

## Russia's Entrenchment in Syria

by **Grigory Melamedov**

Contrary to its widespread perception as purposeful and effective, Moscow's military intervention in the Syrian civil war did not ensue from or follow through with a clear strategy for dealing with the unfolding conflict. The illusion of success is largely due to its surprise factor, which confounded Western leaders accustomed to publicly discussing their intended actions in advance. However, Moscow's moves in Syria have secured two main goals: a naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean and the survival of the Assad regime.

### Moving the Goal Posts

It has been argued by pro-Kremlin commentators that the September 2015 intervention was part of a carefully contrived plan, preceded by a disinformation campaign aimed at convincing Western, Turkish, Saudi, and Qatari leaders that Moscow was prepared to abandon Assad under certain terms.<sup>1</sup> Yet there are no indications that such a campaign actually took place. On the contrary, citing anonymous sources, the decision about the Syria intervention was reportedly made in July 2015 after a visit to Moscow by Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, a senior officer in Tehran's Islamic Revolutionary



*Russian suspicions of the West's aggressive designs were exacerbated by the overthrow of Libya's dictator Muammar Qaddafi and the ouster of Ukraine president Viktor Yanukovich (left). The Syria intervention provided Russian president Vladimir Putin (right) with a golden opportunity to reassert Moscow's superpower status.*

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Yuriy Scheglov, "[O voennoy aktivnosti Rossii v Sirii](#)," The Institute of the Middle East, Moscow, Sept. 12, 2015.

Guards Corps (IRGC) and commander of its elite Quds Force.<sup>2</sup> The meager attention paid by the Russian public to the Syrian civil war prior to that date seems to support this analysis. Thus, for example, a 2013 survey carried out by the state-owned and government-run Public Opinion Foundation showed that only 38 percent of respondents were aware of the war between the Assad regime and the rebels; 28 percent said that their sympathies were with the Syrian president while 40 percent were undecided.<sup>3</sup> Just a few months before the intervention, the conflict was glaringly absent from the Russian mass media.

Yet in two key respects, the ground for the intervention was ripe. For one thing, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, many Russians pined for the restoration of the country's superpower status and blamed the authorities for the loss of Moscow's international influence. For another, NATO's 1999 military intervention in the former Yugoslavia and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq four years later kindled Russian suspicions of the West's aggressive designs. These suspicions were further exacerbated by the 2011 overthrow of Libya's long-reigning dictator Muammar Qaddafi, which, in Russian president Vladimir Putin's opinion, contradicted prior Western understandings with Moscow, and all the more so, by the EU-lauded 2014 overthrow of Ukraine's president Viktor Yanukovich. The Syria intervention thus provided Putin with a golden opportunity to reassert Moscow's superpower status in the

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eyes of his constituents by rebuffing the West's (alleged) aggression in the Ukraine and restoring Russia's military and political prowess in the

Middle East.<sup>4</sup>

Essentially then, Putin's decision to intervene militarily in Syria was largely spontaneous and opportunistic as were subsequent decisions taken in response to the vicissitudes in the fighting. In an interview with Russian television in early October 2015, for instance, he stated that the intervention's main goal was to stabilize the legitimate Syrian government and to create conditions for a political compromise.<sup>5</sup> Two days later, he told CNBC:

We are not going to get into leadership. There is only one leader in Syria, which is the Syrian people ... What we're trying to achieve is to contribute to the fight against terrorism.<sup>6</sup>

In later statements, Putin was to underscore the desire to crush Russian, Muslim post-Soviet citizens who had joined the ranks of the Islamic State (ISIS) so as to prevent them from returning to the homeland and becoming an even greater threat to innocent civilians.<sup>7</sup> In fact, apart from

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<sup>2</sup> Reuters, [Oct. 6, 2015](#).

<sup>3</sup> "O situacii v Sirii. Fond Obshestvennoye Mneniye," The Public Opinion Foundation, Moscow, Sept. 10, 2013.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta, "[Why Putin Wants Syria](#)," *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2016; Valenta and Valenta, "[Washington and Moscow: Confrontation or Cooperation?](#)" Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* no. 135, June 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Vladimir Putin, interview, Russian TV, [Oct. 11, 2015](#).

<sup>6</sup> CNBC, [Oct. 13, 2015](#).

