
Russia's Policy on Syria after the Start of Military Engagement

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In the fall of 2015, Russia resolved to raise the stakes in Syria by launching an air campaign at the [request](#) of Damascus. The intervention was partly driven by considerations directly related to the Middle East, including concerns about stability in this region neighboring Eurasia and linkages to domestic terrorist threats.² But Moscow also launched its operation in pursuit of major instrumental goals. First, it saw an opportunity through its engagement in Syria to push Russia to the forefront of international politics. Countering Daesh (ISIS/ISIL) and violent jihadism in the region was a rare concern Russia shared with the West at a time of deeply strained Russian-Western relations. Moscow also aimed to overcome the repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine crisis with a more ambitious security agenda of greater international importance.

As of early 2016, it can be said that Russia has largely met its minimal set of original instrumental goals. By upgrading its role in Syria, Russia appeared to receive much of what it sought. It compelled the United States to talk to it "as an equal" while moving Ukraine/Crimea issues to the relative background. There is, furthermore, little doubt now about Russia's overall return to the Middle East. Diplomatic cooperation with the United States on Syria restarted and intensified, as marked particularly by the announcement of the partial ceasefire (excluding Daesh and al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra) that the United States and Russia brokered and which is scheduled to begin at the end of February.

At the same time, there has been no major progress on more ambitious goals that Moscow might have hoped to pursue via its Syria engagement. These could have included the lifting of some or most Western sanctions, getting relations with the West fully back on track, or securing a more radical tradeoff between Syria and the Donbas

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² See: Ekaterina Stepanova, "[The "Islamic State" as a Security Problem for Russia: The Nature and Scale of the Threat](#)," PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 393, October 2015.

(Ukraine). Furthermore, Russia's grand plans for a joint antiterrorist coalition with the West did not pan out. The revival of functional cooperation on Syria with the United States and certain European states cannot be mistaken for a full normalization in relations. For years to come, such cooperation will be lower than it was in the previous decade.

Similarly, on the ground in Syria, Russia's minimal goals have also largely been met. Russian forces have "corrected" the military balance by helping Bashar al-Assad's government survive and even expand areas under its control. In doing so, it has helped stave off the possible "Somalization" of Syria or its total takeover by jihadist groups. That said, in the complex, fragmented, deeply divisive, and heavily transnationalized context of the Syrian civil war, Russian air strikes, already running short of targets by early 2016, could hardly lead to an overwhelming shift of fortunes on the ground, underscoring the centrality of a political solution.

The following sections explore the evolution of Russia's military campaign, Moscow's approach to a political settlement, and the mutual effects of, on the one hand, Russia's involvement in Syria, and, on the other, changing international and regional conditions.

The Evolution of Russia's Military Operation in Syria

In late 2015–early 2016, Russia's military campaign in Syria involved two main components. The first were air strikes against jihadist military targets, including not only Daesh but all major militant groups (including Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Jaish al-Islam) whose primary goal is to impose an Islamist order in Syria by violent means. The second component, since October 2015, involved measured but significant attacks on oil smuggling infrastructure.

As Russia's operation evolved, two issues became especially contentious and were heavily exploited by regional and Western media and states upset by Russia's engagement. One was whether Russia's operation was anti-Daesh or more broadly anti-opposition—including against non-jihadist armed opponents of Assad. By now, however, it is clear that all serious anti-government military activity is conducted by jihadist groups, whereas what is left of the Free Syrian Army are mostly local militias defending their towns or districts. The problem is that jihadists are often based and operate next to other armed groups, making it hard to distinguish between them militarily (especially from the air). This is also a major complicating factor for the February ceasefire.

Another contentious issue has been civilian casualties. Russian air strikes appear to have been relatively well targeted, according to regular and verifiable data [provided](#) by the Russian Ministry of Defense. In the context of intense information warfare, Russia should have been prepared for its opponents to blow the issue of civilian casualties out

of proportion (especially in the case of Gulf-based international media and émigré NGOs like the London-based one-man Syrian Observatory for Human Rights). However, no modern warfare can avoid “collateral” civilian damage in principle. The issue of civilian casualties may become more problematic for Russia as it runs out of identifiable military targets.

Considering these developments, Russia’s fulfillment of its basic operational tasks, and the inherent limits to what air strikes can achieve, in early 2016 the Russian campaign acquired two new angles: 1) open engagement with so-called “patriotic” elements of the Syrian armed opposition in the fight against jihadists and 2) the launching of a proper Russian humanitarian operation. While Russia [claimed coordination](#) with 11 rebel formations (up to 7,000 fighters), this was largely confined in practice to Kurdish formations, some groups aligned to the Kurds, Syriac (Nestorian Christian) paramilitaries, and select Arab Sunni militias such as Jaish al-Thuwar. This is hardly surprising, given the weakness and extreme disparate nature of non-fundamentalist rebels on the ground.

