



The Evolution of Russian, Syrian, and Iranian Actions Against the Jihadist Movements and Turkish-U.S. Responses

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Abstract

Almost three months into the Russian military intervention in Syria and Iraq - a clear strategy has emerged. Russia is spearheading a regional allied effort to consolidate tangible gains - to stabilize the lines before Winter freezes the fighting. When fighting resume in early Spring 2016, the Jihadist forces will no longer be able to threaten the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and the buffer areas surrounding Shiite Iraq. Emboldened, better equipped and retrained - the forces allied with Russia will then be able to go on the strategic offensive under a unified master-plan.

In mid-October, the Kremlin clarified that the Russian strategic-political objectives in Syria are to stabilize and consolidate the Assad administration as the key to defeating the Jihadist forces, as well as to compel the US-led West to accept and acknowledge this reality. For the Kremlin, all anti-Assad forces are terrorists.

In mid-November, Putin returned to Moscow from the G-20 summit convinced that any attempt to deal with Obama was an exercise in futility and that a major face-off, even crisis, over Syria was only a question of time. Hence, the Kremlin resolved to seize the strategic initiative.

Thus, the Russian military intervention has already had a profound impact on the region's strategic-political posture. It is now clear to all and sundry that the Assad administration is not going anywhere. Neither taking Damascus by force, nor effecting a regime change by force, is a viable option. This reality alone compels all involved to reassess their policies and plans.

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Analysis

Almost three months into the Russian military intervention in Syria and Iraq - a clear strategy has emerged.¹ Russia is spearheading a regional allied effort to consolidate tangible gains - to stabilize the lines before Winter freezes the fighting. When fighting resume in early Spring 2016, the Jihadist forces will no longer be able to threaten the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and the buffer areas surrounding Shiite Iraq. Emboldened, better equipped and retrained - the forces allied with Russia will then be able to go on the strategic offensive under a unified master-plan.

In mid-October, the Kremlin clarified that the Russian strategic-political objectives in Syria are to stabilize and consolidate the Assad administration as the key to defeating the Jihadist forces, as well as to compel the US-led West to accept and acknowledge this reality. "They're going to have to recognize that [the] Islamic State is the real threat that has been countered only by the Syrian regular army commanded by President Bashar al-Assad," Iliyas Umakhanov, the Deputy Speaker of the Federation Council of Russia, predicted. For the Kremlin, all anti-Assad forces are terrorists. "In the West, they talk about 'moderate opposition,' but we so far haven't seen any in Syria," General-Colonel Andrey Kartapolov, the Commander of the Russian operations in Syria, argued. "Any person who takes up arms and fights the legal authorities, how moderate can he be?" Fyodor Lukyanov, the head of the prestigious Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, noted that for official Moscow "'terrorists' is a very vague definition which allows Russia to target all groups it needs to fight in order to achieve the main goal - strengthen Syrian army positions and help them restore control over major cities."

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Russian military operations continue to expand and evolve

The bombing of the Islamic State/Caliphate heartlands by Su-24M and Su-34 strike aircraft keep escalating. The main objectives are Jihadist infrastructure, command centers, training bases, weapon and ammunition stockpiles. Most significant are the strikes against supply and communications routes between the Euphrates Valley and western Iraq. The cumulative success of the Russian bombing strikes is best manifested by the growing flow of defectors from the Euphrates Valley across the Turkish border. Several defectors shave before crossing into Turkey and continuing to Europe. The Russian attacks are extremely effective because of the excellent and timely intelligence and guidance provided by Russian and Syrian Special Forces detachments operating on the ground deep in enemy territory.

These detachments are operating from the Deir ez-Zor Military Airport pocket. The Syrian Arab Army's key units in the heart of the Euphrates Valley are the 137th Artillery Brigade of the 17th Reserve Division and the 104th Airborne Brigade of the Republican Guard (whose commander, Issam Zahreddine, recently received battlefield promotion to Major General in recognition of his achievements). The 104th Airborne Brigade is

¹ This paper builds on the author's previous reports "Russia, Syria, and the Crossroads of Strategic Development" (Issue 378, September 2015) and "The Russian Deployment in Syria and Iraq Makes Its Presence Felt" (Issue 379, September 2015).



supporting and deploying the Syrian Panther Forces special forces elements that are assisting their Russian counterparts in target identification and designation. The Panther Forces also operate along the Jazal-Palmyra Road - interdicting Islamic State traffic. The supreme command of the Islamic State forces is cognizant of the importance of the pocket to the devastating Russian bombing. Hence, in the morning of 20 October they launched a major offensive on the Deir ez-Zor Military Airport pocket. The assault was spearheaded by three martyrdom bombers who tried but failed to crash their truck bombs through the airport's southeastern gates. Sporadic fighting continue near the airport and in adjacent villages as the forces of the Islamic State/Caliphate make repeated efforts to paralyze the activities of the Deir ez-Zor Military Airport pocket.

Another major improvement of the Russian ability to identify and locate targets came as a result of the capture of the controlling Jabal Nabi Younis (the Prophet Jonah Mountain) north of Latakia. Standing at 1,562 meters (5,125 feet) above sea level, Jabal Nabi Younis is the highest peak of the Alawite Mountains. On 10 October, the Syrian Arab Army's 45th Regiment of the 1st Armored Division launched an assault on Jabal Nabi Younis. The actual capture of the mountain top was spearheaded by a HizbAllah elite unit and conducted by local irregular forces and the National Defense Forces militias. The capture of the mountain region took three days to complete. On 18 October, cognizant of the important of the mountain, a combined force of Jabhat al-Nusra, Harakat ash-Sham and the Free Syrian Army's Suqour al-Ghaab unit launched a counter-attack on the strategic town of Jubb al-Ahmar in an effort to climb the mountain. Intense firefights ensued with the National Defense Forces and the HizbAllah defenders. The Jihadist forces were repelled only a couple of days later.

Russian elite forces took over the tip of Jabal Nabi Younis a few days later. A convoy of tank carriers deployed a battery of the Borisoglebsk 2 electronic warfare and electronic intelligence systems. The Russian deployment is comprised of the core systems mounted on nine MT-LB armored personnel carriers, numerous auxiliary vehicles and an elite force of over a company for the defense of the compound. Considered one of the most sophisticated system in the world, the Borisoglebsk 2 can not only intercept transmissions on a wide range of frequencies on the electromagnetic spectrum, but also identify the location of the transmitters (including mobile phones) with unprecedented precision. The data is fully integrated on-site with other sources of intelligence including satellite visuals - thus providing precise targeting in record time. The Borisoglebsk 2 is also used for the jamming, blocking and disruption - from blanket to focused - of enemy communications and all other electronic signals and emissions.

The Borisoglebsk 2 battery on top Jabal Nabi Younis became operational within a few days and started providing the Russian Air Force with targeting data around 25 October.

By now, the Kremlin resolved to markedly escalate the bombing campaign while further refining the targeting procedures. Analysis conducted by the Russian General Staff concluded that in order to meet the strategic and tactical objectives, the Russian Air Force would have to increase the bombing, strike and close air support sorties from the average of 50-a-day flown by mid-October (with 88-90 sorties on peak days) to 300-a-day. This tally did not include helicopter sorties, fighter air cover patrols and electronic warfare and intelligence collection patrols. The Kremlin accepted the analysis and instructed the General Staff to plan this escalation including the introduction of additional resources to the arsenal used over Syria. The Kremlin also instructed that the process of targeting and damage assessment be further refined, particularly regarding to air strikes called by the Syrian Army because of their vague target designation. In mid-October, Russia deployed additional drones whose mission was to verify in real time targets for close air support and battlefield strikes.



During the second half of October and into early November the Kremlin deliberated the patterns and extent of an escalation in Russian military operations in Syria. The General Staff's recommendations to capitalize on the initial military achievements in order to consolidate tangible gains in Syria were balanced by the political prospects of a confrontational face-off with the US-led West.

To a great extent, the Kremlin's reticence to needlessly provoke Washington was an outcome of the Obama White House's reaction to the October 7 cruise missiles strike against targets in central Syria. Russia launched 26 Kalibr NK sea-based cruise missiles against eleven strategic targets and destroyed them. The Kalibr NK missiles were launched from Buyan-M class frigates with displacement of just 950 tons that were sailing the Caspian Sea. The missiles flew about 1,500km and hit their target with great precision. The operation came as a major intelligence surprise for the West because the Kalibr NK cruise missiles were launched from combatants far smaller than expected, flew for a longer range than expected, and hit their targets with greater accuracy than expected by US intelligence. US criticism of the operation and US disinformation about missiles allegedly crashing in Iran failed to take hold or dampen the impact of the Russian strike.

Comes mid-November, the Kremlin accepted the recommendations of the General Staff and ordered the escalation of the bombing campaign. The Kremlin also approved the introduction of additional capabilities - mainly strategic bombers and more naval cruise missiles - in order to as much surprise the Jihadist forces with strikes with profiles completely unexpected by them, as to remind the US-led West of Russia's immense military capabilities.

If the Kremlin had any doubts about the political imperative to escalate and demonstrate immense capabilities - the Obama-Putin meeting on November 15 convinced the Kremlin of an inevitable clash with the US-led West over the long-term posture in Syria and the Middle East as a whole. Putin's reading of Obama's intentions and priorities would prove right on 24 November with the downing of the Su-24M by a Turkish F-16. Putin and Obama met on 15 November for more than 30 minutes in an informal setting on the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Turkey. In the meeting, Obama sanctimonious, dictating and non-compromising. Putin was calm, cool, reserved and factual.

According to the Obama White House's version, both countries "reached consensus" on the need for "a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition" starting with the speedy removal of Assad from power. According to Putin's aide Yuri Ushakov, both presidents had an extensive discussion on two topics - "first on Syria and then Ukraine." Ushakov claimed that "strategic objectives relating to the fight against the Islamic State are, in principle, very similar, but there are differences on the tactics side." In reality, the crux of the matter remained Assad's fate. The "Assad has to go now" remained Obama's top priority and Obama continued to insist that Assad's presence in Damascus was preventing the resolving of the Islamic State problem and thus threatening the West. Obama also split hair regarding the Jihadist credentials of most Syrian opposition forces and the expediency of empowering them in Damascus.

