



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

RUSSIA'S WAR IN SYRIA

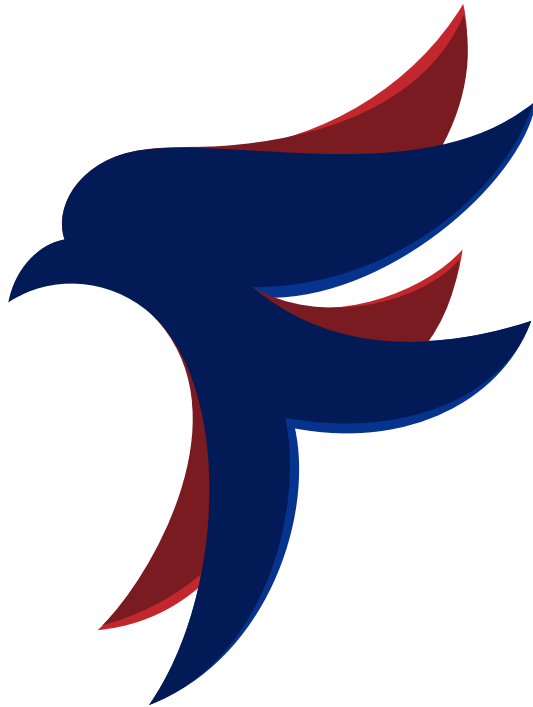
THE RUSSIAN WAY OF WAR IN SYRIA

IMPLICATIONS

FOR THE WEST

ROBERT E. HAMILTON





All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Author: Robert E. Hamilton

ISBN: 978-0-910191-00-5

The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a non-partisan organization that seeks to publish well-argued, policy-oriented articles on American foreign policy and national security priorities.

Editing: Thomas J. Shattuck

Design: Natalia Kopytnik

© 2020 by the Foreign Policy Research Institute

December 2020



FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

A nation must think before it acts

OUR MISSION

The Foreign Policy Research Institute is dedicated to producing the highest quality scholarship and nonpartisan policy analysis focused on crucial foreign policy and national security challenges facing the United States. We educate those who make and influence policy, as well as the public at large, through the lens of history, geography, and culture.

OFFERING IDEAS

In an increasingly polarized world, we pride ourselves on our tradition of nonpartisan scholarship. We count among our ranks over 100 affiliated scholars located throughout the nation and the world who appear regularly in national and international media, testify on Capitol Hill, and are consulted by U.S. government agencies.

EDUCATING THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

FPRI was founded on the premise that an informed and educated citizenry is paramount for the U.S. to conduct a coherent foreign policy. Through in-depth research and extensive public programming, FPRI offers insights to help the public understand our volatile world.

CHAMPIONING CIVIC LITERACY

We believe that a robust civic education is a national imperative. FPRI aims to provide teachers with the tools they need in developing civic literacy, and works to enrich young people's understanding of the institutions and ideas that shape American political life and our role in the world.

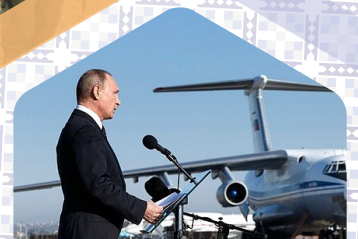


THE RUSSIAN WAY OF WAR IN SYRIA IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WEST

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



COLONEL (RETIRED) ROBERT E. HAMILTON, PH.D., is an Associate Professor of Eurasian Studies at the U.S. Army War College and a Black Sea Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. In a 30-year career in the U.S. Army, spent primarily as a Eurasian Foreign Area Officer, he served overseas in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Germany, Belarus, Qatar, Afghanistan, the Republic of Georgia, Pakistan and Kuwait. He is the author of numerous articles and monographs on conflict and security issues, focusing principally on the former Soviet Union and the Balkans. He is a graduate of the German Armed Forces Staff College and the U.S. Army War College and holds a Bachelor of Science degree from the United States Military Academy, a Master's Degree in Contemporary Russian Studies and a Ph.D. in Political Science, both from the University of Virginia.



The Russian Federation's intervention in Syria is a watershed event. However the war there ends, its impact on Russia is likely to be profound. For the first time in its post-Soviet history, Russia's military is fighting outside the borders of the former Soviet Union. In doing so, it is exercising military capabilities that had atrophied from long lack of use. Moscow is also rebuilding its diplomatic muscle through its role in Syria by managing a diverse coalition, leading a parallel peace process, and forcing the United States to take the Kremlin's preferences into account when making decisions in the Middle East. Through Syria, Russia has reemerged on the geopolitical stage. The war is not over, and there are many ways in which things could still go badly for Russia. Moscow may find that a return to geopolitical prominence entails costs and risks at least as great as the rewards that status brings. Nevertheless, the West will be dealing with a Russia that has changed fundamentally through its experience in the war.

Understanding these changes and their implications for Western governments is the focus of this conclusion chapter. It is structured around two questions. First, what does Syria tell us about how Russia fights its wars? Second, how has Russia's experience in Syria affected the capabilities of its armed forces? Answering these questions should increase our understanding of Russia as a geopolitical actor and allow Western governments to make more effective policy on issues where Russia is a factor.

Before answering these questions, a brief review of the reasons that Russia goes to war will be useful. Like all states, Russia goes to war for reasons that are complex and multifaceted. Yet, for Russia more than most states, decisions on war and peace are driven by the ideas that the world is a dangerous place, that Russia's security and even sovereignty are under constant threat, and that Russia is beset with external and internal enemies who collude against its interests. Coupled with these ideas is the belief that the U.S.-led "liberal world order" is not the rules-based, consultative arrangement that

its supporters claim, but is actually a scheme designed to enshrine U.S. hegemony and keep Russia from assuming its rightful place as a center of power in a multipolar world.

HOW HAS RUSSIA'S EXPERIENCE IN SYRIA AFFECTED THE CAPABILITIES OF ITS ARMED FORCES?

Given this view of the world order, it is unsurprising that—as Anna Borshchevskaya notes in her [chapter](#)—the desire to overturn that order played a role in the Kremlin's decision to go to war in Syria.

But there were other reasons driving the decision, and these revolved around the idea that what was happening in Syria was a direct threat to Russia's own security. There are two reasons for this. First, as Michael Kofman argues in [his chapter](#), Russian elites firmly believed that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's fall—an event that looked likely in late summer 2015—would end with Islamic State (ISIS) and al Qaeda affiliates in charge of a dismembered Syria, allowing Sunni extremism to spread to neighboring states and eventually threatening the Caucasus and Central Asia, both areas that Russia has long seen as its "soft underbelly."

Next, as both Borshchevskaya and Kofman note, Russian leaders saw what was happening in Syria as part of a larger pattern. In the Kremlin's view, Syria was not an isolated case, but simply the latest instance of the United States engineering "regime change" in states friendly to Russia. Particularly chilling for Russian President Vladimir Putin was the fate of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, executed in the street by rebels after a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led intervention there in 2011. Putin directly blamed the



Airbase in Syria. (Kremlin.ru)

United States for Gaddafi's murder, claiming that after a NATO airstrike on his convoy, U.S. "commandos, who were not supposed to be there, called for the so-called opposition and militants by the radio, and he was killed without an investigation or trial."¹ When the United States began accusing Assad of war crimes and saying that he had to be removed from power, the Kremlin's leaders saw and dreaded a potential repeat scenario in Syria.

