

WHAT WERE THE MAIN OBJECTIVES OF RUSSIA INTERVENTION IN SYRIA AND TO WHAT EXTENT HAS THE CAMPAIGN BEEN SUCCESSFUL

Alexandros P. Kassidiaris

(Security Analyst, Postgraduate from the Department
of War Studies, King's College London, UK)

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Introduction

In September 2015, Moscow announced the upcoming campaign in Syria taking a wide part of the public by surprise. Despite the progressive support since 2011 and the catalytic contribution of Russian advisors on June 2013 regarding the voluntary destruction of Syrian stockpile of chemical weapons –a decision that undoubtedly saved Assad’s regime literally in the last minute¹- no one could predict a straight Russian military intervention in Syria, especially in a moment that the record low oil prices and the EU sanctions have left the country’s economy bleeding.

In this analysis the dynamics that brought Russia in the center of Syrian conflict and eventually indicated Moscow as a key player in the Middle East theatre are to be thoroughly examined, followed by an extensive analysis on the outcomes of this strategic engagement. The degree of success of the respective objectives will be assessed with regards to the period of Russian military operations in Syria as officially defined by Kremlin and the latest developments on the current geopolitical status quo of the region.

¹ Boyer, 2013.

The strategic and geopolitical significance of Syria

Despite the surrounding doubtful voices,² the Syrian-based naval facility of Tartus is an area of strategic importance to Russia. The 1971 agreement upon the port rights between Soviet Union and Hafez al-Assad government bound the century-old ties³ between Moscow and Damascus, consolidating the perspectives for considerable military and commercial cooperation in the long-term. Being the only Russian Navy base with access to the warm waters of Mediterranean Tartus constitutes an essential sign of Russian presence in the Middle East with the deriving semiological value. Simultaneously the NATO long-standing undisputed position of strength in eastern Mediterranean with the 6th Fleet operating across the seas of Europe and Africa and the strategic strongholds of Souda Base in Crete and Incirlik Base at Adana, seriously interrupted the regional balance of power from a Russian perspective. Therefore Kremlin has been seeking to stabilize a de facto military presence in the wider Mediterranean and Middle East region.

In the aftermath of the operations in Syria the significant enhancement of Russia's strategic and operational capabilities in Middle East should be admitted. Moscow has managed to re-establish its powerful presence, not only by reactivating and upgrading the former ill-functioning Tartus port facility, but also by building from nothing and establishing the valuable Khmeimim airbase in Latakia - two literally vital access points to the Middle East theatre of operations.⁴

The multidimensional impact of keeping Assad on power

Besides the fact that a potential prevalence of rebel forces would not leave any space for the establishment of Russian infrastructure as described above, the significance of Syrian government's survival can also be interpreted in additional ways. President Putin has traditionally been standing against the so-called manipulated and foreign-backed popular uprisings that aim to topple legitimate, albeit

² Gardner, 2012.

³ Kreutz, 2007. Russian-Syrian diplomatic ties date back to the Ottoman era, considering the significant Russian presence in Lattakia, Aleppo (1830) and Damascus (1890).

⁴ Unver, 2016.

repressive, regimes or governments. Kremlin made clear in South Ossetia and Ukraine its determination to oppose such tactics. However these Russian initiatives had been strictly limited in the post-Soviet space, in countries where Moscow faced a territorial conflict of interest.

In the Middle East context, Kremlin conceptualized from the very first moment the ‘Arab Spring’ movements as a part of the wider West-backed ‘Colour Revolutions’ strategy.⁵ The intervention in Syria can be read as an overt Russian effort to openly question the Western and US ability of controlling the regime-change procedure in MENA region and was presented as a preventive measure against an *a la Libya* catastrophe. Therefore the retention of Assad’s rule has been a multifaceted message to the West, stressing that any further unilateral unconsidered support to rebel groups or ill-planned strategies capable of turning a powerful country to a *failed state*, would not go unchallenged.

President Putin’s dual objective

The non-ending decline in world oil prices, alongside the long-lasting sanctions after Crimea annexation have literally demolished two of the pylons of Russian economy –gas industry and the imports-exports sector- leading to a dramatic Ruble depreciation.⁶ An increasing sense of grievance has been dominating the country, while the external image of Russia was significantly downgraded. Kremlin officials aimed to rebuild the trust and upgrade the morale of their own citizens, while restoring Moscow’s international profile. The intervention in Syria seemed as a decisive step capable of achieving both objectives simultaneously.

