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Operation Alawistan: The Implications of Russia's Military Presence in Syria

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Russia's deployment of troops to Syria might become a turning point for the regime in Damascus, the regional balance of power and Western calculations. With its forces already active in Syria, the Russians might serve to defend cities that are the traditional bastions of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad but which are threatened by rebel offensives from mostly Islamist groups. Russia's military presence in Syria serves its much broader regional and international goals. However, if the West were to drop its demand for Assad's removal and include Russia in the coalition against the Islamic State the result might hold more negative implications for the situation there, as well as outside Syria.

The Situation in Syria. Russia's growing military presence in Syria might be a second turning point in the civil war that started there in 2011. The previous turning point came in August 2013, when Syrian President al-Assad's forces used chemical weapons in the suburbs of Damascus, increasing the likelihood that the U.S. and France would intervene militarily. It is estimated that the war in the country, which had 23 million people at the outset, so far has resulted in 250,000 deaths, seven million people displaced within Syria and four million refugees who fled to neighbouring countries and beyond. The civil war is not a struggle between the government and radicals from the Islamic State (IS, a.k.a. ISIS) or its opposition, the Jabath al-Nusra Front (JAN). The dynamics of the war are dictated by the complicated religious, ethnic and tribal structure of Syrian society and it also involves local groups and now-marginalised moderate forces. Among the factors that tie Syria to Iraq is the spread of IS and the merger of areas involved in a greater Sunni-Shia conflict (the ruling Alawites are tied to the Shia branch of Islam). The religious lines are further blurred by the interests of Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel, and are intertwined with the threat of destabilisation of smaller countries nearby, including Lebanon and Jordan.

The war in Syria has a clear impact on Europe in a growing terrorism threat and recently the large waves of refugees. In spring 2015, offensives by regime forces weakened, mainly due to JAN's counter-offensives in Hama and Latakia. In August in Latakia, the Alawis protested the corruption and impunity of Assad's forces. Meanwhile, Russia's increasing engagement came at the same time as Turkey ramped up its military operations in northern Syria, intended to create an "IS-free zone" and also to control Kurdish rebels there. In summer 2015, the Israelis debated creating a similar zone of protection for the Druze minority in Syria. At the same time, in Washington there was increasing questions about the year-plus campaign of the "coalition of the willing" against IS.

Russian Military Assets in Syria. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia preserved a symbolic presence in Syria, but limited it to a surveillance station for the military intelligence service (GRU) near the Golan Heights and a naval station in the port of Tartus. The GRU station was abandoned by the Russians and taken by the rebels in 2014. Tartus is now the only friendly and guaranteed port for the Russian Navy to operate in the region. Since 2011, this port has been used to evacuate from Syria citizens from post-Soviet countries. It's also been used by the Russians as a base for the demonstration of force in the Mediterranean Sea region, the chemical disarmament of Assad's regime, and now is the centre of the current operations in support of his government. However, the Tartus installations are so poor that they will need a huge investment in modernisation and enlargement to be useful in the future. Russia, though, has officially declared Tartus to be of strategic importance and announced an ambitious plan to build a new submarine base in nearby Jableh.

Since August, Russia has set up specific naval and air transport capacity and essentially increased the quality and capacity of the Russian military presence in Syria. Sea transport came via Bosporus but the U.S. used diplomatic means to block Russian airplanes, with declared cargoes of humanitarian aid, as they attempted to fly over Bulgaria and Greece. Moscow was quick to set up an alternate air bridge over Iran and Iraq to Syria. By 18 September, Russia had deployed at the airbase in Latakia units from its 810th Independent Naval Infantry Brigade (350–500 marines) and six T-90 tanks, 35 BTR-82 combat vehicles, 15 howitzers and an unknown quantity of other vehicles. Satellite imagery shows tents for another 1,700 troops, probably supported by SA-15 and SA-22 anti-aircraft systems. At the same time, the Latakia airbase started to host an air detachment of four Su-30 multi-role fighters, 12 Su-24 bombers and 12 Su-25 close-support planes. As of 29 September, Russia had added six of its newest Su-34 bombers. Pictures from the ground also show there are R-166 radio-electronic warfare vehicles as well drones. Additionally, there are three or four Mi-24 attack helicopters and at least three Mi-17 transport helicopters. Another city district helicopter base was expanded to take Mi-17 and Ka-28 helicopters. Unverified are reports about equipment from the 27th Independent Motorized Brigade and GRU Spetsnaz troops and Zaslon Group, a civilian intelligence (SVR) paramilitary group.

