

OPERATION “RETRIBUTION”: PUTIN’S MILITARY CAMPAIGN IN SYRIA, 2015-16

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September 30, 2016, marked the first anniversary of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to involve his nation militarily in the Syrian conflict on the side of Moscow’s longtime ally, the Assad regime. According to initial Russian Defense Ministry statements and Putin himself, the mission had the primary objective of joining the U.S.-led coalition in fighting ISIS. Russia’s chief of staff of the Presidential Executive Office at that time, Sergei Ivanov, using an alternative name for ISIS, laid out his country’s official objectives on September 30, 2015: “The military goal of the operation is strictly to provide air support for the [Syrian] government forces in their fight against Islamic State.”¹ The Mufti of Kazan (the head of Russia’s Tatar community) and members of the Russian parliament lined up to support Putin’s campaign in Syria, described as a “prophylactic against terrorist organizations” that was necessary to “destroy ISIS at its root.”²

It soon became widely apparent, however, that the Russians had conflated ISIS with CIA-backed rebels and various other anti-Assad Sunni rebel forces with no known connection to ISIS, creating the false narrative of a united terrorist monolith that needed to be eradicated in order to preserve stability in Syria. In the process, Putin was able to successfully “shift the sands” of the conflict and bolster the endangered Assad regime while simultaneously cultivating his image domestically as a strong leader: able to stand up to the West, project power abroad, and support an embattled ally against international jihadists. The operation has been consistently portrayed in Russia as an unmitigated success in “inflicting heavy losses on Syrian terrorist groups.”³ There seems to be little doubt among observers that Putin’s venture into the Mideast has reshaped the war in Syria, but has it been a success in the larger strategic sense?

What follows is an effort to evaluate the first year of this still-unfolding military

campaign, with the aim of assessing the validity of the Russian claims of success.

BACKGROUND

Russia has long been a key supporter of the Syrian Baathist Socialist regime. Hafez al-Assad, father and predecessor of current President Bashar al-Assad, spent years in the Soviet Union learning to fly MIG-15s and MIG-17s as an officer in the Syrian armed forces. The elder Assad subsequently seized control of Syria in a coup in 1970 and brought to power his ethno-religious group, the Alawites (15 percent of Syria's population, they adhere to a syncretic offshoot of Shiite Islam). Having designated himself president, Assad followed the model of a Soviet single-party state, with an all-pervasive network of intelligence agencies that kept the restless Sunni majority in check.⁴

In 1971, the Assad regime provided the USSR with a naval facility in Tartus, on Syria's Mediterranean coast. It remains there today, Russia's sole military facility outside the former Soviet Union. Moscow's basic docking facility, however, is not big enough to be designated a "base"; instead it is described as a "Material Technical Support Point." The Russian facility consists of two floating piers and an Amur-class floating workshop. It is not capable of supporting any of Russia's major warships — frigates, destroyers or its one comparatively small aircraft carrier. This Material Technical Support Point can in no way be compared to massive U.S. naval and aerial facilities in the Persian Gulf, which host 20 aircraft carriers, for example.

Still, as the threat to Assad mounted in 2015 amid the bloody civil war — posed by a new alliance of non-ISIS Sunni rebel groups in northwest Syria known as Jaish

al Fatah (the Army of Conquest) — concern grew in Moscow over possible threats to this asset. In addition to his interest in defending this facility, Putin feared the chaos stemming from the overthrow of strongmen in the region, having noted the turmoil that swept over Libya and Iraq following U.S. intervention. He also felt the need to show the world, and his own audience at home, that Russia stood by its allies. When the Arab Spring demonstrations shook the region in 2011, Putin claimed the United States had abandoned its ally, President Hosni Mubarak, in Egypt. But Putin decided to stand by his ally, Assad, when civil war broke out between the ruling Alawites and dozens of Sunni rebel groups.

Putin feared the threat to Assad from an alliance of Sunni rebel groups, the aforementioned Army of Conquest, advancing on the Alawite coastal homeland. The Sunni alliance, which threatened both the Russian naval facility and Assad, had conquered Idlib Province in northwestern Syria soon after its formation in March 2015. Putin was alarmed when these Sunni rebels began to encroach on the Alawite coastal stronghold in southern Latakia (for three years the Sunni rebels had held northern Latakia).

At this time, the Iranians, unwavering allies of the Assad regime since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, warned Putin that Assad was going to fall and that they did not have the means to save him. In July 2015, the commander of the Quds Force, an elite extraterritorial special-forces arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Major General Qassem Soleimani, visited Moscow to make his case for Russian involvement in Syria. He explained that the Sunni rebel advances were endangering not only their joint ally Assad, but Russia's military

assets at Tartus. A senior Assad official recalled, “Soleimani put the map of Syria on the table. The Russians were very alarmed, and felt matters were in steep decline and that there were real dangers to the regime.”⁵ Soleimani was able to convince his Russian hosts that their involvement was essential.

Putin agreed that Assad needed to be bolstered as a bulwark against “terrorists,” lumping all Sunni rebel groups into this category alongside ISIS.⁶ Tellingly, Putin directly blamed the United States for “creating the conditions in which the [ISIS] terrorist state was born”: “Tens of thousands of militants are fighting under the banners of [ISIS]. Its ranks include former Iraqi servicemen who were thrown out on to the street after the [U.S.] invasion of Iraq in 2003.”⁷

After Soleimani’s visit, Putin was convinced of the need to robustly protect his Syrian ally, save the Russian facility at Tartus, and prevent the rise of jihadist groups of the sort that had taken power in post-Hussein Iraq, post-Qadhafi Libya and parts of Syria. In addition, Putin would be projecting Russia back onto the world stage after its widely condemned 2014 annexation of Crimea and incursions into the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine. The idea of supporting Assad against CIA-backed Sunni rebel groups must have had a strong appeal.

