

Russia's Military Escalation in Syria

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Oct 1, 2015

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Brief Analysis

Following Vladimir Putin's address to the UN General Assembly, a panel of Institute experts detailed the scope of Moscow's military buildup in Syria and its likely objectives and implications.

Video Part 1

Video Part 2

Watch video of the full event above, or read a rapporteur's summary of each panelist's remarks:

FABRICE BALANCHE

Russia's objective in Syria is to protect the country's strategic Mediterranean coast. Yet the surrounding area's image as the Alawite heartland is not entirely accurate because the country's demographics are quickly changing. As government development policies enriched the Baath regime's core Alawite supporters over the years, they had fewer children relative to the Sunni population. Prewar, Alawites constituted only 10 percent of the population, so Bashar al-Assad has since been pushing millions of Sunnis out of the country to rebalance the demographics in his favor. But the movement of displaced people inside Syria is more problematic for him. With the influx of 200,000 mostly Sunni refugees into Latakia province, the regime has to worry about that area's security. And while Alawite and Christian communities will welcome Russian protection, the regime is concerned that covert rebel elements are embedded with the refugees and are waiting for an opportunity to attack its forces. Palmyra was lost in this very manner.

Past incidents have given the regime further impetus to provide better protection for Alawites. In August 2013, opposition forces killed over 150 people in Aramo, an Alawite mountain community east of Latakia; up to 200 others are still held hostage. Assad has good reason to fear that if such incidents are repeated, many Alawites will desert key government and military positions to protect their home villages. In particular, a rebel takeover of Latakia could spur such an exodus. To stave off this scenario, Assad has created a new militia to protect coastal areas, and this effort will benefit greatly from the influx of Russian forces.

While Syrian officials expect Russia to help the regime regain all of the territory it has lost in the war, President Vladimir Putin is wary of a conflict similar to Afghanistan, not to mention the demographic barriers associated with retaking the entire country. A more likely Russian objective is the creation of a coastal ministate, similar to the Abkhazia ministate on the Black Sea coast of Georgia. In that case, Moscow would want the regime to maintain a hold over at least part of the large city of Aleppo. Such a ministate would presumably ensure Russian access to an expanded air and naval base in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moscow also views Assad as the regime's linchpin, and absent a compelling offer from the West, it will not change this position.

As for noncoastal areas that are important to the regime, Russia may be calculating that Hezbollah and Iran will protect Damascus and Homs. Tehran and its main proxy force value these cities for their proximity to the Golan Heights and Lebanon, but they have been less involved in protecting the coast and Aleppo.

Finally, the regime's only means of truly defeating the rebels is to close the border with Turkey -- an unlikely prospect. For one thing, Ankara is unwilling to end its support for Islamist militias. And while Kurdish groups might be induced to help close the parts of the border they control, it is unclear if Russia is interested in supporting such groups.

ANNA BORSHCHEVSKAYA

By intervening in Syria, Putin seeks to deflect attention from the Ukraine conflict, present Moscow as an equal partner in fighting transnational terrorism, and position Russia as a global power equal to the United States. He also hopes to project the Russian navy beyond the Black Sea by establishing a significant presence in Syria and conducting exercises like the recent one with Egypt -- the first of its kind in years.

Russian decisionmakers are convinced that the United States is behind the world's ills and regularly orchestrates coups. This mindset has led them to view the "Arab Spring" as the latest iteration of the "color revolutions" in former Soviet states. Middle Eastern revolutions have also renewed Putin's concerns about his own hold on power. Farfetched as these concerns may seem to Western observers, the lesson Putin drew from watching the Soviet collapse in East Germany and the color revolutions is that protests can quickly turn into regime change. Bolstering

nationalist sentiment and rallying around the flag has helped him politically when his popularity dipped in the past, as seen before the Crimea crisis. Through aggressive military and political moves, he can compensate for domestic and international weaknesses. But he cannot keep inventing crises indefinitely.

Moreover, Russian military spending is too high to be sustained in the current economic downturn, and public opinion has grown more sensitive to casualties. To keep the human toll of the Ukraine and Syria interventions from the public, the Kremlin recently declared military losses to be a state secret, but body bags cannot stay hidden forever.

Nevertheless, the West's lack of political will has empowered Putin to probe and challenge the international community with little resistance. His recent actions represent a zero-sum approach to diplomacy, and he now hopes to influence U.S. decisionmaking through a bolder political and military commitment to Assad. Russia might even be able to turn Syria into a "frozen" conflict similar to Abkhazia, which would allow Moscow to continue its involvement there at a low cost.

