



The Political and Military Consequences of Russia's Involvement in Syria

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In December 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the withdrawal of most of the Russian armed forces in Syria, declaring Russia had achieved its main two political and military goals—keeping Bashar al-Assad in power and defeating the Islamic State group. However, because the situation in Syria remains unstable, this decision means only a reduction of the Russian contingent. At the same time, Russian diplomacy will engage in the peace process and activities associated with it, such as the Congress of Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi on 29–30 January.

Russian Withdrawal. In December 2017, Putin announced victory in the war against Islamic State (IS) and ordered the return of most of his country's military units to their permanent bases in Russia. This decision is already the third of its kind announced by the Russian authorities. The two previous ones on 14 March and 29 December 2016 were not implemented, and only a few months after the announcements, the Russian contingent was significantly increased. Putin used this favourable political and military moment to emphasise it had reached its goals, thanks to the effectiveness of the Russian armed forces. It also marked the fulfilment of a promise from autumn last year that victory over IS would mean the end of the Russian military operation.

Russia's success in Syria has become one of the most important elements of this year's presidential election campaign ahead of the 18 March vote. Putin will use it to maintain his popularity and show the Russian public that the country is again one of the most important players in the international arena. For most Russians, a sense of pride in the strength of the country is also a kind of compensation for the economic difficulties of recent years.

However, the order to withdraw most of the military contingent does not mean an end to operations—the Russian air force is still active in Idlib province, supporting the Syrian and Iranian units fighting there. Regaining control over this region will allow the Syrian government to increase control of the border with Turkey and the route to Aleppo province. The main task of the Russian forces now is to destroy the Islamic group Tahrir al-Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front, a Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda).

The Operation and Military Consequences. Russia's military involvement in Syria has been ongoing since September 2015, primarily aviation and the navy. Special forces, subunits of ground troops, and military advisers training Syrian troops were also involved. According to the General Staff of the Russian Federation, Russian pilots performed more than 34,000 combat flights and, as a result of frequent rotations, crews with combat training comprise the vast majority of its Air Force. Moreover, more than 200 types of weapons were used during the operation.¹ The operation was also characterised by the limited use of Russian

¹ For more see: A.M. Dyner, "Two Years of Russian Military Operations in Syria: Results and Prospects," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 103 (1043), 30 October 2017, www.pism.pl/publications/bulletin/no-103-1043.

ground forces and resources. The number of troops involved in Syria never exceeded several thousand at any one time (though, in total about 48,000 troops were in country), along with a reported 50 aircraft and 40 helicopters.

The General Staff of the Russian Federation estimated that during the operation, Russian forces destroyed about 8,000 IS armoured vehicles State and killed about 60,000 IS fighters, of which, 2,800 were citizens of the Russian Federation and 1,400 from former USSR states. When Russia began its military campaign in Syria, Assad's military controlled only about 15% of the country. By December 2017, when the decision to withdraw most of the Russian contingent was taken, the Syrian government forces controlled about 60% of the country's territory.

The troops that will remain in Syria are mainly stationed at the Khmeimim air base and the naval facility in Tartus. Under a 2017 agreement, Russia holds a lease on the Tartus facility until 2066, with the right to extend it for another 25 years. In 2016, the Syrian and Russian governments agreed that the base in Khmeimim may be used indefinitely. Eleven ships can be based in Tartus, which would significantly increase Russia's ability to project military force to the Mediterranean. The Russians, however, must strengthen protection of their bases. Last New Year's Eve, seven planes at Khmeimim were damaged by mortar fire, and almost a week later, both bases were attacked by drones, though the attack was successfully repulsed.

Political Consequences, International Dimension. Russia's military involvement in Syria has strengthened its position as one of the main negotiators on this country's future. Since 2016, the Russians have been significantly involved in the Astana Process and its eight rounds of talks. The outcome so far has meant that Russia, in cooperation with Iran and Turkey, has created four "de-escalation" zones in Syria. According to the results of the last Astana Process meeting in December 2017, Russian diplomats organised the January meeting in Sochi of the Congress of Syrian National Dialogue. One of its main results was electing a committee under the aegis of the United Nations to work on a new Syrian constitution. According to Russian announcements, this is one way of implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2254 on the stabilisation of the political situation in Syria. A challenge for the UN will be the improvement of the humanitarian situation, including the possibility of the return of refugees.

However, further agreement on Syria will be difficult to achieve because of external conditions, namely the different visions of the future of the country held by the U.S., Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States. The U.S. still wants different Syrian authorities while Russia claims that it is far too soon for such a change and that any decision on that matter should not be taken by external actors. The Kurdish issue also will be difficult to sort out, with divergent interests held by all countries involved in the military operations in Syria, in particular the U.S. and Turkey, with the Turks starting a military operation in Afrin province last month against the Kurds.²

Conclusions. Russia will use its military success to actively engage in the Syrian peace process. Moreover, the Russian authorities will want to transfer control over all "de-escalation" zones to the Syrian military, which would be a first step to restoring the country's territorial integrity.

Russia's long-term goal is to restore political stability in Syria through the UN. However, its rivalry with the U.S. and different vision of the future of the Syrian peace process will most likely make it impossible to reach agreement within the UN Security Council. Nevertheless, Poland, now a non-permanent member of the Security Council, may engage in other activities related to Syria, such as UN-led working groups.

The situation in Syria also will play a role in Russian domestic policy. Despite the "victory" rhetoric connected to the collapse of IS in Syria, the Russian authorities are aware that not all IS fighters were killed and that the terrorist threat to Russia may increase. On this, Russia will probably seek to increase intelligence cooperation with NATO and Middle East countries.

At the same time, the possible return of former IS fighters to Central Asia, where many of them were recruited, could pose a threat to that region. This would not only adversely affect the internal stability of countries there, including Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, but also the regional security situation. Russia in turn is likely to actively support Central Asian governments through the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation, not only to fight radical Islamic groups but also the Islamic opposition.

² P. Sasnal, K. Wasilewski, "Turkish Military Operation *Olive Branch* in Syria," *PISM Spotlight*, no. 5/2018, 22 January 2018, www.pism.pl/publications/spotlight/no-5-2018.