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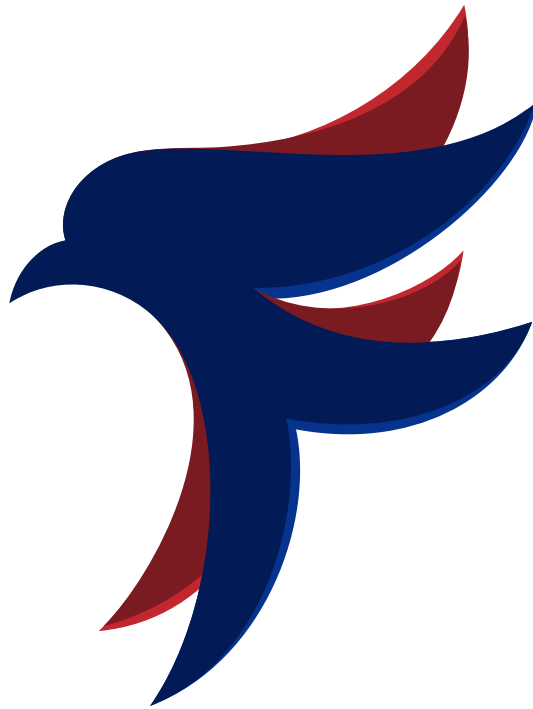
RUSSIA'S WAR IN SYRIA

RUSSIA'S INTERVENTION IN SYRIA:

HISTORICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

ROBERT HAMILTON, CHRIS MILLER,
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FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

A nation must think before it acts

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RUSSIA'S INTERVENTION IN SYRIA: HISTORICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT

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TIMELINE OF THE SYRIAN WAR

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MARCH 2011

A group of teenagers write “It’s your turn, doctor” on a wall in Der’a and within days the teenagers were taken into custody and thousands took to the streets to demand they be freed. 100 protesters were killed.

July 2011

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Protests have grown to other cities in Syria and the first defections amongst Syrian military officers to the Free Syrian Army to oppose Bashar al Assad take place.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sends operatives to Syria in order to recruit fighters for a group that would become ISIS.

JULY 2012

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Opposition forces capture eastern Aleppo and becomes their de facto capital.

Spring 2013

A coalition between ISIS and Al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Al Nusra Front, capture Raqqa.

August 2013

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4

The Syrian government uses chemical weapons in East Ghouta.

SUMMER 2014

ISIS continues to rampage across Syria defeating government forces and other opposition groups. al-Baghdadi moves to Syria and announces the establishment of a caliphate across both Syria and Iraq with himself as leader.

SEPTEMBER 2014

ISIS fighters besiege Kobani near the Turkish border. U.S. policy shifts towards focusing on defeating ISIS. U.S. and coalition partners begin launching strikes against ISIS fighters. The U.S. also continue to pressure the Assad regime to compromise and let another government body take its place.

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Early 2015

Kurdish and U.S. military collaboration sees the defeat of ISIS in Kobani.

March 2015

Al Nusra and its allies capture Idlib.

May 2015

ISIS captures Palmyra in central Syria and with the capture of Idlib in March.

Summer 2015

Russia begins to mobilize forces into the country at its airbase in Latakia Province.



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September 2015

Russia begins conducting airstrikes from its airbase. The Kremlin claims they are against ISIS, but reports show that the majority of the strikes were hitting Western and Turkish-backed groups in northern Syria.

September 2015

Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama meet at the UN General Assembly which kickstarted negotiations that led to a Memorandum of Understanding to “deconflict” the air operations over Syria between the two countries

October 2015

U.S. announces it will deploy Special Ops Forces to northern Syria to assist forces fighting ISIS.

November 2015

Turkey shoots down a Russian Su-24, ameliorating tensions between Turkey and Russia.

December 2015

UN Security Council passes Resolution 2254 to halt hostile actions against the resolution’s signatories, provide humanitarian assistance, and talks on political transition. Al Nusra and ISIS, as terrorist groups, are not involved in this process and still remain targets of U.S., Russia, and allies.

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FEBRUARY 2016

Nationwide ceasefire, concocted by U.S. and Russia, takes effect.

MARCH 2016

Syrian government forces with the help of Russian airpower drive ISIS out of Palmyra.

AUGUST 2016

Syrian Democratic Forces liberated Manbij from ISIS in northern Syria which kickstarted a year and half long campaign with help from the U.S. that resulted in the north and east of Syria being liberated from ISIS.

