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**Act of Desperation or Game Changer?
Russian Deployments in Syria**

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Executive Summary

- ✓ Russia's foremost goal is to invigorate its ally in Damascus that was increasingly losing its ability to sustain the ongoing stalemate in the Syrian Civil War. This is parallel to increased Iranian involvement in the Syrian battleground.
- ✓ Moscow has argued that its recent military overtures are aimed at countering the ISIS threat, but the nature of its military deployments and military exercises in the region suggest additional motives.
- ✓ Russian maneuvers suggest that Moscow will not tolerate any external operations that may (or may be perceived to) pose a threat to the survival of the Assad regime. Furthermore Russia signals that it will ensure the permanence of a pro-Russian entity, whether it's in the form of the entire Syrian Arab Republic or a micro-state that will form in the aftermath of the Syrian Civil War.
- ✓ With its latest move Moscow has managed to stir Western ranks on how to treat the Assad regime. In addition to its military maneuvers, Russia has engaged regional powers, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt diplomatically. Contrary to the initial Western desire to isolate Russia, Moscow may stand to benefit from a *de facto* negligence of its position over Crimea and Ukraine if the sides decide to cooperate with Russia.
- ✓ On a broader scale, the Russian move should be read under the backdrop of the ongoing competition between the West and Russia. Moscow has shown its interest in regaining its influence over its hinterland, first with Georgia, then with Ukraine, and lately, with Syria.
- ✓ In its latest move, Russia has forced the West into a major dilemma. Accepting the Russian position would amount to the tacit approval of a dictator with countless war crimes in its track record and solidify Russia's foothold in the region. Rejecting it would be tantamount to risking potential confrontations, and may turn out to be a proxy war between the West and Russia, thus serving to elongate the civil war.
- ✓ In either scenario, the Turkish plans for a safe-zone in Syria have been rendered virtually impossible in the near term. Furthermore, Russia's increasing involvement may threaten the bilateral relations between Ankara and Moscow.
- ✓ Newly surfaced open-source intelligence suggests critical changes in the Russian manner of conduct in Syria. The underlying reason that caught many Western nations off-guard about Moscow's recent moves remains the very difference between the Western and Russian military thoughts. The most challenging aspect of the new Russian way of warfare is the hardships it poses to intelligence analysis and strategic forecasting. This new way of warfare

brings about ‘wars without declaration’ and a blurring distinction between war and peace situations.

- ✓ EDAM military assessment suggests that activities such as extending runways and resurfacing pavements could probably point to the enhancement of the airbase’s capacity for heavier strategic lift aircraft. In this regard, an increase in the Russian strategic airlift activity into Syria has been reported.
- ✓ There is also ongoing maritime supply route from Russia to Syria, as recently surfaced by the passage of Alligator and Ropucha class amphibious transport vessels (landing ships) through the Bosphorus. While the sea-lift between Russia and Syria is not a new development; there is an increase in the maritime supply activity.
- ✓ The current airlifted assets and personnel could well perform as a spearhead for a larger follow-on force, run a comprehensive military advisory mission attached to the operational and tactical level maneuver units, establish a logistical line via strategic air-bridge; and as a worst case scenario for the Baathist regime, the Russian assets and air-bridge can ensure the existence of a pro-Moscow micro-state with a gateway to the Mediterranean.
- ✓ Another political-military objective of the Russian deployments could be signaling to outside powers that Russia might be willing to directly intervene in the Syrian conflict, even in a limited fashion. In this respect, the Russians delivered six Mig-31 Foxhound interceptor fighters to the Syrian Arab Air Force as recently as August 2015. Normally, an air force dealing with irregular threats would need more attack aircraft and gunships than interceptor-fighters that are primarily effective against other aircraft. Thus, the arms transfer is believed to reflect Moscow’s unease with the idea of a openly voiced or tacitly conducted no-fly zone over Syria.

I- The Political Context : Russia as a Game Changer in the Middle Eastern Geopolitical Chessboard

Russian deployments in Syria come at a time when it was becoming clear that the Assad regime was increasingly losing its ability to sustain the ongoing stalemate in the Syrian Civil War, much less overturn the stalemate in its favor. Hence, the most visible goal of Russia's increasing presence in Syria is to invigorate its ally in Damascus; much akin to Tehran's increased support for the regime through the Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah, as argued in the military analysis of this report.

In addition to potentially giving the Assad regime, or as Kremlin prefers to frame it – the Syrian Government – a better chance of survival against the challenging attrition inflicted by several armed opposition groups, the aim is to both signal and physically demonstrate Kremlin's willingness to support its ally against a potential Western intervention. This is evident in the transfer of air defense systems, anti-ship cruise missiles, and interceptor aircraft, as well as military exercises that Russia has conducted in Eastern Mediterranean, most notably near the Tartus naval base and the coastal city of Latakia. The latest round of naval muscle flexing involved scenarios that mimicked “to repulse an attack from the air and to defend the coast, which means firing artillery and testing short-range air defence systems”¹. Such exercises near the regime stronghold in Latakia may be aimed to give three potential messages:

- ✓ Russia will not tolerate no-fly zones or other military maneuvers against the Syrian government;
- ✓ In case a micro Baathist state emerges as an outcome of the civil war, Russia will continue to defend its existence;
- ✓ Russia may see air operations near the areas that regime forces control as potential threats. The final point is bolstered by Russia's call to the United States for military-to-military cooperation on ongoing airstrikes in Syria to avoid “unintended incidents”².

