



RUSSIA FOREIGN POLICY PAPERS

RUSSIAN AND AMERICAN DE-CONFLICTION EFFORTS IN SYRIA: What's the Endgame in the Civil War?

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FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



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COVER: Two Air Force F-22 Raptors fly over Syria, Feb. 2, 2018, while supporting Operation Inherent Resolve. Air National Guard photo by Staff Sgt. Colton Elliott, U.S. Department of Defense

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RUSSIAN AND AMERICAN DE-CONFLICTION EFFORTS IN SYRIA:

What's the Endgame in the Civil War?

By: **Robert E. Hamilton**

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Executive Summary

The war in Syria is reaching a decisive point. As the campaign against ISIL winds down, the battle for influence over the final settlement in Syria is heating up. This larger war—geopolitically more consequential than the campaign against ISIL—is characterized by shifting and sometimes surprising coalitions of states and non-state actors. Despite some close calls, the United States and Russia have been effective in what both sides call the “de-confliction” of operations in Syria, but it's doubtful that these efforts can serve as a foundation for more meaningful efforts to put Syria back together. Securing a peaceful future for Syria and preventing the war there from further destabilizing the region—and possibly escalating into a regional war—will require new ideas. It will also require all parties to the conflict, both Syrian and foreign, to compromise on their objectives—something that no side looks ready to do.

A Confusing Quagmire

The war in Syria is reaching a decisive point. As the campaign against ISIL winds down, the battle for influence over the final settlement in Syria is heating up. This larger war—geopolitically more consequential than the campaign against ISIL—pits the U.S.-led coalition of some 75 countries and organizations against Russia, the Syrian regime, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah. Turkey, although formally a member of the U.S.-led coalition, is pursuing its own interests against Kurdish groups in northern Syria. Israel, ever wary of Iran's influence, insists on its right to strike Iranian forces that threaten it from Syrian soil.

In early February 2018, pro-regime forces attacked U.S.-backed forces, resulting in a U.S. counterattack that killed dozens to hundreds of the attackers, including Russian private military contractors. The same week, Turkey's operation against Kurdish forces aligned with the United States—its NATO ally—continued. Israel launched airstrikes against Syrian regime and Iranian forces, with one of Israel's aircraft shot out of the sky. In April, the conflict continued to escalate. An Iranian drone penetrated Israeli airspace and the Israeli Air Force attacked the base from which the drone originated, killing seven Iranians. Only days later, the Syrian regime apparently used chemical weapons in the rebel-held town of Douma, killing dozens of people. Despite Russian warnings, the U.S., UK, and France launched retaliatory strikes against the Syrian regime's chemical weapons research and storage facilities. Turkey, which had recently aligned itself with Russia and Iran in its approach to the war, called the strikes justified and renewed its call for President of Syria Bashar al-Assad's ouster.¹

If this all sounds confusing, that's because it is. More than any issue since the end of the Cold War, the war in Syria has the potential to engulf not only the entire region, but also the U.S. and Russia, whose forces are heavily invested in the conflict. Syria could continue to destabilize the region, even after the defeat of ISIL.

But that outcome is not foreordained. Despite the bloodshed among major powers in February, the United States and Russia have been effective in what both sides call the “de-confliction” of operations

in Syria.² Whether these de-confliction efforts can prevent future escalation of violence or even serve as a foundation for more meaningful efforts to put Syria back together remains to be seen. But avoiding direct conflict between the United States and Russia is itself a substantial achievement.

This paper begins by providing a short history of U.S.-Russian de-confliction in Syria, followed by an assessment of Russia's objectives in the war and the methods it uses to achieve them. The third section of the paper assesses Russia's military performance and lessons learned in the conflict. The paper closes with an appraisal of the various plans for ending the war and establishing a durable peace. It concludes that, while U.S.-Russian de-confliction efforts have so far succeeded in preventing accidental escalation of the conflict, they are unlikely to provide a foundation for cooperation on a durable peace plan. Neither the United Nations plan nor the Russian-backed Astana process is likely to lead to durable peace. Only a confederal arrangement that preserves a unitary Syrian state but allows for extensive self-government for Sunni Arabs and Kurds, all under significant international supervision, is likely to succeed. Finally, although the Russian military has gained significant experience and showcased impressive capabilities in some areas, it still has major shortcomings that make talk of Russia as a peer competitor to the U.S. premature.

A Short History of U.S.-Russian De-Confliction in Syria

De-confliction of air operations over Syria began not long after the Russian intervention in September 2015. By the summer of 2017, air de-confliction procedures were established and robust. However, it was about this time that ground forces from the two sides began to come uncomfortably close to one another. With communication between U.S. and Russian ground commanders becoming an almost-daily requirement, the commander of the U.S.-led coalition decided that he needed his own de-confliction capability. Until that point, the U.S. air headquarters in Qatar had handled what little communication there was between the U.S. and Russia about ground operations. But the closer proximity of U.S. and Russian ground forces in Syria placed an additional burden on the air headquarters and forced it to handle de-confliction issues it was not familiar with. And the physical separation between the air headquarters in Qatar and the coalition headquarters in Kuwait presented an additional risk to the ground de-confliction effort.

1 Pinar Trembley, “Turkey's response to US-led Syria strikes: Not enough but welcomed”, internet resource at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/04/turkey-responds-syria-strikes-assad-russia-iran-erdogan.html#ixzz5CqN4BwPW>, accessed April 16, 2018.

2 The U.S. uses the term “de-confliction” because the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act prohibits the Department of Defense from cooperating or coordinating its operations with Russia in Syria. Therefore, all interactions with Russian forces are focused on avoiding miscalculation and unintentional escalation rather than coordination of operations against ISIL.