FALL 2016

Russian and Assad-aligned forces attack eastern Aleppo, cutting off supply routes and humanitarian assistance as provided for by the UN’s Resolution 2254. Indiscriminate bombing takes place against both military and civilian targets.

SDF and the U.S. begin the operation to capture ISIS “capital” Raqqa.



DECEMBER 2016

Russia and Assad capture Aleppo. ISIS regains Palmyra.

U.S. pulls out of plan to share intel with Russia and the Syrian peace process at the UN breaks down.

January 2017

Russia initiates the Astana Process in Kazakhstan to bring out about peace in Syria. In attendance are Russia, Assad, Iran, and Turkey.

March 2017

Syrian government forces recapture Palmyra from ISIS.

April 2017

Assad uses chemical weapons again in Idlib Province in the town of Khan Sheikhoun, killing 89 and injuring 500+. Russia's promise to have secured Syria's chemical weapons stock is proven to be illegitimate.

Three days after this attack, U.S. launched 59 cruise missiles at Shayrat Airbase.

May-Summer 2017

U.S. increases its assistance towards SDF, including providing weaponry.

Rebels abandon Homs after government forces had been sieging it for months. They travel to Idlib province to join other rebel forces in the rebel stronghold area

Russian and Assad forces attempt to clear central Syria of ISIS and capture the town of Dayr-Az-Zawr, which had been under ISIS control since 2014.

SDF gains ground in liberating Raqqa from ISIS.

US and Russian forces closely encroach on each other and both sides agree to a deconfliction channel for both air and ground forces.

September 2017

Government forces capture Dayr-Az-Zawr

October 2017

Raqqa falls to SDF.

Russian and Assad forces capture Mayadin in the lower Euphrates River Valley.

End of 2017

U.S. and Russian forces fight ISIS forces down the Euphrates River, pushing them back even further. Deconfliction channels between the two are especially active in both the air and on the ground.



2018 FEBRUARY 2018

Assad forces attack SDF and U.S. Special Forces advisors, who are positioned east of the Euphrates, near the town Khasham. The U.S. call Russian HQ in the country to tell them to stop the attack, but the Russians deny knowledge of it. The U.S. retaliates and kill over 100 people, including Russian mercenaries.

SPRING 2018

Assad and Russian forces capture Ghouta, near Damascus.

SUMMER 2018

Der'a falls to Assad forces.

SEPTEMBER 2018

Russia agrees to terms with Turkey on a de-escalation agreement for Idlib, the last rebel stronghold, to forestall an attack from Assad forces and to set up Russian and Turkish observation posts around Idlib's borders.

A Syrian air defense battery shoots down a Russian military aircraft accidentally, killing 15, after mistaking it for an Israeli aircraft after Israel had attacked Iranian forces in Syria. In response, Russia delivers the Assad regime S-300 air defense systems.

2019 October 2019

U.S. President Donald Trump announces he is withdrawing forces from northern Syria, which opens the way for a Turkish attack on the SDF. Secy. of Defense James Mattis and Special Envoy for the Counter-ISIL Coalition Brett McGurk resign in response.

General Mazloum Abdi, the leader of the SDF, announces he will allow Assad and Russian forces into SDF-controlled area to counter the Turkish forces.

December 2019

Ignoring de-escalation agreements in Idlib, Russian and Assad warplanes begin a bombing campaign in the province. This campaign continued into 2020 and caused many civilians to flee to Turkey.

2020 FEBRUARY 2020

Assad forces conduct an airstrike on a Turkish military post on the border of Idlib, killing 33 Turkish soldiers. Turkey responds by killing over 300 Assad fighters, destroying over 20 tanks, and downing government aircraft.

MARCH 2020

President Erdogan and President Putin meet in Moscow and agree to another de-escalation agreement in Idlib.



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“It’s your turn, doctor.” Those words, scrawled on a wall by teenagers in the southern Syrian city of Der’a in March 2011, were the harbingers of what has become the bloodiest war started in the 21st century. Within days, the teenagers were arrested, and thousands of people poured into the streets to demand their release. A police crackdown killed at least 100 of the protestors, and unrest spread. By July, protests had erupted in other cities, and Syrian military officers began to defect to form the Free Syrian Army, the first organized opposition to the Bashar al Assad regime. That same month, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of a still obscure al Qaeda splinter group in Iraq, sensed an opportunity in the chaos unfolding in Syria. Baghdadi dispatched operatives to recruit fighters for the group that eventually rampaged across Syria and Iraq under the banner of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In July 2012, opposition forces captured eastern Aleppo and named it their *de facto* capital. The next spring, an opposition coalition that included ISIS and the Al Nusra Front, at the time al Qaeda’s affiliate in Syria, captured Raqqa. The desperate Syrian government turned to chemical weapons, killing hundreds of people in a chemical attack in East Ghouta in August 2013 and crossing a “red line” established by U.S. President Barack Obama the previous year. The Russian Federation, which had been watching nervously as one of its few partners in the Middle East teetered on the verge of collapse, brokered a deal with the United States for the Assad regime to turn over its chemical weapons to avert a U.S. strike.

