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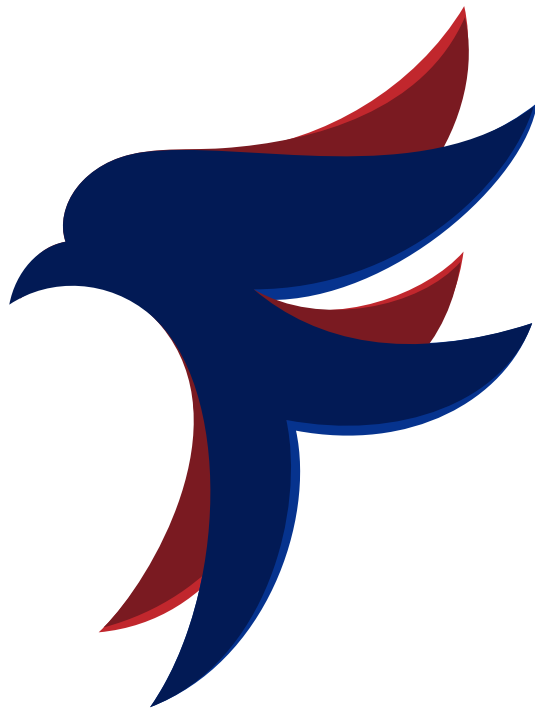
RUSSIA'S WAR IN SYRIA

# SYRIA AND THE RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES

## AN EVALUATION OF MOSCOW'S MILITARY STRATEGY AND OPERATIONAL PERFORMANCE

MICHAEL KOFMAN





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*A nation must think before it acts*

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## An Evaluation of Moscow's Military Strategy and Operational Performance

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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# INTRODUCTION

The Russian Federation's intervention in Syria has been a qualified success from the Kremlin's perspective, and certainly from the Russian General Staff's. The expeditionary operation has accomplished many of the initial objectives of the campaign and continues to serve the institutional interests of the Russian military. True, the war is not over, and Russia's "victory" may yet prove a thorny crown to wear, as it has for countless other great powers who came to the Middle East in search of influence. However, Russia's military operation merits examination, particularly because at the time of initiation, many had presumed the outcome would be a quagmire.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the war in Syria has proven a crucible for evolution in Russian operational art, capability development, and strategy. It will influence an entire generation of military leadership.

A systemic examination of the intervention would seek to first establish what was known about the original Russian political goals, understanding that the ends sought may change over the course of a war, and the extent to which the military campaign was able to accomplish them. Did the Russian military strategy marry with the political ends, and were the ways and means visibly linked to supporting those objectives? This chapter seeks to understand how Moscow was able to achieve relative success in saving the Syrian regime, destroying the opposition, and aiding Assad in recapturing much of Syria's population centers. This chapter also briefly reviews Russia's road to war and its political objectives in Syria, then conducts an in-depth evaluation of Russia's military performance in the Syrian War and the war's impact on Russian military capabilities.

# THE ROAD TO WAR

The Russian deployment to Syria was the logical conclusion of the original position Moscow took at the start of the civil war in Syria, but, at the same time, it was an accident of history. Although Russian-Syrian relations had an extensive Cold War legacy, with Syria becoming a full-fledged Soviet client state in the 1970s, Russian-Syrian relations were transactional by 2011. At the time, there was no discernible Russian strategy to become a power broker in the Middle East, and no notable military activity that could make use of Syria's strategic position in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia's relationship with Syria did contribute to Moscow's status as a great power in international politics, a sort of Middle East outpost that suggested interests and influence in another region. But it was more faux than real. There was little to the relationship beyond arms sales, and Syria's significance was minimal both in a geopolitical and military sense.

It is the Russian involvement in the civil war, and eventual introduction of forces in September 2015, that dramatically upgraded the relationship and the military relevance of Syria to broader ambitions that emerged over the course of those years. Like other classical great powers, Moscow grew hungrier from the eating, becoming more ambitious after seeing success in the Syrian war, thereby making the country an outpost for its expanded interests in the region after 2016. Only after launching combat operations did Moscow sign a 49-year agreement to lease the Tartus naval base, dramatically expanded the facility to actually meet Russian naval requirements, and began

<sup>1</sup> Alistair Bell and Tom Perry, "Obama warns Russia's Putin of 'quagmire' in Syria," *Reuters*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-airstrikes/obama-warns-russias-putin-of-quagmire-in-syria-idUSKCN0R-W0W220151003>.

to entrench its forces in Syria.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Syria was hardly the centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, nor was the United States particularly antagonistic towards the Bashar al-Assad regime in the run-up to the outbreak of civil war. If anything, U.S.-Syrian relations appeared to be warming.<sup>3</sup>

## RUSSIA WANTED TO DRAW A LINE IN THE SAND AT SYRIA AND PREVENT WHAT IT CAME TO VIEW AS A POLICY THAT LED TO STATE COLLAPSE, DEMONSTRATED BEST BY LIBYA'S IMPLOSION FOLLOWING THE U.S.- AND EUROPEAN-LED INTERVENTION IN MARCH 2011.

When protests began in Syria in spring 2011, Russia and the United States found

themselves on opposite sides. The contest would be waged via diplomacy in the United Nations and as a bloody proxy conflict between several intervening states as Syria descended into civil war. Moscow's principal concern was that following Libya, the United States would use the internal crisis as an opportunity to conduct regime change. Russia wanted to draw a line in the sand at Syria and prevent what it came to view as a policy that led to state collapse, demonstrated best by Libya's implosion following the U.S.- and European-led intervention in March 2011. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made Moscow's position clear, "Some leaders of the coalition forces, and later the NATO secretary-general, called the Libyan operation a 'model' for the future. As for Russia, we will not allow anything like this to happen again in the future." Lavrov noted that any scenario "involving military intervention in Syrian affairs is absolutely unacceptable for us."<sup>4</sup>

Statements from senior Russian leaders during this period reflected fears that the United States saw Libya as a model to replicate. Moscow intended to veto this in the case of Syria. The Russian intervention in 2015 was multicausal, serving several goals, with a range of stakeholders among Russian elites beyond Vladimir Putin himself. Some of the reasons stated were undoubtedly rationalizations, but elites often believe in things that an analyst might dismiss as cynicism or post-hoc justification. Ideology, elite perceptions, and personalities play a role in such decisions.

