



BULLETIN

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Russia's Operation in Syria: The Kremlin's Propaganda Game

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In Russian media, the message of its intervention in Syria is one of defending national interests. By its military engagement in the Middle East, the country aims to accomplish a number of foreign and domestic policy goals. In the international arena, it is seeking to break its isolation by forcing contact with the U.S. and the West in general by attempting to take over the initiative in the Middle East while demonstrating its military might. Both inside and outside the country, however, the Kremlin presents a false image of the situation in Syria. On the domestic stage it helps it to meet its goal of effective mobilisation of support for its policies.

Russia initiated military action in Syria on 30 September 2015. Officially, it claims it is defending its national interests and reacting preventively to the threat of the return of Russian foreign fighters who went in search of jihad in Syria and Iraq. However, Russia's actions so far demonstrate that its goal is mainly supporting the weakened regime of its ally Bashar al-Assad and that its attacks on Islamic State (IS) positions have been minimal.

The Meaning and Goals of the Russian Operation in Syria. Military engagement in the Middle East marks a change in paradigm in Russia's foreign policy. For the first time since its intervention in Afghanistan in 1979, Moscow has engaged in a conflict outside of the former Soviet Union. Undertaken a year and a half after annexing Crimea and beginning the war in Ukraine's Donbass, the operation in Syria has made it possible for Russia to break out of its international isolation. In hindsight, Russia's intervention in Syria was *fait accompli* and it intentionally misinformed the West of its intentions in the Middle East. Russian President Vladimir Putin first pushed U.S. President Barack Obama to participate in a bilateral meeting and then exacted the resumption of Russian-American military contacts on Syria. Russian actions in the Middle East had the effect of disorientating other international actors and giving Moscow time for unilateral moves in the region.

The international community's positive or moderately positive reactions to Russia's intervention and cautious hopes that Moscow's actions would help solve the refugee crisis allowed a relative improvement in the image of the Russian regime in the international arena. This reaction was presented by Moscow as a foreign policy success and evidence of a growing or even crucial role for Russia in solving crises with global impacts.

In its propaganda, the action in Syria is part of the same conflict as in Ukraine, namely a geopolitical rivalry in which Russia's main opponent is the West (mainly the U.S.). The Russians blame the U.S. for the chaos in the Middle East and use their actions to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of American policy and Washington's weakness.

The Syrian Intervention in Russian Media. At the end of September, Russian state television started an intensive campaign preceding Putin's address to the UN General Assembly on 28 September. It presented him as a saviour who would point a way to a solution to the crisis and fix the mistakes made by the Americans, who, according to the Kremlin, have been the main cause of the conflict. Russian media then switched to explaining the military operation and its goals.

The main points of Russian media concern the reasons for the engagement, the actions undertaken and their effectiveness. They emphasise that there is a serious threat connected with returning Russian and former Soviet state fighters from Syria and Iraq. The war in Syria is presented as an effect of external interference on the part of the U.S. and their Arab allies. What's worth noting, though, is that the question of the economic and political crises in Syria as

well as Assad's repression of the opposition is completely omitted or minimised in Russian media. The same for civilian victims of Russian airstrikes. Moscow underscores that its operation is legal because it is conducted at the request of the Syrian president and stands out from the actions of the U.S., which it claims fights the legal leader of the country and *de facto* supports IS. In the Russian interpretation, all of Assad's opponents are terrorists (namely IS or equally dangerous) or—at best—the moderate opposition is discredited.

Every day, Russian television reports on tens of IS targets destroyed by Russian planes, though these are not confirmed by other, independent sources. At the same time, the Russians emphasise the ineffectiveness of the American-led airstrikes that have been ongoing for more than a year. This is intended to prove a lack of determination on the part of the West and the Arab states in fighting IS or even to demonstrate favour for the Islamist terrorists.