In summer 2014 ISIS, which had been steadily gaining strength, tore across much of Syria, crushing government forces and other opposition groups alike. Al-Baghdadi, who had moved from Iraq to Syria the previous year, announced the establishment of a caliphate across large parts of both countries,

declared himself its leader, and rebranded his movement the Islamic State. By September, Islamic State fighters had besieged Kobani, along the Turkish border, causing many of its residents to flee. U.S. policy on Syria, which had to this point been ambiguous and uncertain, suddenly had a clear objective: defeat the Islamic State. The United States and its coalition partners launched airstrikes on Islamic State fighters in Syria, and the U.S. military began a program to train and equip so-called “moderate opposition groups” to fight the Islamic State. The United States relied on a separate, clandestine train-and-equip program to put pressure on the Assad regime to compromise and allow for a governing body to take his place.

The year 2015 began with a defeat for the Islamic State, as Kurdish fighters and U.S. airpower forced the terrorist group from Kobani. This first collaboration between the U.S. and Kurdish militias was the kernel that grew into the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an army of some 65,000 fighters, roughly evenly divided between Kurds and Sunni Arabs. While a potent ground force against the Islamic State, the SDF attracted the ire of Turkey, which considered it an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party that Ankara had designated as a terrorist organization.

Despite its setback in Kobani, the Islamic State was far from defeated. In May, it captured the central Syrian city of Palmyra. Coupled with the capture of Idlib two months earlier by the Al Nusra Front and its allies, Palmyra’s fall again put the Assad regime on tenuous footing. From Idlib, the Al Nusra Front could threaten the government’s coastal stronghold of Latakia, and from Palmyra, Islamic State fighters were within striking distance of the capital Damascus. For the Kremlin, it was clear that the window to save its client regime in Damascus was closing. Russia began quietly moving forces and equipment into an airbase at Khmeimim in Latakia Province. By September 2015, it was conducting airstrikes from there, marking the start of the first



Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad meet in Aleppo, Syria. (mil.ru)

Russian military action since the Cold War outside the borders of the former Soviet Union. Although Russia claimed to be striking the Islamic State, most of its early strikes hit Western- and Turkish-backed groups in northern Syria, which it considered a greater threat to the Assad regime.

In October, the United States announced the deployment of Special Operations Forces (SOF) to northern Syria to advise forces fighting the Islamic State there. This marked the first overt deployment of U.S. ground forces to Syria and took cooperation between the United States and the still-nascent SDF to a new level. With aircraft from the U.S.-led coalition and Russia flying over Syria, and with both sides having boots on the ground, the danger of mistakes and miscalculation was high. After a meeting between Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in late September, the United States and

Russia began negotiations that eventually produced a Memorandum of Understanding establishing a channel to “deconflict” the two sides’ air operations over Syria, although the agreement did not guarantee that the two sides would not come into contact.¹

The U.S.-Russian air deconfliction mechanism eased the building tension between the two air forces and reduced the chance of an accidental escalation between them. But, in November, Russia found that the United States was not the only threat that it faced in the air. That month, a Turkish F-16 shot down a Russian Su-24 along the Syrian-Turkish border, raising tensions between Moscow and Ankara to levels not seen since the Cold War. The threat of an expanded war focused minds and gave the Syrian peace process a much-needed boost. In December 2015, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2254 (UNSCR 2254), which called for a cessation of hostilities among signatories, unimpeded

¹ Lisa Ferdinando, “U.S., Russia Sign Memorandum on Air Safety in Syria,” *U.S. Department of Defense*, October 20, 2015, internet resource at: <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/624964/us-russia-sign-memorandum-on-air-safety-in-syria/>, accessed July 17, 2020.

delivery of humanitarian assistance, and talks on political transition. The Al Nusra Front and the Islamic State—both UN-designated terrorist groups—were left out of the peace process and remained legitimate targets for the United States, Russia, and their allies.

