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Fikra Forum

Russia's Investment in Syria Continues to Pay Dividends

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May 16, 2019

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Brief Analysis

Even prior to the announced withdrawal from Syria, the longstanding unwillingness of the United States and the West to become seriously involved in the war has encouraged Russia to entrench itself militarily there. Russia now has a number of secure military bases throughout the country, in addition to airport access and the ability to use Syrian army bases as offensive platforms.

Syria is the lynchpin of Russia's attempts to shape the region in its own image by penetrating its economic and military apparatuses. The solidification of Russian influence in Syria matches efforts to influence other Arab states, including its efforts in Libya, Egypt, and even its recent attempts to work with Saudi Arabia.

Though Putin, like Trump, has announced a series of military 'withdrawals' from Syria, global intelligence reports indicate that over 20,000 Russia naval, land, and air forces, as well as police, remain—significantly larger than the Russian Defence Ministry's latest number of 6000 announced in 2017. Moscow's campaign in Syria affords it invaluable fighting experience that allows it to improve the capabilities of its military forces. Moreover, Syria provides a way for Russia to test new technological weapons and the extent of their efficiency and effectiveness in real battles. During a televised interview on June 7, 2018, Putin himself [claimed](#) that the war in Syria was the best training for Russian troops: "The use of our armed forces in the battlefield is a unique experience and a unique tool to improve [them]."

Moreover, Russia has tested all its modern weapons and military technology fighting Syrian opposition and terrorist organizations. As Putin [said](#), "When we started to use these modern weapons, including missiles, whole teams from our defense industry companies went to Syria, and worked there on-site—it is extremely important for us—to finalize them and figure out what we can count on when using them in combat conditions." Thus, the entrenched nature of Russian military instillation in Syria emphasizes that even with Assad reclaiming significant territory, the Russian military intends to maintain a significant military presence in the country for the foreseeable future.

The capabilities of Russian bases within Syria emphasize this reality. Hmeimim air base, for example, was

established through a foreign agreement with the Syrian government in August of 2015 and lies south-east of the city of Latakia in the north of Syria. It was adjusted into a permanent military center at the end of 2017. Russian ground barracks surround the base in a circle of 70 km deep, the largest of which was established in the Salma region as well as the Turkmen and Kurdish mountainous regions.

The base also includes a major intelligence-gathering and coordination center to organize affiliated paramilitary organizations. Just 50 km away is the Russian naval facility in the port of Tartus, which supplies Russian military vessels in the Mediterranean and manages communications, espionage, and surveillance for the eastern Mediterranean as well.

Russia's access continues throughout Assad-controlled Syria, including Quirres airport base and Hama Military Airport in the countryside of Aleppo, Palmyra base in eastern Homs countryside, and several other land and air bases either built or currently under construction. The model of the Shayrat Airbase demonstrates the type of power these structures can ensure; located in the countryside of Homs, the mission of the Sayrat airbase is to secure Russia's presence in central Syria. The airport's two entrances are heavily fortified with SAM 6 air defenses. It is the most effective military base in the Central region and hosts its most important training camp, along with the largest amount of heavy and medium weapons training. Shayrat served as the launching pad for air raids targeting sites in Homs, Hama, and Idlib—and is thus responsible for the massacres in Homs and Idlib. In addition to Russian officer, Syrian opposition sources also report that Iranian officers are inside as well. And though the American military used 59 Tomahawk missiles launched by order of U.S. President Donald Trump in response to the Assad regime's massacre of Khan Sheikhan via chemical weapons in April 2017, Shayrat remains an key strategic center for Russian operations in Syria.

Russia's military bases also allow the Russian military to showcase their weapons in the Syrian theater. In the past few months, the prospect of Russian military technology purchases by Turkey and Saudi Arabia has become a serious foreign policy concern for the United States. While a number of factors are playing into these arms purchase, Russian forces have used Syria as an advertisement for the effectiveness of some 215 new types of advanced weapons systems in Syria, including advanced missiles such as Kalibr missile—capable of striking a target 2500 km away with an accuracy of 30 meters—and the less well known X-101 missiles. Russian forces deployed a number of new technologies in combat conditions for the first time, such as strategic aircraft drones, S-400 and Pantsir air, Su-33 and MiG-29K ship-based aircraft. Furthermore, the war in Syria has provided Russian pilots with training hours and allowed for the military to test the efficiency of Russian rapid intervention forces.

On March 2018, The Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu revealed: "We have tested 210 weapons [and] tried them together with the Syrians on the battlefield. What we have tried, the notes, the additions—all that, I am sure, will in the future save the lives of those who will use these weapons." Moreover, the Syria theater has inspired weapons manufacturers to craft new types of arms suited to the nature of Syrian territory. Igor Makushev, chairman of the Military Scientific Committee, admitted that the production designs of more than 200 types of new weapons had been adjusted after being tested in the Syrian conflict. As a result, modern Russian weapons, which the Russian army is testing in the fighting inside Syria, are very dangerous to American interests and military superiority in the region.