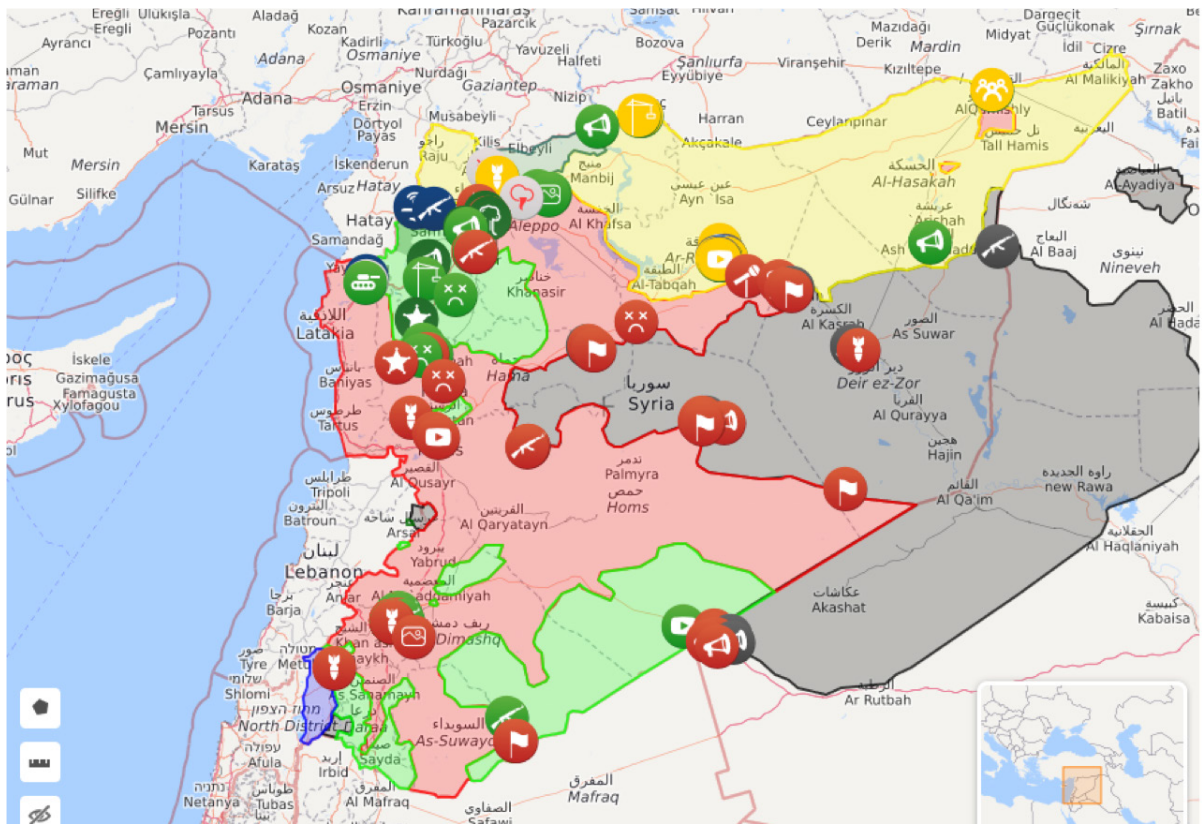
Map 1: Ground situation in Syria, early August 2017 (<https://syria.liveuamap.com>)

Figure 1: 'Zone of Exclusive Operations' east of the Euphrates River, proposed by Russia in August 2017



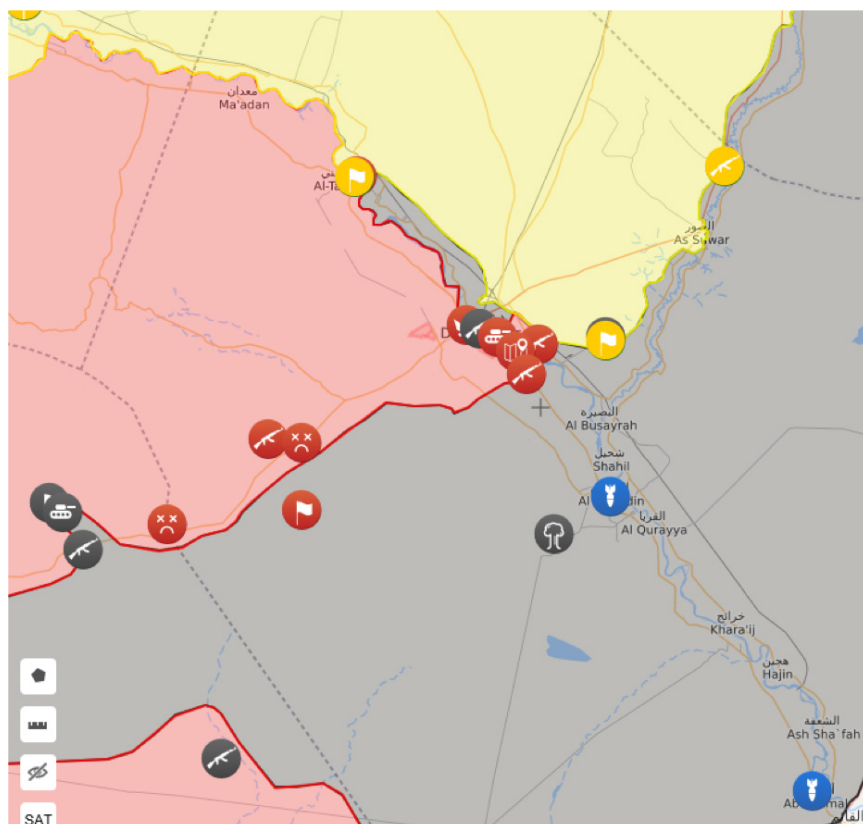
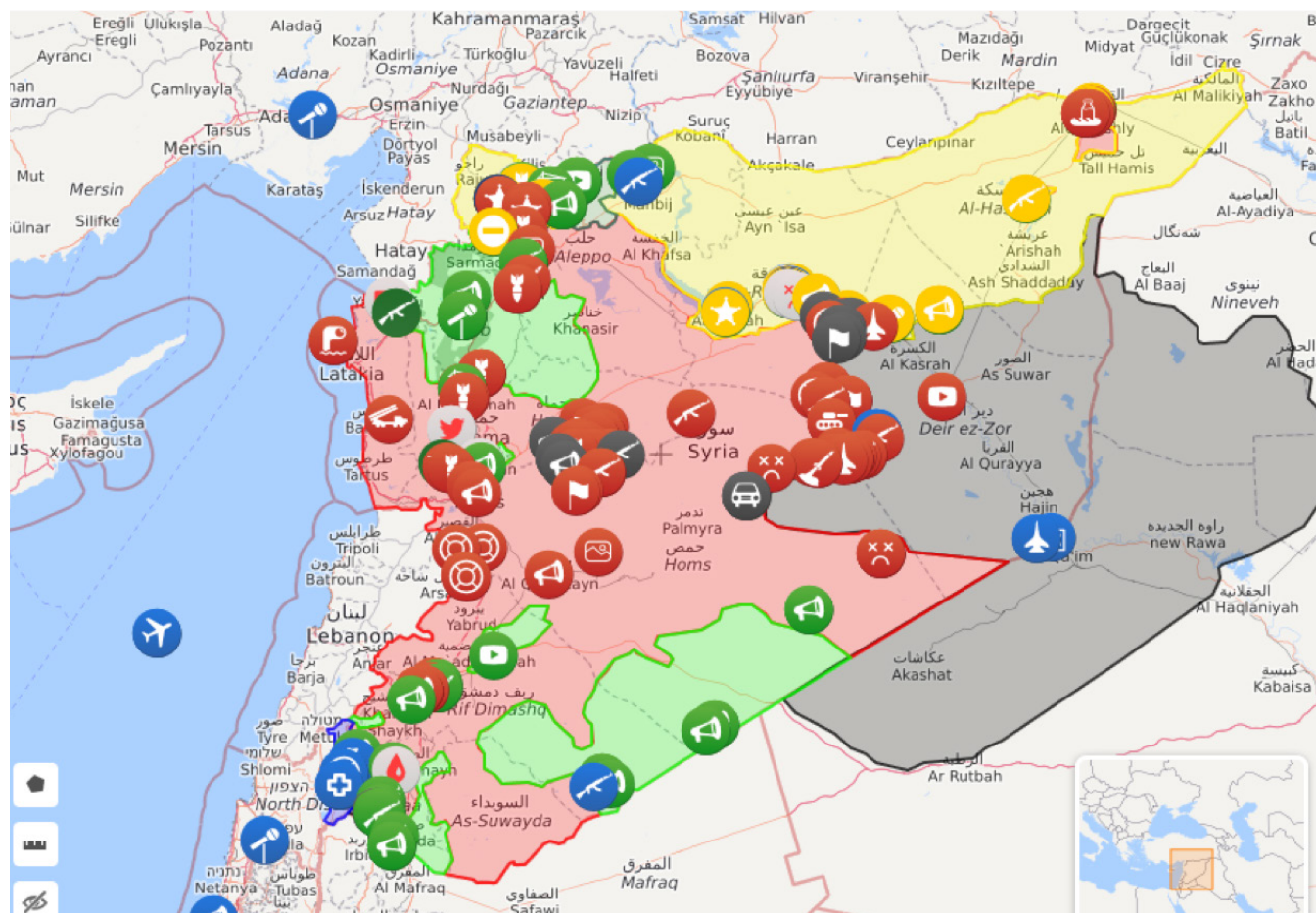
Figure 2: Expanded 'Zone of Exclusive Operations' east of the Euphrates River, proposed by Russia in September 2017.

