



Russia, Syria, and the Crossroads of Strategic Development

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Executive Summary

Summer 2015 saw the Obama Administration launching a global media campaign warning about the Russian presence and military build-up along the Mediterranean shores of Syria. Although the Washington-guided Western media only recently discovered the Russian military activities in Syria, especially the Tartus and Latakia areas along the shores of the Mediterranean – there is little new in these activities. The current Russian military presence in and around Syria goes back to early 2012.

For Putin, the crucial struggle is not over the fate of Bashar al-Assad. Rather, the struggle is for the fate of the greater Middle East as the key to the fate of both the Muslim World and the industrialized world. While this struggle will be long and arduous, there is a crucial milestone ahead: the fate of the Minorities of the Levant – Alawites, Maronites, Druze, and Jews. If these minorities are overwhelmed and vanquished by the Jihadists – there will be no stopping of the fall of Islam’s holy shrines, and no stopping of the Jihadist massive Hijra (migration) into Europe, including Russia. Putin is therefore determined to prevent this horrific scenario by containing and defeating the Jihadist ascent at their heartlands in al-Jazira with the help of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. The Russian military build-up in Syria is for this reason.

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Analysis

Russia has responded strenuously and unambiguously to the US, Turkish, Qatari, and Saudi provocations which began, and sustain, the war — and the Islamic Caliphate — in Syria. What happened that the US led its allies into supporting the al-Qaida-linked jihadist and terrorist groups, while Russia emerged as the champion of the anti-jihad camp? What is Russia really doing in Syria and the eastern Mediterranean?

Summer 2015 saw the US Barack Obama Administration launching a global media campaign warning about the dangers posed by the Russian presence and military build-up along the Mediterranean shores of Syria.

The White House was most worried about the presence of seven T-90 tanks, 15 howitzers, 35 armored personnel carriers, and about 200 Russian marines in a Latakia area air base, as well as the construction of prefab housing for some 1,500 personnel.

In contrast, the larger Russian military presence in Iraq in support of the Haider al-Abadi Administration (which the US also supports with more than 3,000 troops in advisory capacity) does not, apparently, in the eyes of the Obama White House, constitute a threat to the region and the world.

The Obama White House portrayed the Russian build-up in Syria as a major threat to world peace and stability even though the concurrent US-led NATO build-up in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Romania, and Bulgaria — that is, right on the Russian border — was significantly larger. In late June 2015, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg announced that NATO had already increased the size of the NATO Response Force in the area from 4,000 to 13,000, and that NATO decided to soon increase this force to a total of 40,000 troops.

Stoltenberg also announced that NATO was building six new command centers in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria which would “facilitate strategic planning, military exercises and the deployment of the newly formed 5,000-strong Very High Readiness Joint Task Force”. The new force “will be tasked with mobilizing against Russia within days, once it is called upon to do so”. US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced that the US intended to position “hundreds of American tanks, military vehicles and heavy artillery pieces” in these six states as part of the NATO build-up.

The US was also building a wide network of roads, bases and other military infrastructure in the six states in order to support the forthcoming NATO build-up. In mid-June 2015, a US Air Force B-52 long-range bomber conducted a simulated air strike in Adazi, Latvia, less than 200 miles from the Russian border, as part of a “routine exercise”. Unlike the Russian build-up in Syria, this NATO build-up should be of no concern, for, apparently, it threatened nobody.

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There was, however, little new in these Russian military activities in Syria, although the Washington-guided Western media only recently discovered them, especially those activities occurring in the Tartus and Latakia areas, along the shores of the Mediterranean.

The current Russian military presence in and around Syria dates back to early 2012. The Kremlin gradually realized that the struggle for Syria and the entire Middle East was going to be long and challenging. In early February 2012, then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev dispatched Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to



Damascus, along with the Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, Mikhail Fradkov, in order to assess the situation in the country and the prospects of the Bashar al-Assad Administration.

On February 7, 2012, the two held a long and hard conversation with Assad and “discussed in detail the situation in and around Syria”. In Medvedev’s name, they formally informed Assad that “Russia reaffirmed its intention to promote peaceful settlement of the Syrian crisis by Syrians themselves without foreign intervention and with full respect of Syria’s independence”. The Kremlin believed, they told Assad, in “the need to immediately stop violence, regardless of where it may come from, to start an inclusive nation-wide dialogue as early as possible and to implement the long overdue democratic reforms”.

Pres. Assad committed to closely following the advice and ideas of the Kremlin. Lavrov and Fradkov also met with all of Syria’s defense and intelligence senior officials. Back in Moscow, they assured Medvedev that Assad’s Damascus was stable and ready to cooperate.

The Kremlin was prompted into action by the concurrent increase in the US-led sponsorship of the *jihadi* forces. Turkey and Qatar had already sponsored the initial organization of Syrian and foreign (initially mainly Libyan and Iraqi) *jihadi* forces in the Autumn of 2011. In April 2012, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) formally adopted Qatar’s then 2,500-strong *jihadi* Foreign Legion as a key player in the Syrian insurrection and had Turkish Intelligence provide it with facilities in a converted garrison in Antakya. In the coming months, the United States, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia upgraded the overall military and political capabilities of the Syrian *jihadi* opposition. In July 2012, Turkish Intelligence established a secret facility in Adana, about 60 miles from the Syrian border and adjacent to the US-NATO airbase in Incirlik, to serve as a “nerve center” for the joint effort “to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad”. While the CIA was formally not a part of the Adana “nerve center”, Incirlik-based US officials were present in the Adana facility, and, in effect, guided the Turkish and Qatari senior intelligence officials running it.

Both Ankara and Doha were expecting the US involvement to markedly increase in lieu of the enhanced mandate and latitude the US Intelligence Community had just received from the Finding signed by Pres. Barack Obama.

Russian Navy operations started slowly in the Spring of 2012.

The primary mission of the Black Sea Fleet was to sustain military supplies to the Syrian Armed Forces, as well as food, water, and fuel for the Russian naval maintenance and repair base in the port of Tartus. In April and May, the *Smetlivy* (a *Kashin*-class guided missile destroyer) led a two-three combatant contingent patrolling off the coast of Syria. Under their protection, two landing craft — the *Nikolai Filchenkov* and *Tsezar Kunikov* — and two-three Navy cargo ships made repeated delivery runs between Novorossiysk and Tartus. As fighting escalated in May 2012, the *Smetlivy* delivered a small force of about 30 to 40 Marines-*Spetsnaz* to Tartus. They stayed for a short while, working on the security of the Russian facilities. As well, all Russian naval vessels sailing to Syria started carrying a self-protection force of between 20 and 40 Marines each.

Meanwhile, the numbers of Russian military personnel in Syria kept rising.

A group of area experts and intelligence operatives arrived in order to provide real-time analysis to the Kremlin and expert advice to the Syrian leaders. They were provided with security details of SVR (*Sluzhba vneshechny razvedki*: Foreign Intelligence Service) *Spetsnaz* from Directorate S.



Russian military experts and technicians were taking over handling the supplies and the maintenance of the newly-arrived weapon systems. A growing number of military advisers and intelligence experts assisted the Syrian Armed Forces to transform from heavy forces optimized for fighting Israel and Turkey to a decentralized, flexible force, optimized for fighting irregular warfare. More and more Russian technical experts were required to keep the weapons functioning, and growing numbers of trainers were required for the new weapon systems delivered. The numbers of Russian military personnel kept growing but all Russians were ordered to remain in secure rear bases and were forbidden to get close to the battlefield.

In May-June 2012, the Kremlin also began contemplating the dispatch of major military and irregular units to Syria ostensibly for exercises with the Syrian Armed Forces, but ultimately as the core of an international peacekeeping force that would ensure Russia's own interests and also be friendly to the Assad administration. The force the Kremlin was considering might reach 5,000 troops.

Officially, the Russian force would come under the joint headquarters of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), as well as regional Anti-Terrorist Structure of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Around June 1, 2012, CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha was formally instructed to prepare for the possibility of the CSTO's participation in a peacekeeping force for resolving the crisis in Syria. The Kremlin also ordered an intensive training program for the Airborne Troops, GRU (*Glavnoye razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye*: Main Intelligence Director of the General Staff of the Armed Forces) *Spetsnaz* (including semi-regular elements), and light units of the Army and the Navy's Naval Infantry (Marines).

In the first week of June 2012, the Kremlin formalized the composition of the intervention force in Syria and instructed all assigned units to begin preparations for a possible deployment to Syria. Col.-Gen. Vladimir Shamanov, the Commander-in-Chief of the Airborne Troops, was and still is the force commander. This force structure is also still valid.

The key units assigned to the Syria intervention force include the 76th Air Assault Division in Pskov, the 15th Combined Arms Brigade in Samara, the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Black Sea Fleet, the 336th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Baltic Sea Fleet, and an assortment of GRU, VDV and MP *Spetsnaz* units. Most important were the GRU's *Spetsnaz* units comprised of Chechen veterans of the "West" and "East" battalions. Back in 2006-2007, they had already carried out "peacekeeping missions" in Lebanon which amounted to a relentless and very successful hunting down of Caucasus-based *jihadist* terrorists.

By now, the Kremlin was increasingly apprehensive about the specter of a Libya-style US-led NATO intervention in Syria. In early July 2012, the Kremlin ordered a major Russian Navy operation which would serve as a clear show of force at a strategic level. Russia would demonstrate the ability to coordinate the move of naval combatants from three Fleets — the North Sea, the Baltic and the Black Sea — into the eastern Mediterranean. The Navy task force was (1) to show the Russian flag prominently in the eastern Mediterranean; and (2) exercise both autonomously and with the Syrian military the establishment of an anti-aircraft and anti-shiping barrier against a possible US/NATO attack on Syria. The Kremlin wanted to demonstrate to, and convince, the US and NATO that Russia was adamant on shielding Syria against Western intervention.

"Libya will not be repeated," was an assertion made by virtually all Russian senior officials involved.

