Disrupting the Chessboard
Perspectives on the Russian Intervention in Syria

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Editor

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Oct. 20: Vladimir Putin and Bashar Assad arrive for their secret meeting in the Kremlin.
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Oct. 7: A Russian navy ship launches a cruise missile in the Caspian Sea.
Introduction: 
The Russian Intervention in Syria

Payam Mohseni

In late September 2015 at the request of the Syrian government, dozens of advanced Russian warplanes entered Syrian airspace and began conducting intensive airstrikes against enemy targets. With the support of the Russian Air Force, the Syrian government also launched an offensive ground campaign in conjunction with Hezbollah and Iranian forces to recapture key territories in Hama, Idlib, and Latakia provinces and has more recently set its objectives on regaining Aleppo. Moreover, Iran, Iraq, Russia, and Syria established a joint intelligence center in Baghdad to coordinate military and strategic cooperation across the multiple battlefronts in Syria and Iraq. The Iraqi Prime Minister has further expressed interest in having the Russians extend their aerial bombardment to Iraq as well.

These striking developments were met with both surprise and condemnation by the United States and its allies. The European Union called for an immediate cessation of Russian airstrikes, with EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini calling the Russian intervention a “game changer” in the conflict. Likewise, President Barack Obama, while insisting upon Bashar al-Assad’s removal for any future political settlement, claimed Russia was heading for a “quagmire” in Syria.
Various narratives explaining Russia’s recent decision have emerged which portray Russia alternatively as attempting to re-establish its role as a world empire or as a power-balancer protecting its interests in the Middle East. This publication aims to present different scholarly perspectives and viewpoints on Russian objectives in Syria and the implications it holds for world politics. It does so by gathering the opinions of several experts with different backgrounds and analytic viewpoints from across the world.

**Subject of Analysis**

Russia’s recent decision to militarily intervene in Syria is a very significant development in the history of the conflict and holds multiple ramifications for international and regional politics. To analyze these potential implications, we asked seven experts from across the world to provide commentaries on the subject. Our contributors are located in Russia, Iran, the Arab world, the EU, and the US. As such, this report provides a unique snapshot of different perspectives that exist on the topic and attempts to bring the views into a dialogue with one another to attain greater insights on the matter.

Specifically, we asked our contributors to respond to the following two questions:

1. *What are Russian objectives for intervening in Syria?*
   
   and

2. *What are the implications of this decision for the Syrian conflict, as well as regional and international politics more broadly?*
The answers we received were of course diverse and reflected different positions on the factors driving the Syrian conflict.

Themes

There were a few major themes which emerged in these contributions. The first concerns the motives behind the Russian intervention in Syria through the lens of global power politics and balance of power. Our authors were divided on whether the decision was based on Russian ambitions to assert its power in the Middle East and on the world stage as a global power, or whether Russia was reacting to perceived threats to its own national security and attempting to balance its interests in the region on the basis of legitimate security concerns. The reasons for these positions are discussed at length in the articles that follow.

Irrespective of the assessment, however, it is important to also take into consideration that Russia faces many structural and demographic challenges which has led some scholars, such as Joseph Nye, to regard the country as a “declining power” in the long term. This acute sense of foreboding decline may very well affect Russian decision making. If Russian actions in Syria are, as Irina Zvyagelskaya and Kayhan Barzegar argue, mainly out of national security motivations, then its concerns regarding decline only compound its sense of security threats. And, it may increase the degree of risk Russia is willing to undertake in its operations in countries such as Ukraine or Syria. Accordingly, how this affects differing viewpoints on Russia’s commitment in Syria thus remains an open question. Is this, as Bassam Haddad points out, a “Russian moment,” or what Christopher Sage and
Michael Davis see as resurgent Russian imperial ambitions? Can these viewpoints be reconciled with the narrative of Russian decline? And if so, how should this affect the international community’s engagement with Russia over Syria?