U.S. policy in Syria is an evolving structure, but appears to still be based around three essential goals: continuing to repress ISIS, push Iran to leave Syria, and encourage the end of the Syrian civil war through the ongoing UN discussions. As part of the latter issue, the United States is in an ongoing efforts to establish a safe zone in Kurdish controlled territories in the Northeast. However, Russia is likely to work against all of these goals, even those that it publicly claims to support. Take, for example, Russian rhetoric on ISIS versus its actions: though Moscow has argued

that its intervention in Syria is predicated on stamping out terrorism, it has nevertheless consistently attacked the U.S. led coalition's campaign against ISIS. Russia agreed to UN Security Council Resolution 2170 on combating terrorism, but claimed international efforts were in violation of Syrian sovereignty, questioned the objectives of the international coalition, and challenged the legitimacy of coalition strikes against terrorist organization bases in Syria, in part due to their proximity to Russia's Tartus military base. And while Russia may have bombed some ISIS sites, much of its military strikes have been aimed at the Free Syrian Army to protect the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Furthermore, though the U.S. and Russian militaries have set up hotlines to prevent air interference, with relations between individual officers remaining cordial, the Russian Air Force has had a history of testing U.S. planes to determine the type of reaction from the Pentagon. Moreover, Russia, along with Hezbollah and the Assad regime, actually made an [agreement](#) with ISIS to transfer 300 of its fighters from the Syrian-Lebanese border to Deir al-Zour city, where U.S. forces and their Kurdish allies were based.

This was far from the only time that Russia targeted U.S.-Kurdish cooperation against ISIS. In fact, Russia has consistently pushed for Kurdish leaders to end their cooperation with the United States. In one case, the Russian military held meetings with PYD leaders at the base of Hameimim in September 2017. In response to Kurdish refusal to end its operations with the United States, Russia threatened that it would allow Turkey to strike Kurdish forces in Afrin, and have since withdrawn their forces from Afrin as punishment for the rejection of Russian demands.

Pro-Assad militias and Russian mercenaries including the Wagner Group, a company often used by the Kremlin to carry out objectives that officials do not want to be connected to the Russian government, have also attacked Kurdish forces to block the war against ISIS. These attacks are partially motivated by Putin's anger over the control of oil and gas wells in Deir al-Zour by Kurdish Forces and the Pentagon. In February 2018, around 500 pro-Syrian government forces and Russian mercenaries [attacked](#) SDF forces as well as the United States troops on the ground at a small dusty outpost next to a Conoco gas plant, near the city of Deir al-Zour. While Russian government forces in Syria denied any involvement in the battle, U.S. military officials confirmed that the Russian military have previously jammed the communications of smaller American drones and gunships such as the type used in the attack.

Putin is also motivated to push Russian extremists into Syria as a way of managing his own country's national security. And since Russia [tops the list](#) of countries with the highest estimated number of foreign fighters who went to fight in Syria and Iraq with ISIS, Russia has a compelling motive to keep ISIS occupied within Syria so those thousands of fighters do not return back to Russia. And Russia's continued willingness to supply the Assad regime with heavy weapons such as the S-300s poses an ongoing security risk for the people of Syria. Moreover, a policy that does not adequately challenge terrorist forces indicates that these weapons could fall into the hands of Hezbollah or other terrorist groups by way of the Assad army.

The issue of Russia's perspective on Iran's presence in Syria is even more complicated. Russia's ambiguous position on Iran is contributing to the flourishing of Iran and its proxy militias in Syria, a policy diametrically opposed to the United States' efforts against Iran. Therefore, the U.S. administration must push Russia for its position on Iranian influence in Syria and to pressure the Assad regime to formally request the withdrawal of Iran, Hezbollah, the Quds Force, and other Iranian militias from Syria. The United States should impose further diplomatic and economic sanctions on Russia if it rejects this request.

Indeed, Russia is attempting to demonstrate its power and influence by shaping the solution in Syria in its own image and reducing an American role to the fullest extent possible. To bolster this effort, it has joined with Iran and Turkey when their interests and goals in Syria align, despite their differences over the fate of Assad and the policies of each regime in the region. The multiple meetings held in Astana, Sochi, and Ankara reflect a joint effort to resist American diplomatic efforts for a political solution in Syria and to add pressure on the American administration to withdraw from Syria after defeating ISIS. The meetings also served as a declaration that America is supporting

terrorism, seeking to divide Syria through the federalism project, and helping Kurds to form a free state in northern Syria. It is in Putin's interest is to keep the Iranians and Hezbollah in Syria even as it pushes Israel and America to target Tehran and its proxies. To this end, Putin also promised Israel that the borders of Israel would remain secure through the deployment of the Syrian army on the Syrian-Israeli border.

These policies ostensibly at odds with one another are designed to allow Russia to be the sole ruler of Syria in the future. Putin ultimately has the goal of attracting the United States to cooperate with him for the interests of Syria out of necessity. His cooperation with Erdogan despite Turkey's downing of a Russian plane and Putin's relative silence on that incident allowed him to later exploit Turkey's concern about U.S.-Kurdish cooperation in northern Syria. Putin is now attempting to create rapprochement and negotiations between the Assad regime and Turkey as well as Iran under the pretext of the U.S. threat in Syria and the possibility of a Kurdish state in the Syrian north. This, in turn, may be designed to pressure Washington to ask Putin to stay away from Tehran and cooperate with him to divide the Syrian cake on Moscow's terms, with America and its allies accepting the partnership of Russian companies in rebuilding Syria. As a result, Russia cannot be trusted as a partner in Syria.

.In order to stop the civil war in Syria and find a political solution, the United States and any friends of Syria must form an international force to maintain security inside the country. A no-fly zone should be established where remaining U.S. forces and Kurdish allies are stationed. Part of this strategy should also be to ensure that Russia does not finance the reconstruction of liberated areas, thereby building soft power in areas outside of regime control as well as within it. ❖



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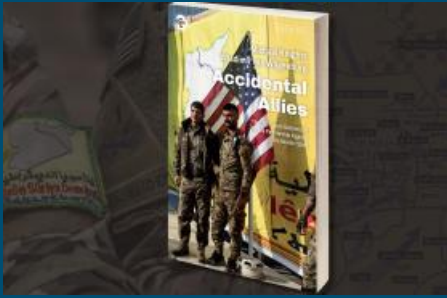


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