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Russia in Syria: Changing the Power Balances

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Back in 2012 it was argued that Syria has become an arena for conflicting regional and international interests.¹ This reality is more salient today than any other time in the past. After reports that Turkey,² Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran and other countries of the region have mingled in Syria's conflict through their support to militia groups, we saw the United States using Special Forces for raids into Syria. Not long after that we witnessed Russia moving military forces into Syria, particularly close to the city of Latakia,³ where a key air base is located, even as reports came out that China will send military advisers to Syria in order to help in the fight against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham).⁴ Most importantly, on September 30, Russia launched its first airstrikes against Jihadist groups in Syria.⁵



Latakia (Source: Google Maps)

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Moscow's move came only two days after Russian president Vladimir Putin called for the formation of an international coalition against ISIS during a speech at a United Nations summit. Notably, Russia's involvement came after the request of Syria's president Bashar al Assad. What might be driving the Russian approach?

To begin with, it is quite clear that Russia is trying to shift the balance of power within Syria in Assad's favor. This effort is twofold: on the one hand it is aimed at helping materially Assad's army. On the other hand, Russia conducts airstrikes, and may potentially conduct other military operations as well, against anti-Assad targets. Moreover, given that the Russian air force has hit places such as Homs, which is a stronghold of Jabhat al Nusra (al Qaeda's affiliate) and other groups, it seems that ISIS is not the only concern. The aim is rather to hit the whole Jihadist front which fights against Assad. It has been argued that this strategy points to Russia's "intent to assist in the Syrian regime's war effort at large," instead of pursuing more limited goals such as the security of Latakia and Tartus.



The strategically located Latakia and Tartus.



This may well be the case. But should worst come to worst, Russia would be more eager to secure its interests at these strategic locations (Russia maintains a naval base in Tartus) which also happen to be mainly populated by pro-Assad people, notably Alawites. As such, by ensuring that Latakia, Tartus and Syria's coast more generally remain under Assad's control, Russia essentially ensures its access to the Mediterranean Sea and collaboration with a friendly regime. By extension, this means that should Syria end up dismembered, which at this point seems very likely, Russia would be content with an Assad-controlled zone that would include these locations.

And yet, not all of Russia's concerns would be addressed in such a scenario. The threat of Islamic extremism remains very real, and one that Russia would like to exterminate. Its own problem with and fears about Islamic terrorism stem from the Chechen insurgency that it has been facing as well as from the development of multiple other Islamist groups in the Caucasus and Central Asia that might cause troubles in the future; especially if ISIS is not dealt with effectively. Further, Russia seems to be using its military might to improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis the West and countries such as Turkey in the case that things come down to negotiating whether Assad will stay, leave or be part of a transitional government in a united or divided Syria.

More generally, Russia's ultimate - or high strategic - goal is to challenge the post-Cold War international order that has been based on the power supremacy of the United States. By solidifying its foothold in the Middle East and Syria in particular, Moscow seeks not only to alter Syria's domestic balance of power. It also wants to alter the regional balance of power and fill the power vacuum that the US left behind when it completed its withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Lastly, Russia claims - perhaps rightfully - a place among the powerful of an international system that seems to be entering a whole new phase.



¹ Zenonas Tziarras, “The Struggle Over Syria”, *The GW Post*, 31 March 2012, <http://thegwpost.com/2012/03/31/the-struggle-over-syria/>. See also, Zenonas Tziarras, “Turkey’s Syria Problem: A Talking Timeline of Events”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol.11, no.3 (Nov. 2012), pp.129-138.

² Turkey also undertook a swift military operation in Syria for the relocation of the Suleyman Shah tomb, a historic piece of land in Syria seen by Turkey as Turkish sovereign land.

³ <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/9/18/russia-foreign-military-bases.html>.

⁴ <https://www.rt.com/news/316705-china-syria-isis-fight/>

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/30/russia-launches-first-airstrikes-against-targets-in-syria-says-us>