



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The Russians Are Leaving Syria. Why the Surprise?

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The partial departure of Russian forces from Syria reflects Vladimir Putin's achievement of several well-defined goals, including the stabilization of Bashar al-Assad and the bolstering of Russia's global diplomatic position. The resultant balance of power in Syria gives Israel time and space with which to bolster its defenses.

Why are Russian military forces leaving Syria? And what does the withdrawal tell us about why they came? Vladimir Putin's snap decision to withdraw a significant proportion of Russian forces from Syria (while leaving "boots on the ground" at the naval base in Tartus and the air base in Hmeimim in northwest Syria) puzzled many Western observers, reflecting their misunderstanding of why those forces were deployed in the first place.

The intervention in Syria was not quite the triumphant hegemonic thrust it was made out to be (not least by Russia's own propaganda machine, by far the best developed among Putin's foreign policy instruments). The intervention, which evolved in secret over the summer of 2015, was driven by Russian foreboding over what seemed at the time to be the immediate risk of the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's army. The worn and haggard army of the regime appeared about to melt away, following Iraq's example, under the steady pressure of the Islamic State's military success, particularly at Palmyra. From Moscow's perspective, allowing the armed forces of a well-established Russian client to crumble—as did the hapless US-trained forces in Mosul when it fell—would have been unbearable. Putin was also adamant that the mistake of abandoning Qaddafi would not be allowed to repeat itself.

By the late winter of 2016, everything had been changed beyond recognition from the Russian point of view. The Syrian regime was no longer in immediate danger, creating a new scenario that called for a reassessment and refinement of policy.

As Israel bitterly learned in Lebanon, the US in Vietnam, and the Soviets in Afghanistan (the last still a scar and a living memory for the Russian elite), the difficult art of intervention requires a keen sense of how to avoid doing too much. Unless carefully managed and calibrated, what begins as an excursion can turn into a long and bloody mess. The massive use of force in a local civil war can easily turn friends and clients into happy but passive onlookers, while their enemies become heroes defending the nation against an invader.

A well-planned exit strategy, closely linked to well-defined and achievable goals, is thus a necessity. For the Russians, their intervention in Syria has already achieved two or even three such goals.

Above all, Assad's slide towards oblivion—which the Russians saw as the beginning of the region's descent into further murderous chaos—has been not only halted but reversed. The regime made significant gains and consolidated its contiguous control over the western parts of the country ("la Syrie utile", as the French once called it). The diplomatic work now being done in Geneva clearly reflects these new dynamics. The Russians boldly assert that Assad will now remain in power, notwithstanding some concessions they will expect on his part to mollify the opposition.

True, there is no prospect at present for the full re-conquest of eastern Syria; and the Russian claim that they came to help destroy Islamic State forces now rings hollow. But there was little hope for any of that to begin with. There is, in fact, reason to suspect that the Assad regime never intended to regain control of the areas now under IS control. After all, the very conspicuous nature of IS horrors, and their impact on the public mind in both Syria and in the West, make Assad's own terrible but less deliberately spectacular crimes seem almost tolerable by comparison.

Thus, the partition of Syria was more or less settled before the Russian intervention. Neither the Russians' arrival nor their (partial) departure changed this reality once the survival of the "regime state" had been secured.

Another remarkable achievement for Putin's policy is the new note of respect with which Russia is now being treated by US diplomacy. In the National Security Strategy document of the Obama Administration for 2015, Russian aggression—specifically in Ukraine—was singled out as a threat to America's

vision of an international order. Fast forward to early 2016, when Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reemerged as Secretary of State John Kerry's interlocutor and partner in pushing forward an ambitious agenda in Syria, acting (relatively) responsibly and in a manner conducive to the continuation, albeit not yet the success, of the Geneva process.

This transformative moment might have implications well beyond the Syrian issue. America is currently experiencing an unexpectedly turbulent political cycle, in which the Democrats cannot afford a rise in international tensions and the leading Republican contender is barely able to contain his admiration for Putin. Thus Russia might have an opportunity to mend fences and erode the sanctions imposed in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Such a reduction in tensions, even if it effectively means the government in Kiev would be left to its own devices, would be welcomed by key players in the EU, even if some of the Eastern European members may give vent to anger and frustration.

A much less certain "deliverable," and one that the Saudis vehemently deny, has to do with Russia's urgent need to bring oil prices up again. It is possible that the Syrian power play was leveraged by Moscow to persuade the Gulf monarchies to decrease production and stop flooding the world with cheap oil. It is safe to bet that no such crude Russian-Saudi collusion ("Syria for \$80 a barrel") will ever come to light. It is much more likely that the Russian venture was designed, among other purposes, to prove to the Saudis that Putin's Russia cannot be ignored.

What are the lessons and implications of these turns of events for Israel? To begin with, they reaffirm the insight that drove Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to seek operational understandings with the Russian leadership: namely, that the interest shared by Russia and Iran in Assad's survival does not necessarily extend to other Iranian ambitions. This "crack of daylight" can be used to secure vital Israeli interests in the context of the so-called "war between the wars."

Looking towards the (extremely uncertain) future, this also means that a delicate balance of power will probably continue to prevail in what was once Syria. Iran and Hezbollah will continue to have their hands full helping their fragile ally survive. This gives Israeli planners time and space to strengthen Israel's defenses, improve plans, and take action to deny dangerous capabilities. It is incumbent upon the IDF, the defense establishment, and the Israeli cabinet to make good use of these opportunities.

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