

Main Drivers of Russian Military deployment in Syria

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Abstract

Russian military deployment in Syria should not be considered as the core goal of Moscow's diplomacy but its instrument. It is also a serious mistake to present Russian efforts in the country as the result of a game of "chicken" between Moscow and the West. Moscow is playing a different type of game that could be characterized as "geostrategic poker", where the Assad regime is logically considered Russia's main stake. This stake allows the Russians to influence the situation on the ground and demonstrate their importance in the international arena by positioning Moscow as one of those players without whom the Syrian question cannot be solved. By increasing military support to the Syrian government the Russian authorities simply strengthened their stake. Now they are starting to reveal their hand. The latest developments also show that Russian stance on Syria is determined by the interplay of the complex factors among which the growing security concerns are of the main importance. The Kremlin is worried that the fall of Assad will inevitably bring radical Islamists to power in Syria. This, in turn, will lead to the further destabilisation of the situation in the Middle East inevitably affecting the Muslim regions of Russia. At the same time, this does not mean that Moscow supports Bashar Assad as a person. On the contrary, the Kremlin accepts the possibility of the post-Assad Syria and Russian contacts with the Syrian opposition also demonstrate that Moscow is open to the dialogue.

By September 2015, on the eve of Russia's dramatic military moves, the Kremlin feared that Assad's regime was on the verge of collapse. The assessment was that the existing levels of military, technological, and financial assistance by Russia to the Syrian regime would only prolong its agony and not save it. Moscow could not afford losing its stake in the Middle East. Intervention was based on a choice between a "bad" and a "very bad" scenario: either a costly military operation to support Assad, or doing nothing as his power crumbled. The Russian leadership was also motivated in part by its perception of what had happened in Libya and Iraq, where—in its view—nothing good came of the complete destruction of the old regimes. It did not want to see the same happen to Syria as, from the Kremlin point of view, this would mean the turning of Syria into another regional source of instability and jihadist threat..

Keywords: Russia, Syria, Bashar Assad, War, Terrorism, Damascus Regime, Politics, Middle East.

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Introduction

Russian military deployment in Syria should not be considered as the core goal of Moscow's diplomacy but its instrument. It is also a serious mistake to present Russian efforts in the country as the result of a game of "chicken" between Moscow and the West. Moscow is playing a different type of game that could be characterized as "geostrategic poker", where the Assad regime is logically considered Russia's main stake. This stake allows the Russians to influence the situation on the ground and demonstrate their importance in the international arena by positioning Moscow as one of those players without whom the Syrian question cannot be solved. By increasing military support to the Syrian government the Russian authorities simply strengthened their stake. Now they are starting to reveal their hand. The latest developments also show that Russian stance on Syria is determined by the interplay of the complex factors among which the

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growing security concerns are of the main importance. The Kremlin is worried that the fall of Assad will inevitably bring radical Islamists to power in Syria. This, in turn, will lead to the further destabilisation of the situation in the Middle East inevitably affecting the Muslim regions of Russia. At the same time, this does not mean that Moscow supports Bashar Assad as a person. On the contrary, the Kremlin accepts the possibility of the post-Assad Syria and Russian contacts with the Syrian opposition also demonstrate that Moscow is open to the dialogue.

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1. Russia and the rise of jihadists

Even before September 2015, the Kremlin was warning the international community that the leadership of the anti-government uprising in Syria could be hijacked by radical forces. To support this, the Russian authorities usually referred to the experience of post-Qaddafi Libya. Yet, initially, these statements were part of a Russian propaganda campaign that tended to position the West as the force whose involvement in the Middle Eastern affairs never brings good results.

However, the jihadist threat became real by 2015. In June 2013, the head of the FSB (Russian Counter-Intelligence Service), Bortnikov, officially stated Moscow concerns that the Syrian conflict could negatively affect the security situation in Europe, the post-Soviet space and Russia. He argued that Syria was becoming a training camp

for extremists and religious radicals from all over the world. According to Bortnikov, it was logical to expect that these people would not stay in Syria but would return to their home countries to begin the struggle against their own governments. Since then, the FSB has been periodically reporting the capturing and neutralisation of jihadist emissaries from the Middle East recruiting volunteers for the struggle in Syria and Iraq.