Having decided on intervention, on August 26, 2015, Russia and Syria signed a formal agreement in Damascus granting Russia access to Syria’s Hmeimim airbase near regime-controlled southern Latakia.⁸ The pieces were thus in place for the projection of Russian power for the first time beyond the borders of the former Soviet Union. What resulted from this unexpected intervention in a war that had cost the lives

of one in 10 Syrians and caused the near-collapse of the Assad regime was to come as a surprise to those who had expected Putin to fail in his “quixotic” adventure.

RUSSIAN OFFICIAL INTERVENTION

In early September 2015, Russia deployed artillery units and advanced T-90 “Vladimir” main battle tanks and flew in approximately 2,000 Russian military personnel to the Hmeimim base. They later deployed at Hmeimim S-400 “Triumph” anti-aircraft missiles with a 250-mile range to defend these assets. Most important, the Russians also dispatched to the base approximately 50 fighters and bombers (primarily Su-25 Frogfoot ground-attack planes, new Su-34 Fullback medium bombers, and Su-24 Fencer fighter jets) and several Mil 24 Hind attack helicopters. These air assets would later be bolstered by larger Tu-22M3 Backfire, Tu-160 Blackjack, and Tu-95MS Bear strategic bombers, from a base in Mozdok, capital of the Russian Caucasus republic of North Ossetia, and eventually from western Iran.

Then, on September 30, in a move that caught America and its allies by surprise, the Russians began an intensive bombing campaign, informally known as Operation Vozmezdiye (retribution), against what they claimed were ISIS targets in Syria. However, the initial Russian strikes appeared to be against the Army of Conquest in the northwest and the capital of Idlib province. A member of a U.S.-backed Sunni rebel brigade operating in Talbiseh the day after the initial strikes observed, “The [Assad] regime has bombed this area many times before, but not heavy like yesterday. ... We knew there would be bombing from Russia, but we didn’t think it would be like this.”⁹

The Obama administration did not initially seem to be worried by Putin's intervention in Syria. One official said, "If he wants to jump into that mess, good luck," while another sarcastically said, "Knock yourself out."¹⁰ President Obama, who had thus far refused to insert U.S. personnel into Syria to support the Sunni rebels, clearly

saw Putin's involvement as doomed. On October 2, he stated, "An attempt by Russia and Iran to prop up Assad and try to pacify

the population is just going to get them stuck in a quagmire, and it won't work. And they will be there for a while if they don't take a different course."¹¹

But the White House soon became concerned about the intervention, as it was negatively affecting moderate groups in the northwest supported by the United States and its Arab and Turkish allies. With Putin conflating all Sunni rebel groups with ISIS, the conflict gradually came to resemble a proxy war between Russia and the United States, despite efforts to "de-conflict" the crisis and make sure Russian and U.S. planes did not fly in the same airspace. The U.S.-backed Free Syrian Army (previously marginalized in the Army of Conquest) initially fought back ferociously against a Russian-backed Syrian army ground offensive in the northwest using American-supplied TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missiles to destroy Russian-built Syrian tanks in October 2015. One Russian T 90 tank did beat the odds and

survived a direct missile strike, leading a Russian Ministry of Defense website to proclaim the tanks "death proof" after the video of the failed attack went viral online.¹² But the Russians adjusted and instead began using Mil 24 Hind attack helicopters, which could not be brought down by TOW missiles. In essence, the Hinds

provided vital "airborne artillery" support and suppression fire for Syrian army advances. Footage was widely posted online at the time by

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the Syrian government depicting Russian Hinds strafing rebel positions with missiles in support of their troops.¹³

The CIA-backed Sunni rebels, who were forced to retreat, requested anti-aircraft missiles to shoot down Russian and Syrian jets and attack helicopters, but they were not delivered for fear of escalating the proxy conflict further. The CIA, by contrast, had had no qualms about providing Stinger shoulder-fired ground-to-air "manpad" missiles to the mujahideen in Afghanistan in the 1980s, where they proved to be the ultimate equalizer, downing Soviet jets and helicopters. One Free Syrian Army fighter bemoaned the lack of anti-aircraft missiles: "We can have most of the weapons we want. But nothing to shoot down the planes."¹⁴ As a result, the previously advancing Sunni rebels were forced on the defensive and began to retreat from northern Latakia, which they had held for three years, and parts of Idlib.

Meanwhile, Putin announced he had arranged an intelligence-sharing agreement

with Iran, Iraq and Syria. It appeared as if the demoralized Syrian regime, which had been low on manpower, would be bolstered by an alliance of Russia, Hezbollah and Iran (although at roughly this time an Iranian brigadier general advising the Assad regime was killed fighting in the east, as were several Russians, demonstrating the risks of involvement in the war).

On October 3, 2015, Hezbollah and Iran expanded their roles in the conflict by deploying fighters to the Hama and Homs provinces in western Syria — two strategically important locations for augmenting Assad’s strongholds along the coast — to prepare major ground offensives backed by Russian airstrikes.¹⁵ On October 7, pro-Assad forces from Iran and Hezbollah carried out their first major coordinated ground assaults on Sunni rebels in western Syria under the cover of Russian warplanes.¹⁶ On that day, Russia also stepped up the bombing campaign, firing 26 new Kalibr cruise missiles at Sunni rebel targets in Aleppo, Idlib and Raqqa from warships 900 miles away in the Caspian Sea. It soon became apparent that Syria was a testing ground for Moscow’s new state-of-the-art military technology, including the Su-34 “Fullback” fighter bomber, the Mi-35M attack helicopter, and the Kalibr cruise missile, later fired from Russian warships in the Mediterranean as well.¹⁷