On a broader scale, the Russian move should be read under the backdrop of the ongoing competition between the West and Moscow which was sparked by Russia's annexation of Crimea and its ongoing involvement in Ukraine. For a long time, the Russian Federation has used military drills and snap inspections as a 'multi-functional strategic tool' to foster its armed forces' combat readiness, to flex its muscles and for political and military signaling to the West. Coupled with its naval exercises in Eastern Mediterranean, Russia recently began its largest military exercises of 2015, with the

¹ Reuters (2015, September 11) “Russia intensifies naval exercises off Syrian coast – sources”

² Reuters (2015, September 11) “Russia to U.S.: talk to us on Syria or risk 'unintended incidents’”

participation of some 95,000 troops, which were launched in the Central Military District Headquarters in Yekaterinburg³.

The U.S. in turn has tried to convince Bulgaria, Greece and Iraq⁴ to deny Russia strategic airlift access to their airspaces. Russia continues to avoid using Turkish airspace due to an incident in 2012 when Turkey forced a Russian passenger jet *en route* to Syria to land due to intelligence that military equipment was transported in the plane.⁵ So far, only Bulgaria has decided to shut down its airspace to Russian transfers and it is reported that Iraq has turned back one aircraft⁶. Furthermore, Russia continues to conduct its military transfers through the sea; it is reported that 39 Russian ships have crossed over the Bosphorus in the last two months alone⁷. Yet, as reported by the military assessment of this report, while sealift could constitute a consistent supply line, strategic airlift enjoys the speed element, and thereby much effectively responds to shifts on the battleground and dangerous setbacks.

The Kremlin has built its rationale over the fight against ISIS, with Russian FM Sergey Lavrov arguing that “the most effective and powerful ground force to fight Islamic State is the Syrian Army”⁸, and calling on other states to support the Syrian government forces as well. President Putin has echoed these statements, stating “without an active participation of the Syrian authorities and the military, it would be impossible to expel the terrorists from that country and the region as a whole” and suggesting that President “Assad was ready to conduct political transformations and engage a ‘healthy part of the opposition’”⁹. On the outset, the Russia’s declared rationale may seem to have solid grounds as ISIS has increased its presence in Chechnya and the broader Caucasus region. Still, the nature of the deployment thus far points towards a variety of motives as discussed above.

It appears that Russia has managed to stir ranks in the Western coalition with regards to their stance on President Assad’s future. British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond suggested that Britain was ready to make “compromises” with Moscow and Tehran for “Assad to play a role “for some months” in a transition process”¹⁰. Austrian FM Sebastian Kurz has argued that Assad must be involved in the fight against ISIS, whereas Spain has suggested that negotiating with Assad was a necessity to end the civil war¹¹. Additionally France has argued that although Assad must step down “at some point or another”,

³ Newsweek (2015, September 14) “Russia Begins Biggest Military Exercises of 2015, Involving 95,000 Troops”

⁴ Taştekin, F. (2015, September 16) “Suriye’de ABD için Rus ruleti” Radikal

⁵ The New York Times (2015, September 8) “U.S. Moves to Block Russian Military Buildup in Syria”

⁶ Foreign Policy (2015, September 14) “This Satellite Image Leaves No Doubt That Russia Is Throwing Troops and Aircraft Into Syria”

⁷ Taştekin, F. (2015, September 16) “Suriye’de ABD için Rus ruleti” Radikal

⁸ RT (2015, September 13) “Russia backs Syria’s fight against ISIS, not Assad’s regime – Lavrov”

⁹ Military.com (2015, September 15) “Putin Defends Russia’s Military Assistance to Syrian Regime” Accessed on 17 September 2015 at <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2015/09/15/putin-defends-russias-military-assistance-to-syrian-regime.html>

¹⁰ ABC News (2015, September 14) “Analysis: Russia Gambles in Syria, Ramping up Involvement”

¹¹ Reuters (2015, September 11) “Russia to U.S.: talk to us on Syria or risk ‘unintended incidents’”

“a solution must be found with the regime, the state”¹². It has been reported that even Washington is contemplating whether to engage Russia and risk emboldening Moscow¹³.

In addition to the aforementioned developments, Russia has already been running a parallel track with Middle Eastern powers. The last few weeks have seen an intensive diplomatic traffic between Riyadh and Moscow, and analysts have even hinted at the possibility of Saudi Arabia moving away from its anti-Assad coalition with Turkey and Qatar¹⁴. In the meantime, it has been suggested that Egypt may choose to inch closer to its partner, Russia, and reinstate diplomatic relations with the Assad regime¹⁵. Furthermore, for the first time in a decade, President Putin is expected to deliver a speech at the United Nations General Assembly on September 28th to emphasize his country’s Syria strategy¹⁶.

If Moscow manages to sway Western stances on President Assad, it will score a major point that could potentially divide Western ranks on how to treat the Syrian issue. It could be argued that such a move would strengthen the Russian position internationally and hamper the transatlantic position on isolating Russia. As such, Russia may stand to benefit from a *de facto* neglect of the Russian position over Crimea and Ukraine.

With the anti-ISIS coalition airstrikes failing to go beyond proving some military efficiency only at tactical level and in limited theaters, in the absence of the backing of capable local forces, and the training and equipping Syrians falling short well beyond even the most pessimistic expectations, the anti-ISIS coalition in its current state appears unlikely to reach its goals in the near term. Thus, Western states may be tempted to talking to Russia and taking up on Moscow’s call to form a broader coalition against ISIS. This would serve as a double edged sword. While forging a broader coalition with Moscow could potentially shorten both the Syrian civil war and the war against ISIS, it would amount to a reversal of the Western position against President Assad and mean that the West is tacitly supporting a dictator that has conducted countless war crimes and human rights violations, rejuvenate the Baathist regime, and work to strengthen Moscow’s influence and footprint in the region. By playing against Western security concerns, recalcitrance and inter-alliance divisions, Moscow may well score multiple points in the global strategic chessboard.