Implications for Russian Domestic Policy. From the Kremlin's point of view, the operation in Syria serves an important goal and has serious implications for internal policy. By concentrating the attention of Russians on the Middle East by increasing the amount of news concerning Syria, and by proclaiming threats to Russia, Moscow attempts to justify Russia's actions abroad and replace the increasingly stale Ukrainian theme with a new one. For more than a year and a half, the authorities have effectively mobilised and consolidated Russian opinion using propaganda concentrated on Ukraine. It seems that in the near term this role will be filled by news from Syria. According to the opposition weekly *The New Times*, in February the situation in Ukraine was mentioned 1,250 times on television, but in August fell to 750, then to only 250 times in September.

In a 29 September Levada Center survey, only 14% of Russians were in favour of the Russian military entering Syria. At the same time, as many as 39% declared support for the Russian government's policy on Syria (the intervention had not been announced in the country yet). In a survey published 10 days later, 72% of respondents were positive or mostly positive about the Russian airstrikes, while only 14% were negative or mostly negative. As many as 46% declared support for using military outside of Russia. This means that with the help of Russian media, the country's authorities were able in a very short time to generate a substantial change in public opinion according to surveys concerning its foreign policy decision.

The conflict in the Middle East, however, does not arouse the same level of emotion as the conflict with neighbouring Ukraine. Thus, it is a less effective tool of domestic policy. Unlike the operation in Donbass, though, where the Russians have repeatedly denied a military presence, their actions in Syria allow them to demonstratively use the Russian military and use it to burnish its image. According to the Levada Center, the military is the second most-trusted institution, coming in at 64% compared to the president, who has 80%. What's also important is that there has been a large increase in the level of trust in the military in the last two years—in 2013, it was 43%

Russia's military engagement does come with some risk. According the Levada Center survey, 46% of Russians fear that the operation in Syria has a high probability of becoming a "new Afghanistan." Because of the still vivid trauma among Russian society of the Afghanistan invasion, the authorities and media emphasise that ground operations are not an option and that the Russian engagement has a specific time limit.

As long as Russia's military actions in Syria can be presented as a success, they will hold substantial potential for the Kremlin to mobilise public support and divert attention from the economic and other situations in Russia. The pride in Russia's military strength and its supposed new role in the world is intended to compensate for the worsening economic situation, degradation of its education and health services and overall falling general level of well-being. As with its war in Ukraine, in order for the Kremlin to achieve its goal it needs to cut the Russian public off from information about deaths, injuries and other costs of the military operation.

External Implications. Russia's support of Assad's regime is meant to enhance its principle of non-interference in internal policy, any breach of which is perceived as a threat by the Russian regime. Russia intentionally swaps the notions of legality and legitimacy. It argues that a legal leader has unlimited right to act inside his country and any opposition or criticism is equated to illegal external interference, akin to export of revolution. Russia used this interpretation in portraying the anti-government protests in Ukraine in 2013 and 2014, as well as the later military conflict, as the effects external forces steered by the U.S. In a similar manner, Russian opposition are presented as foreign agents.

Contrary to international opinion, Russia's actions will not help solve the refugee crisis in Europe. By crushing the moderate opposition or pushing it to side with IS, Russia hopes to push the U.S. and the West into a choice between Assad or IS. Either way, it likely will only increase the number of refugees. According to UN data, the Russian-backed Syrian ground operation towards Aleppo has already resulted in the internal displacement of another 35,000 to 50,000 people. Moreover, and contrary to Russia's declared willingness to fight IS, this only helps IS grow stronger. By attacking the anti-Assad opposition, Russian may provoke some parts of the rebel forces (such as Jaish-al-Fatah) to join forces with IS, which would, of course, make the latter more powerful.

Russia has been efficiently building a coalition in the West for support for Assad's regime, at least to keep it in place as an interim option and an element of a possible settlement process in the Middle East. To do this it uses disappointment and criticism from around the world of American policy, the fear of deeper chaos in Syria and the refugee influx and anti-immigrant attitudes in Europe and elsewhere. Along with its claim to be fighting IS, its formula for finding a solution to the crisis—making the opposition part of the talks on Syria's future as well as Middle East powers (Iran among them)—serves only as a tool to strengthen Russia's international position and will not help improve the situation on the ground.