

# Russia's Deepening Military Involvement in Syria

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Brief Analysis

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**Three experts discuss what Moscow's arms deliveries and growing military footprint in Syria mean for American operations in the Levant, U.S.-Russian relations, and Washington's allies in the region.**

*On October 5, Anna Borshchevskaya, Col. Robert Hamilton, U.S. Army (Ret.), and Steven Zaloga addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at the Institute and author of its 2016 study [Russia in the Middle East: Motives, Consequences, Prospects \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russia-in-the-middle-east\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russia-in-the-middle-east). Hamilton is a professor of strategy at the U.S. Army War College and a Black Sea Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Zaloga is a defense analyst at the Teal Group. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## **ANNA BORSHCHEVSKAYA**

In recent years, Russia has been playing an increasingly influential role in the Middle East and North Africa, building bridges to Egypt, Libya, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Over the last year, it has also become more active in other parts of Africa—with the Middle East as a useful springboard.

In 2015, perceiving weakness from the West, President Vladimir Putin decided to intervene in Syria in order to advance several key interests: namely, burnishing Russia's status as a great power, forcing the United States and Europe to treat Moscow as an equal, helping Assad flood Europe with refugees, and distracting the West from Ukraine. Syria also provided a training ground for the Russian military, a way of advertising homemade weapons to boost arms sales, and a means of reducing America's ability to maneuver in the region. While also useful in the fight against the Islamic State, Russian military hardware mainly helped support Assad and create an antiaccess/area-denial bubble. With this, Putin limited Western operations while placing Russia in a better position to collect regional intelligence.

Before the recent downing of the Russian IL-20 reconnaissance aircraft, Putin had achieved many key objectives in Syria. He situated Russia as the primary mediator for the region, kept Assad in power, boosted arms sales, and temporarily distracted the Russian public from domestic issues. Moreover, Moscow has now ensured a long-term military presence in Syria and an access point to the rest of the region.

Putin wants a resolution to the Syrian crisis, but on his terms. The downing of the IL-20 was a considerable embarrassment. No matter how much Moscow blames Israel, the event demonstrated Putin and Assad's relative incompetence. Yet by delivering S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Syria, Moscow can still consolidate its dominance, strengthen its leverage, and undermine Washington. To be sure, many critical elements remain unknown, such as the variant, quantity, location, and price of the transferred S-300s, and whether they will be under full Syrian control.

Moscow may find it difficult to maintain balance with the region's many players. Ultimately, its ability to do so depends on Washington. Much of Moscow's prior success owes to the lack of major pushback from the West. Thus, Washington's decision to remain in Syria potentially complicates matters for Putin, who wants U.S. forces to leave.

Finally, when assessing Moscow's international activities, it is always important to keep the Russian domestic situation in mind: the economy is slowly deteriorating, the government's pension reforms are hugely unpopular, and local protests continue. Last month, a number of Putin-endorsed candidates lost in regional elections, revealing that the "anyone but Putin" sentiment may be growing. This is why the Kremlin has been playing up the "besieged fortress" narrative in recent years, and Putin will likely orchestrate additional interventions or distractions in the future.

## **ROBERT HAMILTON**

Since Moscow's 2015 intervention, Russian and U.S. forces have been in close proximity inside Syria. By summer 2017, they began to use ground and air deconfliction channels, zones of independent operations, and email and phone communications to avoid an inadvertent clash. Ongoing topics of discussion include proposals for deconfliction zones and where each side can operate with prior notification.

Russia, however, has challenged the legality of the U.S. presence by arguing that Washington was not invited to intervene by the legitimate government of Syria. It has also spread disinformation that America supports the Islamic State. Furthermore, Russian forces have on several occasions struck at Washington's primary partner on the ground, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), who often have U.S. advisors embedded within their ranks.

Last September, Russian forces established a bridgehead across the Euphrates River, then attacked an SDF headquarters on the east side of the river. The United States responded militarily, killing many Russian private

military contractors. It is not clear if they had crossed the river to access oil infrastructure, deter the SDF from moving further south, or oust U.S. forces.

Russia's military successes in Syria include leveraging maritime and naval vessels for sealift, sustaining aircraft sortie rates, and flying strike missions at what Washington would consider a risky rate. Russia's long-range bomber sorties have not consistently hit their targets, but this presence itself demonstrates the Kremlin's capability to carry out strategic bombing missions. Russia has also gotten a lot better at managing a coalition, but it had initial problems deploying forces to Syria, a shortage of precision munitions, and issues with conducting amphibious landings.

The large U.S. base at al-Tanf was the original reason for establishing a ground deconfliction mechanism. Located in a major border crossing area, the base is a thorn in Russia's side since it potentially constrains pro-regime forces.

Idlib is also a challenge and exposes a rift between Turkey and Russia. Moscow and the Assad regime cannot freely operate in Idlib because it borders Turkey. Additionally, Russia cannot afford to have simultaneous crises with Turkey and Israel, which is why Putin reportedly called the IL-20 shutdown "a chain of tragic circumstances."

Interestingly, the Russian military has continued to be very aggressive regarding the Israelis despite Putin's calming rhetoric. The two countries have an aerial deconfliction arrangement similar to the one Russia has with the United States, and it worked fairly well up until the shutdown.

## STEVEN ZALOGA

**M**oscow's recent transfer of S-300s to Syria has caused a fair amount of concern. Development of the S-300 began in 1968 and resulted in the production of three systems: S-300P (strategic air defense), S-300F (naval air defense), and S-300V (army air defense). The S-300P first went operational in 1979. Although it is very similar to the U.S. Patriot system, it serves a very different mission. While it was initially developed to defend major Soviet cities, industrial centers, and strategic sites, it has continually evolved. Allegedly, the version the Syrians are receiving is the S-300PMU2, known by its export name "Favorit."

When the Russians first started marketing Favorit, they offered it with two different missiles: the older 200 kilometer range missile and a newer, smaller variant designed to provide greater capability against shorter-range cruise missiles. In Russian usage, an S-300P battery consists of six to twelve launchers (each mounting four missiles), a command-and-control vehicle, and a vehicle-mounted fire control radar known as a Flap Lid. Buyers have several options, including a mix of missiles and various early warning radars. Syria seems to be receiving one fire battery consisting of four launchers and a Flap Lid; it is not clear whether additional radars will be delivered. In sum, Assad is apparently obtaining only a token capability at this time.

While the S-300 missiles have a maximum range of 200 kilometers, their effective range is likely to be much less, depending in part on the terrain and placement of their fire control radar. And if the S-300s are not unified with other security systems to provide mutual support and overlapping coverage at various ranges and altitudes, Syria's air defenses will be less effective, since Russian defense technologies are designed to be integrated.

Damascus has been trying to purchase the S-300P for several decades. It initially approached Russia in the 1970s after the collapse of the Soviet Union and is now buying a small fraction of what it initially wanted. Since S-300Ps are no longer in production, the Russians are probably now delivering reconditioned S-300s from existing stockpiles.

*This summary was prepared by Alessandra Testa. ❖*



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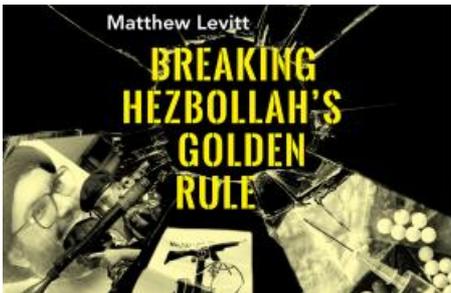
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