But Russia's fear and suspicion of U.S.-backed regime change extend far beyond the Middle East. Kremlin leaders routinely point to the movements that overthrew authoritarian governments in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004, 2014), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), which the Kremlin collectively labels the "Color Revolutions," not as popular revolts against authoritarianism but as coups backed and directed by U.S. intelligence services.

As far-fetched as it may seem to Western observers, the Kremlin's obsession with

Color Revolutions is based in the fear that America's ultimate goal is to unleash one in Russia itself. Indeed, Putin said this in late 2011 when Russians took to the streets to protest his planned return to the presidency and Duma elections were labeled fraudulent by international and Russian observers. The protests, said Putin, began after the U.S. had sent "a signal" to "some actors in our country." Putin continued, "They heard the signal and with the support of the U.S. State Department began active work."² In the aftermath of the 2014 Maidan Revolution in Ukraine, the Color Revolution threat again loomed large in Putin's mind. In an address to Russia's Security Council later that year, he reminded them of the government's duty to prevent such an outcome. "We see what tragic consequences the wave of so-called color revolutions led to," he said. "For us this is a lesson and a warning. We should do everything necessary so that nothing similar ever happens in Russia."³

1 Maxim Tkachenko, "Putin points to U.S. role in Gadhafi's killing," *CNN*, December 15, 2011, <https://www.cnn.com/2011/12/15/world/europe/russia-putin-libya/index.html>, accessed June 17, 2020.

2 David M. Herszenhorn and Ellen Barry, "Putin Contends Clinton Incited Unrest Over Vote," *New York Times*, December 8, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/world/europe/putin-accuses-clinton-of-instigating-russian-protests.html>, accessed June 17, 2020.

3 Darya Korsunskaya, "Putin says Russia must prevent 'color revolution,'" *Reuters*, November 20, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-security-idUSKCN0J41J620141120>, accessed June 17, 2020.

In Syria, then, Russia's fundamental insecurity and its rejection of the legitimacy of the U.S.-led world order combined to make military intervention an attractive option. As [Anna Borshchevskaya](#) writes, the Kremlin has always perceived a link between external and internal threats and fixated on its own sovereignty, which it sees as permanently under threat. Regime survival is the primary goal, and this means deterring the West from interfering in Russia's internal politics. Syria provided a stage to do exactly that. As it did in Ukraine the previous year, Moscow saw Syria as a place to draw a line against further Western-backed "regime change" in a state important to Russia, thus ensuring that the contagion of the Color Revolution never threatened its own hold on power. In the Russian view, saving Assad was also critical to ensuring another contagion—that of violent Sunni fundamentalism—never threatened Russia's soft underbelly. Finally, Syria provided an opportunity for Russia to erode the "unipolar" nature of the U.S.-led world order by reestablishing itself as a geopolitical player in the Middle East.

HOW RUSSIA FIGHTS

Like all modern militaries, Russia entered the war in Syria with a strategy in mind. One way to define strategy is "a calculated relationship among ends, ways, and means—informed by an assessment of risk."⁴ In this definition, ends are the objectives the state pursues, ways are methods it uses to pursue those ends, and means are the resources it puts toward the effort. Another way to define the relationship among these terms is that means are nouns (people, things) and ways are verbs (actions a state takes, using the means available, to achieve its ends). For Russia, getting the strategy right in its first foray into the Middle East since the collapse of the Soviet Union was critical. It could not afford to allow the Syrian government to fall, nor could it allow itself to be drawn into a morass that it would struggle to escape.

Russian Ends

The ends that Russia pursued in Syria were largely negative or preventive. Put simply, Russia deployed its military to Syria to prevent the collapse of the government there. As [Kofman](#) [notes](#), the Russian political elite believed that the collapse of the government would lead to a surge of ISIS- and al Qaeda-affiliated militants into neighboring states and eventually into Russia itself. Both Kofman and Borshchevskaya observe that drawing a red line to prevent further "Color Revolutions" was also on the minds of Kremlin decision-makers. Restoring the sovereignty of the Syrian government was a necessary precondition to both of these goals and therefore should be seen as Russia's primary end in Syria.

Moscow has, to this point at least, lived by the maxim "the perfect is the enemy of the good enough." It has been content with enough restoration of sovereignty to preserve Russia's strategic position in the eastern Mediterranean and the Levant, embodied in its air base at Khmeimim and its naval base at Tartus. It has shown little appetite for supporting Assad's pursuit of his periodic pledges to reestablish control over all of Syria. Russia also lacks the means and the inclination to rebuild Syria once the fighting has stopped, something the Assad regime clearly needs and hopes for. Whether or not Moscow is able to manage this divergence in preferences between it and Damascus remains to be seen.

Russian Ways

Like most strategies, Russia's initial strategy did not survive first contact with reality. As a result, Moscow showed impressive adaptability and flexibility. It continuously adapted the ways it fought to adjust to realities on the ground. Russian military pursued multiple vectors—or ways, in the strategy model used here—reinforcing those that had success and abandoning those that did not. Over time, the following ways showed success and emerged as the core of the Russian campaign strategy in Syria.

4 "War, Policy and National Security Course Directive," *U.S. Army War College*, Academic Year 2020, p. 13.



Mine detection specialists in Palmyra (mil.ru)

The first way was a deliberate, geographically phased effort that allowed Russia and its allies to fight in key areas while holding the line in others. This effort had four main phases. In the first phase, from fall 2015 through spring 2016, Russian armed forces established transport and logistics links and created a buffer zone in Latakia to protect the Russian base at Khmeimim. In the second phase, which lasted through fall 2016, Russian and partner forces captured Palmyra from ISIS and eastern Aleppo from a coalition of Western-backed opposition groups. The third phase lasted until early 2018. In this phase, Russian and partner forces recaptured Palmyra from ISIS for the second time, captured Dayr-az-Zawr and towns to its south along the west bank of the Euphrates, and consolidated control over key southern Syrian districts like Hama. In the last phase, still ongoing, Russia and the Assad regime hope to regain control over Idlib Province.

Russia supported this geographically phased effort in two key ways. First, it used de-escalation zones as economy of force measures to reduce fighting in some areas, allowing it to focus its efforts according to the above plan. Moscow convinced much of the opposition into signing agreements to stop fighting in areas that they controlled.

While the opposition saw these de-escalation agreements as steppingstones to ending the conflict and a political settlement, Moscow used them as temporary, tactical measures to allow it to focus its military efforts in other areas. As soon as the situation allowed and the forces were available, Russia and its partners broke the de-escalation agreement in a particular area, attacked the opposition force there, and defeated it.

Another way Russia pursued its ends of restoring state power was indiscriminate air attacks. These attacks were indiscriminate in two ways. First, they did not discriminate between United Nations-designated terrorist groups and other opposition groups, many of which were UN-recognized and signatories to the cessation of hostilities agreement under UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254. Russia bombed ISIS, al Qaeda affiliates, and Western-backed moderate opposition groups alike. Early in the campaign, Moscow actually targeted primarily the latter, largely ignoring ISIS and al Qaeda-affiliated groups. Russia's use of air power against all Sunni groups in Syria—terrorist or not—actually strengthened ISIS in some ways by destroying some of the moderate Sunni groups that were its adversaries.

