

# PUTIN'S REAL SYRIA AGENDA

The Institute for the Study of War ([ISW](#)) produced this report with the Critical Threats Project ([CTP](#)). The insights are part of an intensive multi-month exercise to frame, design, and evaluate potential courses of action that the United States could pursue to destroy the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) and al Qaeda in Syria. The ISW-CTP team recently released "[America's Way Ahead in Syria](#)," which details the flaws in the current U.S. approach in Iraq and Syria and proposes the first phase of a strategic reset in the Middle East

*Key Takeaway:* Russian President Vladimir Putin's primary objective in Syria is to constrain U.S. freedom of action – not fight ISIS and al Qaeda. Russia's military deployments at current levels will not enable the Iranian-penetrated Assad regime to secure Syria. Moscow's deepening footprint in Syria threatens America's ability to defend its interests across the Middle East and in the Mediterranean Sea. The next U.S. step in Syria must help regain leverage over Russia rather than further encourage Putin's expansionism.

Russia's intervention in Syria in September 2015 fundamentally altered the balance of the Syrian Civil War.<sup>1</sup> Russia re-established momentum behind Syrian President Bashar al Assad and his Iranian allies at a moment when major victories by ISIS and Syrian rebels threatened to force the regime to contract into Syria's central corridor.<sup>2</sup> The capabilities Russia deployed were not limited to the airframes, artillery, and personnel needed to conduct a counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency mission, however. Russia deployed advanced air defense and ballistic missile systems, naval units, air superiority aircraft, and other capabilities in a display of major Russian force projection in the region. Russian President Vladimir Putin is altering the balance of power in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean through sustained Russian military operations and additional deployments of high-end capabilities.

## Russian Force Projection

Russia ultimately seeks to expand its permanent naval and air bases on the Syrian coast in order to further project force into the Mediterranean and Middle East. Russia's establishment of an anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) exclusion zone from its bases at Latakia and Tartous allows Russia to create de-facto no fly zones in the Eastern Mediterranean as well as over most of Syria. These

A2/AD zones constrain U.S. freedom of movement and ultimately raise the cost of U.S. involvement in Syria.<sup>3</sup> Russia deployed the naval version of the S-300 to protect the airspace over Latakia airbase in Syria in November 2015.<sup>4</sup> Russia also deployed the S-400 in late November 2015 shortly after the Turkish downing of a Russian jet.<sup>5</sup> Russia has since deployed an additional seven S-300 systems in an effort to build in redundancies, advance the integration of its air defenses, and provide more comprehensive coverage.<sup>6</sup> The S-300 and S-400 systems are road mobile and interoperable, increasing the difficulty of neutralizing the systems. [See Appendix I]

Putin wants to challenge the U.S. and its allies by increasing Russian military and political influence in the Middle East. Russia has rotated a wide range of naval vessels to participate in the conflict in order to demonstrate the capabilities of these units and Russia's willingness to deploy them in the Mediterranean. Russia has deployed some of its most advanced non-nuclear naval capabilities to the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> Russian subsurface and surface vessels successfully engaged ground targets in Syria after launching Kalibr cruise missiles from the Mediterranean and Caspian Seas.<sup>8</sup> Russia has shown it can undertake precision strikes with the nuclear-capable Kalibr cruise missile at significant distance.

Russia also maintains anti-ship capabilities in the Mediterranean, including the Bastion-P coastal defense system. Russia demonstrated the land attack capabilities of the Bastion in November 2016.<sup>9</sup> Russia has also deployed battle cruisers that bring advanced anti-ship and air defense capabilities off the Syrian coast. Russia's deployment of its much-ridiculed aircraft carrier the *Admiral Kuznetsov* nevertheless showcased its force projection capabilities and intent to exhibit its naval presence in the Mediterranean.<sup>10</sup> [See Appendix II]

Putin has deployed air defense and anti-ship systems to Syria in order to threaten the United States. Russia does not need these systems to support the counter-terrorism campaign it claims it is waging against anti-Assad opposition groups in Syria. Those groups do not operate aircraft or naval vessels. Russia also deployed the nuclear-capable SS-26 'Iskander' ballistic missiles to Syria and used the systems to attack opposition-held terrain.<sup>11</sup> The Iskander missiles provide no meaningful additional advantage against the opposition. The only conceivable target for these advanced systems is the U.S. and its allies. [See Appendix III]