The second major theme our authors touched upon revolves around the implications of the intervention on the outcome of the conflict. Would the intervention lead to an escalation or to reconciliation? Our contributors were again divided on whether Russia’s decision would lead to a possibility of resolving the Syrian conflict or whether it would only exacerbate the conflict and further violent escalation. There are, of course, nuances in these arguments which can be found in each author’s assessments and that take into consideration the geopolitics of the Syrian conflict regionally and internationally. It is still to be seen, however, whether the Syrian conflict has truly reached the point of no return or whether the conflict can be diplomatically resolved. As the grinding four year violence has demonstrated, it is quite possible that the situation is so critical that it is impossible to be diplomatically resolved. If this is true and there is not enough political will to reach a resolution, is there an increased possibility of escalation between the United States and Russia? Or would the international community grudgingly accept or be forced to live with a “quasi-victory” imposed on Syria by Russia and Iran with a simmering low-level conflict that continues to stretch into the future? For now, the world will have to wait and see how these multiple dimensions evolve.
Iran

In our previous publication on *Iran and the Arab World after the Nuclear Deal*, most of our analysts expected an escalation of conflict on the part of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies in order to weaken Iran’s hand following the nuclear agreement before entering into negotiations over other regional issues. The unexpected Russian intervention, however, has in many ways blocked such a scenario from taking place—or at least will make the costs of escalation higher. Not only has Russia disrupted the chessboard of power rivalry within the Syrian landscape, but it has also strengthened and consolidated the Iranian-Syrian position and conserved the status quo of the conflict to Iran’s benefit.

Given the worries that exist in the United States about the implications of the nuclear deal on Iranian regional power and ambitions, the Russian intervention in many ways may exacerbate these concerns. Qassem Suleimani’s trip to Moscow to presumably discuss with Russia its involvement in Syria shortly after the diplomatic nuclear agreement reflected Iran’s heavy commitment to its regional strategy and posture. If the Syrian conflict is not resolved peacefully, the Russian intervention could consolidate Iran’s position within the Russian orbit and axis of power, hence preventing significant outreach by Iranian President Rouhani to the West or the potential of Iran being weaned away from Russia and moving closer politically to America and its allies in the European Union. While Kayhan Barzegar notes the strong cooperation between Iran and Russia, he argues that this is not, at the moment, a strategic alignment but rather a tactical one in which security and political objectives overlap. However, the continuation and escalation of the Syrian conflict could potentially further entrench the two
countries into a greater strategic partnership. In this sense, Jamal Wakim’s analysis of a larger geopolitical realignment would be a more realist assessment of Iran’s position on the global geopolitical landscape in the foreseeable future.

An additional viewpoint which should be taken into consideration thus regards Russian objectives—in coordination with the Iranian leadership—to consolidate the ties between the two countries and impede Iranian factions which wish to cooperate more closely with the United States. In other words, Russian security concerns regarding terrorism in Syria or bolstering the Assad regime are not the only driving force behind its actions, but it is also Putin’s wish to foster a Russian-Iranian partnership as a bulwark against American influence in the region and an opportunity to utilize the Iranian axis as a gateway for Russia’s entrance into the Middle East. In this sense, the recent developments may be seen as involving a strategic and political coordination, above all else, between Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Vladimir Putin via Qassem Suleimani. Even if Khamenei may not fully oppose furthering Iranian working relations with the United States as the recent nuclear negotiations may foreshadow, he does not wish to see President Hasan Rouhani move Iran closer the pro-US camp. This issue thus also serves as an area of overlapping interest between Khamenei and Putin as Russian moves in Syria could serve to undermine Rouhani’s outreach to the West. For Russia, the threat of losing Syria—an indispensable partner in the Iranian “axis of resistance”—and potentially the larger pro-Iran axis may have been too great a threat in the face of which to remain quiescent. Likewise, for Iran, the loss of Syria would be a major blow to the hardliners and would empower the moderates in changing Iranian foreign policy and reaching out to the United States. Russia and Iran
are consequently fighting a defensive battle to maintain and strengthen their Syrian partner, preserve the axis of resistance, and guarantee Iran’s geopolitical alignment with Russia.
Oct. 5: A Russian pilot fixes an air-to-air missile at his Su-30 jet fighter before a take off at Hmeimim airbase in Syria.
Biography of Contributors

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Christopher Sage is a Colonel in the U.S. Air Force and has served in both the Middle East and Afghanistan. He has over 1,100 combat hours in the F-15E Strike Eagle and commanded a fighter squadron at Bagram AB in Afghanistan. He was the lead advisor to the U.S. Navy’s Global War on Terrorism strategy in the Middle East and Central Asia. He holds a master’s degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College and was a fellow at the
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The statements and views presented in this report are solely those of the individual authors and do not imply endorsements of other views and assessments of this report.
Russia’s Intervention, an Opportunity for Iran

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Russia’s military presence in Syria will balance the political-security equations within the Syrian domestic scene, which will in turn likely accelerate a political solution in the country at the regional and international levels. This circumstance presents an opportunity for Iran, a country which seeks to find a middle way resolution for this crisis.