On the other hand should the West opt for not taking the deal, then the Russian involvement in Syria would work to elongate the 4 year old civil war even more and may potentially turn the Syrian battleground into a proxy war between the West and Russia. Either way, the Turkish position of establishing safe zones in Syria have been rendered virtually impossible, as going forward with such a plan and foregoing working together with Russia would risk engagements with Russian assets and

¹² Euro News (2015, September 7) “France to begin Syria reconnaissance flights, mulls air strikes”

¹³ The New York Times (2015, September 15) “Obama Weighing Talks With Putin on Syrian Crisis”

¹⁴ Taştekin, F. (2015, September 16) “Suriye’de ABD için Rus ruleti” Radikal

¹⁵ Associated Press (2015, September 14) “Analysis: Russia gambles in Syria, ramping up involvement”

¹⁶ The New York Times (2015, September 16) “Putin Sees Path to Diplomacy Through Syria”

defenses over Syrian skies and potential Russian casualties. An alternative scenario that would pit the sides against each other is the potential for Western or Turkish backed local forces clashing with Russia backed “little green men”. In case Ankara’s allies choose to side with Moscow, the safe-zone plan would automatically be scrapped as it would be impossible to convince Russia. Furthermore, it should be noted that there is a growing uneasiness among the Russian strategic circles about Turkey’s stance in Syria. A 2015 report by Andrew Korybko criticized Turkey for being a destabilizing factor in Syria. Korybko even used the term “Slavic Turkey” in critique of Poland’s position in Ukraine¹⁷. Therefore, as Moscow fosters its footprint and military activities in Syria, we may expect more tensions in Turkish – Russian relations that could have ramifications in a broad spectrum from energy affairs to strategic competition in other regions and issues.

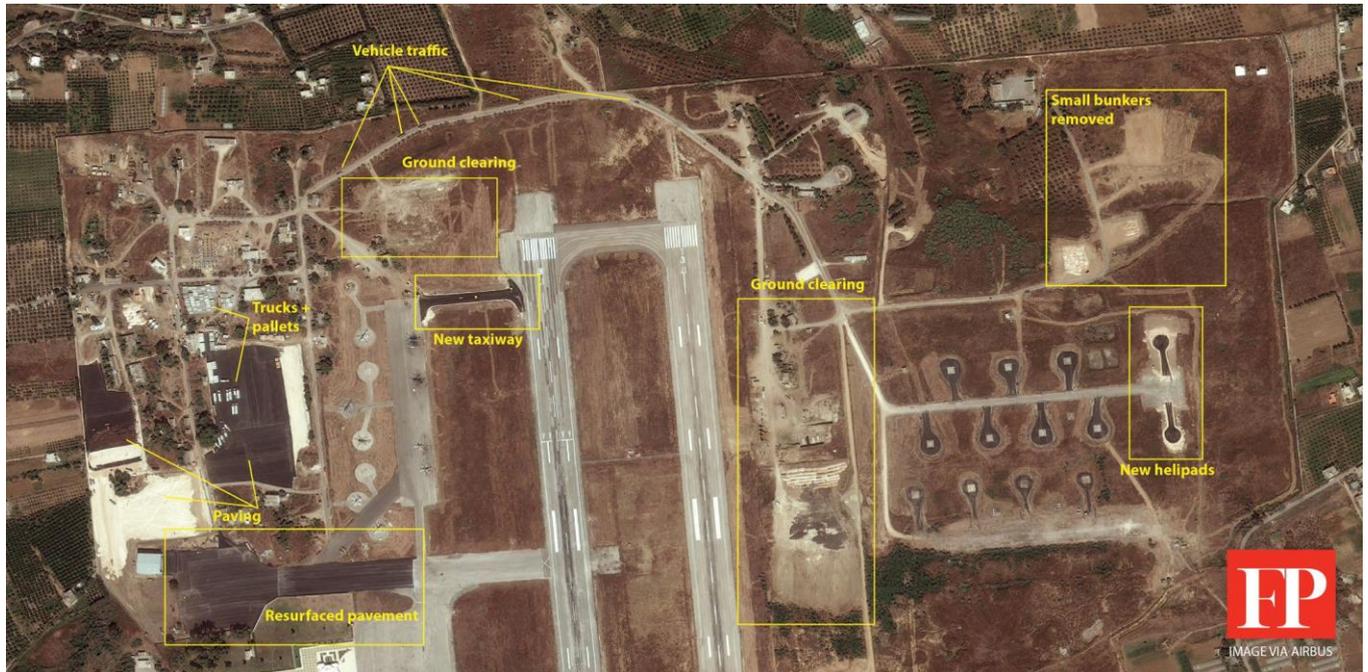
Paradoxically, Russia’s engagement in Syria is more legitimate strictly in terms of international law compared to ongoing coalition operations against ISIS in Syria, due to the widely recognized Assad regime’s request for assistance from Moscow, and Moscow’s previous bilateral agreements with the Syrian government. Furthermore, Moscow could argue that it is threatened more directly by ISIS due to its large marginalized Muslim populations and ISIS’ growing influence in Chechnya and the broader Caucasus region.

Shedding the scabs of the breakaway of the USSR, Moscow has shown its interest in regaining its influence over its hinterland, first with Georgia, then with Ukraine, and lately, with Syria. In its latest move, Russia has forced the West into a major dilemma and a difficult choice. No matter which way the West, or more broadly, the international community decides to weigh in on Moscow’s recent diplomatic and military advances, Russia has effectively strengthened its position in Syria and the Middle East.

