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Making Sense of the Russian Withdrawal:

A Tactical Assessment

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Introduction

Recently, the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that it started to withdraw its aircrafts from Syria on the orders of President Vladimir Putin. A preliminary examination of initially withdrawn assets suggests that Russian defense planners are mainly focusing on the pullout of air-ground attack capable assets. Without a doubt, this would significantly curb the offensive capacity of Assad's forces. The Russian led campaign had managed to clear key rebel-held areas along the regime's troublesome lines of communications, re-connected the Aleppo-Damascus axis, and put the regime in an offensive position. Thus, Moscow's move would probably force the Baathist regime to protect its gains and to back down from unrealistic military objectives. Still, withdrawn assets could be quickly re-deployed to the area of operations allowing Moscow to maintain the initiative in terms of maintaining intrawar deterrence. More importantly, from Turkey's perspective, Russia's anti-access area denial (A2/AD) assets would remain intact despite the announced withdrawal, as no clear pullout of layered air and missile defense systems, electronic warfare assets, and air-to-air combat capable aircrafts can be witnessed.

Understanding the 'Withdrawal'

Regarding withdrawn assets, the overall picture remains limited to air-ground capable platforms, with the exception of Su-34s with its air-to-air capabilities in addition to ground-attack role as a strike fighter. In this respect, the Russian Ministry of Defense identified the withdrawn aircrafts as Su-24M, Su-25, and Su-34 (totally around 30 aircrafts),[1] which was confirmed by EDAM's military assessment from the visual evidence. Probably, some rotary-winged assets, namely gunship and utility helicopters, fall under the withdrawal plan.

[1] For detailed information, see: https://twitter.com/mod_russia?lang=en, Accessed on: March 16, 2016.

Source: Russian Ministry of Defense Twitter Account

Of these platforms, Su-25 is an attack aircraft designed for close air-support missions, and Su-24 is a tactical bomber, primarily used for air-ground missions. Thus, only Su-34 has a considerable air-to-air combat capability. In this regard, it was reported that Russia had deployed additional Su-34s in Syria the total package of eight aircrafts of this type was noted in December 2015 by open-source military intelligence.[2] Following downing of the Russian Su-24 by Turkish combat air patrols, visual evidence showed that Russia had started to fly its Su-34s with within and beyond visual range air-to-air missiles (primarily R-73 and R-77 missiles) over Syrian skies,[3] having turned this platform into an additional deterrence asset against the Turkish Air Force. Therefore the withdrawal of Su-34s would significantly reduce Russian threats posed to Turkish combat air patrols along the border areas. The status of the deployed Su-30 and Su-35 air superiority fighters remains unclear.[4] Besides, it is known that Russia delivered six Mig-31 Foxhound interceptor fighters to the Syrian Arab Air Force in August 2015. Mig-31 Foxhound is a highly maneuverable platform with robust radar systems

[2] IHS Jane's 360, http://www.janes.com/article/56588/russia-deploys-additional-su-34s-to-syria, December 10, 2015, Accessed on: March 16, 2016.
[3] For visual evidence on air-to-air missile configurations, see: http://sdelanounas.ru/blogs/74959/, Accessed on March 16, 2016.
[4] Can, Kasapoglu. "Prospects of a Turkish Incursion into Syria", War on the Rocks, Feb. 9, 2016, http://warontherocks.com/2016/02/prospects-for-a-turkish-incursion-into-syria/, Accessed on: March 16, 2016.

and is capable of carrying beyond-visual-range munitions[5]. It is likely that these Mig-31s could be flown by the Russian pilots, and being under the doctrinal order of battle of the Syrian Arab Air Force, they will not be subject to any withdrawal plan.

In addition, it should be underlined that the withdrawal could well be a part of a rotation/maintenance and deployment cycles plan of the Russian Air Force. In this respect, open-source military surveys indicate that the contingent in Syria is primarily drawn from the front-line units, and back in 2008, the Russian Air Force had to reassign experienced pilots from test-duties because of shortages in front-line unit personnel.[6] Furthermore, pilot training hours and ground crew's maintenance performance/capabilities have always been problematic issues within the Russian Air Force (as of August 2015 the Russian Aerospace Forces). In the 1990s accident rates of the Russian Air Force had peaked and similar rates were reported in 2015.[7]

Apart from the fixed and possible rotary-wing air platforms, the Russians are probably pulling out other forces as well. In the course of the campaign, open-source intelligence evidences suggested that Russia had deployed T-90 main battle tanks[8], BTR-82A armored personnel carriers[9], 152mm MTSA-B artillery along with BM-27 Uragan and BM-30 Smech rocket launchers[10], and TOS-1A thermobaric multiple rocket launcher systems[11] in Syria. Besides, at peak level, it is estimated that Russia committed some 4,000 personnel for its assertive campaign. Recently, military analysts have noted tank crew and other support personnel moving outside the Russian base in Latakia[12].

