will be left to manage, rather than resolve, this conflict—similar to other conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Despite Russia's official justification that it intervened in Syria to fight terrorism, Moscow **(https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/world/europe/russia-airstrikes-syria.html)** never targeted the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra with any consistency. Instead, it indirectly strengthened them as the sheer brutality of Russia's indiscriminate airstrikes and preservation of the Assad regime drove moderates toward extremism. Rather than a genuine anti-terrorism campaign, Moscow ran a counterinsurgency campaign to save Assad. Because Assad (often with Russia's backing) was responsible for most of the civilian deaths in Syria, as long as he remains in power the root cause of terrorism recruitment will remain in place, especially in **Idlib (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/idlib-may-become-next-gaza-strip)**.

A frozen conflict scenario may not be ideal for Moscow, but it is one that it can live with for a long time—especially because it will help make the argument for the need for Russia's continued presence. In the West, policymakers always look for solutions; they perceive an unresolved situation as one of diminished gains. Moscow does not necessarily see things that way. Russia's presence in Syria is limited enough that it can protect its interests there at low cost and for a long period of time. Only several thousand Russian military personnel, mostly elite forces, are deployed to Syria at any given time. Russia and Turkey conduct joint patrols in the northeast, and recently **began a**

project to restore (https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/11/russia-begins-restoration-arc-triumph-syrias-palmyra#ixzz7FjyLZLxF) the Arch of Triumph in Palmyra in central Syria, but Russia's positions are primarily in the west. It maintains a presence at the naval base at Tartus and the air base at Khmeimim, where Russian forces recently extended (https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/39113/what-does-russia-have-planned-for-its-lengthened-runway-at-its-air-base-in-syria) the runway and deployed nuclear-capable bombers (https://www.voanews.com/a/middle-east_russia-deploys-nuclear-capable-bombers-syria/6206207.html). Russian positions also tend to be close to Iranian-supported positions, and generally far away from Islamic State-controlled pockets. Perhaps most importantly, the United States continues to signal its diminished interest in Syria (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/23/biden-syria-policy-assad-middle-east/), so Russia will not face genuine competition that would raise the cost of its presence in the country.

To be sure, Moscow may still encounter problems. Two Russian servicemen died as a result of a drone attack on Khmeimim (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42595184) in January 2018, for example, and a frozen conflict scenario is ripe for exploitation by the Islamic State, but these are not crippling costs to the Russian state. To the contrary, small-scale problems could create arguments for select and targeted Russian reinforcement of the Russian position—which is how a frozen conflict tends to perpetuate itself and justify Russia's interest in a continued presence. In the past, attacks spurred Russia to bring advanced equipment into Syria, such as the S-400 (https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34976537) air-defense system, which ultimately served to strengthen Syria's anti-access area denial (https://breakingdefense.com/2015/09/russians-in-syria-building-a2ad-bubble-over-region-breedlove/) and deter the West (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/shifting-landscape-russias-military-role-middle-east).

For years, one of the Kremlin's primary goals has been to demonstrate that no major crisis could be resolved without Russia. Future crises in the Middle East will likely involve Russia one way or the other, but as in Syria, Moscow's presence is more likely to bring Russia status than result in Moscow taking on the responsibilities of a genuine leader. This will suit Moscow just fine, but it will not bolster regional security or the U.S. position in the Middle East or in other parts of the world as the United States pivots toward great power competition with China and Russia. U.S. adversaries and allies around the globe have watched how the United States handled the Syria conflict and extracted lessons about what it portends for U.S. behavior elsewhere. The United States' tacit acquiescence to normalization with Assad, a dictator accused of war crimes, demonstrates to observers that, in essence, Russia (and Iran) won the war. They may conclude that the benefits of challenging the United States, in the long term, outweigh the costs.

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the book Putin's War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America's Absence (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/putins-war-syria-russian-foreign-policy-and-price-americas-absence). *This article was originally published on the Lawfare website* (https://www.lawfareblog.com/russias-strategic-success-syria-and-future-moscows-middle-east-policy). ❖

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