The new ground de-confliction channel mirrored the air de-confliction channel. On the U.S. side, it was manned by a senior military officer specializing in Russia, supported by four interpreters. This team was based at the U.S.-led coalition headquarters in Kuwait and was designated the Ground De-Confliction Cell. It maintained regular communication with the Russian headquarters at Hmeymim, Syria via a special phone line and separate email channel. Periodic phone conversations at the three-star and one-star general levels supplemented the more routine interactions between this cell and its Russian counterpart. The goal of these interactions was to prevent inadvertent contact between the U.S.-led coalition and its partner forces and Russian, regime, and pro-regime forces.

As the fight to eliminate ISIL in Syria reached its culmination, the ground de-confliction channel proved vital to avoid miscalculation and unintentional escalation. For example, the Syrian regime, supported by Russian forces, launched a long-planned operation in mid-August to capture the city of Dayr-az-Zawr, where ISIL had besieged two regime military garrisons since the summer of 2014. Around the same time, using the new ground de-confliction channel, the Russian side began insisting that the U.S. grant it a 30x130km "zone of exclusive operations" on the east bank of the Euphrates (Figure 1). The United States resisted these requests, noting that Russia had agreed

to use the Euphrates as the de-confliction line from Raqqa in the north to Dayr-az-Zawr in the south. The American side proposed that Russia continue to attack ISIL forces west of the river, including inside Dayr-az-Zawr, while U.S. forces would destroy ISIL east of the river. As Syrian regime and Russian forces drove toward Dayr-az-Zawr, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a U.S.-trained and advised Kurdish and Arab force from northern and eastern Syria, was fighting to liberate ISIL's self-designated capital of Raqqa.

In early September 2017, with ISIL facing defeat in Raqqa, the SDF began a long-planned operation to clear the jihadist group from its strongholds on the east bank of the Euphrates. The U.S. de-confliction cell notified the Russian headquarters that this operation was underway and that it would complement the Russian-led operation to clear Dayr-az-Zawr and the west bank of the river. In response, Russia escalated pressure on the SDF and the U.S. to grant it a zone of exclusive operations east of the Euphrates. Now, instead of the 30x130km zone east of the Euphrates it had previously declared, Russia insisted on a zone that stretched all the way to the Syria-Iraq border (Figure 2). As soon as the SDF moved down the east bank of the Euphrates, Russian and regime forces began conducting air and artillery strikes near the U.S. partner force, which had U.S. and coalition military advisors embedded with

Map 2: Ground situation in Syria, early September 2017 (<https://syria.liveuamap.com>)Map 3: Ground situation in Dayr-az-Zawr, Syria, mid-September 2017 (<https://syria.liveuamap.com>)

it. These Russian strikes, ostensibly directed at ISIL forces, culminated in an attack on September 17, which wounded 10 SDF fighters.

This episode tested the ability of the de-confliction channel to prevent an escalation of violence between U.S. and Russian forces. U.S. representatives stressed to their Russian counterparts that they would protect their forces from further strikes and that U.S. and coalition military advisors were embedded with the SDF. The message here was that any strike against the SDF had the potential to involve direct combat between the U.S. and Russia. To de-escalate the situation, the sides agreed to meet face-to-face elsewhere in the region. That meeting took place in mid-September and resulted in an agreement to extend the de-confliction line on the Euphrates River from Dayr-az-Zawr south to Abu-Kamal, on the Syria-Iraq border.

