



Tip of the Iceberg: Russian Use of Power in Syria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Russians are determined to reacquire some of the status once enjoyed by the Soviet Union of yore. They believe Western carelessness is to blame for the rise of Islamic State, and are using the Syrian theater to demonstrate their strategic capability.

Russia's status in the Middle East has changed remarkably in recent years. Some go so far as to argue, with some justification, that it has become the most powerful superpower in the region, or at least within the context of the Syrian conflict. The main reason for this has been Russian President Vladimir Putin's ability to invest significant resources in the region, coupled with his willingness to take significant risk.

The extent of Russia's involvement in the region has been vast. It has encompassed active warfare meant to stabilize the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad; participation in efforts to destroy Islamic State (IS); the establishment of a Russian air base in northern Syria and the deployment of ground forces to protect it (beginning in Autumn 2015); the operation of the Russian air force from a base in Iran (for few days in August 2016); a rift and subsequent reconciliation with Turkey; the supply of weapons to Iran; and, most recently, the signing of a (doomed) deal with US Secretary of State John Kerry regarding the future of Syria wherein Russia, unlike the US, does not abandon its positions.

To understand why Russia is making such an extraordinary effort in the region, one must look at what happens outside the Middle East in parallel with what happens inside it. Consider, for example, the war against Georgia

in 2008, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the threat to Ukraine's territorial integrity, and the warnings to the Baltic states. All of these were the decisions of a single man, so they have a common foundation.

In all these cases, it appears that Russia – as embodied by president Putin – is motivated by its unwillingness to accept as a *fait accompli* the marginal position into which it was pushed by the West following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russians are determined to recover at least some of the status enjoyed by the Soviet Union of yore. This desire is given expression on both symbolic and practical levels.

On the symbolic front, Russia makes a point of emphasizing the role the Soviet Union played in the Second World War, its contribution to the Allied victory, and the number of people it sacrificed. On the practical front, Russia is actively trying to maintain its influence in its own region and around the world.

This is why Russia reacted so aggressively when it felt that NATO was trying to deploy in additional nearby countries. Moscow is not prepared to agree to containment and exclusion efforts against it, which it believes are being led by the US. Russia sees NATO's and the EU's steps as a threat, and does not accept the explanation that they are meant only as protective measures. Russia believes they are part of an American attempt to isolate and weaken it.

Thus, a significant proportion of Russia's efforts are being directed against the US, which it perceives as its main rival – and at the same time a superpower at a point of historic weakness. That weakness is due primarily to the character of the current US administration, which fears any conflict that could ultimately might deteriorates to a military one.

This perception explains why Russia is not compromising on anything. It is not bending on the annexation of Crimea, or on continued aid to eastern Ukraine. Nor is it wavering on Assad's status in Damascus. The Russians have been consistently tough in talks on all these topics, and have shown themselves determined in their use of military force. So far, their approach has been successful.

With its national motive in mind and its perception of the US in the background, it is easier to understand Russia's activities in the Middle East, a region close to home. Russia is still feeling the effects of the trauma of the Libyan crisis. In March 2011, Russia agreed to get on board with the UN Security Council resolution, which had been carefully worded so as to prevent an all-out war on late Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi. regime s'

Ultimately, Russia found itself surprised by Western powers, which – under the umbrella of the resolution – took out the regime in which Russia, and the Soviet Union before it, had invested considerable funds and political energy.

The operation led to chaos in the country that has yet to settle. Libya became the main weapons source for major terrorist organizations, and has attracted refugees from all over Africa on their way to Europe.

The wildly disordered situation in Libya is an ongoing illustration to the Russians (and to others) of why a repeat scenario must be prevented. This is why, when unrest erupted in Syria, Russia refused any resolution that could have provided an opening for action against the Syrian regime.

Events in Egypt also influenced Russia's decision-making. As a result of the Arab Spring and the ousting of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, the US took on the image of an ally that is ready to abandon its long-time friends. For the Russians, an opportunity thus presented itself to make themselves appear completely different from the US in this respect – that is to say, loyal rather than traitorous.

These two sets of events, in Libya and in Egypt, shaped Moscow's immediate reaction to the unrest in Syria. Russia quickly and unequivocally stood by Assad.

Another important issue influencing Russian policies in the region is concern over the spread of radical Sunni Islam in the direction of Russia, which has a large Sunni population. The rise of IS and its emissaries around the world – along with the large number of IS volunteers who have come to join the organization from Russia, and the horrific terrorist attacks Russia has suffered in the past – justifies Russia's fears and strengthens its claims.

The Russians have repeatedly claimed that the American destruction of Saddam Hussein regime, and the strengthening of Syria's Sunni opposition by US allies and with US encouragement, is responsible for the rise of IS. The world, Russia argues, is paying the price of Western carelessness. Russia claims that it is trying to prevent much more problematic situation that will be the immediate consequence of the fall of Assad.

Russian intervention in Syria developed in three stages. The first was a product of the Syrian military's complete reliance on Russian weapons. Russia continued to supply the Syrian army's needs at full speed, enabling it by expanding its hold on the Tartus port.

At first, the arms delivered were mostly ammunition, but they later included advanced weapons systems that the regime did not need for the fighting. The sale of these weapons indicates that profit may be an important consideration here. (Some of these advanced systems were ultimately transferred to Hezbollah, a move the Russians did nothing to stop.)

The second stage of Russia's intervention was less clear. At a certain point, the involvement of Russian intelligence advisers and officials in the fighting grew significantly. It is difficult to determine exactly how many Russian officials there were and how deeply involved they were, but it is clear that their participation went beyond weapons provision. It appears that Russia's sophisticated intelligence efforts tipped the scales and stopped the deterioration of Assad's army on the battlefield.