2 "Moscow close to finalizing deal to lease Syria's Tartus port for 49 years," RFE/RL, April 21, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/moscow-damascus-near-deal-on-lease-syrian-port-tartus/29894114.html>.

3 Hillary Clinton even stated, "There's a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer. See, Glen Kessler, "Hillary Clinton's incredible statement on Syria," Washington Post, April 4, 2011.

4 See, Lavrov's statements in: "Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at Joint Press Conference with UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah Al Nahyan," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, November 1, 2011; and as quoted in James Brooke, "Syria: Russia Clings to Legacy of Soviet Ties in Arab World," Voice of America, November 29, 2011, <http://blogs.voanews.com/russia-watch/2011/11/29/syria-russia-clings-tolegacy-of-soviet-ties-in-arab-world/>.



President Bashar al-Assad meets with President Putin and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu in 2020 (kremlin.ru)

## RUSSIAN POLITICAL OBJECTIVES

The proximate cause of Russia's intervention was Assad's looming defeat in 2015, despite almost five years of Russian and Iranian efforts to aid him in the war. By April 2015, Assad faced an opposing coalition of Jabhat al-Nusra fighters and various opposition groups, calling itself the Army of Conquest, which was threatening the population centers under his control in the north. Meanwhile, the Islamic State (ISIS) pressed from the east, capturing Palmyra, pushing back Assad's forces on multiple fronts. Russian policy, initiated in 2011, was failing, and Iran was lobbying for a coordinated military intervention.<sup>5</sup> Russian elites firmly believed that the regime's collapse would end in

Islamic State and various al Qaeda affiliates in charge of a dismembered Syria. From Moscow's perspective, the implosion of Syria would further destabilize the region, with Sunni extremists invading neighboring states, eventually sending radicalized fighters into Russian parts of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Libya experience loomed large, given that Damascus was geographically much closer than Tripoli, and thousands of Russian citizens had already joined the extremist groups fighting there.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, some in Moscow saw the war as a preventive conflict against jihadists, a sort of "fight them over there" rationalization that had been widespread in the United States during the George W. Bush administration. The wider context played an important role. U.S.-Russian relations had seemingly reached a nadir after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with the United States and Europe imposing

<sup>5</sup> "Iran Quds chief visited Russia despite U.N. travel ban: Iran official," *Reuters*, August 7, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-iran-soleimani-idUSKCN0QC1KM20150807>.

<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Frolov, "Signing In is Easier than Quitting," *Vedomosti*, September 29, 2016, accessed December 19, 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/amp/a00ffd6a64/opinion/articles/2016/09/29/658952-voiti-legche-viiti>



sanctions, and Washington attempting to isolate Moscow internationally. In 2011, Russia sought to veto U.S. foreign policy and avert what its leaders expected to be an American attempt at regime change in Syria. But this contest with relatively lower stakes paled in comparison to the circumstances in which Moscow found itself in 2015. Facing an economic and political pressure campaign by the United States and its European allies, Russia's risk tolerance increased along with the stakes, making Syria much more significant as a front in that confrontation.<sup>7</sup>

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Furthermore, Syria presented an opportunity to take the escalating political contest out of Europe to a flank theater like the Middle East, where terms were much more favorable to Russia. Moscow hoped that the intervention would outmaneuver the United States, force it to deal with Russia as an equal, and coerce Washington to abandon sanctions imposed over Ukraine. A successful expeditionary operation in Syria could also upgrade Russia's international standing and return it as a player in the Middle East, conferring the status of an indispensable actor.<sup>8</sup> This might seem to read outcome as cause, but ambition creep is not uncommon, with military success driving aspirations.

## **RUSSIAN MILITARY STRATEGY**

The first objective that the military campaign had to achieve was a restoration of the Syrian state's power, not necessarily Assad's personally. Hence, Russia intervened in the role of a "sovereignty provider" to avoid the collapse of the regime.<sup>9</sup> There was never an intent to engage in nation building, reconstruction, or political transformation in Syria. This required a successful military campaign, followed by a political settlement, though the former would largely decide the outcome of the latter. Although Russia entered Syria with a deliberate strategy, it

7 Section based partly on: Michael Kofman, "A Tale of Two Campaigns: U.S. and Russian Military Operations in Syria," in *Пути к миру и безопасности* [Pathways to Peace and Security], No 1 (52), IMEMO, 2017; and Michael Kofman, "US and Russia in Syria's War: Cooperation and Competition," in *The War in Syria: Lessons for the West*, Andis Kudors, Artis Pabriks eds. (University of Latvia Press, Riga 2016), pp. 65-88. Also, see, Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, Edward Geist, "Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria," RAND Corporation, 2019, p. 3-9, for a useful discussion on this subject.

8 This argument is based on the author's previous work in Michael Kofman and Matt Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?," *Military Review*, January 2018, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Army-Press-Online-Journal/documents/Rojansky-v2.pdf>; but also analysis by Dmitry Adamsky, "Moscow's Syria Campaign: Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 109, Ifri, July 2018, p. 6.

9 Andrey Sushentsov, for example, references Russia as a "sovereignty provider" in his commentary on the Russian deal with Turkey, permitting Turkey to further reduce its dependency on the United States. Andrey Sushentsov, "C-400 в Турции: зонт в дождливую погоду [S-400 in Turkey: an umbrella in rainy weather]," Valdai Club, August 5, 2019.





Meeting on Russian forces in Syria, 2015 (kremlin.ru)

did not survive first contact with realities on the ground. Rather than stick to one enduring political and military strategy, Moscow would course-correct several times in Syria, announcing withdrawals, altering expectations based on the changed circumstances, and changing the direction of military operations.