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Putin, address, Federal Assembly, Moscow, [Dec. 3, 2015](#).

sporadic anti-ISIS air strikes, apparently intended to allay Western apprehensions, the Russian war effort was predominantly directed against the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and other Islamist groups.<sup>8</sup> These posed the foremost risk to the Assad regime since ISIS operated in remote and sparsely populated areas that did not directly threaten Damascus. Most of the Islamic State's leaders were foreigners, mistrusted by the local Syrian citizenry, and because of its extreme conduct, it had no local allies and was not looking to participate in any transitional government.<sup>9</sup>

Before long, however, Russia's stated goals began to change. On October 20, 2015, Assad made an unheralded surprise visit to Moscow, and, soon thereafter, the Russian leadership announced its readiness to work with the Syrian opposition (including armed but "moderate" groups such as the Free Syrian Army) toward a diplomatic solution to the conflict. While the Russian media did not remark on this, there appears to have begun a clash of opinions within the political elite. On the one side were the "hawks," members of the military such as Dmitry Rogozin, deputy prime minister of Russia, and Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Russian



*Putin meets with director of the Federal Security Council Nikolai Patrushev (left) and Vladimir Pronichev (right), Border Service. Hawks such as Patrushev claimed that negotiations with the Syrian opposition would inevitably fail.*

Federation Security Council, and on the other, the "doves" led by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his deputy Mikhail Bogdanov (Middle East policy). The doves supported and recommended some form of a peace process while the hawks claimed that the negotiations would inevitably fail, and that every short term armistice would only be used by the enemy to rest and regroup.<sup>10</sup>

Despite Assad's visit—or perhaps as a result of it—Putin spoke less and less about the need to keep the Syrian president in power. A path to reconciliation seems to have been adopted, culminating in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, which Moscow supported, demanding that all parties immediately cease any attacks against civilian targets and calling for the United

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Vox Media (New York), [Oct. 7, 2015](#).

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Lauren Williams, "As US targets ISIS, [al-Qaeda's Syria branch waits in the wings](#)," *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, Sydney, Aus., Jan. 29, 2015; Aryn Baker, "[Why Bashar Assad Won't Fight ISIS](#)," *Time Magazine*, Feb. 26, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, "[O Strategii SSHA v Sirii](#)," *Journal Politicheskoye Obrazovaniye*, Oct. 29, 2016.

Nations to convene the parties to engage in formal negotiations in early January 2016.<sup>11</sup>

Moscow's goals in the conflict shifted again in late November with the downing of a Russian Su-24 bomber by Turkish airplanes. A separate "war inside the war" quickly ensued with a Russian media campaign against Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reaching unprecedented levels when he was named as the main patron of all terrorists confronting the Russians in Syria. Accordingly, the Russians declared new goals, beginning with severing oil trade routes from ISIS-controlled territories into Turkey, which denied important revenue sources for both the terror group and Ankara.

Moscow then intensified its support for the Syrian Kurds. A new plan was set into motion to destroy ISIS through combined attacks by Assad loyalists from the south and Kurds from the north, with Putin revealing, in April 2016, that "the Russian forces in Syria are in contact with Kurdish armed units, also near Aleppo. We will support them."<sup>12</sup> Moscow also called for the transformation of postwar Syria into a federal state where the Kurds would be granted autonomy.<sup>13</sup> This proposal was directed primarily against Ankara, which had been embroiled in a prolonged conflict with its own Kurdish population over the issue of

**Moscow betrayed its Kurdish allies and refused to protect them against Turkish operations in northern Syria.**

autonomy and independence. Only the negative reaction of Assad and Tehran (with its own restive Kurdish minority) compelled Moscow to

back down.<sup>14</sup>

The "war inside the war" seems to have wound down in June 2016 when Erdoğan officially apologized for the downed aircraft. Until then, Moscow had insisted that only Russian and Iranian forces had a legitimate right to be in Syria as they were operating there at the request of the legitimate government in Damascus. But after the apology, Turkey launched operation "Euphrates Shield" and entered the north of Syria. Moscow then betrayed its short-term Kurdish allies and refused to protect them, supporting Ankara on the creation of spheres of influence to the Assad regime's evident displeasure.<sup>15</sup>

By this time, it had become evident that the goal to mediate between Assad and the opposition was going nowhere. Damascus and Tehran still considered the recapture of Aleppo their main priority, and Russian aircraft participated in a bombing campaign with huge civilian casualties.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, military actions against ISIS seesawed back and forth. Russian special forces took part in the liberation of the ancient city of Palmyra despite Putin's repeated promises to refrain from using ground troops. But even after that success, the Syrian army did not want to continue the offensive against ISIS until Aleppo was retaken.

<sup>11</sup> ["Resolution 2254 \(2015\). Adopted by the Security Council at its 7588th meeting, on 18 December 2015."](#) United Nations Security Council, New York.