Russia's bombing also did not discriminate between legitimate military targets and those outlawed under the Geneva Conventions. The United Nations and multiple independent investigations found that Russian and Syrian aircraft routinely hit markets, hospitals, camps for displaced persons, and other protected sites.⁵ Russia also routinely denied humanitarian aid to rebel-held areas under siege by Russian and Assad regime forces, often citing the security situation as a justification. This combination of indiscriminate bombing, military siege, and the denial of humanitarian aid allowed under UNSCR 2254 gave rebel groups a choice between surrender and death, either by airstrike or starvation. Once that choice had become clear, Russia generally offered to open corridors for surviving opposition fighters to leave the area, usually transporting them to Idlib Province. Unsurprisingly, this tactic worked: in city after city, opposition fighters surrendered or left for Idlib, where many of them remain today.

The next way that Russia pursued its ends in Syria was the deliberate escalation of tensions with the United States. Shortly after the Russian intervention in September 2015, the U.S. and Russian militaries established a channel to de-conflict their air operations over the country. In July 2017, as U.S. and Russian ground forces and their partners found themselves operating in close proximity to one another, they established a parallel ground de-confliction channel. When it wanted to signal its displeasure with the military situation in Syria or force the United States into a conversation on a specific issue, Russia used these channels to announce that it was preparing to strike areas where U.S. and partner forces were operating, claiming it had evidence that ISIS fighters were there. This would force a high-level conversation between U.S. and Russian commanders, which the Russian side could then use to raise other issues that it wanted to discuss. Russia also deliberately struck areas ahead of where U.S. and partner forces were advancing in attempts to slow or halt

their advance. Finally, the Russian military sent the U.S. military multiple proposals for "de-confliction agreements" that would have forced the United States and its partner forces to withdraw from areas that they had already liberated from ISIS. In this way, Russia sought to minimize the areas in which U.S. forces were present.

RUSSIA USED DIPLOMATIC AND INFORMATIONAL CAMPAIGNS TO SUPPORT ITS MILITARY STRATEGY FOR SYRIA.

Russia used diplomatic and informational campaigns to support its military strategy for Syria. The approval of UNSCR 2254 in early 2016 established Russia and the United States as co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group, based at the UN in Geneva. Russia hoped to steer this group into ending the war on terms favorable to the Assad regime and the portraying its efforts in Syria as part of an international effort to fight terrorism. There was even a short-lived effort to establish a joint U.S.-Russian military headquarters in Geneva, where intelligence officers and military planners from the two countries would coordinate their attacks on ISIS in Syria. This effort at cooperation broke down over Russia's attack on Western-backed opposition groups that were protected from attack under UNSCR 2254 and the cessation of hostilities it put in place. Unable to achieve its diplomatic goals through the UN peace process, Russia launched the Astana Process in 2017. Participants include the Assad regime,

⁵ Nick Cumming-Bruce, "U.N. Panel Says Russia Bombed Syrian Civilian Targets, a War Crime," *New York Times*, March 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/02/world/middleeast/united-nations-syria-idlib-russia.html>, accessed June 18, 2020.

Russia, Turkey, Iran, and occasionally some Syrian opposition groups. The main purpose of the Astana Process is to end the war on terms favorable to the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran by sidelining the United States and other supporters of the moderate Syrian opposition.

Russia has also used information and disinformation to support its campaign in Syria. Consistent themes of Russia's information operations have been that the Assad regime is the legitimate government of Syria, that Russia is in Syria legally while the U.S. presence there is illegal, that all groups opposed to Assad are terrorists, and that the United States is assisting ISIS in Syria. Russian information and disinformation tactics range from the diplomatically deft to the absolutely absurd. As an example of the former, Russia frames its intervention as a response to a request from the legitimate government of Syria and as a part of a war on terrorism. Its information operations contrast clean-shaven, Western-dressed Syrian government representatives with bearded radicals that Russia claims represent all opposition to the government.

RUSSIA FRAMES ITS INTERVENTION AS A RESPONSE TO A REQUEST FROM THE LEGITIMATE GOVERNMENT OF SYRIA AND AS A PART OF A WAR ON TERRORISM.

An example of the latter is the Russian “evidence” of U.S. support to ISIS, a picture purporting to show a U.S. vehicle leading a convoy of ISIS vehicles from southern Syria across the border to safety under U.S. protection in Iraq. The picture was later proven to be a screenshot from a video game. Russia's information operations in Syria fit the mold described in a 2016 RAND report on Russian propaganda: they are high-volume and multi-channel; they are rapid, continuous, and repetitive; they contain no commitment to objective reality and no commitment to consistency of message.⁶ As with much of Russia's propaganda, Moscow's messaging on Syria is less about convincing audiences that the Russian position is true, than about muddying the waters with so much conflicting information that the entire idea of truth seems implausible.

To summarize, Russia settled on the following ways to pursue its ends in Syria: a deliberate, geographic phasing of its operations; the use of de-escalation zones to allow it to focus in some areas and hold the line in others; the deliberate targeting of Western-backed groups and indiscriminate attacks on population centers to induce opposition groups to abandon them; deliberate escalation with the United States to hamper U.S. operations, followed by de-escalation to ensure no direct conflict between U.S. and Russian forces; a parallel diplomatic process designed to end the war on terms favorable to Damascus, Moscow, and Tehran; and an information/disinformation campaign against the United States and its partners.

Russian Means

Limiting the means dedicated to the effort in Syria was a key consideration, both in the sense of not becoming overextended, and in the sense of not “owning” the conflict. Kofman notes that Russia's Syria strategy was not means-driven: Moscow never substantially increased the resources dedicated to the mission there. It maintained a relatively light footprint, probably never exceeding 5,000, and less than 4,000 by 2018. The original Russian plan called for the Syrian Arab Army to

6 Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It,” RAND, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>, accessed June 29, 2020.

do the ground fighting with Russia providing much of the air support, long-range fire support, and other key enablers. Russia soon found that the Syrian Army was incapable of assuming this burden, so Moscow turned to irregular forces like the Desert Tigers, Desert Falcons, Hezbollah, and Shia militias from Iraq to assume the burden for the bulk of the ground operations early on, as it worked to rebuild the combat capability of the Syrian Army. The Russian Army provided artillery, combat engineers, military police (MPs), Special Forces, and advisors to support local ground forces.

THE RUSSIAN AEROSPACE FORCES WERE THE PRIMARY MILITARY MEANS THAT RUSSIA USED TO IMPLEMENT ITS STRATEGY IN SYRIA.

The Russian Aerospace Forces were the primary military means that Russia used to implement its strategy in Syria. Even though it carried much of the load, Russian planners endeavored to keep the air contingent as small as possible. Kofman estimates it averaged between 24-40 aircraft and about 16-40 helicopters. The small number of aircraft deployed necessitated a high sortie rate, which the Russian Aerospace Forces managed to maintain for an extended period of time with relatively few maintenance or safety problems. Means employed by the Russian Navy consisted primarily of supply ships that maintained the logistical support lines, as well as surface ships and submarines that maintained air defense coverage and fired cruise missiles at high-value targets.

