



The Russian Deployment in Syria and Iraq Makes Its Presence Felt

Yossef Bodansky

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Executive Summary

The Russian Air Force launched the first bombing raids in Syria on 30 September. The primary objective of these strikes was to significantly reduce the Jihadist threat to the 'Alawite heartland and particularly the Russian defense zone. Other military operations followed.

The initial focus of the Russian planning team is setting the system for region-wide containment and subsequently destruction of the Jihadist cauldron as the first step toward restoring the indigenous stability of the region. The Russians established the joint command center for the General Staffs of Russia, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Ultimately, the center will coordinate a tightening siege on the Islamic State from both Iraq and Syria by Shiite, Kurdish, and 'Alawite-Druze forces.

On 1 October, the Russian strategy in Syria-Iraq is very clear. The initial Russian effort is to consolidate and stabilize the areas adjacent to the Alawite heartland and particularly the Russian defense zone. The second priority is to clear the roads to Aleppo and lift the Jihadist siege and occupation. These Jihadists also control the key supply roads from southern Turkey to the heart of the Caliphate's Euphrates Valley bastion.

Only then, will the Syrian Armed Forces be in position to advance eastward into the Euphrates Valley. Alas, the Russians' initial priority areas are also the priority areas of the US-sponsored Jihadists in their repeated efforts to reach Damascus and topple the Assad administration, as well as destroy the Alawite heartland in between. These US-sponsored Jihadists not only do not confront the Islamic State forces – but closely cooperate with them in the Aleppo area, the Damascus area, and the Homs pocket. Rhetoric notwithstanding, any progress of the Syrian and Russian forces is a setback to Obama's pro-Jihad anti-Assad efforts.

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Analysis

The Russian Air Force launched its first acknowledged bombing raids in Syria on September 30, 2015. Most of the sorties were flown by Su-24M2s, and the rest by Su-25s.

The Russians claimed that they conducted about 20 sorties against at least six objectives in three specific target areas. The targets included *jihadist* force concentrations, headquarters, fortified positions, as well as weapons, ammunition, vehicle, and fuel storage sites. The primary objective of these strikes was to significantly reduce the *jihadist* threat to the 'Alawite heartland and particularly the Russian defense zone.

The first target area was *jihadist* forward positions on the main highway from Jisr al-Shughur toward Latakia, not far from the Sheekhaneh road junction which also leads to Slanfah. The main *jihadist* positions bombed were in Jabal al-Zaweed, Kassab, and Deir Hanna: all in the direction of the Turkish border. This was the forwardmost area of advance by *jihadist* forces in the aftermath of the recent Jisr al-Shughur offensive in the Idlib area. The *jihadist* positions were some 20km from the Russian base in Latakia and were thus most threatening to the 'Alawite heartland. The forces attacked were mainly from *jihadi* groups *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham*.

The second target area was in the Al-Lataminah and Kafr Zita area west of the M5 highway to Hama, overlooking the Khan Shaykhun-Morek section of the highway. The *jihadist* forces there were threatening the road to Hama and on to Damascus. This was the southernmost advance of *jihadists* forces in north-western Syria. The forces attacked were mainly from *Jabhat al-Nusra* and *Jaysh al-Fath*.

The third target area was in the greater Homs area, up to about 10km north of the city. These were the edges of the *jihadist* pocket which blocked the M5 highway from Damascus to the north. One cluster of *jihadist* forces bombed was in the Rastan area some 10km north of Homs, one in the Talbisah area some 5km north of Homs, and another cluster was in Ter Maelah some 2km north of Homs. One of the targets destroyed was a car bomb factory which served all *jihadist* terrorists inside Homs. The forces attacked were mainly local *jihadist* entities with diverse affiliations including *Jabhat al-Nusra*, *Fatah al-Islam* (of northern Lebanon), and *takfiri jihadists* loyal to the Islamic State.

As promised in Moscow, the Russian General Staff warned its Israeli counterpart of the impending strikes more than an hour in advance. A Russian general also personally warned the US military authorities in Baghdad about an hour before the strikes were launched. He recommended that US aircraft keep away from the Russian zone of operations and that the US intelligence community evacuate pertinent assets and resources with the *jihadist* forces. The Russian recommendation that US aircraft keep away from the strike zone became a major political incident when the US Barack Obama White House presented the forewarning as a Russian warning for the US military not to fly over Syria at all.

The Russian Air Force expanded the bombing strikes on October 1, 2015. Most of the targets hit in the morning were *jihadist* positions and concentrations in the Jisr al-Shughur and Jabal al-Zawiya areas in Idlib Province, and the south-eastern approaches to Aleppo where the Syrian Armed Forces had been struggling to sustain a corridor into the contested city.

