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Russia's Choice in Syria

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I. Overview

In announcing Moscow's intent to withdraw the "main part" of the military assets that it deployed to Syria since last September, President Vladimir Putin again caught much of the world off-guard, this time allies and adversaries alike.[1] Having declared victory while maintaining its war-fighting capacity in Syria, Russia has left key questions unanswered: will it actually reduce its military role and, if so, to what extent, where and against whom. But if it implements the announcement in a meaningful way, this could create the best opportunity in years to push the conflict toward an initial settlement, especially on the heels of Moscow's decision to help implement a "cessation of hostilities".

This much is clear: Putin's announcement underlined crucial points distinguishing Russian aims from those of the Assad regime and enhanced Moscow's leverage over Damascus. It also, for the moment at least, increased Russia's investment in the fledgling, fragile political process it is co-sponsoring with the U.S.

This much is unclear: having battered Syria's non-jihadist rebels nearly to the brink of defeat but not over it, what sort of political and military arrangements will Moscow seek?[2] Will it aim to cement battlefield gains, while maintaining a less aggressive posture in the hope that reduced violence will encourage the U.S. to drop any active

[1] On Syria, as with other conflicts, Crisis Group reporting typically addresses the broader strategic landscape and full gamut of major stakeholders. This briefing, however, focuses specifically on Russia's policy in Syria, due to the recent dynamism of Moscow's approach and its potentially pivotal role in shaping the conflict's trajectory, and in order to highlight a major strategic choice before Russian decision-makers.

[2] This briefing divides Syrian insurgents into two main categories: Salafi-jihadist organisations (such as the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra) and non-jihadist rebel groups (ranging from non-ideological factions to Islamists such as Jaish al-Islam and Ahrar al-Sham). In previous reporting, Crisis Group referred to the latter by the terms "mainstream" and, most recently, "*thawri*" (revolutionary); here, non-jihadist is used for simplicity. The strategic and ideological differences distinguishing the two categories are discussed in Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°155, *Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War*, 9 September 2014; and N°163, *New Approach in Southern Syria*, 2 September 2015. In brief: Salafi-jihadist groups seek to overthrow the modern nation-state system in the Muslim world, replacing what they deem "apostate" regimes with their version of Islamic rule; to them, Syria is but one front in that transnational armed jihad. In contrast, *thawri*/non-jihadist factions define their military and political goals within Syrian borders. They welcome material support from regional governments that oppose Assad, viewing them as partners rather than apostates to be toppled; they engage with the UN and other elements of the international community, participate in opposition politics and accept the principle of political pluralism.

opposition to President Bashar al-Assad's rule and to increase coordination with Moscow against jihadist groups? This option is consistent with Russia's general approach to the conflict, but would entail an open-ended military commitment, offer little prospect of improved stability and possibly play to the jihadists' advantage.

Alternatively, will Moscow push for a more robust settlement that has a chance of stabilising the country – at least those parts the regime and non-jihadist rebels control? That would require an additional, political outlay: most importantly, delinking its own interests in Syria from the person of Assad – and, ultimately, convincing Iran to do the same. If Moscow wishes to avoid further regional unravelling and spiraling radicalisation, this is an investment worth making.

II. A Downward Spiral That Could Resume

To contextualise President Putin's announcement and highlight what remains at stake, it is worth noting how different – and bleak – the conflict's trajectory appeared just six weeks ago.[3]

During the first phase of Moscow's intervention, from late-September 2015 through mid-February 2016, the Russian approach appeared clear. In an effort to preserve an ally threatened by a string of recent defeats and the steady erosion of its military capacity, Moscow threw significant weight behind the Assad regime and adopted key aspects of its strategy, which is focused on crippling its non-jihadist opponents and pounding their popular base into submission (or displacement) via a combination of military defeat and collective punishment.

Damascus based its approach on the hope that the mainstream opposition's demise and the acceleration of the jihadist threat would leave the U.S. and other opposition backers with little choice but to accept continued Assad rule, and perhaps would convince Washington even to tackle that threat jointly with Russia. By focusing the brunt of Russian air strikes on areas under opposition control rather than Islamic State (IS) territory or distinct Jabhat al-Nusra targets, Moscow appeared not only to embrace that strategy, but also to adopt a particularly ruthless regime tactic: targeting civilian neighbourhoods and infrastructure, including medical facilities, in a seemingly deliberate effort to render specific opposition-held areas unlivable.[4]

The combined impact of Russian airstrikes and an apparent surge of pro-regime foreign fighters, facilitated by Iran, not only gave the regime the upper hand, but also threatened to drive non-jihadist rebel factions toward military defeat and political marginalisation. Of particular note was Russia's dramatic 2 February escalation of airstrikes on key non-jihadist opposition strongholds in Aleppo; those paved the way for major regime advances and, in effect, aborted the first round of U.S.- and Russia-backed talks in Geneva (involving regime and opposition delegations) that had kicked off the day before. This approach made sense from Moscow's perspective: as a

[3] For President Putin's announcement, see en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51511, 14 March 2016. For further background, see Crisis Group "Statement on a Syria Policy Framework", 27 April 2015; and Crisis Group Report, *New Approach in Southern Syria*, op. cit.; also, Crisis Group Special Report, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016.