<sup>12</sup> Putin, interview with Interfax Agency, NTV (Moscow), [Apr. 14, 2016](#); *Zhurnal Ekspert* (Moscow), [Sept. 2, 2016](#).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Yuriy Bogdanov and Andrei Rezhnikov, "[Poyavleniye Kurdskoï Federacii v Sirii](#) pomozhet spravit'sia s krizisom," *Vzgliad* (Moscow), Mar. 17, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, *al-Monitor* (Washington, D.C.), [Oct. 24, 2016](#).

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Fabrice Balanche, "[Syria Conflict](#): What is at stake in the battle of al-Bab?" *BBC News*, Feb. 11, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, "Ekspert: [Dlya Asada Aleppo vazhneye chem Palmira](#)," BBC Russian Service, Dec. 12, 2016.





*Putin meets with Iranian president Hassan Rouhani (middle) and Azerbaijan president Ilham Aliyev (left), Tehran, October 31, 2017. The confused nature of the Russian intervention in Syria appeared to follow a pattern in which Tehran dictated a plan to Syria's Assad and Moscow followed along.*

### Without Goals

By March 2016, Putin was looking for a way out of the fighting, having declared that the main objectives of the operation had been obtained and that the withdrawal of a greater part of the military presence was to begin.<sup>17</sup> The only troops that were to remain in Syria were to be those needed to ensure the safety of the Russian naval base in Tartus and the Khmeimim air base near the Syrian city of Latakia.

How ineffective the Russian intervention was in light of earlier goals can be gauged from comments made at that time by Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu:

We were able to significantly hinder, and in some places completely stop resource support for terrorists by intercepting hydrocarbon trade ... Over 2,000

<sup>17</sup> RT (Moscow), Mar. 14, 2016, [Mar. 14, 2016](#).

criminals who have come from Russia have been eliminated in Syria, including 17 field commanders ... In total, with support from our air force, the Syrian troops liberated 400 towns and over 10,000 square kilo-meters of territory. We have had a significant turn-ing point in the fight against terrorism.<sup>18</sup>

While such data may seem impressive at first glance, the situation it describes was a far cry from Russia's initially declared objectives: Roughly six months after getting involved, Assad loyalists were in

control of less than half of the country's territory. Putin even had to admit that some 4,000 terrorists from Russia, and about 5,000 militants from other post-Soviet republics, were still operating in Syria.<sup>19</sup>

In March 2016, at a ceremony honoring troops returning from Syria, Putin put still another spin on the reasons behind the military intervention. In essence, he declared that while the operation in Syria entailed a certain financial burden, the main costs were part-and-parcel of the defense ministry's budget. Moscow had merely redirected 33 billion rubles already outlaid for exercise and combat training to actual fighting in the field, and no one had yet invented a more effective method of training or honing military skills than through actual

<sup>18</sup> "Meeting with Sergei Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu," Information Office, Presidential Executive Office, The Kremlin, Moscow, [Mar. 14, 2016](#).

<sup>19</sup> TASS News Agency (Moscow), Feb. 23, 2017.

combat operations.<sup>20</sup> Even more confounding was a statement by Foreign Minister Lavrov: “Bashar Assad is not an ally of Russia in the sense that the U.S. is an ally of Turkey.”<sup>21</sup>

Its declarations of a drawdown notwithstanding, Moscow remained deeply embroiled in the Syrian morass. Since even a slight weakening of Russian airpower allowed Assad’s opponents to go on the counterattack, the summer of 2016 saw Russian air units repeatedly used to break the will of the rebel forces in Aleppo, eventually retaken by Assad and his allies in December. By that time, however, Palmyra which had been liberated with Russian help had been retaken by ISIS.

Matters have become even more complicated vis-à-vis the on-again off-again relationship between Tehran and Moscow. In August 2016, the Iranians revoked a previous agreement with Russia allowing it to use the Hamadan airbase under the pretext that “the Kremlin had been unacceptably public and arrogant about the privilege.”<sup>22</sup> And while this decision was later reversed, it, nevertheless, underscored the confused nature of the Russian intervention in which Tehran dictated to Assad a certain plan of action and Moscow followed along because it saw no other way out. As Vladimir Sazhin of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences observed:

Some groups in Iran insist that Russia is too inactive in Syria

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, TASS, [Mar. 17, 2016](#).

<sup>21</sup> Reuters, [May 4, 2016](#).

<sup>22</sup> *The New York Times*, [Aug. 22, 2016](#).