While there were still significant details to be worked out, this tentative

agreement served to de-escalate the situation around Dayr-az-Zawr and allow both sides to focus their efforts on defeating ISIL. Even this progress was not without drama. On the eve of the meeting, after over a week of attempting to ford the Euphrates just south of Dayr-az-Zawr, Russian and regime forces did so, and established a small bridgehead on the east bank of the river. The United States agreed to allow them to maintain that bridgehead if Russian and regime forces did not expand it and interfere with the operations of the SDF. This Russian “cut out” east of the Euphrates mirrored similar “cut-outs” for U.S. and partner forces on the western side of the river.

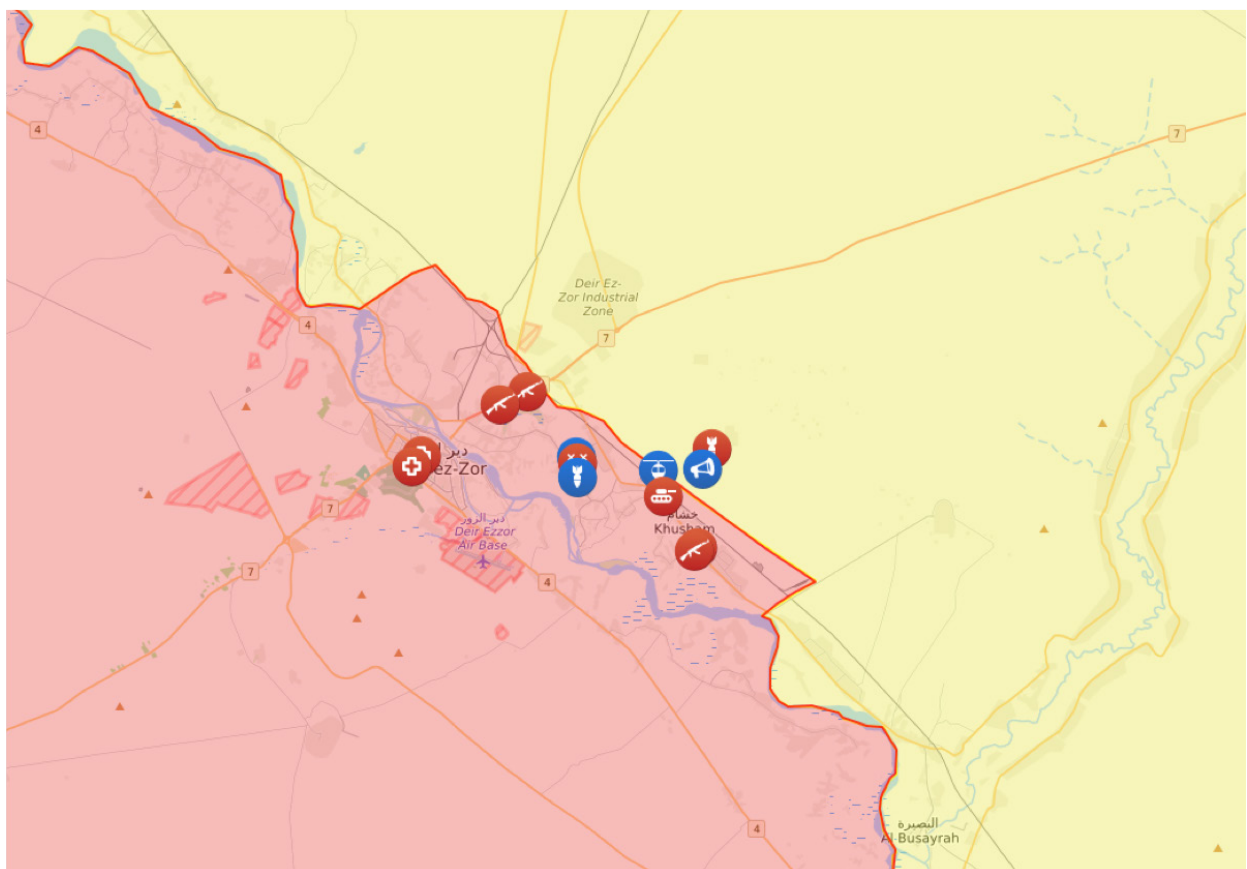
For the rest of September, both sides focused on the continued destruction of ISIL on their respective sides of the Euphrates. This allowed Russian and regime forces to complete the capture of Dayr-az-Zawr city and allowed the U.S. and SDF to expand the areas it had cleared east of the river. A second round of face-to-face discussions in early October resulted in a detailed de-confliction agreement, which was sent back to Moscow and Washington for review. As the capitals were reviewing the draft agreement, operations against ISIL on both sides of the Euphrates continued. Although Moscow and Washington failed to approve the agreement before military forces from both sides had reached the Iraqi border, the understandings reached in the second meeting allowed the continued destruction of ISIL and prevented escalation between U.S. and Russian forces.

Syrian forces, backed by Russian mercenaries, challenged that understanding on February 7, 2018 when they launched an attack on an SDF headquarters east of the Euphrates. The jumping-off point for the attack was the “cut-out” the United States had granted to Russian and Syrian regime forces east of the river across from Dayr-az-Zawr. The U.S. response was overwhelming, killing dozens to hundreds of the attacking forces. This attack on the SDF was an escalatory step in Russia’s campaign to drive the United States out of Syria, a campaign that has used legal arguments, disinformation, and military strikes as tools. The duration and scope of any future U.S. presence in Syria is not yet clear, but the events of February 7 suggest that it won’t be forced out of the country by military pressure.

Russia’s Objectives and Methods in Syria

Russia’s intervention in Syria was driven by multiple aims, most of which are complicated by the presence of U.S. forces and their relationship with the SDF. First, Russia intervened in Syria to prop up one of the two pillars of its regional strategy. Russia has staked its presence and influence in the Middle East on its partnership with the Syrian and Iranian governments. With the regime in Damascus on the verge of falling in 2015, Russia believed that key interests, including important air and naval bases in Syria, were threatened.