[4] "Syrian and Russian forces targeting hospitals as a strategy of war", Amnesty International, 3 March 2016.

principal backer of the Assad regime (and opponent of regime change, in Syria as elsewhere), Russia had ample incentive to weaken the opposition before negotiations.

Many would say this tactic carries profound risk for Syria and its external stakeholders, Moscow included, because any truly sustainable political settlement of the conflict requires a non-jihadist opposition with sufficient credibility to negotiate and implement an agreement and sufficient strength to protect it from jihadist spoilers. Russia appeared to calculate risk differently, at least until the cessation of hostilities: by equating the jihadist and non-jihadist opposition, it signalled that any sustainable settlement would require the defeat of all parts of the opposition, period. Yet, by stopping short of decisively defeating the non-jihadists, it has left an opening to prevent a worst-case scenario for Syria: unending war between a brutal regime too weak to pacify large swathes of the country and Salafi-jihadist groups (IS and Jabhat al-Nusra) willing and able to wage perpetual, asymmetric insurgency against it, while exploiting the continued bloodshed to augment their global recruitment.

Such a worst-case scenario would entail further radicalisation, continuing refugee flows and growing regional instability. For the regime's Russian and Iranian backers, the situation would not only amplify the jihadist threat, but also demand military and financial outlays to compensate for the regime's erosion, a potentially significant burden, particularly in light of the economic constraints both face.

III. A Sharp Turn, Maximising Moscow's Leverage

In late February, roughly two weeks prior to the president's withdrawal announcement, Russia changed course and diverged from the regime strategy it had been emulating. Beginning on 27 February, in accordance with a "cessation of hostilities" agreement it negotiated with the U.S., Russia significantly reduced the scope and intensity of its attacks on opposition areas and secured a similar de-escalation by the regime. The reversal was enormous: Russia's military push, had it continued on the same course, might well have defeated the non-jihadist opposition within months. Reorienting toward the political path, Moscow redid what it had undone less than four weeks before: after having derailed the first attempt at Geneva talks, it paved the way for a second.

Equally notable, in retrospect, was the public message Moscow directed toward Damascus. Responding to an interview in which President Assad had dismissed the need for compromise and suggested his forces eventually would regain control of the entire country, Russia's UN envoy, Vitaly Churkin, on 18 February sternly noted that the regime's recent gains were due to the Russian air force and suggested that any failure by Damascus to follow Moscow's lead toward a political resolution could prove costly.[5] Four days later, Damascus invited further frustration when it announced plans for parliamentary elections, in direct contravention of the terms for a political process that Russia had agreed with the U.S. (and other states active in the conflict). Finally on 12 March, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem, in a rare press conference, reiterated the regime's uncompromising position: the army will

[5] "Russia warns Assad not to snub Syria ceasefire plan", Reuters, 18 February 2016.

retake "every inch" of Syrian territory, and negotiations will not address the "red line" of Assad's presidency.[6]

Two days later, Putin delivered his surprise withdrawal announcement. While it is unlikely that he made such a strategically significant decision on the basis of a few grating statements, word came just as the regime delegation arrived for talks in Geneva. Damascus and (to a lesser extent) Moscow portrayed the decision as mutual, but the timing and content suggest it was Russia's alone, taken with little, if any, advance notice to Assad. The Kremlin needled the regime in the announcement itself, further emphasising its investment in a political process whose objectives and framework Damascus rejects out of hand.[7] This divergence bears emphasis: the regime leadership, which views a meaningful political transition as an existential threat, will do what it can to prevent it – which is precisely why Moscow, perhaps the only power that might ultimately prove willing and able to deliver one, is an essential partner on Syria in Western eyes.

The president's announcement has put Russia in a position of relative flexibility that improves its leverage, not only over the regime, but also over Tehran. The extent to which the regime owes its improved military position to Russia's efforts is obvious, as are the burdens that would fall on both the regime and Iran (including its network of proxies) if Russia significantly diminished its role over a sustained period.

