

Expanded Syria Presence Would Carry Big Risks for Russia

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Rather than recalling past glories, Russia's reportedly escalating support for Assad may prove to be a reminder of why they faded in the first place.

In July 1972, Soviet forces were ordered out of Egypt by Anwar Sadat, signaling the end of serious military involvement in the region by Moscow. Now, forty-three years later, Russian troops are returning.

According to the *New York Times*, "Russia has sent a military advance team to Syria and has transported prefabricated housing units for hundreds of people to an airfield near Latakia, according to American intelligence analysts." The *Times* adds that "Russia has also delivered a portable air traffic station to the airfield and has filed military overflight requests through September." The reports follow closely on the heels of similar allegations in recent weeks, including reports of new arms, and even combat troops. U.S. military officials said Tuesday that Russia has moved new personnel, planes and equipment into Syria in recent days.

That Moscow is heavily involved in the Syria conflict is not itself news. Russian military links with the Assad regime go back many years -- the USSR, and then Russia, long operated a naval station at the Syrian port of Tartus, and Moscow has provided Assad with what Russian President Vladimir Putin recently described as "serious" amounts of military equipment and training to prosecute its civil war.

Russia has also had a prominent diplomatic role in the Syrian conflict. It has shielded the Assad regime from pressure by vetoing a number of UN Security Council resolutions on the conflict. More recently Moscow has become

the nexus of diplomatic activity aimed at ending the fighting; Russia has hosted a parade of Western and Middle Eastern officials including both Secretary of State John Kerry and Iran's General Qassem Soleimani, as well as two rounds of multilateral discussions.

The proximate aim of Russian policy seems clear: to protect the Assad regime, for decades an ally of Moscow's and in more recent years one of Russia's last remaining channels of influence in the Middle East. Mr. Putin has criticized the Syrian regime and acknowledged that "a process of political change" is needed, but has steadfastly refused to withdraw his support for Assad or suggest that he should be replaced as part of any political transition. Russian weapons, ammunition, and spare parts keep Assad's war machine running.

Regime strongholds have come under increasing pressure in recent months from rebel forces, which likely contributed to Moscow's decision to step up its support. Beyond any direct military effect, the Russian moves may signal to rebels, and their foreign backers, the depth of Moscow's commitment to the regime, thus dampening their hope for a military victory and bolstering their incentive to accept a resolution on terms preferred by Russia and Mr. Assad.

Mr. Putin has asserted that Russian aid to Syria is part of an effort to fight "extremism and terrorism." While Russia's motivation to help Mr. Assad is doubtless reinforced by the presence of jihadist groups among the Syrian opposition, Russian aid to Damascus predated the rise of ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra and puts Moscow at odds not only with Islamists but with the entire Syrian opposition. Indeed, the Syrian regime, with Russia's support, has even indiscriminately targeted civilians, inflicting a tremendous humanitarian toll and likely fueling rather than stemming the rise of jihadism.

The Russian gambit, however, likely has wider aims. The involvement of Russian forces on the side of the regime would complicate any American military action against Mr. Assad, including a no-fly zone. Like the impending sale of the advanced S-300 air defense system to Iran, it has the effect not only of enhancing Russian influence but limiting US options and influence at a time where Moscow may calculate that Washington is unlikely to respond sharply.

Finally, direct Russian military involvement would be consistent with Moscow's recent, revanchist pattern of behavior globally. Mr. Putin has spoken of restoring Russia's faded glory, and has made good on his musings in Georgia, Crimea, Ukraine, and via the increasingly aggressive behavior of Russian air and naval forces around the world. So too would deeper involvement in the Middle East hearken to Russia's past.

Whatever Moscow's motivation, expanded Russian military involvement in Syria, should it come to pass, seems likely to be a lose-lose proposition for the United States and Russia. For Washington, it would seriously complicate any contemplated military pressure on the Syrian regime, and lend Assad renewed confidence that would make more remote any diplomatic settlement acceptable to the U.S. and the Syrian opposition. Russia, meanwhile, will be further yoked to a vulnerable and needy ally while antagonizing regional powers such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. An increased Russian presence may itself become a target for Syrian opposition and jihadist elements, with resulting Russian casualties. Rather than recalling past glories, the move may prove a reminder of why they faded in the first place.

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute. From 2005 to 2008, he worked on Middle East issues at the National Security Council. Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at the Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. This article originally appeared on the [Wall Street Journal](http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/09/08/expanded-syria-presence-would-carry-big-risks-for-russia/) blog "Think Tank." (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/09/08/expanded-syria-presence-would-carry-big-risks-for-russia/>) ❖

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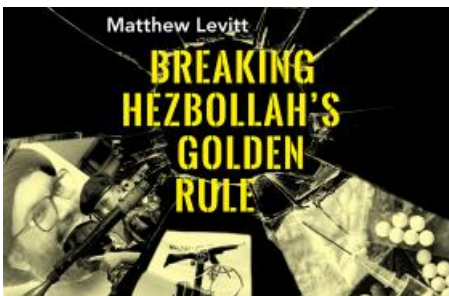
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