

Russia's Military Strategy in Syria Becoming Clearer as Its Forces Engage in Combat

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Brief Analysis

Moscow's intervention is intended to support the regime, is backed by a small but potent force, and appears set for the long haul.

Russia is undoubtedly pursuing multiple goals in Syria, some clear, others still inchoate. One obvious goal is to prop up Bashar al-Assad's regime in its western heartland; critical supporting military goals include degrading and defeating opposition forces and establishing a secure base to support large-scale operations for an extended duration. Success in these and other goals depends on an effective military strategy and the effective conduct of operations. The role of military strategy is to establish the size and type of forces to be employed and the manner in which they will be used to achieve specific goals. The shape of Russia's military strategy in Syria is becoming clearer as the buildup proceeds and its forces engage in combat.

SIZE AND TYPE OF FORCES

Russia has deployed a substantial force -- one whose striking power, coherence, and direction will have larger effects on the battlefield than its size alone might indicate. The ultimate size of this force remains unclear, as Moscow continues to introduce new military capabilities into the situation, most notably the use of naval cruise missiles to strike opposition targets in Aleppo and Idlib provinces on October 7 ([see "Russia's Cruise Missiles Raise the Stakes in the Caspian" \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-cruise-missiles-raise-the-stakes-in-the-caspian\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-cruise-missiles-raise-the-stakes-in-the-caspian)).

The air component is the largest and most active element thus far. It is a composite force with up to thirty-four combat aircraft, including advanced models: Su-30SM/Flanker-C fighters and Su-34/Fullback strike aircraft. All types are actively involved in combat operations. Twelve Mi-24/Hind attack helicopters are also available for strike operations, though so far they have only been confirmed in an airfield security role. In addition, a few advanced Mi-

8/Hip armed transport helicopters are available for combat search-and-rescue missions, while reported airborne intelligence assets include drones and an IL-22/Coot signals intelligence (SIGINT) collector.

Russian ground forces include what appears to be a reinforced naval infantry battalion (from the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade), with armored personnel carriers (BTR-80 types) and attached main battle tanks (T-90s) and field artillery. U.S. officials have also noted the presence of the potent BM-30 Smerch multiple rocket launcher system. Russian special forces are persistently reported in Syria performing a variety of missions, but their presence has not been confirmed. Other force components include SA-22/Greyhound surface-to-air missiles for air defense, electronic warfare (signal jamming) systems, and naval units operating off the Syrian coast, most likely to bolster air defense and provide communications and intelligence support.

The command structure reportedly includes a combined Russian-Syrian operations center at Bassel al-Assad International Airport (BAIA) in Latakia province, a Russian-Iranian-Hezbollah operations center in Damascus, and a Russian-Syrian-Iraqi-Iranian intelligence center in Baghdad. For now, Russian operations are aimed at supporting regime and allied forces (Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiite militias, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). The Syrian air force is already carrying out actions in conjunction with Russian airstrikes, and regime/allied forces will likely be the major ground component of operations involving the Russians. One such operation began in northern Hama province on October 7.

HOW THE FORCES ARE BEING USED

Based on what has been seen so far, the presence of Russian forces helps with the following:

- *Prioritizing strikes.* Not all threats everywhere can be attacked simultaneously; the priority will change according to the military situation.
- *Degrading high-priority threats.* Currently, elements of the Free Syrian Army and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra operating in the Idlib-Hama area are deemed to pose the greatest threat to the regime.
- *Enhancing regime offensive and defensive capabilities* by providing fire support for efforts to retake lost territory or prevent the loss of key positions.
- *Increasing attrition of opposition forces* through sustained strikes on personnel, equipment, and infrastructure.
- *Deterring intervention by U.S., coalition, and/or Israeli forces* by deploying capable air and air-defense systems in the coastal base area and where Russian aircraft are operating

Russia's intervention was preceded by two preparatory tasks. The first was to establish a secure base in Syria. This began in early September with the creation of an air and sea bridge to bring forces and equipment to Syrian ports and BAIA. Second, a command structure was established to direct the operation and coordinate with regime and allied forces.

The Russians began military operations on September 30 with airstrikes against priority targets, primarily rebel forces in northern and western Syria. Although the precise numbers are in dispute, most or all of Russia's strikes since then have been against targets other than ISIS.