Putin returned to Moscow convinced that any attempt to deal with Obama was an exercise in futility and that a major face-off, even crisis, over Syria was only a question of time. Hence, the Kremlin resolved to seize the strategic initiative.

Russia escalated markedly the air campaign in the early morning hours of 17 November. First, in the predawn hours, the Russian Navy launched from the Mediterranean a barrage of cruise missiles against Islamic State infrastructure targets all over northern Syria. This was a distraction from the main strike. The first wave was



comprised of a squadron of twelve Tu-22M3 bombers, two Tu-22M3 reconnaissance and electronic warfare variants, eight Su-34 strike aircraft, and four Su-30SM fighters for escort. All the aircraft took off from the large Russian Air Base in Morozovsk in the Rostov area. The strike formation overflew Iran and Iraq. Between 4:00 and 4:30 am (local time) the Tu-22M3 and Su-34 aircraft hit multiple targets in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor with guided and gravity bombs. Special attention was paid to fuel supply and oil export facilities of the Islamic State. More than fifty tanker trucks were destroyed by the Su-34s (bringing the total number of tankers destroyed by Russian aircraft by November 17 to 410).

The second wave of the strike included five Tu-160 and six Tu-95MS strategic bombers escorted by two Il-78M aerial tankers. They took off from the Engels Air Base east of Saratov. The bomber force overflew Iran escorted along parts of their flight by four F-4Es, 4 F-14As and two MiG-29Bs of the Iranian Air Force. Between 8:00 am to 8:40 am (local time) they launched from western Iran near the Iraqi border thirty-four cruise missiles against targets in the Aleppo and Idlib areas. Moscow reported that “fourteen terrorist facilities of special importance were destroyed.” Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu stated that “a massive air raid on ISIS facilities is underway in Syria. The number of sorties has been doubled, allowing to deliver powerful, accurate strikes on ISIS targets on the entire territory of Syria.” The Commander of Long-range Aviation of the Russian Federation, General-Lieutenant Anatoly Zhikharev, elaborated that “all types of aviation strike units available for Long-Range Aviation have been involved: strategic bombers Tu-160 and Tu-95MS and long-range bombers Tu-22M3. The crews of strategic bombers execute the task of striking the targets in strict accordance with the first massive air raid plan.”

The Russian strategic air offensive continued on 18, 19 and 20 November. Several formations of Tu-160, Tu-95MS, Tu-22M3 and Su-34 aircraft took off from their bases in Russia and bombed or launched cruise missiles against a wide array of Jihadist targets throughout northern and central Syria. For the first time, the Su-34 strike aircraft took off from the Krymsk Air Base in Krasnodar Krai on the shores of the Black Sea. The Russian air strikes were fully integrated with the theater strikes by Su-24s and Su-34s operating from the Hemeimeem Air Base near Latakia. The Russians flew 126 combat sorties on 18 November, and more than 100 sorties on the 19th. Additional close air support sorties were flown by Su-25s and helicopters.

The Russians continued to focus on strategic objectives. According to General-Colonel Kartapolov, “the Tu-95 strategic bombers launched twelve long-range cruise missiles on IS targets, including its headquarters in the province of Idlib, fuel depots and a factory making explosives.” The Tu-22M3 bombers continued to operate in squadron-level formations. They hit “six facilities in the provinces of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, hitting IS oil refineries, an ammunition depot and a facility manufacturing and repairing mortars.” Additional oil facilities were struck with the total number of tankers destroyed by the Russian Air Force now standing at over 500.

On the night of 19-20 November, the Russian Air Force launched a strike aimed to demonstrate their new capabilities to the US-led West. Two Tu-160 bombers took off from the Olenegorsk Air Base in the Kola Peninsula at 23:00 local time. They flew westward and then southwards over the Atlantic - skirting the airspace of Norway, the UK, Spain and Portugal. They turned eastwards and flew over the Straits of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean Sea. Off the Syrian coast they were met by an escort of four Su-30SM fighters that took off from Hemeimeem Air Base. The two Tu-160 bombers launched stealthy KH-101 cruise missiles against targets in northern Syria. The Tu-160 bombers and their Su-30SM escorts then entered Syrian airspace and returned to Russia via the eastern corridor of Iraq, Iran and the Caspian Sea. Over the Caspian Sea, the two Tu-160 bombers



were met and refueled by to Il-78M aerial tankers before heading back home to Olenegorsk Air Base. The two Tu-160 bombers completed a 13,000km long operational mission.

Later on 20 November, sixteen Su-34 strike aircraft once again took off from Krymsk Air Base and struck military and oil infrastructure objectives along the Euphrates Valley with emphasis on the Raqqa area. This was the opening salvo in the Russian air campaign to effectively destroy Raqqa - the capital of the Islamic State/Caliphate. Starting 21 November, Russian naval combatants in both the Caspian Sea and the Mediterranean launched salvos of Kalibr cruise missiles against targets in the greater Raqqa area. By late November, the Russian Air Force was flying an average of 76 sorties-a-day against the Raqqa area.

Concurrently, the Kremlin decided to markedly increase the number of aircraft dedicated to the Syrian operations both in Syria and in Russia. By 21 November, the number of Russian aircraft in Syria reached 69. The most important additions were eight Su-34s (bringing the total to twelve), a second squadron of twelve Su-24Ms and a second squadron of twelve Su-25Ms, as well as four more Su-30SMs for air cover. Additional assault helicopters (Mi-8s and Mi-17s) and attack helicopters (both the veteran Mi-24s and the latest upgrade Mi-35Ms) were also deployed to Syria. The Kremlin also earmarked twenty-five long-range bombers (Tu-22M3s, Tu-95MSs and Tu-160s), twelve additional Su-34s, a host of fighters (Su-30s and Su-27s) and Il-78M aerial tankers to supporting the Syrian operations from air bases in Russia.

However, the analysis and recommendations of both the Russian General Staff and the Russian command center in Latakia pointed out to the need for a far greater expansion of the Russian military effort in both the overall number of aircraft and the numbers of generated sorties. Moreover, in the aftermath of the shooting down of the Russian Su-24M by a Turkish F-16 on 24 November, 2015, the Kremlin instructed that all Russian air operations be conducted under the umbrella of long-range high-performance fighter-interceptors. "All the activities of the attack aviation will be carried out only under cover of fighter aircraft," General-Lieutenant Sergei Rudskoy, a senior member of the General Staff announced on 25 November. In order to attain the expansion of fighter escort for their strike aircraft, the Russian Air force prepared the deployment in January 2016 of at least a dozen more Sukhoi Su-30SM and modernized Su-27SM3 air superiority fighters to Hamameen. Taken together, in late November the Russian Air Force envisioned well over 100 combat aircraft and dozens of helicopters in Syria by early 2016.

To accomplish these reinforcements, the Kremlin decided to build another major Russian base away from the coastal area. The site selected is the al-Shayrat Air Base located approximately 35 kilometers southeast of Homs. Al-Shayrat is an extremely large military compound with two runways over three km long and some 45 fortified hangars. Back in early October, several small units of the Syrian military started to dissect and destroy methodically the Homs area pocket. The Syrian army's primary objective in the Homs area was to reopen the Homs-Hama Highway. The leading units of the Syrian Arab Army in the northern Homs region have been elements of the 3rd Armored and 11th Tank Divisions, supported by Syrian National Defense Forces (NDF) militias and HizbAllah units, as well as massive air support from Russian Su-25 attack aircraft and Mi-24/Mi-35M attack helicopters. In the second half of November, the area was sufficiently pacified to permit the Russian Air Force to begin using the al-Shayrat Air Base as a transit hub and an entry point for military supplies for the Syrian military - thus reducing the congestion in Hamameen. A team of Russian and Syrian military engineers work on rebuilding and modernizing the facilities of al-Shayrat. Several Il-76 and An-124 transport aircraft are already using the base. Moreover, al-Shayrat is also increasingly used as a forward refueling and rearming base for the Russian helicopters supporting Syrian forces in the area.



The Russian al-Shayrat Air Base is expected to be completed and fully operational by early 2016. The primary mission of the aircraft and helicopters in al-Shayrat will be supporting the Syrian and allied military offensives in al-Qaryateyn, Palmyra-Tadmur and Deir ez-Zor to the east, as well as Aleppo to the north. The first combat aircraft to be based in al-Shayrat will be one or two squadrons of Su-25Ms and numerous helicopters.

Significantly, in early December, Moscow concurred to requests from both Damascus and Tehran to permit two squadrons of Iranian Su-25s, and subsequently also Su-24s, to deploy to al-Shayrat and join the Russian-controlled air operations. The IRGC expects the Russian Air Force to provide maintenance services, munitions and air cover for their strike aircraft. Syrian senior officials noted that unlike the Russians, the Iranians have no political constraints regarding the bombing of all anti-Assad forces whomever they might be. Iranian Su-25s are already operating in Iraq in support of government and Shiite militia forces. It is not clear whether Tehran will deploy some of these aircraft to Syria.

The al-Shayrat Air Base will also host several ground forces elements. The key Russian unit will be a Brigade of around 1,000 troops. "Russia is preparing to send a Brigade of intelligence and Special Forces, in support of the already deployed forces in Syria to participate to selective battle and to deploy around al-Shayrat military airport," explained a Syrian senior official. Moreover, Russian, Syrian military, Iranian Pasdaran, Iraqi militia and HizbAllah forces will be used "to expand the security perimeter around the airport to prevent any shelling possible that may affect the Russian Air Force once inside the new airport."

Al-Shayrat is also being transformed as the main base of the new Russian artillery and armor weapon systems being already deployed to Syria for use by the Russian, Syrian and Iranian forces. In late November, Russia deployed three battalions/batteries of 2S19 Msta-S 152mm self-propelled howitzers renowned for their long-range, accuracy and high-speed firing. Russia also deployed a few batteries of the TOS-1 220mm multiple rocket launcher renowned for their immense destructive power. Two TOS-1 batteries were already used in combat in the Hama and Homs areas. Russian military teams will continue to provide fire control for the long-range artillery even as local crews increasingly man the weapons. As well, since early December, the Russians supplied a growing numbers of the latest models of T-90 tanks. The Russians are already training Syrian crews from the 4th Armored Division of the Republican Guards under the command of Gen. Ali Maher Assad. Training on the T-90 is taking place in the al-Sharyat area for the key units selected for assaulting Aleppo. Russian military advisers will gradually train Syrian and Iranian crews to use these weapons.