¹⁷ Andrew, Korybko. *Hybrid Wars: The Indirect Adaptive Approach to Regime Change*, Institution for Strategic Studies and Predictions, Peoples’ Friendship University of Russia, Moscow, 2015, p.68

II- Understanding the Military Context: Russian Strategic Airlift into Syria and IMINT Assessment

The open-source image intelligence (IMINT) obtained from satellites shows comprehensive ground clearing and construction, runway pavement, and new helipad images in Latakia area, where the Basal al Assad Airport is located¹⁸.



Retrieved from: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/14/this-satellite-image-leaves-no-doubt-that-russia-is-throwing-troops-and-aircraft-into-syria-latakia-airport-construction/>

EDAM military assessment suggests that activities such as extending runways and resurfacing pavements could probably point to the enhancement of the airbase's capacity for heavier strategic lift aircraft. In this regard, the *Antonov-124* flights from the Russian Federation to Syria to augment the troubled Baathist regime draw attention. Recently, it was reported that the Pentagon tracked some 15 *Antonov-124 Condor* flights into Syria¹⁹. From a military standpoint, the strategic airlift is a critical requirement of the expeditionary operations. *Antonov* is one of the rare military transport aircrafts that can carry 100 plus tons payloads beyond the 2,500 nautical miles range, and enjoy roll-on/roll-off capability that supports transport missions for tanks and armored vehicles²⁰. Furthermore, *Antonov An-*

¹⁸ Jeffrey, Lewis. "This Satellite Image Leaves No Doubt That Russia Is Throwing Troops and Aircraft Into Syria", *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2015.

¹⁹ <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/09/14/russia-shipping-tanks-into-syria-in-first-clear-sign-offensive-weapons/>,

Accessed on: September 16, 2015.

²⁰ Carlo, Kopp. "Strategic Air Mobility for the ADF", *Defence Today*, February 2005.

124, along with the Lockheed C-5 and Boeing C-17 in the same class, is able to carry “outsize” cargos, which is different from “oversize” cargos in military airlift planning, and refers to extremely large and / or bulky items²¹. The airlift’s advantage over sealift is first and foremost the speed when compared flights with maritime navigation²². The “speed factor” is critically important given the current state and trajectory of the Syrian civil war. Nevertheless, there is also ongoing maritime supply route from Russia to Syria, as recently surfaced by the passage of *Alligator* and *Ropucha* class amphibious transport vessels (landing ships) through the Bosphorus²³. While the sea-lift between Russia and Syria is not a new development; there is an increase in the maritime supply activity.



Antonov An-124, Retrieved from: <http://www.janes.com/article/46548/russia-completes-initial-an-124-upgrade-programme>,

Given that US airlifted some 500,000 troops and 543,548 tons of cargo for the military buildup leading to the 1991 Operation Desert Storm in Iraq²⁴, it would not be accurate to suggest that the Russians are about to launch a massive invasion in Syria. Moreover, both in the Georgia and Ukraine cases, Moscow deployed highly-trained, elite forces in smartly effective numbers. For a massive invasion mission in Syria, it would be fairly doubtful that the Russian regular forces with conscripts lacking

²¹ Katia, Vlachos-Dengler. *Carry That Weight: Improving European Strategic Airlift Capabilities*, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2007, pp.16-17.

²² Christopher, Bolkcom. *Strategic Airlift Modernization: Background Issues and Options*, Congressional Research Service, 2005, Washington D.C. p1.

²³ <http://turkishnavy.net/2015/09/13/another-southbound-passage-of-nikolay-filchenkov/>, Accessed on: September 17, 2015.

²⁴ Christopher, Bolkcom. *Strategic Airlift Modernization: Background Issues and Options*, Congressional Research Service, 2005, Washington D.C. p1.

adequate modern equipment and combat record could match the required force-to-space and force-to-population ratios efficiently²⁵.

Yet, the current airlifted assets and personnel could well perform:

- ✓ as a spearhead for a larger follow-on force,
- ✓ run a comprehensive military advisory mission attached to the operational and tactical level maneuver units, probably with the authorization of calling in close air-support or directly engage when necessary,
- ✓ establish a logistical line via strategic air-bridge to sustain and increase Moscow's support to the regime that could rapidly respond to possible shifts on the battleground,
- ✓ As a worst case scenario for the Baathist regime, the Russian assets and air-bridge can ensure the existence of a pro-Moscow micro-state with a gateway to the Mediterranean.

Another political-military objective of the Russian deployments could be signaling to outside powers that Russia might be willing to directly intervene in the Syrian conflict, even in a limited fashion.

In this respect, the Russians delivered six *Mig-31 Foxhound* interceptor fighters to the Syrian Arab Air Force as recently as August 2015. *Mig-31 Foxhound* is a highly maneuverable platform with robust radar systems and is capable of carrying beyond-visual-range munitions²⁶. Notably, the arms deal, which was signed in 2007 for eight aircrafts, ended up with actual deliveries following Turkey's "anti-ISIS safe zone" intentions in Syria was revealed. Normally, an air force dealing with irregular threats would need more attack aircraft and gunships than interceptor-fighters that are primarily effective against other aircraft. Thus, the arms transfer is believed to reflect Moscow's unease with the idea of an openly voiced or tacitly conducted no-fly zone over Syria.

²⁵ For a comprehensive assessment on Russian non-linear warfare and defense modernization, see: Andras, Racz. *Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy's Ability to Resist*, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, FIIA Report: 43.

²⁶ <http://www.janes.com/article/53660/syria-reportedly-receives-mig-31-interceptors-from-russia>, Accessed on: September 17, 2015.