Winter and spring 2016 were the most hopeful time for peace since the start of the war. In February, a nationwide ceasefire, jointly brokered by the United States and Russia, took effect. In March, Syrian government forces, backed by Russian airpower, chased the Islamic State from Palmyra. As spring turned to summer, relentless U.S. and Russian airstrikes, combined with increasingly capable ground forces allied with the two, began to have an effect. In August, the SDF liberated the northern Syrian town of Manbij from the Islamic State, the beginning of an 18-month campaign by the SDF, with U.S. support, that would see the entire north and east of Syria liberated from the terrorist group's control.

Russia, meanwhile, was using the cessation of hostilities for its own purposes. The recapture of Palmyra by government forces removed the immediate Islamic State threat. So Russian and Syrian government forces turned their attention to Aleppo, the eastern half of which was then under the control of a coalition of rebel groups, most of whom were signatories to the cessation of hostilities agreement and therefore not legitimate targets. The attack on eastern Aleppo followed a pattern that Russia and the Assad regime used in many rebel-held cities.

First, they cut supply routes into the city and prevent humanitarian assistance provided for under UNSCR 2254 from reaching it. Next, they began a bombing campaign that did not discriminate between terrorist groups and legitimate opposition groups that were parties to the cessation of hostilities. Russian and Syrian bombing also did not discriminate between legitimate military targets and civilian targets, such as schools, hospitals, and residential areas. Having choked off

humanitarian assistance to the city and subjecting it to relentless and indiscriminate bombing, the Russian military then offered to open “humanitarian corridors,” allowing rebel fighters to leave along with civilians. In most cases, these people were moved to Idlib Province, which was filled with opposition groups—from moderate, Western-backed groups, to Turkish-backed groups and UN-designated terrorist groups.

RUSSIA RESPONDED TO THE BREAKDOWN OF THE GENEVA PEACE PROCESS— LARGELY OF MOSCOW'S OWN MAKING—BY LAUNCHING A PARALLEL PROCESS THAT EXCLUDED THE UNITED STATES AND UNITED NATIONS

As Russia and the Assad regime besieged eastern Aleppo in fall 2016, the SDF, with support from the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, launched an operation to capture Raqqa, which the Islamic State had designed as its Syrian “capital.” December saw both victory and defeat for Russia and the Syrian government: Their operation to capture eastern Aleppo succeeded, but the Islamic State again captured Palmyra, pushing out the government forces that had liberated it seven months earlier. The fall of Aleppo made clear that Moscow and Washington had widely divergent views on the implementation



Aleppo, Syria. (mil.ru)

of UNSCR 2254 and incompatible strategic objectives for Syria. The United States pulled out of a nascent plan for a U.S.-Russian intelligence-sharing and joint targeting center in Geneva, and the Syrian peace process at the United Nations there devolved into acrimony and recriminations between its co-chairs.

Russia responded to the breakdown of the Geneva peace process—largely of Moscow's own making—by launching a parallel process that excluded the United States and United Nations. In January 2017, the first meeting of the Astana Process took place in the capital of Kazakhstan, attended by Russia, the Assad regime, Iran, and Turkey. Bringing Turkey on board was a coup for Moscow and demonstrated how far Russian-Turkish relations had come since their nadir in November 2015 after Turkey downed the Russian warplane.

In March, Palmyra once again changed hands when government forces wrested it from the Islamic State. In April, the Assad regime again

used chemical weapons against a rebel-held area. This time, the attack came in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib Province, killing at least 89 people and injuring over 500. Aside from the fact that it was a clear war crime, the attack proved that Russia's promise to have secured all of Syria's chemical weapons was hollow. This time, U.S. retribution was swift: Three days after the attack, the United States launched 59 cruise missiles at Shayrat Airbase, where the Trump administration claimed the attack had originated.

In May 2017, the United States stepped up its assistance to the SDF, when it began providing weapons in addition to the non-lethal equipment and advisors that it had been providing for 18 months. That same month, rebel forces abandoned Homs, which had been under siege by government forces for months. Many of the rebel fighters evacuated to Idlib Province, where they joined other rebel groups in what was fast becoming the lone remaining rebel stronghold in western Syria. Having secured Palmyra and Homs—and having no answer for what to do about



(mil.ru)

Idlib—Russian and government forces began a sustained campaign against Islamic State forces in central Syria. The objective of this campaign was to clear Islamic State fighters from the central Syrian desert and capture the town of Dayr-Az-Zawr, along the Euphrates River.