On the night 6/7 December, four US strike aircraft bombed a Syrian base in the Deir ez-Zor area. The Army's 104th Airborne Brigade, the leading unit in the area, reported that the US struck the base of the 137th Artillery Brigade of the 17th Reserve Division in the village of Ayyash in northern Deir ez-Zor and the nearby broadcast and communications tower. The Syrian forces suffered four fatalities, sixteen severely wounded, and damage to equipment. There could not have been a mistake. Unlike other Syrian bases in the Deir ez-Zor area, the Ayyash base has never been threatened by the Islamic State forces. After the US bombing, Islamic State forces did launch a powerful assault on the nearby village of Ayyash. However, Ayyash is the home-base of the Syrian Panther Forces and Russian Special Forces that target and home the Russian bombing of Islamic State/Caliphate targets. Their neutralization could markedly reduce the effectiveness of the Russian bombing, particularly on the eve of the planned major assault from the al-Shayrat area. "The most important military mission of the US is to win back Raqqa province and for the same reason it prevents the Syrian Army's advance in that region," noted Lebanese Brigadier General (ret.) Ali Maqsoud.



By mid-December 2015, the Russian air operations settled into a routine. Russian intelligence has developed a clear picture of both the strategic posture of the Islamic State/Caliphate in Syria-Iraq and the Jihadist military posture in the key fronts where the Syrian and allied forces were operating. This intelligence picture enables the Russians to build a steady sustainable pace of operations. The Russians established a three-tier operational system.

The first tier - close air support for the Syrian-led ground forces - is conducted mainly by Su-25 attack aircraft and a variety of assault and attack helicopters. With many of the close air support sorties are emergency scrambles in response to crises on the front-line, the Russians improved markedly their reaction time. By mid-December, the reaction time for close air support by Su-25s from the Latakia area ranged from 10 minutes to the Idlib area and 25 minutes to the Deir ez-Zor area.

The second tier are the preplanned strikes by strike aviation - mainly Su-24s and Su-34s - against known objectives. The Russian Air Force sustains an average of 60-80 sorties a day against Jihadist infrastructure. The growing use of guided munitions enables the Russians to strike between 200 and 300 targets-a-day. By mid-December, the Russian Air Force struck "roughly 9,000 training camps, munition depots, command posts and oil refineries [that were] taken out overall." The pace of these sorties is expected to markedly rise in early 2016 as additional strike aircraft are deployed to Syria.

The third tier are the strategic strikes carried out by bombers of Long Range Aviation from bases in Russia. These strikes are mainly conducted in concentrated waves as per the strategic and political needs. By mid-December, reported the Commander of Russian Long Range Aviation General-Major Anatoly Konovalov, his bombers "carried out about 145 sorties in total; dropped over 1,500 bombs and fired about 20 air-launched cruise missiles."

On 25 December 2015, General-Lieutenant Sergey Rudskoy, the Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, disclosed that "Since September 30 Russian Aviation has conducted 5,240 sorties in Syria, including 145 sorties by Long-Range Aviation." Russian senior officials insist that the Russian Air Force can sustain this, and even higher, pace of operations "virtually indefinitely". The Kremlin is ready to escalate and expand the Russian air operations comes early 2016 in order to guarantee victory.

Speaking publicly in mid-December 2015, Putin addressed key aspects of the Russian presence and operations in Syria. Addressing military leaders on 11 December, Putin asserted that any future provocation or threat to the Russian forces would be met with swift escalatory retaliation. "I want to warn those who may again try to stage provocations against our troops," Putin stated. "I order you [Russia's High Command] to act in an extremely tough way. Any targets threatening Russia's [military] group or our land infrastructure must be immediately destroyed."

Meeting security service officials on 19 December, Putin addressed the Russian performance in Syria and the potential for expansion and escalation in the near future. "We see how effectively our pilots and intelligence officers work in Syria and how effectively they coordinate their efforts," Putin said. "At that, they are diversified, and the army, navy and aviation use the most modern weapons. ... I would like to note that these are by far not all of our capabilities. We have, by far, not used everything of what we already have. We have additional capabilities. If necessary, we will use them, too." Should the need arise, Putin stressed, Russia will escalate in order to guarantee victory. Putin and the Kremlin mean every word.



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Meanwhile, starting 7-10 October the Russian advisers and experts helped the Syrian Armed Forces launch a major strategic offensive aimed to change the overall posture of the government-held areas and their vicinity. Hence, the main ground operations have been taking place mainly in northern and northwestern Syria. In each area, the local force is built around a core Syrian Arab Army unit and includes a myriad of Syrian militias, Iranian Pasdaran regulars, Shiite forces of the Lebanese HizbAllah and numerous Iraqi, Afghan-Pakistani and other foreign militias. The Russians provide experts and advisers for the Syrian and Iranian commanders, experts in directing artillery fire and air-support, communications experts, and small Naval Infantry and SPETSNAZ security detachments for the Russian senior personnel and sensitive equipment.

In principle, fighting is very intense and dogged. Achievements on the battlefield are the aggregates of small unit engagements - fierce fighting over few houses and controlling hills. At times, advance is measured in hundreds of meters rather than kilometers. The Syrian and allied small units have proven increasingly successful due to the extremely accurate and efficient air support by Russian Mi-24s and Su-25s, and by Russian-guided Syrian and Iranian artillery fire. The ability to overwhelm the Jihadists with firepower makes all the difference.

The key to the success are the Russian thorough preparations of the Syrian Arab Army since the Spring of 2015. At the core was the organizing and training of a new Fourth Corps - or Corps No. 4 - for the launching of the strategic offensive against the Jihadist and other opposition forces. The new Corps is a further evolution of the major reorganization of the Syrian Arab Army starting Spring 2011, once it became clear that the fratricidal war will be protracted. At that time, the loyal elements of the Syrian army were reorganized into three ad-hoc "Corps" based on units considered reliable and loyal, and which are normally deployed along the Syrian-Israel border. These were:

- Corps No. 1 deployed in the Damascus area and the outlying towns and districts;
- Corps No. 2 deployed in central Syria and particularly the towns of Aleppo, Homs and Hama; and
- Corps No. 3 deployed in the south and Jabel Druze, including Daraa.

By mid-2015, these units and their tactical-organizational concepts have proven themselves for the Syrian army did not collapse and continued fighting quite effectively for four intense years.

In Spring 2015, Moscow concluded that the only way to break the deadlock resulting from the growing US and allied sponsorship of Jihadist forces and the ensuing, if unintended, rise of the Islamic State/Caliphate was to seize the initiative through a major escalation in order to bring the crisis to an end. Hence, starting early Summer 2015, the Russians expanded the flow of weapons, ammunition and other military supplies by sea and air. The numbers of military advisers, technicians and experts rose accordingly in an effort to cope with the escalation. In late-August, Syrian senior military officials described the latest developments as a "big shift" in Russian strategy and support. "Our ties are always developing but in these days a qualitative shift has happened. We call it a qualitative shift in Arabic, which means big," the Syrian officials said.

Meanwhile, Syria started pulling units from the battlefield in the Spring to prepare them for advanced training. This created troop shortages that led to major setbacks at the front. Most significant were the ensuing retreats from Idlib City and Palmyra. The Syrian High Command believed that reduced and stretched units will be able to hold out against larger numbers of Jihadists. However, Damascus underestimated grossly 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. Thus, the front-lines in Idlib and Palmyra crumbled quickly with the withdrawing forces leaving behind tanks, artillery and other weapons. Nevertheless, the imperative to effect strategic change convinced Damascus of the need to stick to the Russian plans despite the glaring military setbacks, and not to succumb to the temptation to resend the vacated units back to the front. Instead, the evacuated units continued their training and preparations of the new Fourth Corps.

Concurrently, Iran assumed responsibility for the popular mobilization and the deployment of a myriad of paramilitary forces - both Syrian and non-Syrian. IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps] Commander Brigadier General Hossein Hamadani was put in command of the organizing and training of all irregular forces and militias. Hamadani was killed in combat near Aleppo in northern Syria on 9 October. According to the Commander of the IRGC, Major General Muhammad Ali Jafari, "martyred Brigadier General Hamadani played an important role in convincing the Syrian officials, including President Bashar al-Assad, of the importance of organizing people as the only way to save Syria." His main achievement was organizing and preparing 100,000-strong popular forces in Syria to fight against the Jihadists. "Today, we are witnessing the organization of 100,000 Syrian people to fight against insecurities and Brigadier General Hamadani played an effective role in this regard," Jafari revealed on 17 October.

The Iran-organized and -enabled popular forces in northern and northwestern Syria are directly under the command of the IRGC's Central Command. They operate in conjunction with the Syrian High Command and particularly the Fourth Corps. At the core of this force are IRGC elite units that, in turn, control Syrian, Lebanese, Iraqi and Afghan-Pakistani Shiite militias. Some of these militias are actually semi-regular forces equipped with tanks and combat vehicles received from Iran and Iraq. The key Iranian unit is comprised of 1,500-2,000 commanders, trainers and military experts. Most of them arrived at the Basel Assad International Airport, adjacent to the Russian Hemeimeem Air Base near Latakia, in early October. (Another IRGC force also 1,500-2,000-strong arrived in Damascus at the same time and deployed in the Damascus area, central and southern Syria.)

The main non-Iranian units are the Syrian National Defense Forces (NDF) and Kataebat al-Ba'ath (the al-Ba'ath Battalions) that number between 20,000 and 25,000 troops of varying qualities and training in this area. Of great importance are the 1,000-strong elite forces of Lebanon's HizbAllah who operate both independently and as part of the IRGC command core. Another highly trained force of about 1,000 fighters is the predominantly Palestinian Liwaa al-Quds (the Jerusalem Brigade) recruited in the refugee camps of the Damascus area and Lebanon. Also of importance are the Iraqi Kataeb HizbAllah and Harakat al-Nujaba (the Nujaba Movement) units. These are combat hardened forces with extensive experience in Iraq. The Iraqi forces in northern and northwestern Syria are 4,000-strong and are organized in mechanized battalions equipped with tanks and armored combat vehicles. In addition, the Iranians deployed over 2,000 Afghan Shi'ite fighters notorious for their bravery and cruelty.