### **Constrain U.S. Freedom of Action**

Russia has used its deployment to constrain U.S. freedom of action and limit American policy options in Syria. Russia deployed the S-300 and S-400 air defense systems to deter the U.S. from direct military action against the Assad regime through the unilateral establishment of a no-fly zone. Russia has also forward deployed assets beyond its air and naval bases on the coast in order to further complicate the prospect of direct U.S. strikes against the Syrian regime for fear of inadvertently hitting Russian troops. Sources estimated that Russia maintains between 1,500 and 4,000 military personnel in Syria.<sup>12</sup> These

personnel are primarily concentrated in Latakia, Aleppo, and Tartous Provinces, but are also active in Hama, Homs, Damascus, and Hasakah and include a wide range of units including air assault, tank, medical, naval infantry, and special operations forces. [See Appendix IV]

Russia has intentionally removed potential U.S. partners within the armed opposition from the battlefield in Syria. Russian airstrikes from October 2015 to March 2017 have primarily targeted the mainstream Syrian opposition – not ISIS – in order to ensure the opposition's defeat through its submission, destruction, or transformation. The Russian air campaign has driven what remains of the mainstream opposition closer to Salafi-jihadi groups, which are stronger and better able to defend against intensified pro-regime military operations. Russia is also exacerbating radicalization through its deliberate, illegal targeting of civilians. Russia has consistently targeted hospitals, schools, and other critical civilian infrastructure throughout the sixteen months of its air campaign.

### **Russian Testing Grounds**

Russia has also used sustained use of transport aircraft in Syria to exercise the Russian military's overall combat readiness and force projection capabilities. Expeditionary logistics and force projection is difficult for militaries to exercise, in general. Russia is exercising expeditionary logistics by air and sea in Syria.<sup>13</sup> Russia is refining its ability to deploy its military personnel and equipment rapidly at a large scale in order to message its ability to threaten the U.S. and its NATO and European allies. Russia announced its intent to prioritize the development of naval equipment for troop transport on March 8 in order to increase the Russian Navy's ability to provide logistical support in Syria and in other coastal zones.<sup>14</sup> Russia also re-supplies and provides combat support for

forces in Syria through frequent deliveries from Russian Il-76 and An-124 transport aircraft. As of October 2016, these transport aircraft were making multiple trips to Syria each month and it is likely that these aircraft continue to make regular trips to Syria. [See Appendix V]

### Limitations of Russian Capabilities

Putin faces a number of economic and military constraints that limit the resources Russia can bring to bear in Syria. Russia's economic crisis has forced Russia to balance limited resources across key theaters like Ukraine, the Baltics, the Middle East, and domestically in Russia. Putin has opted to pursue multiple, mutually reinforcing lines of effort using a diverse set of naval, air, missile, and ground capabilities in Syria. The overlap allows Russia to extract significant benefits with minimal cost. The Russian military has demonstrated its many shortcomings during its deployment to Syria, including frequent friendly fire incidents, losses of Russian aircraft, a poor performance by Russia's aging aircraft carrier the Admiral Kuznetsov, and reports of mechanical failure of Russian equipment.<sup>15</sup>

The Russian deployment, at current levels, will be insufficient to grant Assad victory over the opposition, al Qaeda, or ISIS. Russia, Iran, and the regime have been unable to sustain significant simultaneous operations against ISIS and the Syrian opposition, despite Russia's considerable airframe deployments. Russian airframes were unable to prevent ISIS's recapture of Palmyra in December 2016 alongside a final pro-regime push to defeat the opposition in Aleppo, for example.<sup>16</sup> Russia has instead used 'cessation of hostilities' agreements to drawdown its airstrikes against the opposition and surge its air campaign against ISIS for limited periods of time.<sup>17</sup> Salafi-Jihadi groups have meanwhile begun to consolidate the opposition under more effective command-and-

control structures, increasing rebels' capabilities and resiliency.<sup>18</sup> This dynamic will not only lead to a protracted and bloody civil war for the foreseeable future, but it ultimately raises the requirements for the U.S. to deal with the conflict.

### Implications

Russia is both an unacceptable and ineffective partner against jihadists in Syria. The Russian deployment is inconsistent with Putin's narrative that Russia intervened in Syria in order to combat terrorists. Many of its capabilities have no utility in the anti-ISIS fight. Putin instead seeks to use Russia's deployment to subordinate U.S. military action and policies to Russian objectives in Syria. Russia's aggressive deployment to Syria intends to deter the U.S. from intervening for fear of incurring significant costs. Russia has largely pursued its objectives in Syria with impunity. It has deprived the U.S. of freedom of maneuver, disrupted U.S. partnerships with key allies in the region, and facilitated Russia's emergence as a geopolitical force in the region. Any potential partnership with Russia in Syria will further strengthen jihadists and force the U.S. to capitulate to a Russian vision for the broader Middle East that endangers America's security interests.

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## APPENDICES:

The following charts outline the high-end capabilities Russia has deployed to Syria since the start of the Russian intervention in September 2015.