By mid-October 2015, with the assistance of Russian, Hezbollah and Iranian allies, Assad’s forces began to stabilize and regain lost territory. By this time, it had become clear that the vast majority of Russian bombings were in the northwest against the Army of Conquest alliance of Sunni rebel groups threatening the Assad regime from territories they had recently conquered in Idlib. The White House made it clear it had not bought into Putin’s nar-

ative that he was waging counterterrorism in Syria. White House spokesman Jack Kirby bluntly stated:

Greater than 90 percent of the strikes that we’ve seen them take to date have not been against ISIL or al-Qaida-affiliated terrorists. They’ve been largely against opposition groups, groups that want a better future for Syria and don’t want to see the Assad regime stay in power. So whether they’re hit by a cruise missile from the sea or a bomb from a Russian military aircraft, the result is the same: that Assad continues to get support from Russia. Assad continues to be able to have at his hands the capability of striking his own people, including those who are opposed to his regime. And that’s not a good future for Syria.¹⁸

Obama personally discussed the issue with Putin in a February 2016 phone call, and the White House later reported in an official statement that “President Obama emphasized the importance now of Russia playing a constructive role by ceasing its air campaign against moderate opposition forces in Syria.”¹⁹ Putin was not, however, swayed by Obama. A Kremlin statement indicated it would continue its aerial campaign against the Nusra Front and “other terroristic groups” in the northwest.

Republican politicians used the Russian intervention to attack Obama for “surrendering the Middle East to Putin,” even as they criticized the Kremlin’s aggression. Senator John McCain, who had visited moderate rebels in Syria and called for the creation of a no-fly zone to protect them, was particularly incensed: “Mr. Putin is not interested in being our partner. He wants to shore up the Assad regime, he wants to establish Russia as a major power in the Middle East, he wants to use Syria as a

live fire exercise for Russia's modernizing military."²⁰

Undeterred by such criticism from Washington, which began to mount in October, the Russians went on to launch air attacks on the CIA-backed rebels in Hama and Homs provinces to the south of Idlib. The Russian Ministry of Defense described

one attack on this region by a squadron of massive strategic bombers making the long flight to Syria from southern Russia: "During a massive

airstrike today, 14 important ISIL [ISIS] targets were destroyed by 34 air-launched cruise missiles. The targets destroyed include command posts that were used to coordinate ISIL activities in the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo, munition and supply depots in the northwestern part of Syria."²¹

There was, however, a problem with this statement: ISIS did not have forces in Idlib or the areas of Aleppo that were targeted. Among the Russians' targets in this northwestern region were actually several U.S.-backed Sunni groups in the rebel alliance, such as the Free Syrian Army, Sham Legion, Jund al Aqsa, Jaish al Sunna, Ahrar ash Sham and Division 13. One U.S.-backed Sunni rebel leader whose position was bombed by Russian aircraft bemoaned the toll of the airstrike: "We are on the front lines with Bashar al-Assad's army. We are moderate Syrian rebels and have no affiliation with ISIS. ISIS is at least 100 kilometers from where we are."²² Another Sunni rebel stated, "The Russian airstrikes for more than a month had intensified to

a horrific extent, and they were bombing all the frontlines that we are on. We had to withdraw from the area because it would have been suicide to stay. The destruction cannot be described, even the trees have been burned as a result of this scorched-earth policy."²³ At the time, non-ISIS Sunni rebels began to post harrowing, close-up

footage online of Russian aircraft dropping bombs on civilians in towns controlled by their forces in the northwest as they fired back, often

from truckbeds mounted with anti-aircraft guns.²⁴

Still, Russia officially claimed to be conducting pinpoint strikes on ISIS targets. To support its claims, the Russia Ministry of Defense released YouTube videos of several airstrikes purported to be against ISIS.²⁵ But the videos were scrutinized by investigative journalists using a collaborative verification platform to match the locations seen in the YouTube videos with satellite images, as well as ground-level photographs.²⁶ The journalists were able to conclude that Russia's claims contained numerous elements of Soviet-style disinformation. Most of the areas identified lacked a known ISIS presence, thus confirming what many had already suspected: Russia was primarily bombing Sunni rebel groups with no known connection to ISIS.

It must be stated that, among these groups being targeted in the northwest, was the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, which had been declared a "Foreign Terrorist Organization" by the U.S. State De-

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partment.²⁷ This allowed Putin to claim his forces were engaged in a counterterrorism campaign. However, the Nusra Front was allied with several moderate Sunni groups that considered it to be an effective, local Syrian-dominated fighting force against Assad and not as fanatical as the foreign-led ISIS (the Nusra Front officially broke its ties to al-Qaeda in late July 2016 and renamed itself Jabhat Fateh al Sham, the Front for the Conquest of the Levant).

For all Putin's successes on the battlefield against what he described as "terrorists," by late October 2015, the risks he was running in Syria began to materialize. On October 31, an ISIS affiliate in Egypt's Sinai Desert claimed responsibility for blowing up a Russian charter plane flying from the resort town of Sharm el Sheikh to St. Petersburg, killing all 224 people on board. Having perpetrated the deadliest disaster in Russian aviation history, ISIS gloated by posting a picture on its online magazine, *Dabiq*, of the small bomb that brought down the plane. In the publication, ISIS justified its action as a response to the Russian airstrikes in Syria, which it termed "a rash decision of arrogance."²⁸ Putin responded by declaring, "Our military operation with aviation in Syria should not simply continue, it should be intensified so that the criminals understand that revenge is unavoidable."²⁹ Media in Russia began casting the campaign in Syria as one of revenge or retribution.