In its final phase, the Iranian effort was personally supervised by Major General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps - Qods Force. He traveled to forward positions, studied the preparations first hand, and addressed his troops. On 14 October, Soleimani addressed Iranian officers and HizbAllah fighters in a wooded area in Jabal al-Akrad (Kurdish Mountains) - then the hottest front in the northern Latakia province. He spent two days visiting all the Iranian and HizbAllah units in the area. By



18-19 October, Soleimani arrived in the Aleppo Governorate to supervise the preparations for the main offensive.

In early October, the Syrian Arab Army declared Corps No. 4 operational and ready for commitment to battle. The Fourth Corps was earmarked for playing the leading role in the forthcoming strategic offensive for the liberation of northern and northwestern Syria. "The formation of the Syrian Army's Fourth Corps will result in deep penetration into the northern areas and collapse of the terrorist groups," Lebanese military expert Issa al-Zaher opined. He explained that the key to the anticipated success of the Fourth Corps was its being comprised of "the Syrian army's elite forces who are well-experienced in combat under different geographical and climatic conditions, and they are familiar with different kinds of war tactics." According to Zaher, Corps No. 4 will be 60,000 to 100,000 troops strong as more units would join the Corps upon the completion of their training and preparations. "The Syrian army's artillery and missile attacks on the terrorists' positions in northern Syria showed that the terrorists have completely lost their power," Zaher explained. Actual offensive operations started throughout northwestern Syria between 7 and 10 October. Fighting quickly expanded to the Aleppo area.

Tehran was very optimistic about the prospects of the new Syrian offensive. In mid-October, Iranian Defense Minister Brigadier General Hossein Dehqan addressed Teheran's expectations in a speech to IRGC senior officers involved in Syria. The comments were made during the commemoration of the martyrdom of Brigadier General Hamadani. Dehqan expected "the new joint operations plan of Iran, Syria, Iraq and Russia" to destroy the Islamic State/Caliphate to be decisive. "At present, we are witnessing [the] start of new developments in Syria, thanks to the efforts and measures adopted by martyr Hamadani," Dehqan noted. "God willing, these developments will pave the ground for the full annihilation of the Takfiri groups."

In Damascus, Syrian senior officials were equally optimistic in view of the participation of Syria's main allies. In a mid-October briefing to foreign defense officials from allied states, two Syrian senior defense officials announced that "Syria's army and allies will soon launch a ground attack supported by Russian air strikes against rebels in the Aleppo area." They stressed that "the Syrian army and allied Iranian and HizbAllah forces are preparing for a ground offensive against rebels in the Aleppo area [to be] backed by Russian air strikes." In response to questions, the Syrian officials were very explicit. "The big battle preparations in that area are clear," the first official stated. "There is a large mobilization of the Syrian army ... elite HizbAllah fighters, and thousands of Iranians who arrived in stages in recent days." The second official stressed that Damascus and its strategic allies had already resolved to launch a decisive strategic offensive. "The decision to launch the battle of Aleppo has been taken," he reiterated. "It is no longer hidden that thousands of Iranians are now in Syria and their role is fundamental."

A week into the fighting, prominent military analysts in Lebanon were impressed with the initial results. Senior Political Analyst Ali Maqsood explained that the Russian bombings and supplies enabled the Syrian and allied forces to launch "massive and decisive operations" in the northern Syria. "Blizzard military operations which will be of decisive importance will soon start in Idlib, Jisr ash-Shughour and Aleppo," Maqsood said. He noted that the evolving offensive would change the fate of the region as "the US and Israeli plots are being defused in the region rapidly, and efforts to uproot terrorism in Syria have started."

Retired Lebanese Army General and Military Expert Amin Hateet concurred. The Russian bombing campaign was heralding a new strategic push on the ground. "We will witness victories of the [Syria-led] Resistance Front in the near future as a result of increasing assistance of Iran and Russia to Syria over the past two weeks," he



explained. The anti-terrorism campaign “has entered a new phase” in Syria as a direct result of the Russia-led joint effort. “The battleground conditions and the Syrian army’s advances in Syria have resulted in the failure of the plots hatched by the US to help the terrorist groups gradually advance in Syria and topple the Damascus government,” Hateet concluded.

The primary objective of the ground offensive is to consolidate Damascus’s control over the area from the Aleppo-Damascus corridor in the east to the shores of the Mediterranean and the Turkish and Lebanese borders to the west. This is the social- and economic-viable part of modern Syria - the urban, intellectual and economic part of the land. This is also the area inhabited by most urban-secular Sunni Arabs and the minorities (Alawites, Druze, Christians, the western Kurds, etc.). Once pacified and rebuilt, these areas will constitute a viable socio-economic entity. The Assad administration sought to consolidate this area back in 2011-2012 before being ensnared in futile fighting in the east and having the Turkey-based Jihadist forces invade Aleppo and provoke the still unfolding fratricidal fighting and siege. Thus, the main ground operations launched by the Syrian and allied forces in early October focus on attaining these objectives. Their aggregate outcome will be the consolidation of a viable western Syria.

To the south, several small units dissect and destroy methodically the Homs area pocket. The Syrian army’s primary objectives in the Homs area are to reopen the Homs-Hama Highway and to capture the strategic cities of Talbiseh and ar-Rastan that are currently Jihadist strongholds. The Jihadist forces in the area are mainly Jabhat al-Nusra (The Support Front [for the People of ash-Sham]) and Harakat Ahrar ash-Sham al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Movement of the Free Men of ash-Sham aka Ahrar ash-Sham), as well as local rebel forces affiliated with the Free Syrian Army and local Jihadist forces affiliated with the Islamic State. The leading units of the Syrian Arab Army in the northern Homs region are elements of the 3rd Armored and 11th Tank Divisions, supported by Syrian National Defense Forces (NDF) militias and HizbAllah units.

These forces are divided into small groupings that in a series of pincer attacks are dissecting the pockets into smaller sub-pockets. The Syrians are attempting to avoid protracted clashes and frontal assaults. Thus, the Syrian army’s initial goal is to create numerous Jihadist mini-pockets that, if they do not collapse soon, will be bombarded and starved through the Winter. The Syrian forces have proven capable of advancing and holding onto challenging terrain. In mid-November, the Syrian High Command deployed the elite Tiger Forces under Colonel Suheil al-Hassan to the northern Hama and east Homs regions in order to conduct deep raids and target killings that will put the Jihadist forces on the defensive and expedite the advance of the locally-deployed 87th Brigade and 47th Regiment of the 11th Tank Division. In mid-December, the Syrians also introduced the 120th Brigade of the 2nd Division along with NDF and SSNP support units in order to expand the offensive in the Maheen area south of Homs. The advance of all Syrian forces is made possible by Russian-guided Syrian artillery and close air support mainly by Russian Mi-24s and more recently Mi-35Ms that fly at roof-top altitude and strike small positions and individual vehicles.

In early December, the success of the Syrian forces against the Homs area pocket convinced the remaining Jihadist forces inside Homs that they were doomed. Consequently, on 7 December they signed a local truce and two days later, on 9 December, virtually all the Jihadists and their families vacated the al-Wair neighborhood of Homs. According to the Red Crescent, a few thousand people left Homs. Most of the Jihadists evacuated were Jabhat al-Nusra cadres. In Istanbul, Ahrar ash-Sham commanders claimed they instructed their cadre in Homs to go underground and disobey the agreement. On 12 December, the Jihadists blew up a huge car-bomb with over 150kg of High-Explosives near the Al-Ahli main hospital of Homs. At least twenty-five civilians



were killed and over seventy-five were wounded. The Islamic State claimed this was a martyrdom-bombing by one of its Jihadists. “Abu Ahmed al-Homsi parked his car in the Zahra neighborhood and exploded it among the Rafidis [a derogatory term for Shiites] before detonating his explosives belt,” the statement read. At the request of the Red Cross, Damascus agreed to sustain the truce and permit the last of the Jihadists and their families to leave Homs.

The westernmost major offensive is conducted mainly from the al-Ghaab Plains but also on the mountain crest overlooking the plain from the west. The key unit of the Syrian Arab Army is the 45th Regiment of the 1st Armored Division. Irregular forces include the National Defense Forces (NDF), the HizbAllah, the predominantly Christian-Lebanese Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), and the predominantly Latakia-Alawite Muqawama Souri (the Syrian Resistance). The key Jihadist forces are the Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaysh al-Fath (Army of Conquest), as well as the locally based Liwaa Suqour al-Ghaab (the al-Ghaab Hawks Brigade).

The offensive started with massive bombing by the Russian Air Force of Jihadist concentrations, facilities and positions - particularly on the mountains overlooking the main axes of advance. In a few days of intensive bombing, the Russians succeeded to destroy many of the Jihadist military installations in order to pave the way for the Syrian attack. Subsequently, every phase of the advance of the Syrian forces is preceded by powerful air-strikes by Russian Mi-24 attack helicopters on the Jihadist defensive positions. Meanwhile, Su-25s continue destroying Jihadist positions further away from the front lines.

The main Syrian push is in the direction of Jisr al-Shughour. The main force grouping is pushing northwards in the direction of the Turkish border in order to cut the main supply lines of the Jihadist forces in the entire northwestern Syria. The initial surge began on 10 October - spearheaded by a HizbAllah elite unit operating in the border area between the Idlib and Hama Provinces. Among the first fatalities was senior HizbAllah commander Hassan Hussein al-Haj (aka Abu Muhammad al-Eqleem). He was killed in the Sahl al-Qab region. On 16 October, the Syrians also opened another western thrust toward the al-Mansoura Grain Silos - the site of major al-Qaida-affiliated Central Asian and North Caucasus forces.

This push was reinforced in late-November in the aftermath of the shooting down of the Russian Su-24 and Mi-38 over this area. Most important is the deployment of the Syrian Arab Army's 103rd Brigade of the Republican Guard along with the National Defense Forces (NDF) of Latakia City, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), the Muqawama Souri (the Syrian Resistance) elements, as well as Iranian and HizbAllah reinforcements. They spanned along three different axes in the Latakia Governorate's northern countryside along the Turkish border. The reinforcements led by the 103rd Brigade of the Republican Guard enabled the expansion of the area of operations so that by early-December the Syrian forces were in control of the entire area south of the Turkish border - cutting the main supply lines of the Jihadists from the Turkish town of Reihanly. By mid-December, the main fighting were with Jabhat al-Nusra and the Free Syrian Army at the Al-Nuba Mountains inside the southern rim of the Turkmen Mountain chain.