Formally, the Russian Navy deployment was "not linked to the escalation of the situation in Syria." The deployment in the Mediterranean was expected to last at least until the end of September 2012 and include port visits to Syria, though. "The program of the voyage includes a call in the Syrian port of Tartus," a Navy



senior officer acknowledged. “In Tartus the ships are going to top up on supplies of fuel, water and food-stuffs.”

The first contingent came from the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol. It was led by the destroyer *Smetlivy*, a veteran of operations the coast of Syria. The Black Sea Fleet contingent included another combatant, two landing craft with experience in Syria — the *Nikolai Filchenkov* and *Tsezar Kunikov* — and two or three Navy cargo ships. All naval vessels carried Naval Infantry detachments for self-protection. According to a Navy officer, the cargo ships were carrying food, water and fuel for the Russian naval maintenance and repair base in Tartus.

The key element of the task force came from the North Sea Fleet. This contingent was led by the Adm. Chabanenko (a *Udaloy II*-class anti-submarine destroyer), and included the *Alexander Otrakovsky*, *Georgy Pobedonosets* and *Kondopoga* large amphibious assault ships, as well as the *Nikolai Chiker* and *Sergei Osipov* support vessels. All of them left their home port of Severomorsk loaded with weapons and supplies for the Syrian Armed Forces. The assault ships also carried Naval Infantry units for training exercises on the Syrian coast, as well as spare parts and supplies for the Tartus base.

In the north Atlantic, the contingent led by the *Admiral Chabanenko* was joined by “a group of Baltic Fleet ships” led by the *Yaroslav Mudryy* (a *Neustrashimy*-class multi-purpose frigate), the tanker *Lena*, as well as additional combatants and a support vessel. The Baltic Sea Fleet contingent joined the North Sea Fleet contingent and formed a single task force which sailed together into the Mediterranean and Tartus.

Off the Syrian coast, they were joined by the Black Sea Fleet contingent then already in place. The combatants from the Black Sea and Baltic Sea Fleets included anti-aircraft vessels: another signal to Washington.

In early Winter 2012, the Kremlin was shaken again by the unpredictability of the situation in Syria.

Warning signs were everywhere to be seen.

There was a marked escalation in the fighting country wide as larger numbers of *ihadists* kept crossing from Turkey with better weapons and large quantities of both weapons and funds in order to recruit local fighters. The Turkish Armed Forces escalated their provocations and cross-border fighting along the Turkish-Syrian border, leading to growing fears of Turkish military intervention aimed to topple the Bashar al-Assad Administration. In late November 2012, US-sponsored *ihadists* trained and equipped in northern Jordan made their way to the Damascus area. The Syrian defenders caught by surprise and fierce fighting erupted near the Damascus International Airport and the nearby Russian facilities.

As well, since early December 2012, *ihadist* pressure was growing around the main strategic facilities in north-western Syria. On December 22, 2012, Russian military experts working in the Chemical Weapons arsenal in al-Saphira, north-western Syria, had to fight their way out, carrying the chemical weapons they were evacuating. Under Russian supervision, the Syrian Government consolidated its chemical weapons into a couple of locations. However, the Russian experts remained unsettled about long-term prospects given the incessant *ihadist* onslaughts on Syria’s strategic facilities.

Starting late-December 2012 and into early January 2013, the Russians maintained teams of the military, intelligence, and Ministry of Emergencies in the airports of Damascus and Aleppo. They were handling the Russian transport aircraft bringing both military and humanitarian supplies. However, they were also prepared and equipped to handle an airlift for the evacuation of Russian and former-Soviet Union citizens. There was a



smaller Russian team in the Latakia airport dedicated to the need to evacuate Russian and former-Soviet Union citizens. There are about 20,000 Russian citizens and an unknown number of former-Soviet Union citizens (including at least 5,000 Belorussians and Ukrainians) in Syria.

Meanwhile, there was growing apprehension in Moscow about the stability and survivability of the Assad Administration.

By mid-December 2012, the Kremlin faced for the first time the question of whether Damascus would fall. Russian experts opined that the Assad Administration should be sustained in power if humanly possible. The Kremlin also sought the advice of official Jerusalem. The Israeli team under Maj.-Gen. (Res.) Amos Gilad, the Director of Political-Military Affairs at the Ministry of Defense, concurred with their Russian counterparts. "Suppose he [Assad] does leave, there could be chaos," Gilad opined. "In the Middle East you never know who will come instead. We need to stay level-headed; the entire world is dealing with this. At the moment, the chemical weapons are under control."

Just before Christmas 2012, there were irregular Russian military and intelligence activities in the Moscow area in the relation to Syria. These activities suggested that the Kremlin was considering military intervention in Syria. The major unknown was whether the Kremlin aimed to prop-up a government in Damascus which would not be *Ikhwani*-Islamist (which the Kremlin correctly considered to be US-dominated) and with which Moscow could live, or that the Kremlin just prepared to thoroughly clean-up Damascus of all vestiges of sensitive Soviet and Russian activities (the way Moscow cleaned Baghdad in Spring 2003 before the arrival of the US forces).

The first indication of something irregular came when Airborne units, Special Forces units, and transport aircraft in the Caucasus, Pskov, Samara, and the Moscow area were put on a high state of readiness. The units were told to prepare for combat deployment to Syria. The units mobilized were these earmarked back in June 2012 for intervention in Syria. Then, a special combined force of the SVR was organized in the Moscow area under the direct command of SVR Chief Mikhail Yefimovich Fradkov who answered directly to Pres. Vladimir Putin. The force included at least a *Spetsnaz* battalion (from Directorate S) and the *Zaslou* (Screen) unit responsible for "clean-up" of foreign countries of sensitive Russian and Soviet materials (from intelligence systems to archival material to weapons).

In Spring 2003, *Zaslou* had done an exceptionally good and thorough job in Baghdad, as well as clashing with US Special Forces while evacuating to Syria. Specialized military equipment and vehicles as well as a Naval Infantry *Spetsnaz* unit for their protection left Novorossiysk for Tartus (more below).

By the first of the new year, 2013, the Syrian Armed Forces went on the offensive in several locations using new Iranian weapons, including long-range rockets. Within a few days, they were able to push the *jihadist* forces away from key facilities. In both public and private, Bashar al-Assad projected calm and confidence. Official Ankara assured Moscow that no intervention in Syria would be launched from Turkish territory. The Kremlin attributed Ankara's initiative to the naval presence off the Syrian coast. "The presence of the Russian Marines near the Syrian waters will deter the West from deploying ground forces in Syria," explained a Russian senior official. In the Kremlin, calm and confidence in Assad were restored in the first days of January 2013.

A thorough security study by Russian Intelligence concluded that if properly propped up, the Assad Administration could hold onto power for the foreseeable future.

The focus was back on ongoing naval operations.



By their inherent character, naval operations have their own momentum and pace, and are thus more resilient to sudden changes.

In the Fall of 2012, the Kremlin had resolved to sustain a permanent Mediterranean Sea task force of 10 warships. The operation was entrusted to the Russian Black Sea Fleet, but the key combatants came from all Fleets. “Since the end of 2012, an average of 10 ships and auxiliary vessels from the Black Sea, Baltic and Northern Fleets are permanently in the Mediterranean Sea, but the command of the permanently deployed Navy in this region is carried by the Black Sea Fleet and the burden of performing the tasks of this group lies mainly on this Fleet’s warships and auxiliary vessels,” Adm. Aleksander Vitko, the Black Sea Fleet’s commander, explained in late July 2015.

The Black Sea Fleet established a dedicated command which was in control of all naval forces in the Mediterranean irrespective of their Fleet of origin.

In early December 2012, the Mediterranean task force was still in organizational phase. Until December 10, the task force was led by the amphibious landing ships *Novocherkassk* and *Saratov* of the Black Sea Fleet. Both ships unloaded a lot of military equipment in the port of Tartus on December 5, 2012, before heading back to sea. Significantly, the *Novocherkassk* delivered *Iskander* ballistic missile systems and other strategic weapons. Both landing ships returned to Novorossiysk on December 10, 2012. A Black Sea Fleet task force comprised of the missile cruiser *Moskva*, the patrol ship *Smetlivy*, the ocean tanker *Ivan Bubnov* and the sea tugboat MB-304 remained on standby in the Aegean Sea until further notice from the General Staff. The *Novocherkassk* and *Saratov* were expected to return to the eastern Mediterranean after loading “specialized equipment”: heavy weapons for the Syrian military.

By mid-December 2012, there was no naval task force off the Syrian coast from the Black Sea Fleet.

With tension mounting, the Kremlin on December 18, 2012, ordered Russian Navy reinforcements to be rushed to the Syrian coast from the North Sea and Baltic Sea Fleets. The Kremlin insisted that the Fleet was preparing to evacuate civilians. The joint task force of the North Sea and Baltic Sea Fleets was led by two large amphibious assault ships — the *Alexander Shabalin* and *Kaliningrad* — and included the patrol ship *Yaroslav Mudryy*, the tugboat SB-921 and the tanker *Lena*. Additional combatants from the North Sea Fleet were expected to join this task force when ready for sea duty. Both the *Alexander Shabalin* and the *Kaliningrad* were carrying heavy military equipment and supplies for the Syrian military. Initially, this task force would reinforce the *Moskva*-led task force of the Black Sea Fleet in order to create major naval presence.

Concurrently, the Kremlin ordered the deployment of the *Severomorsk*-led (an *Udaloy*-class destroyer) task force from the Pacific Fleet to the Gulf of Aden and Sea of Oman. This deployment reflected the growing apprehension in the Kremlin that any development in the Syrian crisis might quickly escalate into a war with Iran. The *Severomorsk*-led task force also included vessels from the North Sea Fleet. The *Severomorsk* itself was a North Sea Fleet asset and was last seen in the Barents Sea. The Kremlin was adamant on being present at the eye of the storm.

