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[Putin's Syrian adventure: Masterstroke or Poisoned Chalice](#)



In a strongly worded speech before the United Nations General Assembly, Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed that the United States join forces with Russia and the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to fight ISIS. Leading Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump promptly [stated](#) that if Putin wanted to fight ISIS it would be a “wonderful thing” with “very little downside.” Secretary of State John Kerry even stood shoulder-to-shoulder at a with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov at a press conference, lending the unintentional appearance that the United States was ok with Putin's Syrian intervention.

It turns out however that Putin has a slightly different definition of “ISIS” and “terrorists” than the West does. In air strikes over the last several days, Russian jets struck a series of positions held by non-ISIS rebel groups. As one Twitter wag noted, while Washington spent the last three years searching for “moderate rebels” to support, the Russians had apparently found them in 24 hours.

This raises two obvious questions: What are the objectives Russia's Syrian intervention? And what might be the consequences?

According to Stephen Blank, a long time expert on Russian foreign policy at the American Foreign Policy Council, Russia's main interest is to preserve the Assad regime. “This has nothing to do with ISIS. Russia's overriding interest here is to preserve Assad and establish a network of bases which it can use to project influence in Syria and the broader region,” said Blank. As Blank points out, the mountainous coastal regions of Latakia and Tartus hosting the Russians is also where the Alawite sect that makes up the backbone of Assad's regime is centered.

Examining the map of Russian airstrikes ([see below](#)) from the Institute for the Study of War shows Blank is correct. Russian jets struck areas where rebel fighters pose the greatest threat to the perimeter of Assad's Alawite heartland, and stabilizing this front is clearly Russia's first order of business. The Russian military already possesses a naval presence at the port of Tartus, and in the last several weeks has established a other bases in Latakia. Putin clearly assigns the protection of this infrastructure as a high priority for the Russian military.

Russia's attempt to shore up the perimeter of the regime's heartland demonstrates another possible scenario: A possible ‘Plan B’ for the Assad regime involves establishing an Alawite statelet – “Alawistan” – along the coast. This is not as far-fetched as it sounds. In [2012](#) and [2013](#) the Assad regime engaged in a series of ethnic-cleansing operations directed against Sunnis concentrated in villages in and around this Alawite core, and if Damascus were overrun the regime might regroup in its Alawite heartland. An established Russian military presence could serve as new statelet's praetorian guard, while allowing Russia to maintain control over Tartus and its other bases. If the idea of a Russian-sponsored mini-statelet sounds familiar it is – Russia has pursued a similar strategy for Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and now the Donbass.

The Syrian crisis also allows Russia to establish itself as a player in the Middle East equal to the United States. In a move that caught Washington completely off-guard, Iraq announced a four way agreement between itself, Iran, Syria and Russia to share intelligence about ISIS. Iraq also surprised Washington by

allowing Russian transport planes to fly through its airspace on the way to Syria after NATO member Bulgaria refused to provide over flight rights to the Russians.

Blank has [warned](#) previously about Moscow's desire to form a Russia-Shiite alliance in the region to counter the United States, and he believes the Iraqi announcement should not have come as a surprise. "Russia's objective has been to establish a Shiite-Russian Middle East alliance and this has been obvious for a long time," argues Blank. "Unfortunately Washington policy makers have been completely missing the boat on this, although it's clear now," he added.

The new Russian-Shiite pact clearly represents a strategic victory for Moscow - and a setback for the United States. In a stroke, Russia substantially expanded its military footprint, restored its standing as an indispensable great power in the Middle East, and made clear that any solution to Syrian conflict requires Moscow's sign-off. Nevertheless, Russia's policy comes with great risks as well as rewards.

The atrocities committed by the Assad regime against Syria's largely Sunni civilian population inevitably build support for extremist groups like ISIS. The Russian airstrikes have already produced strong anti-Russian [sentiment](#) in Arab cyberspace, with hashtags such as "Russian aggression" or "Russian occupation of Syria" trending on Twitter and photos of dead children superimposed against images of Putin.

As a post from the Brookings Institution [notes](#), "accommodating Russian and Iranian demands for Assad's survival...will only prolong and intensify the conflict and will almost certainly spark a jihadist mobilization the like of which the world has never seen." As the Syrian government's primary great power supporter, Russia will inevitably face angry Sunni Jihadists itching to avenge Moscow's support for Assad.

Russia has also increased the risk of an accidental military clash in Syria between itself and other major powers. The Russian and American militaries are ostensibly coordinating with each other to avoid an accident, but given the increasingly chaotic skies above Syria an inadvertent clash cannot be ruled out.

A Russian-Israeli clash over Syria - accidental or not - cannot be ruled out either. A recent incident highlights this risk. According to the Israeli intelligence site Debka, Israeli jets [reportedly](#) struck a concentration of Iranian Revolutionary Guard forces on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights. The Revolutionary Guard is ostensibly in Syria to protect Assad, but setting up shop directly across from the Israeli border indicates the Iranians could be there to target Israel as well. According to Debka, Putin warned Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu that further attacks on Iranian military targets in Syria presented a problem for Russia because they weakened Assad. Could another strike by the Israeli Air Force against Revolutionary Guard forces on the Golan Heights lead to an incident between the Russian and Israeli militaries?

More broadly, while Russia says it will not send ground troops into combat, there is no guarantee it can avoid being dragged deeper into the Syrian quagmire. For example, what if the initial Russian deployment is not enough and Assad requires even deeper Russian support? Here the choices become much less palatable. Putin has put Russia's credibility and prestige on the line in Syria, and if Assad's situation deteriorates Putin will surely be tempted to increase support for Assad. As the United States discovered in both Iraq and Afghanistan however, it's a lot easier to get into a country than out, and at this point Russia's exit strategy for Syria is not clear.

Finally, Putin must consider the domestic effect of a prolonged military intervention in Syria. For the Russian public Syria is not Ukraine. While Russians support Putin's view that Ukraine is a key Russian interest, they do not appear to look at Syria the same way. According to a recent [poll](#) from the Levada center, only 39 percent of Russians support Putin's Syrian policy and a miniscule 14 percent favor Russia sending troops or other direct support to Syria. Going to war without public support is not the kind of step any politician should take lightly.

Moreover, Russia's economy is already in a deep recession, raising the question of how long Putin can even sustain a military commitment in Syria? With oil prices showing no signs of recovering and Western sanctions still holding, Putin cannot afford to blow through Russia's already shrinking stockpile of foreign reserves. At some point - probably sooner rather than later - the Kremlin will face some tough fiscal choices: Continue Russia's huge military build-up and forward-leaning military posture would mean cutting other domestic expenditures such as pensions or other social insurance programs. If his constituency observes him cutting

pensions in favor of a military adventure in Syria Putin's political support could hemorrhage.

While his bold Syrian deployment may appear off to a good start, Putin may yet come to rue the gamble.

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