CONCLUSIONS

Russian strategy in Syria is summarized as follows:

Ends

- Immediate: prevent the collapse of the Syrian government
- Long Term: restore the sovereignty of the Syrian government

Ways

- A geographically phased approach
- Instrumental use of de-escalation agreements as an economy of force measure
- Intentional lack of discrimination between terrorist groups and opposition groups that were UNSCR 2254 signatories
- Intentional lack of discrimination between military and civilian targets
- Intentional escalation and de-escalation with the United States to minimize U.S. control or influence of areas
- An information campaign designed to portray the U.S. presence in Syria as illegitimate and the United States as an ally of ISIS
- A parallel diplomatic channel designed to shut the United States and United Nations out of the Syrian peace process

Means

- Light footprint with airpower as the primary Russian contribution
- Use of militia forces and a reconstituted Syrian Army as the primary ground fighting force
- Russian enablers: artillery, combat engineers, military police, Special Forces, and advisors to support local ground forces.
- Naval forces for resupply, long-range missile strikes, and air defense



In terms of the ends of Russian strategy, Western observers should understand that Moscow is often comfortable with protracted, low-level conflict and unclear outcomes in ways that Western governments are not. Russia's war in Syria is a limited war, and the Kremlin is comfortable with the fact that limited wars often end inconclusively—if they end at all. Western governments often strive to conclusively defeat an adversary, set the country where the war happened on the path to security and stability, and bring the troops home. This is a very tall order and is one of the reasons Western wars of the 21st century have largely been seen as failures.

Russia does not need such an outcome to see its intervention in Syria as a success. An outcome that restores the government's sovereignty over most, but not all, of Syria is acceptable, as long as Damascus and the areas around Russia's air base and naval base are stable. Similarly, Moscow has neither the appetite nor the means to engage in post-war reconstruction and stabilization in all of Syria. It may assist in the areas important to Russia, but will be content to let the rest of the country languish in post-war misery. As noted earlier, it bears watching to see if these minimalist goals are acceptable to the

Assad regime. If not, then a rift could develop between Moscow and Damascus.

For Western audiences, several lessons emerge from an examination of Russian ways in Syria. First, Moscow's lean, flexible approach focused on solving discrete problems, but, in doing so, it created other problems more difficult to solve. For example, the "surrender or die" strategy the Russian military used in opposition-controlled cities, combined with the offer to let opposition fighters withdraw to Idlib Province, enabled Russia and the Assad regime to capture these cities without doing the hard, bloody work of urban fighting and without running huge prisoner camps for captured fighters. However, this strategy created another problem: Idlib Province is now a "petri dish" of terrorists, Turkish-backed opposition groups, and the remnants of Western-backed groups. The Assad regime's attempt to resolve this problem by destroying all opposition in Idlib in early 2020 was met with a vicious Turkish counterattack that severely hobbled Syria's military capability. An early March summit between Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan resulted in a tenuous ceasefire, but did nothing to resolve the problem that is Idlib.

The means that Russia used to achieve its objectives in Syria also hold implications for the West. Many of these will be examined in the next section of this chapter, but two points are relevant here. First, Russian strategy was not means-driven. Moscow never substantially increased the means devoted to Syria, and refused to allow itself to be drawn deeper into the conflict than its limited objectives warranted. For example, when confronted with the fact that the Syrian Arab Army had essentially disintegrated and was unable to provide the ground force to do the fighting, instead of deploying large numbers of Russian ground forces, Russia patiently cobbled together a ground force from local and regional militias while it reconstituted the Syrian Army. If this pattern holds, then the Kremlin is likely to be able to avoid “quagmires” of the type that the United States encountered in Vietnam and Afghanistan. Patience, deliberately limited ends, and a refusal to throw more resources at the problem may allow Russia to retain its leverage and not “own” the conflict the way that Western governments often do.

EFFECT ON THE CAPABILITIES OF THE RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES

Russia has always been primarily a land power. Even at the height of its Cold War naval power, the Soviet Navy never rivaled the U.S. Navy’s ability to project power globally. The Red Army and its allies, by contrast, dwarfed their NATO adversaries, at least in terms of the sheer number of forces and equipment. In 1975, the Warsaw Pact had some 58 divisions facing 27 NATO divisions, and 19,000 tanks facing 6,100 NATO tanks in Central Europe.⁷ Today, the balance of land power in Europe looks drastically different. NATO armies today

total some 1.75 million soldiers and 9,460 tanks against some 230,000 soldiers and 2,600 tanks for Russia, now stripped of its former Warsaw Pact allies, all of whom have joined NATO.

WHERE RUSSIA DOES SEEM POISED TO CHALLENGE WESTERN INTERESTS IS IN THE BLACK SEA AND EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN.

Despite NATO’s clear superiority in land power, some Western politicians, military leaders, and analysts continue to worry about a Russian land invasion of Europe. Concern peaked after the 2014 Russian seizure of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine. This concern is overstated: Russia can pose operational dilemmas for NATO, for example by closing the Suwalki Gap between Belarus and Kaliningrad or cutting off NATO forces in the Baltics. Assuming NATO members possess the political will to fight, a major war between Russia and NATO only ends one way: NATO victory. And there is no indication that Russia intends to start a war with NATO, in the Baltics or anywhere else. Some NATO members might have misgivings about the sanctity of the Alliance’s Article 5, but Russia shows no sign of wanting to test NATO here. Add to this the facts that Russia’s State Armament Plan 2011-2020 prioritized modernization for the Aerospace Force and the Navy, and the fact that these are the services that gained the most experience in Syria, and the focus by some Western analysts

7 “NATO and Warsaw Pact: Force Comparisons,” North Atlantic Treaty Organization, https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/declassified_138256.htm, accessed June 25, 2020.



Mine detection specialists in Palmyra (mil.ru)

on the threat of a Russian land invasion of Europe looks misplaced.

Where Russia does seem poised to challenge Western interests is in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean. All of Russia's three most recent military interventions—Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria in 2015—have occurred in this region. Of these, Syria is the only intervention that has been both overt and long term: the Russia-Georgia War was over in five days; Russia's war in Ukraine is undeclared and unacknowledged, so Moscow has been careful to limit the extent of its involvement. The fact that it is taking place where the Russian challenge to the West is greatest and that it has been an overt, long-term war means that the Syrian war's effect on the Russian armed forces deserves serious study.

Ground Forces

In their [chapter](#), Les Grau and Charles Bartles note that Russian ground force operations revolved around a Russian model of military advisors, integrated and modernized fires, mobility and counter-mobility operations, a featured role for military police, and use of

Special Forces and private military company (PMC) forces. While the Russian Army was the least affected of the services by its experience in Syria, it nevertheless improved its capabilities in these areas. As Grau and Bartles [argue](#), Russia's ground force advisors played a significant role in saving the Assad regime from collapse. Russian military advisors soon realized the army that they were supposed to be advising existed largely in name only. In reality, by the time Russia intervened in September 2015, the Syrian Arab Army was close to collapse. Instead of falling in on coherent units, Russian advisors found themselves relying on militias like the Desert Tigers, Desert Falcons, and Hezbollah, while working to rebuild the Syrian Army. Kofman gives an example of this, noting that Russian advisors built the 5th Assault Corps "out of disparate fighting formations and volunteers, plus hiring perhaps 2,000 mercenaries to fight as battalion tactical groups."

In contrast to the U.S. model of advising, which uses Special Forces or Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs) specifically trained in the task, Russia deployed entire staffs from combat units to Syria in advisor roles. While this meant that the Russian

advisors were less familiar with advising partner forces than a U.S. unit would be, the Russian model has the advantage that it produced entire staffs of combat units with advising experience. In an era of warfare where fighting with partner forces is increasingly common, the ability to advise and fight at the same time may provide advantages that the U.S. model lacks since U.S. SFABs are not meant to be employed as combat units.