Russia also intervened in Syria to show it deserved to be taken seriously as a global power that can



Map 3: Ground situation in Dayr-az-Zawr, Syria, February 7, 2018 (<https://syria.liveuamap.com>)

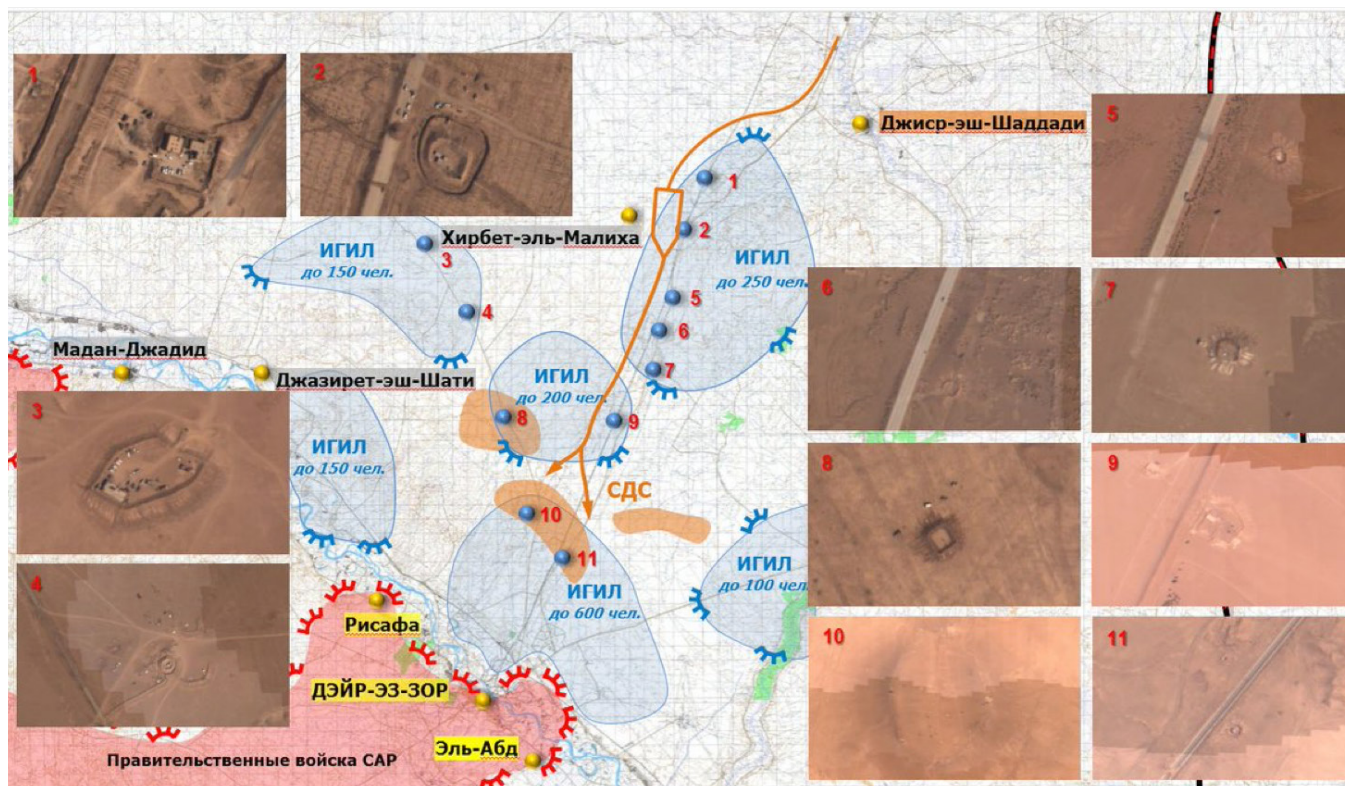


Figure 3: Images from Russian MOD Twitter feed purporting to show U.S. forces in ISIS positions.

defend its interests even outside of its region. Next, propping up the Assad regime was a way for Moscow to take a stand against what it sees as a series of U.S.-engineered regime changes. The Kremlin claims the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 and 2013-14 revolutions in Ukraine, the Arab Spring movements, and the overthrow of Qaddafi in Libya represent a pattern of assaults by the U.S. against regimes friendly to Russia. Many Russians believe regime change in Moscow is the logical endpoint of this process.³ Finally, Russia intervened in Syria to destroy ISIL, which it sees as the next in a long line of Sunni terrorist groups with global connections, including connections to Sunni extremist groups inside Russia itself.

While the United States is also interested in fighting ISIL, it does not support Russia's other aims. U.S. involvement in Syria makes Washington a key actor in a post-war settlement, something Russia hopes to avoid. How Russia reacted to this paradox revealed that in Syria its geopolitical aspirations outweighed its interest in fighting ISIL or other forms of terrorism.

Even before the defeat of ISIL in most areas north and east of the Euphrates, Russia was using military pressure, legal arguments, and disinformation to

undermine the U.S. presence in Syria. Russia does this because it faces a conundrum. It has higher-order security interests at stake in Syria than does the U.S., but it is able to deploy less overall military capability. This mismatch between ends and means makes Russia willing to take more risk in Syria, in a bid to even the scales with the U.S.-led coalition. Russian forces will often “escalate to de-escalate”—intentionally escalating tensions with the U.S. to force a conversation on an issue important to Russia, only to de-escalate once that conversation happens.

Both the September 17, 2017 and February 7, 2018 attacks on the SDF are examples of this behavior. In September, the Russian goal was to force a conversation on its self-declared zone of exclusive operations east of the Euphrates (see Figure 1). While the resulting direct U.S.-Russian talks did not acknowledge that zone, they did recognize the small Russian and regime presence east of the river, from which the February 2018 attack was launched. That attack was probably aimed at seizing key oil and gas infrastructure, expanding the Russian and regime military presence east of the Euphrates, and damaging the U.S. relationship with the SDF by proving that the American military would not protect its partner force. It is unlikely that the attack against the SDF was carried out without Russian approval or at least prior knowledge. The use of mercenaries from the Wagner Group was a way for Russia to maintain deniability of involvement in case the attack went awry, as it clearly did.

³ Dmitry Gorenburg, “Countering Color Revolutions: Russia’s New Security Strategy and its Implications for U.S. Policy” internet resource at <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/2014/09/15/countering-color-revolutions-russias-new-security-strategy-and-its-implications-for-u-s-policy/>, accessed April 16, 2018.