New Helipads: Comparative Open-Source IMINT Assessment

1. Helipads as of 2014



2. Helipads, Recently Captured IMINT Snapshot in 2015



Retrieved from: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/14/this-satellite-image-leaves-no-doubt-that-russia-is-throwing-troops-and-aircraft-into-syria-latakia-airport-construction/>

Protecting the Air Bridge: Air Defense Site Detected



**EDAM note: The satellite imagery shows an Air Defense Base located to west of Bassel al Assad Airport in Latakia. Battery positions and satellite imagery suggests SA-2 Guideline systems as claimed by the source. SA-2 battery is composed of 6 missile launchers, engagement radar, and transporter / transloader trucks²⁷. 6 missile launchers can be seen in the base. The Syrian regime operates SA-2 Guideline (or SA-75 Dvina) systems in its integrated missile defense architecture.*

Verification Reference for the Syrian SA-2 SAM Site in Latakia: Below SA-2 Site image photographed at low altitude by a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft during the Vietnam conflict. Circular SAM Site configuration around the radar can be clearly seen.



Retrieved from: <http://www.ousairpower.net/APA-S-75-Volkhov.html#mozTocId267156>, Accessed on: September 17, 2015.

As shown in the satellite imagery retrieved from Google Earth, the buildup at the Latakia International Airport is protected by an air defense base equipped by the SA-2 Guideline system. Both under the

²⁷ Carlo, Kopp. "SAM System Mobility", *Defence Today*, for the full text, see: <http://www.ousairpower.net/SP/DT-SAM-Mobility-Sept-2009.pdf>, Accessed on: September 16, 2015.

Syrian Arab Army (for mobile systems) and the Syrian Air Defense Forces (for longer range systems), Assad's forces operate mobile systems such as (in NATO reporting names) *SA-8 Gecko*, *SA-9 Gaskin*, *SA-13 Gopher* (systems that can easily and swiftly relocate), *SA-11 (Gadfly)* (with multiple-target engagement capability), *SA-22* (Russian reporting name *Pantsir S1*, reportedly responsible for the downing of the Turkish *Phantom* in 2012), *SA-17*²⁸; while the *SA-5 Gammon* (static system with very long range) *SA-6 Gainful* (self-propelled), *SA-3 Goa*, *SA-2 Guideline* (both towed) along with some 4,000 anti-aircraft artillery pieces (both army and air defense branches possess anti-aircraft artillery)²⁹. Most probably, in addition to the SA-2 site, there are also deployed mobile systems around the Latakia Bassel al Assad airport in order to protect the static site and the military buildup.

Russian Supermaneuverable Aircraft Deployment: Harbingers of Denying the Syrian Airspace?

There are also surfacing news with imagery evidence suggesting that the Russians have been deploying supermaneuverable aircraft in Syria.



Retrieved from: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/09/20/clarification-russian-su-30sm-in-syria-not-su-27/>
Accessed on: September 21, 2015.

²⁸ IISS, *The Military Balance: Middle East and North Africa*, Routledge, London, 2013.p. 404.

²⁹ IHS Jane's, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment- Eastern Mediterranean: Syria Air Force*, 28 Jan 2012, p. 5.

Bellingcat identified the deployed aircraft as Su-30SM³⁰ and ISW reported them as Su-27 Flanker³¹. While such an information would make a difference at operational and tactical levels militarily, at strategic and policy level it comes to the same thing. Clearly, the aforementioned aircrafts are not attack aircrafts to be used in anti-ISIS operations for close air-support, such as SU-25 variants, but multirole fighters with air supremacy and air superiority missions. In parallel with the MIG-31 interceptor-fighter delivery that this report touches upon, currently, early signs of Russian Air Force deployments suggest that Moscow might be willing to establish an air force deterrent in Syria. Such a move could theoretically challenge any Western flights over Syria, and render Turkey's intentions to implement a partial no-fly zone abortive.

Furthermore, although, not confirmed yet, some sources even hinted a possible transfer of S-300 systems into Syria³². Actually, rumors of such an arms deal attracted Israel's harsh reaction in the past as S-300 variants would be a significant boost for Syrian integrated air defenses. So far, EDAM military assessment cannot confirm any S-300 transfers to Syria given lack of reliable open-source intelligence.

More than “Simply” IMINT: Visual Evidence Suggesting a Shift in the Military Buildup

The newly surfaced open-source intelligence other than satellite images also suggests changes in the Russian manner of conduct in Syria. First, Russian arms, which are not present in the Syrian Arab Armed Forces inventory,³³ such as *BTR-82A* armored personnel carrier (APC)³⁴ and *R-166-0.5* signals vehicle were recently spotted in Syria³⁵. Based on the uploaded *YouTube* videos from the regime's operations, EDAM's military assessment also confirmed the cited reports on the *BTR82-A* presence in Syria.

³⁰ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/09/20/clarification-russian-su-30sm-in-syria-not-su-27/>, Accessed on: September 21, 2015.

³¹ <https://twitter.com/TheStudyofWar/status/645383460350238720>, Accessed on: September 21, 2015.

³² <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/09/20/clarification-russian-su-30sm-in-syria-not-su-27/>, Accessed on: September 21, 2015.

³³ For a comprehensive list of the Syrian Arab Armed Forces inventory, see: IISS, *Military Balance 2015*, Routledge, London, 2015.

³⁴ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/09/07/are-there-russian-troops-fighting-in-syria/>, Accessed on: September 16, 2015.

³⁵ <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2015/09/16/sighting-of-r-166-0-5-signals-vehicle-affirms-inflow-of-russian-military-into-syria/>, September 16, 2015.



Snapshot from the uploaded YouTube Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCg_UrZOUWQ.



Snapshot from the uploaded YouTube Video (BTR-82A firing rounds on targets):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCg_UrZOUWQ, Accessed on: September 16, 2015.