The Russian approach could best be described as an emergent or “lean” strategy in this case, avoiding sunk costs and remaining flexible in the ways employed to achieve the desired ends.<sup>10</sup> In practice, this means changing key elements of the strategy, the means employed, ways, and adjusting the theory of victory in response to friction or failure. Emergent approaches favor pursuing multiple vectors simultaneously, with quick

iterations in decision making to adjust course. Furthermore, operational objectives had to be reconciled with those of local allies, including the Syrian regime, Iran, and Hezbollah. As a result, the Russian military strategy had to be premised on flexibility and adaptability, operating in a coalition environment. The Russian theory of victory was governed by the principle of reasonable sufficiency, both imposed by objective constraints in means available for the expeditionary operation, but equally through discipline.<sup>11</sup>

Importantly, Russian thinking was not means driven. The operation retained a small footprint, which was continuously managed in-country and calibrated even when the means and operating environment afforded a much larger presence. Sufficiency as a

<sup>10</sup> For more on emergent strategy in strategy making and foreign policy, see: Ionut Popescu, *Emergent Strategy and Grand Strategy: How American Presidents Succeed in Foreign Policy*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> For further exposition on reasonable sufficiency as a guiding principle in Russian strategy, see, Michael Kofman, “A Comparative guide to Russia’s use of force: measure twice, invade once,” *War on the Rocks*, February 16, 2017; and Dmitry Adamsky, “Moscow’s Syria Campaign: Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy,” *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 109, Ifri, July 2018, p. 11.

principle tends to privilege gradualism, and takes more time, but, in an operationally permissive environment, entailed fewer costs and risks. Beyond the initial surge of capabilities to execute the deployment into Syria, Russia never substantially increased the resources allocated to the conflict.

Moreover, the Russian strategy was premised on Syrian, Iranian, and other forces doing the fighting. These would subsequently be supplemented by Russian mercenaries, for example private military company (ChVK) Wagner Group, fielded in the form of several battalion tactical groups. Russia's military and political leaders sought to avoid getting sucked into Syria, and eventually being in a position where they were being used by local actors rather than having leverage themselves. Hence, the Russian task force regularly pulled forces out of theater back to Russia. This minimized Russian exposure to casualties, political costs, and the financial burden of maintaining a force larger than necessary in Syria. Some observed that it also reflected a change in Russian military attitude from previous conflicts, as retired General of the Army Petr Deynekin commented, "The most important thing is that we learned to value people."<sup>12</sup> Moscow sought to represent the other actors as a broker in international discussions, but never to end up with ownership of the conflict.

Third, Moscow sought to neutralize opposition groups, making no distinction between al Qaeda affiliates, ISIS, or the so-called "moderate" Syrian opposition. The opposition groups were conveniently labeled as terrorist organizations, which made sense from the Russian and Syrian political perspective, making much of Syria a target for joint bombardment. Destroying the opposition was a battlefield necessity, but also an integral part of a coercion strategy to get external parties to the conflict to the negotiating table on favorable terms. The war

would never end if powerful external actors, such as Turkey, the United States, and various Arab-majority states, continued to funnel weapons and fighters into the conflict zone believing that victory on the battlefield was possible. This approach was married with dissuasion towards others, namely, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, and convincing them that they did not need to oppose the Russian intervention in order to achieve their objectives in Syria. This part of the strategy was aimed at changing the strategies of other players by convincing them through coercion aimed at their proxies to abandon their existing theories of victory for the war.

## DESTROYING THE OPPOSITION WAS A BATTLEFIELD NECESSITY, BUT ALSO AN INTEGRAL PART OF A COERCION STRATEGY TO GET EXTERNAL PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE ON FAVORABLE TERMS.

There was also a diplomatic effort to wrap the Russian operation as part of a counter-terrorism coalition in support of the Syrian state and pressure the United States to join. That gambit began from the outset in September 2015 when Vladimir Putin addressed the United Nations General Assembly in an

<sup>12</sup> Oleg Falichev, "СИРИЯ УРОКОВ, военно-промышленный курьер [a Syria of Lessons, Military-Industrial Courier]," No. 31, August 17, 2016.





U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry stands with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on November 14, 2015, at the Hotel Imperial in Vienna, Austria, as they each deliver statements condemning the terrorist attacks in Paris, France, before co-chairing a multinational meeting focused on the future of Syria. [State Department Photo/Public Domain]

attempt to frame Russia's actions as part of a broader fight against terrorism, "We think it is an enormous mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian government and its armed forces, who are valiantly fighting terrorism face to face. We should finally acknowledge that no one but President Assad's armed forces and Kurdish militias are truly fighting the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Syria," and "We must join efforts to address the problems that all of us are facing and create a genuinely broad international coalition against terrorism."<sup>13</sup>

This continued through the Obama administration's tenure, as then-Secretary of State John Kerry and Sergei Lavrov negotiated

throughout summer 2016 to upgrade bilateral interactions from deconfliction to a de facto cooperation agreement called a Joint Implementation Group.<sup>14</sup> The Russian purpose was to use Syria to achieve objectives relevant to the bilateral relationship, ending the Western consensus on sanctions and reframing U.S.-Russia relations after Ukraine in a sort of forced reset as the outcome of this cooperation.

<sup>13</sup> "Read Putin's U.N. General Assembly speech," *Washington Post*, September 28, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/28/readputins-u-n-general-assembly-speech/>.

<sup>14</sup> Josh Rogin, "Obama's Syria plan teams up American and Russian forces," *Washington Post*, July 13, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/obamas-syria-plan-teams-up-american-and-russian-forces/2016/07/13/8d7777cc-4935-11e6-acbc-4d4870a079da\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.21ebf154a418](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/obamas-syria-plan-teams-up-american-and-russian-forces/2016/07/13/8d7777cc-4935-11e6-acbc-4d4870a079da_story.html?utm_term=.21ebf154a418).

## DEPLOYMENT, LOGISTICS, AND FORCE STRUCTURE

The initial deployment consisted of 33 aircraft and 17 helicopters, primarily modernized Soviet workhorses such as 12 Su-24M2 bombers, 12 Su-25SM/UB attack aircraft, four Su-34 bombers, and four S-30SM heavy multirole fighters along with one reconnaissance plane. The helicopter contingent was composed of 12 attack helicopters (Mi-24P) and five transports (Mi-8AMTSh).<sup>15</sup> As the campaign progressed, particularly after Turkey shot down a Russian Su-24 bomber in November 2015, this contingent was reinforced with an additional four Su-35 air superiority fighters, four Su-34 bombers, and upgraded Mi-35 attack helicopters. Russian air defense assets at Khmeimim Air Base were reinforced with a S-400 battery, electronic warfare units, and greater force protection.

Initially, a company of T-90A tanks deployed to the base along with Naval Infantry from the 810<sup>th</sup> brigade. Later, secondary air defense units would arrive, with a S-300V4 battery and another S-400 battery further afield to cover the eastern half of Syria. Beyond air-based fire support and strikes, artillery companies would also deploy to the combat zone for closer support, including towed MST-A batteries. Russia's Special Operations Command (KSO), which had been undergoing

rapid evolution as a recently created special forces unit, took on an increasingly prominent role in supporting combat operations with diversionary operations, punitive raids, and target designation missions.