As Russia realized that there was less of a chance to engage with Bashar al-Assad’s moderate opposition for finding a political solution and recent military and grounds developments only strengthened the position of the so-called Islamic State and other terrorists groups, it decided to intervene directly and battle the terrorists. The goal is to bolster the Assad regime, which Russia perceives to be essential in fighting terrorism.

Iran has welcomed the Russian intervention as such operations would change the current political-security equations on the grounds in favor of Assad’s regime and this would intensify political pressures on Western countries and especially America to adopt a more workable policy in Syria. This situation would subsequently affect the policies of Iran’s main rivals, namely Saudi Arabia and Turkey, forcing them to possibly retreat from their current policy of “Assad must go first and then the political process starts.” With Russian direct involvement, the Syrian crisis has turned into an international geopolitical rivalry.
between Russia and the West. The result will be, as the experiences of the Georgian and Ukrainian crises in 2008 and 2014 respectively show, not a direct Western confrontation with Russia but rather potentially a middle way solution for solving the crisis.

The conventional wisdom in the West and in some regional Arab countries is that Iran and Russia are taking advantage of the situation in order to increase their regional and international role and influence. From this perspective, Iran perceives Syria as a traditional converging point within the politics of the Arab world. Additionally, Iran’s propensity to comprehensively implement the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—struck between Iran and world powers in July 2015 within a short period of time—necessitates the country to play a more active regional role and increase its bargaining position and leverage with the West. Also from a Western perspective, it is considered that Russia is primarily seeking to keep Syria as an ally for geostrategic reasons related to its position in the Mediterranean as well as for strengthening its regional role and influence in the context of geopolitical rivalry with the West in other areas such as Ukraine.

Such discourse is somewhat convincing. Yet one should not ignore that the Syrian issue is primarily a national security matter for Iran and Russia and that is why the two countries hardly compromise their positions with the West. At present, the two countries’ real concern is centered on preventing the expansion of terrorism and extremism followed by increased sectarian politics, which can spread insecurity across and within their own countries and most importantly lead to the disintegration of regional states. In fact, national security concerns have led Iran and Russia, in a defensive manner, to seek an increased regional role to tackle their adversaries and opposing forces.
In the course of the last four years, the West and its regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey have persistently attempted to minimize the role of the state in Syria and Iraq—the main territories within which terrorists operate—and their main allies, namely Iran and Russia, in fighting terrorism. This policy has, however, produced the opposite results as a new coalition comprised of these same states is emerging to help prevent the Syrian regime and possibly Iraq from collapsing, as such a situation may lead to the disintegration of the two countries. The almost similar positions taken by President Hassan Rouhani and Vladimir Putin in this year’s UN General Assembly summit warning about the precarious implications of this kind terrorism for regional and international security substantiate this reality.

Although Russia’s presence in Syria is an opportunity for Iran in terms of opening up a new political space for accelerating a political solution for the crisis, one should also note that Iran-Russian proximity in the Syrian crisis is more a political coalition and based on mutual need for tackling a national security threat in the time of insecurity, rather than a strategic alliance. Because Iran is more interested in balancing its relations with great powers and increase its regional cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Turkey and even Egypt, Iran prioritizes strengthening multilateralism in regional issues. The strategic logic behind this policy is to avoid great power rivalry and traditional unilateralism that can end up at the expense of Iran’s regional role. For instance, Iran is cautious that its role in the Syrian political transformation is not compromised by a Russian-American agreement.
The Russian Moment via Syria

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There are several factors at play that complicate the Syrian crisis. True, Syria is a pivotal regional player that has brought in the world powers into the conflict, making the Syrian uprising-turned-civil war much more than just about Syria. This much has become clear, even for latecomers who were fixated exclusively on the local dimensions of a revolution-against-dictatorship narrative. The fact remains that the Syrian case is enmeshed in a web of local, regional, and international tensions, aspirations, and contradictions, which makes it difficult to disentangle motives and identify causality.

Thus, things are not always what they appear.