The third stage, which still prevails, began only after the Iranian nuclear deal was signed. It includes the deployment of advanced planes, which have taken on a visible, direct and very important role in the warfare. This stage also includes ground forces to secure areas such as the airport and the naval port.

The Russians are operating at full force, at times without any humanitarian consideration, in full cooperation with Iran and Hezbollah in order to save the Alawite regime. As a secondary priority, they are seeking to harm IS and other radical organizations.

Russia took full advantage of the opportunity in its path. It turned the Syrian battlefield into a testing ground for its new weapons systems, and, more significantly, into an arena for the display of its own strategic capabilities – which is much more than what is required to deal with the situation on the ground.

For example, Russia fired cruise missiles from ships in the Caspian Sea when it had planes stationed 150 kilometers (about 90 miles) away from its targets. Russia used strategic bombers and deployed the S-400 air defense system, despite the lack of any airborne threat to Russia's forces in Syria. Russia took these excessive measure to demonstrate its capability as a superpower to the regional powers, and – perhaps even more so – to decision-makers in Europe and the US.

Its successes have not only been military. The Russian leadership faced a difficult test with Turkey, but managed to get through it in a manner than demonstrated an ability to deal with crises.

Prior to the Russian intervention in Syria, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had worked against Assad, whom he loathes. Russia's intervention in Assad's favor meant that Russian troops were deployed south of Turkey. These troops operated directly along the Turkish border, with Russian planes flying overhead in what Erdoğan took as a deliberate display of Russian disrespect for Turkey. In response, in November 2015, the Turks prepared an ambush and shot down a Russian plane they claimed had invaded Turkish airspace.

This was a test for Putin, and he reacted forcefully. Trade with Turkey (excluding gas) was immediately halted, and Russia began a personal campaign against Erdoğan and his family. Even more significantly, Russia made the strategic move of "courting" the Kurds in northern Syria – even though these Kurds, who desire regional autonomy, are Assad's enemies. This was the most powerful card Russia could play against Turkey, which fears any sign of Kurdish sovereignty along the Turkish-Syrian border.

The Syrian Kurds have a strong relationship with the armed Kurdish group in Turkey, the PKK, which Turkey considers a terrorist organization and which its army is fighting. Erdoğan understood the strategic risk involved in the steps taken by the Russians, and decided to entirely change the relationship with Russia. He took the opportunity after the failed coup in Turkey in July to apologize to the Russians for downing the plane, and conceded his demand for Assad's immediate ouster. Putin came out on top in this struggle between two leaders, both of whom are very powerful at home.

Russia did not get involved in saving the Alawite regime for the same reasons Iran did, but the two countries have found themselves fighting on the same side. Both want to harm the US and minimize its influence in the region. The Iranians appear to be struggling to keep up the relationship with Russia, which accelerated after the signing of the nuclear deal.

Leadership meetings have taken place, and significant cooperation agreements have been signed in the fields of energy (including the sale of nuclear power plants to Iran) and weapons supply. But Iran still remembers the occupation of parts of its territory by Russia during World War II, and is very sensitive to the involvement of foreign countries. When it became public, about a month ago, that the Russian air force was using a base in Iran, Iran quickly nipped that in the bud.

In addition to recasting its relationship with Iran, Russia is also trying to establish a different relationship with the Sunni Arab states. There have been

more talks of late regarding Russian arms sales to Egypt and the construction of nuclear reactors in Jordan. Relations with Saudi Arabia are more complicated, due primarily to Russian outrage over the Saudis' flooding of the oil market. There is, however, a possibility of growing Saudi investment in Russia and maybe even Russian arms sales to Saudi Arabia. (Russian efforts on that front have been fruitless to date because in some Sunni states, there is no faith to be had in Moscow's intentions.)

It is interesting to speculate at what point Russia's ambitions will be curtailed by its limited resources. While Russia is a large country, its population is shrinking and its economy is, according to all theoretical calculations, on the verge of collapse. It has nevertheless made a huge investment in modernizing its army and in expensive adventures abroad.

How long can this go on? There is no good answer to this question. The world will continue to be surprised every time Russia takes another step that expands the deployment and operations of its forces.

As for Israel, it has some major disagreements with Russia, especially after the sale of sophisticated weapons to Iran and Syria and the transfer of many weapons systems to Hezbollah. On the other hand, Russia's willingness to tolerate Israeli Air Force operations over Syria reflects a certain understanding of Israel's position. In a way the tacit permission it grants to Israeli operations to stop the arms transfers legitimizes those operations.

Overall, in its relationship with Russia, Israel is realistic. It tries to understand what can be achieved (for example, a lengthy delay in supplying Iran with the S-300 missile system) and what cannot be achieved (for example, the outright cancelation of the sale of the S-300 missile system).

Israel understands that it cannot stop cooperation between Iran, Hezbollah and Syria in the war against the rebels. Israel has been able, however, to establish a conflict-prevention mechanism to prevent any incidents that could occur if Israel and Russia were to operate in the same area without reliable communication.

This mechanism is not an alliance, nor even a coordination agreement. It is a technical arrangement with the goal of preventing incidents. It is limited to the narrow field of preventing error in an area where both sides are active, each for its own purposes. The diplomatic significance of the conflict-prevention mechanism should not be overstated. Nor should Israel rely on the hope that the Russians will limit Hezbollah's and Iran's operations against Israel or do anything to mitigate them.

It is up to Israel to continue to live with Russian troops in its neighborhood, while making its interests clear. It will need on occasion to use force to safeguard those interests, but should do so without engaging in a head-on collision with Russia. Israel must maintain dialogue with Russia at all levels.

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