On December 24, 2012, the two large landing ships of the Black Sea Fleet — the *Azov* and *Nikolai Filchenkov* — suddenly left the Novorossiysk port on their way to Tartus, Syria. Russian officials claimed that the two ships were carrying “detachments of Naval Infantry and several pieces of military hardware”, the latter being military equipment for the Syrian army. The *Azov* and *Nikolai Filchenkov* were mainly carrying specialized military and intelligence equipment and vehicles that might be required for the evacuation of Damascus, as



well as a *Spetsnaz* Naval Infantry unit for their protection. They were escorted by combatants and technical support vessels. On December 28, 2012, the group linked up with the Black Sea Fleet task force comprised of the missile cruiser *Moskva* and the frigate *Smetlivy* which had been loitering in the Aegean Sea. They all headed to Tartus as a single task force.

On December 28, 2012, Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov stated that Russia would continue to honor contracts on military supplies to Syria. "Russia has always been a reliable partner in fulfilling its obligations under contracts. We were fulfilling, we are fulfilling and we will fulfil our obligations in this field," he said. "As for Syria, no decisions have been adopted that would limit our arms supplies to that country." Antonov stressed: "Russia does not supply offensive weapons to Syria."

On December 30, 2012, the large landing ship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet — the *Novocherkassk* — suddenly left Novorossiysk on its way to Tartus. According to the Russian General Staff, the *Novocherkassk* was carrying "Naval Infantry and several units of military hardware" destined for Tartus. This was a highly irregular move because the *Novocherkassk* was sent to Tartus in early December and had just returned to the Novorossiysk naval base. It was supposed to stay in base for at least a month. Moreover, the other two large landing ships of the Black Sea Fleet — the *Azov* and the *Nikolai Filchenkov* — sailed into the Aegean Sea on December 28, 2012, and joined the Task Force heading for the Syrian coast.

Hence, the sudden dispatch of the *Novocherkassk* to Tartus was an emergency undertaking at a time the Kremlin was less apprehensive about Assad's immediate survival. Indeed, the *Novocherkassk* carried mainly strategic weapons and munitions for the Syrian military in order to sustain the impending offensive and heightened war effort.

In early January 2013, the Kremlin decided to transform the emergency naval deployment into an unprecedented show of force in the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea. Several Naval combatants from all four Fleets would hold "combined exercises" in late January. "The Russian Navy's drills of this scope will be held for the first time over the past few decades and are designed to improve control, ensure and practice multi-service force interaction of the fleets in the far-off maritime zones," the Defense Ministry announced. The objective of the exercise would be to "practice the issues of establishing a multi-service grouping of forces outside Russia" and to help personnel acquire skills needed for "combat training missions in the Black and Mediterranean seas". The exercise would also include operational loading of Naval Infantry and Airborne troops onto amphibious ships from the "rough coast of the North Caucasus" for a quick deployment to Syria.

By January 21, 2013, numerous combatants and auxiliaries from the Northern Fleet base near Murmansk, the Baltic Fleet base in Kaliningrad, the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol, and the Pacific Fleet base in Vladivostok converged on the eastern Mediterranean. The 10-day exercise was the largest naval exercise since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

At least eight major warships led the maneuvers. Also participating were numerous assault-landing and support craft, submarines and long-range aircraft. Some of the scenarios exercised were Syria-optimized. The *Novocherkassk* led a group of landing ships in accessing hostile coast in order to evacuate Russian citizens still in Syria. The *Kaliningrad* led a group of ships which exercised breaking a naval blockade on Syria. The *Nikolai Filchenko*, *Azov*, and *Aleksander Shabalin* exercised providing support for operations inside Syria. The combat elements of the entire flotilla exercised establishing air defense barriers, as well anti-ship and anti-submarine warfare against notional major fleets.



Meanwhile, Russian experts continued to study the emerging trends in Syria and the entire Middle East in order to develop long term strategy. Their findings, presented in late April 2013, still guide the Kremlin's overall strategy and policy. The Russian experts who interact with the upper-most leaders in Damascus concluded that the day-to-day fighting does not constitute the primary yardstick for determining the state of the Assad Administration. The main indicator is the posture of key segments of the population.

Most important was that the minorities — Alawites, Druze, Orthodox Christians, Armenians, Aramaics and Shi'ite Arabs — were all siding with Assad's Damascus and were formulating their communal long-term plans on the assumption that Assad was going to win the war. This reinvigorated confidence was manifesting itself in the resilience of society and the military, as well as in the military's assertiveness. Moreover, key elements of Sunni Arab economic élites were also increasingly committing to the Assad camp. The only minority which was not part of this dynamics were the Kurds because they remained fixated on the consolidating of their Kurdish State which had effectively seceded from both Iraq and Syria.

The other key conclusion was that the "neutral majority" — the tribal, rural and urban clan Sunni Arabs — had given up on the ability of the Islamist-*jihadi* forces to topple the Assad Government. Hence, this tormented, yet silent majority was adamant on not antagonizing both the Syrian military and security forces, as well as the increasingly violent *jihadi* forces. The majority of Sunni Arabs were inclined to make localized expedient live-and-let-live deals with those capable of harming them, be they the *jihadi* forces or the government forces. Having been abused by the *jihadists*, tribal elements were even ready to pick up arms against *jihadi* forces encroaching into their native zones. With this development, Damascus might no longer fear that the Islamist-*jihadi* insurrection transform into a genuine popular revolt.

The long-term goal of Assad's Damascus, the Russian experts concluded, should therefore be the sustenance of the *status quo* until it was possible to defeat the Sunni *jihadists*. Given the immense and growing support the *jihadists* were receiving from the US and its allies (Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, etc.), and given the complete integration of the Sunni *jihadi* wars in Syria and Iraq, the war in Syria could only be won in a regional context.

Hence, Russia began to examine and focus on long-term regional dynamics involving potential allies, such as the rôles of Israel and Egypt, and mega-trends such as the evolving energy architecture and the future of the Maghreb in view of the *jihadi* chaos spreading from Libya to Tunisia and Algeria (aggravated by the Bouflicka succession crisis).

These conclusions caused the Kremlin to re-examine the most basic concepts of how to secure and sustain, let alone further, Russia's vital security and economic interests.

The key to the Russian strategy was to shield the entire region and isolate it to the best possible way from regional forces and US-led intervention. The ultimate long-term objective was to empower grassroots-supported forces over a new regional, post-state tapestry while crushing the *jihadi* scourge. In practical terms, the Kremlin committed to the two-tier isolation of the *jihadi* cauldron in al-Jazira (the Sunni heartlands of Syria, Iraq and central Saudi Arabia) before it would be possible to replace the *jihadists* with indigenous entities.

The internal tier would be the historic buffer and stabilizing force: the Fertile Crescent of Minorities stretching from the Persian Gulf, along the Iranian and Turkish borders, to the shores of the Mediterranean, and all the way to the Gulf of Aqaba. Initially, the Kremlin assessed that the external tier would largely be in the southern



and eastern spaces of the Mediterranean, and would be determined by Russia's naval and military presence on a regional scale.

The Kremlin experts warned that the rising *jihadist* forces could not be defeated until the US-led sponsorship via Turkey (and increasingly Iran) was brought to an end. On their own, Ankara's neo-Ottoman aspirations and Tehran's Mahdist aspirations were providing incentive to intervene in, and exacerbate, the multi-faceted fratricidal carnage engulfing the entire Middle East. Still, neither Turkey nor Iran was immune to regional pressure.

In the face of all this, the US commitments to Turkey (a NATO member state) and Iran (on the coattails of the nuclear agreement) profoundly changed their strategic behavior. Both adopted audacious and risky strategies, protected by the specter of US-led NATO intervention in support of their *jihadist*-based interests.

This meant that the Kremlin had to rethink Syria in the context of a regional theater stretching from the western Mediterranean, the greater Middle East, and the greater Black Sea Basin, and even (in Sunni *jihadist* and Iranian contexts) the greater Central Asia.

In addition to major security and *jihadism* challenges, these regions also contained major economic and energy resources Russia could not ignore. The US and French rush to bomb Syria in August 2013, ostensibly in response for the sarin attack provocation but in reality as a precursor to toppling the Assad Administration, convinced the Kremlin they had been right all along. That the air strikes were averted at the last moment by diplomatic maneuvers gave no guarantee that a new provocation would not elicit US-led NATO intervention.

Therefore, starting in Autumn 2013, the Kremlin ordered an increase in naval deployments and military support in the eastern Mediterranean basin and the Levant. The build-up of naval forces would be on a permanent basis and focus on consolidating anti-US/anti-NATO naval capabilities. "Russia will be building up its Mediterranean fleet until it is deemed sufficient to perform the task set," explained Admiral of the Fleet Viktor Chirkov.

While the size of the task force would remain the same — about a dozen combatants — their quality would improve markedly. Starting in Autumn 2013 and into early 2014, the Russians deployed to the eastern Mediterranean the *Moskva* (an *Atlant*-class guided missile cruiser), the *Varyag* (a *Slava*-class guided missile cruiser known as "aircraft carrier killer"), and the *Pyotr Veliky* (a *Kirov*-class battlecruiser). Finally, the *Novorossiysk* — the first new *Varshavyanka*-class diesel-electric stealth submarine — was delivered to the Black Sea Fleet in January 2014.

In early 2014, Russia initiated, sponsored and participated in several international initiatives to mediate and negotiate end to the Syrian fratricidal fighting. All of these efforts failed to take off because of unreasonable and excessive demands by the representatives of "the Syrian opposition" (who lack any legitimacy on the ground in Syria) on the basis of false hopes promised by the US and its allies. As Arab media emphasized the failure of all these efforts, *jihadist* forces escalated the fighting inside Syria. Consequently, in February 2014, the Russians increased the flow of weapons and other military supplies to Syria. Numerous technicians, trainers and experts arrived with the weapons. By early March, they were joined by several Russian military experts who arrived to help the Syrian military make the best use of the new weaponry and capabilities.