Before addressing Russia’s recent and ongoing intervention, we should address the outrage or shock one reads in mainstream media. The Russian direct participation now puts on an equal footing the categorical local, regional, and international forces on both sides (i.e., in relation to US direct participation, for other regional interventionists existed on both sides). Further, being outraged or disconcerted about the Russian intervention in this one arena is to take the United States’ multiple and brutal interventions in the entire region for granted as the norm. There is little that should turn heads about this recent development.
Much has been written already about the motives for the intervention. Beyond the proclaimed cause regarding fighting ISIS—a reasonable rationale but also a most convenient cover for a host of motives—one can cite the basic desire to keep the regime afloat in order to strengthen its potential bargaining position after recent setbacks. Other reasons range from Russia's desire to divert attention from what is happening in its own neighborhood to its desire to assert its loyalty to its allies.

Though these, and other analyses all contain more than a grain of truth, they intersect with what can be called the “forced Russian moment” whereby the Russian leadership are trying to establish its intervention in Syria as a crown on the country’s ascension to global power. Whether it results in a dangerous showdown in the context of brinkmanship or simply sets new terms for an alternative balance of power in the region, Russian decision-makers determined that the Syrian crisis happens to be the time and place for such an advance, and it comes at the right time when Russia is content to distract from its own adventures close to home. No matter the analysis, Syria is a vehicle, not a goal, for Russia. China is watching and not disagreeing.

The rationale for the current active leap cannot possibly be the same as that of simply supporting the regime in its fight, as this conflict has long turned into something of international proportions. It is facile to explain this direct intervention as a response to the US intervention in its relatively mild campaign against ISIS. But the Russians are not interested in ISIS as much as they are interested in the regime's tenure and much more in its own regional and international clout. ISIS and similar groups can be, and at times have been, a godsend for the Syrian regime in its own propaganda war regarding the nature of the uprising, even its first moments.
Russia’s decision is also not simply a calculated move to avoid a complete tipping of the balance in favor of the “opposition,” even if this is part of the rationale. Such a concern could have been served in a far less risky manner by taking defensive positions along the coastal lines and elsewhere, thereby justifying retaliation to potential attackers. The main purpose of the Russian plan was not, or is not, simply to preserve the regime’s existing territorial control, and I argue, nor is it to regain lost territory—though this may well be one of the results with the aid of other forces, including Iranian ones, on the ground. Rather, this is likely to be an attempt to establish a Russian moment, however premature and rushed, deliberated by a president that is eager to restore, aggrandize, and/or be heard loud and clear in a slowly emerging kind of world where the global economic- and power-pie seems to be less and less dominated by a single power and, ironically, more and more democratically distributed. The Russian objective is to test the waters a bit using a particular rationale that has some legitimacy worldwide: fighting ISIS.

This is partly why there will be no magnificent outrage, in the region or beyond, however much we hear roars and threats, so long as the campaign does not disempower the US and its regional allies. Fears of a new cold war are certainly premature. Also exaggerated are fears of an immediate military confrontation—that was resolved almost two years ago when the United States was no longer, if it ever was unequivocally, interested in an Assad-less Syria.

The ramifications of the Russian intervention are difficult to assess at this early state. However, they will depend less on the intensity of the participation and more on who is being targeted. The less ISIS is the object of the bombardment, the more
likely that the intervention will complicate matters, especially if the Russian operations provide an entry point for regime and pro-regime forces into territories lost by the regime in recent months. The United States will wait before it acts, but one ought not take for granted US docility under changing circumstances on the ground. The same might apply to China.
Russian president Vladimir Putin’s decision to intervene militarily in Syria seems to have caught almost everyone off guard. The Russian move was in stark contrast with the public assessment that had been made a few weeks earlier by several notable world leaders, including the presidents of the United States and Turkey. Russia’s military buildup in Syria however began in early July, around the same time that President Obama suggested that President Putin was having a change of heart on Assad! Assuming that President Putin did not discuss his plans to send troops to Syria with President Obama during their famous phone conversation in early July, Russia may have indeed misled the Obama administration. Otherwise, President Obama’s intention for being upbeat on Russia’s position must have been to convince a skeptical Congress that the nuclear deal with Iran was paying dividends, helping to soften Russia’s position on Syria.

