



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Russia's Unlikely Withdrawal from Syria

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Moscow's intervention in the Syrian civil war boosted the reputation of the Russian military, afforded it valuable training, and enhanced Moscow's political clout in both the conflict zone itself and the Middle East more generally. With that said, Syria threatens to become a quagmire for Russia, and Moscow is looking for an exit. This will be difficult to pull off as Russia faces considerable geopolitical constraints.

Following the recent successes of the Russian military forces in Syria, there are renewed indications that Moscow is seeking some kind of exit strategy. Already in 2016 there were reports that the Kremlin was planning on withdrawing its forces from Syria, but Russian leaders are now openly hinting at closing off their combat operations there.

One of the latest signs that the Kremlin is exploring possible exit strategies came during a recent bilateral meeting between Russian and Israeli officials. On October 10, major Russian media outlets announced that the future of the Russian involvement in Syria had been discussed at a Tel Aviv meeting during which Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu told his Israeli counterpart, Avigdor Lieberman, that the Russian operation in Syria was nearing its completion.

In another indication of Moscow's intentions, the Russian presidential press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, recently noted Russian military successes in Syria and described them as "the beginning of the end" of the war in Syria.

These statements may in fact be a direct result of those Russian successes, which include the liberation of Deir ez-Zor and nearby villages as well as the bigger victory earlier this year when Damascus restored its authority over Aleppo.

Indeed, since the beginning of its intervention, Moscow has largely succeeded at stabilizing the Syrian battlefield by providing loyalist forces with concrete military support, thereby restoring their military advantage. Furthermore, Moscow's entry into the conflict not only secured the existing Russian military infrastructure on the Mediterranean, but also allowed for its expansion. No less important, Russia's military successes in the Syrian theater have increased its geopolitical weight, making Moscow a major player in the conflict. Also, Russia's participation in the war has narrowed the opportunity for jihadists in Syria and Iraq to increase their own operations across most of the post-Soviet space and in Russia itself.

In addition to Moscow's having achieved several of its aims, there are also strategic reasons for Russia to leave the Syrian battlefield. For example, the Kremlin's relations with important Syrian rebel backers such as Turkey and the Gulf Cooperation Council were shaken by the intervention. From the Russian point of view, reestablishing those relationships would be a wise foreign policy move for the sake of the country's economy. Relations with Turkey are developing fast, and many believe this might come at the cost of Russia's positions in Syria.

Beyond that, there is also a purely psychological reason for the Russian desire to withdraw: support for the Assad regime has cost Russian military casualties whose numbers have steadily risen over the past several months.

Related to that issue is the Russian fear of being stuck in Syria for a long period, which would increase the likelihood of more casualties. Russians are still haunted by the Soviet misfortune in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Many believe the time is ripe for withdrawal from Syria, as Moscow has succeeded militarily on many fronts.

But there are serious constraints that will impair Russia's ability to successfully extricate itself from the Syrian conflict. First, Moscow needs a negotiated political resolution to the conflict that leaves it strong enough to safeguard its military and political influence. This is unlikely at the moment, as such a process would require the participation of rebel forces and their allies, such as Turkey. Secondly, Russia is afraid that its major ally, Iran, might seize the strategic opportunity and increase its clout in Syria after a Russian pull-out.

Beyond that, there is also a real possibility that a Russian withdrawal would look very much like what happened in 2016 when President Vladimir Putin ordered the immediate withdrawal of the bulk of his forces from Syria after five and one-half months of airstrikes. However, it should be remembered that at that time, the withdrawal was used by the Russians as an opportunity to

regroup their forces in Syria as they continued their operations alongside Syrian loyalists and Iranian allies.

Looking at the potential withdrawal from Syria from a broader perspective, Moscow entered the war with another strategic objective: to gain momentum on the Syrian battlefield that would in turn encourage the West to become more amenable to Russian interests in other conflicts.

One of those conflicts is Ukraine. The Kremlin's intentions appear clear: political leverage in Syria would influence the West's negotiating position in Ukraine, which remains the most crucial theater for Russia in the Eurasian landmass. So far, the West has successfully blocked these Russian initiatives, and its resolve to continue doing so is borne out by recently ramped-up pressure on Russia. The US introduced new sanctions in August, while various reports indicate that the EU will likely extend its own measures against the Kremlin and Russian state companies.

Although this strategy has not worked so far, Moscow still has hopes for it. This strategic imperative makes the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Syrian conflict unlikely for the moment. Without its Syrian presence, the Kremlin risks losing a bargaining tool and with it a chance of restoring its diminished influence in Ukraine.

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