Russian operations were supported by sea via a standing squadron in the Eastern Mediterranean (although often most of the ships were support or logistical in nature), focusing on maintaining the sea lines of communication, which had been dubbed in earlier years of 2011-2015 as the "Syrian Express." Given limitations in availability and transportable tonnage via landing ship tank (LST) vessels, this capacity was supplemented by bulk cargo ships purchased from Turkey and an air link utilizing primarily Il-76 strategic airlifters, along with a few much heavier An-124 transports.<sup>16</sup> These aircraft typically flew routes over the Caspian Sea and through Iranian airspace, which would also be used by Russian Long Range Aviation (LRA) when delivering strikes from the mainland.<sup>17</sup> According to the Russian Minister of Defense, there were 342 supply trips by sea and 2,278 via air transport by 2018. A total of 1.608 million tons of supplies and equipment had been delivered.<sup>18</sup> The logistics were not scalable, but sufficient for the Russian deployment, and the combination of air and sea lift could be recreated elsewhere.

15 Ruslan Pukhov, "Russian Military, Diplomatic and Humanitarian Assistance" in *Syrian Frontier*, ed. M.U. Shepova-Ilenko, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2016), pp. 105-107, <http://cast.ru/upload/iblock/686/6864bf9d4485b9cd83cc3614575e646a.pdf>.

16 An-124s were used to deliver helicopters into theater.

17 These aircraft typically flew out of Mozdok airbase in North Ossetia, over the Caspian and then turned towards Syria, occasionally refueling in Iran.

18 The bulk of these supplies were delivered by sea lines of communications, much of it via four bulk cargo ships purchased from Turkey. "Операция в Сирии показала силы России [Operation in Syria showed Russia's strength]," *Red Star*, January 31, 2018, <http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/news-menu/vesti/v-voennyh-okrugah/iz-tsentralnogo-voenno-go-okruga/item/35940-operatsiya-v-sirii-pokazala-silu-rossii?attempt=1>.



## COMMAND AND CONTROL

Russian military reforms from 2008-2012 had sought to flatten the number of echelons involved in combat operations, while increasing the situational awareness and timeliness of information flow between responsible command and control (C2) structures. At the top of this structure sat the National Defense Management Center (NDMC), integrating the operating picture between the mixed combat grouping in Syria, the Ministry of Defense, and national political leadership. This organization was a sort of Stavka, or high command.<sup>19</sup> The Southern Military District, which provided logistics, controlled force flow, and long-range strikes from the mainland was a high echelon command in a supporting role. Coordination appeared to take place at the level of Deputy Military District Commander. The Russian contingent in Syria would typically be considered an operational level force, but, in that role, it was actually a strategic element with a senior commander.

At the beginning, the operational planning began with a cell in the Russian General Staff, details were filled in by the operational group commander in Khmeimim in charge of Russian forces on the ground. This process flow was also supposed to include the Syrian General Staff, as though Syria still had a functioning institutionalized military. However, the Syrian command proved incompetent for the task, and much of the operational-level planning reverted to the Russian commander in Syria.<sup>20</sup> This was done in conjunction with a combat

management group, which worked round-the-clock shifts at the NDMC and coordinated with other countries. Within Khmeimim, the lowest echelon was the planning cell, which collected representatives from different Syrian fighting formations at the command, dividing the country into zones of responsibility among the planning officers. According to the recollections of Aleksandr Dvornikov, one of the generals who commanded the task force in Syria, initially these were staffed with 3-5 planners, but the cells eventually grew to planning groups of 15-20.<sup>21</sup>

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Planning cells were formed around the operations being executed. For example, a naval aviation operations cell was formed at one point composed of 12 Black Sea Fleet

19 This characterization was made by Dima Adamsky in: Dmitry Adamsky, "Moscow's Syria Campaign: Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 109, Ifri, July 2018, p. 18.

20 Aleksandr Dvornikov, "штабы для новых воинов [Headquarters for new warriors]," *Military-Industrial Courier*, 28 (741), July 24, 2018.

21 Aleksandr Dvornikov, "штабы для новых воинов [Headquarters for new warriors]," *Military-Industrial Courier*, 28 (741), July 24, 2018.



and Northern Fleet officers. Task forces were created at the tactical level; for example, a counter-Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) group was formed within the force protection cell. Finally, the Center for Reconciliation of Belligerents in Syria was a lateral grouping and was an important attachment to the Russian operation, as this Center worked to organize ceasefires, monitor so-called de-escalation zones, and help turn entire towns to the Syrian regime side. This Center took on the responsibility for de-confliction with U.S. operations in theater. The entire C2 structure benefitted from new automated systems of command and control, steadily being deployed across the Russian forces at all echelons, and the march of digitization making its way through the military's communication infrastructure. A unified communications network increased combat management tempo, reduced decision-making time, allowed a steady data flow, and improved battle damage assessment.<sup>22</sup>

## OPERATIONAL DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The initial Russian operation sought to restore ground lines of communication and main roads linking infrastructure with the goal of breaking out pockets of Syrian forces from encirclement. Russian forces targeted transport arteries linking Damascus, Hama, and Aleppo. They also sought to break through to Syrian forces at Kvaires Air Base.<sup>23</sup> The Russian air campaign first attempted to change the momentum on the battlefield, halt the advance against Assad's forces, and bolster the morale of regime units and affiliated militias by providing them with combat air power. Russian airpower halted the advance of Syrian opposition forces, though early probing attacks organized with Syrian units made little headway. Most of the

22 Dmitry Adamsky, "Moscow's Syria Campaign: Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy," *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 109, Ifri, July 2018, p. 19.