A parallel thrust is evolving northwest of Hama. The main thrust is an enveloping force moving to the northwest on the road toward both Jisr al-Shugour from the east and Idlib from the south. The surge of this force was made possible by a major frontal attack in the direction of Kafr Nabudah that prevented, at high cost, the Jihadists from intercepting the surge. As well, the Syrians exploited the situation to launch another thrust to the east toward Khan Sheikhoun and the M4 Aleppo-Latakia Highway (linking up with another force advancing westwards to jointly encircle large Jihadist pockets). The key units of the Syrian Arab Army are the 87th Brigade of the 10th Tank Division that pushes north, the 106th Brigade of the Republican Guard that



pushes east, and platoons from the 7th and 9th Divisions along with units of the NDF, the SSNP and local Shiite militias that remain entangled in the Kafr Nabudah area. The key Jihadist forces in the area are the Free Syrian Army's 101st Brigade, Liwaa Suqour al-Ghaab, the predominantly Homs-raised Faylaq ash-Sham (the Sham Legions), Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar ash-Sham.

This was the first major operation in the area since the Summer of 2014. At first the Syrians surprised the defenders of the strategic Kafr Nabudah. After a couple of days of intense fighting in the dense build-up area they controlled most of the village. However, the Jihadists rushed in reinforcements and were able to launch a counter-attack on 9 October. Most important was the arrival of the 13th Division of the Free Syrian Army under the command of Ahmad al-Seoud that brought with it a dozen TOW launchers recently supplied by the US and Saudi Arabia. "They are highly effective. They are breaking the Russian-Iranian and Syrian army," al-Seoud gloated. By mid-October, the township was saturated with Jihadists and intense house-to-house fighting continue. The Russian Air Force helps with preventing additional Jihadist reinforcements from arriving, but has little impact on the urban fighting.

The Jihadist focus on Kafr Nabudah enabled the Syrian military to launch two successful deep surges. To the west, the 87th Brigade of the 10th Tank Division surged in the direction of both Jisr al-Shugour from the east and Idlib from the south. The Syrian military enjoyed massive close air support by Russian Mi-24s and Su-25s that effectively made the advance possible. The Brigade advanced 70km in the first couple of days. That put the Syrians some 50km into an area controlled by some of the best Saudi Arabian-equipped units of Jaysh al-Fath. Initially, the Russian Air Force successfully targeted the various Jihadist forces in villages overlooking the main route taken by the Brigade. However, on 14 October Jaysh al-Fath along with Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar ash-Sham launched a large-scale counter-offensive in an effort to slow down the 87th Brigade of the 10th Tank Division. Extremely accurate Russian air-strikes enabled the Syrian forces to defeat the counter-offensive after lengthy and bitter fighting. On 18 October, the Brigade resumed its rapid advance northwards.

Meanwhile, and under comparable conditions, the 106th Brigade of the Republican Guard surged in the general northeastern direction. The Brigade was the western pincer in an effort to reach the strategic city Khan Sheikhoun and the M4 Aleppo-Latakia Highway. A few days later, the Syrians were able to complete the encirclement of the Khan Sheikhoun area even though localized clashes continued for a while, particularly with Jabhat al-Nusra mobile units. By early-November, this pincer maneuver succeeded to encircle the local Jihadist forces and created three large Jihadist pockets to the north of Hama. The surge of the 106th Brigade was made possible by intensive and very accurate close air support by Russian Mi-24s and Su-25s. By early December, Syrian military and militia forces were systematically destroying these pockets.

The secondary thrust to the east of Hama turned out to be a major success. The key units of the Syrian Arab Army are most of the 11th Tank Division and the remaining elements of the 7th and 9th Divisions. Irregular elements include units of the NDF, the SSNP and local Shiite militias. The main Jihadist forces are Jaysh al-Fath, Ahrar ash-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, the predominantly Palestinian Jund al-Aqsa and the Free Syrian Army.

The primary mission of this force grouping was to advance westward and northwestward in order to complete the pincer with the 106th Brigade arriving from the West. The elements of the 7th and 9th Divisions moved along the M4 and south of Khan Sheikhoun to link with the 106th Brigade - thus completing the encirclement of the three main Jihadist pockets in the North Hama Plain. Meanwhile the elements of the 11th Tank Division surged to the north from a point to the east. Their primary mission was to turn westward, encircle Khan Sheikhoun from the north, link up with the joint force of the 106th Brigade and the elements of the 7th and 9th



Divisions, and thus create another pocket that includes Khan Sheikhoun and adjacent villages. These units encountered heavy resistance from Jihadist forces that used tanks, rockets and artillery pieces in order to try and block the Syrians. Russian Mi-24s destroyed many of the Jihadist combat vehicles. These maneuvers also disrupted and cut the Jihadist lines of communications from the north toward Hama and Homs. The rapid advance of the Syrian forces quickly created a series of Jihadist pockets that will ultimately be bombarded and starved through the Winter.

Originally, the secondary mission of the elements of the 11th Tank Division was to feint a major push northward toward al-Tamanah in the general direction of Idlib to the northwest. However, once the Syrians breached the main Jihadist lines on 13 October, they discovered that the area was empty. The Syrian command decided to focus on the northward thrust in order to help the closure on Idlib and redirected more platoons to this task. The Russian Air Force allocated several Su-25s and Mi-24s to providing air-support to the Syrian forces while Su-24Ms bombed key Jihadist facilities in the villages of Atshan, al-Tamanah and Tel Sukayk that were standing in the way of the Syrian surge. By 16 October, the Syrian forces advanced more than 80 km toward Idlib. Counter-attacks by Jihadist forces slowed down the Syrian surge as Russian Su-25s and Mi-24s to launched relentless air-strikes against the Jihadist positions. However, by late-October the Syrian 11th Tank Division was able to renew the dogged if slower advance toward Idlib. Meanwhile, commanders of all the Jihadist factions blamed each other for the initial collapse of the Jihadist lines and the failure to block the Syrian forces. The crisis built on existing tensions between Ahrar ash-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra and between Jund al-Aqsa over the refusal of the latter to fight the Islamic State forces. Fratricidal fighting ensued among the various Jihadist forces - a chaotic situation exploited by the Syrian forces in order to sustain their advance.

Taken together, these operations removed the threat to the Alawite heartlands including the Russian bases and the roads to Damascus - that is, the M5 and M4 corridors. While the Jihadist forces are far from being defeated - they have been put on the strategic defense. After more than two months of intense fighting, the Syrian forces proved capable of sustaining the momentum. The Syrian and allied forces were able to withstand and mostly repel repeated counter-attacks by Turkey-based Jihadist forces, including freshly trained units equipped with large numbers of TOW ATGMs and other sophisticated weapons. In mid-December, the Syrian forces expanded the areas under government control on all fronts. Should the Syrian and allied forces be able to maintain tight siege of the Jihadist pockets during the winter - it will be very difficult for the Jihadist forces to rebound in Spring 2016. Only massive reinforcements from across the Turkish border will be able to reverse the current trend.

The other major strategic effort is in the greater Aleppo area. Liberating what used to be Syria's second largest city and the center of the national economy has long been a major objective of Damascus. Back in 2011-12, the predominantly secular and sectarianly diverse Aleppo sought to stay out of the revolt and insurrection. However, Aleppo was pushed into war by Jihadist forces that infiltrated from Turkey and occupied large parts of the city. The ensuing fratricidal carnage resulted in the destruction of both the city and Syria's urbane elite. Hence, the liberation of Aleppo has quickly become the primary uncompleted strategic task for the Assad administration and its allies.

To accomplish the task, Damascus organized a major force grouping under Corps No. 4 with the 4th Mechanized Division as the key unit. Although the 4th Mechanized Division took part in major military operations such as the al-Qusayr battle (May 2013) and the Qalamoun Mountain offensives (December 2013 and June 2015) - it was deployed to the Aleppo offensive in early October with only partial elements. The initial offensive opera-



tions were conducted only by the Division's 42nd and 63rd Brigades. These shortages were compensated by large units of the Syrian National Defense Forces and Kataebat al-Ba'ath, as well as a large assortment of Iranian Pasdaran, Lebanese HizbAllah, Palestinian Liwaa al-Quds, Iraqi Kataeb HizbAllah and Harakat al-Nujaba, and Afghan Shiite fighters. These semi-regular and militia forces are under the direct command of several senior officers from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Central Command.

In the second half of November, as fighting in the Aleppo theater escalated and expanded, the Syrian and Iranian High Commands introduced significant reinforcements. Most important was the completion of the 4th Mechanized Division with the introduction of the 154th Brigade. The 154th Brigade is a unique and important unit because it is predominately made-up of Sunni volunteers from the Aleppo Governorate who are fighting to liberate their homes from the Jihadists. Concurrently, the Iranians deployed to the Aleppo theater additional IRGC elite units, HizbAllah special forces and major elements of the Harakat al-Nujaba.

In mid-December, elite tank battalions of the 4th Mechanized Division received the new T-90 tanks after brief training in order to be able to break through the defenses saturated with US-made TOW ATGMs. The combination of Russian-guided artillery and air support and T-90 attacks proved extremely effective in opening up axes of advance for the conventional units armed with T-72s and even T-55s, as well as assortment of softer combat vehicles.

In early October, the Aleppo-area offensive started with sub-operations to the north. The Syrians launched numerous offensive sweeps from the Bashkuy area in order to disconnect the main supply route from central Turkey. The Syrians focused on the narrow corridor where the supply-lines of both the US- and Turkey-sponsored forces - such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar ash-Sham and the Free Syrian Army - and the Turkey- and allies-sponsored forces of the Islamic State are running in close proximity. Consequently, the Islamic State forces have repeatedly attempted hard to envelop the Syrian forces by pushing back Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar ash-Sham forces - resulting in fratricidal fighting among the Jihadist forces. By mid-December, the area remained a major flash point as Turkey-based Jihadists repeatedly commit major forces in order to breach the Syrian lines, and thus sustain short-term corridors in order to supply the Jihadist forces in and around Aleppo. Ultimately, the Syrian military push is getting results for Jihadists in the entire Aleppo area complain about acute shortages in weapons and ammunition.