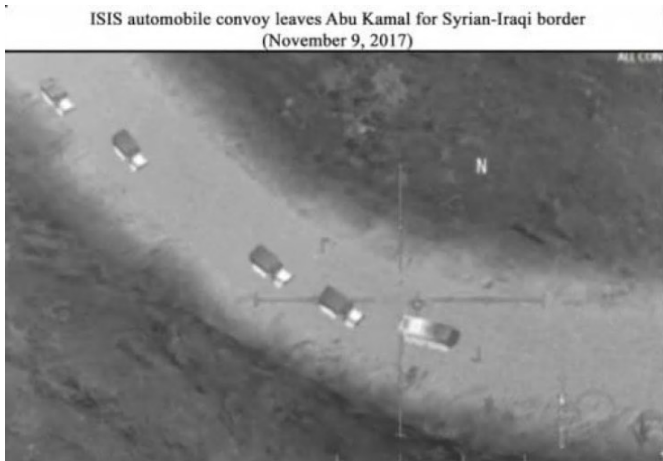


Figure 4 Russian MOD photo claiming to show U.S. forces leading ISIS convoy out of Abu Kamal



Image from AC-130 Gunship Simulator: Special Ops Squadron game

Russia's legal arguments against the U.S. presence note that the Syrian government requested Russia's help, while it did not request that the U.S. and coalition allies send forces. Thus, in Russia's view, the latter forces are illegal. Aside from questioning the legitimacy of the Syrian regime due to its well-documented human rights abuses, U.S. counter-arguments cite Article 51 of the UN Charter and a request from the Iraqi government as their foundation. Article 51 allows states to respond in self-defense if attacked; the U.S. and its coalition partners argue that many of the ISIL attacks on their territory originated from Syria and that this position justifies their operations against ISIL there.⁴ They also base their presence on a request from the Iraqi government to assist it in fighting ISIL attacks against Iraq but originating from Syria. As long as there remains an ISIL presence in Syria and Iraq, these arguments will provide defensible legal justification for continued U.S. military operations there.

Failing to muster support for its legal challenge to the U.S. in Syria, Russia turned to disinformation. One example is the publication of photos of U.S. and SDF forces occupying positions from which they had driven ISIL as "evidence" of collusion between them (Figure 3). The Russian implication is that since the U.S. and the SDF were occupying former ISIL positions, the two sides must be cooperating. As any military leader knows, occupying former enemy positions is standard practice. This is especially true in open desert, where man-made berms—even those constructed by an enemy force—often provide the only protection against being observed and fired upon.

Russian disinformation efforts crossed over from the dubious to the absurd in November 2017 when the

Ministry of Defense published a photo purporting to show a U.S. vehicle leading an ISIL convoy out of the Syrian city of Abu Kamal toward the Syria-Iraq border (Figure 4). When the photo was later revealed to be a screenshot from the "AC-130 Gunship Simulator: Special Ops Squadron" game, Russia dropped the claim of a U.S.-enabled exodus for ISIL fighters, but maintained that the U.S. nevertheless supports the terrorist group. This claim continues to reverberate through Russian media and social media outlets.

An Assessment of Russian Military Performance in Syria

While the Kremlin focuses on the geopolitical stakes in Syria, the Russian military is using the deployment to exercise systems and capabilities not used in Georgia, Ukraine, or other recent Russian military operations. Syria functions as a training laboratory for its forces and as a showcase for its most advanced weapons. The war has demonstrated Russia's capabilities in some areas and revealed limitations in others. It has allowed Russia to gain experience that previous conflicts did not.

Strategic mobility is one area in which Russia revealed adaptability and increased capability. To supply its forces and Syrian government forces, Russia established the "Syrian Express," a sea and air resupply line using military and commercial airlift and sealift. The Syrian Express sea route originates at the Russian Black Sea Fleet base in Crimea and the port of Novorossisk and terminates at the Russian naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus. Besides using Russian Navy cargo ships, Russia bought commercial ships for this effort and contracted roll-on/roll-off cargo ships capable of carrying tanks and other vehicles.⁵ Its aerial resupply effort similarly relied on a

⁴ Specifically, Article 51 says, "Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security." From <http://legal.un.org/repertory/art51.shtml>, accessed April 8, 2018.

⁵ "Сирийский экспресс" тормозить не собирается [Syrian Express: No Plans to Hit the Brakes], Независимое военное обозрение [Independent Military Review], December 26, 2017, internet resource at: <http://nvo.ng.ru/news/604103.html>, accessed March 23, 2018.

mixture of military and civilian aircraft.

The Russian Aerospace Forces revealed increased abilities to conduct long-range bombing and to sustain high daily sortie rates. Russian Tu-95 MS, Tu-160, and TU-22 M3 bombers, flying from Russia, have repeatedly struck targets in Syria. And Russian aircraft stationed in Syria have maintained a high daily sortie rate with a lower level of losses than in previous Russian deployments. With only 16-40 helicopters and 30-50 combat aircraft in Syria, Russian daily sortie rates have averaged 30-50 and have surged to over 100 for short periods.⁶

Russia's relative success in deploying land-based aviation was offset by its failure to project air power from the sea. While the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, Russia's only aircraft carrier, made the trip to the eastern Mediterranean, it proved useless once there. Its air wing of 15 aircraft—U.S. carriers carry some 60 aircraft for comparison—struggled to operate from the ship, with two planes crashing while trying to land on its deck.⁷ One joke noted that Turkey managed only to shoot down one Russian plane, while the *Kuznetsov* destroyed two. After only three months, the Russian Navy ordered the carrier home, leaving its air wing to operate from the Russian air base in Syria. Given that its aircraft could have flown to Syria without the carrier, the *Kuznetsov* added nothing. Upon return to its home port of Severomorsk, the Russian Navy announced that the *Kuznetsov* would head to dry dock for three years of repairs.