Such a pullout of army units would reduce the Russian land-based fire-support to the regime's operations. On the other hand, the Kremlin has to carefully watch a well-balance force ratio in order to protect the base from hostile militant activity, as the remaining Russian assets would constitute high-value targets for several opposition groups.

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[5] IHS Jane's, http://www.janes.com/article/53660/syria-reportedly-receives-mig-31-interceptors-from-russia, August 16, 2015. Accessed on: March 16, 2016.
[6] IISS, *Military Balance 2016*, Routledge, London, 2016, p.163.
[7] Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment-Russia and the CIS, 10 February 2016.
[8] https://www.rt.com/news/333729-tow-t90-hit-video/, Accessed on: March 16, 2016.
[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzbCK6jfk0Q, Accessed on: March 16, 2016.
[10] Paul, Richard, Huard and Robert Beckhusen. "Russia's Big Guns Reached Syria's Front-lines", *The National Interest,* December 4, 2015.
[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fUgOJpuf50, Accessed on: March 16, 2016.
[12] http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/14/russia-exit-syria-vladimir-putin-military-tactical-move, Accessed on: March 16, 2016.

No Major Changes for Turkey: Russian A2/AD Capabilities in Syria Remain Intact

From Ankara's standpoint, the most important aspect of the Russian withdrawal from Syria would relate to the status of Moscow's forward deployed *anti-access & area denial* (A2/AD) assets in the Hmeymim Base.

Primarily, Russian A2/AD architecture in Syria depends on an advanced and menacing layered air and missile defense systems. At the high altitude & long range layer of the Russian air and missile defense network in Syria, S-400 *Triumf (SA-21 Growler)* comes into the picture. With newly introduced 40N6 surface-to-air missiles (SAM) integration to S-400 batteries, the system is reported to have some 400km range.[13] Satellite imagery obtained from Syria shows that the Russian S-400 batteries, which were brought following the Su-24 incident, are deployed under a sophisticated SAM site configuration along with shorter range assets, such as Pantsyr-S1, as shown below.[14]

Furthermore, it is know that Russia also deployed SA-17 self-propelled, medium-range air defense systems from the BUK missile family in Syria, and this very asset was particularly

[13] Carlo Kopp, Technical Report on S-400 system, http://www.ausairpower.net/APA-S-400-Triumf.html, Accessed on March 16, 2016.
[14] For reference and the copied satellite intel: Jane's Intelligence, "Russia's Middle Eastern Adventure Evolves", 2015.

used for 'painting' (identifying with radar lock-on) flying aircrafts along Syria's northern airspace following the Su-24 incident.[15]

So far, EDAM's military monitoring of primary and secondary open-source intelligence evidences could not confirm withdrawal of any air and missile defense systems from Syria. This means the A2/AD threat to the Turkish Air Force still continues not only over border areas, but also within deep Turkish territory.

Notably, as of now, we are not able to confirm the withdrawal of Russian electronic warfare assets, such as Krasukha-4. As EDAM noted in previous reports, "the system is reported to be capable of suppressing spy satellites, ground-based radars, and airborne systems AWACS. It is believed to cover an object from radar detection at 150-300 km, and reported to be capable of damaging the enemy's radars, along with electronic warfare and communication systems[16]. In fact, the Russians also deployed the system in eastern Ukraine before Syria"[17].

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQtsEyAYBWk&feature=player_embedded. Accessed on: October 8, 2015.

Last but not least, Russia's only aircraft carrier, Admiral Kuznetsov, was scheduled to sail to the Eastern Mediterranean, and this mission did not change so far. In accordance, the Russian Navy's air defense surface vessels did not leave the Mediterranean, and the Russian contingent still holds anti-ship cruise missiles. Thus, for now, EDAM's military assessment cannot confirm any withdrawal in naval A2/AD assets.

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[15] Josh Rogin and Eli Lake, New Russian Air Defenses in Syria Keep US Grounded, December 17, 2015. http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-12-17/new-russian-air-defenses-in-syria-keep-u-s-grounded, Accessed on: March 16, 2016.

[16] KRET, http://www.kret.com/en/product/12/, Accessed on: October 8, 2015.

[17] Can, Kasapoglu and Doruk Ergun. *Russia in Foreign Skies: Assessing Russian Air Operations in Syria and Violations of Turkish Airspace*, EDAM, October 2015.

Military Implications for the Syrian Regime

Without a doubt, the first and foremost military implication of the Russian partial withdrawal from the standpoint of the Assad regime would be a significant setback in offensive capabilities. Although the Russian air contingent mainly used unguided munitions in the Syria campaign, large number of strikes (by even flying Tupolev bomber variants from the Russian mainland)[18] and effective sortie / strike ratios helped intensive firepower to make significant differences on the battleground.