After the annexation of Crimea in mid-March 2014, the Kremlin determined not to compromise with the US-led West on all other issues as well. Russian leaders were apprehensive of a US effort to undermine Russian



interests worldwide as a revenge for the Kremlin success in Ukraine. The Kremlin was convinced that the Obama Administration would first concentrate on reversing Russia's gains and position in Syria and the Middle East. The appearance of US-made weapons — especially TOW ATGMs — in the hands of *jihadist* forces, including those formally affiliated with *al-Qaida*, was used by Moscow as a proof of Washington's commitment to escalating *jihadist* violence. Indeed, these weapons, including the TOWs, were provided to the *jihadists* by Saudi Arabian Intelligence with US foreknowledge and tacit approval.

Hence, Putin decided on assertive policy in pursuit of Russia's geo-strategic and geo-economic interests in the greater Middle East, starting with Syria. In late March 2014, Alexander Malevany, the Deputy Chief of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), articulated the Kremlin's new regional policy. In the aftermath of US-led actions related to Crimea and Ukraine, Malevany stated, "Moscow was taking offensive intelligence measures to counter Western efforts to weaken Russian influence in the region."

In this context, the highest echelons in the Kremlin, starting with Putin in person, reached out to Jerusalem in order to reassure Israel of the Russian intentions and actions. Russia was cognizant of the urgent imperative to address the growing fears in Israel of spill-overs of the war either because of the empowerment and emboldening of Iran-*HizbAllah* or of *jihadist* forces. Moscow also knew that Jerusalem was under incessant pressure from Obama's Washington to get actively involved in Syria and support the *jihadist* forces that the US was once again training in northern Jordan for a major assault on Damascus.

Jerusalem was extremely reluctant to abide by Washington's demands, and Moscow sought to further assuage Jerusalem.

In late April 2014, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov assured his Israeli counterpart, Avigdor Lieberman, of the Russian Doctrine as it applied to Israel. "If we are attacked, we would certainly respond. If our interests, our legitimate interests, the interests of Russians have been attacked directly ... I do not see any other way but to respond in accordance with international law," Lavrov explained. He further stressed that "Russian citizens being attacked is an attack against the Russian Federation." Israel has the largest community of Russian citizens outside the former Soviet Union. According to the Kremlin's calculations, more than a third of Israel's six-million-plus strong Jewish population were either Russian citizens or eligible for Russian citizenship.

Hence, the Kremlin's explicit commitment to the well-being of Russian citizens is of great significance.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin was focusing on the extent of the Islamic State/Caliphate threat to both Syria and Iraq, as well as the rest of the Muslim World. Russian experts warned the Kremlin that the emergence of the Khorasan Pledge and the revival of the Caliphate myth in Spring 2014 would transform the entire Sunni World and create a *takfiri jihadist* upsurge that would keep spreading on its own and would soon reach Russia's own restive Muslim communities. As a result, they argued, it was imperative to reverse the rise of the Islamic State/Caliphate by winning back the Sunni Arab grassroots and not just through military means.

The strategy formulated by the Kremlin required to first contain *takfiri jihadism* and isolate it from the rest of the Sunni world. This would be attained by a comprehensive approach based anew on the strengthening and sustenance of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. The Kremlin decided to adopt the strategy even though the evolving US-Iran clandestine relations were complicating the situation regarding the strategic posture on the Levant shores.



Russia remained committed to the 'Alawite-Druze-Maronite coalition as the key to the greater Syria while the US-sponsored Iran was committed to the Shi'ite *HizbAllah*. Because of the importance of the Mediterranean coastline, Syria, rather than Iraq, was the key to the Russian regional posture. In early April 2014, the Kremlin was convinced they could rely on the Assad Administration. "Russia's confidence in Assad's hold on power has increased as the conflict has evolved in his favor," noted Alexander Zotov, a former Russian Ambassador to Syria.

On the advice of Moscow, Damascus focused anew on the consolidation of hold over the western parts of Syria. The Syrian military would advance from these safe zones eastwards in order to contain the *jihadist* and Turkey-sponsored forces in north-western Syria and beyond. To enable the Syrian offensives, the Russians expanded their seairlift (mainly by Black Sea Fleet assets) and airlift (mainly by Ministry of Emergencies transport aircraft) of both military supplies and humanitarian aid continues unabated. Russian transports used the airports in Damascus, Latakia, and Aleppo (fighting permitting), while the Fleet used the ports of Tartus and Latakia.

The Russians provided through this "lifeline" large quantities of ammunition, and spare parts for T-72 tanks, BMP, and BTR armored vehicles, Mi-24 attack helicopters and other weapon systems. In February 2014, the Syrians received and started to use long-range *Smerch* and *Uragan* rockets. In early March 2014, the Syrian Air Force increased the use of MiG-29 fighters converted to ground-attack modes with a new generation of guided munitions. Between early March and late May 2014, there was a marked improvement in the performance and effectiveness of the Syrian Air Force as a whole. This was attributed to greater serviceability of aircraft and helicopters, improved accuracy of bombing, and larger number of sorties.

By mid-2014, the Russians supplied and started to operate for the Syrian military Yakovlev *Pchela*-1T tactical UAVs. These Russian UAVs have since markedly improved the tactical intelligence and targeting of the Syrian Armed Forces. All of these developments were the result of on-site Russian training, as well as on-site technical and maintenance support.

Meanwhile, the Russians launched in early Spring 2014 a myriad of intelligence and special operations against *jihadists* from the North Caucasus and Central Asia. Russian *Spetsnaz* detachments conducted relentless pursuits after wanted *jihadists* which resulted most of the times in the target killing of the Russians' prey. In the process, Russian Intelligence acquired voluminous knowledge of the real situation inside Syria and the grassroots undercurrents. These special operations also exposed the Russians first hand to the extent of the presence of Western intelligence and special forces in the ranks of the *jihadists*, the extent of their active support and weapons supplies to virtually all *jihadists* irrespective of their *al-Qaida* affiliation.

The Russians also noted the extent of the support by Turkish Intelligence for *jihadists* planning on returning to Russia (mainly the North Caucasus) and the greater Central Asia, as well as the tacit support of US intelligence for these undertakings.

In mid-June 2014, the Kremlin consented to requests from Iraq and Iran, as well as the Obama White House, to provide major military support for Iraq in order to prevent the fall of Baghdad to the rapidly advancing forces of the Islamic State. The Russians were asked to help address Iraq's endemic shortages of trained manpower, as well as help training of a new generation. The Russians established forward facilities, mainly in the Iraqi Air Force base al-Muthanna where there was a large US military and contractor presence.



In late-June 2014, the Russians delivered by heavy transport aircraft the first five Su-25 attack aircraft (out of a squadron of 12, the delivery of which would be completed within three to four months) and large quantities of sophisticated guided munitions. With the Su-25s also came a group of Russian technicians who worked around the clock to get all the aircraft operational within three to four days. Officially, Russia sent “trainers” to help the Iraqi pilots learn to use the new aircraft and munitions. “Their objective is to, first of all, assemble the supplied equipment and, secondly, to ensure that the aircraft flies properly. Our pilots will not be flying and taking part in military operations. This is forbidden,” Ilya Morgunov, the Russian Ambassador to Iraq, explained.

In reality, Russian combat pilots flew the majority of the combat sorties which stopped the *jihadi* advance. The rest of the sorties were flown by Iranian *Pasdaran* pilots who deployed five Su-25s of *Pasdaran* Combat Aviation. No Iraqi pilots took part for lack of proper training.

In the first week of July 2014, the Russians started the delivery by air of eight Mi-35M and the first six (out of a total of 32) Mi-28 attack helicopters, as well as large quantities of munitions. Again, the Russians deployed technicians and experts who assembled the helicopters and made them operational within days. Again, Russian “trainers” — both pilots and system operators — who were in Iraq only to check the operability of the helicopters before their handover and to train Iraqi pilots ended up flying combat sorties in support of both the Iraqi military (including US-trained and -mentored units) and Iran-controlled Shi’ite militias. As fighting evolved in late Summer and into Autumn 2014, the US military advisers developed a system of indirect communications via the Iraqi High Command so that they could in effect call upon Russian and Iranian pilots to provide close air support to Iraqi units in duress.

In the Summer of 2014, Russia intensified the strategic naval build-up with intention of both deterring the US/NATO from expanding their anti-Caliphate air operations to include anti-Assad operations, and further allying Israel’s fears of adverse ramifications of the growing Russian involvement.

The Kremlin’s primary instrument for raising the confidence in Jerusalem was encouraging and bolstering the Greece-Cyprus-Israel alliance with active Russian participation.

With the increase in NATO air operations — including flights from airbases in Romania and Bulgaria over the eastern Mediterranean, then Israel and Jordan, and into Syria, as well as from Cypriot airbases — the Kremlin’s apprehension about a possible expansion of the operations to include anti-Assad strikes grew. The Russian Fleet increased its air defense, intelligence and surveillance operations in the eastern Mediterranean. Moscow made clear that the base in Tartus was crucial for Russia’s overall strategic posture. The Russian Fleet was using the port facilities for refueling and maintenance for all ships in the Mediterranean. Without Tartus, the Russians explained, the Fleet in the Mediterranean would be dependent on Black Sea facilities, and thus beholden to NATO member Turkey for passage through the Bosphorus.

The strategic-political turning point took place on October 20-23, 2014. Slightly earlier, on October 16, key elements of the Northern Fleet and the Black Sea Fleet met in the central basin of the Aegean Sea and formed a joint task force under the *Vice-Admiral Kulakov* (an *Udaloy*-class anti-submarine destroyer) originally from the Northern Fleet. Another key member of the task force was the *Novocherkassk* that had just delivered military supplies to Syria. The task force started sailing toward the eastern Mediterranean exercising joint maneuvering and the organization of mutual communication, antisubmarine protection and air defense for the entire detachment of warships.