Then, on November 24, a Turkish air-force F-16 shot down a Russian Su-24 "Fencer" fighter-bomber that had strayed for 17 seconds into the southern Turkish province of Hatay. The Turkish newspaper *Millet* reported that the trespassing Russian plane had been warned before it was shot down that it was about to cross the Turkish border, a contention supported

by NATO, despite Russian protests to the contrary.³⁰

The two Russian pilots in the downed aircraft, Konstantin Murakhtin and Oleg Peshkov, ejected from the bomber and attempted to parachute to safety. Peshkov, however, was shot dead by vengeful Turkmen rebel forces as he descended; his body was found riddled with bullets. To compound matters, Alparslan Çelik, a Turkish citizen belonging to a nationalist group known as the Boz Kurts (Grey Wolves), claimed responsibility for killing the Russian pilot — in retaliation for the bombing of Turkmen civilians.³¹ The other Russian pilot was rescued by Russian special forces, who, despite losing an Mi 8 helicopter and a Russian marine to a rebel TOW missile during the search, were able to follow his radio beacon and save him.³²

While the shoot down came as a shock to many observers, who saw it as an over-reaction, those who knew the region saw it as a direct response to Moscow's repeated aerial bombardment of Turkish-supported Syrian Turkmen rebels operating in northern Syria's Jabal al-Turkmen region. These rebels, whose long-repressed ethnic group is essentially Turkish, claimed, "The Russians were heavily bombing Turkmen villages before the downing of the plane. Thousands of Turkmen families have been driven to the [Turkish] border."³³ Prior to the downing of the jet, Turkey had warned Russia that "the Russian side's actions were not a fight against terror, ... they bombed civilian Turkmen villages and this could lead to serious consequences."³⁴ As late as November 20, 2015 (four days before the downing of the Russian jet), Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu had described northern Syria's Turkmen as "*kardeşlerimiz*" (our brothers), stating, "If the Russian Air Force and army are fight-

ing Daesh [ISIS] then they should fight Daesh.”³⁵

Putin personally vowed “revenge” for the downing of the jet, which he described as a “stab in the back” by Turkish “terrorist accomplices.”³⁶ On the following day, Turkey’s *Sabah* newspaper reported that seven drivers were killed in the bombing of an aid convoy traveling from Turkey into Syria near the border town of Azaz.³⁷ Russia followed up this bombing with a large-scale attack in the Idlib province on November 29.

But the Kremlin’s air offensive soon gained a reputation for the lack of discrimination it had used in Chechnya. In the second Chechen conflict, 1999-2009, Russian bombers had callously obliterated whole neighborhoods in the capital of Grozny to drive out rebels. They also had ample experience in using Hind attack helicopters to strafe villages suspected of sheltering Chechen *bojeviks* (fighters).³⁸

It quickly became obvious that the Russian forces did not have close-air-support advisers on the frontlines in Syria of the sort the Americans had embedded with anti-ISIS Kurdish forces operating in Syria’s northern Hasaka Province and on the front in Mosul, Fallujah and Ramadi in Iraq. Instead of having spotters on the ground calling in precision bomb strikes, the Russian air force defaulted to a clumsy strategy of indiscriminately bombing whole neighborhoods and towns under Sunni rebel control.

Following the pattern set by the “rubbleization” of Grozny, a Russian airstrike on a crowded market in Ariha, a town controlled by the Army of Conquest, killed at least 44 people and wounded scores more. A witness at the scene recalled, “In just a few moments, people were screaming, the smell of burning was in the air and there

was just chaos. There was a primary school nearby, and children were running out absolutely terrified. ... There were bodies everywhere, decapitated and mutilated.”³⁹ On October 20, the Sarmin field hospital in suburban Idlib was struck by Russian warplanes, killing 13 people, including two medical staff. “I wish I could say that targeting a hospital in Syria is unique, but is not,” said Dr. Mohamed Tennari. “The field hospital I direct in Sarmin has been hit by airstrikes more than a dozen times — by the Syrian government and now by the Russian government.”⁴⁰ Britain’s *Guardian* was to report in March 2016 that Russia’s indiscriminate bombing had killed approximately 2,000 civilians in Syria.⁴¹

In early December 2015, the Russians stepped up their involvement and began preparations to expand operations by opening a second major airbase in Syria. They deployed reinforcements to al-Shayrat airbase near Homs, which already housed many attack helicopters in its fortified hangars. The base was bolstered by military personnel, increasing the number of Russian troops in Syria from the initial 2,000 to roughly 4,000, (slightly fewer than the 5,000 military personnel Obama deployed in Iraq to bolster Iraqi and Kurdish Peshmerga forces in their offensive against ISIS by the fall of 2016). Many of these troops were guard personnel involved in protecting the aircraft used to provide close air support for Syrian troops.

Meanwhile, the Russian campaign to tilt the balance in favor of Assad appeared to weaken the U.S.-backed rebels in Aleppo Province sufficiently for ISIS to make some advances in the northern areas of the region.⁴² The Russian air campaign also allowed Syrian government troops to clear Sunni rebels out of the Alawite homeland in northern Latakia. In February 2016,

Russian aircraft continued their momentum, supporting regime troops and allied Hezbollah and Iranian fighters, encircling neighborhoods of eastern Aleppo that had been controlled by Sunni rebels since 2012. In the process, the revived Assad forces were able to cut off the rebels' supply lines to the Turkish border at Bab al-Salameh, their most successful offensive of the war.

This decisive offensive also broke a three-year siege of several pro-government neighborhoods in the area, causing a panicked flight of Sunni refugees to Turkey. As

the Russians and Syrian air forces indiscriminately bombed rebel areas, causing hundreds of civilian casualties, the Syrian army

starved rebel-controlled neighborhoods. While the Russian bombing was, more often than not, indiscriminate, it could also be deadly accurate. A Russian airstrike just prior to this, for example, killed Zahran Al-loush, a powerful Sunni rebel commander who led a major fighting force known as the Army of Islam on December 25, 2015.

As Russian involvement expanded in the north, Russian-backed Syrian army forces were also able to go on the offensive against Sunni rebels belonging to the moderate alliance dominated by the Free Syrian Army in the south around Daraa. Most important, the Syrian army was able to take over the Damascus-Daraa road in February 2016, by gaining control of the towns of al-Shaykh Maskin and Uthman. In both north and south, the Russian intervention thus propped up the crumbling

Assad regime, allowing it to maintain control over the western corridor, where most Syrians lived. It also fulfilled Putin's goal of preventing the fall of Damascus to jihadists and allowed Assad to go on the offensive from Daraa to Hama and Homs to Aleppo and Latakia.