By now, the Russians and their allies were settling in the Middle East for the long duration. The Kremlin was now formally committed to helping Damascus win and to the complete eradication of the *jihadist* scourge emanating from the heart of al-Jazira, no matter how long it would take.



On September 30, 2015, Russian Pres. Vladimir Putin formally articulated the objectives of the intervention:

Syria is the issue here. The only real way to fight international terrorism ... is to take the initiative and fight and destroy the terrorists in the territory they have already captured rather than waiting for them to arrive on our soil. ... I want to stress the point though that the conflict in Syria has deep roots and is the result of many factors. This includes interstate and domestic political factors, and religious and inter-ethnic differences, which have been exacerbated by unceremonious foreign intervention in the region's affairs.

Given these circumstances, we naturally have no intention of getting deeply entangled in this conflict. We will act strictly in accordance with our set mission. First, we will support the Syrian Army only in its lawful fight against terrorist groups. Second, our support will be limited to air strikes and will not involve ground operations. Third, our support will have a limited time frame and will continue only while the Syrian Army conducts its anti-terrorist offensive.

Our view is that a final and long-term solution to the situation in Syria is possible only on the basis of political reform and dialogue between all healthy forces in the country. I know that Pres. al-Assad knows this and is ready for this process. We are counting on his active and flexible position and his readiness to make compromises for the sake of his country and people.

To date, the Russians have been rapidly deploying the forces needed to prevent the overrunning and collapse of the predominantly-'Alawite western Syria. However, the initial focus of the Russian planning team was setting the system for region-wide containment and subsequently the destruction of the *jihadist* cauldron as the first step toward restoring the indigenous stability of the region (but not necessarily the modern states).

The Kremlin seemed cognizant that the destruction of the *jihadists* would first create the most dangerous phenomenon in the Middle East: socio-political vacuum. The law of the region is that, on its own, a vacuum would always be filled by a phenomenon far worse than the one which preceded it. Hence, before creating a vacuum, it was imperative to prepare the positive forces which would fill it. In the case of the greater Middle East, this meant reinforcing the minorities and rebuilding the Sunni Arab tribes and urban clans (extended families).

This dynamic is what the Kremlin was determined to accomplish.

While the *jihadist* forces might be defeated by external forces, the vacuum created must be filled by indigenous grassroots elements. Hence, the Kremlin resolved, it was imperative to coordinate the anti-*jihadist* effort with all pertinent local forces from the very beginning. Therefore, the Kremlin decided to expand the military coordination center opened in Baghdad in Summer 2014 into a full-fledged center for the coordination of the regional fight against *jihadism*.

On September 27, 2015, the Iraqi High command formally announced an agreement on "security and intelligence cooperation" with Russia, Iran, and Syria in order "to help combat the Islamic State" forces. The statement elaborated that the coordination agreement would enable the participating militaries to "help [each other] and cooperate in collecting information about the terrorist DI'ISH group".



Initially, the center would better coordinate the Russian supply flights from Russia over Iran, Iraq, and Syria. In the very near future, the center was to begin to coordinate the distribution of pertinent intelligence about the *jihadi* forces they are all confronting jointly. The joint intelligence work would also include coordinating reconnaissance flights, satellite, and other source collection on the basis of operational requirements.

The objective of the center would be to provide the allied forces with actionable intelligence and targeting data. Timing depended, first and foremost, on the Kremlin's formulating strategy and deciding on timeframes, including how long it would take to deploy all necessary forces and deliver all necessary military supplies. The long-term objective was to create regional warfighting capacity, from unified logistical effort to coordinated fighting all around al-Jazira, to the establishment of the joint command center for the General Staffs of Russia, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Ultimately, the center would coordinate a tightening siege on the Islamic State from both Iraq and Syria by Shi'ite, Kurdish, and 'Alawite-Druze forces.

The Kremlin considers the Baghdad center as the venue through which the great war for the elimination of the *jihadi*s in the entire al-Jazira be managed and waged. "The Russian Federation, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Republic of Iraq, and the Islamic Republic of Iran have decided to open an information center in Baghdad which will include the General Staff representatives from the named countries," a Russian senior official noted. "The success of the center in the near future will create conditions for the formation on its basis of the coordination committee for the purpose of planning operations and control of units of the armed forces of these four countries fighting against [the Islamic State]." The key to the center's success would be the joint work of the representatives of the general staffs of Russia, Syria, Iran, and Iraq. "The main functions of this structure will be the collection, processing, compilation and analysis of current information about the situation in the Middle East region in the context of the fight against the 'Islamic state', the distribution of intelligence and its operational transfer to the general staffs of these countries," the official explained.