On October 20, 2014, the *Vice-Admiral Kulakov* and the *Novocherkassk* detached from the main group and linked up with a group of Cypriot and Israeli Navy vessels exercising jointly between Cyprus and Syria. For the next three days, the Russian, Israeli, and Cypriot navies conducted a joint naval exercise. First the three navies developed and formulated joint operational procedures. They then tested them in joint specialized operations including mutual air defense, repelling underwater attacks, and anti-submarine operations. Live fire operations included shooting rockets against notional land and maritime targets. The Israeli Air Force also participated both as the “target” for the air defense drills and in joint operations. The three-navy exercise concluded with a joint coastal operation led by the *Novocherkassk* in the western coasts of Cyprus. The naval group were joined there by Greek Navy vessels and continued to train together in the waters between Cyprus and Crete.

Starting late 2014 and well into 2015, the Syria crisis kept escalating as the great powers were being drawn into deeper involvement.

Putin and the Kremlin no longer believed a word Obama and the White House were saying. After the US’ blatant lies concerning Libya, Iran, and Syria, as well as the US provocations around Ukraine, it became impossible for the Kremlin to trust any message coming from Washington. Lavrov and Mikhail Bogdanov, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Special Envoy of the Russian President to the Middle East, were increasingly at a loss over the blatant US hypocrisy. In meetings and by telephone, Secretary of State John Kerry and other US senior officials were, at the same time, urging Russia to increase military supplies and support for the Iraqi fight against the Islamic State while criticizing and threatening Russia for supplying and supporting the Syrian fight against the very same Islamic State. Efforts by Lavrov to reason with Kerry would always yield the assertion that “Assad must go first”.

In the Autumn of 2014, as the US-led bombing of ostensibly *jihadist* targets in Syria continued, Moscow put pressure on Assad not to interfere with the air operations. Russian experts and advisers deployed with the Syrian Air Defense forces ensured that all air defense systems were turned off when US and allied aircraft were carrying out their raids. Syrian senior officials complained to Putin that giving the US free run over Syria amounted to “a violation of state sovereignty that smacks of shame”. However, Putin interceded with Assad to ensure that nobody threatened the US and allied aircraft.

The Obama White House was aware of the Russian efforts from both conversations with Russian senior officials and intercepts of Russian and Syrian communications. Around the first of 2015, US and European senior officials accused Russia of threatening their countries’ air operations over Syria by the mere presence of Russian officers and advisers in the Syrian facilities.

For the Kremlin, the message was that the US-led West would have long bombed the Syrian air defense facilities, even though they were shut off when US and allied forces were around, had Russians not been present there. Hence, in mid-January 2015, Putin let it be known that Russia was willing to supply strategic weapons including the latest long-range air defense and point air defense systems to Iran, Iraq and Syria. The stated objective of such supplies would be to deter or block US-led bombing against the Assad Administration and other allies of Russia. On a visit to Tehran, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu explained that “Iran and Russia had a shared analysis of US global strategy, its interference in regional and international affairs, and the need to cooperate in the struggle against the interference of foreign forces in the region”. The Kremlin was worried that the US-led bombing campaign against the Islamic State would soon expand into a Libya-style attempt at “regime change” in Damascus.



In Spring 2015, the Kremlin watched as US and Turkish intelligence, using lavish Qatari funding, started to reorganize and train a myriad of *jihadi* forces into the *Jaysh al-Fath* (The Army of Conquest), a semi-regular *jihadi* Army whose primary mission would be advancing on Damascus and toppling Bashar al-Assad. Meanwhile, US and other Western intelligence services started buying huge quantities of Soviet-origin weaponry and ammunition, including shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles, battle tanks, artillery pieces, anti-aircraft artillery and armored combat vehicles, on top of the usual small arms and anti-tank missiles. Qatari and Saudi Arabian government paymasters paid the sellers exuberant prices, no question asked. These weapons were immediately shipped to Turkey.

The majority of these weapons, as well as US-origin weapons and missiles arriving from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, were handed to a wide variety of *jihadi* forces, including those formally affiliated with *al-Qaida*. Moreover, major military supplies and funding were provided to *jihadi* forces from Russia's North Caucasus and the greater Central Asia bordering Russia. All these *jihadi* forces received extensive military training from Turkish and Gulf States Special Forces officers, as well as military-age English-speaking "contractors" who were in command. *Jihadi* commanders also received large sums of money to recruit and supply additional *jihadi* elements inside Syria. The training and equipping focused on confronting the Syrian Army.

The forces of the Islamic State/Caliphate were never mentioned, let alone considered a target.

By the time large elements of the *Jaysh al-Fath* and other *jihadi* forces crossed into Syria, they attacked the Syrian military forces in the Aleppo area and north-western Syria, mainly Idlib. By late May 2015, the Syrian Army was forced to vacate several outlying large bases and consolidate defensive lines closer to the 'Alawite-inhabited areas. Moscow was sufficiently alarmed by the sudden setbacks to increase the number of Il-76 transports of the Ministry of Emergencies which flew to Jablah (near Latakia) with humanitarian supplies and evacuated Russian family members and other civilians. Russian exerts presented the Kremlin with indisputable evidence that despite the repeated assurances of the Obama White House that the Islamic State/Caliphate was the primary foe of the US in Syria and Iraq, the actual primary mission of the US, their Western allies and *jihadi* proxies, was the Assad Administration in Damascus.

Anticipating an escalating great power struggle, Moscow reached out to major allies starting with Beijing. From May 17 to 21, 2015, the Russian and Chinese (PRC) navies held "escort drills" in the eastern Mediterranean code-named *Joint Sea 2015*. This was their first-ever joint naval exercise in the Mediterranean.

The Russian task force included six ships under the command of Vice Adm. Alexander Fedotenkov, the Deputy Commander of the Russian Navy. The command ship was the cruiser *Moskva*, a veteran of Mediterranean operations. The other ships were the *Ladny* (a *Burevestnik*-class frigate), the *Samum* (a *Bora*-class hoverborne guided missile corvette), the *Alexander Shabalin* and the *Alexander Otrakovsky* (both *Ropucha*-class assault landing ships), and the MB-31 tug. The Chinese People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLAN) task force included three ships under the command of Rear Adm. Du Jingchen, Deputy Commander of the Navy of the People's Liberation Army of China. The PLAN ships were the *Linyi* and *Weifang* (both Type 054A multi-rôle frigates) and the *Weishanhu* (a Type 903 replenishment ship).

The main missions practiced reflected the political-military challenges which Russia was facing in the eastern Mediterranean.

"Russian Navy and the Navy of the People's Liberation Army of China ships held a joint practice of maritime escorts ... in a drill episode simulating the protection of safe shipping in remote areas of the World Ocean,"



explained the Russian Navy Captain 1st Class Igor Dygalo. He elaborated that “the combined naval group of Russia and China practiced underway replenishment, cargo transfer and escorting missions” during daylight. Both sides also practiced maritime defense against hostile ships and aircraft, including live-fire exercises. The navies also “practiced troop control by use of lighted aids” and no radio during darkness. “Naval forces of both countries made concerted efforts to explore new formats of joint exercises, and learn valuable experience from each other, which has made the drills a success,” explained Du Jingchen. “The exercises, held far away from the Russian and Chinese naval bases, showed our readiness to jointly face new threats and challenges at sea, and the ability to safeguard stability practically in any area of the World Ocean,” Alexander Fedotenkov stated.

Russian Navy Commander Adm. Viktor Chirkov added that “Russian-Chinese naval cooperation will continue to promote peace and stability” in all pertinent remote corners of the world. Simply put, Russia was not alone in its interest to ensure the safe resupply by sea of Syria.

In late June 2015, tensions between Russia and the United States were rapidly growing.

The Kremlin and the White House disagreed profoundly on a host of hot issues including the situation in Ukraine, Iran and Syria. On June 26, 2015, Putin called Obama in an effort to talk through the disagreements over the crises spots. Putin raised the possibility of a US-sponsored military intervention in Syria in order to create safe zones and stressed the Russian opposition to such a move. In response, Obama warned Putin not to intervene in the US handling of the crisis and its aftermath: the toppling of the Assad administration. The communiqué noted that both presidents referred to the “dangerous situation” in Syria.

Meanwhile, the US and Turkey focused once again on establishing “no-fly safe zones” in northern Syria. In Ankara, Pres. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that Turkish forces were put on alert in anticipation for “Western intervention” in the coming days.

On June 29, 2015, Putin theatrically interrupted a scheduled meeting between Lavrov and Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, and summoned the latter to his Kremlin office. Putin used the occasion to declare that Russia’s “policy to support Syria, the Syrian leadership and the Syrian people remains unchanged”. Putin then advised Western governments not to contemplate military intervention in the Syrian war or to attempt to oust Assad. Should foreign troops enter Syria, Putin warned, Moscow “will respond in kind”. Shortly afterwards, Putin ordered a new round of naval exercises in the eastern Mediterranean and particularly off the Syrian coast. This round of Fleet activities would peak in mid-September 2015.

Meanwhile, since early Summer 2015, the Russians had continued to pour weapons, ammunition, and military supplies into Syria by sea and air.

For the first time, the Russians also reached out to friendly countries such as Egypt to purchase large quantities of locally-made Soviet-origin munitions of types no longer in production in Russia. For example, the Russians replenished the Syrian stockpiles of rockets for older launchers with Egyptian-made rockets. The number of military advisers, technicians and experts rose accordingly in an effort to cope with the escalation.

However, no foreign help could counterbalance the continued exhaustion and depletion of the Syrian Armed Forces. The years of continued fighting were suddenly taking their long expected toll on the Syrian military. That, when thousands of fresh and well equipped *ihadists*, both Syrian and foreign, kept pouring into north-western Syria from camps across the Turkish border in Hatay Province.



On July 26, 2015, Pres. Assad publicly acknowledged the manpower shortages and their adverse impact on the Syrian war effort.