The largest city in eastern Syria, Dayr-Az-Zawr had been under Islamic State control since 2014, but two garrisons of Syrian government forces held out there, refusing to surrender or withdraw. For this reason, the liberation of the city held considerable value for the Russian and Assad regime narrative that they were turning the tide in the civil war. As government forces, supported by Russian advisors and air power, fought their way across the central Syrian desert toward the Euphrates, with sights set on Dayr-Az-Zawr, the U.S.-backed SDF was steadily gaining the upper hand in its fight to liberate Raqqa from the Islamic State, farther up the Euphrates, and preparing to fight its way down the east bank of the river. With U.S. and

Russian ground forces converging along the Euphrates, the chance of miscalculation and accidental clashes between them rose. So, as they had in the skies over Syria, Washington and Moscow set up a deconfliction channel for their ground forces and eventually reached a more detailed air deconfliction arrangement.

As summer 2017 turned to fall, U.S.- and Russian-backed forces in Syria enjoyed a series of victories over the Islamic State in the Euphrates River Valley. In September, Dayr-Az-Zawr fell to government forces, providing a huge boost to morale. In October, Raqqa—the terrorist group’s Syrian “capital”—fell to the SDF. That same month, Assad regime and Russian forces captured Mayadin in the lower Euphrates River Valley. As 2017 ended, U.S.-backed and Russian-backed forces fought their way down the Euphrates toward the Iraqi border, sending Islamic State fighters reeling before them. Both the air and ground deconfliction channels were exceptionally active during this period, with the Euphrates River the only boundary between ground

forces, and U.S. and Russian aircraft operating on both sides of the river.

As 2018 began, the war seemed to be winding down. The Islamic State's "caliphate" had been overrun by government forces and their allies west of the Euphrates and by the U.S.-backed SDF east of the river. While there were still a few rebel-held areas in western Syria, none posed a threat to the Assad regime in the way that they had prior to Russia's intervention in 2015. The regime and its Russian sponsor still had no answer to the problem of rebel-held Idlib Province, but had it surrounded and contained so that the groups there posed no real threat. The U.S. military garrison at Al-Tanf, west of the Euphrates in the Syria-Jordan-Iraq tri-border region, still rankled Damascus and Moscow, but also posed no threat to regime control elsewhere in the country. And the U.S.-backed SDF, which controlled almost the entire country east of the Euphrates, insisted on managing its own affairs and resisted government control. These were problems that could be resolved over time. None of them were urgent, and none eclipsed the fact that in just over two years, Russia's intervention had prevented the fall of the Syrian regime and helped it regain control over most of Syria.

Then regime forces and their allies pushed too far. In February, flush with their recent success against the Islamic State, pro-regime forces attacked the SDF and their U.S. Special forces advisors east of the Euphrates, near the town of Khasham. The United States activated the ground deconfliction line, notifying the Russian headquarters at Khmeimim that unless the attack stopped it would retaliate. The Russian headquarters disavowed knowledge of the attack.² The U.S. then carried out massive air and artillery strikes on the attacking forces, killing well over 100 of them and ending the attack. Included in the dead were mercenaries from

the Russian Wagner Group. The Russian military downplayed the attack, claiming it had no knowledge of it or control over it, even though at one point they did ask the United States to call off the attack.

Stymied east of the Euphrates, the Assad regime turned its attention to clearing the remaining small pockets of rebel control in the west. In spring 2018, regime and Russian forces captured eastern Ghouta, in the Damascus suburbs; that summer, Der'a—the place where it all started seven years before—fell to the government. In September, the Assad regime turned its attention to Idlib, the last major pocket of resistance west of the Euphrates, and one in which Turkish-backed rebel groups were prominent. To avoid an escalation that could draw Turkey directly into the war, Russia brokered a new de-escalation agreement for Idlib, forestalling a regime attack and establishing Russian and Turkish observation posts around the borders of the rebel-held area.

That same month, escalation occurred from an unexpected quarter. A Syrian air defense battery, responding to an Israeli airstrike against Iranian forces in Syria—Tel Aviv and Tehran had quietly been fighting a proxy war against each other there—accidentally shot down a Russian military aircraft, killing all 15 of its crew. In response, Russia announced it was delivering S-300 air defense systems to Syria to better enable the Assad regime to deal with threats from the air. After the de-escalation deal in Idlib and the downing of the Russian plane, the rest of 2018 and early 2019 passed in an unstated and uneasy truce among all the disparate parties.