A second significant failure is in precision-guided munitions (PGMs). Analysts estimate that only 20% of the bombs Russian planes have dropped in Syria have been precision-guided, with the rest being “dumb” bombs.⁸ And even those PGMs Russia used tended to be imprecise compared to Western munitions. Part of the reason for this is the shortage of advanced targeting pods for Russian aircraft. These pods, standard equipment on advanced Western strike aircraft, allow for the precise identification and designation of targets in all weather conditions, during both day and night. The lack of PGMs and targeting pods has caused Russian airstrikes to kill civilians in Syria at a rate six

times higher than Western airstrikes.⁹

Despite these limitations, the laboratory of the Syrian conflict has allowed Russia to make rapid progress in its use of airpower. Analyst Michael Kofman compared the overall capability of the Russian Aerospace Forces at the outset of the conflict to that of the U.S. Air Force in the 1991 Desert Storm operation, in terms of finding and accurately striking targets. After some 16 months of combat, Kofman argued Russia's capabilities were equivalent to those of the U.S. Air Force in the 1999 Kosovo Campaign.¹⁰ While this still leaves Russian air power almost 20 years behind its U.S. counterpart, the Syrian conflict has the potential to further narrow that gap.

Finally, the Syrian intervention has allowed Russia to increase capabilities in several areas in which it had little previous experience. These areas include managing a coalition and training, advising, and assisting indigenous forces. Whereas the U.S. has extensive experience leading large coalitions, Russia had not recently managed a coalition. While the Russian-led coalition is significantly smaller than the 75-nation group the U.S. leads in Iraq and Syria, the experience of arbitrating among the competing objectives and employing the diverse capabilities of even a small coalition is invaluable. Similarly, prior to Syria, Russia had little experience in training, advising, and assisting indigenous forces, as it is now doing with the Syrian Arab Army and affiliated militias. Russian Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov noted,

Within every subunit—battalion, brigade, regiment, division—there is a military advisor's staff. It comprises the essential officials: namely, operations staff, intelligence officer, artilleryman, engineer, interpreters and other officials. They essentially plan the combat operations.

6 Paul Iddon, “For the Russian Military in Syria, Old Habits Die Hard,” *War is Boring*, December 29, 2017, internet resource at: <https://warisboring.com/for-the-russian-military-in-syria-old-habits-die-hard/>, accessed March 23, 2018.

7 Andrew E. Kramer, “Russian Aircraft Carrier Is Called Back as Part of Syrian Drawdown,” *New York Times*, January 6, 2017, internet resource at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/06/world/middleeast/russia-aircraft-admiral-kuznetsov-syria.html>, accessed March 23, 2018.

8 Yuri M. Zhukov, “Understanding Russia's New Role in the Middle East,” *Lawfare*, April 23, 2017, internet resource at: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/understanding-russias-new-role-middle-east>, accessed March 23, 2018.

9 “A Reckless Disregard for Civilian Lives,” *Airwars*, March 2016, internet resource at: <https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Reckless-Disregard.pdf>, accessed March 23, 2018. The use of non-precision munitions may be part of a deliberate Russian strategy to sow fear among civilians and legitimate opposition groups. Russia often follows indiscriminate bombing of rebel-held areas with an offer to evacuate civilians and fighters to another rebel-held area, which is then targeted itself. Eventually, many opposition fighters and civilians are evacuated to Idlib Province, where there is a large presence of fighters from Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the terrorist group formerly linked to al-Qaeda. This co-mingling of legitimate, UN-recognized Sunni opposition groups with HTS allows Russia to claim all are “terrorists” and therefore legitimate targets of its air campaign.

10 “Russia's Intervention in Syria: Lessons Learned,” Center for Strategic and International Studies panel discussion, January 13, 2017. Video available at <https://www.csis.org/events/russias-intervention-syria-lessons-learned>.

They provide assistance in subunit command and control during combat mission performance.¹¹

While Russia still lags the U.S. in its abilities to lead a large coalition and train, advise, and assist indigenous forces, these are areas where Russia has made rapid progress. This progress, along with successes and failures in other capabilities demonstrated in Syria, make Russia a more formidable military competitor to the U.S., but still leave it short of being a peer competitor.

A Lasting Peace?

Given that the only military aim the U.S. and Russia share in Syria is the defeat of ISIL and that for Russia that aim is subordinate to other geopolitical objectives, it is reasonable to ask whether Washington and Moscow can work together to stabilize the country. The signs are not encouraging. Formally, both Russia and the U.S. support the UN's plan for Syria, which calls for elections 14 to 18 months after the implementation of a ceasefire, and envisions those elections leading to a credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian government. In the Russian view, elections held in the immediate aftermath of a war that has killed over 400,000 people and displaced over 11 million, fought along ethnic and sectarian lines with significant intervention by outside powers, is not likely to lead to a credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian government. With ethnic and sectarian divisions so prominent and memories of the war's atrocities still so fresh, people are likely to go the polls and vote along ethnic and sectarian lines.

Russian representatives believe such elections can only lead to one of two outcomes. The first is what Russians call "the Iraq model," in which the government is "captured" by the majority ethnic or sectarian group, which then uses the power of the government to oppress minority groups, leading to renewed civil war. The second outcome, even more threatening to Russian interests, is a Sunni majority government in Damascus that holds itself and the country together. Here, Syria would turn from an ally of Russia to an adversary, depriving Moscow of one of the two pillars of its Middle Eastern strategy. These reservations lead Russia to support the UN peace process rhetorically, while working to undermine it in practice.