ANDREW TABLER

Different policy centers in Russia view Syria in different ways. The most well-known position is that of the Foreign Ministry, headed by Sergei Lavrov, which is associated with statements suggesting that Russia is not inextricably tied to Assad and is willing to negotiate. Another Russian narrative, however, asserts that the United States is fomenting revolutions to tear at the very fabric of states -- part of a low-cost approach to creating instability that allows Washington to intervene at will and topple governments in countries such as Libya. According to this camp, these revolutions either engender illegitimate governments or break states down into terrorist safe havens, forcing Russia to provide military support to help sovereign governments shoot their way out of these crises. From this perspective, Putin views the Assad regime as legitimate but regards the government in Kiev as illegitimate because it resulted from a coup.

This viewpoint has significant impact on both Moscow's policy in Syria and the Assad regime's calculus. With increased Russian support, Assad is under less pressure to make any hard decisions, not the least of which is to leave the country. He is therefore unlikely to show any new flexibility. For their part, the Russians know that it would be very difficult to withdraw their increased military presence in Syria without negative repercussions for Moscow, so they are unlikely to back down at this stage. The situation is dynamic, however, and it is unclear if Moscow views Assad as essential to the regime's survival.

Whatever the case, Putin's intervention likely ensures a partitioned Syria for the foreseeable future, if not permanently. Neither Russia nor Iran is intent on regaining much of the territory lost to opposition groups. Moscow would accept a de facto or de jure partition of Syria if it allowed Russia to maintain its interests in the country's strategic western region.

JEFFREY WHITE

The nature of the latest buildup shows that Russia's aim is to support the Assad regime militarily against its enemies. The Russian air contingent consists of at least twenty-eight fighter/attack aircraft as well as attack and transport helicopters, drones, an IL-20 Coot intelligence collector, and possibly an airborne command post. Russian ground forces include elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade, possible elements of the 363rd Naval Infantry Brigade, T-90 tanks, BTR-80 armored personnel carriers, two batteries of field artillery, several thousand troops, SA-22 Greyhound surface-to-air missiles, and a presumed command-and-control structure.

This force allows Russia to prosecute a variety of missions: reconnaissance, close air support, strike interdiction, and airborne command and control. Potential roles for Russian ground forces include advising and embedding with

Syrian units as well as various defensive, offensive, security, and special operations. Although the current Russian contingent is not very large, it is a capable joint force that will grant significant benefits to Assad. And notwithstanding the political implications of their presence in Syria, the Russian units are prepared for combat.

For the most part, the conflict remains a war of attrition, and Russian forces can alter the attrition dynamics to benefit the regime and restore Assad's waning offensive capabilities. They can also increase the combat effectiveness of Syrian forces by improving their intelligence resources, morale, and ability to clear and hold territory. Although the current structure and size of Russian forces will not allow them to roll back rebels en masse or reclaim large swaths of territory, they can provide a decisive edge on select battlefields, such as Aleppo or the gas fields in eastern Homs province. While some have raised fears of Russia repeating its experience in Afghanistan, Moscow is well aware of this risk; for now, it is unclear whether significant numbers of jihadists will engage its forces.

Russia's involvement is also expected to limit other countries' activities in Syria. For example, American air operations in the north could be inhibited unless the U.S. military pursues deconfliction with Russian aircraft flying over Latakia. Similarly, Russian ground forces might wind up fighting U.S.-supported Syrian opposition groups, and Washington's potential response to such clashes is unclear. The Russian air presence in Latakia could also prevent Israeli strikes in that region and complicate Israeli activity around the Golan Heights.

This summary was prepared by Patrick Schmidt.

Jeffrey White's Presentation

Russia in Syria



Military Buildup and Implications
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Reasons



- **Support the regime**
- Bolster Russian influence on Syrian situation
- Increase Russian role in region
- Fight "terrorism"
- Divert attention from domestic troubles
- Challenge the U.S.

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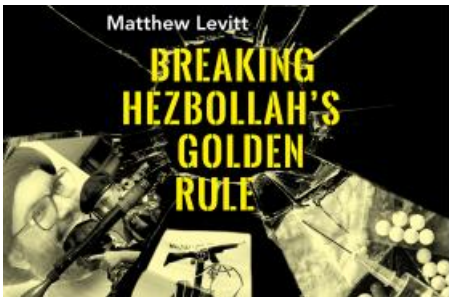
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