By declaring victory before its domestic audience, Russia has freed itself to do just that – but by stating that it will maintain some forces in Syria, it will be able to calibrate their reduction according to what it can achieve at the negotiating table. It could allow the regime's fortunes on the battlefield to sink (though it is unlikely to ever put the regime in a position to collapse); at the same time, Russia will have both the military capacity and political flexibility to re-escalate, under the banners of "fighting terrorists" and "supporting the political process", if it so chooses. In short, Moscow's move puts it in a better position to attach clear conditions to whatever support it provides.

IV. Mission Partially Accomplished

The first phase of Moscow's intervention went a long way toward accomplishing two apparent priorities. First, in addition to reversing the erosion of the regime's power, Moscow significantly raised the risks and potential costs of any Western effort to impose a "no-fly" or "no-bomb" zone over parts of Syria, thus rendering untenable ideas that had been gaining steam in some Western capitals. In so doing, it blocked any realistic path for externally-backed regime-change by military means – as happened in Iraq and Libya, precedents loathed by Moscow, which is bent on preventing a repetition in Syria. Secondly, the Kremlin enhanced and reinforced its starring role on what may be the world's most prominent geopolitical stage, where its influence and leverage today are on par with the otherwise more powerful U.S. Given the way Russia has framed its withdrawal announcement, it appears that it will remain well-positioned, politically and militarily, to realise these two priorities.

[6] www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwFmmbW3Et8.
[7] See President Putin's announcement, op. cit.

Progress toward another two key Russian objectives, however, likely will require further adjustments in strategy. Officials in Moscow emphasise the importance of restoring stability in what has become an extremely volatile Middle East (a condition they accuse Washington of having created), and of weakening the power, reach and appeal of jihadist groups.[8] Those goals are inextricably linked in Syria, but there is tension between them, on one hand, and Russia's stated goal of preventing an externally-engineered change in regime leadership, on the other.

Given the brutality, scope, and sectarian nature of a regime military strategy that relies heavily on collective punishment, and the extent to which President Assad has both led and personified that effort, no conceivable settlement could prove sustainable and leave Assad in power indefinitely. Any armed opposition groups that agreed to such a deal likely would find many of their fighters decamping to other factions willing and able to continue the fight. And even in the unlikely event that the opposition's regional backers could be convinced to stop support to the rebellion while Assad's rule continued, jihadist groups would gain new waves of recruits from rebel remnants.

IS and Jabhat al-Nusra do not depend on state backing and would continue to attract supporters throughout Syria and the world by leading an insurgency that easily could shift focus toward asymmetrical attacks in areas of regime control. That would likely entail more bombs against pro-regime forces and civilian targets within communities viewed as core regime constituencies; IS has already demonstrated that capacity in recent weeks, with suicide attacks targeting high-profile strongholds of the regime and allied militias in Homs and Damascus.[9] Should jihadist groups increase the tempo of such attacks, they would likely elicit more heavy-handed, radicalising responses from pro-regime forces that are incapable of effective counter-insurgency.

In such a situation, there is neither stability, nor sustainable de-escalation, nor even an overall weakening in the global appeal of Salafi-jihadist violence. This is not a hypothetical worst-case scenario. It is a likely outcome if the regime's backers insist on a settlement that excludes compromise on Assad – whether due to exaggerated faith in their ability to deliver Damascus a military victory or to misplaced confidence either that the opposition's backers ultimately will fold and acquiesce to Assad's continued rule, or that a Russia-U.S. condominium would be able to manage its proliferating fallout.

V. A Viable Way Forward

Having added to its leverage, Russia enjoys policy options that can address the tension between its objectives, improve prospects for the political process it is co-sponsoring and reduce risks of further trans-border destabilisation and radicalisation. Here are three recommendations:

- **Maintain the cessation of hostilities.** Russia's role in achieving the truce was instrumental; despite regular breaches, its early results have far exceeded most expectations. The cessation has dramatically lowered violence; provided desperately-needed credibility to the political process, thus creating space for the opposition

[8] Crisis Group interviews, Moscow, March 2016.
[9] "At least 119 killed in multiple bombings in Syria", RTE News, 22 February 2016.

to agree to negotiate with the regime; enabled civil activists to reassert themselves on the ground in opposition areas, pressuring hardline militants; and helped bring to the fore key strategic and ideological differences separating "revolutionary forces" (including major, armed Islamist groups) which wish to settle the conflict politically from the Salafi-jihadist groups that have cooperated with them (most notably Jabhat al-Nusra) whose leaders prefer perpetual war. The longer the cessation is sustained, the more prospects for negotiation will improve.