Regardless, it seems that by June 2015, Moscow had grown extremely concerned about the ability of the Syrian regime to survive in the medium term. An increasingly gloomy prospect dominated their analysis following a series of military setbacks by the Syrian army and its allies especially in the northwest, where opposition forces came very close to the heartland of the
Assad regime. The early July 2015 U.S.-Turkish agreement to establish an ISIL-free no fly zone in the northwest of Syria must have also troubled Moscow. Having clinched a nuclear deal with Iran, Moscow feared that President Obama might grant Turkey a freehand in the Syrian conflict without having to worry about Iran’s response. The Iran nuclear deal in itself may have also contributed to Moscow’s decision to intervene in Syria. Moscow must have feared a possible US-Iran understanding on Syria that would not necessarily respect its own interests. Having all that in mind, Russia decided to take the initiative, go into the offensive, and lead a direct military intervention in the Syrian conflict.

Putting Russia in the heart of the Syrian crisis, this intervention was tantamount to a coup by Putin against the four big players in the Syrian war: the U.S., Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

In addition, Moscow took it upon itself to further divide the opposition. Inviting certain parts of the Syrian opposition groups to meet and talk in Moscow while excluding others served this purpose quite well. Under the broad mantle of fighting the terror inflicted by Daesh and likeminded extremist groups, Moscow tried also to sway the anti-Assad regional camp. Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov urged Saudi Arabia to back the formation of a broad coalition that would include the Syrian regime beside Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Jordan to lead the fight against Daesh. Moscow succeeded in arranging for a meeting between Syria's top security chief, General Ali Mamlouk, and Saudi Defense Minister Prince Mohammad bin Salman in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, in early July 2015. When Russia failed to change the Saudi position, however, it went for direct military intervention to hold and push back the Turkish and Saudi-backed armed opposition factions.
Russia picked a convenient regional and international moment for intervention. The failure of the Obama administration strategy to contain Daesh a year into the US-led international coalition aerial campaign and its hesitance to train and equip an acceptable Syrian opposition force to confront Daesh on the ground lent Moscow the “legitimate political” ground to intervene.

Russia also took advantage of the refugees crisis in Europe, with hundreds of thousands (mostly Syrian) arriving on the northern shores of the Mediterranean. The surge in the number of refugees seeking shelter in Europe, helped create a new European stance toward the Syrian crisis, with Germany, Austria, Spain, Britain, and Hungary calling for cooperation with Russia to find a quick fix to the Syrian conflict. Desperate European capitals overwhelmed by the unprecedented waves of refugees were even ready to consider talking to Bashar al-Assad and accept his presence during the presumed transitional period. Regionally, Russia exploited the bad shape of the pro-Syrian opposition regional powers to present them with a fait accompli. The AKP-led caretaking government in Turkey was almost totally absorbed by its confrontation with the PKK and the forthcoming early elections. Yemen has also become a top priority for Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, while Syria was receiving lesser attention.

Indeed, the Russian intervention will do little to change the current status quo in the Syrian conflict. The goal of the intervention will most probably be limited to propping up the regime and prevent its collapse. Russia may also try to help the regime regain certain strategic locations in the northwest and around the capital. It cannot, and does not intend, however, to help it try to regain the entire territories it had lost to the opposition over
the past three years. The regime does not have the manpower to do that and Russia does not have the resources to fight a war of attrition in Syria. Indeed, if the Russians do not use the leverage they now have in Syria to make Bashar al-Assad accept a political solution to the crisis, their intervention will only serve to prolong the conflict and increase the suffering of Syrians on all sides.
Understanding Russian Strategic Ambiguity in Syria

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Understanding the objectives and implications of Russia’s intervention in Syria begins with understanding its autocratic ruler. Vladimir Putin is a student of history – and symbolism. It is for this reason that he chose to enter the ceremony announcing the annexation of Crimea through the enormous gold doors of the gilded Hall of Saint George in the Grand Kremlin Palace. Prominently displayed above him as he entered was the golden double-headed eagle on the Russian coat of arms.

It is not lost on historians that the eagle’s origins hearken back to the reign of Ivan the Great, the Grand Prince of Moscow who is commonly known as the “Gatherer of the Russian Lands.” The double-headed eagle was also a prominent symbol of the Byzantine Empire – stretching across the Mediterranean Sea from southern Spain to western Syria.