Indeed, by September 2015, the numbers of foreign fighters from Europe, Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia who join the IS and other radical Islamists groupings in Syria and Iraq were growing. Thus, according to EU Justice Commissioner Vera Jouriva, by April 2015, up to 5000-6000 Europeans had left Europe for Syria.¹ Estimates about Russian-speaking jihadists fighting in the conflict were different. On May 28, 2015, Russian Deputy-Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov argued that some 500 Russian citizens (mostly from the Northern Caucasus) were fighting for the IS.² On 27 May 2015, Russian society was shocked by news about the Russian teenage girl Varvara Karaulova from Moscow who had left her family to join the Islamic State in Syria. This was a case of a well-educated girl from a middle-class family who was also a student at a prestigious Russian university, who suddenly converted to Islam and fled to a war-torn country. Varvara's story had a happy end. She was stopped on the Turkish-Syrian border and returned home. However, her case was not unique.

All in all, Russian security services and independent analysts believe that, by 2015, there were about 1500-2000 Russian-speaking nationals from the Northern Caucasus, the Russian mainland and Chechen communities of Georgia, Turkey and the EU fighting on the side of different Islamic groupings (such as Jabhat an-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham) in Syria.³ Apart from that, several hundred people from Azerbaijan and the ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia (such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) could be found among jihadists in Syria and Iraq.⁴ According to the director of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, Erlan Karin, by 2015 there were up to 500 Uzbeks, 360 Turkmens, 100 Kirgiz, and 190 Tajiks in Syria. He also talked of Kazakhs taking part in the Syrian war on the insurgents' side.⁵ The leading Russian expert on Syria at the Institute of the Middle East in Moscow, Yuri Shcheglov, says that by mid-2014 there were at least

1500 Chechens, 200 Dagestanis and about 100 people from other Russian regions fighting in Syria.⁶ Other sources are reporting the presence of Russian citizens from Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria and even mainly Orthodox Christian Northern Ossetia among Syrian and Iraqi Islamists.⁷ Finally, apart from Northern Caucasians, the so-called Russian grouping of jihadists includes people from the Volga region. For instance, some evidence refers to the participation of Tatars from the extremist organization Jamaat Bulgar in the Syrian conflict, and even ethnic Russians. In the latter case, media reports about Russians who converted to Islam and fled from their homes to join the Islamists in the Middle East have become relatively common.⁸

Such participants do not always see the IS or Jabhat an-Nusra's cause as their own. For some of them, this struggle is just a preparatory stage on their way back to their home countries where they can start their own battle. For instance, the ex-commander of Tajik OMON (police special operation force), Gulmurod Khalimov, who defected to join the ISIL (allegedly, with some other Tajik officers) in May 2015, officially declared his intention to bring the Islamic Caliphate to his home country and threatened both Russia and the U.S. In September 2014, Russian speaking fighters in the ISIL released a video on the Internet with promises to "liberate" the North Caucasus.

A Syrian connection was allegedly found by Russian authorities during their investigation of the terrorist attack on Grozny in December 2014. On the other hand, some of those extremists who stayed in Russia and Central Asia seem to try to find connections with the Jihadist movement in the Middle East.⁹ Thus, in late 2014, several leaders of the separatist movement and religious preachers in Dagestan and the Northern Caucasus declared their loyalty to the ISIL. Roughly at the same time, the leadership of the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan also stated their intention of joining the global IS network.¹⁰ In June 2015, the leadership of the Emarat Kavkaz movement allegedly declared its alliance with the ISIL. Under these circumstances, the Russian authorities believe that the only way to stop the spread of instability in the post-Soviet space is to address the source of the issue and stabilize the situation in Syria.