Additionally, quoting “US officials”, some press sources claimed that Russian *T-90* main battle tanks were spotted in Latakia³⁶. If confirmed by visual evidence, this would also be an important indicator of the shift in Russia’s military mission in Syria, as the Syrian Arab Armed Forces have not operated *T-90s* up until now.

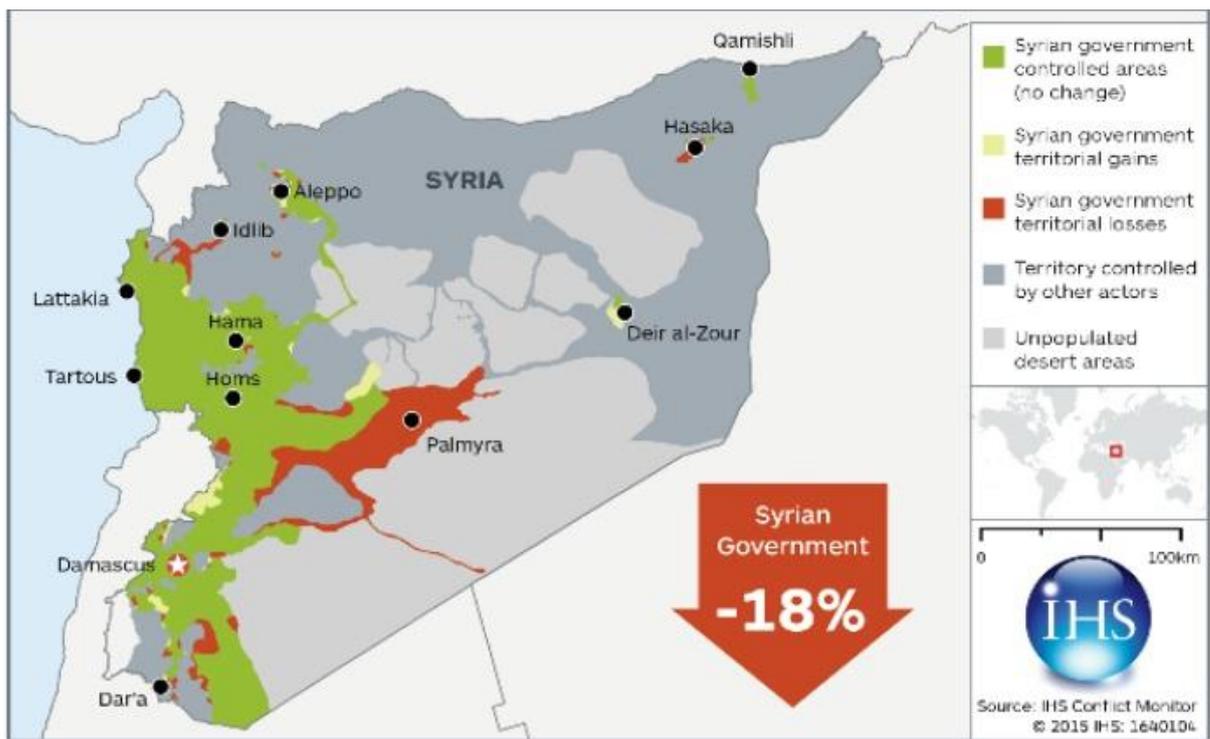
Apart from the *YouTube* coverage of the civil war, pictures “reportedly” taken by the Russian troops in Syria were recently posted on social media. By all means, these pictures could well belong to Russian mercenaries on the ground with no “official” ties to the Russian Federation’s Armed Forces or military intelligence special operations forces. Yet, Moscow’s “non-linear” and / or hybrid operational patterns monitored in Georgia, and currently Ukraine, suggest that there might be a “blurring” distinction between Russian elite forces (*i.e. VDV- Airborne Troops*) and pro-Russian irregulars with no official

³⁶ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/14/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa-idUSKCN0RE1LH20150914>, Accessed on: September 17, 2015.

patches-identifications on the ground: **The “little green men” phenomenon is becoming a “normal” conduct of operations by the Russian forces.**

III- The Syrian Regime’s Setbacks: Understanding the Strategic Context of the Russian “Surge”

Recent reports from the Syrian battleground suggest that the regime lost control over a further 18% of the Syrian territory between January and August 2015³⁷.