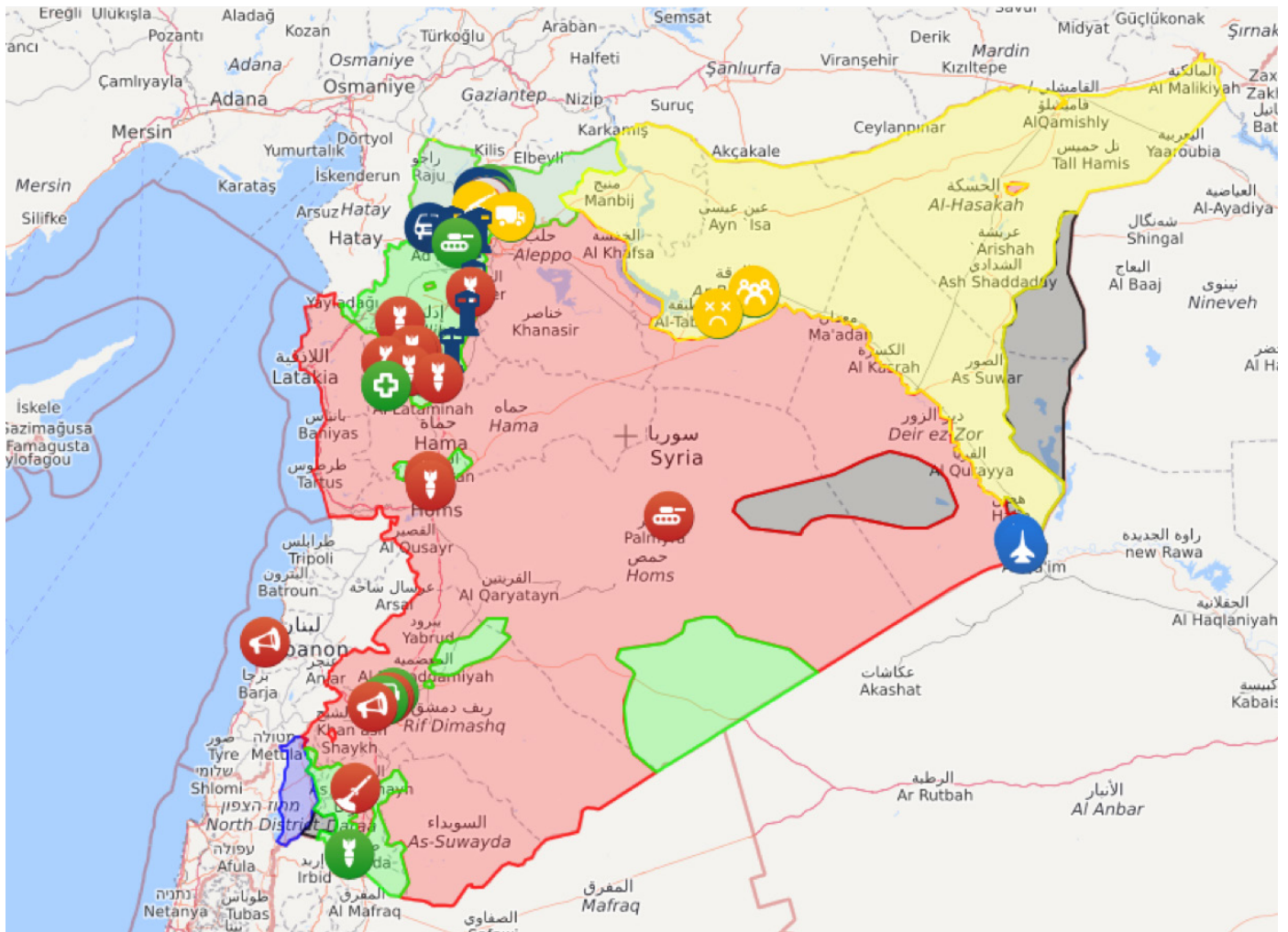
It does this through its military actions inside Syria, which are intended to destroy all Sunni-based opposition to the Assad regime, including those groups recognized as legitimate opposition under UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Another way is the Astana Process, which is headed by Russia and includes Iran and Turkey. Although ostensibly pursuant to UNSCR 2254, the Astana Process is an attempt to side-line the U.S., most of the International Syria Support Group, and many of the UN-recognized Sunni opposition groups. Russia's aim is to reach a settlement that leaves Assad in power for now and transfers power to another authoritarian Alawite Shia government when he departs.

The problem with the Russian plan is that Syria's Sunni Arabs and Kurds have fought too hard to allow the re-imposition of an authoritarian Alawite Shia government across the country. In northern and eastern Syria, Sunni Arabs and Kurds have worked together to liberate their homelands from ISIL, building in the process a robust military and credible institutions of local governance. The U.S. should sustain its military support for the SDF and support these local government institutions, while clarifying that it sees them as part of a single, sovereign, post-war Syrian state. Given the success of the Kurdish-Sunni Arab coalition in northern and eastern Syria, any Shia-dominated regime will struggle to impose its writ over these communities.

Rather than elections or the re-imposition of an authoritarian regime, a stable peace in Syria requires a power-sharing arrangement that protects the political and security needs of all parties. Such an arrangement will only be constructed and upheld with considerable external support. An arrangement like the 1995 Dayton Accords for Bosnia and Herzegovina—as imperfect as these are—has the best chance of achieving this outcome. This arrangement might result in a confederal system with a Shia-dominated government in western Syria, and a combined Sunni Arab/Kurdish government in the north and east. At the national level, as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the major ethnic and sectarian groups would share power through a rotational system overseen by an international administration, with security guaranteed through an international peacekeeping force.

While imperfect, as the experience of Bosnia and Herzegovina shows, this arrangement has the most potential to bring lasting stability to Syria. It would prevent oppression of and retribution against the Shia minority by giving the Shia their own portion of the country, in the same way that the Dayton Accords allowed Bosnian Serbs their own "republic" inside of a federated Bosnia-Herzegovina. Combining Kurds and Sunni Arabs into a single political entity would help ease the fears of neighboring states, chief among them Turkey, about the spectre of Kurdish separatism. For this arrangement to have any chance of becoming a reality, U.S. support to the SDF, which to this point

11 Viktor Baranets, "Начальник Генштаба Вооруженных сил России генерал армии Валерий Герасимов: «Мы переломили хребет ударным силам терроризма» [Chief of staff of the armed Forces of Russia Army General Valery Gerasimov: 'We pushed the shock forces of terrorism from the ridgeline'], " *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, December 26, 2017, internet resource at: <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693/>, accessed March 22, 2018.



Map 5: Ground situation in Syria, March 2018 (<https://syria.liveuamap.com>)

has consisted solely of military training and equipment, must also be apparent in the political realm. U.S. support for the SDF's civic councils could allow these councils to form local self-government inside a single, federated Syrian state.

Neither the UN plan nor the Russian plan is likely to bring lasting peace to Syria. The military de-confliction effort and the political channel headed by U.S. Special Presidential Envoy Brett McGurk and his Russian counterpart Alexander Lavrentyev has prevented inadvertent military escalation between the U.S. and Russia and has ensured the two sides remain in contact on Syria's political future. But securing a peaceful future for Syria and preventing the war there from further destabilizing the region—and possibly escalating into a regional war—will require new ideas. It will also require all parties to the conflict, both Syrian and foreign, to compromise on their objectives—something that no side looks ready to do. 🕌





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