The launch of Russia’s humanitarian campaign and increased pressure on the Assad government to allow the United Nations and aid agencies access to besieged towns were more politically significant and substantial steps, even as Russia’s humanitarian role remains disproportionately low compared to its level of involvement. Still, it helped to highlight the plight of civilians not only on the opposition side but also in places such as Kafriya and al-Fuah (Shia enclaves in Idlib) or the mixed area of Deir ez-Zor, all under blockade and suffering an acute humanitarian crisis. Most importantly, both angles underscore that the military operation is not an end in itself, as the primary goal has been to back intensified efforts to reach a political settlement.

Russia and the Syrian Political Settlement

The United States and many other Western governments have long shared the belief that it is possible to achieve a united Syria that is both democratic and secular. This concept has been smashed by reality across the Middle East. Such an ideologically shaped vision fails to capture Syria’s basic sociopolitical structure, similar to that of most Middle Eastern societies. One layer is composed of internationalized elites and the local analogue of a middle class (parts of which indeed aspire to Western-style democracy). This layer, however, is thin and isolated from a massive lower layer formed by a disenfranchised majority population that leads a dire traditional (or “retraditionalized”) life and, whenever given a vote, goes Islamist. These two layers largely evolve in parallel and there are few institutions (such as the armed forces in Egypt) that can provide some links between them. As a result, a “democratic” revolution today is doomed to morph into an Islamist one; a “democratic” Syria can only be an “Islamist” Syria, much like “democratic” Egypt inevitably came to be ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood, prompting intervention by the country’s armed forces.

In terms of process, Russia fully supports the political transition framework outlined by UN Security Council [Resolution 2254](#). In terms of substantive political arrangements, however, Moscow generally prefers to hide behind the mantra that Syria's political future should be solely "the choice of the Syrian people." This diplomatic cliché does not mean that Russia lacks ideas about the political structure of postwar Syria. But its point of departure is what is feasible, rather than the promotion of ready-made solutions based on specific ideological models.

While Russian ideas are not easy to discern and are rarely made public, a hint of their general direction can be discerned on the basis of official and expert comment. These can be summarized in four main points:

(1) Russia concedes that a more pluralistic system is a must. This is a basic condition to ensure the unity of Syria, a goal that Moscow shares with the UN and the United States, even if it does not share the Western belief that Syria can transition to Western-style liberal democracy. Moscow is also suspicious about calls for Syrian democracy by deeply undemocratic Gulf states that claim to support democracy in Syria but are really using democratization as a fig leaf to advance Islamist rule. In Russia's view, a more realistic and workable way to incorporate elements of pluralism and democracy in Syria is to ensure better representation of different regions and communities through decentralization. The optimal form and degree of decentralization falls somewhere between two extremes: a unitary state following the Assad/Baath model, which is no longer feasible, and full compartmentalization along the lines of Lebanon's quota system.

(2) Moscow views the Syrian armed forces as the most (if not only) functional and organized national institution. Russia might support an even more central role for the military in a postwar settlement. This is especially if the current peace process fails, which could happen due to intransigence by Assad and his followers and the failure of opposition elements to accept each other and the rest of the country (not to mention direct spoiling by jihadist forces). A secular cross-sectarian government run by a former military commander might be a better alternative than endless war, political deadlock, and the further disintegration of the state. In such a scenario, non-jihadist rebel formations, especially from the south (for instance, Jordanian-backed), could be incorporated into the military establishment.

This arrangement would not have to strictly follow the Egyptian model under General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, which excludes even the moderate part of the Muslim Brotherhood. In Syria, such elements can and should be part of the political system on the condition that they recognize the secular nature of the state. Such an arrangement in Syria would likely gain Egyptian support, which could benefit Moscow politically (on top of its existing good relations with Cairo) by underlining that its involvement in the region rests above the Sunni-Shia divide. The next U.S. administration could tolerate or even

provide tacit support for such a model in Syria and even use it to improve relations with Egypt.

(3) The question of Assad's departure is no longer a substantive one, even if it is still put forward by armed and émigré opposition groups and their main foreign backers in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey. It has instead increasingly become a technicality, especially in the Russia-U.S. context. A calculated leak by the U.S. administration in January 2016 about best-case scenarios for the departure of Assad and his inner circle (in a year or year-and-a-half, but before Syrian presidential elections) could reflect a degree of emerging compromise. In case Assad stubbornly refuses to depart, there still remains the option of a military-based transition.

(4) Russia is likely to keep naval and air bases in Syria, perhaps on modified terms, depending on the future political configuration of the state. To the extent this presence could serve as an additional security guarantee for minorities such as Christians and Alawites, it could formally or informally be made part of a final deal, preferably as part of a broader international force.

The Broader International and Regional Context

In terms of changes in the international and regional environment since the start of Russia's military operation, a certain balance has emerged between negative and positive trends, both for the prospects of resolving the conflict in Syria and with regard to Russia's particular interests and concerns. More positive trends can be seen in the broader international context, especially in the Russia-US and UN formats, while more negative ones manifest themselves mainly at the regional level.