### APPENDIX I: Long Range Anti-Aircraft Systems

Aerial Defense System	Location	Notes	Source	Last Date Observed
S-200 (SA-5 Gammon)	Unknown <sup>19</sup>	Russia repaired the S-200 systems in November 2016 in order to “[protect] Syrian territory, as well as [provide] air protection for the eastern flank” of bases in Tartous and Bassel al Assad	IHS Janes <sup>20</sup>	November 2016
S-300 (SA-23)	Latakia & Tartous <sup>21</sup>	Russia deployed seven additional S-300v4 systems to Syria in November 2016.	International Business Times <sup>22</sup> ; Reuters <sup>23</sup> ; Mehr News <sup>24</sup> ; Interfax <sup>25</sup> ; Kremlin <sup>26</sup>	Latakia: November 2015 Tartous: January 2017
S-400 (SA-21 Growler)	Latakia		BBC <sup>27</sup>	November 2015

## APPENDIX II: Naval Capabilities

Hardware	Equipped with	Location	Source	Last Date Observed
Bunyan class corvettes	Kalibr cruise missiles	Caspian Sea	U.S Naval Institute News <sup>28</sup>	October 2015
Kilo-class submarines	Kalibr cruise missiles	Black Sea	IHS Janes Defense & Security Intelligence Analysis <sup>29</sup>	May 2016
Kirov-class battlecruiser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Granit anti-ship missiles</li> <li>• S-300FM</li> <li>• Tor missile system</li> </ul>	Mediterranean (NOW NORTHERN FLEET)	Naval Technology <sup>30</sup>	January 2017
Slava-class battlecruiser	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulkan anti-ship missiles</li> <li>• S-300F</li> </ul>	Unknown	YouTube: New Weapons Channel <sup>31</sup>	January 2017
Bastion-P coastal missile defense system		Latakia	IHS Janes <sup>32</sup>	November 2016
Admiral Grigorovich-class frigate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kalibr cruise missiles</li> <li>• Shtil-1 surface-to-air missile system</li> <li>• AS Ka-27-type helicopters</li> <li>• Bastion-P coastal missile defense system</li> </ul>	Mediterranean	TASS <sup>33</sup> ; TASS <sup>34</sup> ; TASS <sup>35</sup> ; RIA <sup>36</sup> ; TASS <sup>37</sup> ; Kremlin <sup>38</sup>	March 2017
Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Su-33</li> <li>• Mig-29K/KUB</li> <li>• Ka-52 attack helicopters</li> </ul>	Mediterranean <small>(SATELLITE IMAGERY SUGGESTS THAT ITS AIRCRAFT WERE MOVED TO LATAKIA AIRBASE)</small>	The Guardian <sup>39</sup> ; Sputnik <sup>40</sup> ; UPI <sup>41</sup> ; Russian Ministry of Defense <sup>42</sup> ; Pravda <sup>43</sup> ; IHS Janes <sup>44</sup>	June 2016

APPENDIX III: Ballistic Missiles

Ballistic Missile System	Location	Notes	Source	Last Date Observed
SS-26 "Iskander"	Latakia	Russia used Iskander against opposition-held terrain in Idlib Province in February 2017.	IHS Janes <sup>45</sup> ; FOX News <sup>46</sup>	February 2017
SS-21 "Scarab"	Tartous	Russia fired Scarab missiles against opposition-held terrain in Idlib Province in February 2017.	FOX News <sup>47</sup>	February 2017

## APPENDIX IV: Russian Personnel

Russian Personnel	Estimated Number of Personnel Active in Syria	Location	Source	Last Date Observed
Total Russian Military Personnel	Estimates range from 1,500 - 4,000		The Washington Institute <sup>48</sup> ; Global Affairs <sup>49</sup> ; Reuters <sup>50</sup> ; The Moscow Times <sup>51</sup>	
Foreign Military Intelligence Agency (GRU) officers	Approx. 60	Latakia	Fondusk <sup>52</sup>	March 2016
OSM/Wagner private military contractor personnel	Approx. 100	Latakia, Homs, & Aleppo Provinces	The Wall Street Journal <sup>53</sup> ; The Interpreter <sup>54</sup> ; Reuters <sup>55</sup> ; The Interpreter <sup>56</sup>	March 2016
Special Operations Command (KSO)	500-1000 total, unclear how many are currently in Syria	Latakia, Aleppo, & Homs Provinces	The Washington Post <sup>57</sup> ; The Wall Street Journal <sup>58</sup>	December 2016
Spetsnaz (ZASLON, NAVAL SPETSNAZ, GRU UNITS)	Unknown	Latakia, Aleppo, & Homs Provinces	The Washington Free Beacon <sup>59</sup> ; War on the Rocks <sup>60</sup>	March 2016
Russian mine experts	Approx. 200	Aleppo City & Palmyra, Homs Province	All4Syria <sup>61</sup> ; All4Syria <sup>62</sup> ; Al Masdar <sup>63</sup>	March 2017
Military Police	"Several hundred" including Chechen Zapad and Vostok battalions	Aleppo City & Damascus	All4Syria <sup>64</sup> ; Zaman Al Wasl <sup>65</sup> ; YouTube <sup>66</sup> ; Zaman Al Wasl <sup>67</sup> ; Wall Street Journal <sup>68</sup> ; SNN <sup>69</sup> ; El Dorar <sup>70</sup> ; SNN <sup>71</sup>	February 2017