23 Aleksandr Lapin, "Сирийская Академия [The Syrian Academy]," *Military-Industrial Courier*, Number 16 (729) April 24, 2018.

strikes focused on Syrian opposition, although there was an attempt at a punitive campaign against the Islamic State in November 2015 after the bombing of Russia's Metrojet flight 9268 out of Egypt.<sup>24</sup>

In the first several months, Russia had helped Syrian and Iranian forces recapture perhaps only two percent of the territory lost to the anti-Assad opposition. By February 2015, the campaign was showing results, placing the Syrian opposition on the back foot. Territorial control in Syria could quickly shift via agreements with local leaders, who would sign up with whoever was winning. Thus, large tracts of territory could flip quickly in a war with a relatively low density of forces. Operational planning took early adjustments. Initial enthusiasm dissipated as Russian elites saw that there would be no easy or relatively quick victory to be had in Syria.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, the Russian military discovered that there was no real Syrian Army left; they had, in effect, intervened too late. Syrian forces were completely exhausted and degraded, instead forcing Russian planners to rely on pockets of fighting power in the Desert Falcons, Desert Tigers, Hezbollah, and units belonging to individual commanders like Brigadier General Suhela.<sup>26</sup>

The Russian approach was to launch offensive operations, pause, and then reinstate combat operations to steadily take back territory. Tactical aviation was most useful when enemy forces were exposed in counterattack, but it was difficult working alongside the mixed groupings of local forces and pro-Iranian militias. They readily

gave up terrain to counterattacks, and had little battlefield staying power much to the chagrin of the Russian advisors and officers planning operations. Hence, they began to terraform the local forces landscape, building the 5<sup>th</sup> Assault Corps out of disparate fighting formations and volunteers, plus hiring perhaps 2,000 mercenaries to fight as battalion tactical groups. Notably, the Russian approach to deploying advisors took complete staffs from regiments, brigades, and battalions, deploying them with Syrian counterparts. This method is quite different from, for example, the U.S. approach of forming a Security Force Assistance Brigade designed to assist partner forces.<sup>27</sup>

## THE RUSSIAN APPROACH WAS TO LAUNCH OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS, PAUSE, AND THEN REINSTATE COMBAT OPERATIONS TO STEADILY TAKE BACK TERRITORY.

Above all, Russian planners sought to keep

24 Anton Lavrov, "The Russian Air Campaign in Syria," CNA Occasional Paper series, June 2018, p. 5.

25 Anton Lavrov, "Russian in Syria: a military analysis, in Russia's return to the Middle East," Chaillot Paper No. 146, July 2018, p. 47-56.

26 Aleksandr Dvornikov, "штабы для новых воинов [Headquarters for new warriors]," Military-Industrial Courier, 28 (741), July 24, 2018.

27 Analysis by Charles Bartles, and commentary on an article by Valery Gerasimov in OE Watch Commentary, Foreign Military Studies Office, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmsow/o-e-watch-mobile-edition-v1/22715/gener-al-gerasimov-on-the-syrian-campaign/>.





Mine unit in Palmyra (mil.ru)

their footprint small, retaining a mixed aviation regiment somewhere between 24-40 aircraft on average and about 16-40 helicopters. Total personnel likely did not exceed 5,000 and was probably less than 4,000 by 2018.<sup>28</sup> Notably, this number includes contractors and supporting personnel. An entire village of defense industry specialists was present to support Russian combat operations at Khmeimim. According to official figures, somewhere on the order of 1,200 representatives from 57 defense companies and defense research organizations were involved.<sup>29</sup>

For Russia, the war in Syria consisted of a series of phased operations. Phase One focused on transport links and the attempt to push encroaching forces back in Latakia to create a buffer space around the Russian base of operations. Phase Two included the battle for Palmyra in 2016, but the campaign

focus was the encirclement and siege of Aleppo in summer/fall 2016. Phase Three entailed consolidation over central regions in Syria, the second battle for Palmyra in 2017, but the operational objective was a drive east to seize Dayr al-Zawr from ISIS. Following the fall of Dayr al-Zawr, Russian forces supported drives to consolidate regime territorial control in the south in key cities or districts like Hama. Phase Four constitutes the steady capture of remaining territory in Idlib.

To deleverage, Moscow declared multiple withdrawals from Syria, including in March 2016, January 2017, and at the end of 2017. These were efforts to cast expeditionary operations in Syria into a series of one-year campaigns. Each one did follow a genuine rotation of forces whereby the Russian military sought to manage and downsize their footprint. The most important of these was March 2016 when differences were

<sup>28</sup> A Russian registry of votes from those in Syria suggested the number was closer to 3,800 at the time.

<sup>29</sup> Aleksandr Tikhonov, "Операция в Сирии показала силы России [Operation in Syria showed Russia's strength]," *Red Star*, January 31, 2018.



visible between the Syrian and Iranian desire to drive towards Aleppo versus the Russian preference to push towards Dayr al-Zawr. Understanding that Syrian forces lacked the capability and mass to easily besiege Aleppo, Russia stepped back and settled in for the long haul in Syria, recognizing that the price of an “economy of force” mission meant that operational design would have to accommodate the political objectives of local allies.

## OPERATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF THE VKS

The Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) had no real combat experience, having been established in 2015, after the Russian Air Force previously flew a small number of sorties during the five-day war with Georgia in August 2008. Other air operations included limited support in 1999-2000 during the Second Chechen War. Since those wars, hundreds of new aircraft and helicopters had been procured, and modernized, as part of the State Armament Program launched in 2011. Yet, Russian crews had no actual combat experience in many of these aircraft. Much of the initial bombing was done by older Su-24M2 and Su-25SM aircraft, almost all with unguided area of effect munitions, with the exception of select systems on the Su-34, which was able to employ the KAB-500S satellite-guided bomb.<sup>30</sup>

Russian fixed-wing aircraft lacked targeting

pods to employ what few precision-guided munitions were available, and there were almost no precision munitions available initially because they had not bought them. Hence, only a tiny percentage of the weapons used in Syria could be considered precision-guided. Under the modernization program, the Aerospace Forces invested in a more accurate targeting system package called Gefest-SVP, which was supposed to provide much higher accuracy for existing unguided weapons. Forced to conduct strikes at altitudes above 4,000 meters to avoid ground fire and man portable air defenses, the Russian air force found that Gefest offered limited improvements in accuracy. Russia's Navy and Long Range Aviation also conducted combat strikes, a first for Russia's strategic bombers, employing long-range cruise missiles, such as Kalibr, Kh-555, and Kh-101. Meanwhile, sorties in Syria were supplemented by Tu-22M3 flights from Russia, which typically dropped 250kg or 500kg unguided FAB bombs from medium to high altitude.