According to Moscow decision makers, the fall of the Assad

regime would inevitably mean the further radicalization of the Middle East and the exporting of Islamic radicalism to Russia, the Caucasus region and Central Asia. The Russian authorities genuinely believed that by helping Assad they were protecting their national security interests. In August 2014, Lavrov called the radical Islamists “the primary threat” to Russia in the region. According to Russia, Assad was the only person able to guarantee the integrity of the Syrian state and the military institutions needed to fight against ISIS and other radical Islamists. Although Moscow did not exclude the possibility that Assad could be replaced in the future, it could only happen when there was confidence in any new leaders who are able to control the situation in Syria.

The further concerns of Moscow with regard to the jihadist presence in Syria were aggravated by the beginning of the Russian confrontation with the West over Ukraine. By 2015, its negative implications for the economy and international relations of Russia obviously went beyond the expectations of the Kremlin. Under these circumstances, Moscow became increasingly interested in diminishing possible security threats. The confrontation with the West demanded the maximum concentration of Russian attention and resources. As a result, it has become an unaffordable luxury for the Kremlin to be distracted by other problems. From the very beginning of the Ukrainian opposition mass-meetings on Independence Square in Kiev in late 2013, Moscow’s officials have been concerned that they will not be able to cope equally efficiently with both the Ukrainian crisis and the Syrian jihadist challenge.¹¹ Under these circumstances, in 2014-2015 the Russian authorities demonstrated great interest in the stabilization of the situation in Syria in order to prevent the spread of Middle Eastern instability to the Muslim parts of Russia and the post-Soviet space.

2. The main targets of Russian air raids

At the same time, Russia never intended to take the burden of fighting against terrorism in Syria or saving the regime solely on its shoulders. Instead, one of the main goals of the Russian military deployment in Syria was to re-establish the military and political capacities of the Assad regime. Consequently, any groupings (not

necessary Islamist radicals and terrorists) that posed a serious threat for Damascus immediately became the target of Russian air strikes, although the Kremlin never acknowledged this and kept insisting that its main goal in Syria was to bomb the Islamic State.

Russia's military presence in Syria clearly increased the regime's chances for long-term survival. Apart from that, the Russian military presence made any Western military intervention in Syria extremely unlikely. Previously, Moscow had suspicions that the US-led coalition conducting anti-ISIS operations could be used to overthrow the Assad regime. The deployment of the Russian air force in Syria allayed Moscow's concerns. At the same time, by exchanging information and trying to coordinate its military efforts with other countries Moscow continued promoting its idea of the anti-Islamic State coalition that would involve the Syrian regime, and, thus, bring Assad back from international isolation.¹² By deploying its air forces at the Khmeimim airbase Russia also strengthened its own diplomatic position by proving that any decision on Syria could not be taken without Moscow's participation.

Russia's ultimate goal in Syria was much more ambitious than just strengthening the Assad regime. The Kremlin remained extremely interested in the end of the Syrian war and, in the mind of Russian strategists, this settlement was only possible through the beginning of a national dialogue between the regime and the anti-government forces (excluding radical Islamists and foreign fighter groupings).¹³

However, the Kremlin wanted to launch this reconciliation process on its own conditions. These conditions included the preservation of the territorial integrity of Syria, immediate formation of a united anti-Islamic State coalition, the saving of remaining state structures and the transformation of the Syrian regime only within the framework of the existing government mechanisms.

By 2016 Putin continued to insist on a peace settlement in Syria based around the existing Syrian state structures and institutions and with some sort of power-sharing between the Damascus regime and the "healthy" elements in the opposition. Moscow also insisted that the removal of Assad from power should not be a precondition for the beginning of national dialogue.