In addition to propping up the Syrian army and bolstering its rather limited ground offensives, Putin's incursion also quashed any discussion of a no-fly zone or "safe zone" north of Aleppo. The United States and Turkey had been discussing

plans to keep Syrian air-force planes out of a 60-mile zone between Aleppo and Turkey to protect Sunni rebels and civilians north of

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Syria's largest city. With Russian fighter-bombers active in and around Aleppo, such a plan might have led to U.S.-Russian aerial confrontations, so it was shelved. This proved a tremendous boon to the Syrian army forces, which, by spring 2016, captured some of the area that would have been included in the no-fly zone and cut off the rebels' supply line to Turkey, the Azaz Corridor.

From the fall of 2015 to the winter of 2016, Operation Retribution reshaped the battlefield in western Syria. However, it did not have much impact on ISIS, which controlled a swath of territory stretching from the Turkish border at Tarabulus to its capital at Raqqa in the central Syrian desert to the Iraqi frontier at Abu Kamal. Prior to the Russian intervention, Assad's forces were said to have been so depleted that the

government was weighing a retreat from Damascus to the coastal heartland of the Alawites near Latakia and Tartus.⁴³ While the Syrian army at one time comprised 220,000 troops (many of whom were Sunni conscripts led by Alawite commanders), it had dwindled to an Alawite-led core of 65,000 personnel.⁴⁴

It became clear that a second Russian goal appeared to be to establish “facts on the ground” that would allow Assad to negotiate from a new position of strength when peace talks commenced. This could be done by destroying or weakening the more moderate Sunni rebel groups, effectively leaving the American-led coalition with a stark choice: supporting Assad or ISIS “Caliph” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. As previously stated, Putin’s calculus seemed to be to reassert his country as a major player on the world stage following its March 2014 invasion of the Crimean Peninsula, and he thought his role in shaping the U.S.-led coalition’s choices in Syria would help achieve that objective.⁴⁵

Despite a few setbacks and tension with Assad, Russian support succeeded in bolstering his regime, allowing it to make modest gains on the ground that were temporarily frozen by a Russian- and American-backed ceasefire signed on February 27, 2016. This cessation of hostilities between almost 100 Sunni rebel groups and the Assad regime (it did not include ISIS or the Nusra Front) led to deliveries of humanitarian aid to hundreds of thousands of people in besieged zones. But with ISIS and the Nusra Front outside the parameters of the ceasefire, its impact was limited beyond Aleppo; the Nusra Front was active in the northwest as an ally of many moderate Sunni groups.

Having buttressed the faltering Assad regime, Putin inserted himself as a major

player in the Middle East and achieved a seat at the table for peace talks in Geneva in March 2016. Then Putin surprised the White House and announced on March 14, 2016, that the Russian military’s goals in Syria were “on the whole accomplished” and that he would withdraw his “main forces.”⁴⁶ The announcement seemed to signify that Russia would not permanently back Assad with its air force, although it was unclear when or if a complete withdrawal would take place.

While President Obama called the five-month Russian intervention in Syria a “blunder,” Putin’s limited campaign seemed to demonstrate that intervening in Syria did not necessarily have to be a slippery slope leading to a quagmire. Putin had seemingly put both his troops and his advanced T-90 battle tanks on the ground, reconfigured the battlefield, then quickly called for their withdrawal with only a few casualties. This suited the Russian public, strongly supportive of their president, but harboring memories of the disastrous Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

History would show, however, that Putin’s mission was not yet accomplished. Despite his official order for the withdrawal of troops, Russia remained very much involved in a protracted war in Syria. In fact, Russia gradually found itself enmeshed in a lingering battle against ISIS fighters in Syria’s vast eastern desert and Sunni rebels trying to break the siege of Aleppo in the northwest.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED?

Even as Putin announced that major operations in Syria were over, reports began to emerge of continued Russian involvement. Pavel Felgenhauer, a military analyst based in Moscow, stated that there had been no real Russian with-

drawal: “Some of the attack planes, yes, were flown back to Russia, others were flown back to replace them; new advanced helicopters, gunships. But everything else stayed. The ground crews mostly, the logistics, the stockpiles of weapons. So that was mostly a diversional PR move.”⁴⁷ It soon became apparent that these residual Russian forces had a new mission, most notably, support for a Syrian ground offensive in the eastern desert. This

time Russia was finally involved in fighting, not against CIA-backed rebels in the northwest, but against ISIS.

On March 27, Russian forces assisted the Assad regime in recapturing from ISIS the city of Tadmur, home to the ancient ruins of Palmyra. While ISIS, in the thirteenth issue of *Dabiq*, would proclaim victory over Syrian forces backed by Russian aircraft, they were ultimately defeated by the heavy firepower of the allied forces.⁴⁸ Syrian government troops on the ground were backed by Russian airpower as they drove ISIS forces from the “bride of the desert,” as Palmyra was known. Approximately 400 ISIS fighters were killed in this offensive, one of the group’s worst defeats since its humiliation by YPG Kurds backed by U.S. bombers in the border town of Kobane in November 2015.⁴⁹

To celebrate this victory, a Russian symphony orchestra led by renowned conductor Valery Gergiev was flown in to perform a surprise concert in a second-century Roman amphitheater in the heart of ISIS-ravaged Palmyra. While under ISIS control, the amphitheater had served

as the set for a 2015 film featuring the execution of 25 Assad-regime soldiers by an ISIS firing squad. The stark contrast between the medieval ISIS atrocities and the beauty of the Russian concert was resonant with symbolism. Putin clearly intended to portray Russian intervention in Syria as a *mission civilisatrice*. Seizing the

moment for all it was worth, Putin proclaimed his “hope for Palmyra’s revival as the heritage of the whole