Russia employed its artillery extensively and effectively in Syria. The Russian Army learned to use unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to spot targets for its artillery and to protect lead and flanks of columns of Russian and Syrian forces. The long loiter time and relative invisibility of UAVs give them considerable advantages over helicopters—Russia's previous platform of choice—in this role. The Russian Army also established a combined command and control system in order to integrate Russian and Syrian fires, something it had little experience in since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia used almost the entire inventory of its tube and rocket artillery systems in Syria, as well as the Iskander Operational-Tactical Rocket Complex (OTRK). Iskander fires two short-range ballistic missiles (SS-26 STONE) or two ground-launched cruise missiles (SSC-7), and is capable of hitting targets at ranges of up to 500 kilometers. The use of UAVs to find targets and do battle damage assessment and the integration of Russian and partner force fires are capabilities that Russia largely developed in Syria. And the use of nearly the entire inventory of the Russian Army's artillery over a long period of time in the Syrian desert doubtless revealed much about how to maintain the capabilities of these systems in a harsh and austere environment.

Russian Army engineers and MPs also played significant roles in Syria. Engineers gained experience in constructing installation defenses, route reconnaissance, road construction, and water purification, among other capabilities. Perhaps most significantly, Russian engineers demonstrated the ability to bridge rivers under fire. In September 2017, after several failed attempts by Syrian forces to do so, Russian engineers constructed a float bridge across the Euphrates just south

of Dayr-az-Zawr, allowing Russia and the Syrian regime to establish a foothold east of the Euphrates, which had long been an operational objective. Russian MPs gained experience in a wide range of standard and non-standard MP tasks. Standard tasks exercised include maintaining base security; manning checkpoints and observation posts; ensuring passage to and from de-escalation and de-confliction zones; conducting security patrols; and controlling civilian traffic. They also monitored ceasefire agreements, escorted humanitarian assistance convoys, and conducted peace support operations, none of which are standard tasks for Russian MPs.

RUSSIA USED PMCS, ESPECIALLY THE KREMLIN-LINKED WAGNER GROUP, EXTENSIVELY IN SYRIA.

Russian Special Forces and PMCs were also active in Syria. In contrast to U.S. Army Special Forces, whose missions are unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense (training and assisting partner forces), direct action (raids and attacks on important targets), special reconnaissance, and counterterrorism, Russian spetsnaz in Syria performed a more limited mission set. The primary spetsnaz missions in Syria were long-range reconnaissance and spotting targets for artillery, missile, and air strikes. Russian spetsnaz have also had a geographic focus that is unlike the Western Special Forces model. While Western Special Forces are trained to work in any environment, spetsnaz in Syria have generally operated in the deserts and mountains, leaving the cities to conventional forces.

Russia used PMCs, especially the Kremlin-linked Wagner Group, extensively in Syria.

Grau and Bartles conclude that at the high point of its activities, Wagner was estimated to employ 6,000 personnel, with some 2,500 of them working in Syria. Russia's use of PMCs in Syria also does not follow the Western model, in which PMCs generally perform personal security detail (PSD) and guard duties. Russian PMCs in Syria were configured for combat and performed full-scale combat operations. Grau and Bartles provide a picture of the Wagner Group's organization for combat. Wagner deployed four reconnaissance and assault brigades to Syria. Each brigade had three companies, and each company had up to 100 personnel. Wagner also deployed an artillery, armor, reconnaissance, communications, staff, and support units.

PMCs provide the Kremlin "off the books" and "non-attributable" combat power in Syria. Augmented by PMCs that do actual fighting, the Kremlin can claim a smaller official footprint in Syria, and it can allow PMCs to conduct missions that it prefers not to be associated with. The best example of this is the February 2018 incident near the town of Khasham in the Dayr-az-Zawr governorate. Wagner Group and allied Syrian forces attacked toward a unit of the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), where U.S. Special Forces Advisors were present. When the U.S. ground de-confliction cell called the Russian headquarters at Khmeimim, Russian officers claimed no knowledge of the attack or control of the attacking forces.⁸ The resulting U.S. counterattack killed over 100 of the attackers. Kofman argues that poor coordination—and not a deliberate Russian attempt to test U.S. resolve—is the likely reason for the attack. Given the number of informal armed groups fighting in Syria and the difficulty of controlling or even monitoring their activities, this is a reasonable conclusion. Whatever the level of Russian military knowledge of or control over the incident, the Russian headquarters in Syria learned a valuable lesson about the resolve of the United States to protect its forces in Syria.

The level of coordination between Russian PMCs and the Russian military is increasing. The best evidence for this is the recent deployment to Libya of Russian fighter aircraft to support Wagner Group fighters there. U.S. intelligence observed 14 Russian MiG-29 and Su-24 aircraft fly from Russia to Khmeimim, Syria, where they were repainted to conceal their Russian markings, before flying on to Libya.⁹ Increased coordination between the Russian military and Russian PMCs could bolster the Kremlin's ability to influence conflicts that it claims it is not involved in. This will come at a cost to the Kremlin's reputation for veracity, but denying things that are clearly true is something that it has done routinely and will continue to do.

Aerospace Forces

Kofman describes Russian airpower as "grossly underrated" in Syria. Grau and Bartles argue that Russia learned that airpower alone was incapable of turning the tide in the war. These seemingly contradictory statements are both true. Russian airpower was necessary but insufficient for success in Syria. Without the deployment of Russian airpower in September 2015, the Assad regime probably would have collapsed by the end of the year. And without the deployment of Russian ground forces to rally and reassemble the disintegrating Syrian Army, Russian airpower alone would have been insufficient to regain and consolidate control over most of Syria.

Since none of Russia's adversaries in Syria had an air force, the primary measure of effectiveness for Russian airpower there is its effect on the ground situation. Anton Lavrov argues that Russian aircraft had little effect on the ground fight in the early stages of Moscow's campaign in Syria. He gives two reasons. First, Russian aircraft simultaneously attacked many different opposition groups spread over a vast area. Second, the fear of losses led Russian aircraft to operate from high altitudes and to drop mostly unguided bombs, making their attacks ineffective against moving targets, hardened targets,

⁸ Email exchange between the author and the Director of the CJTF-OIR Russian Ground Deconfliction Cell.

⁹ Diana Stancy Correll, "Russian aircraft deploy to Libya to back private military contractors, AFRICOM says," *Military Times*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/05/26/russian-aircraft-deploy-to-libya-to-back-private-military-contractors-africom-says/>, accessed June 26, 2020.



Su-25s at Latakia (Wikimedia Commons/mil.ru)

or point targets. It also limited their ability to provide close air support to ground forces in contact. Russian bombs were “too big, too dumb, and ill-suited to the task of countering mobile formations.”

It was a tragedy that jolted Russia into changing the way it used airpower in Syria. After the November 2015 ISIS bombing of Russian Metrojet Flight 9268, Russia conducted a massive retaliation campaign against the terrorist group. Instead of dissipating the effect of its airpower by attacking a diverse array of mostly Western-backed groups, it focused on punishing ISIS. It used not only the air contingent deployed to Syria, but also strategic bombers flying out of Russia itself. As Lavrov says, the Russian Aerospace Forces conducted “attacks on large, soft, and stationary targets: oil production and refining facilities, columns of thousands of oil carriers engaged in oil smuggling for terrorists.” The effect of these attacks, combined with the ongoing U.S.-led air campaign against ISIS, destroyed the economic base of the terrorist group and began the process of wresting much of Syria from its control.