However, Russian air crews demonstrated a high sortie rate, averaging perhaps 40-50 per day with peak times spiking to 100-130 as in early 2016.<sup>31</sup> VKS used two crews per air frame both to sustain the intensity of operations, but also to give squadrons more experience. Compared to previous conflicts, the rate of mechanical failure was magnitudes lower, even among older Soviet models, and there were no friendly fire incidents of note. The main reasons for dramatically improved performance include better maintenance state of the platforms compared to the Russia-Georgia War in 2008. The platforms have undergone modernization and recapitalization as part of the the State Armament Program 2011-2017, thanks to a small village of defense industry technicians working to maintain the

30 Michael Kofman and Matt Rojansky, “What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?,” *Military Review*, January 2018, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/Army-Press-Online-Journal/documents/Rojansky-v2.pdf>.

31 “Russian air group in Syria has destroyed more than 1,600 objects of terrorists in Syria in a month,” *Interfax*, October 30, 2015, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/476571>.

aircraft. Increased emphasis on training and exercises, noticeable beginning in 2013, undoubtedly played a positive role.

## THE ABSENCE OF UNMANNED COMBAT AERIAL VEHICLES (UCAV), AND THE RELATIVE BACKWARDNESS OF RUSSIA'S CURRENT UAV FLEET, COMPOUNDED THE LIMITATIONS OF RUSSIAN AIR POWER WHEN IT CAME TO THE USE OF PRECISION WEAPONRY

Drones were used heavily for the first time in Russian combat operations, flying more sorties than manned aviation, although most of these were light Russian Orlan-10 or Forpost (Israeli Searcher) drones. They provided intelligence and reconnaissance, battle damage assessment (BDA), and the ability to compensate for Russia's low availability of higher-end intelligence gathering assets, such as satellites or long endurance drone

platforms. The integration of unmanned and manned aviation led to tactical adaptations, as Russian bombers struck targets individually, drones would provide real time BDA, which would allow the aircraft to repeat the strike within minutes if needed.<sup>32</sup> That said, the absence of unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV), and the relative backwardness of Russia's current UAV fleet, compounded the limitations of Russian air power when it came to the use of precision weaponry.

Although Russian Aerospace Forces were able to cut corridors for Syrian attacks, striking fixed targets and degrading enemy positions, they were ineffective in close air support or at hitting maneuver formations. Russian munitions were too big, too dumb, and ill-suited to the task of countering mobile forces. Air strikes were incredibly costly in civilian casualties, and evidence shows that targeting of critical civilian infrastructure, such as hospitals, in a number of cases was deliberate.<sup>33</sup> As the war progressed, Russian forces used more satellite- and laser-guided weapons of varying sizes, but much of this mission fell to rotary aviation, which could combine anti-tank missiles with the proper means of targeting. Helicopters proved essential, but their increased use came with a rise in casualties. Many of the few losses that Russia suffered in Syria were among rotary aviation. According to one count, Russian losses include 91 servicemen, of which 52 were combat-related, and another 39 lost aboard an An-32 transport aircraft that crashed. Equipment losses include 7 aircraft and 12 helicopters, of which only one aircraft was lost in combat compared to six helicopters.<sup>34</sup>

32 Anton Lavrov, "The Russian Air Campaign in Syria," CNA Occasional Paper series, June 2018, p. 3.

33 Nick Cumming-Bruce, "U.N. Panel Says Russia Bombed Syrian Civilian Targets, a War Crime," *New York Times*, March 2, 2020.

34 Anton Lavrov, "Russian in Syria: a military analysis, in Russia's return to the Middle East," Chaillot Paper No.146, July 2018, p. 51.

## COMPETITIONS IN RISK TAKING: U.S.-RUSSIAN INTERACTIONS IN SYRIA

Several incidents took place between Russian and coalition forces that merit examination from the standpoint of compellence or deterrence. Russia sought to establish deescalation zones and zones for exclusive operations with the goal of securing an entire area for their own combat operations, thereby displacing the United States and coalition forces. In June 2016, Russian bombers struck with cluster munitions near the U.S. and British forces base at al-Tanf, on the Syrian-Iraqi border.<sup>35</sup> After being warned via the deconfliction line, Russian bombers struck again. Although mishaps happen in war, there was an observable pattern to Russian strikes in Syria near bases, or forces, they wished to displace. Al-Tanf was the clearest case, as Moscow had sought to wedge U.S. forces out of this position and had frequently voiced a desire to see the base gone.<sup>36</sup> There was an agreement to divide operations at the Euphrates River, but, in 2017, Russian aircraft bombed a position where coalition forces were supporting fighters from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). U.S. forces signaled back that any repeat strikes carried the danger of direct conflict between the two sides' respective aircraft.

However, as Russian and Syrian forces approached Dayr al-Zawr, they sought modifications to conduct operations on the eastern side of the river. As Russian aircraft

began flying east, there were numerous close calls and near misses. Although some were likely tactical errors, there was a discernible Russian pressure campaign against coalition forces, and a reasonably effective deterrence campaign on the part of the United States, based on messages backed by the credible threat of force. So called "dirt strikes" took place against U.S. partner forces in the SDF, in attempts to deter them from advancing in 2017. The clearest incident, and perhaps one of the more confusing episodes of the war, was an attack by two battalions of Wagner Group mercenaries, and local proxies on February 7, 2018 against a position held by SDF forces east of Dayr al-Zawr. The objective was a Conoco facility.

Syrian forces sought to reclaim valuable sources of revenue, namely the hydrocarbon extraction industries located in the eastern part of the country. Russian ground commanders knew the location of the facility and of U.S. forces present there. Yet, when U.S. forces warned the Russian commander via the deconfliction line, they disavowed any knowledge of forces operating in the area. U.S. air power was brought to bear, catching the mercenaries on unfavorable terrain, and killing upwards of 200 of the fighters out of a total of 500-600 men. It seemed to have been a raid gone bad and an opportunity for the United States to demonstrate its resolve in a case where there was no threat of escalation.

Although seemingly a coercive test by Moscow of U.S. resolve gone wrong, this is likely a self-validating interpretation of the Wagner attack. A simpler explanation is that the entire episode was an operational fiasco, whereby the Syrian operational planning cell had no knowledge of the mercenaries' designs to seize a commercial facility on behalf of their Russian benefactor. Alternatively, Russian military intelligence

35 "Russia Bombed Base Used By U.S. in Syria — Reports," *Moscow Times*, July 22, 2016, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-bombed-base-used-by-us-in-syria-reports-54696>.

36 Barbara Starr, "Russia warns US of pending attack in Syrian area with US troops," *CNN*, September 7, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/06/politics/syria-russia-attack-warning-pentagon/index.html>.