Broader Implications. The Russian intentions are diverse and based on strategic interests outside Syria. In summer 2015, Moscow floated the idea with Arab countries and France of building a new coalition against IS with the participation of the Syria and Iran. Troops already deployed by Russia in Syria suggest that the minimal military goal is securing Alawi enclaves from Damascus to Latakia. The Russian airplanes and helicopters and operational tactical freedom of action to do this offer the capability to attack selected targets or to support ground troops, even if not enough in terms of quantity or quality to change the strategic situation in favour of Assad's forces. In the short term these might improve the state of command, morale and armament status of the Syrian army and Alawi militias supporting it. The role of the Russian marines or Spetsnaz might also be very limited. Russia's declarations on 30 September after the first airstrikes on Homs also suggest that Moscow is not considering a larger ground operation.

Russia's deployment of the SA-22 systems and Su-30 fighters is seriously limits military options of the U.S., Turkey and Israel, which now must take into account the "Russian umbrella" over the regime troops as well as the risk of mistaken identification of Russian and Syrian airplanes. These limitations imposed by Moscow pressure these countries to effectively "de-conflict" their military operations and—in a clearly designed scenario—force these countries to recognise Russia's interest in preserving Assad's regime. Russia's plans are probably even more ambitious and directed more towards influence in Syria and Iran, as well to position itself to sell more weapons to Iraq. The recent opening in Baghdad of a coordination centre for the intelligence services of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Russia gives credence to this perspective. Further actions by this four-member "coalition" are likely to be perceived by Turkey, Jordan and the Gulf states as a consolidation of a "Shia crescent," one controlled by Iran and backed by Russia. This might mean the end of any chances for a durable regional compromise on the stabilisation of Syria.

Russia's military presence in Syria aims to ease its Western isolation and the sanctions imposed on it after its aggression on Ukraine. One optimal goal may be recognition of Russia's importance in the Syrian conflict, similar to its role in the regime's chemical weapons disarmament and in the nuclear negotiations with Iran. Noteworthy also is Russia's information campaign for European audiences, stressing threats from refugee inflows and terrorism threats as well as the protection of minorities in Syria. Of equal importance is its highlighting of issues intended for domestic public opinion in Russia, especially the terrorist threat, as well as its claim on the need for dialogue between religions and a humanitarian duty. However, the internal message in Russia about Syria is less intense than it is about Ukraine, likely due to the trauma of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, which is still vivid amongst older Russians and high-ranking military members.

Conclusion. Russia's intervention in Syria is designed to protect the Alawi constituency of President Assad and force some recognition of him by the West as the legitimate side in any proposed political and diplomatic solution. The size of Russia's contingent in the country allows it to choose among its preferred goals and change its military priorities. It came as a surprise to the U.S, Turkey and Israel and limited their freedom in military terms. Russia is playing also on EU concerns about the refugee crisis and threat of terrorism to change attitudes to the regime in Damascus. Russia's efforts are based on cooperation with Iran, which might result in a proxy conflict with Turkey and the Arab countries. Paradoxically, the recognition of Assad as the legitimate side in any Syrian peace talks might cause polarisation of the region into two hostile religious blocs, the full marginalisation of moderate forces and an increase in recruits to radical groups. That would mean further consolidation of IS, the long-term fragmentation of Syria and Iraq, and additional threats to Europe. It cannot be excluded that Russia has calculated these risks accompanying a protracted war in Syria into its movements. In the future and with any possible scenario, Russia wants to preserve an important role for itself in the Middle East, to create internal divisions in NATO and EU, and at the same time to condition all relations with the West on its "Finlandisation" of Ukraine.