

After the 'Pullout': Putin's Military Options in Syria

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#), [James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#)

Apr 6, 2016

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](#)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



[James Jeffrey \(/experts/james-jeffrey\)](#)

Ambassador is a former U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and Iraq; from 2013-2018 he was the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He currently chairs the Wilson Center's Middle East Program.



Brief Analysis

If Washington continues to employ inadequate military pressure, Russia and its supposedly 'withdrawn' forces will have several paths to bolster their position in Syria while undermining U.S. credibility and influence.

Whatever is behind Russia's latest moves in Syria -- pulling out some forces but adding others -- Moscow now has several military options to complement its diplomacy in the political phase the conflict is entering. In contrast, Washington has put all of its cards on diplomacy and could be caught flat-footed once again by Vladimir Putin's military actions.

Given the Kremlin's approach to other recent conflicts, it comes as little surprise that the pullout from Syria is not a real withdrawal. As Garrett Campbell pointed out in a March 18 Brookings article, Russia's antiaccess/area-denial weaponry remains in place and could complicate any U.S. efforts to establish a no-fly zone. Russian forces also supported the Assad regime's latest operations to retake Palmyra from the Islamic State (IS). More broadly, Putin has publicly stated his readiness to reinforce Russia's Syria presence at any time. These apparent ambiguities and contradictions in Moscow's policy raise questions about how the latest developments will affect the United States and the rest of the "International Syria Support Group," as well as Iran and Syria itself.

PUTIN'S MOTIVES

Russia's military success is undoubted -- as Syria expert Fred Hof noted in a March 16 *Huffington Post* article, opposition forces have been pushed back hard since the intervention began late last year. While they still hold strategic territory, they no longer threaten the regime's survival. As in Georgia and eastern Ukraine, Putin has seemingly opted to "win on points" in Syria rather than go for the knockout he achieved in Chechnya and Crimea. In practice, this means saving Bashar al-Assad, expanding Russia's military presence, and advancing Moscow's strategic agenda. Pushing for total victory might be dangerous given U.S. threats of a "Plan B" for supporting the rebels, and with Secretary of State John Kerry asserting in his February 23 Senate testimony that Russia cannot totally defeat the opposition. Further advances would also generate more refugee flows toward a desperate Europe, which could rebound against Russia.

So what comes next? To evaluate Putin's choices, one must examine his motives. Historically, Moscow has cared less about establishing relationships with the Middle East than about using the region as a lever against the West or a means of improving its domestic situation, and Putin is no different. To be sure, Russia is no longer the same Great Power it was in the Cold War, when it maintained a strong regional presence. Yet the Middle East is particularly fragile these days, so Putin does not need to do much to assert influence, especially given the perceived Western retreat from the region. Aside from the Syria intervention, he has mainly focused on trade, energy sales, and diplomatic support for key regional allies.

The Russian domestic context is crucial as well. Putin appears to genuinely believe that Western support for democracy in Syria and elsewhere is just a disguise for toppling regimes -- including his own. In his view, the West is behind most every major international protest, from Ukraine's Orange Revolution to the Arab Spring. He cannot imagine that the people themselves demand change. Similarly, he believes that encouraging people to rally around the flag will distract them from the incompetence of his government back home. He annexed Crimea from Ukraine at a time when his approval ratings had fallen to an all-time low and the Russian economy was in deep recession, and the Syria adventure is rooted in the same mindset.

Thus, while arms sales and military factors are important to Putin's relationship with Syria, the political goals are paramount: namely, exposing the West as weak and incompetent, reclaiming Russia's Great Power status, and signaling to small countries in its near abroad that the West will not support them if they try to escape Moscow's orbit, as Georgia did. Protecting Assad is less about the leader himself and more about increasing Russia's ability to influence events in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union.

U.S. Central Command chief Gen. Lloyd Austin offered a similar assessment on March 8: "By putting the full range of their military capability on display in Syria, the Russians hope to impress regional actors and assert global power. Ultimately, they want to enhance their regional influence to counter the U.S. as the indispensable power player in the Middle East." He also warned of an "emerging strategic partnership" between Iran and Russia.