Despite all the declarations of unity and close cooperation, the strain with Iran continues. Politically, Iranian Pres. Hassan Rouhani is reticent about cooperation with Russia. "I do not see a coalition between Iran and Russia in the war against terrorism in Syria," he stated on September 25, 2015, in New York. Earlier that week, Maj.-Gen. Ataollah Salehi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Iranian Army, explained why there was, and there could be, no military coordination on the ground between Iran and Russia in both Syria and Iraq. "We are not tied to anyone in helping the resistance and we do our own job. Russia helps its allies within the framework of the treaties it has, and we also act by our own methods," Salehi stated.

This was an extremely important statement.

Salehi distinguished between Iran's commitment to "the resistance" – that is, the *jihadi* trend fighting the Nusayra, the Sunni *takfiris* and the Zionist-Western presence – and between Russia's commitment to alliances with the states of Syria and Iraq.

The Russian strain with Iran was further aggravated by the Russian suspicion of the US dealings with Iran. Indeed, the Obama White House has kept trying to seduce Iran to break away from the cooperation with Syria and Russia. The last round took place in the meeting between US Sec. of State John Kerry with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in New York. Under current conditions, this would be an impossible task given Tehran's inherent mistrust of bilateral relations with the US and of the US' ability to deliver on promises. As well, Tehran fears losing the long-term weapons and technology supplies from both Russia and the People's Republic of China.



Meanwhile, the Obama White House announced that the US would not cooperate with the Baghdad center. The sole result was the further marginalization of US influence in Iraq and elsewhere.

The Russian build-up in the region continued in late-September 2015.

At least six Su-34s, Russia's most modern strike aircraft, arrived in Jablah. The Russians also deployed an Ilyushin Il-20 ELINT platform: the Air Force's premiere electronic surveillance aircraft. The Il-20 model in Syria was equipped with a wide array of antennas, IR, and optical sensors, a SLAR (side-looking airborne radar), and satellite communication for real-time data sharing with Moscow and pertinent headquarters. A growing number of combat and assault helicopters were being assembled in Jablah. As well, Russian landing ships delivered additional Russian forces, and weapons and ammunition for the Syrian Armed Forces. The expansion and construction of military facilities all over the greater Latakia-Tartus area also continued. As reflected from the nature and scope of the construction, the Russians were clearly planning on a long-term stay and on significantly larger forces.

The last week of September 2015 saw the forces of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Black Sea Fleet expanding their operations in Syria. The armored personnel carrier (APC) patrols of the Russian Naval Infantry along the Slanfah-Masyaf road expanded to nearby towns with emphasis on Christian Orthodox and Armenian towns threatened by *ihadists*. Naval Infantry detachments joined Syrian Special Forces and began to man checkpoints on roads leading toward the Russian defense zone. Naval Infantry forces were also guarding the 4th Armored Division's headquarters in Ras al-Bassit near Latakia. This was the fallback northern headquarters of the core of the Assad Administration's security forces under the personal command of Maher al-Assad. If Damascus was to fall to the enemy, the 4th Armored Division and related Special and Security Forces would deploy to the 'Alawite heartlands, and their headquarters would be moved from Yafour, near Damascus, to Ras al-Bassit.

Russian commanders started visiting key combat zones in areas adjacent to the 'Alawite heartland. They were interacting with the Syrian forces, *HizbAllah* (in the Zabadani area), and the Iranians (near Damascus and Homs).

The first major clash involving Russian ground elements began on September 24, 2015, near Aleppo's Kuweires military airbase. The airbase had been besieged and partially occupied by large *ihadist* forces for about two years.

On September 15, 2015, a major offensive by the Syrian Armed Forces failed to break the siege and link-up with the base. The Syrian advance forces were ambushed and badly mauled by nimble *ihadist* forces. On September 24, 2015, Russian commanders and military specialists, along with a large security detail by 810th Naval Infantry Brigade *Spetsnaz*, conducted a reconnaissance near Kuweires with Syrian, Iranian and *HizbAllah* commanders. The Russians were attacked by *ihadists*, including Chechens and other North Caucasus *mujahedin*. A quick firefight ensued in which the Russian commanders guided Syrian and *HizbAllah* forces in destroying the *ihadist* attackers. The *Spetsnaz* only repelled the attacks on the Russian vehicles. The Russians would like to use the Kuweires airbase as a forward base for the liberation of Aleppo and the region. Hence, lifting the siege had become a priority. Large quantities of combat vehicles, weapons and supplies were delivered by the Russians to the Syrian forces.



On September 27, 2015, the Syrian army launched a new offensive at the Deir Hafer Plains, east Aleppo, in the direction of Kuweires. The assault was preceded by massive air strikes by both Su-25s and attack helicopters of the Syrian Air Force. The lead pilots were Russian advisers.