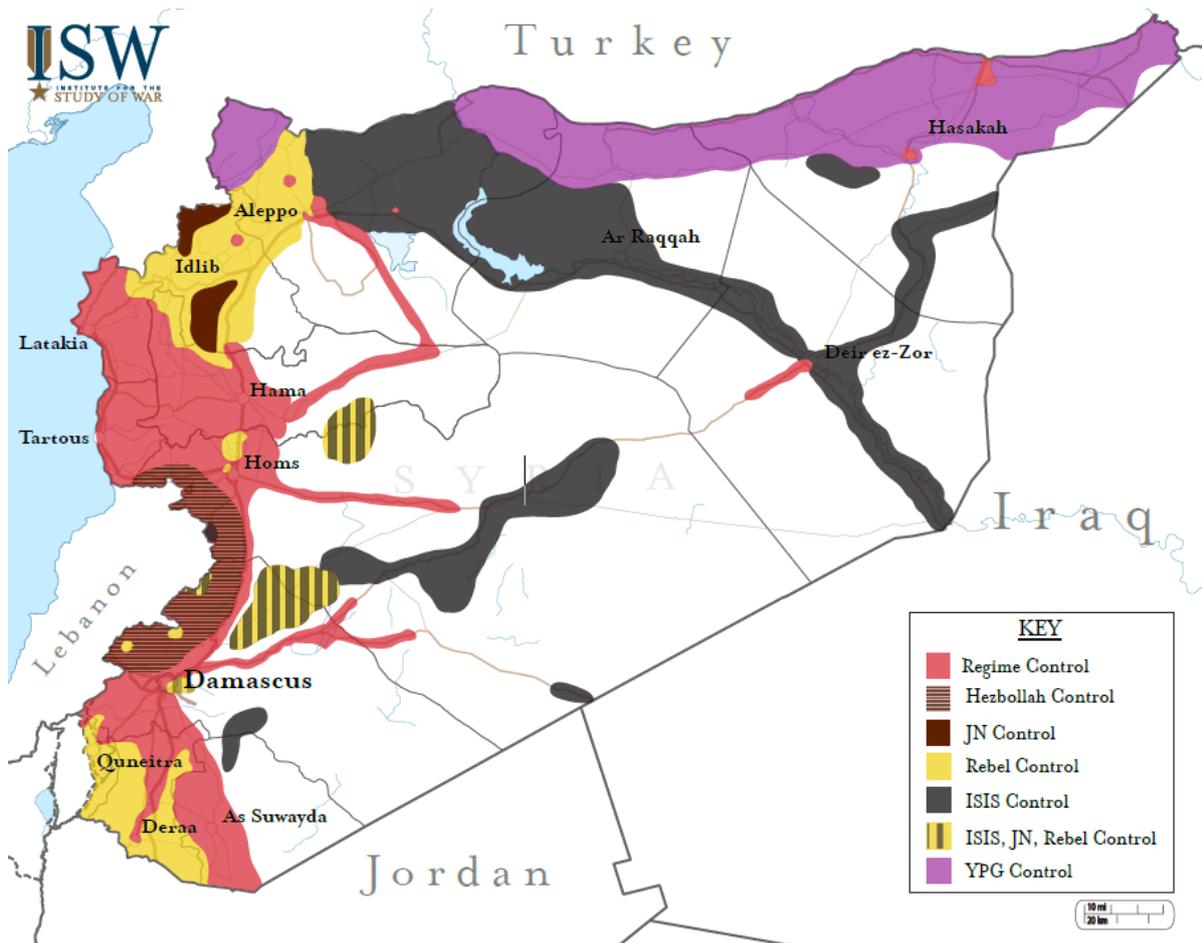
Retrieved from: <http://www.janes.com/article/53771/syrian-government-no-longer-controls-83-of-the-country>, Accessed on: September 16, 2015.

Since the outset of the Syrian civil war, EDAM’s military assessment has underlined the fact that the geostrategic focus of the conflict lays along the north-south axis, and the most critical issue for the regime is to hold the lines of communications among key provinces, i.e. a “new battle for the roads” in the Middle Eastern military history. In the worst case scenario, the Baath regime would possibly consider the probability of evolving into a micro Alawite-Christian state with some secular and pro-regime Sunni components from the Syrian bourgeoisie. In this case, the regime might have to chance to sell the new micro-state as the lesser “evil” being the “only alternative” to ISIS and other radical Salafi

³⁷ Columb, Strack. “Syrian government no longer controls 83% of the country”, IHS Jane’s 360, <http://www.janes.com/article/53771/syrian-government-no-longer-controls-83-of-the-country>. Accessed on: September 16, 2015.

violent groups. Then, Aleppo would come into the picture as a potential alternative governance center, which could have served the moderate opposition in the 2012 – 2013 period, when Free Syrian Army was a major player. The regime even used ballistic missiles, which marked a turning point in terms of the use of strategic weapon in the civil war, to prevent a moderate opposition takeover in Aleppo.

Regarding the regime's geopolitical evaluation of the civil war; controlling the access to Mediterranean, keeping the lines of communication between (preferably Aleppo) Hama, Homs, Latakia, Tartous, and Damascus; and making sure that the Syrian – Jordanian border area is contained are more important than the large swaths of eastern Syria.



Retrieved from: ISW, *Control of Terrain in Syria*,

<http://www.understandingwar.org/background/control-terrain-syria-september-14-2015>,

As of September 2015, the Lebanese Hezbollah controls a critical link in the aforementioned geopolitical axis. Furthermore, it is reported that the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' elements are positioned along the northern-southern axis, from Deraa in the south to Nubl and al Zahraa up in the North holding specifically critical positions such as Mazzeah airbase, Safirah defense factories, and

Aleppo Airport; while the Russian forces are holding the strategic gateway to Mediterranean along Latakia – Tartous axis in addition to the strategically critical Damascus International Airport³⁸. With recent loss of Abu Duhur military airbase in eastern Idlib province, and given the very fact that some of the Assad's forces' other military airbases are either isolated or besieged (i.e. Tiyas, Saykal, and Kuwaires), the regime currently remains in a dangerous situation³⁹.

At this point, [as underlined by a 2013 EDAM report](#), the Syrian Baathist regime has had to rely on its air force, which was at a low combat readiness level at the outset of the civil war and has been kept operational by foreign aid, for supporting besieged bastions and conducting air-ground missions to augment forces on the battleground⁴⁰.

Although several open-source military surveys give more speculative estimates about Assad's available manpower, due to the political context of the conflict, the regime has had to imperatively follow a selective deployment strategy that depends on politico-militarily reliable (both in terms of combat capabilities and sectarian issues), mostly *praetorian*, units since the very beginning (*i.e. the 4th Armored Division*)⁴¹.

The opposition has confronted the aforementioned strategies in two ways: First, having only MANPADS and lacking mid and high altitude air defenses, rebel groups have been besieging and overrunning the regime's airbases in addition to targeting rotary-wing assets at low altitudes. Second, rebel groups expanded theaters of operations geostrategically to overstretch Assad's shortage of reliable manpower.