It was not long, however, before Russian Aerospace Forces reverted to the original strategy of attacking Western-backed groups, which it saw as the most immediate threat to the Assad regime. In summer and fall 2016, it conducted a relentless, indiscriminate bombing campaign against opposition-held eastern Aleppo. Focusing on Western-backed groups, Russian airpower decimated the city while Syrian and militia forces attacked it from the west, cutting the Castello Road, a key line of supply for opposition forces. When Russia and the Syrian government denied humanitarian aid to the eastern half of the city, rebel groups there had no choice but to accept Russia’s offer of safe passage to Idlib Province.

With the fall of the Western-backed opposition’s self-declared capital in Aleppo, Russia felt comfortable directing its attacks against ISIS again. Throughout summer and fall 2017, Russian aircraft supported the drive of Syrian and militia forces across the central Syrian desert to the Euphrates River. A key victory in this part of the campaign was the liberation of Dayr-az-Zawr, under ISIS control for three years. In this part of the campaign, the Russian Aerospace Forces improved their

abilities to support advancing ground forces and to hit targets quickly. As Lavrov observes, “The improvement in reconnaissance capabilities and accumulated overall experience since the start of operations allowed Russia to establish a more effective ‘kill chain’ and to improve reaction time from detection to destruction of the target.”

In early 2018, with Syria east of the Euphrates under control of the U.S.-backed SDF, and the ISIS caliphate reduced to a small area of desert in central Syria, the Russian Aerospace Forces switched focus to eliminating the remaining pockets of resistance in the west of the country. This part of the campaign showed how much their capabilities had improved. Lavrov says of Russian airpower in this stage of the campaign, “Its effectiveness, lethality, and coordination with ground forces significantly improved. The fight for these heavily fortified and well-defended cities went much faster than the fight for Aleppo.” By this time, improvements in tactics and the accumulated experience of several years in Syria gave Russian pilots the ability to hit moving enemy forces, something they lacked at the outset of the conflict. Again, to quote Lavrov, “Russia easily defeated the rare attempts by militants to mount counterattacks in 2018. An example is the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) counterattack in Northern Hama on March 14, when the RuAF decimated entire armored battle teams.”

The Russian Aerospace Forces have had a decisive effect on the ground situation over the course of the intervention. After a slow start in fall 2015, Russian airpower steadily improved its ability to influence the situation on the ground. Reduced times from detecting to engaging targets, an improved ability to strike targets in support of ground operations, and the ability to hit moving enemy forces are three of the most important improvements. While the Russian Aerospace Forces still lag behind their Western counterparts in these areas, they are much closer to equality than they were at the start of Russia’s intervention in Syria. The biggest remaining capability gap

between Russian and Western air forces is in the area of precision munitions, but even here Russia has made progress.

THE RUSSIAN AEROSPACE FORCES HAVE HAD A DECISIVE EFFECT ON THE GROUND SITUATION OVER THE COURSE OF THE INTERVENTION.

Western experts estimate that only about 20% of the munitions dropped by the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria were precision-guided.¹⁰ Russia made up for this deficiency in two ways. The first was the use of larger bombs, incendiary bombs, and cluster bombs. Lavrov says that as late as 2019-2020, large, unguided bombs were still the weapons of choice, especially for soft, stationary targets, where their explosive power made up for their lack of accuracy. The use of unguided munitions poses little problem when civilian casualties and collateral damage are not major concerns. And there is little evidence that Russia cared much about avoiding either. In fact, in the 2016 campaign to capture eastern Aleppo, it appears that indiscriminate bombing to induce terror was part of the campaign strategy.¹¹

The second way that Russia compensated for its lack of precision-guided munitions (PGMs) was the use of the Gefest bomb sight, which allowed Russian pilots to drop unguided bombs with theoretically PGM-like accuracy.

¹⁰ U.S. military officers, conversations with the author, August-October 2017.

¹¹ “Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo,” Human Rights Watch, December 1, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo#>, accessed June 26, 2020.



Early in its deployment, the Gefest had limited effectiveness due to the lack of training in its use by Russian pilots and the requirement to fly above 4,000 meters to avoid short-range air defense weapons. Lavrov concludes that as Russian pilots became more proficient in its use, the Gefest performed well, allowing them to hit a “single house in an urban environment or a weaponized pick-up truck hiding in a shelter.” By late 2019, Russian pilots were proficient enough in using the Gefest that they were able to rely less on cluster and incendiary bombs. Lavrov claims that in the Russian air attacks on Idlib Province that lasted from December 2019 until March 2020, not a single Russian use of these munitions was recorded. Given the fact that Turkish forces were deployed to Idlib at the time, Russia’s ability to be more accurate from the air might have prevented an unintentional conflict between Russian and Turkish forces.

Russian Aerospace Forces maintained a much higher sortie rate over Syria than Western observers expected, given the number of aircraft deployed there. Despite never having more than 40-44 jets in Syria, the Russian Aerospace Forces maintained a daily sortie rate of 40-50, with a peak of 100-130 in early 2016. Kofman notes that

the Aerospace Forces often deployed two crews for each aircraft to sustain the high sortie rate. And perhaps surprisingly, given the track record of Russian aircraft safety and maintenance, they did so while maintaining a rate of mechanical failure much lower than in previous operations. Some of this is doubtless due to the fact that many of the aircraft deployed to Syria were newer models, but Kofman’s observation that even older aircraft proved safer and more reliable than they have in past Russian operations implies systemic improvements in safety and maintenance.

Syria provided two more significant benefits to the Russian Aerospace Forces. First, it functioned as a test ground for the newest and most advanced Russian aircraft and equipment. The Su-57 fighter, the AT-16 Scallion anti-tank missile, the MiG-29K, the maritime version of the Ka-52K helicopter, and the Orion armed drone all made their debut in Syria. But even some platforms like the Tu-160 and Tu-95MS strategic bombers, which had been in service for years, saw their first combat use over Syria. In all, Lavrov estimates that some 359 pieces of Russian military hardware saw their first combat use in Syria. Their performance allowed the Russian

Ministry of Defense to make improvements to platforms already in service and informed procurement decisions on those still in the test and evaluation stage. Finally, Syria was the formative combat experience for a large majority of the Russian Aerospace Forces. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu claimed in 2019 that 98% of transport aviation crews, 90% of operational-tactical and army aviation crews, and 60% of long-range bomber crews had fought in Syria. Lavrov describes a continuous loop, whereby the lessons learned in combat over Syria were integrated into the curricula of Russia's professional military educational system. This resulted in changes to doctrine and tactics, which were then tested in Syria, and, if necessary, further refined.

The Russian Aerospace Forces are Russia's center of gravity in its Syrian campaign. Without it, the Kremlin would probably have been unable to achieve its primary campaign objective of preventing the fall of the Assad regime. Although it was necessary for preventing the collapse of the Syrian government, airpower alone was insufficient for the restoration of government control over most of Syria. That required the deployment of ground forces that helped reconstitute the Syrian Army, instill a modicum of discipline into the many irregular forces fighting on the government's side, and provided key enablers like artillery, engineers, and MPs.