Soon afterwards, Syrian forces recaptured the strategic hilltop of Tal Rayman, the village of Al-Salihyah from where the *ihadists* blocked the main supply route along the Khanasser Highway. Syrian senior military officials stressed that the key to the success of the attack was the guidance provided by the Russian military advisers. Moreover, “the logistical assistance from their Russian military advisors has propelled the Syrian Armed Forces to advance along the south-western axis of the Kuweires Military Airport, resulting in the capture of Al-Salihyah after fierce firefights with the terrorist group.”

At the request of Pres. Assad, the Russians agreed to “oversee the Syrian Armed Forces’ operations in northern Syria” and toward this end “have now taken complete command of the east Aleppo offensive to lift the siege of the Kuweires Military Airport”. Russian advisors and experts started leading the operations from the Syrian command room. On September 29, 2015, Syrian senior military officials noted that their forces had already “benefitted immensely from their guidance”.

Damascus now deployed to the area two of Syria’s top Special Forces units: the *Qawat al-Nimr* (Tiger Force) under Col. Suheil Al-Hassan and the *Qawat al-Fahoud* (Cheetah Force) under Col. Luayy Sleitan. Another key unit earmarked was *Liwa al-Quds* (Jerusalem Brigade), a unit comprised of Palestinians who had undergone specialized training by the Syrian Special Forces before 2011. This deployment indicated the immense importance of the Kuweires fighting for Assad’s Damascus.

Indeed, Syrian senior military officials stressed that all the illustrious Syrian senior commanders were “taking a backseat to the Russian military advisors overseeing the battle of east Aleppo”. Under Russian guidance, the Syrian Special Forces, on the morning of September 30, 2015, launched a major assault on the Scientific Research Building in the Al-Rashideen District of west Aleppo. Overnight (September 30/October 1, 2015), *Qawat al-Fahoud* carried out a highly unusual night raid on the village of Ayn Sabil, a forward position of the Islamic State forces.

Syrian senior military officials elaborated that *Qawat al-Fahoud* attacked the Islamic State forces “along the southern perimeter of Ayn Sabil, while helicopters from the Russian Air Force provided them coverage during their advance along this desolate territory that sits approximately 13km from the Kuweires Military Airport”.

Meanwhile, Russian pilots started familiarization and reconnaissance sorties over key areas of both Syria and Iraq. Most reconnaissance flights have been conducted by single or pairs of Su-30SMs. Familiarization sorties were being conducted by pairs of Su-24M2s. The initial sorties were over north-western Syria, mainly the Idlib and Aleppo areas. Starting September 28, 2015, the Russians focused on the Islamic State/Caliphate heartlands.

The Russian Air Force conducted more than 20 reconnaissance flights on the first day. Its focus was the strategic supply routes between the Deir ez-Zor area in Syria and the al-Anbar Province in Iraq. The Russians also covered the cities of al-Mayadeen, Abu-Kamaal, and Mohassan in eastern Syria and the city of al-Heel in western Iraq. This was the first major intelligence collection operation coordinated by the new center in Baghdad. On September 29-30, 2015, the Russians conducted reconnaissance flights over the provinces of Deir ez-Zor, al-Hasakah, al-Raqqah, Aleppo, al-Sweida, Damascus, and Homs. Russians were identifying and mapping



jihadist positions and facilities throughout Syria's vast desert. Damascus expected the Russians to soon begin air strikes in the Deir ez-Zor, al-Raqqa, al-Hasakah, Aleppo, and Homs areas.

By October 1, 2015, the Russian strategy in Syria-Iraq was very clear.

The initial Russian effort was to consolidate and stabilize the areas adjacent to the 'Alawite heartland and particularly the Russian defense zone. This meant focus on defeating the *jihadist* forces in north-western Syria; areas where the *jihadists* were supported and sustained by the US-led sponsorship infrastructure in Hatay Province across the Turkish border.

The second priority was to clear the roads to Aleppo and lift the *jihadist* siege and occupation: again, confronting and defeating *jihadist* forces sustained from across the Turkish border. These *jihadists* also controlled the key supply roads from southern Turkey to the heart of the Caliphate's Euphrates Valley bastion.

Only then, would the Syrian Armed Forces be in position to advance eastward into the Euphrates Valley.

Significantly, the Russians' initial priority areas were also the priority areas of the US-sponsored *jihadists* in their repeated efforts to reach Damascus and topple the Assad Administration, as well as destroy the 'Alawite heartland in between. These US-sponsored *jihadists* not only do not confront the Islamic State forces, but closely cooperate with them in the Aleppo area, the Damascus area, and the Homs pocket.

Rhetoric notwithstanding, any progress of the Syrian and Russian forces represents a setback to US Pres. Obama's pro-*jihad*/anti-Assad efforts.

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

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About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (New York Times No. 1 Bestseller & Washington Post No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (New York Times Bestseller & Foreign Affairs Magazine Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



Yossef Bodansky