It was Ivan “the Gatherer” himself, who wed the Russians with the Byzantine Empire in 1472, when he married the last true heir of Byzantium and added the double headed eagle to the Russian regalia. As inheritors of the Byzantine mandate, it is natural for an expansionist Russia to feel comfortable returning in force to Syria, a country where personal and military contacts survive from the earliest days of Syrian independence.
Russia’s Cold War ideologically-driven objectives were relatively easy to discern. Determining Russia’s ultimate goals in Syria in 2015 can only be accomplished by closely examining the recent Russian pattern of strategic ambiguity – publicly proclaiming one set of goals and objectives while masking additional activities designed to undermine the status quo security environment. Witnessed in both eastern Ukraine and Crimea, this emerging pattern in the eastern Mediterranean region is not encouraging for the United States and its allies.

While Russia’s military action in Syria is predominately aimed at fighting anti-regime forces to prop up its beleaguered client state, one must question the additional buildup of anti-access, area denial (A2/AD) forces such as surface-to-air missiles and advanced fighter aircraft that serve no purpose against the various groups opposing the Assad regime. This strategic buildup is inconsistent with a counter insurgency (COIN) strategy.

Such a buildup mirrors the strategic buildup and A2/AD capabilities in Kaliningrad and Crimea. The former constricts and threatens the Baltic nations and Poland, while the latter has the potential to hold at risk NATO countries and forces in and around the Black Sea.

Beyond Syrian regime survival and shifting the focus away from Ukraine, Russian objectives from a military perspective are three-fold: secure access to the Mediterranean Sea by keeping a foothold in Syria, mute Western influence in the region by offering parallel or replacement security strategies to Daesh-battered countries, and contest freedom of movement for the United States and its allies by creating a formidable A2/AD bubble.
King Abdullah II of Jordan recently spoke at the United Nations on the same day as Presidents Obama and Putin. He called the fight against Daesh “a third world war.”

It is important to know Mr. Putin’s true intentions to ensure that Russia and the United States do not end up on opposite sides of an expanded “world” war. Efforts to deconflict military operations have thus far proven elusive. The potential for miscalculation is high.

Shortly after the annexation of Crimea, a Russian factory minted a 1kg silver coin with Putin’s image on one side and the map of Crimea with the year 2014 on the other. According to the BBC, the limited edition coin set has been dubbed “The Gatherer of Russian Lands.” Be on the lookout for the 2015 edition proudly displaying the map of Syria.

[The views presented in this article are personal in nature and do not reflect the positions of the Department of Defense or NATO.]
Russian Troops in Syria: Ensuring Access to the East Mediterranean

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In September 2015, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to step up his support to the Syrian army and government under president Bashar al-Assad by sending 1500 soldiers and personnel, equipped with sophisticated airplanes and tanks, to establish a base at the Bassel al-Assad International Airport in Latakia. This came a few days after the outburst of the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe, which sparked a wave of calls by western European and American leaders to end the crisis in Syria while considering al-Assad to be an obstacle in the fight against ISIS. The Russians saw this as a maneuver by their Western foes to intervene militarily in Syria to oust al-Assad, in a repetition of the Libyan scenario four years earlier. Hence, the Russian military intervention was intended to ensure that no such thing happens.

Syria...Part of a Global Struggle

The Russians were unwavering in their support to the Syrian regime since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011. They feared that the Americans and their European allies were waging a war by proxy in Syria against them and their Iranian and Chinese Allies. For the Russians, the American aim is to prevent them from having access to maritime trade routes, second to destabilize the existing order in central Asia, and to damage
the national security of Russia, China and Iran. The Russians and the Chinese were profoundly disturbed by the increasing involvement of Chechens, Caucasians, Central Asians, and Uyghur Chinese in the fighting in Syria.

What augmented the Russian resentment was the growing indifference of the US to Russian, Chinese, and Iranian interests since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In order to face American unilateralism, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan joined forces to form the Shanghai Five in 1996, which became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) after the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2001 and that holds the prospects of including other states like Iran, India, and many others.

The Battle for the Middle East

The SCO gained more importance after the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2002 and of Iraq in 2003. The Russians interpreted these acts as US attempts to reinforce its hegemony over the Middle East. The Russians also feared an extension of NATO eastward into Eastern Europe and the US establishment of a Pacific economic zone that would exclude China and Russia. This grand American strategy conforms to the legacy set by American geopolitical thinkers with its premise being mainly to prevent Eurasian land powers from having access to maritime trade routes.

The US military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, proved costly and had a negative impact on the American economy. This mainly explains why upon his election US President Barack Obama declared his objection to any involvement of the
US army in another war. Instead he preferred to resort to soft power to achieve US objectives. As the US had a long history in supporting colored revolutions, including Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004, the Russians and Iranians considered the Arab Spring as an attempt by the United States to achieve its political objectives through soft power and to dominate the Middle East through supporting revolutions against existing regimes, including the Syrian regime.