The Russian airpower, along with Iranian Quds Forces and their Shiite proxies support, has enabled Assad's forces' advance through key choke points along the main geopolitical axis of the civil war, and helped the regime to clear rebel-held bastions. Under the Russian airpower support, the regime made tangible advances such as securing key offensive jumping-off locations Nubl and Zahra, relieved the besieged Kuweires Airbase, and overall, has gained offensive upper hand around Aleppo.[19]

EDAM's military assessment concludes that in the absence of Russian air-ground campaign, the regime would not be able to maintain its multi-front, offensive position. First, intensive – albeit indiscriminate in many cases– firepower of the Russian contingent itself had become a compensation of the Baathist regime's shortage of reliable manpower. The Syrian Arab Air Force has been suffering serious attrition with regards to both platforms and pilot losses for a long time. Even before the civil war, Damascus' airpower was facing obsolescence due to ageing platforms,[20] and now it cannot sustain high operational tempo for a long time in a hybrid conflict. Secondly, the Iranian Air Force would not be able to replace the Russian air-ground firepower easily, as Tehran faces both combat-readiness and obsolescence problems as well. Although some of its squadrons, such as the 72nd Squadron in Shiraz with its Su-24MK aircrafts, could theoretically be forward-deployed to conduct air-ground attack missions in Syria, such an operation cannot be sustained for too long. Last but not least, as Tehran needs to cover its huge national airspace with a combination of ground-based radars, SAM sites, and carefully flying ill-maintained aircrafts, such as F-14A Tomcat fighters from

[18] IHS Jane's, http://www.janes.com/article/56062/russia-launches-long-range-air-sorties-into-syria, Accessed on: March 16, 2016.
[19] Chris, Kozak. *Assad Regime Gains in Aleppo Alter Balance of Power in Northern Syria*, ISW, Feb 5, 2016.
[20] Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment – Eastern Mediterranean Syria-Air Force, March 2016.

the Shah era,[21] Iranian military planners cannot commit large number of platforms to a possible campaign in Syria.

In sum, without Russian air-ground support, EDAM estimates that the regime is to halt its multi-front offensive for adopting a defensive role to protect its gains. Only some offensive power could be concentrated in certain front(s) for some key advances, but more ambitious objectives, like a complete recapture of Aleppo, would have to wait until the Kremlin opts for resuming its campaign in Syria.

Mission Accomplished

Through its military involvement in Syria, Moscow hoped to assert its influence in the Middle East by establishing a permanent foothold in the region through ensuring the survival of its ally in Damascus. In addition to expanding its influence in its perceived hinterland, former Soviet Union, Syria came as a new front of the Russian-NATO competition at the Alliance's southern flank. Whilst ensuring the survival of the Assad regime or any regime that would be lenient to Russian interests was key to this strategy, ensuring that the entire Syrian territory was taken back was not an integral part of it. With its 6 month long involvement, Russia reversed the trend of the Syrian civil war in favor of the Assad regime and has helped the regime make territorial advances in provinces that would be essential for providing strategic depth in defending Russia's core areas of interests in Tartus naval base and Hmeymim air base. In other words, Russian withdrawal equals to a disinterest in more involvement in the civil war, as the core objectives of sustaining a key ally, gaining a foothold in the region, and securing the said foothold have been achieved.

With the precedent of the 1980-1988 War in Afghanistan still fresh in Russian political thinking, Moscow has avoided getting entangled in the civil war in favor of the Assad regime at the expense of its own core interests. As the Russian economy is under considerable pressure, it has also been wise on the part of Moscow to declare victory after its core objectives were achieved and whilst negotiations for a ceasefire were underway. Furthermore, as the withdrawal does not amount to a full withdrawal, Russia retains the potential to conduct further military operations in Syria – or a renewed deployment – depending on developments on the ground.

[21] IHS Jane's, Iran Air Force, 2016.

Meanwhile the responsibility of supporting the regime may fall under the shoulders of Tehran, Bashar al-Assad's other staunch ally. If the Russian downscaling is to be a continuing trend, both securing the recent progress of the regime against rebel forces – which may be emboldened after Russia's withdrawal – and assisting any further advances of the regime would warrant the military assistance of Iran and its proxies. Furthermore, the political future of Bashar al-Assad may come to be an expendable bargaining chip for Moscow. As such, the regime may have to rely on Tehran's political and diplomatic assistance for its survival.

In sum, through the vague announcement of withdrawing the "main part" of its troops in Syria, Moscow once again took the initiative in shaping the discussion surrounding the Syrian civil war, effectively positioned itself as an honest broker in ceasefire negotiations and as an integral actor to the solution of the Syrian calamity, avoided the political, military and financial costs of further entanglement in a risky civil war scenario, and managed to declare victory at a favorable political setting[22] after its core objectives were achieved.

[22] NPR (16, March 2016) "Is Putin Withdrawing From Syria out of Strength or Weakness?"