Maritime Forces

The effect of the intervention on the Russian Navy has been more uneven than in the other branches of the Russian military. On the one hand, the Navy oversaw an impressive logistical sustainment effort and demonstrated its ability to deliver precision cruise missile strikes from very long range. On the other hand, its lone foray into carrier aviation operations was close to disastrous, and it revealed deficiencies in its air and missile defense capabilities. But navies are unique among military services in their ability to exercise geopolitical—and not simply military—power. And it is here that the Russian Navy's experience in Syria may have the greatest effect on it and the country it serves.

The Russian Navy coordinated and implemented a logistical support effort unique in Russia's post-Soviet history. As Igor Delanoe notes, from July 2012 through January 2018, there were 318 rotations between Novorossiysk and Syrian ports, delivering 185,500 tons of cargo, 50% of which was delivered on Black Sea fleet vessels. When the logistical needs of the Syrian campaign outstripped the capabilities of the Navy, it quickly leased or purchased commercial vessels. This "Syrian Express," as it came to be known, continues to meet the logistical requirements of the Russian contingent in Syria.

RUSSIA'S NAVY HAS ALSO SHOWCASED ITS ABILITY TO STRIKE TARGETS AT LONG RANGE WITH THE KALIBR CRUISE MISSILE.

Russia's Navy has also showcased its ability to strike targets at long range with the Kalibr cruise missile. Russia's first Kalibr strike came in October 2015 when surface vessels from the Caspian Sea Flotilla fired 26 Kalibr-NK missiles on 11 targets in Syria, overflying Iraqi and Iranian airspace to do so. The fact that Russia carried out this strike from the Caspian Sea showcased the Kalibr's 2500 km (1500 mile) range. In December of the same year, a Russian submarine fired four Kalibr's while submerged in the eastern Mediterranean, marking the first firing of the Kalibr by a submerged submarine. While the use of the Kalibr by the Russian Navy showcases a new capability, Delanoe cautions against overestimating Russia's cruise missile firepower. He notes that the "kalibricized" task force that Russia deployed in the Levant in August 2018 consisted of nine ships (three

frigates, three small missile boats, one small missile corvette, two submarines) with a combined capability to fire 60 Kalibr cruise missiles. While this may sound impressive, it represents only about 2/3 the number that a single U.S. Arleigh Burke class destroyer can fire.

The aircraft carrier *Kuznetsov* represents the most visible failure of the Russian Navy in Syria. Its highly anticipated 2016 deployment proved a debacle. It arrived in the eastern Mediterranean carrying the new MiG-29K and the maritime version of the Ka-52K helicopter as well as modernized Su-33s. Almost immediately after arrival, it lost a MiG-29KUB and Su-33 in landing accidents. Rather than continue to conduct high-risk takeoffs and landings from the carrier, the Navy decided to fly the aircraft ashore and operate them from the Russian air base at Khmeimim, making the carrier redundant. The *Kuznetsov* steamed home to Murmansk and began extensive repairs that continued into mid-2020. Even in dry dock, the ship has continued to be cursed with mishaps. In October 2018, a floating dry dock servicing the *Kuznetsov* sank, “dropping a 70-ton crane that tore a 215-square-foot hole in the carrier’s flight deck.” A December 2019 fire aboard the ship while in dry dock added \$6.6 million to the cost of the repairs, which may now total \$1.5 billion.¹² The deployment of Russia’s sole aircraft carrier to the eastern Mediterranean, where it played no useful role in the Syrian campaign, put it out of action for four years and counting.

Air and missile defense is an area where the Russian Navy showed both strength and weakness. On one hand, the Navy provided air and missile defense coverage for Russian forces in Syria via the ship-borne S-300 FORT system. It used this to defend the maritime approaches to the Syrian coast, allowing the air and missile defense systems ashore in Khmeimim and Tartus to focus in other directions. On the other hand, the Mediterranean Squadron’s vulnerability to other threats forced the Russian military to deploy air defense and anti-ship systems ashore. As Delanoë says, “The deployment

of anti-ship coastal battery Bastion and electronic warfare systems combined with the various anti-air systems (S-300, S-400, Pantsir-S1 for close-in anti-air warfare and Buk-M2 for middle range air defense) created multilayered protection for the Mediterranean Squadron.” However, this limits the distance that the squadron’s ships can operate from shore since if they stray too far from shore they will be unprotected by land-based systems.

AIR AND MISSILE DEFENSE IS AN AREA WHERE THE RUSSIAN NAVY SHOWED BOTH STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS.

As noted earlier, navies are unique in that they play a geopolitical role, not just a military one. And it is in this role that the Russian Navy’s Syria experience may prove most important. The Navy’s Mediterranean Squadron, resurrected in 2013, is here to stay, as is a Russian naval presence on the eastern Mediterranean. To again quote Delanoë, the Kremlin sees the Mediterranean Squadron as a way to “locally counter balance NATO navies and protect Russia’s southern flank from perceived instability emanating from the Mediterranean’s southern shore, in the context of the ‘Arab Spring.’”

The agreement with the Syrian government to extend the lease agreement for Russia’s naval base at Tartus for 49 years with a possible extension of 25 years means that Russia is in the region for the foreseeable future. The agreement allows 11 vessels to dock there, and Russia is currently upgrading Tartus to make it more robust as a base. Western navies will

¹² Michael Peck, “The Repair Bill for Russia’s Aircraft Carrier: \$1.5 Billion?,” *The National Interest*, December 28, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/repair-bill-russias-aircraft-carrier-15-billion-109001>, accessed June 26, 2020.

need to adjust to a much larger Russian naval presence and geopolitical role in the eastern Mediterranean. The good news for the West is that this is likely the extent of Russia's ability to project maritime power. As Delanoë notes, "The projection of littoral warfare executed by Russia in Eastern Mediterranean seems unlikely to be duplicated other contexts outside the Mediterranean space. The VMF lacks proper projection capabilities, and Tartus remains Russia's sole naval base outside the post-Soviet space that Moscow can count on."

The story of Russia's maritime operations in support of its campaign in Syria is a mixed one. The Navy quickly organized an impressive logistical operation and has sustained it for over five years. It also showcased new long-range strike capabilities in the Kalibr cruise missile. But its lone foray into carrier aviation operations was a debacle, and the Mediterranean Squadron revealed weaknesses in its ability to protect itself unless covered by assets ashore. This essentially makes it a littoral, or "green water," unit. Furthermore, as Delanoë concludes, the Russian Navy is not a priority for future investment. Since Russia's State Armament Program 2011-2020 "prioritized naval rearmament, with roughly 25% of its budget going toward the modernization" of the Navy, the priorities through 2027 will "focus on the ground forces, air forces, airborne forces, and the manufacture of precision-guided munitions." Add to this Lavrov's conclusion that through their performance in Syria, the Russian Aerospace Forces bested the Navy in the competition to be Russia's premier force projection arm, and it is clear that Russia's Navy will not fare well in the competition for scarce budget rubles in the near future.

CONCLUSION

Five years on from its intervention in Syria, Russia presents a different and more formidable set of challenges for the West. Western policymakers will need to get used to the idea that Russia is intent on establishing itself as a force to be reckoned with in the geopolitical region that extends from the Black Sea to the eastern Mediterranean.

