

# Does Putin Have a Plan for Syria?

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## The Iran nuclear deal has given Moscow an excuse to pursue its geostrategic goals in Syria more directly, and sticking a thumb in Washington's eye is at the top of the list.

There is no doubt that Russia is stepping up its military presence in Syria in support of President Bashar al-Assad. A Sept. 9 Reuters report documented Russian forces participating in military operations in Syria. Photo evidence published in a *Daily Mail* report suggests that Russian troops have been on the ground in Syria at least since April. Other reports of Moscow's increased military buildup there have mentioned additional deliveries of advanced weaponry to the Assad regime, a military advance team, and prefabricated housing units sent to an airfield near Latakia. [A new satellite image \(http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/14/this-satellite-image-leaves-no-doubt-that-russia-is-throwing-troops-and-aircraft-into-syria-latakia-airport-construction\)](http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/14/this-satellite-image-leaves-no-doubt-that-russia-is-throwing-troops-and-aircraft-into-syria-latakia-airport-construction) obtained by *Foreign Policy* confirms the scale of the construction to accommodate additional Russian troops and aircraft. If there was any doubt about who's fueling this war, now Moscow reportedly plans to supply Assad with an annual 200,000 tons of liquefied petroleum gas through Kerch, a port in the Crimean peninsula, which Russia annexed from Ukraine in March 2014.

Predictably, the Kremlin will not comment on whether Russian troops are fighting in Syria. But Moscow's clearly not hiding: On Sept. 9, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria V. Zakharova said, "We have been supplying Syria with arms and military equipment for a long time...and we can't understand the anti-Russian hysteria about this."

Indeed, Moscow has been Assad's staunch supporter since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, propping up the Damascus regime with weapons, advisors, loans, and political cover on the U.N. Security Council. But it's clear that a change is underway in Russia's involvement in the civil war. The question is why. The answers range from naval strategy to international diplomacy to Russia's domestic politics.

For the past several weeks, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been advancing his idea for a "broad coalition" to fight the Islamic State -- an idea that the Iran deal made possible, according to top Russian officials. The deal

"removes the barriers -- largely artificial -- on the way to a broad coalition to fight the Islamic State and other terrorist groups," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in July.

Keeping Assad in power is central to Putin's plan. His speech at the U.N. General Assembly later this month is expected to focus on this topic.

If Putin succeeds in convincing the world that Russia is indispensable in the fight against the Islamic State, this could help end the international isolation that followed his annexation of Crimea and gain Putin legitimacy by redirecting the world's attention toward what the Russian president describes as a common fight against a greater enemy -- a fight bigger than differences with the West over Ukraine. This is what he is after; fighting the Islamic State is hardly the priority. It may be working: French President Francois Hollande expressed hope earlier this month that sanctions against Russia would be lifted. Hollande's statement coincided with his announcement of French preparations for airstrikes against the Islamic State in Syria. In a climate where some in the West appear tired of the economic burden that has resulted from sanctions against Russia, Putin is poised to take advantage, offering a partnership of convenience as a prelude to restarting business contacts with an audience that largely has moved on from events in Crimea a year ago.

Assad has been losing ground in Syria in recent months and needs urgent support. And Putin knows well -- from Ukraine in particular -- that if he deepens his involvement in the war, the United States is likely to do absolutely nothing about it. Russia has many interests in Syria: strategic, cultural, and economic. The Assad regime has been Moscow's closest ally in the Arab world for over 40 years because Syria had been key to the Soviet Union's influence in the Middle East. During the Cold War, tens of thousands of Russians moved to Syria while Syrian elites studied at top Russian schools. Inter-marriage was common, and, at the time of the Syrian uprising, an estimated 100,000 Russian citizens were living there. Moscow had also emerged as Syria's primary weapons supplier in the years before the uprising broke out in March 2011. Russian companies have reportedly invested approximately \$20 billion; giving up Assad would also entail giving up these investments. It's hard to imagine any new government that might come in Syria being as friendly to Russia.

There are compelling strategic reasons for Moscow to bolster Assad now, too. Syria is Russia's most important foothold in the region, bordering the Mediterranean, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq. Putin has made expansion of Russian sea power a pillar of his third presidential term, and Assad's fall would mean losing Russia's only military base outside the post-Soviet space -- a naval resupply center in Syria's port of Tartus. In September 2014, Putin announced plans for the massive expansion of Russia's Black Sea fleet. Keeping the base at Tartus will further project the country's power into the Mediterranean.

But most importantly, support for Assad fits within Putin's plans to restore Russia as a great power opposing the West. For the United States, diplomacy is about win-win scenarios, but Putin's approach is zero-sum. Support for Assad means sticking a thumb in the eye of the White House. He might claim to be fighting "terrorism" by propping up Assad, but it also bolsters Putin's domestic support; getting citizens to rally around the flag in the face of a perceived external enemy. Indeed, Putin took a similar approach in Ukraine and throughout other parts of the former Soviet Union when he claimed the need to protect Russian minorities. At least in the short term, this approach has produced results -- after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, Putin's approval ratings shot up from an all-time low to over 80 percent.

It's not the first time he has profited from selectively going to war. Claims of fighting terrorism helped propel Putin into power in 2000, following a series of bombings in September 1999 in Moscow and several other Russian cities, for which Putin quickly blamed Islamist terrorists from the Chechen Republic in the North Caucasus.

But in the long run, Putin's policies may be self-defeating. Moscow may want a limited involvement, but it could be

dragged into a real war -- and it can't fight one both in Ukraine and Syria, while also maintaining troops throughout the post-Soviet space as it currently does. Indeed, some Russian analysts have already pointed out that in Syria Putin risks repeating the mistakes of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s -- a war that contributed significantly to its fall. Russia's dire economic state, its declining population, unsustainable defense spending, and other problems in the long run will take their toll. But these trends seem to only fuel Putin's aggression. Indeed, the weaker Russia gets, the more dangerous it becomes.

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