

# How Putin Is Winning in Syria

by Leni Friedman Valenta and Jiri Valenta

Russian president Vladimir Putin's drive into Syria and the Middle East has been astonishingly successful, but do not expect him to build a *Pax Sovietica*. He intensely dislikes the Bolsheviks despite having been one himself. A student of history, he lives and breathes Russia's defeats as well as its victories, and he still feels the pain of losing land to the Germans during World War I. [“We lost to the losing side,”](#) he told pro-Kremlin activists in 2016, “a unique case in history!”<sup>1</sup>

Putin, like it or not, is one of the most important statesmen of our time. Among the richest, the most experienced, the most manipulative, and the most innovative world leaders, he is obsessed with appearing strong and being strong. Not only does he have a black belt in karate, he is a judo expert at the eighth of ten levels of Dan. He has proven himself to be as brutal as he is cruel, at the cost of thousands of lives. And his primary goal is countering and containing the United States with an anti-Western world order.



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<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian* (London), [Jan. 25, 2016](#).

## Putin's Mariupol Ploys

Russia has been fighting in Syria since September 2015 when Putin set out to rescue his longstanding client, Syrian dictator Bashar Assad, from his numerous enemies: Sunni Arab insurgents, al-Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS), Turkey, and U.S. president Barack Obama, who claimed to be arming “moderate rebels.”<sup>2</sup>

The murder of Libyan tyrant Mu‘ammar Qaddafi by Western-backed militants convinced Putin it was time to save his Syrian protégé. He had already invested much in Syria’s port of Tartus for the servicing of Russian ships.<sup>3</sup> He had established an air base at Latakia.<sup>4</sup> And he saw Syria as a future transfer state for oil and gas. He also bet that entering the Syrian war theater was the best way to establish himself in the Middle East, an objective long denied him by the West.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly enough, the saga began more than a thousand miles from Syria when, in January 2015, Putin first backtracked on a military feint toward the eastern Ukrainian port city of Mariupol. After Russia’s violent assault there in January, he was expected to attack again. Instead, he surprised the West, froze the Ukraine war, and went into Syria to save the Assad regime.

Nearly four years later, on November 25, 2018, Russia seized three Ukrainian ships en route to Mariupol for allegedly violating Russian waters and detained their crews. To

the West it seemed an opening gambit to cripple Ukrainian trade between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. But nothing more happened. Again, Putin froze the war in Ukraine, this time to intensify his war in the Syrian governorate of Idlib.

A year later, even before the December 2019 Normandy peace summit, hosted by French president Emmanuel Macron and brokered by German chancellor Angela Merkel, Putin stabilized his European front by agreeing to a ceasefire and prisoner exchange with Ukraine’s new president Volodymyr Zelensky.<sup>6</sup>

Few foresaw Putin’s Syrian success. The price of oil had dropped, aggravating an economic crisis in Russia. The outcome of the U.S. presidential elections was uncertain. But having learned that fortune favors the bold, risk-happy Putin ignored all this, and Russia’s military forces have since performed exceptionally.<sup>7</sup>

He was also lucky. After Donald Trump’s 2016 election, opposition from Washington ended.<sup>8</sup> But while Trump was open to leaving Assad in place and pursuing diplomacy with Moscow, he could not do so for obvious political reasons: He was already accused by his opponents of being a Russian stooge. Trump’s diplomatic overture failed, but he rejected any hostility.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, [Apr. 12, 2016](#).

<sup>3</sup> *Navy Times*, [Sept. 26, 2019](#); *Financial Times* (London), [Dec. 17, 2019](#).

<sup>4</sup> Reuters, [Nov. 15, 2019](#).

<sup>5</sup> Jiri Valenta and Leni Friedman Valenta, [“Why Putin Wants Syria,”](#) *Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2016.

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<sup>6</sup> [Paris Summit](#), Presidential Office of Ukraine, Kiev, Dec. 9, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Seth Jones, [“Russia’s Battlefield Success in Syria: Will It Be a Pyrrhic Victory?”](#) *CTC Sentinel* (West Point), Oct. 2019; Kamal Alam, [“Russia’s strategy in Syria](#) shows how to win a Middle East war,” *Middle East Eye* (London), July 11, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “The Syrian crisis is now Russia’s to resolve,” *Financial Times*, Oct. 20, 2019.



Photo: Vadim Indeikin

*Russian minesweepers, Sevastopol Crimea, May 2015. Putin's recapture of the Sevastopol naval base enabled Moscow to easily deploy and resupply troops and materiel from Black Sea ports to Syria's Port of Tartus.*

## The Russian Intervention

Aside from a lack of opposition from Washington, Putin succeeded in Syria largely because his military planners mounted an air campaign against rebels who lacked not only air power but also anti-aircraft capabilities, sparing Moscow a bruising ground campaign. After deploying aircraft to Latakia in October 2015, Russia sent advanced S-300 and S-400 air defense missiles, preventing foreign enemy aircraft from overflying Syria. In the words of former national intelligence officer Eugene Rumer, "The Russian air force acquired a potent anti-access/area-denial (A2AD) capability over the Levant and

eastern Mediterranean,"<sup>9</sup> thus preventing other militaries from using the air space.