In due course, the opposition's strategies and tactics have not proven to be decisive enough to topple Assad, but managed to inflict existential attrition to the already civil war-torn regime. Currently, the regime might face the bitter reality of conflicts other than inter-state war, namely suffering "death by a thousand cuts". Thus, the depicted overall picture could give a good explanation about the increased and officially declared Russian support to Assad's forces.

IV - Political – Military Context: Russian Military Thinking and Non-Linear Ambiguity

The underlying reason that caught many western nations off-guard about Moscow's recent moves remains the very difference between military thoughts of the West and the Russians. Recently, Russian military strategic thought has evolved to a considerable extent, and surfaced in the phenomenon called the "Gerasimov doctrine". Briefly, General Valery Gerasimov, the Chief of the General Staff of the

³⁸ Chris, Kozak. Posture of Syrian Regime and Allies: September 14 2015, ISW, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/posture-syrian-regime-and-allies-september-14-2015>, Accessed on: September 16, 2015.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ For the full text see: Can, Kasapoglu. *The Syrian Civil War: A Military Strategic Assessment*, EDAM, Istanbul, 2013.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Russian Federation, penned an article for the Russian ‘Military Industrial Kurier’ in February 2013. Notably, the Russian general voiced robust ideas indicating that in the 21st century there is a blurring tendency between ‘war and peace’, “wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template”. According to General Gerasimov:

“The experience of military conflicts -- including those connected with the so-called colored revolutions in north Africa and the Middle East -- confirm that a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war. Of course, it would be easiest of all to say that the events of the "Arab Spring" are not war and so there are no lessons for us -- military men -- to learn. But maybe the opposite is true -- that precisely these events are typical of warfare in the 21st century. In terms of the scale of the casualties and destruction -- the catastrophic social, economic, and political consequences -- such new-type conflicts are comparable with the consequences of any real war. The very "rules of war" have changed. The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures -- applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population. All this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character, including carrying out actions of informational conflict and the actions of special operations forces. The open use of forces -- often under the guise of peacekeeping and crisis regulation -- is resorted to only at a certain stage, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict”⁴².

As seen in the aforementioned remarks by the top Russian general, Moscow has been shifting towards a new military thought –definitely not ‘simply’ strategy but a military thought and paradigm– that brings about ‘wars without declaration’ and a blurring distinction between war and peace situations.

Furthermore Russian operations in Crimea would hint important aspects of the new doctrine. The operations depended on three pillars as follows⁴³:

- ✓ Doctrinal unilateralism that considers successful use of force as a gateway to legitimacy,
- ✓ Adhering to legalism or legal arguments. In Ukraine, the legal ‘basis’, albeit a weak one in international law standards, was the Russian Parliament’s authorization,
- ✓ Denying the idea of ‘occupation’ and claiming ‘self-defense forces’ type arguments.

In the aforementioned context, Russia’s interventions are becoming more asymmetric that combines political, economic, information, technological, and ecological campaigns. In terms of ‘duration’ it is

⁴² For English translation, see: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-coalson/valery-gerasimov-putin-ukraine_b_5748480.html, For the original Russian text, see: http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf, Accessed on: September 17, 2015.

⁴³ Janis, Berzins. *Russia’s New Generation Warfare in Ukraine: Implications for Latvian Defense Policy*, National Defense Academy of Latvia Center for Security and Strategic Research, 2014, p.3

seen that the new military thought goes well beyond “a defined period of time”, and adopts “a state of permanent war as the natural condition in normal life”. Such a paradigm favors “direct influence” over traditional “direct destruction” objectives⁴⁴. Besides, as what we are talking about is a permanent state of war of perceptions, any offensive operation –predominantly by a core group elite forces and elements with no clear affiliation– would be intensively supported by information operations⁴⁵.

The most challenging aspect of the new Russian way of warfare is the hardship it poses to intelligence analysis and strategic forecasting. Clearly, Russia’s evolving approach to the conflict brings about strategic ambiguity that masks intentions, distorts operational timelines, and slows down Moscow’s rivals’ decision-making capabilities⁴⁶. On the other hand, taking the advantage of highly centralized political-military decision-making, the Russians can initiate both snap exercises and military operations within very short timelines. Besides, related to this concept, strong coordination between different defense and security bodies of the Russian state apparatus fosters fighting hybrid wars⁴⁷.

Last but not least, the Russian Military Doctrine, which replaced the 2010 document in late 2014, recognizes “*creation and training of illegal armed groups and their activities in the territory of the Russian Federation or in the territories of its allies*” as one of the main military threats⁴⁸. Especially, Moscow’s emphasis on anti-ISIS operations is a carefully tailored rhetoric that, in consistence with the existing military doctrine, ISIS refers to an illegal armed group in the Western eyes.

In sum, in terms of intervening in regional contingencies and taking advantage of crises, the Russian military thought seems way more pro-active, efficient and superior when compared to generally inactive and bulky reactions of the West. The only interesting thing about the current shift in Moscow’s stance remains the geography. Clearly, Syria cannot be categorized as the “neighborhood” or the “area of privileged interests” for the Russian geopolitical reading. Therefore, in coming days, Western strategic community should discuss whether Putin’s strategic calculations are going well beyond former Soviet Union area, and gaining a global reach.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p.5.

⁴⁵ Andras, Racz. *Russia’s Hybrid War in Ukraine: Breaking the Enemy’s Ability to Resist*, The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, FIIA Report: 43.

⁴⁶ Dave, Johnson. *Russia’s Approach to the Conflict – Implications for NATO’s Deterrence and Defense*, NATO Defense College, 2015, pp.10-11.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, Article 14 / c.