

• Author: [Stephen Blank](#)

[A Reckoning for Russia in Syria](#)



Even if the United States had not bombed an airbase controlled by the Syrian government on April 7th, it would still be clear that Moscow is approaching a critical moment in Syria. Initial gains are looking less impressive as the conflict grinds on, and a rethink looks imminent and necessary for the Kremlin.

Certainly, Russia has gained some victories since its decision to intervene militarily in September, 2015. By fighting alongside Iran (and Iranian proxy groups like Hezbollah) to prop up the government of President Bashar al-Assad, Russia has reasserted and expanded its influence in Syria as well as across the Middle East. In particular, its intervention means Russian air and naval bases in Syria are an established fact; no Syrian government, whatever its affiliation, will be able to close down these bases for decades to come.

This has been a competitive and profound attempt by Russia to restructure the regional strategic order. By gaining leverage over the region through military bases and energy deals, Russia also clearly intends to alter the overall European power balance as well.

At first it all seemed to work: an appearance of a regional restructuring could be seen through Assad prevailing over rebel forces. By keeping Assad in power, a client leader remained who could advance Russian and Iranian interests alongside those of the Assad family. It also brought Russia back, at least temporarily and

partly, from being left out in the cold by the West after its military actions in Ukraine.

The Kremlin, nevertheless, is already aware that Russia cannot afford to sustain a long-term military operation in Syria's civil war. Neither are the costly tools required for peacemaking and reconstruction in its reach. If Russia's aim is for a postwar order in Syria where Assad and his party would be the dominant political forces, then that is looking like an increasingly distant hope. Diplomatic costs are also beginning to rise for Russia. As the Kremlin continues to support Assad, the risk is increasingly of guilt by association. Assad's repeated use of chemical weapons breaks international law and appalls leaders around the world; sticking up for him would only isolate Moscow further from the EU and the US. As much as anti-Western rhetoric may be rousing for a domestic audience, there comes a point where Moscow is surely eager to revive ties with its largest trade partners and preferred political interlocutors - countries of the West. Not authoritarian China, Turkey or Iran.

Moscow, like any other foreign intervener in an external civil war must now convert power into authority - that is, an order enjoying some form of legitimacy based on reciprocal political understandings among the various players in Syria. This is not only because of the mounting costs of long-term intervention without a clear endpoint, but also because its interests would then have been "hijacked" by Assad, if not by Tehran as well. The longer fighting continues, Assad's survival (personal as well as political) depends ever more on a robust display of Russian military force; but without hopes of conflict resolution, this would take the form of an indefinite, open-ended commitment that benefits Assad and his masters in Tehran, not Russia.

It is not as if Russian commitment seems to be bringing much compliance from Damascus. Assad's recent use of chemical warfare shows that he intends to remain, as far as possible, independent of Russian control and will accept no restraints or orders. Indeed, there are [many reports of Moscow's fury with him](#) for using those weapons without telling Russia. Effectively, by virtue of their alliance, even if Russia was aware or not, Assad has made Russia complicit in that war crime, while poisoning the well in regard to Vladimir Putin's efforts to resume a strategic dialogue with Washington.

In theory, Russia need not commit itself irrevocably to Assad himself, even if it does remain committed over the long run to a similar version of his state continuing to rule over Syria. That outcome, if it won the approval of all local actors at peace talks, would indeed possess legitimacy, authority, and might even demonstrably enhance the security of Syria's people. But in fact until now [Putin has stood by Assad and even told him that he would not let him lose](#). Meanwhile Assad [has repeatedly made it clear](#) that nothing less than a total reconquest of Syria under his control, and presumably an extirpation of any remaining insurgents, is his endgame. It hardly makes for heartening grounds for compromise over ceasefire agreements, let alone a peace deal.

If the war goes on interminably, against the interests of Russia, Assad's ability to rule Syria will only go on through heavy and costly Russian backing; the likelihood of terror bombing and chemical weapons from the Assad government will remain, as it looks more remote that Assad can muster enough ground forces. Reports indicate his usable and reliable forces are down to 18,000 men and Russian commentary about the quality of the Syrian "army" have been scathing.

So even before the US bombing of Sharyat Air Base on April 6-7, a moment of truth was already looming before Vladimir Putin and his government. The US bombing and the renewed American demand that Assad must go, dramatically exposes the rising costs and risks of the intervention to safeguard Assad. Moscow continues to deny Assad's use of chemical weapons, making itself an accessory after the fact to his treaty violations, and must now send more air defenses based on naval assets to Syria. Its isolation has grown and all hope of a deal with America is fast going out the window.

Meanwhile Washington has essentially told the Kremlin that not only must Assad go, but that if it continues to stand by him, the Trump Administration will essentially write off Russia as a partner. If it abandons Assad, it will also have forfeited any chance for real partnership with Iran as well, since Assad is indispensable to Iran's larger regional grand strategy. But since all Washington offers is just a possibility of a strategic dialogue, with no sign of a compromise regarding Syria or Ukraine, it is likely that for now Putin will temporize and persist with policies that have brought him to the looming impasse he and Russia now face. Thus Russia will imminently confront its reckoning in the Middle East.

Tags

[syria](#)

Category

[Security](#)

© Intersection - for republishing rights, please contact the editorial team at intersection@intersectionproject.eu