This vision of the situation drastically differed from that of the West and many Middle Eastern powers that considered Assad as the

source of the Syrian problem rather than its solution. Yet, the Kremlin was determined to change international opinion. Consequently, the Russian authorities adopted a two track approach. On the one hand, from spring 2015 onwards, the Russian authorities intensified their dialogue with the international community. This step made some policy-makers mistakenly think that Moscow was looking for ways to trade Assad for some economic and political concessions. Meanwhile, the main task of the Kremlin was to impose its views on the conflict settlement. On the other hand, the Russians increased the volume and quality of military supplies, as well as launching their military operation in the country to weaken the Syrian opposition and to guarantee that the Syrian regime would survive long enough to see the moment than the Kremlin achieved break-through on the diplomatic track.¹⁴

In the end, the Russian plan worked. The Syrian regime stayed in power. Meanwhile, by March 2016, the Russian idea of establishing an anti-Islamic State coalition with the participation of the Syrian regime had been gradually finding support outside Russia. Even before the beginning of the Russian military deployment in Syria, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi openly expressed support for the Russian initiative. Some western politicians also started to voice their opinion that the West probably should deal with Damascus in its anti-ISIS struggle.

3. Moscow's flexibility

However, the Russian vision of the future of Syria was also changing. By January 2016 Moscow finally stopped labeling all fighting opposition forces as "terrorist" and recognized at least some of them as legitimate players. Previously, Russia agreed to deal only with the political wing of the Syrian (preferably, official) opposition. Yet, after the beginning of its military operation in Syria, Moscow strengthened its relations with the Syrian Kurds. Earlier, on 9 and 13 September 2015, the Russian MFA stated Moscow's readiness to include in the anti-IS coalition the Syrian moderate opposition and those Syrians who were not foreign fighters or international jihadists.¹⁵ This statement allowed the legitimisation in Moscow's eyes of those moderate Islamists who had serious influence on the

ground but with whom Russia had previously avoided dealing. Consequently, the Kremlin included some of them (first of all, the Muslim Brotherhood) in the list of groupings that could take part in the intra-Syrian negotiations. Finally, in early October 2015, the Russian MFA openly declared Moscow's readiness to negotiate with the Free Syrian Army.¹⁶

By January 2016, Russian officials also became more certain about the possibility of political reforms in the country and the emergence of a post-Assad Syria. While insisting on preserving Syria in its current borders, the Kremlin does not exclude the scenario of the country's federalization. The Russian authorities still consider Assad the only person capable of guaranteeing the integrity of the remnants of the state and military institutions which survived the previous years of conflict and are still capable of fighting against Daesh/ISIS. Yet, Moscow does not exclude the possibility that Assad could be replaced in the future. However, this should not happen before there is confidence that the new leaders are able to control the situation in Syria. Ultimately, Moscow sees the gradual transformation of the regime as inevitable.

Less than a month after the beginning of its military operation in Syria, Moscow started to flesh out ideas for the next phase of its involvement in the conflict. Harboring no illusions about the feasibility of a military victory in the country, it wanted to put itself at the center of a political process. The chief goal of the first phase of Russia's military intervention was largely achieved: by November 2015, the opposition groups in Syria representing the main threat for the regime started to lose their ground. At the same time, Assad's forces and his Iranian allies were able to stabilize their front lines and make a few territorial advances.¹⁷ Yet, Moscow was unwilling to invest the sizeable military resources that would be required to tip the scales decisively in Damascus's favor. A protracted military operation could be very damaging for Russia. There were potential military losses and economic costs to be considered (by 2016, the costs of the operation was estimated at upwards of 1 billion dollars per year).¹⁸ There was also the threat that Russian public opinion on the intervention could cool, although the Russian elite was still united in support of it. There were additional political risks for Russia's position in the Middle East. By November 2015 Moscow was severely

criticized in the region itself (and this resulted in the tragic incident of 24 November 2015 when a Russian bomber was shot down by a Turkish fighter jet).