“Listen O Putin, we will come to you in Russia, we will kill you all in your homes, Allah willing.” ... Thus far, there have, however, only been four small ISIS-inspired attacks in Russia.

of humanity, but also as hope that our contemporary civilization will be relieved from this horrible disease, international terrorism.”⁵⁰

Having liberated Palmyra, located in the heart of the desert, Russian ground forces established a new base just to its west. The military assets there consisted of mine-clearing equipment and dozens of fighting vehicles, in addition to armored personnel carriers to help protect the site from potential attack. While these assets were purportedly for defensive purposes vis-à-vis ISIS, Russia also deployed a sophisticated Pantsir-S1 air-defense system with the capacity to both launch missiles and fire cannons at incoming planes.⁵¹

But the Russian presence proved to be a magnet for ISIS attacks, and on the evening of July 8, ISIS launched a coordinated assault on Palmyra. During the attack, what appeared to be a state-of-the-art Russian Mil MI-35M Hind E attack helicopter was shot down. The next day, *Pravda* and *Lenta RU*, popular Russian-language newspapers, confirmed that the advanced helicopter had been destroyed, resulting in

the death of two Russian "military instruction pilots," Ryafagat Habibullin and Yevgeny Dolgin.⁵²

Colonel Habibullin, who had the qualification of "pilot-sniper," was, however, much more than just a military instruction pilot. He had participated in the Georgian civil war during the 1990s, the war in Chechnya from 1994-2002, and again in Georgia during the 2008 Russian invasion. While in Chechnya, Habibullin's Mi-24 was shot down by a DShK anti-aircraft gun, and he was the lone survivor.⁵³ In 2012, Putin personally visited the military base Habibullin commanded in the Krasnodar region of Russia to award it with an Order of Kutuzov on the hundredth anniversary of the Russian Air Force. There Putin declared, "Your unit has been on combat duty serving our Fatherland for the past 60 years. Its victories are truly legendary and heroic."⁵⁴

Habibullin was considered to be one of Russia's most experienced pilots and a legend in Russian army aviation, but Syria would be his last war. On the evening of July 8, ISIS released a YouTube video of an explosion that seemed to disable the tail rotor of his helicopter as it spun out of control and the two pilots plunged to their deaths. The Moscow-based Conflict Intelligence Team, which investigates Russia's involvement in Syria, was able to match the landscape in the video to a Google Earth landscape model, confirming that the video was filmed just east of Palmyra, as ISIS claimed.⁵⁵

Since then, Russia has been heavily involved in supporting Syrian government offensives against rebel-controlled areas in the east of Aleppo in the late summer and fall of 2016. While the Assad regime, with support from Russian air strikes, has been effective in rolling back the offensives

from Sunni rebel groups and laying siege to rebel controlled areas around Aleppo, this caused a humanitarian crisis. As many as a quarter of a million people faced starvation due to the Russian-Syrian encirclement of their neighborhoods.

In response to international condemnation, Russia claimed to have opened "humanitarian corridors" in early August 2016 to allow civilians to leave the besieged city. According to the pro-Assad Syrian state news agency, SANA, "scores of families" left rebel-controlled neighborhoods in eastern Aleppo via the corridors and a number of rebels began turning themselves and their weapons in.⁵⁶ Sources on the ground, however, claimed to have visited the crossings but to have seen no such activity, nor any sign that the corridors had even been opened.⁵⁷

As the Syrian-Russian siege of Aleppo unfolded, on August 1, another Russian helicopter, this time an Mi-8 "Hip," was shot down over the city, killing all five on board. While no group immediately claimed responsibility, video footage soon emerged showing dozens of fighters chanting "Allahu Akbar" around the flaming wreckage.⁵⁸

There was other bad news for Russia as well. Putin's involvement in fighting ISIS (in Palmyra) earned his nation the wrath of the terrorist group. On July 30, 2016, ISIS released a nine-minute video in which a Russian-speaking fighter threatened Putin directly: "Listen O Putin, we will come to you in Russia, we will kill you all in your homes, Allah willing." The Russian-speaking, masked militant also urged Muslims to mobilize for jihad against the nonbelievers and launch attacks on Russian soil.⁵⁹

Thus far, there have, however, only been four small ISIS-inspired attacks in

Russia. This is despite the fact that the Soufan Group, a New York-based intelligence consulting firm that tracks foreign fighters who have joined ISIS, has found that 2,400 Russian citizens have joined the group and represent a “blowback” threat.⁶⁰ The first terrorist attack involved a shooting incident in the city of Derbent in the insurgency-plagued southern Muslim republic of

Dagestan. The second involved the beheading of a Russian child by a Muslim nanny to

protest Putin’s bombing campaign and imitate an ISIS beheading of what it called a “Russian spy” in Syria. The third involved an attack on traffic police in Moscow in August 2016 by two axe- and gun-wielding Chechens who had sworn allegiance to ISIS. The fourth involved an October 23, 2016, attack on police in the town of Nizhny Novgorod by two terrorists pledged to ISIS; both were shot dead.

Meanwhile, the Russian-Syrian alliance’s gains in the northwest around Aleppo remained tenuous. In August 2016, the Sunni rebel alliance led by Nusra Front suicide bombers claimed to have broken a Syrian army siege of the eastern part of the city that had been supported by regular Russian aerial bombardments, effectively turning the tables once again on Assad and his allies. This breakthrough victory was a major boost for the Army of Conquest in Aleppo, and the alliance pledged to keep fighting until they recaptured the entire city. Alliance leaders announced at the time, “We will not rest until we raise the flag of conquest over Aleppo’s citadel.”