The facts during the intervention and the developments following the official withdrawal of Russian Forces indicate that the respective purposes have been effectively accomplished. Russia carried out a successful force-projection campaign using in many cases weaponry seemingly undue for the specific targets or missions - like the Kalibr missile system deployed to engage Syrian-based targets with ballistic

⁵ Nikitina, 2014.

⁶ Dreger et al., 2016.

missiles from the Caspian Sea.⁷ Besides the opportunity for Russian Forces to conduct a productive ‘exercise’ in the utter realistic framework, the unprecedented capability of eliminating enemies from thousands of miles away has been well visualized to all directions. Now regarding Russian public, the campaign has also brought satisfying results. A considerable portion of Russian citizens supported the intervention putting aside, at least temporarily, the economic problems of the country, a fact that eventually restored President Putin’s popularity.⁸

Containing Islamic terrorism in domestic and international level

Islamic terrorism has been a considerable thorn for Russian government and as history has shown the expansion of Islamic terrorist groups and insurgents in neighboring areas could eventually trigger emerging threats on Russian borders or even within Russian federation. The impact of the Afghanistan insurgency on the wider area of Northern Caucasus and Central Asia is indicative of such claims,⁹ while a considerable number of Islamic State fighters operating in Syria are originated from Russian territory.¹⁰ It is believed that Moscow on purpose let those individuals and groups flee the country and seek recruitment in Syria, aiming at a double success during the intervention. On the one hand hitting Islamic terrorism in the very heart of its strongholds and trapping in Syria a remarkable number of foreign fighters; in fact Kremlin brought a domestic problem to another country where terrorist presence would be much more centralized and easily targeted, while any collateral damages would have minimal political cost. On the other hand strategic victories over Islamic State, just a few hundred miles away from its self-proclaimed capital –like the reconquest of Palmyra¹¹– are more likely to ruin the morale of those Russian-based radical Muslims flirting with terrorism and minimize the threat in domestic level.

⁷ Sychov, 2015.

⁸ Jacobsen, 2016.

⁹ Hill, 2003.

¹⁰ Lister, 2014.

¹¹ Daren & Calderwood, 2016.

Russian achievements in limiting IS capabilities to a great degree, enhanced its credibility as a security guarantor in the fight against terrorism. This success is even more obvious, when comparing the flimsy results of the enduring Western-led engagement¹² to the Russian campaign that just in a few months caused innumerable casualties to the terrorists and forced such groups and militias to fold back, retreat or totally dissolve themselves.

Additional Parameters and Conclusions

All the previous assumptions could lead to a certain conclusion in the overall context of Russian intervention. In such a fragile and resource rich region, like the Middle East, Kremlin claimed the position of the key regulator and not that of a simple ally to the Assad regime.¹³ Under those circumstances and with respect to the developments thus far, the intervention in Syria could be described as an unambiguous Russian military and diplomatic success. Moscow became a de facto negotiator on the Syrian crisis and managed to globally promote the image of peace broker in the region.

The Su-24 shoot-down in the alleged Turkish FIR and the ensuing grave consequences for Ankara¹⁴ proved that regional powers should comply with Moscow policy otherwise they would end up losing out the most. President Nentanahyu holds bilateral meetings in order to talk about the Syrian crisis and officially hails President Putin's efforts for the elimination of anti-Semitism in Russian Federation. Commercial agreements take place among Moscow and the prosperous and oil-rich Sunni Gulf States, while military and diplomatic ties with Shiite Tehran hold well. The first deployment of Russian S-300 in Iran is a case of special interest, showing that Kremlin managed to achieve a *modus vivendi* with two openly declared enemies (Iran and Israel).

¹² Nissenbaum, 2015.

¹³ Trenin, 2015.

¹⁴ Girit, 2016. The freezing of bilateral relations after the incident is estimated to cause Turkish economy a \$7 billion loss.

Given the ongoing nature of the conflict and the ever-changing character of our world it is hardly to say if these short-term tactical and political Russian apparent successes could turn into a long-term strategic victory. However one could certainly say that President Putin by not chasing a zero-sum game in the middle of Syrian crisis led Russia to keep the balance among all major regional players, overcoming smartly political rigidities and biases, shaping eventually a lucrative context for future decisions and moves.

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