PUTIN'S OPTIONS

In the context of his limited but significant victories thus far and his motives as outlined above, Putin has at least four military-political options in Syria:

Option One: Hold Gains. As other analysts have noted, this scenario entails showing tactical flexibility -- including cosmetic distance from Assad's often-brutal approach -- while still ensuring that the opposition remains under military pressure. It also means keeping Assad in the political saddle, which is particularly important to Iran, as Randa Slim described in a November 17 *Huffington Post* article. This might require the threat or execution of Russian airstrikes against rebel elements if they are recalcitrant at the negotiations, but no major military change.

Option Two: New Anti-Opposition Offensives. With the aircraft now in Syria -- if necessary reinforced -- Putin could support regime forces and Iranian elements in a new campaign to seriously press the opposition, including the

strategic Azaz lifeline to Turkey. Even the threat of such offensives would strengthen his diplomatic cards.

Option Three: All-Out Victory. While this scenario is militarily possible (at least initially in northwestern Syria), trying to destroy the opposition would be costly. As discussed above, it could also spur countermoves by the United States, Arab governments, and the wider Sunni world, as well as tougher EU positions on various issues that affect Russian interests. This is therefore the least likely scenario.

Option Four: The Islamic State Gambit. This medium-risk scenario holds the potential for major gains. Given Putin's rhetoric about IS and the recent victory in Palmyra, he could announce a new offensive against the group in cooperation with Assad and Iran. With the help of airpower and perhaps some elite ground troops from Russia, a combined force of Iranian, Hezbollah, and trusted Syrian units could do well against IS -- certainly as well as the 6,000-strong Syrian Kurdish-led "Democratic Forces of Syria" did in taking the strategic town of al-Shadadi recently. Such a campaign would not fully defeat IS, but that might not be Putin's real goal; more likely, he would be looking to advance Russia's dominance in the region. Indeed, he could score a significant geopolitical win by contrasting the progress and risks of a Russian anti-IS operation with the slow, "zero risk" campaign that President Obama and his coalition have waged -- all without endangering the Syrian peace negotiations.

A bolder twist would be for Assad to couple the offensive with a demand that the coalition end its "uncoordinated" operations in Syria unless they are subordinated to his joint campaign with Russia. Washington is vulnerable on this point. The coalition's anti-IS campaign has only threadbare legality under international law -- UN Security Council Resolutions 2170 and 2249 endorsed action against the group, but the Syrian government did not directly authorize such action on its territory as the Iraqi government did. The other pillars propping up the campaign are even shakier -- international tolerance of strikes against IS may not be indefinite, and the Assad regime's muted response could quickly crescendo if Putin promises a more successful alternative to the American-led campaign. In that case, Damascus might protest "violations of its sovereignty" to the UN, and Russian generals could demand deconfliction measures that push U.S. forces away from major IS targets. Even if Washington were able to fend off Security Council action, the legal status of coalition operations in Syria would fall into doubt, which could leave the United States isolated if allies begin to abandon the campaign. Would Washington risk a military confrontation with Russia under such murky legal circumstances?

CONCLUSION

To forestall the negative consequences of these scenarios, the Obama administration should start by emulating Putin's combination of military and diplomatic options. This means chalking up victories against the Islamic State using the same degree of force that Russia has been willing to employ, minus the civilian casualties. It also means keeping open the possibility of a Plan B to reinforce the opposition, repairing relations with Turkey and Arab states, and avoiding operational military concessions to Putin's commanders anywhere in the region. Above all, Washington should avoid a "coordinated" approach to defeating the Islamic State, since that would empower Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus, thus replacing one regional threat with another even if it proved effective against IS. Alternatively, if Russia is permitted to emerge as an increasingly dominant power in the Middle East through some mix of the above options, then the IS threat will linger, other threats to international security will multiply, and the damage to U.S. interests and credibility will be severe.

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute. James Jeffrey is the Institute's Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow. ❖

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