Conclusion

With the Russian direct military intervention in Syria, American and Western European leaders changed their tune for the first time since the beginning of the Syrian crisis and declared their approval for al-Assad to remain in power. The Russians seem to have ensured their access to the East Mediterranean, and at the same time they would be fighting Chechen, Caucasian, and Central Asian terrorists on Syrian rather than on Russian Soil. The Russian move aims to assert their position vis-à-vis the Americans and West European governments and to make them accept a multipolar system in which Russia and China would play a deciding role alongside the US and Western Europe.
Russia’s Strikes in Syria: New Risks or a Window of Opportunity?

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What are Russian objectives for intervening in Syria?

The International dimension. Moscow believes that tense international relations, largely caused by the conflict around Ukraine, should not marginalize other no less significant and even more dangerous conflicts. Common threats are an incentive for cooperation. Despite all their differences, Russia, the EU, the US, and Middle East powers realize that IS, which has become an important regional and global player, is able to capture Syria in the post-Assad era. Russia, which has never concealed that it provides military-technical assistance to Damascus, was calling for a broad coalition with the participation of global and regional powers. While this proposal meant to accentuate its international posture and high profile, there was no politicking: a struggle against terrorism has always been a priority to Moscow.

The idea turned out to be difficult for implementation. The United States and a number of coalition allies have been bombing IS positions in Syria and Iraq. They had no interest in a change of the format. Russia for obvious reasons could not be a part of this coalition. So, Russia, upon the receipt of an official request from the Syrian government, decided to go ahead on its own.
The Syrian dimension. The situation on the ground has been getting more and more dramatic. Suffice it to say that IS and other Islamic radical groups now control up to 80 per cent of Syrian territory. If a decisive victory over radicals and terrorists was not achieved, they would completely ruin Syria in the near future and would continue their conquest further. Russia’s objective is to maintain a unified Syria. A resurrection of Syrian statehood would secure Moscow’s foothold in the area, including the infrastructure on the coast such as a modernized naval base in Tartus (providing refueling, repair, etc.) required for the Russian navy in the Mediterranean, and, according to media reports, an eventual airbase in Latakia.

The Russian domestic dimension. The fight against IS for Russia is driven by domestic concerns. Thousands of Russian citizens have already fled to fight on the side of IS, snaking their way there via Turkey. Among volunteers there are fighters from different parts of Russia -- from the North Caucasus, from Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, from large cities and small villages. Their departure does not mean that they won’t come back some day. No less dangerous from the security point of view is the activities of IS in Central Asia, given the absence of a visa regime and porous borders.

What are the implications of this decision for the Syrian conflict, as well as regional and international politics more broadly?

Russia does not want to send troops to Syria for combat operations; there is already a force to wage the war on the ground. The Syrian army, along with its allies—Iranian militias, the Kurds, and Hezbollah—has been fighting against jihadists. Russia will
provide air support for ground operations, a missing element in the actions of the coalition coined up by the U.S. With local boots on the ground, air strikes are to ensure success.

The conduct of this campaign is fraught with certain risks. The propaganda war seems to be on the rise. Certain regional and external powers are against Russia’s support for the Assad regime. Although the choice is limited—either Assad in Damascus, or IS—the idea of Assad’s stay for some time is still unacceptable to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and some other Arab states. Iran’s participation in a coordinated military action with Russia will contribute to Tehran’s strengthening, which also comes into conflict with goals of the Arab regimes. A period of thaw in Russia’s relations with Saudi Arabia, for example, may be replaced by a new political freeze. A few observers point out that a lack of coordination with the US led coalition might result even in an air collision.

This said, one should not ignore the silver lining. Russia’s involvement in the conflict in Syria could contribute to its resolution. Russia has been working on two parallel tracks for several years, getting seriously involved in mediation efforts. Russia will continue its consultations with a moderate part of the Syrian opposition to incite it to participate in the political process and, probably, to minimize possible damage. It is not inconceivable that Assad, who is totally dependent on Russian aid, can be forced to take a more responsible position like accepting an idea of an inclusive transitional government followed by national elections. Such an option looks as a win-win outcome, but it presumes trust and coordination among various players. An alternative might be a partition of Syria into several zones of influence with shaky balances and no winners.