“There is a lack of human resources,” he said. “But that doesn’t mean we can talk about collapse.” Assad conceded that the military was stressed and strained by the years of continued fighting. But there was no thought of defeat. “We will resist,” Assad said. “The armed forces are capable of defending the motherland.” Assad confirmed that the military was no longer trying to regain all of the areas lost to the *ihadists*. “There were areas where we wanted to show our commitment,” he explained. “But the Army cannot be on every part of the territory. In some areas, residents have taken up weapons alongside the Army and that has had a decisive impact on the fighting.”

The growing manpower shortages were also responsible for the recent consolidation of defense lines and loss of major facilities. “Sometimes, in some circumstances, we are forced to give up areas to move those forces to the areas that we want to hold onto,” Assad acknowledged. “We must define the important regions that the armed forces hold onto so it doesn’t allow the collapse of the rest of the areas.”

The Kremlin was, of course, acutely aware of the deteriorating situation in Syria.

The key units earmarked for intervention were ordered to refresh their knowledge of contingency plans and inspect the readiness of their equipment. It was in this context that Shamanov was hosting local and foreign press on August 5, 2015: the Airborne Troops Day. A Syrian journalist asked Shamanov whether the Airborne Troops were “ready to assist Syria in countering terrorists” should they be ordered to do so “by Russia’s leaders”. Shamanov immediately answered in the affirmative. “Of course we will execute the decisions set forth by the country’s leadership, if there is a task at hand,” Shamanov stated. He quickly added that Russia and Syria had had “long-term good relations” for many years. “Many Syrian experts, including military, received education in the Soviet Union and in Russia,” Shamanov noted.

In the coming days, the Kremlin sought to avert the looming escalation and crisis.

Moscow increased the effort to convince the Arab World, and particularly Riyadh, to abandon their struggle against Assad’s Damascus and instead focus on an uncompromising struggle against all *ihadists*. The Kremlin argued that priority should be given to fighting *ihadist* entities such as the Caliphate and *al-Qaida*-affiliates which were threatening all Arab countries and not just Syria. The Obama White House reacted with fury, threatening the Arab capitals with abandonment to Iran should they decide not to give priority to the effort to topple the Assad Administration and rely on a myriad of *ihadist* forces toward that end.

On August 11, 2015, Moscow made a final effort to convince Riyadh during discussions in Moscow between Lavrov and Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir.

The Kremlin failed. Lavrov argued that “coalition’s strikes on ISIS did not fulfill their targets” and that “toppling Assad will pave the way for ISIS to seize the power and control the whole country”. Once in control of Syria and Iraq, the *ihadists* would set their sights on Saudi Arabia. Jubeir would hear nothing of this and refused to budge from the long-standing policy line. Jubeir reiterated the unwavering position of the Saudi Government. “Assad must go either through a political operation or by military one.”

The Kremlin made a last ditch effort on August 25, 2015, when several Arab leaders visited Moscow to attend the International Aviation and Space Show, MAKS 2015.



These were Egyptian Pres. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, King Abdullah II of Jordan, and *Sheikh* Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces. Putin met all of them together during the demonstrations of Russia's latest combat aircraft and then separately in the Kremlin. Putin tried to persuade them to agree with Russia that priority should be given to the defeat of the *ihadists* before seeking a political solution for post-war Syria and deciding the fate of Bashar al-Assad.

Al-Nahyan stuck to the Saudi position that Assad must be toppled and replaced with an Islamic government before confronting the *ihadists*. King Abdullah stressed that Moscow had a vital rôle to play in bringing together rival sides in Syria for political negotiations on ending the war. While Abdullah acknowledged the threat of the *ihadists* and reminded Putin of the heavy price paid by Jordan, he would not commit Jordan to abandoning the US-led anti-Assad campaign. Only Egypt's Sisi supported the Kremlin's idea to create a broad anti-terrorist coalition — specifically including Assad's Syria — in order to fight and defeat the Islamic State and other *ihadist* forces.

The challenge facing the Kremlin in Summer 2015 was largely political.

The military situation in and around Syria is complex. The Islamic State/Caliphate was then — and remained through September 2015 — rising and consolidating its hold over al-Jazira without any real challenge or viable effort to contain or defeat them. The Syrian military is desperate to consolidate defense lines protecting the strategically crucial areas in western Syria. Their secondary task would be to stall or defeat the *ihadist* forces pouring in from across the Turkish border.

However, no matter how many weapons and how much ammunition the Russians are supplying, the key impediments to Syrian military operations are the shortages in Syrian manpower and the long time it would take to recruit and properly train new units. This weakness has been known to all, including the US. Hence, the political challenge facing the Kremlin is creating a situation whereupon the US and the allies are deterred from capitalizing on Syria's temporary weakness in order to push for the Libya-style toppling of Assad's Damascus through the use of *ihadist* forces and US-led air strikes.

In the longer term, the Kremlin has concluded, the Obama White House would not take kindly the Russian frustrating of their latest effort to take down Assad, and therefore Russia should expect longer-term escalation of the regional crisis with prospects of a need for a growing direct involvement in protection of Russia's vital interests against the US-led West.

In mid-August 2015, Russia transformed the Russian-Syrian Military Commission into an executive body through which Moscow is influencing the strategic posture and main fighting. The Kremlin also ordered the quiet activation of an intelligence and command and control center at the Russian Embassy and Military Attaché offices in Damascus. In early September 2015, the Russians started the deployment of strategic communications system which could extend to the front lines, as well as receive intelligence briefings and updates from Moscow. When completed, the new system should enable the Kremlin to have better real-time information feed and to have direct secure communications with the key advisers with the Syrian operational units and headquarters. The first few R-166-0.5 armored command vehicles (providing secure HF/VHF communications for a range of about 1,000km) have already deployed to front lines along with BTR-80/BTR-82 escort vehicles manned by Russian elite troops.



The first Russian overt move took place on August 18, 2015. Six Russian Air Force MiG-31 interceptors deployed to the al-Mazze Air Base near Damascus, ostensibly for delivery to the Syrian Air Force. The aircraft have since remained under Russian command with Russian pilots and system operators, as well as missile experts and maintenance crews.

The Kremlin's message is unmistakable.

The MiG-31 is a long-range interceptor optimized for shooting down from long-distances enemy bombers and reconnaissance aircraft. Should the US decide to launch air operations against Syria (rather than the Islamic State), the Russians would be there to defend Assad's Damascus. To sustain operations, the Russians enlarged their secure facility in the military wing al-Mazze and increased the number of Special Forces security personnel from the regular 10 to 15 to about 40 troops.

The Russians also transferred some of the military supplies from the slow deliveries by ship to delivery by heavy transport aircraft: a mixture of the Il-76 workhorse and the huge An-124. The Russians were running three to six sorties a day. On August 18, 2015, An-124s delivered about 1,000 *Kornet* ATGMs which would enable the Syrian military to destroy from long range *ihadists'* vehicles and positions. The next day, Russian transports delivered several ubiquitous M-46 130mm towed artillery pieces which are highly reliable and liked by the Syrian army to bolster the defense lines east of Damascus.

Most of the weapons and other military supplies still — as of late September 2015 — arrive by a major sealift from the Black Sea ports. Between August 26 and September 10, 2015, the Russians sent six heavy landing ships (four *Ropucha*-class and two *Alligator*-class) through the Bosphorus. These were all veterans of earlier trips to Tartus: the *Korolev*, the *Novocherkassk*, the *Nikolay Filchenkov*, the *Azov*, the *Tsezar Kunikov* and the *Saratov*. They brought a wide variety of combat vehicles including BTR-80 APCs, BTR-82A APCs (a derivative with the highly lethal 30mm 2A72 automatic cannon), trucks and T-90 tanks. Each of these ships also carries a Naval Infantry security detachment of about 40 troops.

The Russians have made it clear that they were also willing to abide by earlier agreements to provide the Syrian Air Force with modern aircraft. Back in late 2013, Moscow agreed to supply 24 MiG-29M/M2 strike-fighters and 36 Yak-130UBS advanced trainers (which can be converted to light-strike aircraft). Since 2014, the delivery was repeatedly postponed under US pressure. In Summer 2015, Russia agreed to supply advanced model Su-25s attack aircraft. Moscow also agreed to supply undetermined numbers of tactical helicopters: Mi-17s/Mi-38s, Mi-24s/Mi-35s and Mi-28s. In mid-September 2015, the Russians started delivering the aircraft and helicopters by air to both Damascus and Jablah. Russian technicians were assembling them in Syria and Russian test pilots checked them before handover to the Syrian Air Force. These supplies were as much replenishment of losses and attrition due to lack of maintenance and airbases falling to the *ihadists* as an increase in the Syrian Air Force arsenal.

By early September 2015, there started a discernable increase in the Russian forces and facilities in western Syria. Technical teams arriving on the heavy landing ships beefed up the Russian maintenance facilities in the ports of Tartus and Latakia. Most important are the Russian construction activities in the Bassel al-Assad International Airport near Jablah. The airport is located 20km south of Latakia and the city of Jablah is 25km from Latakia. The Russians constructed a portable air traffic control tower, prefabricated housing and other buildings, as well as expanded the paved areas including taxiways, parking areas, and two helipads. The Russians established a defense perimeter around the airport which is patrolled by Naval Infantry troops riding



APCs. Many of the combat vehicles and tanks delivered by the heavy landing ships are stored in the Jablah airport compound. Starting mid-September 2015, the majority of the supply flights of both Il-76s and An-124s was handled at Jablah. At least half-a-dozen helicopters were assembled in Jablah in the first week of operations.

On September 16/17, 2015, the Russians deployed to Jablah four Su-30SM long-range multi-rôle fighters, belonging to the Russian Air Force. These were the first deliveries in a still going massive clandestine deployment of air assets to both Jablah and al-Mazze. The Russians concealed their fighter aircraft behind the An-124 transports. A few fighters flew in radio silence extremely close to each of the transport aircraft, thus creating a single radar blip.