- **Shift from offence to defence.** President Putin's announcement could be read as a shift in emphasis, from supporting the Assad regime toward co-custodianship of a political process to settle the conflict. For that to translate into real gains, the announcement will have to be accompanied by a real change on the ground: moving from supporting pro-regime offensives against non-jihadist opposition groups toward monitoring the cessation of hostilities and, if necessary, defence of the regime's core holdings in western Syria. In so doing, Moscow can improve conditions necessary for settlement while maintaining its role and leverage as a potential guarantor for pro-regime constituencies.

  Ongoing Russian support for regime offensives against IS could fit within such an adjusted approach. Moscow enabled regime and allied forces to capture Palmyra from IS on 27 March, and similar gains may be possible elsewhere. There is a real danger, however, that advances by pro-regime forces utilising indiscriminate tactics and enjoying limited local credibility could generate additional radicalisation that offsets any territorial gains – particularly in areas that rebelled against the regime earlier in the conflict, prior to the advent of IS.

- **Address the Assad conundrum.** To a large extent, the regime has held its principal backers hostage to its own structural fragility. In conversations with Iranian, Hizbollah and Russian officials, it is common to hear acknowledgements of Assad's shortcomings paired with suggestions that any alternative to his rule – whether an opposition victory or an attempt to push him from office in a negotiated transition – would only increase chaos and thus further threaten Russian and Iranian interests in Syria.[10] Yet, as noted, there is no conceivable scenario in which an Assad-led government can decisively defeat the diverse range of armed opponents it faces.

  Moscow might hope to impose a minimalist agreement to essentially freeze the conflict, but – while temporary political arrangements in the Middle East often are sticky, since the cost of changing them can be high – such an arrangement is unlikely to be sustainable. Moscow's choice ultimately will prove more stark: to continue to cover, along with Iran, a rising share of the war's costs as the regime's own manpower further depletes, or for both to develop alternative means of securing their bottom-line interests in the context of a transition from Assad rule.[11] For Moscow, having largely discredited Western-backed regime change and guaranteed itself a central role in negotiating Syria's future, those interests include weakening the power and appeal of Salafi-jihadist groups, preventing additional destabilisation in the region and securing its recently-expanded military foothold on Syria's Mediterranean coast.

[10] Crisis Group interviews, Tehran, Beirut and Moscow, 2013-2016.
[11] See Crisis Group "Statement on a Syria Policy Framework", op. cit.

VI. Conclusion

Putin's withdrawal announcement has improved Moscow's prospects for delinking its primary interests from the fate of Syria's current president. The outlines for a political transition Russia negotiated with the U.S. (and others) in Geneva (2012) and Vienna (2015) are vague on key points, but they provide means to separate Assad's personal future from that of the Syrian state.[12] In its communications with regime leadership, core pro-regime constituencies and Tehran, Moscow is now positioned to present clear incentives for accomplishing that.

It has much to offer. Thanks in part to its bases in Tartous and Lattaqia, it can provide credible security guarantees to the Alawite-dominated coastal region; and, through its lead role in the political process, it can apply significant leverage to help ensure that an eventual deal maintains as much of the state apparatus as possible. While dangling these carrots before the pro-regime camp, Russia could wield a stick: if the regime is unwilling or unable to make the concessions necessary to facilitate the political transition of which Moscow is a co-sponsor, it could further reduce its military support. That threat, if implemented, not only would endanger the interests of pro-regime constituencies, but also would leave Tehran and its proxies with an even bigger, ultimately unsustainable military burden. If the war is to end in the foreseeable future, that is an eventuality they must be made to confront.

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[12] The November 2015 Vienna statement agreed by the U.S., Russia and other states active on the Syria file outlined the basic contours of the current political process, including the goal of a "political transition based on the [June 2012] Geneva Communiqué in its entirety". Neither document refers directly to Assad's fate (or role) in such a transition, but each offers potential means of addressing the question, provided Moscow and Washington agree on them and exercise influence on that basis. The 2012 communiqué calls for the establishment of a transitional governing body with "full executive powers" agreed "by mutual consent" of the Syrian sides; the implication is that the transitional body would assume the main responsibilities currently in the hands of the president. The November 2015 Vienna statement prescribed additional steps: the drafting of a new constitution and the holding of "free and fair elections" pursuant to that constitution within eighteen months, with all Syrians (including the diaspora) eligible to participate. See "Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué", 30 June 2012, www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroup forSyria.pdf; and "Statement of the International Syria Support Group", 14 November 2015, www.un.org/undpa/Speeches-statements/14112015/syria.

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International Crisis Group
Headquarters
Avenue Louise 149
1050 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: +32 2 502 90 38
Fax: +32 2 502 50 38
brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office
newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office
washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office
london@crisisgroup.org

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