In response to these developments, on August 16, Russia began using long-range Tu-22M3 Backfire and Sukhoi-34 Full-back bombers flying from an Iranian base known as Shahid Nojeh, 30 miles north of Hamadan in western Iran. The mission: to carry out what the Russian Defense Ministry described as “group massed strikes on militant positions” in Aleppo, Deir

al-Zour and Idlib.⁶¹ The following day, a second wave of Sukhoi-34 bombers took off from the Iranian base

Iran’s constitution unequivocally bans the establishment of foreign military bases on Iranian soil. Not even the shah had dared to allow Americans to deploy military forces in combat from his country.

and conducted a raid against ISIS in Deir al-Zour. According to the Russian Defense Ministry, “The planes carried the maximum payload of high explosive fragmentation bombs OFAB-500. ... As a result of the strike, two command centers and large field training camps of [ISIS] near Deir el-Zour were destroyed. More than 150 militants, including foreign mercenaries, were killed.”⁶² Russia Today further added, “The core benefit for the Russian Air Force is a drastic reduction in flying time to terrorist targets in Syria.”⁶³

The closer location of the Iranian bases to the Syrian battlefields enabled the Russian strategic bombers, considered too heavy to be accommodated by the Russian airstrips in Syria, to carry larger payloads (including incendiary bombs, whose use in civilian areas is banned) than is possible from distant Russia.⁶⁴ The trip was 1,000 miles shorter than from the airfields in North Ossetia in the Caucasus.

The Russian-Iranian arrangement appeared to be temporary; Iran’s constitution unequivocally bans the establishment

of foreign military bases on Iranian soil.⁶⁵ Not even the shah had dared to allow Americans to deploy military forces in combat from his country. The agreement was fraught with tension; Iranians even alluded to Moscow's occupation of Iranian territory after World War II. The agreement appeared at least officially to fall apart a week after it began. The Iranians claimed on August 22, 2016, that it had been secret and that Moscow's public announcement had been "ungentlemanly."⁶⁶ Russia's Interfax news agency on August 22 quoted Moscow's ambassador to Tehran, Levon Dzhagaryan, as confirming that all of Russia's warplanes have been withdrawn from Iran. He said, however, that he did "not see any reason" why the Russians could not use the Iranian base again in the future.

Meanwhile, Russia and America tried to patch up their differences in regard to the war in Syria. After bloody fighting in the summer of 2016, which exacerbated the worst humanitarian crisis of the twenty-first century, months of U.S.-Russian peacemaking efforts culminated in an ambitious deal initiating a nationwide ceasefire. Under the terms of the deal, all parties would refrain from both air and ground attacks — except for Syrian government attacks on ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly the Nusra Front) — so that humanitarian aid could reach Aleppo and other besieged territories unimpeded. It would also allow the United States and Russia to organize a Joint Implementation Center in the vicinity of Amman, Jordan, from which the two countries could begin a bilateral military campaign against agreed terrorist targets.

But on September 17, 2016, U.S. and Coalition aircraft that were targeting ISIS militants on Al-Tharda Mountain, near Deir ez-Zour in eastern Syria, accidentally

bombed Syrian military personnel who were attacking these very ISIS forces. Coalition spokesmen claimed that the aircraft called off their attacks on what they thought was an "ISIS tank position" once Russian officials notified the Coalition's Combined Air Operations Center that the targets were actually Syrian military. But by then it was too late. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least 90 Syrian soldiers lost their lives in the bombing.⁶⁷ The Russian Defense Ministry wasted no time in condemning the attack: "We consider what happened as a natural result of the persistent refusal of the United States from [sic] the establishment of close cooperation with Russia in the fight against ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra [Jabhat Fateh al-Sham] and other affiliated terrorist groups."⁶⁸

Two days later, on September 19, a UN/Red Crescent aid convoy delivering food relief to a rebel-held area near Aleppo was targeted in an airstrike, destroying 18 vehicles and killing at least 20 people. The UN subsequently suspended all of the much-needed aid deliveries to Syria. The Americans blamed the Russians, but Moscow denied involvement. Their denials were, however, undermined when the tailfin of a Russian bomb was found in the crater of one of the bomb strikes on the convoy, and footage of a Russian drone monitoring the convoy was released.

As Russia continued to indiscriminately bomb Sunni eastern Aleppo, on October 3, the U.S. State Department officially suspended efforts to both implement the ceasefire with Russia and organize a joint military-coordination body. The State Department cited Russia's "failure to abide by international law" as the primary reason for the collapse. The State Department also declared that "Russia and the Syrian

regime have chosen to pursue a military course, inconsistent with the Cessation of Hostilities, as demonstrated by their intensified attacks against civilian areas, targeting of critical infrastructure such as hospitals, and preventing humanitarian aid from reaching civilians in need.”⁶⁹

As the tensions between Moscow and Washington heated up, Putin deployed the entire operational Northern Fleet to the Mediterranean in mid-October 2016. This was, however, more of a saber-rattling propaganda gesture than a projection of real might. The outdated aircraft carrier that formed the core of the seven-ship battle group, the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, was a relic from the Cold War and was unable to serve as a significant platform for deploying Russian aircraft to Syria.

CONCLUSION

These events are still unfolding on shifting sands, but they indicate some of the risks that might have been foreseen from Putin’s bold decision to enter the fray in Syria, such as a rise in tensions with America and such regional allies as Turkey. From the counterterrorism perspective, Putin’s military campaign would certainly seem to have been fraught with risks. His involvement in Syria put his nation squarely in the terrorists’ crosshairs. Most notably, it led to the retaliatory downing of the Russian civilian airliner in Sinai, Russia’s deadliest air disaster. But there were also unforeseen benefits: the growing alliance with Tehran that led to a historic, if seemingly temporary, agreement on the basing of Russian bombers. But despite the risks and setbacks, the consensus among both Russian and Western observers initially seemed to be that Putin’s decision paid off; he had achieved his narrow objectives on the battlefield

in western Syria. *The New York Times* captured the new conventional wisdom in a front-page article on August 6, 2016: “Military Success in Syria Gives Putin Upper Hand in U.S. Proxy War.”