In mid-October, the Syrian and allied forces started launching probing attacks into central Aleppo. Most attacks were by small armored units operating from the general area of the Aleppo International Airport. The looming battle for Aleppo has become politically explosive because the US, Turkey, Qatar and other allies have openly supplied weapons, including TOW ATGMs, to all the Jihadist forces explicitly in order to resist the Russia-supported Syrian and allied forces. Thus, the US and its allies have created for the first time an explicit Proxy-clash between the great powers. The Kremlin is adamant on winning in Aleppo. Hence, starting early December, the Russians rushed in heavy artillery and T-90s that turned around the military situation. The Jihadist forces are compelled to withdraw under the superior firepower and persistent thrust of the Syrian forces. The fact that the 154th Brigade along with HizbAllah special forces spearhead the entry into Aleppo itself already results in cooperation by the local population.

To the west and south, Syrian and allied forces focused on expanding the Syrian corridor leading from the Latakia area into southern Aleppo. This corridor is the key to the Syrian ability to sustain the offensive effort and rush reinforcements and supplies as need be. The key objective is to reach the northern parts of the M5. Little wonder that the Jihadist forces have committed to the war on the road some of their best forces in the



area. Indeed, several counter-attacks by Jihadist forces were at times able to block the axis for several days. Fighting to sustain this supply route has thus become a constant drain on Syrian forces and Russian close air support. By mid-November, the Syrian forces finally widened the corridor to the point it is virtually impossible to cut it. Nevertheless, Jihadist raiding forces continue to lay ambushes against Syrian convoys - compelling the Syrians to sustain heavy forces - now predominantly National Defense Forces and Kataebat al-Ba'ath - along the roads.

A crucial separate operation in the Aleppo area was the lifting of the Islamic State's three-year siege of the Kuweires Military Airport that entrapped 314 officers and soldiers. The operation was led by the Cheetah Force special forces now under the command of Colonel Shady Ismail. The Cheetah Force spent 45 days in southeast Aleppo - 34 of them doggedly fighting to lift the siege. In these 34 days, the Syrian special forces covered the 10 km between the Syrian lines and the besieged airbase. They fought hard for every rock and house with daily advance measured in tens of meters. Constant Russian close air support guided by on-site Naval Infantry SPETSNAZ was instrumental in facilitating the advance toward the Kuweires Air Base.

By mid-November, the Syrian forces entered the perimeter and lifted the 35-month long siege. In the process, the Cheetah Force also conducted raids against the Islamic State throughout the Kuweires area. In one raid, they target killed Mohammad Hamdoush - the Morocco-born "Kokeeto the Beheader" who executed numerous captured soldiers and civilians. On 18 November, HizbAllah elite forces reinforced the Kuweires Military Airbase as the Cheetah Force withdrew. That day, the Syrian Air Force officially resumed military operations from the Kuweires Air Base. However, Air Force jets still have to reach sufficiently high altitudes over Syrian-held areas because of prevalent Jihadist anti-aircraft guns. Meanwhile, Syrian and HizbAllah forces keep expanding the Kuweires area pocket.

On 15 December, Tiger Force Commander Colonel Suheil al-Hassan was promoted to the rank of Major General. For more than a year, Suheil al-Hassan had adamantly refused promotion to Brigadier General in order not to be taken away from his troops. Currently, the new Major General al-Hassan is commanding all the special forces and units, including the Tiger Force, in the Aleppo Governorate's eastern countryside.

Taken together, the Syrian and allied operations in the greater Aleppo area are the precursor for the Syrian inevitable major offensive to retake Aleppo from the Jihadists most likely in Spring 2016.

By the end of 2015, the overall military situation in Syria remains complex. Russian senior military experts define it as a combination of tactical achievements and a strategic adverse posture. Indicative of these tactical achievements, the experts noted, is the fact that "the nearest front-line has been pushed back from some 25 kilometers from the Hemeimeem [Air] Base to about 50 kilometers." At the same time, however, the Islamic State/Caliphate keeps expanding the territory it controls at the expense of other Jihadist forces - while focusing greater resources on the export of the Jihad to foreign lands. The Islamic State/Caliphate "is spreading: the militants control about 70% of Syrian territory and the majority of Iraq. The number [of terrorists] is close to 60,000. They might transfer to Central Asia and the Caucasus," warned Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on 11 December.

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The Russian campaign is conducted under extremely adverse conditions at the strategic-political level. While the Russian-led campaign has been changing profoundly the situation in and around Syria, the Obama White House focused on undermining and failing the Russian undertaking virtually at all cost. Obsessed with, and



immersed in, a risky election campaign - Turkey's President Recep Tayipp Erdogan and his inner-circle resolved to capitalize on Obama's fixation with Putin in order to enhance both their own political fortunes and Turkey's strategic-economic posture.

Already on 10 October 2015, when the extent of the Russian supported Syrian offensive became clear, Turkey's Erdogan started discussions with his innermost circle about drastic ways to provoke the US-led NATO into intervening in the crisis and coercing Russia to abandon victory and the entire Middle East. Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu concluded that only the threat of a major war with the US-led NATO could coerce the Kremlin into abandoning their intervention in Syria. It was, therefore, imperative for Turkey to provoke the threat of such a war. On 11 October, the authoritative Turkish blogger known as "Fuat Avni" reported that "erdogan is afraid of election and thinking about shooting down russian war plane [sic]."

Erdogan's AKP won a decisive victory in the 2 November elections - reversing the June setback. The two main reasons for the electoral victory involved Russia. First, was the AKP's strong commitment to supporting pan-Turkic causes including in the Caucasus, the Crimea and the greater Central Asia (including China's Xinjiang) that stole thunder from the nationalist MHP. However, all of these issues are deemed vital interests by the Kremlin. The second issue was the threat of relentless crackdown of the Kurds in an escalating war that is sliding into the de-facto Kurdish state in Syria-Iraq. Putin has repeatedly stated Russia's support for the Kurds.

Moreover, the war with the Kurds necessitates the marked increase in the sponsorship of, and support for, numerous Jihadist forces in Syria-Iraq, including the Islamic State/Caliphate, by Turkish Intelligence. Indeed, back on 18 October, Turkey's intelligence chief Hakan Fidan addressed Western senior intelligence officials. He accused Moscow of trying to "smother" the Islamist revolution in Syria and throughout the Middle East. He highlighted Ankara's support for the Islamic State/Caliphate and the imperative to stop Putin from destroying the Islamists of Syria. "ISIS is a reality and we have to accept that we cannot eradicate a well-organized and popular establishment such as the Islamic State; therefore, I urge my western colleagues to revise their mindset about Islamic political currents, put aside their cynical mentalité and thwart Vladimir Putin's plans to crush Syrian Islamist revolutionaries," Fidan stated. Thus, Erdogan put Turkey on a collision course with Russia with Obama cheering.

Turkey on a collision course with Russia

Ankara still needed a major provocation in order to keep Moscow on the defensive. It thus became even more imperative for Turkey to guarantee US endorsement and support for fear of a Russian retribution. The idea of shooting down a Russian aircraft kept coming up at the highest levels and the Obama White House promised to stand behind Erdogan. On 6 November, the USAF deployed six F-15C interceptors to Incirlik, Turkey, in order "to assist in training and participate in missions with Turkish F-16s guarding Turkish airspace." The USAF's six F-15E strike aircraft originally committed for the escalation of the bombing in Syria as part of Operation Inherent Resolve would not arrive in Incirlik until mid-November. Concurrently, US and NATO AWACS patrols along the Turkish-Syrian border intensified.

On 15 November, Obama met with Erdogan during the G-20 Summit in Antalya, Turkey, to discuss Syria. Obama reiterated that the US prioritized overthrowing the Assad administration over fighting the Islamic State. Obama stated the US "insistence that we will redouble our efforts, working with other members of the coalition, to bring about a peaceful transition in Syria and to eliminate Daesh [the Islamic State] as a force that can create so much pain and suffering for people in Paris, in Ankara, and in other parts of the globe."



Subsequently, Obama conceded that the Russian intervention in Syria meant an end to Erdogan's pet project - namely, establishing Turkish hegemony by declaring a no-fly zone in Syria. Obama did so by raising doubts about the viability of declaring a no-fly zone in Syria without boots on the ground. "There have been some who are well-meaning, and I don't doubt their sincerity when it comes to the issue of the dire humanitarian situation in Syria, who, for example, call for a no-fly zone or a safe zone of some sort. ... After we've gone through a lot of planning and a lot of discussion, and really working it through, it is determined that it would be counterproductive to take those steps - in part because [the Islamic State] does not have planes, so the attacks are on the ground," Obama explained. "A true safe zone requires us to set up ground operations. And the bulk of the deaths that have occurred in Syria, for example, have come about not because of regime bombing, but because of on-the-ground casualties." Under current circumstances, Obama conceded, it would be imprudent to start a no-fly zone without knowing "how would it end?"

Obama's resolve to confront Russia was strengthened after his embarrassing short meeting with Putin. Obama tried to dictate in the name of vaguely defined principles while demonstrating repeatedly his lack of mastership of facts and shallow analysis of the situation on the ground. Obama insisted that regime change - "a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition" - must take precedence over anything else in Syria. Obama also insisted Russia must stop bombing most of Assad's enemies. Putin would hear nothing of it. However, Putin's attempts to articulate the Kremlin's analysis of the Middle East and the logic behind Russia's policies and operations hit a brick wall. Publicly, Kremlin foreign policy adviser Yuri Ushakov tried to soften the extent of the disagreements. "Strategic objectives relating to the fight against the Islamic State are, in principle, very similar, but there are differences on the tactics side," Ushakov summed up the meeting.

Privately, Obama and Erdogan fumed about what they considered Putin's affront. According to a senior Turkish intelligence official, Erdogan argued, and Obama concurred, that it became imperative "to teach Putin a lesson". Thus, Obama was laying the ground for the escalatory provocation by Ankara. Indeed, after the shoot-down of the Russian aircraft, numerous Arab senior officials insisted that "the Su-24 decision was taken by Obama and Erdogan at the G-20 summit in Antalya." According to these officials, Erdogan presented Obama with "a plan to shoot down the aircraft of the Russian Federation on the border with Syria" and "received support" from Obama for the provocation. "Fuat Avni" also reported that "Erdogan was the one to give order to shoot down the Russian bomber over Syria under the false pretext that the aircraft violated Turkish airspace" after consulting with Obama.