Under these circumstances, Russia intensified its attempts to revitalize international negotiations on Syria and to launch the process of national reconciliation. This was seen as the only way for the Kremlin to pull back from the conflict it had become involved in. Subsequently, Moscow's diplomatic efforts led to the relatively productive multilateral talks in Vienna on 30 October 2015.¹⁹ This meeting was held with the participation of China, the EU authorities, France, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the UAE, Britain, the UN and US. Moscow was pleased that the final communiqué in Vienna supported many long-standing Russian positions.²⁰ It restated international support for Syria's territorial integrity, a continuing secular government, the need to protect the country's remaining state institutions, and a refusal to negotiate with ISIS, as well as called for a continuing fight against any other groups in Syria listed by the UN as terrorist organizations. Two weeks after, the sides met again. On 14 November 2015, the participants of the second meeting stepped up with a peace plan for Syria. They agreed to ensure a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition based on the 2012 Geneva Communiqué; to implement a nationwide ceasefire in Syria; to convene Syrian government and opposition representatives in formal negotiations with a target date of 1 January 2016; to defeat the ISIS, Jabhat an-Nusra and other terrorist groupings; and to authorize the Jordan government to prepare a comprehensive list of terrorist organizations acting in Syria.

The results of the Vienna meetings were a notable achievement for Russia. First of all, the launching of the UN-sponsored talks in Vienna involved a wider-than-ever range of parties, including Iran, and they committed themselves to meeting more often. In spite of great tension between Russia and the West, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov seemed to find a common language. At the same time, Moscow also demonstrated its readiness to talk to other regional countries. In spite of existing contradictions, Saudi Arabia and Qatar clearly expressed their intention to continue the dialogue with Moscow. Shortly before the Vienna meeting, Russia

and Jordan agreed on the establishment of a coordination center that would allow the two countries to exchange information and coordinate their efforts in their struggle against ISIS. It was the second center of that kind created by Moscow in the region (the first one was established in September 2015 in Baghdad to facilitate the exchange of information between Russia, Iraq and Iran).

However, Moscow also had to pay a price for the organization of the Vienna meeting by reconsidering some of its approaches towards Assad's destiny. Thus, Russia's invitation to the Syrian president to visit Moscow on 20 October 2015 had two goals.²¹ While discussing the strategic parameters of military cooperation between Moscow and Damascus, Putin also wanted to check whether Assad would agree to stick to Moscow's plan for a political settlement. That would involve the gradual transformation of the Syrian regime by making it more inclusive. Moreover, on November 3, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said that keeping Assad in power was not a matter of principle for Moscow, and that it was up to the Syrian people to decide whether he should leave.

Of course, the Vienna meeting did not eliminate all contradictions between the countries involved in the conflict, although it definitely led to a decrease in the degree of misunderstanding. Thus, the first and most contentious issue was the fate of Bashar al-Assad. Western countries wanted a timetable for him to leave and his regional adversaries wanted him to quit immediately, while Russia was reluctant to set a timeframe for his departure. Second, there was disagreement as to what constitutes a "terrorist organization" in Syria—and who therefore was a legitimate target for air strikes. Part of the problem was the near-complete lack of trust between Moscow and Western governments active in the anti-ISIS coalition. Russian officials from Putin on down stated that they would like help in compiling a precise list of groups that did not fall into this category.²²

For their part, members of the U.S.-led coalition were adamantly opposed to informationsharing for fear that it could be used to target Assad's many opponents.

Third, it remained unclear how negotiations between the Syrian regime and the opposition could be organized. On the one hand, Moscow and Tehran would have to work on Bashar al-Assad, who was well known for his obstinacy and political inflexibility. On the

other hand, the standard Russian line was that it was not obvious whom Assad would need to negotiate with. The Syrian opposition was fragmented and it would take a lot of effort to form a group that could be a viable negotiating partner.

Finally, there was still great distrust between the different players at the table. The continuing deep hostility towards Iran by leading Gulf Cooperation Council members made it almost impossible for them to agree on Syria. The U.S. and Russian military elites also saw each other in extremely hostile terms and there was no appetite for working jointly.