Russian aircraft initially appeared to be flying twenty to thirty sorties per day, hitting perhaps ten to twelve targets. Russian officials indicated that the air effort would intensify over time. Indeed, airstrikes surged on October 7 in support of the Hama offensive and were supplemented by cruise missile strikes. For its part, Assad's air force appears to be cooperating with the Russians, striking targets in the same areas they are hitting.

Russia's air group has flown several types of missions so far:

- Strikes aimed at degrading opposition forces, infrastructure, headquarters, storage facilities, and heavy weapons

- Interdiction of rebel reinforcement/redeployment movements
- Preparatory strikes to support pending regime offensive operations
- Strikes against opposition forces deemed to be a potential offensive threat
- Air security patrols for BAIA
- Intelligence collection flights (SIGINT and image intelligence, or IMINT)

Air operations have focused on an arc of territory extending from northern Latakia province, east to southern Idlib, and then south into Hama and Homs provinces. Opposition units in these areas are some of the most capable forces fighting Assad and are responsible for significant regime attrition and positional losses. Russian aircraft have also carried out deeper missions into Aleppo province, and perhaps a few against ISIS targets in Raqqa province.

Russian ground forces in Syria are not large or heavy enough for a substantial combat role, and they have not yet become directly involved in significant ground operations. Their major role so far has been to defend the Russian base at BAIA. But they do appear to be building the capability to provide significant fire support from artillery elements; opposition reports suggest they may have done so in the regime's Hama offensive. And they are likely performing less visible but important roles as embedded elements and advisors with regime units, and perhaps via special forces actions.

For serious ground operations, Moscow would probably need to deploy at least a brigade-size formation with substantial armor and artillery. The air and sea bridges continue to bring in personnel and equipment, suggesting that Moscow is not finished building its presence. Additional forces would allow the Russians to expand and/or intensify their air operations and perhaps begin significant ground operations. They could also bring additional strategic offensive assets to bear, including more cruise missile units and perhaps long-range bombers.

CONSTRAINTS AND RISKS

Along with force size, there are substantial constraints on Russian operations, at least for now. These include limited space for aircraft (restricted to BAIA and an improvised helicopter base), a lack of hardened aircraft shelters, and seemingly limited logistical support (fuel, ammunition, spare parts). Moscow will need to invest more in all of these areas if it intends to expand operations significantly. Securing access to another major airfield -- perhaps Hama military airfield or Tiyas/T-4 airfield in eastern Homs province -- would permit much wider air operations, providing additional aircraft were deployed. Russia could also tap into the Syrian military logistics system for some items, especially for ground force elements. And as the cruise missile strikes demonstrate, it can provide long-range firepower from well outside Syria.

Much commentary has focused on the risks that Vladimir Putin is running in Syria and the problems his forces could encounter, with some likening the intervention to a quagmire or another Afghanistan where he will face growing resistance from outraged Sunnis. Either scenario depends on two factors: first, the opposition that Russian forces supporting regime operations encounter from their opponents, and second, Putin's will to persevere. The first depends primarily on how Assad's opponents respond to the new situation, including how effectively they can mobilize outside support; at present, it is unclear how much support they can expect. As for the second factor, Putin's other military adventures have shown that he can press on despite challenges.

CONCLUSION

Putin has deployed quite a capable force to Syria, and he is steadily expanding it, giving Moscow a direct role in the war's conduct. The Russian force can make a difference on the battlefield, though it cannot be used everywhere at once, and its success will depend substantially on the combat abilities of its allies. Its effects will be greater if it prioritizes important missions, which is the way Moscow is using it now.

Finally, the Russian military appears to be in Syria for the long haul. The commitment of prestige and forces, the logistical buildup, and the long-term nature of the military challenge indicate that Russia will be fighting there for some time. Moscow has probably calculated the risks of intervention and found them acceptable.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. ❖

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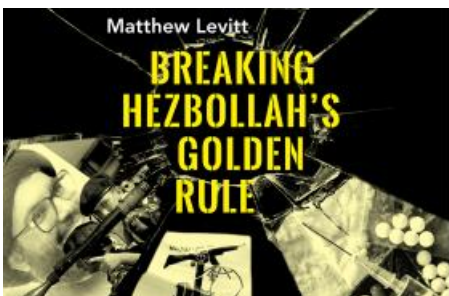
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