Consequently, by 22 September, the Russians already had between 30 and 40 combat aircraft in Jablah, including a squadron of 12 Su-25s (brought in by An-124s and assembled) and a squadron of 12 Su-24Ms that was flown in along with additional Su-30SMs. Their numbers keep growing. The Russians also assembled at least 24 combat and assault helicopters. Additional helicopters await assembling in Jablah and more were being flown in.

In mid-September 2015, the Russians also expanded their security presence and created a defense zone. Small numbers of Russian troops with communications and intelligence-gathering systems established small compounds in the villages of Slanfah (30km east of Latakia) and Masyaf (40km west of Hama and overlooking Tartus). Both villages are high in the mountains on the water-crest. Slanfah sits on the road to the main fighting zones to the north. Masyaf sits on the road to restive Hama and on to Damascus. Dozens of Russian troops (most likely Naval Infantry) riding APCs now frequently patrol the mountain road between Slanfah and Masyaf. Thus, the Russians have established a forward defensive line in the mountains shielding their key military facilities at the Latakia port, the Jablah airport and the Tartus port.

Jihadist forces immediately tried to challenge and test the Russian defenses.

On the night of September 18, 2015, the *jihadists* attacked a Russian facility near the Latakia port. The *jihadists* launched a short barrage of 122mm GRAD rockets from a Technical-mounted multiple-barrel rocket launcher. The rockets impacted on the edges of the facility, causing no damage. On the night of September 19/20, 2015, the *jihadists* attempted a major attack on the Jablah airbase. A group of eight to 12 *jihadists* tried to reach the perimeter on foot in order to attack the base with mortars and small arms fire. The Russian detected them and a Naval Infantry force was dispatched to ambush and engage the *jihadists*. A brief firefight ensued in which three *jihadists* were killed, two were captured, and the rest withdrew.

Significantly, the Russians recovered from the *jihadists* “a detailed plan of the airbase and clear satellite images marked with key military installations”.

Meanwhile, the escalation of Fleet exercises and activities off the Syrian coast peaked. In early August 2015, the naval combatants ordered by Putin to the eastern Mediterranean started arriving. On August 5, 2015, four Russian warships — the *Moskva*, the *Pytlivy* (a Project 1135M escort frigate), the *Ivan Bubnov* (a large sea tanker) and the rescue tug *Shakhtyor* — crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and docked at the Mediterranean port of Ceuta (the Spanish exclave on the coast of Morocco) on their way to Syria. They were followed on August 26, 2015, by the submarine *Novorossiysk*, returning from a refit, and an SB-36-class tug.



On September 3, 2015, Russia filed a formal announcement of a series of naval drills including rocket firing tests and other live fire activities to be held between September 8, 2015, and October 7, 2015. These maneuvers were to take place along the Syrian coast between Tartus and Latakia and westward toward Cyprus. The first major maneuver by five combatants and rocket firing took place on September 12, 2015, within Syrian territorial waters. Russian defense officials did not try to conceal the strategic ramifications of these naval exercises. "They [the Russian combatants] will train to repulse an attack from the air and to defend the coast, which means firing artillery and testing short-range air defense systems," the officials explained. They added that the Syrian Government was most supportive of the Russian naval activities.

On September 4, 2015, the *Dmitri Donskoy* (TK-208, the largest *Akula*-class ballistic missile nuclear submarine) left the port in Severodvinsk ostensibly toward the White Sea. It was escorted by the *Onega* and *Naryan-Mar* (both Project 1124 *Albatros*-class small antisubmarine warfare ships). In reality, the *Dmitri Donskoy* and its escorts were also dispatched to the Syrian coast to provide added deterrence against US/NATO naval operations. On September 9, 2015, the *Dmitri Donskoy* passed through the Strait of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean.

The Russian naval task force off the Syrian coast continued to train and evolve in accordance with operational requirements. On September 21, 2015, the *Novorossiysk* returned to the Novorossiysk Naval Base after a series of maneuvers in the eastern Mediterranean. The next day, September 22, 2015, Moscow announced a new major naval exercise off the Syrian coast. "The crews of Russian ships ... will practice the organization of anti-submarine, anti-aircraft and anti-ship defense, search and rescue missions, as well as communication training and assistance to the crews of ships and aircraft in distress at sea," as well as "40 combat exercises, including rocket and artillery fire at sea and airborne targets". The task force will include the *Moskva*, the *Smetlivy*, the *Pytlivy* and other missile-carrying combatants from the Black Sea Fleet, as well as the Saratov amphibious landing ship. Meanwhile, the sealift operations by the heavy landing ships continued.

It was Assad's Damascus which raised the political ante, hinting on a preemptive and preventive strategy in conjunction with Russia. On September 17, 2015, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Mouallem discussed the war effort on Syrian TV. He acknowledged that "Russia increased military supplies to the Syrian army" but would not specify the nature of the military assistance. He stressed that there were no Russian troops in Syria, but quickly added that Damascus would "consider" requesting Moscow to send troops should the need arise. He expected Moscow to cooperate fully.

"[The Russians] have realized before others that confronting terrorism in Syria requires preemptive operations in self-defense, and therefore they have escalated the pace of supplies to our army with weapons and ammunition," Mouallem explained. The next day, September 18, 2015, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov provided the Kremlin's response. He did not rule out such a deployment but emphasized that the Kremlin had no such request. "If there is a request, than in the framework of bilateral contacts, in the framework of bilateral dialogue, it will, of course, be discussed and considered. For now, it is rather difficult to speak hypothetically," Peskov stated.

On September 15, 2015, Pres. Putin delivered the keynote speech at the summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. He devoted a major part of his address to "the situation in this region, the situation around Syria". He analyzed the *jihadist* threat as seen from the Kremlin and outlined the key to resolving the crisis:



The scope of the [Islamic State's] work has reached far beyond the borders of Iraq and Syria. Terrorists are carrying out mass executions, plunging entire nations into chaos and poverty and destroying cultural monuments and religious shrines. ... The state of affairs [in Syria] is very serious. The so-called Islamic State controls significant stretches of territory in Iraq and Syria. Terrorists are already publicly stating that they have targets set on Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem. Their plans include expanding activities to Europe, Russia, Central and Southeast Asia.

We are concerned by this, especially since militants undergoing ideological indoctrinations and military training by ISIS come from many nations around the world — including, unfortunately, European nations, the Russian Federation, and many former Soviet republics. And, of course, we are concerned by their possible return to our territories.

Putin emphasized that it was impossible to defeat the Islamic State menace without close cooperation with the Syrian government. Russia would continue to do so while keeping an eye on finding a viable long-term solution to post-war Syria.

We support the Syrian Government — I want to say this — in countering terrorist aggression. We provide and will continue to provide the necessary military technology assistance and urge other nations to join in.

Clearly, without active participation by the Syrian authorities and military, without participation by the Syrian Army, as the soldiers fighting with the Islamic State say, you cannot expel terrorists from this nation, as well as the region overall, it is impossible to protect the multi-ethnic and multi-faith people of Syria from elimination, enslavement and barbarism.

Of course, it is imperative to think about the political changes in Syria. And we know that President Assad is ready to involve the moderate segment of the opposition, the healthy opposition forces in these processes, in managing the state. But the need to join forces in the fight against terrorism is certainly at the forefront today. Without this, it is impossible to resolve the other urgent and growing problems, including the problem of refugees we are seeing now.

...

But right now, as I said, we need to focus on joining forces between the Syrian Government, the Kurdish militia, the so-called moderate opposition, and nations in the region to fight the threat against Syria's very statehood and the fight against terrorism — so that together, with our efforts combined, we can solve this problem.

Walid al-Muallem stated the position of Damascus on September 20, 2015. The Assad Administration was convinced that the assertive policy of the Kremlin "would prove a game changer" in the entire region, beyond Syria. "More important than the supply of arms to Syria is Russia's participation in the fight against [the Islamic State] and *Jabhat al-Nusra*," Muallem explained. "Russia is making no secret of its desire to take part in the fight against terrorism, and Syria has faith in the Russian leadership." Therefore, Russia's new prominent rôle would "wreck the plans of all those who have been plotting against Syria and also show up America's lack of a



clear strategy” against all *ihadists*. Muallem stressed that the Russian intervention was “within the framework of international law and in coordination with Syria, unlike the United States ... whose actions have been ineffective.”

On September 23, 2015, the Syrian Ambassador to Russia, Riad Haddad, reiterated that Syria would welcome a Russian military base in Latakia or anywhere else. “If Russia agrees, Syria would only welcome such a step, because it would be aimed against terrorism on our soil,” he said.

In early Autumn 2015, the thrust of the Russian effort in and around Syria was to salvage the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and with it the stability of the greater Middle East. Enclosure by a minorities’ stabilizing buffer is a precondition to the reestablishing of post-*intifada* stability in al-Jazira on the basis of localized entities to whom the grassroots will be genuinely committed. This concept is an evolution and adaptation of the Russian successful fight against Chechenization a decade ago. In the North Caucasus, the revival of grassroots Sufi Islam led to the rejection and defeat of *ihadism*; and in al-Jazira the revival of grassroots tribe- and clan-based Sunni Arabism would similarly lead to the rejection of *ihadism*.

The primary challenge facing Russia is that the US and their key regional allies — Iran and Turkey — were actively undermining the Fertile Crescent of Minorities as the key to their own regional aspirations.

Both Turkey and Iran have sought to control al-Jazira and through it the Holy Shrines of Islam. While Russia has important economic and strategic interests in both Turkey and Iran, their hostility toward the Minorities increasingly becomes a priority issue for the Kremlin. Ankara’s top priority is the destruction of the Kurds inside and outside Turkey, and the elimination of a Kurdish entity on Turkey’s border.

Turkey is bombing the Kurds rather than the *ihadists*.