Russia-US Dialogue on Syria

A certain easing of tensions has occurred in Russia's relations with the United States and the West in recent months—resulting directly and primarily from Russia's radically increased leverage in Syria and the pressing need for diplomatic interaction on both sides. Russia's military involvement served as a catalyst to help wake Washington up from its inertia and procrastination on Syria and Iraq—not only to reactivate the fight against Daesh but also to increase diplomatic activity in search of a political solution for Syria. US-Russia dialogue was central to producing and ensuring the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 calling for a ceasefire and political settlement in Syria, as well as the first round of the new Geneva talks. This dialogue, including at the most senior (presidential) policy level, produced the first international agreement on a partial ceasefire in Syria this month.

Saudi Arabia-Iran Tensions

In contrast, regional developments have been producing new challenges. One such challenge has been the increase in tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The 2015 window of opportunity created by the Iran nuclear deal, paralleled by a degree of legitimization for Iran's regional role (especially in Iraq), and generational change in Saudi leadership was shut in early 2016 by a sharp rise in tension between the two states. This has reinforced the Sunni-Shia divide in the region, which can pose a greater problem than Russia-West tensions or even the Russia-Turkey rift for negotiations and the search for a political solution in Syria. At the same time, this could open additional diplomatic venues for Russia, as it remains much easier for the Saudis and Qataris to discuss Syria with Russia than with Iran.

The Effects of the Russia-Turkey Rift

As for the Russia-Turkey crisis that began in late 2015, Moscow's direct security involvement in Syria certainly spoiled Turkish President Recep Erdoğan's "Syria game." Turkey's stance has been driven by Ankara's Islamist solidarity and regional ambitions, as well as the latter's instrumentalization by the president and the AKP in their domestic struggle for power. Russia spoiled Turkey's game by helping the Syrian government survive, expand its area of control, and, along with parallel efforts by Syrian Kurdish forces (also supported by the United States), push many Turkish-backed militants, jihadist and non-jihadist, out of northern Syria. Russia's air campaign also helped cut oil smuggling routes to Turkey and, following the downing of the Russian Su-24 fighter jet, established a de facto no-fly zone for Turkey over Syria. Syria's future political arrangement is unlikely to be to Ankara's liking. Still, Erdoğan effectively exploited Russia's intervention in Syria in his domestic struggle for power to mobilize a nationalist wave and reinforce the Islamist-nationalist nexus.

The role of the Syrian Kurds, in particular, is a significant point of disagreement between Turkey and Russia. Turkey sees them as terrorists and insists they be excluded from peace talks. Turkey even started directly bombing Kurdish positions in northern Syria. Much like the United States, Russia supports the Syrian Kurds in their fight against Daesh as well as their role in a political settlement. However, direct Russian support to date has been confined to welcoming an NGO representative office in Moscow (the first outside the region) and providing some small arms and light weapons.

In some ways, the Russia-Turkey rift and Ankara's increasingly erratic behavior on Syria might have paradoxically contributed to the acceleration of the negotiation process, especially in the Russia-US framework. The urgency of the crisis at the Syrian-Turkish border raised the chances of the situation spilling totally out of control and of direct military intervention by Turkey. This helped push the United States to mobilize the full

power of its diplomacy and influence to (a) avoid putting NATO on the verge of direct confrontation with Russia over Syria, (b) find a way around the issue of the Syrian Kurds, which Washington continues to support against Ankara's objections, and (c) prevent further major advances by Assad's forces on the ground, especially in and beyond Aleppo (two-thirds of the area is now under the control of government or allied forces). While the United States and NATO have been ready to restrain Turkey's adventurism in Syria within certain limits, Russia has exercised maximum pressure on Damascus to accept a ceasefire (at a stage when its forces are advancing) and shown increased flexibility on the range of groups it qualifies as jihadist. This combination may very well have been critical for achieving the US-Russia ceasefire agreement, endorsed by the UN and the International Syria Support Group.

Conclusion

The ceasefire [announced](#) by Russia and the United States in February does not yet imply the end of the Russian or U.S.-led coalition campaigns. For one, Russia and the United States agreed that military strikes against Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra would continue after the ceasefire, while the Turkish-backed Ahrar al-Sham in the north and the Saudi-backed Jaish al-Islam in the south have been left aside for the time being (which may be seen as a concession from the Russian side). More importantly, the proximity of Daesh and al-Nusra to the positions of both Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam, as well as to a variety of smaller and more fragmented non-jihadist groups, points to the ceasefire's inherent limits. There will inevitably be collateral damage to surrounding opposition forces from attacks formally directed against Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra; these, in turn, will lead to counter-responses. It is also unlikely that foreign-backed Islamist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam, or at least their most radical elements, will in principle observe the ceasefire.

Even though we need to moderate high expectations for this ceasefire (while being prepared for follow-up ones), its potential positive effects should not be underestimated. These include: (a) solidifying, multiplying, and building upon so-called "local ceasefires" across the country, (b) facilitating humanitarian access to many areas, (c) stopping, at least for the time being, the government forces' systematic shelling of urban areas while hardening its latest military gains, and (d) keeping jihadist forces under international military pressure. All this should improve the setting for continuing peace negotiations on Syria.