In 2015, after the Russian insertion into Syria, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan scornfully told Putin, "You don't even have common borders with Syria." Erdoğan failed to understand that Russia does not need them. Putin's Crimean power grab had transformed geopolitics in Russia's favor, especially for its navy. The biggest payoff was the recapture of the Sevastopol naval base, the home of Russia's Black Sea fleet, which itself was preceded by Putin obtaining Georgia's Abkhazian coastline in 2008. The ports and waterways gained by these two interventions enabled the Russians to easily deploy and resupply troops and materiel between the

Black Sea ports and Syria's Port of Tartus.

Putin's navy is not top flight (or sail), but he has made excellent use of it. Russia's Caspian Sea flotilla has been moved forward to a new base in ice-free Kaspiysk, which is closer to Syria than its previous one in Astrakhan.<sup>10</sup> And while the Caspian Sea is landlocked, the flotilla's ships have used their cruise missiles' shorter striking

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<sup>9</sup> Eugene Rumer, "[Russia in the Middle East, Jack of All Trades, Master of None](#)," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., Oct. 31, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Sputnik Radio, *Rossiia Segodnya News* (Moscow), [Mar. 4, 2018](#).

range to great advantage against enemy targets in Syria.<sup>11</sup>

Moscow has also made effective use of special forces in joint operations with Assad's army, employing 2,500-3,000 mercenaries who help ensure that the public is not alarmed by Russian soldiers coming home in body bags. The mercenaries belong to the Wagner Group, presided over by Russian billionaire Yevgeny Prigozhin, who acquired the sobriquet "Putin's chef" from his booming restaurant and catering business. His fighters, largely young Arabs and Russians, have fought for Putin in Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and several other countries for meager remuneration.<sup>12</sup>

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### **Putin and Erdoğan**

Putin opened by using force in Syria and Ukraine so he could dominate subsequent negotiations. Then he did his best to develop and maintain positive relationships with his international adversaries so he could advance his goals where interests on both sides converged.

This paradigm is perhaps most dramatically illustrated in Moscow's relations with Turkey, a NATO member and a longtime enemy of Russia. Seeking Assad's downfall, Erdoğan provided both military and financial support to the Syrian

rebels, but his relationship with Putin was meanwhile changing. Ironically, the shift began after serious conflict erupted between Ankara and Moscow. On

November 24, 2015, when two Turkish pilots shot down a Russian fighter jet over the Turkish border, and rebels killed a Russian pilot as he parachuted from the plane, Putin imposed sanctions against Turkey.<sup>13</sup> Seven months later, on June 27, 2016, Erdoğan apologized, and the two men grew closer when Ankara purchased Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missiles instead of the U.S. Patriot, triggering a sharp rebuke by Turkey's NATO peers.<sup>14</sup>

No less galling for Washington was the intensifying Russo-Turkish collaboration in the development of the TurkStream natural gas pipeline.<sup>15</sup> TurkStream parallels Nord Stream 2, which will deliver gas beneath the Baltic Sea to Germany, but not to Poland and Lithuania,<sup>16</sup> countries that hope to eschew dependence on Russia. Both projects have broken ground despite heavy U.S. sanctions.

Putin and Erdoğan's relationship changed again following Trump's December 2018 decision to pull U.S. troops out of Syria and "bring our youth back home."<sup>17</sup> Turkey followed this move with a major attack on the weakened Kurds—Washington's foremost ally in the war against ISIS. As a result, many Kurds were forced to flee their long-standing, autonomous zone along Syria's

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<sup>11</sup> *BBC News* (London), [Oct. 7, 2015](#).

<sup>12</sup> Adam Taylor, "[What we know about the shadowy mercenary firm behind an attack on U.S. troops in Syria](#)," *The Washington Post*, Feb. 23, 2018; Neil Hauer, "[Russia's Favorite Mercenaries](#)," *The Atlantic* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 27, 2018; Hauer, "[The Rise and Fall of a Russian Mercenary Army](#)," *Foreign Policy*, Oct. 6, 2019.

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<sup>13</sup> *The Guardian*, Nov. 28, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> *BBC News*, [July 12, 2019](#).

<sup>15</sup> "[TurkStream](#)," Gazprom, Moscow.

<sup>16</sup> "[Nord Stream 2](#)," Gazprom, Moscow.

