



Geopolitics and non-western intervention in Syria **THE RUSSIAN GAMBIT IN SYRIA**

The Kremlin presents Russia's political and military involvement in Syria as an unconditional success. While currently Russia does seem to hold the key to any negotiated settlement of Syria's protracted civil war, it risks becoming embroiled in a sectarian conflict from which there is no easy escape.

Through its engagement in the Syrian civil war, Russia now enjoys a level of influence in the global arena which is unprecedented in the post-Cold War era. It is generally acknowledged that a possible solution to the conflict can only be found in Moscow, and this has left Russian president Vladimir Putin where he prefers to be: in charge of a state – a rising challenger – whose

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Be prepared for a near future where Russia will be able to dictate the character of the future Syrian regime.
- Be prepared for a situation where sectarian conflict will remain intense and the Russian military will need to support the regime in Damascus.
- Expect that the general public in Russia will increasingly question the value of their country's military engagement in Syria, thus putting pressure on the Kremlin to identify an appropriate exit strategy and date. Danish politicians are advised to prepare for long-term instability in Syria.

It is not at all certain that Russian taxpayers will be willing to fund Syria's reconstruction

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great power status is now widely recognized by the global community, which is desperate to end the devastating conflict.

This recognition may in fact have been Russia's ultimate goal, given that it has decided to invest so heavily in the conflict, not least through the deployment of its armed forces since September 2015. An immediate goal has been the preservation of a pro-Russian regime in Damascus, ideally a regime strong enough to sustain itself and manage Syria's domestic affairs without Russian support, but also under such pressure internationally that it would still be dependent on Russia for its ultimate survival.

Putin has pursued a flexible approach to the actual composition of any pro-Russian regime. There is no reason to believe that he and the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, enjoy a particularly close relationship. In fact, it seems that Putin does not fully trust al-Assad, whom he finds too bellicose and who has occasionally committed his Russian sponsors to more than they seemed to have agreed to. Earlier in the conflict, there was even open talk in Russia of the possible resignation of al-Assad and of exile for himself and his close relatives in either Minsk or Moscow. Behind-the-scenes talks were even more explicit, but the Russian offer to force through al-Assad's resignation, presumably in exchange for a new pro-Russian president, was rejected by the Western states that were parties to these talks. The expectation was that the al-Assad regime would eventually collapse and that concessions were therefore unnecessary. As a result, an important opportunity seems to have been lost.

The Russian military in Syria

After a swift decision in the Kremlin, followed by an equally rapid vote giving formal authorization by the

Federation Council on 30 September 2015, the Russian military entered the Syrian theatre. Its involvement in Syria marks the first military engagement of contemporary Russia outside the post-Soviet space, causing Russian commentators to celebrate what is often described as the country's coming of age. In this view, the "Afghan syndrome", that is, the collective trauma suffered by the Russian population as well following its heavy losses in the Soviet-Afghan war, should now be relegated to the history books. The ostentatious celebration of Russia's new military involvement may reflect a newfound confidence, but it also seems to mask a certain vulnerability in the face of a possible military defeat in Syria.

The dominant reading of the decision to intervene militarily in Syria is still that Putin wanted to enforce his immediate goal of securing a pro-Russian regime in the country. Western hesitancy, especially on the part of the USA, had opened a window of opportunity for Russia to act decisively, bringing the situation on the ground to a point where al-Assad would remain the president of Syria should Putin agree. An alternative reading holds that Russia only intervened reluctantly, fearing the possible costs of an intervention. However, the likely consequences of a failure to intervene, specifically the near-certainty of a total regime collapse in Syria, was given more weight by the Kremlin, and in the end Putin decided to order the military to initiate operations in Syria.

Whatever the background to the decision to intervene militarily, Russia has invested heavily in the conflict. It relies mainly on its air force, supported by special forces on the ground, to conduct operations. The Russian navy is also involved, however, and its presence felt at an early stage of the operations when, on 7 October 2015, it fired cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea flotilla at targets in Syria. The date is

noteworthy, as it is also Putin's birthday. Observers estimate that the first year of military operations cost 65 bn. rubles and the loss of some twenty military personnel. The most dramatic loss occurred on 24 November 2015, when the Turkish air force shot down a Russian Sukhoi SU-24 fighter jet, prompting a heavy diplomatic crisis between the two states. Anti-regime rebels killed one pilot as he parachuted to the ground, and a Russian marine died during a subsequent search-and-rescue mission. The financial costs of the war effort may be somewhat offset by increased future arms sales, as Russia's military industry is able to demonstrate some of its most advanced equipment during actual battle operations.