Late 2019 saw renewed escalation. First, in October, U.S. President Donald Trump announced suddenly that he was withdrawing American forces from northern Syria, opening the way for a Turkish offensive against the

² Email exchange with the Director of the Russian Ground Deconfliction Cell, Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, February 8, 2018.

SDF. The announcement caused a wave of resignations in the U.S. government—among them, Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Special Envoy for the Counter-ISIL Coalition Brett McGurk—and threw U.S. Syria policy into renewed disarray. The move was a boon not only to Turkey, which quickly moved against the SDF in northern Syria, but also to Russia and the Assad regime. General Mazloum Abdi, the leader of the SDF, announced a deal to allow Syrian government and Russian forces into part of the area under SDF control to prevent further Turkish incursions. Mazloum framed the deal this way, “If we have to choose between compromises and the genocide of our people, we will surely choose life for our people.”³

This second escalation in late 2019 came, again, in Idlib. Ignoring the de-escalation agreement there, Syrian and Russian warplanes began a relentless bombing campaign in December. The bombing continued into early 2020, causing a wave of civilians to flee north toward Turkey. In late February, a regime airstrike hit a Turkish military post on the borders of the rebel-held area of Idlib, killing at least 33 Turkish soldiers. Turkey’s response was swift and massive, killing over 300 pro-regime fighters, destroying over 20 tanks and downing several Syrian aircraft. As escalation continued and direct conflict between Turkish and Russian forces loomed, Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin met in Moscow in early March, inking another de-escalation agreement. Under this agreement, Russian and Turkish forces would conduct joint ground patrols in Idlib, and airstrikes would be suspended.

As summer 2020 grinds on and the 5th anniversary of Russia’s intervention approaches, Syria presents a far different picture than it did in September 2015. The Assad regime, which was teetering on the


edge of collapse then, now controls most of Syria. The Syrian armed forces have regained much of their fighting power thanks to Russian assistance, although Turkey’s attacks in Idlib have done real damage. The strategic partnership between Moscow and Damascus, which had withered in the post-Cold War period, has been revitalized, as has Russia’s geopolitical presence in the Levant and eastern Mediterranean. The Russian armed forces have been transformed by their experience in the war and present a far greater problem for Western militaries than they did five short years ago. For all these reasons, Russia’s intervention in Syria can be seen as a success.

**THE RUSSIAN ARMED
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A FAR GREATER
PROBLEM FOR WESTERN
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DID FIVE SHORT YEARS
AGO.**

But the war is not over and could still escalate again. Conflict among regional powers like Turkey, Israel, and Iran is still possible. And despite the success of the deconfliction arrangements at preventing conflict between

3 Tareq Haddad, “Kurds Strike Deal with Putin and Assad in Syria: ‘We Had to Choose Between Compromises and the Genocide of our People,’” *Newsweek*, October 14, 2019, internet resource at: <https://www.newsweek.com/kurds-strike-deal-putin-assad-syria-donald-trump-criticized-1464950>, accessed July 21, 2020.

the United States and Russia so far, the potential for mistakes and miscalculations will exist as long as both militaries are operating in Syria and in the skies over it. The U.S. garrison at Al-Tanf still rankles Damascus and Moscow and complicates Tehran's efforts to establish a zone of influence from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. Despite Turkey's operation against the SDF and the subsequent agreement of the SDF to allow Russian and regime forces into part of its zone of control, eastern Syria is still largely not under government control. Neither the problem of Al-Tanf nor the problem of eastern Syria can be resolved without the acquiescence of the United States, and Moscow seems to have little idea how to gain it.

Idlib is still probably the most dangerous place on earth, where jihadist groups co-exist uneasily with moderate opposition groups, all ringed by Russian, Turkish, Syrian-regime, and Iranian-backed forces, themselves in uneasy co-existence. The March 2020 de-escalation agreement, like its predecessors, is unlikely to last. Eventually, an escalation between proxy groups is likely to draw in their state sponsors, or the Assad regime—with or without a green light from Moscow—will renew its offensive, bringing it into renewed conflict with Turkey and threatening to draw in Russia. If violence escalates again in Idlib, new waves of refugees, doubtless with jihadist fighters mixed in, will push north toward the Turkish border. Rather than deal with the problem itself, Turkey will likely open its own borders to the European Union to force its neighbors Bulgaria and Greece to deal with it, as Erdogan did in March. As this picture makes clear, Russia's intervention has achieved much, but has not solved the problem that is Syria. 

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