The main reason for supporting the *ihadists*’ effort to destroy the ‘Alawites has been to prevent the exacerbation of the ‘Alawites/Alavis of Turkey’s Hatay Province. Although Iran is considered the primary defender of the Assad Administration, and indeed has sacrificed much toward this end, the issue is far from simple. Tehran’s primary goal is a Shi’ite Crescent to the Mediterranean. Iran wants ultimate power to rest with the Shi’ite *HizbAllah* and not non-Muslim Minorities.

The US sponsorship and empowerment makes Tehran audacious. Moreover, by removing Assad to make room for a Nasrallah protégé — Tehran would also enhance the *rapprochement* with Obama. Meanwhile, as Assad’s Syria shrinks, ‘Alawite, Druze, and other minorities’ self-identities become more pronounced, and their hostility toward the imposition of Shi’ite Islam grows.

Russia’s war against the *ihadists* and for saving Assad’s Damascus is taking place within this context.

Although Putin mentioned Russia’s support for the Kurds, there is relatively little Russia can do for them given the hostility of Turkey, Iran, and the Baghdad authorities. In view of the plight and isolation of the Kurds, Russia is focusing on the Levant link — ‘Alawites, Maronites, Druze, and Jews — as the primary barrier against regional *ihadization* and exploitation by both Mahdist Iran and neo-Ottoman Turkey.

For the Kremlin, the saving of Assad’s Damascus from the Iranians is as important as defeating the Turkey-sponsored *ihadist* forces in north-western Syria, presently the greatest and most urgent military challenge facing Syria. “The Russians are saving Assad from Iran!” observed Abdulrahman al-Rashed, a most influential columnist for the al-Saud-owned *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*. This realization might herald a major change in Riyadh’s Syria policy.



Should Russia fail and the *ihadists* and their Turkish sponsors reach Damascus, then there would be little stopping of their advance southwards to the heart of Islamdom and taking over Mecca and Medina.

The key challenge is Israel: for the Kremlin the major military power of the Levant and the key to the survival of all minorities. In Russian strategic calculations, Israel is also a key nemesis of US-sponsored Turkey, Iran, and the *ihadists*, all of whom are desperate to reach and liberate Jerusalem. The similarity of Israeli and Russian grand-strategic interests has long been comprehended by several Israeli leaders, most notably Lieberman. But the Israeli political élites, including Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, are mesmerized by the ostensible special alliance with a United States which no longer exists and is no longer ready to abide by previous commitments.

For domestic political reasons — starting with his dread of the inevitable skewering by Israel’s vicious leftist-liberal media élites — Netanyahu tries to postpone the all but inevitable reexamination of the Israeli stance *vis-à-vis* both the United States and Russia. But unfolding developments in the region might not cooperate with Netanyahu’s political expedencies. Meanwhile, Putin is going out of his way to ally the Israeli fears and ease the transformation. Putin also published a gracious New Year greeting to the Jewish people in mid-September 2015.

The gas and pipeline economy might convince Israel to enter a regional security system which would extend to the strategic posture as well. In late August 2015, Putin proposed to Netanyahu that Russian companies invest \$7- to \$10-billion in the development of Israel’s Mediterranean gas fields and an underwater gas pipeline to Turkey or Greece. Beyond the economic viability of the offer, Putin explained, such investment would make the Israeli gas fields “a Russian project” which neither the *HizbAllah* nor Iran would dare to touch, let alone attack.

With Russia already involved in Mediterranean gas projects off the eastern Libyan and Egyptian coasts — and, once circumstances permit, also the Syrian-Cypriot coasts — Russia has planned on developing a regional security system for all oil, gas, and pipeline projects in the eastern Mediterranean. Putin urged Netanyahu to have Israel become an active and major partner in this maritime security system. Russia envisaged a major underwater pipeline system feeding gas from Libya, Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, and Syria-Lebanon to a European feeder line in Turkey or Greece. Netanyahu consulted with Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi (since Italy’s Eni is already partner of Russia’s Gazprom in huge regional projects) and his predecessor Silvio Berlusconi. Both Renzi and Berlusconi have encouraged Netanyahu to accept Putin’s offer and promised to help mediate between Moscow and Jerusalem.

On September 21, 2015, Netanyahu made a brief visit to Moscow for discussions with Putin. He brought with him 11 senior military and intelligence officers including Chief of the General Staff Lt.-Gen. Gady Eisenkot, and the Head of Military Intelligence Maj.-Gen. Hertzi Halevi. They discussed with the Russian counterparts the details, and worked out intelligence cooperation and modalities for coordination of aerial operations over Syrian and pertinent airspace.

In his opening remarks, Netanyahu stressed the narrow focus of Jerusalem: the direct threats to Israel. In principle, Netanyahu stated, “Israel and Russia have common interests: ensuring stability in the Middle East. I am here because of the complicated security situation, it is becoming more and more complicated.” The security situation has been deteriorating in recent months largely because “Iran and Syria are arming a radical Islamist terrorist group with modern weapons aimed against our country. Over the last years, thousands of



rockets were used against the residents of Israel.” Israel is apprehensive because “Iran and Syria are trying to create the second terrorist front against us on the Golan Heights.”

Israel remains adamant on preventing weapons supplies and the opening of a second front on the Golan Heights. “In such conditions, I thought it is very important to come here in order to explain our positions and do everything possible so that there are no misunderstandings between our countries,” Netanyahu concluded. He noted that “dialogue between us has always been in the spirit of mutual respect” and therefore “I am confident that it will continue like this”.

In his response, Putin reassured Netanyahu that the Kremlin understood and was sensitive to the concerns of Israel. “Our main goal is to defend Syria,” Putin explained. “With that being said, I understand your concerns and I’m very happy you’ve come to discuss these issues in detail.” Russia’s actions in the Middle East “always were and will be very responsible” and will not threaten Israel. Putin suggested that Israel was overplaying the cross-border threats. “As for shelling, we know, we condemn that shelling. As far as I know, makeshift missile systems are used in it,” he said. “As for Syria, we know and understand that the Syrian army and Syria on the whole is in a position when maintaining its own nationhood comes to the forefront, not opening a second front.” [The Kremlin later provided a cleaner version of the sentence: “We know and understand that the Syrian Army and Syria in general is in such a state that it isn’t up to opening a second front — it is trying to maintain its own statehood.”]

The real threat was the *jihadi* upsurge that Russia has been determined to address and hoped Israel would join. Putin reiterated that the Russian policy would always remain immensely sensitive to Israel’s circumstances. “[A] great many people from the former Soviet Union live in the state of Israel, and this has special impact on our inter-state relations, and all of Russia’s actions in the region will always be responsible,” Putin concluded.

Putin dictated the agenda and thus ensured that the closed meeting with Netanyahu and the ensuing meetings of the senior military and intelligence officials would be most successful. Assad’s Damascus was neither a cause for problems nor a factor in their solutions, the Kremlin asserted.

The Russians and the Israelis therefore focused on two key issues. First, agreeing on modalities by which Israel would be able to deal with the Iran-*HizbAllah* threats, and, second, preventing “misunderstandings between IDF troops and Russian troops”. Israel considers Iran responsible for the arming of the *HizbAllah* via Syria, and for the *HizbAllah*’s attacks on Israel. Israel intends to continue “to prevent through various means the transfer of lethal weapons from Syria to *HizbAllah*, which is actually done at the direction of Iran”, and Russia was most interested in Israel’s limiting retaliation against the Syrian military as distinct from Israel striking Iranian and *HizbAllah* targets.

Both sides then “established a mechanism to prevent [Israel-Russia] misunderstandings”. Netanyahu considered these measures to be “something very important for Israel’s security”. Israel agreed that jihadist terrorism constitutes a major threat (separate from that of Iran and the *HizbAllah*), and committed to contributing to, and participating in, the Russia-led anti-*jihadi* campaign. Israel and Russia agreed to share intelligence on *jihadi* terrorism and regional instability. Specifically, modalities were established for the transfer in real-time of threat warnings. As well, both sides agreed on means of communications and coordination between the Israeli Air Force and the Russian Air Force command centers in Jablah and Damascus to



prevent incidents between their respective warplanes when operating over Syria, Lebanon, and pertinent areas.

To accomplish this, the IDF and the Russian Military was to establish, within two weeks, a coordination committee which would convene frequently starting on October 5, 2015. It would be co-chaired by the two Deputy Chiefs of Staff. The two would also keep a Red Line communication to deal with intelligence and coordination issues. Initial coordination between the Air Forces started on September 24, 2015, with both sides sharing identification measures and frequencies.

However, even at this point, Netanyahu could not disengage from his domestic political concerns. In a briefing to Israeli media, Netanyahu volunteered that his trip “was in no way intended as any kind of signal to the US”, and that he had “coordinated the visit with the US and briefed Washington on its purpose — to prevent any accidental incidents with Russia in Syria”.

Putin has resolved to suppress and hopefully destroy the *jihadi* scourge at the heart of al-Jazira. He intends to stabilize and contain the rising Caliphate in the long term through the saving and empowerment of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities. The possible harm to Russian relations with both Turkey and Iran is a price the Kremlin is willing to pay. Russia understands what the US-led West cannot, or does not want to, face the *takfiri jihadi* awakening, even though it challenges the validity of the entire world order and the supremacy of the West and Western Institutions (from states to the UN).

For Putin, the crucial struggle is not over the fate of Bashar al-Assad.

Rather, the struggle is for the fate of the greater Middle East as the key to the fate of both the Muslim world and the industrialized world. While this struggle will be long and arduous, there is a crucial milestone ahead: the fate of the Minorities of the Levant: ‘Alawites, Maronites, Druze, and Jews. If these minorities are overwhelmed and vanquished by the *ihadists*, there would be no stopping of the fall of Islam’s holy shrines, and no stopping of the *jihadi* massive *hijra* (migration) into Europe, including Russia.

Putin is therefore determined to prevent this horrific scenario by containing and defeating the *jihadi* ascent at their heartlands in al-Jazira, with the help of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities.

The Russian military build-up in Syria is for this reason.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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