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Russia and the Syria Ceasefire Deal

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Brief Analysis

How will the Syrian cessation of hostilities deal brokered by Washington and Moscow affect the geopolitical and military dynamics of Russia's intervention? Read a summary or watch video of this expert forum.

On September 19, Anna Borshchevskaya, Paul Schwartz, and Robert Ford addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Borshchevskaya is an Ira Weiner Fellow at the Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East. Schwartz is a senior associate with the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Ford, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute, served as U.S. ambassador to Syria from 2011 to 2014. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

ANNA BORSHCHEVSKAYA

Vladimir Putin's stated goal in launching the Syria intervention last year was to combat terrorism. Yet based on the weapons Russia has used and the targets it has chosen, this was clearly never his intention -- in fact, some reports indicate that the campaign has at times strengthened the Islamic State. Meanwhile, human rights groups have raised concerns about Russian forces deliberately striking civilian targets, while top NATO commanders such as Gen. Philip Breedlove have accused Moscow and Bashar al-Assad of "weaponizing" refugee migration flows to "break European resolve."

In Putin's view, the intervention's benefits no doubt outweigh the costs. The campaign's estimated \$480 million price tag is a drop in the bucket compared to Russia's roughly \$55 billion annual defense budget. In addition, Putin has emphasized the training benefits of fighting in Syria, arguing that no experience is better than real combat. Likewise, the war has been a useful testing ground for new Russian weaponry; despite Putin's March announcement of a "[partial withdrawal](#)" from Syria, some reports indicate that Russia has actually brought more weapons into the country than it took out.

In geopolitical terms, Moscow has dramatically strengthened its alliance with Iran over the past year -- an unprecedented development for these traditional rivals. The two governments often speak of shared goals, though unlike Tehran, Russia is not interested in helping Assad retake every inch of Syria.

This cooperation with Iran has tested Russia's pragmatic relationship with Israel. Although Putin would like to preserve that relationship, he will only go so far in appeasing Jerusalem; for instance, Russia [recently began delivering](#) portions of the potent S-300 air-defense system to Iran after delaying the sale for years. Russia's actions in Syria raise questions about how long Putin can continue this balancing act.

On the peace front, Russia has not pressured Assad on ceasefires or political negotiations. To the contrary, Assad has been free to exploit loopholes in ceasefire agreements that Russia has helped broker, using the pauses in combat to regroup his forces and besiege Aleppo.

On the domestic front, Putin has used the intervention to solidify his own hold on power, deflecting attention from his actions in Crimea and bringing Russia out of international isolation by fighting a common international enemy, the Islamic State. His goal of convincing the West to lift its Ukraine-related sanctions remains unfulfilled, giving him every reason to continue pressuring Europe by exacerbating refugee flows from Syria. He also believes that the West's primary modus operandi throughout the world is regime change, including against his own government, so he sees support for Assad as a way of defending himself. And by attempting to renew Russia's great-power status, he believes he can force the United States to respect Moscow's interests.

In short, Putin's track record in Syria is troubling. He has repeatedly tested the West and received no pushback, bolstering his perception of Western weakness. He has not been a trustworthy partner on ending the war, raising the question of how long Washington should continue taking him at his word. Yet it will be difficult to change Russia's approach to the conflict until the United States changes its own posture.

PAUL SCHWARTZ

Russia and Washington managed to overcome deep-seated mistrust and sign a new "cessation of hostilities" (COH) agreement recently, which would seem to be good news for Syria. Yet reports of violations and undelivered humanitarian aid have marred the deal from the start. Moderate rebel forces are not decoupling from al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS), and the U.S. strike on Syrian army forces in Deir al-Zour raises further complications. Violence has been reduced significantly, especially in Aleppo, which is encouraging, but the question is will it hold. There are reasons to be skeptical.

It is important to look back at what Russia has achieved in the past year. Clearly, the intervention staved off the Assad regime's collapse: last fall, his forces were back on their heels, the opposition had made lightning advances in Idlib province and was pressuring his coastal stronghold of Latakia, and the Islamic State had taken Palmyra in the east. Yet Russian airstrikes and ground support quickly turned the tide. Much of northern Latakia has since been cleared out; the situations in Hama, Homs, and the Damascus suburbs have been stabilized; Palmyra has been retaken; and the most important remaining rebel stronghold in the west, Aleppo, is under continuous pressure.

Thus, the campaign has achieved three core objectives for Assad and Putin: securing the regime's Alawite heartland, maintaining lines of communication between Damascus and Aleppo, and establishing a modicum of strategic depth for the regime-controlled zone. The Syrian army still has difficulty holding territory, but the stage has been set for an Assad statelet to survive in the western part of the country no matter what else happens on the ground.

Russia achieved these objectives in part by playing the rebels against each other, but mainly by using its military power effectively -- that is, by deploying a small detachment of aircraft and sustaining a high tempo of operations. Robust air support for Syrian and Iranian ground forces made it difficult for rebel units to operate in the open en masse, while the lethality of so-called "dumb" munitions was increased due to Russia's advanced onboard targeting technology and well-trained pilots. Russian jets were also better defended from ground attacks because they could conduct strikes from higher altitudes and at night.

Although not as visible, Russian ground support has also been robust. Moscow has provided military technical assistance, new equipment (including improved body armor and weapons, T-90 tanks, and artillery), and expertise to make better use of existing equipment. Russian advisors have helped plan and command operations, and some special operations forces have been deployed for intelligence missions and other purposes.

Because of Russia's achievements in Syria, U.S. positions on key issues -- such as cooperation with Moscow and, perhaps, Assad's role in a future transition -- have shifted. As for the current COH deal, its terms do not inspire optimism. The agreement allows continued operations against JFS, which is closely intermingled with other rebel brigades, giving Russia and Assad a potential excuse to strike more moderate forces. Such attacks could in turn cause the ceasefire to fall apart.

ROBERT FORD

Despite having ample opportunity to walk away from the long and tedious negotiations in Geneva, the Russians stuck it out until the COH agreement was signed, indicating some level of commitment on their part. This comes as little surprise when one considers that the agreement may wind up being a win-win for them. If the COH succeeds, JFS will be isolated and Russia will regain a degree of international legitimacy. If it fails, the opposition will likely move further away from the United States.

In any case, Russia currently seems unable to deliver compliance from Assad on all of the COH's terms. For example, shortly before this forum, the Syrian army command unilaterally declared that the COH had expired, giving no sign that the move had been coordinated with Moscow.

Moreover, Russian objectives do not align with Assad's goal of retaking all of Syria, and this fissure has apparently caused sparks between regime officials and the Russian ambassador to the UN. Evidence also indicates that the regime does not exercise full control over groups on whom it depends to stave off the opposition, including various pro-Assad militias with differing agendas. So when Russia leans on Damascus to allow humanitarian aid flows, Damascus in turn has to pressure potentially unreliable allies on the ground. In addition, Moscow has to use up significant political capital every time it pressures Assad to respect the COH, and it may not be willing to do so indefinitely. Nevertheless, Russia's overarching goals still center on keeping Assad in place: the Kremlin may not like him, but it sees no alternative to him and does not want Damascus to fall apart a la Baghdad in 2003.

Finally, any discussion of the COH should include closer examination of the relationships between Russia, Iran, and Turkey, since they will decide the balance of power in northern Syria. For example, Ankara, Moscow, and the Syrian Kurds are currently absorbed in a dance over who will form a durable alliance. Their choices will have immediate effects on the ground, but the outcome is unclear at the moment, underscoring the importance of considering other factors besides the U.S.-Russia dynamic.

This summary was prepared by James Bowker. ❖



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