

# The Not-So-Great Game in Syria, and How to End It

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Articles & Testimony

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## Russia has greatly complicated an already-fraught situation by picking a fight with Syria's majority Sunni rebels and tripping into other regional players' spheres of influence.

In the last few weeks, Russia has returned to the Middle East through a direct military intervention in Syria. In doing so, it has entered the Great Game for the heart of that country and the region. Early speculation that Russia intervened unilaterally to prop up the Bashar al-Assad regime has since been undermined by evidence that Russian air strikes are coordinated with an Iranian-supported regime offensive near Aleppo. In fact, it is likely that a June 2015 visit to Moscow by Qassem Suleimani, leader of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, was part of the planning for the eventual Iranian-Russian intervention.

Assad apparently invited the Russian strikes, which has given them some degree of legitimacy, as has Moscow's concurrent promotion of negotiations, which started in Vienna last week. But by intervening on behalf of what Russian officials call a "mosaic" of Iranian-supported forces, Moscow has picked a fight with Syria's majority Sunni rebels and their brethren in the region. It has also tripped into other regional players' spheres of influence, including those of Turkey, the Gulf countries, the Kurds, Jordan, and Israel.

Before the Russian intervention, Syria seemed to be turning into Bosnia or Somalia. Now, it could well become another Afghanistan.

## UNBALANCED

Russia's intervention in Syria is the country's first direct military engagement in the Middle East (in Egypt's war of attrition, Soviet pilots flew Egyptian planes; in the 1973 war, the Soviets sent planes but didn't use them). The intervention has primarily consisted of air strikes in areas where the Assad regime had recently been losing ground: north Latakia, the Ghab plain north of Hama, the Rastan pocket north of Homs, and Aleppo. Meanwhile, according to

multiple media reports, Iranian, Assad regime, and Hezbollah fighters have started a ground campaign to retake areas in the north lost earlier this year to the so-called Army of Conquest -- a patchwork of moderate, Islamist, and al-Qaeda-affiliated rebels.

Collectively, the strikes and ground campaign represent a concerted effort to secure three key sites. The first is the Ghab plain, Syria's most fertile area and the boundary between minority populations on the coast and the majority Sunni population inland. The second is the M-5 roadway, the transportation spine linking Damascus to Homs, Hama, and the north. The third is the besieged city of Aleppo.

Russian air strikes and the associated Iranian-backed offensive have already collided head-on with Turkish and Arab Gulf spheres of influence in northern Syria. Russia has indicated to Turkey via multiple incursions into Turkish airspace that it regards northern Syria as being in play. Turkey, as Russia has made clear, must rein in its support for rebel groups at the Bab al-Salam border crossing in the north and the Bab al-Hawa crossing to the west. Although Russian strikes have hit a number of groups, the most significant have been against moderate groups backed by the United States, the Saudi-backed Salafist group Ahrar al-Sham, and al-Qaeda's Jabhat al-Nusra. Rebels in the area have tried to stop or slow the regime's ground offensive using U.S.-made TOW antitank missiles, a weapon rumored to be paid for by Riyadh but that requires Washington's approval of end users.

The Russian strikes have also altered the balance between Turkey and the Kurds. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party and the political heavyweight behind the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG), is attempting to form a contiguous Kurdish belt along Syria's northern border. Russia is reportedly keen to support this effort in order to block Russian and Chechen fighters in Syria from returning home via the Caucasus. The PYD, sensing Washington's weak hand, has openly asked for U.S. backing to connect the western Kurdish canton of Afrin to Kobani by seizing the area west of the Euphrates River (which, not incidentally, is where Turkey has said it intends to create a safe zone).

Washington has encouraged the PYD to focus on working with Arab tribes, Assyrians, and Syriac Christian units under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces in eastern Syria against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS). If the PYD does not receive U.S. support for its unification efforts, though, it could turn to Russia and Iran to close off the belt from the south and cut ISIS off from Turkey. This area is home to a mix of Turkmen, Kurds, and Sunni Arabs, which means that however the situation develops, it is likely to be extremely bloody. The Kurds are strong but likely not strong enough to hold the whole area. ISIS, meanwhile, has long had the region in its cross hairs; ISIS-linked ideologues point to prophecies that in the village of Dabiq, a great battle will take place between an invading "infidel" army that will be turned back by defending Muslims, marking the beginning of the end of the world.

In this conflagration, Russia has been relatively hands-off in southern Syria, with only a few strikes near Tel Harra and Daraa, despite rebel gains there over the last year that have brought them close to Damascus. Southern Syria is split among the Jordanian, Israeli, and Hezbollah spheres of influence, but Israel holds air supremacy in the area. The lack of Russian action there, at least so far, could be the product of a September meeting in Moscow between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The Russians have said they have created a joint antiterror "mechanism" in Amman that might keep Russian planes out of the area, at least for now.