On 24 November, Turkey moved for the kill. The Turkish High command learned that the Russians were planning a bombing campaign just south of the Turkish border near the border crossing of Yamadi. The original target of the bombing raid was camps of Jihadists from Russia's North Caucasus sponsored by Turkish Intelligence. Turkey was provided the advance notice by the US. The US was provided the detailed information by the Russians as part of the bilateral agreement to provide advance notification in order to prevent misunderstandings over Syria. Significantly, the bilateral agreement stipulated explicitly that the data provided by both signatories must not be shared with third parties such as Turkey or Syria. Thus, the US violated the agreement with Russia.

According to Turkish data, the two F-16CJs took off from Diyarbakir - 400 km away from the shoot-down point - at 08:40, and did not reach their loitering zone until 09:11/09:12. The F-16CJs loitered for about an hour and fifteen minutes. The fighters loitered quite low - between 7,500 and 8,000 feet - well below the coverage of the Syrian and Russian radars near Latakia. This is a very fuel-inefficient altitude - so there must have been a



specific order. Moreover, the F-16CJs couldn't see the Su-24Ms, even though they were at higher altitudes, from behind the mountains. They would need guidance from Turkish radar as well as the USAF F-15Cs and AWACS loitering nearby.

The two Su-24Ms took off only at 09:45 and reached their pre-strike loitering spot about 45-50 km inland at 09:51. The Su-24s entered Turkish radar coverage at 9:52 and were immediately pick-up and homed onto. The Su-24Ms were kept on-station by the Russian forward air controller for twenty minutes - until 10:11 when their target was cleared. They completed their first bombing run at 10:16 and circled for a second run. The F-16CJs moved to shooting position at 10:21 and headed toward the Su-24M at 10:22-10:23 - that is even before the Su-24M reached the wedge in the Turkish-Syrian border. The Su-24Ms lined-up for the strike run at 10:22. They were at the wedge's edge (either side of the tip) by 10:23. The Su-24Ms were met by the lead F-16CJ and chased 4-5 km into Syrian territory. The F-16CJ arrival was precisely timed and guided to the missile-shooting position. The Su-24M was shot down on 10:24 while 5-7 km inside Syria as he was pulling off the target.

By Russian account, the Su-24M never crossed the Turkish border and the closest the Su-24M reached the southern tip of the wedge was about 1km. The Turkish account, that is backed by the US and NATO, insists that the Su-24M skirted the border and stayed in Turkish airspace a total of either 12 seconds or 17/18 seconds. The so-called "airspace violation" was so close to the border that the Pentagon acknowledged to Congress that they "cannot confirm" that the downed Su-24 "was in the Turkish airspace." (With evidence mounting that the Su-24M was indeed at least 1 km south of the wedge when engaged and shot down by the F-16CJ, the Turkish High Command came up with a new version in mid-December. According to the revised account, the 17/18-second-long violation of Turkish airspace took place in the first run - at 10:15 - and the F-16CJs were only then guided for a revenge shoot down of the Su-24M on the second run - at 10:24 - even though at that point they were clearly inside Syrian airspace. This new account reinforces the Russian accusation of a preplanned ambush.)

There is no way the Turks could broadcast the ten warnings in the one minute the doomed Su-24M was heading toward the target in the second bombing run. Moreover, the frequency allegedly used by the Turks, as acknowledged by the US and NATO, is one KNOWN to US and NATO intelligence - and thus also Turkish intelligence - to NOT being available in Su-24M cockpits. The Russians and other countries closely monitoring the region have no record of such forewarning. The Pentagon could not provide Congress with a recording of even one of the "ten warnings" the Turks insist that they issued before ordering their F-16s to shoot down the Su-24.

Throughout, there were suspicious activities of the US Air Force in the area. USAF F-15Cs from Incirlik Air Base assumed loitering position off Iskenderun shortly after 09:00 - when the Turkish F-16CJs were arriving at their loitering spot. The F-15Cs loitered at high altitude so that the Russian radar could see them clearly as providing cover for the Turkish F-16CJs in case the Russians were contemplating retaliation. The F-15Cs left the area shortly after the shoot-down. Meanwhile, a USAF E-3 Sentry AWACS took off from the Preveza airbase in Greece in the early morning and loitered off the Turkish coast. The E-3's radar covered the entire crisis area and coordinated activities of the USAF F-15Cs and Turkish F-16CJs. The USAF AWACS could not have failed to detect the Russian Su-24Ms and identify them as such in time to forewarn the Turkish F-16CJs - IF the US wanted to. On the contrary, communications patterns strongly suggest that the AWACS up-dated the Turkish F-16CJs on the position and speed of the Russian Su-24Ms so that the F-16CJ could close in at low altitude and launch



without any effort to identify his prey in advance. It was a quick run and a launch on a target well-known in advance.

The two Russian pilots ejected safely from the burning Su-24M and descend above the bombing area - some 5-7 km inside Syria. The area is controlled by the Alwiya al-Ashar (the Tenth Brigade) of the Syrian Turkmen Brigades. This is a very important Jihadist unit that belongs to Turkish Intelligence and is closely sponsored by the CIA. Significantly, the patron of the Syrian Turkmen Brigades is Bilal Erdogan - the son of Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan. The two pilots were shot at while descending under their parachutes. One was wounded badly, captured and summarily executed. The other was slightly wounded. He pretended to have died and rolled, seemingly uncontrollably, into the thick vegetation. The Jihadists did not go after him. He would be later rescued by a team of Syrian and Iranian special forces led by a Russian SPETSNAZ team. Iranian sources claim that Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani personally oversaw the rescue effort.

The Russians immediately launched a search and rescue Mi-38 helicopter. As it neared the shoot-down area, it was shot down by fighters of the First Coastal Front using a US-made and Saudi-supplied TOW missile. The First Coastal Front of the Free Syrian Army is one of the "moderate" groups formally sponsored by the CIA. Initially, the First Coastal Front reported that all the Russians were killed in the crash and a follow-up mortar and machine-gun attack on the wreckage. The helicopter was later destroyed by mortar fire. In reality, only one Russian Naval Infantry SPETSNAZ was killed and a few were wounded when the Mi-38 was shot down. The pilots crash landed and the Russian crew were able to escape the crashed helicopter before it was destroyed by machine-gun and mortar fire. A second Russian helicopter reached them once the fire was over and evacuated all to safety. The shoot down of the Russian Mi-38 helicopter was a preplanned ambush. Normally, the First Coastal Front, and all other Jihadist forces, are not present in the ambush area because it is virtually on the Turkish border. Hence, they must have been instructed to specially deploy and wait for the Russian search and rescue helicopter the planners of the provocation knew would come to search for the Su-24 aircrew.

Internally, Ankara immediately took credit for a pre-planned operation at the behest of the highest officials. On 25 November, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu addressed a closed meeting of AKP senior politicians and stalwarts. His speech focused on the assertive policies of the new Turkish Government as a regional power and a global power focused on pan-Turkic causes. Davutoglu then claimed that he personally ordered the shooting down of the Russian Su-24. "Despite all the warnings, we had had to destroy the aircraft," Davutoglu stated. "The Turkish Armed Forces carried out orders given by me personally." In the subsequent weeks many other Turkish leaders, including Erdogan, will stress the point that the shoot-down was a preplanned operation aimed to alter Russia's regional policy.

At the Kremlin, senior officials were shocked by the flagrant provocation. They let it be known that Moscow would retaliate but neither quickly nor in a provocative way. Putin called the incident "a stab in the back [by] accomplices of terrorists." He wondered why Turkey had to shoot down the Su-24 even if it strayed into Turkish airspace (which Russia denies) because "either way, our pilots and our plane were not posing a threat to the Republic of Turkey." Putin expects long-term consequences. "This tragic event will have serious consequences for Russian-Turkish relations. We have always regarded Turkey not only as a close neighbor, but also as a friendly state. I don't know who needed what was done today, but we didn't in any case," Putin said. The Kremlin was apprehensive that Ankara would use the incident as an excuse to increase and escalate NATO's involvement in Syria-Iraq. Putin complained that "Instead of contacting us immediately Turkey addressed their



NATO partners - as if it was us who downed their plane, not vice versa. Do they want to put NATO at the service of ISIL?"

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev put the Turkish shoot-down in context. "Turkey's actions are de facto protection of [the] Islamic State," Medvedev said. "This is no surprise, considering the information we have about direct financial interest of some Turkish officials relating to the supply of oil products refined by plants controlled by ISIS. The reckless and criminal actions of the Turkish authorities ... have caused a dangerous escalation of relations between Russia and NATO, which cannot be justified by any interest, including protection of state borders." The Kremlin started studying a plan to ruin Turkish economy. Russia immediately froze, and might cancel, several important projects with Turkey. Russia barred Turkish companies from the lucrative Russian market. Russia scraped the Turkish Stream gas pipeline that would have turned Turkey into a major transit country of natural gas going to Europe. Russia also canceled the construction of Turkey's first nuclear power plant.

In Washington, President Obama immediately threw his support behind Erdogan. "Turkey," he said, "has a right to defend its territory and its airspace." The US intention in encouraging and supporting the Turks is to ruin the Russian-European rapprochement led by France. The close military cooperation against the Islamic State is fast restoring the overall strategic-economic cooperation Washington had succeeded to disrupt by flaring up the fratricidal war in Ukraine. The Obama White House is determined to prevent this Euro-Russian improvement of relations at all cost. That's why the shoot-down incident took place while French President Hollande was in Washington and on his way to Moscow.

Ultimately, the Erdogan-Obama gamble backfired. The Kremlin remained adamant and escalated the military campaign in Syria. Moreover, under incessant Turkish, Saudi and Qatari pressure even the most "moderate" forces were gravitating under the umbrellas of the Islamic State/Caliphate and the numerous al-Qaida-affiliates. Under such circumstances, larger swaths of the prostrate Syrian populace were escaping Syria while the majority of those internally displaced were seeking the protection of the Assad administration.