Nevertheless, the Vienna meeting revitalized the process of international dialogue on the conflict settlement in Syria that brought substantial results. On 18 December 2015, the UN SC unilaterally adopted Resolution 2254 that reconfirmed the accords achieved during the Vienna meetings, entitled the UN to control the process of conflict settlement and declared the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) comprised of the participants of the Vienna meetings and headed by the US and Russia as the main ground for the conflict settlement process under UN control. Apart from that, the document laid down a time framework for new elections in Syria and the beginning of the constitutional reform in the country.²³ This, in turn, created the necessary legal base for the intensification of international efforts aimed at conflict settlement. Subsequently, on 21 February 2016, Russia and the US managed to agree on the principles of a cease-fire between Damascus and the non-radical opposition (i.e. excluding terrorists and Islamists) whose implementation started on 27 February 2016.

4. Mythical withdrawal

The revitalization of the diplomatic track and the beginning of a limited cease-fire in Syria allowed Putin to make another bold move. On 14 March 2016, he declared a partial withdrawal of Russian military forces from the country.

However, Moscow's move was anything but a real military pull-back. The withdrawal of the Russian forces was only partial and limited to a certain portion of the aircraft deployed in the country since 30 September 2015. As confirmed by the Russians themselves,

they plan to keep both Tartus and Khmeimim military bases fully operational and provide the Assad regime with the necessary equipment, training and military support. Moscow will still keep in Syria for an unspecified period a number of advanced fighter jets which continued making airstrikes since the beginning of the official pull-back. Apart from this, the Kremlin also left in the Arab republic its striking helicopters and modern air-defense systems that were officially supposed to guard Russian military installations. Yet, in practice, there are some reports of the Russians using helicopters to support the advance of the Syrian army, while S-400 systems allow them to close Syrian airspace to unwelcome visitors.

The Russian withdrawal clearly demonstrates that Moscow's military intervention in Syria was largely about keeping the regime in power and making the West look flat-footed rather than fighting the so-called Islamic State, as has been continuously claimed. The military pull-back was declared by Putin while ISIS still controlled a large part of Syrian territory. It is not a surprise that, in 2015, the territorial losses of ISIS in Syria were only between 14 – 20 per cent: Russian air-forces never considered the Islamic State as the major target. Instead, they concentrated their firepower against those opposition groupings that represented the greatest threat for the Assad regime itself.

Under these circumstances, the Russian statements on the beginning of the military retreat have to be considered as just another political maneuver made by the Kremlin aimed at saving the Damascus regime and retaining a high degree of Russian influence in the region. Since September 2015, Moscow has basically been trying to stay in control of the Syrian conflict settlement process by periodically putting the international community in the situation where it has to adjust to new Russian moves instead of working out its own solutions. Putin used this trick for the first time when he unexpectedly brought his army to Syria. While the West and regional powers were stunned by this bold move and were trying to understand how to respond, Moscow managed to achieve a number of results on the Syrian front. Yet, by mid-March 2016, the shocking effect of the Russian military deployment started to wear off. The international community started to accept Moscow's military presence in Syria as a new geopolitical reality and started to plan its responses accordingly.

Russia had also exhausted most of the opportunities provided by the situation, and the negative effect from her military presence on the current scale started to overwhelm its positive side. First of all, Assad managed to stabilize control over the territories that were held by Damascus by September 2015, but even with Moscow's support the regime failed to achieve major military victories during its offensive operations launched after the Russian military deployment. The Russians obviously did not expect such weakness from its ally on the ground. In order to boost the further advances of the Syrian army, Moscow would need to bring additional forces and, thus, to risk sinking deeper into a protracted conflict with the risk of higher losses. However, the Kremlin had already been acting in Syria at maximum capacity whereas its Iranian partners started to be more reluctant about using their troops in Syria having seen Moscow's increased presence in the country. At the same time, Assad became more self-confident and less ready to look for a conflict settlement via negotiations and dialogue with the opposition that was seen by the Russians as the only way to resolve the conflict. Apart from that, further military action by Russia would inevitably create the greater danger of direct Turkish and Saudi involvement in the conflict, and could also motivate the US to apply sanctions against Moscow if Washington saw the Syrian ceasefire failing.