<sup>17</sup> *The New York Post*, [Dec. 20, 2018](#).

northern border while more than five hundred of their ISIS prisoners escaped.<sup>18</sup>

As Trump quickly backtracked, most U.S. troops returned to Syria and Washington and Moscow pressured Damascus to create safe zones for the Kurds. When in late October 2019 the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces asked Moscow for a no-fly zone over eastern Syria to protect them from Turkish air strikes, Putin readily complied, effectively ending any U.S. activities in Syria's skies.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the Putin-Erdoğan intermittent bromance is cooling again. With the continued Russo-Syrian bombing of Idlib creating enormous refugee problems for Turkey, Erdoğan sent his troops into the province where, despite a shaky ceasefire, Turkey is effectively at war with Russia and Syria.

Moscow and Ankara also find themselves on opposite sides of oil rich Libya's ongoing civil war: Putin has thrown his weight, including some 1,600 Wagner Group mercenaries, behind Libyan strongman Khalifa Haftar, while Erdoğan backs the country's U.N.-recognized leader Fayez Sarraj and his Government of National Accord (GNA). For its part, the U.S. administration, having initially backed Haftar for his anti-jihadist stance and pitch about democracy, seems to have had second



*January 23, 2020, Putin (left) and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu unveil Jerusalem's Memorial Candle monument, dedicated to Leningrad's residents and defenders. Putin differs from the Russian tsars in that he is friendly toward Jews and Israel.*

thoughts over the prudence of this move.<sup>20</sup> It should. Libya is a Putin power play.

### **Israel, the Silent Partner**

Though widely referred to by scholars and historians as a new tsar, Putin differs from the Russian tsars in one important respect: Unlike most of them, he is not an anti-Semite but is rather friendly toward Jews and Israel. He is also keenly aware of Israel's enormous technological and military prowess and its close political and economic ties with the United States.

As a result, while Iran and its proxy Shiite militias, notably Hezbollah, have acted as Moscow's allies against Assad's Sunni enemies, some of whom are supported,

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<sup>18</sup> *The New York Times*, [Oct. 23, 2019](#).

<sup>19</sup> *Middle East Eye*, [Oct. 16, 2019](#).

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<sup>20</sup> *The Guardian*, [June 8, 2019](#).

armed, and funded by Washington, Putin has effectively acquiesced in Israel's clandestine war against Tehran's military entrenchment in Syria and the transfer of Iranian weapons and military equipment to Hezbollah (notably high precision guiding systems for its long range missiles).<sup>21</sup>

This pattern is not likely to change despite the January 2020 killing of Iran's top military commander Qassem Soleimani in a U.S. drone attack.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that Assad's recovery of lost Syrian land has brought Iran and Hezbollah closer to Israel's "red line" on the Golan Heights increasing the potential for an Israeli-Iranian conflagration. But Moscow remains the only power that can mitigate these explosive circumstances. As commentator Joost Hiltermann put it:

Moscow may be reluctant to assume a political role it has shown little capacity for playing. But as the dominant power in Syria that controls the skies, it has no choice. Unlike any other actor, moreover, it enjoys good relations with all the main actors: Israel, Iran, Hezbollah, and the Syrian regime. There is no reasonable alternative to Russia as a balancing power and mediator.<sup>23</sup>

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Above all else, Putin's successful intervention has not only made Moscow the arbiter in the Syrian conflict but has allowed it to regain its preeminent role in the region. According to Israeli analyst Jonathan Spyer:

Moscow's hand is now profoundly stronger in the Middle East ... Assad, the Kurds, Turkey, and Israel all now depend on Moscow's approval to advance their interest in Syria. All roads to Syria now run through Moscow. Mr. Putin could hardly ask for more.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Putin is determined to contain Washington and create a multipolar world. He has learned how to wage war at minimum cost and how to wield maximum pressure through proxies. Syria is where Putin has best demonstrated how he can win by coupling hard with soft power. Using overwhelming force in the absence of great-power opposition makes subsequent negotiations easier and effectively warns other nations to stay out of his way.

Putin has sewn up much of the Middle East in an astonishingly short time. But this is partly due to U.S. president Donald Trump's errors and his reluctance to use military force even when warranted. Still, with Soleimani's killing, Trump demonstrated that he is not averse to the unpredictable use of hard power. In essence, he pulled a Putin, and he made himself a force to be

<sup>21</sup> David Kenner, "[Why Israel Fears Iran's Presence in Syria](#)," *The Atlantic*, July 22, 2018; *Time Magazine*, [Jan. 25, 2019](#).

<sup>22</sup> *The New York Times*, [Jan. 7, 2020](#).

<sup>23</sup> Joost Hiltermann, "[Russia Can Keep the Peace between Israel and Iran](#)," *The Atlantic*, Feb. 13, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Spyer, "[Putin Is the New King of Syria](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 16, 2019.

reckoned with. What he must do now, since Putin backs dictators, is fully commit himself to democracy, listen to his advisers, and recognize that the United States cannot retreat from the Middle East.

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