Despite the costs and losses, Russia's military involvement is widely supported by the Russian public. Part of the reason for this undoubtedly lies in the fact that Russia's state-controlled media have presented the conflict as highly dichotomized, with the Russian military on the side of the legitimate Syrian regime and opposed to a large number of groups more or less correctly labelled "terrorist". The fight against the Islamic State (IS) has attracted the bulk of public attention in Russia, but the Russian military in general has fought quite indiscriminately against the opposition to al-Assad. In addition, Russia's state-controlled media have failed to

investigate the magnitude of the collateral damage caused by the Russian air force and, even more seriously, accusations of the use of prohibited types of ammunition and involvement in war crimes and crimes against humanity. The heavily biased reporting has made it easier for the Russian regime to maintain support for its policy on Syria.

Catching most observers by surprise, in March 2016 Putin proclaimed a situation of "mission accomplished" in Syria, despite the fact that the Russian military has remained present and active, even more so than earlier. This may reflect Putin's awareness of the volatility of public support for the war in Russia. With no clearly defined exit strategy, Putin apparently felt it imperative to convey the message, at a somewhat arbitrary point in the conflict, that Russia's military involvement had been an unconditional success. If the Russian military eventually finds itself caught up in a prolonged sectarian conflict for which there is no obvious exit strategy and thus no easy escape, it may prove harder to maintain public support.

Opinion polls indeed suggest that public support for the war effort is slowly decreasing. As Western states have learned all too well in both Afghanistan and Iraq, counterinsurgencies are difficult to fight, and the best outcome may be to avoid losing. The Russian military



Syrian and Russian soldiers, March 2016.
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enjoys a freer hand, and thus a more benign operational environment, than its Western colleagues, as the state-controlled media does not question its performance in Syria. Russian commentators, however, have begun to criticize openly what they see as a lack of fighting skills and will on the part of the Syrian military. Such comments seem to suggest a certain frustration with the overall war effort and the prospects for an orderly exit from Syria.

The way ahead

Russia's military involvement in Syria has helped turn the situation around, and for now al-Assad still seems to have a future as the president of his country. The many failed talks and violations of ceasefires all seem to benefit al-Assad and Russia. As the Russian military continues its advance in Syria, helping to re-establish government control over still more pockets of Syrian territory, it is gradually cementing its influence in the country, making a non-Russian-supported outcome even less likely.

The November 2016 US presidential election may accelerate this development. As president-elect Donald Trump has indicated that he prefers a partial US disengagement from Syria, focusing efforts on the fight against IS alone, Putin undoubtedly now hopes that he may soon be able to dictate the character of the future Syrian regime without Western interference. If the new US administration accepts al-Assad – or rather, perhaps, decides that it will not expend any effort to force through a regime change in Damascus – other Western states will clearly find it very difficult to pursue that particular agenda.

Even with such a development, however, the Syrian regime will remain weak, as will the Syrian state in general. The risk of continued sectarian conflict is very high, and the legitimacy of the al-Assad regime will be fiercely challenged by large swathes of the population. The scale of the destruction of the physical infrastructure is immense, and much of the country will have to be rebuilt. Al-Assad has already announced that most orders will be placed with Russian, Iranian and Chinese construction companies, but it remains unclear who will finance this. As the Russian economy is currently suffering from the effects of negative growth, it is not at all certain that Russian taxpayers will be willing to fund Syria's reconstruction. This, however, may be the price that has to be paid for being able to dictate the character of the future Syrian regime.

Finally, an estimated 7,000 Russian jihadists are currently in Syria, fighting mainly for IS. Any normalization of the situation in Syria is likely to lead to a reverse wave, bringing many of these jihadists back to Russia. It will be a major challenge for the Russian security services to handle this situation, as battle-hardened jihadists will join militant groups in the Northern Caucasus and Russia's major cities.

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Coverphoto: Syrians hold photos of Syrian President Bashar Assad and Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin during a pro-Syrian regime protest in front of the Russian embassy in Damascus, Syria, 2012.