*Syrian peace negotiations took place in January 2017 in Astana, capitol of the former Soviet territory of Kazakhstan, with Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran hosting. The fact that the United States and Europe did not participate provided a propaganda coup for Moscow.*

militarily. And they are ready to do everything so that Russia gets deeper into the war in Syria and brings victory over the opponents to Tehran.<sup>23</sup>

Putin has stopped making statements about the specific course of operations in Syria. His rhetoric is limited to abstract phrases about the fight against global terrorism. Contrary to previous promises, Russian boots are on the ground. In January 2017, Russian military police were tasked with maintaining order in Aleppo, essentially to keep the victorious allies from the mass slaughter of local Sunnis. A second Russian battalion was deployed in February 2017. Even the Russian media are covering the involvement of ground-based troops.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> “[Iran-Rossiya: nedoponimaniye ili razlad?](#)” BBC Russian Service, [Aug. 23, 2016](#).

<sup>24</sup> *Vechernyaya Moskva* (Moscow), [Sept. 29, 2017](#); NTV (Moscow), [Feb. 1, 2017](#).

## Waiting on Trump

Putin's fear of grassroots revolutions, notably the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, coupled with a deep antipathy toward any form of Western "democratization crusading," remain at the heart of his worldview. Anti-Americanism simply follows from this as a natural consequence.

However, the recent U.S. presidential elections may have given Putin some hope, but not because of the alleged shenanigans between candidate Donald Trump and the Russian president, which most American news sources have been covering. Rather, Washington's forced period of inactivity between Trump's election and his inauguration provided a window of opportunity. This lull allowed Syrian peace negotiations to be transferred to Astana, capitol of the former Soviet territory of Kazakhstan, with Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran hosting the meetings. Each of these capitals finds itself in some form of adversarial relationship with Washington and its Western allies. While all three understood that objective prerequisites for a Syrian peace had not yet ripened, the fact that such negotiations took place without the participation of the United States and Europe was touted by Moscow as a propaganda success.<sup>25</sup>

Putin may have also expected Trump's election to be beneficial in three other respects. First, during his campaign, Trump indicated that he would insist on U.S. allies sharing a greater portion of the financial burden of military expenditures. The allies' likely discomfort with a greater financial responsibility could be used to lure them into greater understanding of Moscow's interests. Second, Trump might be prodded into anti-ISIS collaboration with Russia, which could in turn help repair some of the reputational damage in the West that

<sup>25</sup> RT, [Jan. 4, 2017](#).

**The July 2017 ceasefire deal constituted tacit U.S. acquiescence in Moscow's role in a solution to the Syrian civil war.**

Moscow had suffered by supporting the "Butcher of Damascus." Finally, Russia might exploit Trump's inexperience in foreign affairs to increase its regional standing as a supplier of

military hardware as well as peacekeeping services. As it were, none of these scenarios were realized. To the contrary, the Trump administration began to work actively to unite its traditional allies including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, along with Egypt, Jordan, and even Israel, into a coalition that would not only cooperate on destroying ISIS but would also contain Tehran and promote Israeli-Palestinian peace.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

For Putin, the July 2017 Syrian ceasefire deal reached between the United States, Russia, and Jordan seems to have been a blessing on several fronts.<sup>27</sup> It constituted tacit U.S. acquiescence in Moscow's role in a lasting solution to the Syrian civil war, and it provided Putin with a success at a time when Russian public opinion was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Syria intervention.<sup>28</sup> Above all, the ceasefire has allowed Moscow to secure its basic goals in the war-torn

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Koll, "[Trump Is Cooking up a New Middle East](#)," *The Algemeiner* (Brooklyn), May.15, 2017; Eytan Gilboa, "[In the Aftermath of Trump's Visit to the Middle East](#)," BESA Center Perspectives Paper, no. 488, June 6, 2017; Jose V. Ciprut, "[Prospects for a Near East Treaty Organization](#)," BESA Center Perspectives Paper, no. 493, June 10, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Reuters, [July 7, 2017](#).

<sup>28</sup> Russian Public Opinion Research Center, Moscow, news release no. 3356, [Apr. 20, 2017](#); *Novaya Gazeta* (Moscow), [Sept. 5, 2017](#).

country: expansion of its naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean and ensuring the survival of the Assad regime—something that seemed an uphill struggle just a few months earlier.

Unexpected political moves and unpredictability are likely to remain Putin's modus operandi. The Trump administration may be tempted to start acting in a similar way. But while this may produce a short-term image improvement in terms of Syria, the costs may be high. Unpredictability increases the threat to stability and the risk of unintended conflict escalation. It would be a

mistake for Washington to ape Moscow. The advantage in Syria will go to those who have more resources and a clearer, more realistic and long-term strategy.

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