Whether Russia has "won" in Syria is an open question. It certainly achieved its immediate goal of preventing the collapse of the Assad regime, but it has yet to restore the government's sovereignty over large parts of the country and seems to have no idea how to do so. The two states standing in Moscow's way here are the United States, which controls the Al Tanf region and much of Syria north and east of the Euphrates, and Turkey, which has forces deployed in Idlib protecting its allies there. Russia seems to have neither the means nor the will to dislodge American and Turkish forces from their perches inside Syria. But it may not need to. Russia's intervention is a limited war in pursuit of limited objectives, and Moscow may be comfortable with the status quo, as it serves those objectives. What remains to be seen is whether the Assad regime and Iran, Russia's primary partners in the war, will accept such an inconclusive outcome.

Syria holds important lessons for how Russia fights. As Kofman notes, Moscow "grew hungrier from the eating" in Syria. After achieving its initial goal of preventing the collapse of the Assad regime, Russia then decided to make Syria the centerpiece of its regional presence. But this does not reflect an expansion of the Kremlin's ends in Syria as much as the logical outgrowth of its initial success. Having saved the Assad regime from collapse and stabilized the western part of Syria, it was natural that Russia would try to gain geopolitically from its efforts. What it will not do is engage in nation-building or significant reconstruction in Syria, as Western states might be tempted to do. The Kremlin will be content with a client state that is just stable enough to protect Russian interests there.

Russia's strategy in Syria was minimalist in the means that it devoted to the effort and flexible in the ways it chose. The number of forces deployed was never more than 5,000 and was below 4,000 by 2018. Moscow was patient in Syria. Rather than deploy more Russian ground forces when they understood the incapacity of the Syrian Arab Army, Russian military leaders chose to rely on local and regional militias in the immediate term as they rebuilt Syria's ground fighting forces over the long term. The overriding concern was to avoid "owning" the ground fight and to avoid being more committed to Syria's success than Syrians themselves were.

RUSSIA PURSUED MULTIPLE ROUTES TO SUCCESS IN SYRIA, REINFORCING THOSE THAT SHOWED PROMISE AND ABANDONING THOSE THAT DID NOT.

Russia pursued multiple routes to success in Syria, reinforcing those that showed promise and abandoning those that did not. It finally settled on a geographically phased approach, with the use of de-escalation agreements to allow it to pause fighting in certain areas so that it could focus on others. Russia also chose not to discriminate between the UN-designated terrorist organizations in Syria and Western-backed moderate opposition groups that were parties to the cessation of hostilities agreement pursuant to UNSCR 2254. The Russian military in Syria also intentionally escalated the situation with the United States in a mostly unsuccessful attempt to deter the United States and its partner forces from moving into areas that Russia hoped to secure for the Assad regime.

Finally, Moscow launched diplomatic and informational campaigns designed to support the military one.

An examination of the ways that Russia pursued its ends in Syria leads to the following lessons for Western observers. First, Russia is more risk-acceptant than most Western governments would be. Russian forces in Syria intentionally escalated the situation with the United States to deter it from taking action counter to Russian interests, confident that they could manage the level of escalation, and de-escalate successfully when required. Russia does this because in Syria and globally, it knows that the United States is the more powerful party and the party more interested in preserving the status quo. Intentional escalation and other forms of risk-acceptant behavior are a way for Moscow to equalize the power imbalance and to cause general disruption of the order the United States leads and hopes to preserve.

Next, Russia is less concerned about reputational damage than Western governments would be. Put simply, Russia is willing to commit war crimes in Syria because they serve the ends of Russian strategy and because Moscow believes its propaganda efforts will muddy the waters enough that it will pay no real price. Finally, Western policymakers should understand that Russia sees all agreements that it concludes in Syria in instrumental terms. Whether it is UNSCR 2254, de-escalation agreements with opposition groups, or de-confliction agreements with the United States, Russia will violate the agreement the moment that it sees an advantage in doing so.

Finally, the Syria experience was transformational for the Russian armed forces, but the extent of that transformation was uneven. The Russian Aerospace Forces was the most transformed by its experience in the war. As Lavrov says, through its performance in Syria, the Aerospace Forces won the competition with the Navy to determine which service would be Russia's premier power projection force. Russian pilots are more experienced and more confident in their equipment than they have been at any time since the collapse of the Soviet Union. U.S. pilots who have flown over Syria

express great respect for the capabilities of some of the Russian aircraft they have seen there, especially the Su-35.¹³ Deficiencies remain, especially in the availability and performance of precision-guided munitions, but the Russian Aerospace Forces are a more formidable adversary than Western air forces have faced in decades.

The Russian Army was partially transformed by its experience in Syria, with the greatest gains coming in its staff operations and among those branches that had the most direct contribution to the fight. The Russian model of advising, which transplanted the entire staffs of combat units to Syria, should make those staffs better able to plan and oversee complex ground operations in any future conflict. And branches such as the artillery, engineers, MPs, and Special Forces gained much from their experience in Syria. Russia's tank and motorized rifle regiments, long the centerpiece of its land power, were largely left out of the war.

The Russian Navy's performance was uneven. It showed agility and staying power in establishing the "Syrian Express," which has met the logistical needs of the Russian military contingent for five years. Its Kalibr cruise missile strikes on Syria from the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas demonstrated a new Russian capability that Western militaries will have to contend with from now on. But the Navy's 2016 attempt to contribute to the air campaign from its lone aircraft carrier was a debacle that has essentially taken that capability off the table for the time being. Instead, Russia will put to sea a "littoralized" and "kalibricized" navy.

The final lesson for Western observers from Russia's experience is that it may have changed the way in which the Russian military views war. Kofman notes that in 2013 Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov wrote, "Each war represents an isolated case, requiring an understanding of its own particular logic, its own uniqueness." In other words, before Syria, the Russian military rejected the idea of a "template" for waging a certain type of campaign. This is very different from the way that Western militaries

operate. In the West, it is the type of warfare that determines how the war is to be fought, not the environment it is to be fought in. If, as Kofman says, Russia is moving away from the idea that each war is an isolated case and is moving toward the idea that the lessons of Syria can be "doctrinally assimilated into a template of sorts for how to deploy forces in future interventions," the implications for those who study the Russian way of war would be profound.

Key Takeaways

- Russia has not won conclusively in Syria, but may not need to in order to achieve its objectives.
- Russia hopes to make Syria the centerpiece of its regional presence, but seeks to avoid engaging in reconstruction or nation-building there.
- Russian strategy has been minimalist in the means deployed and flexible in the ways it used those means; it pursued multiple vectors and reinforced those that had success.
- Russia is risk-tolerant, unconcerned about reputational damage, and sees all agreements in instrumental terms, violating them as soon as it is convenient.
- Syria was transformational for the Russian armed forces, but the transformation was uneven, with the Aerospace Forces the most transformed, the Army partially transformed, and the Navy least transformed.
- The institutionalization of the lessons of Syria may change the way in which Russia approaches warfare, from seeing each war as an isolated case to forming a doctrinal template for certain types of warfare.



13 U.S. Air Force pilots, conversations with the author, August-October 2017.

FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE



The Foreign Policy Research Institute is dedicated to producing the highest quality scholarship and nonpartisan policy analysis focused on crucial foreign policy and national security challenges facing the United States. We educate those who make and influence policy, as well as the public at large, through the lens of history, geography, and culture.

Foreign Policy Research Institute

1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610
Philadelphia, PA 19102

215-732-3774 www.fpri.org