(GRU) knew of the planned attack, but had no direct interest in it, and no authority to stop the operation. They missed every opportunity to take ownership of the attacking force and avoid a geopolitical embarrassment. That said, there was no real political fallout in Moscow or effect on public opinion from this attack, despite the high casualties. Russian decision making will remain a mystery in this regard, but the less likely scenario is that this was a sophisticated probing attack to see if the United States had the political will to use force against Russian mercenaries, especially because there was no prior Russian interest voiced regarding that facility.

## IMPACT OF SYRIA ON RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES

The war in Syria will have tremendous influence on the future course of Russian military thought, modernization programs, and doctrinal adaptation to conduct expeditionary operations elsewhere. The conflict was used to bloody and harden the Russian military at a time when it was relatively fresh from a period of military reform (2008-2012), and in the midst of revising plans for the next State Armament Program (2018-2027) after large-scale modernization purchases began in 2011. There are also inklings of evolution in the Russian military's strategic culture, much

of it at the tactical level, but Syria is likely to prove the most influential war for officers in the Russian armed forces in the post-Cold War period.

The impact on future developments in the Russian armed forces was considerable by the end of 2017. Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov suggested that some 48,000 troops had rotated through Syria (a defense video suggested it was up to 63,000 in 2018).<sup>37</sup> In a discussion later in 2019, Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu claimed that 98% of transport aviation crews, 90% of operational-tactical and army aviation crews, and 60% of long-range aviation crews had participated in Syria.<sup>38</sup> Official statistics should always be taken with a grain of salt, but Russian forces have indeed used Syria to rotate a large percentage of crews from the aerospace forces, general officers, and senior commanders, deploying them in three month stints into the operation zone.

**SYRIA IS RUSSIA'S  
“GOOD WAR,” WHERE  
THE ENTIRE RUSSIAN  
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37 Viktor Baranets, “Начальник Генштаба Вооруженных сил России генерал армии Валерий Герасимов: «Мы переломили хребет ударным силам терроризма» [Chief of the General Staff, Valeriy Gerasimov: ‘We Have Broken the Back of the Shock Troops of Terrorism’],” *Komsomolskaya Pravda Online*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693>; and “Russia says 63,000 troops have seen combat in Syria,” *BBC*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-45284121>.

38 Chuck Bartles, translation in OE WATCH Syrian Combat Experience in the Aerospace Forces, original article with quotes Dmitriy Semenov, “Под руководством главы военного ведомства генерала армии Сергея Шойгу прошло очередное заседание Коллегии Минобороны России [The Latest Russian Ministry of Defense Collegium Session Took Place Under the Direction of Military Department Head General of the Army Sergey Shoygu],” *Krasnaya Zvezda Online*, June 21, 2019.





(mil.ru)

Syria is Russia's "good war," where the entire Russian military must now serve in order to progress in rank. All military district, combat arm, and branch commanders have served there along with a large percentage of division and brigade commanders. Putting aside statements from the top brass, these facts are reflected in interviews by army and lower unit commanders. For example, the commander of the 41<sup>st</sup> Combined Arms Army said in an interview that almost every single commander under him had served either in Syria or in other conflict regions (euphemism for Ukraine) and that their experience is regularly applied in training.<sup>39</sup> The conflict is creating an entire generation of Russian officers who have served in a war that they feel that they won and from which they see valuable tactical experience.

This ranges from learning to fight at night, a historic advantage of Western militaries, to

important tactical-operational concepts, such as recon-strike and recon-fire loops, originally conceived during the late Soviet period. Recon-fires integrate sensors, means of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) with communications, and fires into a functioning kill chain that can engage targets in real time at the tactical level. Fires are oriented towards tube artillery and MLRS, while recon-strike is designed to provide similar functionality at operational depths with precision-guided weapons, both ground- and air-based. The technology and exercises to deploy these concepts have long been in progress, but Syria was the first employment of a much more networked Russian military, where different services were expected to work together in executing fires and strike missions.

Some of the Russian lessons include the need to operate in "non-traditional circumstances,"

39 Taras Rydik, "Боевые приоритеты сибирских бригад [Combat priorities of Siberian brigades]," *Red Star*, May 15, 2019.

and make “non-standard decisions”—that is, to be more flexible at the tactical level. Furthermore, Russian forces need to handle asymmetric forms of warfare, including from undeclared adversaries that range from low-tech to highly advanced foes. Other senior commanders observed a relative flattening of the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war, where operational objectives were being achieved by tactical combat formations. Understanding the complexity of working jointly with other governments and local units proved a major takeaway, while, on the other end of the spectrum, there is equal interest in evaluating the perceived efficacy of active informational and psychological pressure on enemy fighters to reduce their morale. Numerous commanders highlighted the utility of precision strikes against the adversary’s economic potential, command and control infrastructure, and the importance of employing precision-guided weapons as part of a singular information environment. Others emphasized the role of information warfare and experience in modern urban combat that will require updating field manuals.<sup>40</sup> These lessons have subsequently been taken and applied in training, district exercises, and annual command-staff exercises like Vostok-2018.

One can see the impact of Syria simply by looking at the writing and statements of Gen. Gerasimov as a case study and lagging indicator of trends in Russian military thought. In a famous February 2013 article, he wrote, “Each war represents an isolated case, requiring an understanding of its own particular logic, its own uniqueness.” Yet, by 2019, the Russian military appeared to be institutionalizing the lessons of Syria and developing a strategy of “limited actions” for defending its interests abroad in an expeditionary context. As the very same Gerasimov would come to explain, the main thrust of this doctrinal concept for expeditionary operations would be the

“creation of self-sufficient combat groupings of forces on the basis of a formation belonging to one branch of the Russian armed forces (Ground Forces, Aerospace Forces, Navy), which would have high mobility and the ability to make the greatest contribution to the tasks set.” His views appeared to evolve. While no single model may exist for such conflicts, the Russian military as an organism is very much an institutional enterprise. It was only a matter of time before the Syrian experience would become doctrinally assimilated into a template of sorts for how to deploy forces in future interventions.

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OTHER ELEMENT.**

40 Timothy Thomas, “Russian Lessons Learned in Syria,” MITRE, June 2020.





Syria was a meeting ground for Russian and United States forces, offering invaluable intelligence-gathering opportunities. The Russian contingent employed various electronic warfare, radar, and signals intelligence and electronic intelligence platforms, including specialized aircraft for data collection. Russian forces collected immense amounts of data based on interactions with coalition aircraft, observing U.S. combat operations and collecting radar signatures and other information that will later be used to feed into air defense, electronic warfare, and other systems. Syria was not seen by the Russian military as a war against an irregular or ill-equipped opponent. Instead, a technologically superior adversary (the United States) was conducting daily operations in the combat zone, and Russian

forces were interacting with that other element.