## APPENDIX V: Air Assets

Fixed Wing Aircraft	Description	Location (BASED FROM)	Source	Last Date Observed
Su-24 M "Fencer"	Strike aircraft	Latakia	IHS Janes Defense & Security Intelligence Analysis <sup>72</sup> ; Bellingcat <sup>73</sup>	January 2017
Su-25 "Frogfoot"	Short-range ground-attack aircraft used primarily for close ground support	Latakia	IHS Janes Defense & Security Intelligence Analysis <sup>74</sup> ; Bellingcat <sup>75</sup>	January 2017
Su-34 "Fullback"	Strike aircraft	Latakia	Reuters <sup>76</sup> ; Reuters <sup>77</sup> ; Bellingcat <sup>78</sup>	January 2017
Su-30SM "Flanker-C"	Air-superiority fighter/bomber	Latakia	Bellingcat <sup>79</sup>	January 2017
Su-35 "Flanker-E"	Air-superiority fighter/bomber	Latakia	Russian Ministry of Defense <sup>80</sup> ; All4Syria <sup>81</sup> ; Bellingcat <sup>82</sup>	January 2017
Tu-160 "Blackjack"	Long-range strategic bomber	Mozdok Airbase, Ossetia	The Aviationist <sup>83</sup> ; Russian Ministry of Defense <sup>84</sup>	November 2015
Tu-95MS "Bear"	Long-range strategic bomber	Mozdok Airbase, Ossetia; Engels Airbase, Saratov Oblast	The Aviationist <sup>85</sup> ; Russian Ministry of Defense <sup>86</sup> ; Reuters <sup>87</sup> ; FOX News <sup>88</sup> ; Russian Ministry of Defense <sup>89</sup>	February 2017
Tu-22M3 "Backfire"	Long-range strategic bomber	Mozdok Airbase, Ossetia	The Aviationist <sup>90</sup> ; Russian Ministry of Defense <sup>91</sup> ; Russian Ministry of Defense <sup>92</sup> ; The Aviationist <sup>93</sup>	February 2017
Tu-142M "Bear F"	Reconnaissance aircraft	Unknown	The Aviationist <sup>94</sup> ; YouTube <sup>95</sup>	June 2016
A-50E "Mainstay"	Airborne early-warning and control	Unknown	The Washington Post <sup>96</sup> ; Russian Gazette <sup>97</sup>	January 2016
Ilyushin Il-76	Transport plane	Unknown	Reuters <sup>98</sup> ; Russian Ministry of Defense <sup>99</sup>	October 2016 <sup>100</sup>
An-124 "Condor"	Transport plane	Unknown	The Aviationist <sup>101</sup> ; Reuters <sup>102</sup>	October 2016 <sup>103</sup>

Rotary Wing Aircraft	Description	Location (BASED FROM)	Source	Last Date Observed
Mi-35 "Hind-E"	Attack helicopter	Bassel al Assad Airport, Latakia & Shayrat Airbase, Homs Province	Zaman al Wasl <sup>104</sup>	April 2016
Mi-24 "Hind"	Attack helicopter	Bassel al Assad Airport, Latakia, T4 Airbase, Homs Province, & Shayrat Airbase, Homs Province	Stratfor <sup>105</sup> ; Zaman al Wasl <sup>106</sup> ; All4Syria <sup>107</sup>	September 2016
Mi-28 "Havoc"	Attack helicopter	Bassel al Assad, Latakia, T4 Airbase, Homs Province, Shayrat Airbase, Homs Province, & Hama Military Airport <sup>108</sup>	Zaman al Wasl <sup>109</sup> ; IHS Janes <sup>110</sup> ; Orient News <sup>111</sup>	September 2016
Mi-8 "Hip"	Transport helicopter	Bassel al Assad, Latakia, Shayrat Airbase, Homs Province, & T4 Airbase, Homs Province	The New York Times <sup>112</sup> ; IHS Janes <sup>113</sup> ; Orient News <sup>114</sup>	August 2016
Ka-52 "Hokum-B"	Attack helicopter	Bassel al Assad, Latakia; Shayrat Airbase, Homs Province	The Aviationist <sup>115</sup> ; Pravda <sup>116</sup> ; IHS Janes <sup>117</sup>	July 2016

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