What is still unclear is Russia's plans for ISIS. That Russia is serious about combating the terrorist group is doubtful, given that 80 percent of Russian air strikes so far have targeted groups other than ISIS. Unless Russia is willing to commit tens of thousands of ground troops, it is unlikely that it (or Assad) will be able to retake and hold Raqqa and the Euphrates valley. In other words, Moscow is in for a long slog in the Syrian quagmire, a point U.S. President Barack Obama has repeated on multiple occasions.

# THE DIPLOMATIC GAME

**T**he Russian intervention, nominally meant to fight terrorism, is designed to strengthen Assad's and Iran's hands in the diplomatic game over a political settlement in Syria. The ongoing talks in Vienna are just the latest move in untying what is often referred to as the "Assad knot" -- the fraught question of the Syrian president's role in a transition that was outlined in the Geneva Communiqué of 2012, which Russia and the United States negotiated.

At that time, the regime's fall seemed likely, so Western representatives watered down the communiqué's language over Assad's fate to overcome a Russian veto at the United Nations. Instead of demanding that Assad "step aside" as part of a transition, the United States agreed that a "Transitional Governing Body" with "full executive powers" would be formed by "mutual consent." American negotiators argued that the mutual consent clause would give the opposition a veto over Assad's participation in the transitional government. But by not explicitly ruling Assad out of the scheme, and by failing to define which opposition groups had to be consulted, the agreement allowed Assad to stall for time and gave Russia the upper hand.

The political basis for an Assad-led transition (or a transition led by any other member of the Assad regime) seems far from clear. During the last talks in Moscow between the Assad regime and representatives of the opposition, in April, the Russians failed to gain agreement on an antiterrorism platform -- mainly because the regime insists on labeling anyone in the opposition as a terrorist. Russia's subsequent air strikes against moderate elements of the Syrian opposition indicate that Moscow might see the situation in a similar way. Otherwise, it could indicate that when pressed to choose Assad or ISIS, the opposition will opt for the former. The notion of getting the regime and the opposition to bury the hatchet and unite against terrorism is thus a real long shot.

## YOUR MOVE

**T**he ultimate result of Russia's intervention in Syria will depend on what domestic actors and their regional supporters do next. The mothballing, but not cancellation, of the U.S. train-and-equip program shortly after Moscow started bombing Syria was just the latest example of Washington's horrible timing in the Syrian war; the optics are likely to benefit jihadists above all. Washington's sending of 50 Special Forces to back the PYD-supported Syrian Democratic Forces against ISIS is unlikely to help the rebels fighting Assad in western Syria, and it could create considerable tension between the United States and Turkey. Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, a group of 55 clerics and prominent Islamists signed a statement that called for everything just short of jihad to confront the Russian intervention.

In other words, Islamist factions such as Ahrar al-Sham could soon be getting much more support. If Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS starts spreading its influence in southern Syria, it could trigger Jordan and Israel to seriously consider the creation of a formal safe or buffer zone in southern Syria. Until now, the two have maintained the status quo with a de facto safe area stretching about 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) into Syria from the Jordanian border. Something deeper would require a more formal arrangement and, likely, a Security Council resolution.

Turkey and the Gulf states have already facilitated the transfer of TOW missiles into Syria, but the real dilemma remains whether and under what circumstances they will provide their allies with anti-aircraft capabilities. For years, the Syrian opposition has demanded shoulder-fired man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) to counter the regime aircraft and now Russian jets. But the lack of clear lines of separation among opposition forces and the prevalence of terrorist groups in the opposition have kept MANPADS out of Syria. Meanwhile, direct air support for the opposition from Turkey or Jordan could set the stage for a direct military confrontation between NATO and Russia. If Russia continues to pound opposition positions in the north or expand operations to the south in support of the Assad regime, tens of thousands of refugees could go pouring across the border, dramatically accelerating plans for the creation of safe areas.

With the electoral victory of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) on November 1, Ankara is likely to viciously fight any PYD attempt to unite the Afrin and Kobani cantons. Turkey would likely combat such a move by supporting Syrian groups in the area along the Marea line, the main supply route from Turkey's Bab al-Salam crossing south to Aleppo. Although it is unlikely, a PYD move en masse could even trigger a direct Turkish military intervention to fight both the YPG and ISIS.

What remains to be seen is how Tehran will react, not so much to Russia's military campaign (from which it has already benefited) but to Russia's attempts to cobble together a broad-based multisectarian transition in Syria. Up to this point, Tehran's support in Syria has been narrowly focused on building up the minority-dominated National Defense Forces and importing Hezbollah fighters as well as Shiite Iraqi and Afghan militias to fight rebels. Iranians say their approach is based on the assumption that the Assad regime is an inverted pyramid -- that is, that the whole system would crumble without Assad. Russian officials quietly voice an interest in a transition in which the regime is preserved but Assad at some point exits the scene.

Even if Moscow is able to pull a rabbit out of its diplomatic hat and get a process started, it remains far from clear that Tehran would break ranks with the Assad family. For now, deployment of more Iranian forces to the gates of Aleppo indicates that Tehran is doubling down on Assad yet again, even as its nuclear agreement with Washington brings it in from the cold. Such a development would likely ensure Syria's partition indefinitely, and with it, the Great Game of Syria.

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