Being deployed in the midst of two U.S. cruise missile strikes certainly made an impression, and while official Russian military evaluations are not available, this certainly informed Russian thinking on aerospace defense. There are occasional references by generals who commanded in Syria, such as Colonel General Zhuravlev, on the importance of cruise missile defense in current Russian exercises.<sup>41</sup> Retired commanders comment more freely on the need to focus air defense on low-flying cruise missiles, to integrate with electronic warfare, and to promote certain tactical platforms like Buk-M2/M3 over others in their ideas on how best to deal with a U.S. cruise missile strike akin to those conducted in Syria.<sup>42</sup> Russian air defense systems

41 Oleg Pochinok, “С учётом сирийского опыта [Taking the Syrian experience in account],” *Red Star*, May 27, 2019.

42 For these arguments, see, Aleksandr Lyzan, “Tomahawks striking Syria. Valuable lessons,” *Aerospace Domain*, No. 2, (91), June 2017; and Aleksandr Lyzan, “System of active protection for objects,” *Arsenal of the Fatherland*, No. 5, (31), 2017.



couldn't do much about the strike since cruise missile defense is difficult and can only be executed at short ranges without external queuing and complex forms of cooperative engagement. However, the Russian Navy equally failed to be in position to intercept any of the cruise missiles fired, nor was the air component of much use although it could have attempted to degrade the strike. Undoubtedly, there would be lessons learned, and the subsequent Russian naval deployment ahead of a prospective offensive in Idlib (Fall 2018) suggested that they were adapting after failing to intercept any missiles during the 2017 U.S. strike in Syria.

Syria also offers useful inputs for Russian thinking on escalation management, including concepts such as deterrence via fear inducement/intimidation and deterrence through limited use of force. These experiments are implicitly present in cruise missile strikes conducted by Russian strategic bombers and the use of land-attack cruise missiles, surface-to-surface missiles, and other capabilities that fall within the "strategic deterrence forces" designation in the Russian military. Those capabilities offered little in operational utility relative to the cost of the weapons used and their limited availability. They were employed to manage escalation in Syria, dissuade external actors from increasing their involvement, and deter any potential attacks against Russian forces. In some cases, Russian bombers flew complex routes circling around Europe; in others, the Russian Navy would deploy to concentrate forces ahead of a potential offensive in Idlib.

The message was meant for the United States to illustrate the escalation potential in operations that could threaten Russian forces and to remind a watchful audience that capabilities employed in Syria could be

used against their homelands. Simply put, Western nations did not have a monopoly on calibrated use of force, and Russia, too, could deploy standoff precision-guided weapons, though, unlike Western militaries, the Russian military has all the same missiles available with nuclear payloads.

From a capability standpoint, Syria helped settle an important debate during the years of the 2011-2020 State Armament Program, and the new one launched in 2018. It shifted the emphasis from platforms to capabilities and key enablers, precision-guided weapons, targeting systems, automated systems of command and control, electronic warfare, and space-based assets to enable intelligence collection. Since then, a host of contracts have been announced, procuring modernized versions of systems like Ka-52 and Mi-28N helicopters, along with other platforms, in part based on the experience of operating them in Syria.<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The history of how the war in Syria ends, if it ends, remains unwritten. But the war has made a major impact on the Russian military at the tactical, operational, and strategic level. It should also do so on the United States, particularly at a time of perceived great power rivalry and transition in the international order. Russia demonstrated that the bar for entry in expeditionary operations is far lower than many previously perceived. Moreover, deliberate use of force was not only within Russia's capability, but Russian forces were able to turn the tide for the Syrian regime with a limited application of military power. Similarly, the absence of organic

43 Anton Lavrov and Roman Kretsyl, "Защита для «Аллигаторов»: обновленные Ка-52М будут готовы к декабрю [Protection for "Alligators": updated Ka-52 will be ready by December]," *Izvestiya*, July 23, 2020.

sustainment or logistics proved a limiting factor, but only in terms of scalability for the conduct of operations. Russia's General Staff demonstrated that even though they could, they would not expand the size of the operation for reasons of political and military strategy.

## FROM THE RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE, ITS MILITARY PREVENTED THE UNITED STATES FROM ACHIEVING A FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST, DRAWING A RED LINE ON REGIME CHANGE WHEN IT CAME TO SYRIA.

Russian airpower was grossly underrated in Syria. From a tactical perspective, Western observers might argue with good reason. However, the tactical level of war has rarely been where Russian forces shine, especially in the case of air power, which traditionally had been relegated to a supporting role within the Russian military. Russia remains a ground force-dominated military, where air power is integrated with air and missile defense forces. Creativity and flexibility tend to concentrate at the operational level of war and in the area of military strategy. Nonetheless, the

Russian military demonstrated a qualitative evolution over the course of its campaign in Syria. The force currently deployed there is characteristically different from the military that originally intervened in September 2015. It has been changed by the experience, acquired new capabilities, and continues to evolve.

From the Russian perspective, its military prevented the United States from achieving a foreign policy objective in the Middle East, drawing a red line on regime change when it came to Syria. In terms of Russian political aims, the military campaign proved a qualified success in achieving the desired political ends. Moscow did indeed destroy the Syrian opposition as a viable military force, and thereby coerce external actors to change their foreign policy in Syria, including the United States. Despite recent skirmishes with Turkey over Idlib, the Syrian regime appears to have largely won the conflict. Yet, Moscow was unable to parlay the intervention into broader goals related to core interests in Europe. That is, Russia could not find a way to change its bilateral relationship with the United States in a positive manner as the result of this war or leverage the intervention for political gains with European nations.

However, Russian elites do perceive that the war has substantially upgraded the country's position in international politics and its own perception of its position, gaining a higher degree of confidence.<sup>44</sup> The war was a demonstration that Russia could successfully use force outside of its own region in defense of its interests and leverage that success to attain new interlocutors or potential partners.



44 Oleg Falichev, "военно-промышленный курьер [A Syria of Lessons]," *Military-Industrial Courier*, No. 31, August 17, 2016.

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