As a result, the Kremlin once again decided to change the rules by declaring its partial withdrawal. First and foremost, this move was expected to affect the process of the peace talks. Moscow has sent a clear signal to Assad that the Kremlin is not going to repeat the Soviet experience in Afghanistan and keep him in power in a way that the USSR kept the Kabul government going in 1979 – 1992. Consequently, in order to save his regime Assad will need to be more flexible during the negotiations and to look for compromise with the opposition and its sponsors. Secondly, the beginning of the Russian withdrawal is an appeasing message to the West and the Syrian opposition that Moscow is not going to deal with the situation in the country by military means only. Finally, the Russian decision to decrease the numbers of its forces in Syria presents Turkey and some of the GCC states that strive for greater military involvement in the conflict in a negative light, formally placing part of the responsibility on them for the possible failure of negotiations.

It is still not very clear whether Moscow consulted Assad on the decision to withdraw some of its forces from Syria. It may be assumed that while certain technical details were certainly discussed between Moscow and Damascus, the decision itself was taken by Putin's government alone. The Kremlin possibly saw the current ceasefire in Syria as a convenient pretext to start a partial withdrawal in order to avoid becoming bogged down in a long drawn-out conflict and to present this withdrawal as a significant triumph to its Russian and foreign audience.

However, statements by Russian officials that Moscow plans to keep part of its military forces in Syria and continue to supply Assad with modern military equipment suggest that, in practical terms, the situation at the front has not changed much. The military bases in Tartus and Khmeimimare still used by the Russians and, if necessary, the number of forces deployed there could be restored to the maximum once again.

Conclusion

2012 onwards has seen a period of diplomatic activity by the Kremlin in the Middle East which is unprecedented since the fall of the USSR. Existing records of diplomatic and political contacts show an increased exchange of multilevel delegations between Russia and the Middle Eastern countries. Moscow is attempting to cultivate deeper involvement in regional issues and to establish contacts with those forces in the region which the Kremlin considers as legitimate. Under these circumstances, the Russian military deployment in Syria should be considered as a serious attempt undertaken by Moscow to reclaim the status of the influential regional power. To a certain extent, this attempt was successful: Russia, indeed, became a "game changer". It managed to prevent the Damascus regime from falling and insured its recognition as a legitimate participant in the conflict settlement process. The Russian involvement in Syria also minimized the chances of direct foreign military intervention with the goal of Assad's removal. Meanwhile, the process of conflict settlement was fully put within the framework of the UN mechanisms that Russia is very good at using in its own interests. Moscow also managed to launch the sluggish process of intra-Syrian negotiations and to

establish a limited ceasefire regime in the country. Finally, by bringing military forces to Syria, the Kremlin made the West talk to Russia and take its opinion into account in spite of promises previously given by US and European politicians to keep Moscow in political isolation for what it had done in Ukraine.

The question about reasons for the Russian support of the Syrian regime has quite a complicated answer. The Moscow's stance is determined by the interplay of the complex factors among which the growing security concerns are of the main importance. The Kremlin is worried that the fall of Assad will inevitably bring radical Islamists to power in Syria. This, in turn, will lead to the further destabilisation of the situation in the Middle East inevitably affecting the Muslim regions of Russia.

Russian confrontation with the West also played important role in shaping Moscow stance on the conflict. The unprecedented (since, at least, the end of the Cold War) scale of the current tensions between Russia and the US and EU makes Moscow see its diplomacy in the Middle East as another means that could be used in the confrontation with the West. Thus, the Russian authorities believe that they can exercise additional pressure on the US and EU via its contacts with the regional pariah states. Under these circumstances, Russian ties with Assad have special importance for the Kremlin.

So far, the success of Russian initiatives to establish an all-embracing Syrian dialogue was limited. Yet, this does not mean that these attempts were futile. A bad peace is always better than a good quarrel, and in order to reach this peace the sides should talk with each other. Moscow tries to create grounds to let the belligerents see whether the gap between them can be bridged. Moreover, as of this writing, Russia was the only (apart from Iran) country that was capable to talk with both opposition and Damascus as well as to offer a ground for the dialogue between them. The opportunities provided by this Russian status should not be missed.

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