Among other successes, Putin shored up the embattled Assad regime and even helped it go on the offensive in small, rebel-controlled areas in the east, south and north of Aleppo. In the process, he prevented the CIA-backed Sunni rebels from advancing further into southern Latakia and bolstered the Assad regime as it faced the real prospect of losing much of northwestern Syria and retreating to the Alawite coastal homeland. This was Putin’s primary objective and it led to such ancillary successes as the strengthening of the Assad regime’s hand in peace negotiations, the shelving of American-Turkish plans for a “safe zone” north of Aleppo, and a strengthening of ties with Tehran.

After declaring an official end to military operations (no doubt as a sop to Russians who feared a drawn-out Afghanistan-style quagmire) in March 2016, Putin legitimized his continued operations by helping the Syrian army recapture the UNESCO World Heritage site of Palmyra from ISIS. The Russian leader could now push the official Russian narrative that he was involved in the war on ISIS as well as the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, which Russian aircraft had regularly targeted in the northwest. Putin was finally waging counterterrorism, instead of a counterinsurgency campaign such as the one he had carried out in the northwest against non-ISIS Sunni rebels.

Not surprisingly, Iran’s Press TV parroted the Kremlin’s line, regularly touting their Russian allies’ success against what the Iranians called the “Takfiri terrorists” (the strain of Sunni Islamism that encour-

ages war on other Muslims they claim are “non-Muslims”).⁷⁰ Syria’s official news agency, SANA, similarly published a barrage of stories describing Putin’s support in the war on “ISIS-Nusra Wahhabi terrorists,” and Assad supporters thrilled to the images of Russian aerial bombardments of their Sunni enemies.⁷¹

For all the proclamations from the Kremlin that it was a major player in the war on ISIS, however, maps of Russian airstrikes by the Institute for the Study of War clearly showed that the vast majority of its airstrikes were in a corridor in the west stretching from Aleppo in the north to Daraa in the south, far from ISIS’s strongholds in the north and east.⁷² And for all the fact that Moscow’s efforts were focused on this region, the reality was that Moscow’s intensive bombing campaign was not decisive and did not end the rebellion by such non-ISIS Sunni rebel groups as Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) and Jabhat Fateh al Sham (the former Nusra Front). As of this writing, the battle lines in Syria have not shifted dramatically since Putin launched his campaign; the war is still stalemated. To compound matters, Putin’s campaign in Syria, designed to break Russia out of its isolation, has instead further alienated him from the world, due to the high civilian death toll in Aleppo and elsewhere.

It must also be stated that the Assad regime’s extremely limited territorial gains paled in comparison to those of the U.S.-backed Iraqi government and Kurdish forces in neighboring Iraq (the Pentagon announced that ISIS had lost 45 percent of its territory in Iraq by the spring of 2016) and YPG Kurdish forces operating in northern Syria with U.S. support.⁷³ With the Sunni rebels far from defeated and still in control of much of the west,

Russia runs the risk of being dragged into a prolonged fight in Syria that it cannot afford if it wants to decisively beat the so-called “terroristic groupings” in this region. Decisively beating the Sunni rebels would entail Moscow’s becoming involved in exactly the sort of “boots on the ground” quagmire Obama predicted and that the Russian people don’t have the stomach for.

For the time being, however, the Russian public seems to be behind Putin’s predominantly air-based venture in Syria that has resulted in only a handful of Russian deaths. Vladimir Ryzhkov, a prominent Russian opposition politician, summed up the sense of pride many of his countrymen felt in the Russian involvement in Syria: “Russian military officials are clearly showing the Americans that we have the same planes, the same smart bombs. We can carry out the same military campaign as you.”⁷⁴ The head of the International Committee in Russia’s upper house of parliament, Alexei Pushkov, boasted: “I’m certain that the military capabilities displayed by Russia were a shock to the U.S., which apparently believed that only the United States and NATO can wage such a war.”⁷⁵ Polls in Russia at the beginning of the campaign showed that 70 percent of Russians backed Putin’s campaign. One pensioner in Red Square, Natalia Nikolae-vna, summed up the feeling of many of her countrymen: “[President Putin] is doing everything right. He’s raised Russia from its knees.”⁷⁶

Whether Putin’s domestically popular (for now) gamble in Syria proves to have a lasting effect on the ground or is merely ephemeral remains to be seen; the war in the northwest around Aleppo is still in flux. But at least the previously isolated leader can take consolation in the fact that he has made sure his country has a veto over

any future ceasefire or peace deal in Syria. This small victory and his defense of his embattled client have, however, come at enormous cost in regard to Moscow's far more important relations with America and the West. Igor Zevelev, former director of the MacArthur Foundation's Russia office, summed up the damage to Russian-American relations caused, to a considerable extent, by Operation Retribution, "It's not a Cold War...It's a much more dangerous and unpredictable situation."⁷⁷

In October 2016, Putin discussed in the newspaper *Pravda* the rapid deterioration of Russia's relations with America stemming from the Syrian intervention: "We have never wanted that to happen. On the contrary, we wanted to have friendly relations with such a great country as the

United States, the leading economy of the world."⁷⁸ As with his widely condemned annexation of the Crimea and incursion into the Donetsk region of Ukraine, it would seem that the wily leader from St. Petersburg, who came to power promising to make Russia great again, did not fully consider the impact his application of brute force in Syria would have on his vitally important relations with the West. Thus far, however, it would seem that his widely condemned gambit in the deserts of the Mideast — which has incurred the wrath of critics ranging from the United Nations to the White House to the leaders of the Arab Gulf states to ISIS — has, for all its narrow, tactical successes on the ground, been a failure in the wider strategic sense.

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