On 16 December, Obama and Kerry grudgingly accepted the Kremlin's position and conceded that there would not be a regime change anytime soon. "The United States and its partners are not seeking regime change in Syria," Kerry said at the Kremlin. Although the US continued to insist that Assad could not remain Syria's future leader - Washington would not let this stand in the way of cooperating with Moscow. "Despite the different positions of our countries, we have shown that Russia and the United States are moving in the same direction," Kerry insisted. He accepted the Russian priorities. "No one should be forced to choose between a dictator and being plagued by terrorists," Kerry said. Indeed, the rebels' demand that Assad leave immediately is a "nonstarting position, obviously." The focus should now be "not on our differences about what can or cannot be done immediately about Assad," Kerry argued. Rather, Moscow and Washington should focus on facilitating a peace process in which "Syrians will be making decisions for the future of Syria." Kerry concluded by reiterating that "The world is better off when Russia and the US work together. ... There is no policy of the United States, per se, to isolate Russia."

The Kremlin was less charitable. Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova refused to endorse Kerry's enthusiasm and optimism. "Serious differences remain between Russia and the United States over ways to resolve the Syrian crisis" she said. Zakharova added that while the Kremlin considered Kerry's comments as "a public abandonment of the US policy against Russia," this change came about solely because the American policy of isolation "failed". The Kremlin was waiting for tangible developments on the ground before



formulating policy. "In regards to Washington's specific actions, we will see, because 'by their fruits ye shall know them'", Zakharova said.

On 18 December, the US evacuated the USAF F-15Cs from Turkey. No explanation was given.

Ankara, however, continued to escalate the crisis. In a 22 December speech on Turkish TV, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu complained that Russia was inexplicably exploiting that "crash" issue as part of an incessant campaign to take "every conceivable opportunity to undermine Turkey." Hence, although Russia was a valued trading partner - Moscow should realize that Turkey's "patience is limited." Russia, Cavusoglu stressed, should face reality and "should be very scared and wary of Turkey." Cavusoglu concluded by threatening Russia with war. "Certainly my government behaves like a mature and experienced government, but our patience has limits... Faced with Russian efforts, we have, no fear, no remorse. We act with moderation, to bring our relations back to normal... However, if necessary, I can assure you, we can occupy Russia in less than seven days with NATO and our regional allies."

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The Putin-Netanjahu Duet

Starting early October, the Israeli-Russian strategic cooperation continued to improve. The primary impediment to this improvement has been the incessant pressure put by the Obama White House on Netanyahu. Consequently, time and again, Jerusalem let itself be dragged into regional undertakings that were both flagrantly anti-Putin and detrimental to Israel's own national security interests solely in order to pacify the furious and vindictive Obama.

Implementation of the strategic understandings reached in September during Netanyahu's brief visit to Moscow for discussions with Putin proved more complicated than initially assumed. Although the Israeli delegation of eleven senior military and intelligence officers reached concrete and forthcoming arrangements with their Russian counterparts - event on the ground would soon demonstrate that misunderstandings remained on both sides.

First came an incident on the Golan Heights related to the prominent role played by the IRGC's Brigadier General Saeed Azadi. Azadi arrived in Quneitra in early September as the belated replacement of IRGC General Ali Allah Dadi who was target-killed by Israel back on January 18, 2015, along with several Iranian and HizbAllah notables while visiting the Israeli border near Quneitra. Azadi was wearing two hats - the commander of the Iranian-HizbAllah forces supporting the Syrian military in the fighting in southern Syria and the chief adviser to, and de-facto commander of, the Iranian-HizbAllah forces preparing to open a new front against Israel on the Golan Heights. After the Israeli target-killing back in January of the then notional commander Jihad Moughniyah, Samir Quntar emerged as the claimant commander on behalf of the HizbAllah.

On 25 September, Azadi ordered his forces to fire a few rockets into Israel's Golan Heights. Jerusalem protested and was assured the fired was "errant". The next day, 26 September, Azadi ordered a second firing of a few rockets. At the time, Azadi was operating in the headquarters of the Syrian 90th Brigade just outside Quneitra. This time, Israel retaliated by launching a Tamuz missile against the artillery command post of the Syrian 90th Brigade - causing damage and injuring several including the deputy commander.

Putin contacted Netanyahu to protest the Israeli strike against the Syrian military and remind Netanyahu of the Kremlin's request that Israel stop striking the Syrian military in retaliation for "rebel fire" across the Golan



Heights border. Netanyahu responded that Israel had no problem with the Syrian and allied operations against the Jihadists even near the Israeli border. Israel, however, would not tolerate anti-Israel operations by Iran and the HizbAllah. Netanyahu urged Putin to have Damascus restrain the concurrent anti-Israel operations and build-up under Azadi. Putin promised that Russia would exercise tighter and better control over its allies and proxies while reiterating that Israel must not impede the Syrian-led offensives from the Damascus area toward the Jordanian border to the south.

The next incident occurred on the night of 1/2 October off the eastern coast of Cyprus. An Israeli patrol of four F-15s on a reconnaissance mission encountered six Russian Su-30SM that had scrambled from Hemeimeem to investigate. The Russians made a wide maneuver and initially approached the Israelis while flying in attack formation. Both sides “sniffed” each other and completed identification. The F-15s then turned south and the Su-30SMs turned east. No shot was fired and at no time there was a threat of violent confrontation. Nevertheless, both sides realized that such an incident could have been avoided through better coordination. Ultimately, closer coordination was required as both the Russians and the Israelis were monitoring vaster areas than the other side assumed initially. The local instability was heightened a couple of days later when Su-30SMs were scrambled to visually identify an USAF aircraft near Aleppo that refused to identify itself.

Moscow and Jerusalem moved quickly. On 6 October the Russian Deputy Chief of the General Staff General-Colonel Nikolai Bogdanovski led a senior delegation to Tel-Aviv to meet with his Israeli counterpart Major General Yair Golan. They co-chaired a two-day meeting aimed to establish practical measures for better “regional coordination” between the two states and their armed forces. The two sides agreed on a mechanism to avoid “misunderstandings” in the Syrian airspace and adjacent areas. The primary outcome of the Russian visit was the establishment of two hot lines: One between Tel Aviv and Moscow at the Deputy Chief of General Staff level, and the second between the air operations control centers in Tel Aviv and directly in Jabla near the Hemeimeem Air Base at the Chief of Air Operations level. This way, both sides would be able to better understand each other and not just avoid mishaps.

A key understanding was that Israel would have free hand dealing with its enemies in Syria and Lebanon while Russia would do its utmost to contain Iran and Syria with emphasis on blocking the transfer of “offensive weapons” to the HizbAllah so there would be lesser need for Israel to strike. For its part, Israel reiterated its commitment not to interfere with the defeat of the Jihadist forces in southern Syria - including the predominantly CIA-sponsored entities. Israel also agreed to provide Russia with intelligence on the Syrian opposition in the context of a comprehensive intelligence-sharing and joint strategy formulation process. Moreover, at the Kremlin’s request, the Israeli hot lines now coordinate through the back door also US-led coalition aerial traffic even as the Obama Administration was putting political brave face and was publicly refusing to meet the Russian demands for coordination.

Meanwhile, Putin continued to go out of his way to reassure Israel. In mid-October, he dispatched to Israel his close friend and confidant, Russia’s Chief Rabbi Berel Lazar, at the head of a delegation of some fifty Jewish community leaders. The sole goal of the delegation was to express in word and deed solidarity with Israel’s Jews. Rabbi Lazar and the delegation visited and prayed in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, Rachel’s Tomb in Bethlehem and the Western Wall tunnels in Jerusalem. These are all ancient Jewish sacred sites whose ownership is contested by the Palestinian Authority. Rabbi Lazar met with Netanyahu and declared that Putin instructed him to “come to deliver a message that terrorism must not win.” The delegation’s tour was organized accordingly. “Therefore, despite these current hard times, we have chosen to visit all the locations in



which terror has struck during the last days,” Rabbi Lazar explained. This demonstration of solidarity is also important for Russia’s Jews. “A strong Israel is a strong Diaspora and a strong Diaspora is a strong Israel. Standing together makes it much easier for all of us.”

In the coming weeks, Putin continued to praise the Israeli cooperation and coordination.

Russian operations in the vicinity of the Golan Heights escalated in the second half of October. The Russian Air Force launched a concentrated bombing campaign against Jihadist forces near the Golan Heights. The bombing campaign kept escalating over the next three weeks. Russian Su-25s provided close air support to Syrian, Iranian and HizbAllah forces attacking Jihadist positions along a wide front toward the Jordanian border. Some of these strikes were not far from the Israeli border with several targets in the Daraa region being less than ten km from the border. A few Su-25s briefly violated Israel’s air space. Israel scrambled F-16Cs to look around - but nothing happened.

Israel became apprehensive in late-October when IRGC Major General Qassem Soleimani visited the Syrian Army’s 90th Brigade base near Quneitra to discuss regional operations. He arrived a few days after the commander of the Iranian and HizbAllah forces in the region, IRGC Colonel Nader Hamid, was killed during fighting against the Jihadists. While in Quneitra, Soleimani cited intelligence reports that Hamid had actually been target-killed by Israel because he strayed too close to the Golan Heights border. The Syrian and Iranian commanders assured him that Hamid was killed in action. Nevertheless, Soleimani inspected the battle lines in the Quneitra area including forward positions about 1.5-2.0 km from the Israeli border. He berated the HizbAllah commanders for not doing enough, but also promised Iranian reinforcements to boost the 500 HizbAllah fighters in the region.

Jerusalem was apprehensive whether Soleimani’s visit and promise of support were meant to help the war effort against the Jihadists or the Israeli border. The Kremlin assured Jerusalem that the understanding regarding peace on the Golan Heights were ironclad.

On the night of 30/31 October, the Israeli Air Force conducted two major bombing raids in Syria - the first since the beginning of the Russian intervention. The first target was a HizbAllah base near the village of Ras al-Ein in the Qalamoun Mountains on the Syrian-Lebanese border. Six Israeli fighter-bombers arrived via Lebanon and destroyed the base and heavy-weapon convoys that were preparing to travel into Lebanon. Shortly afterwards, an Israeli formation of six or eight fighter-bombers struck the depots of the 155th Brigade of the Syrian Army at Al-Qatifa, some seventy km to the east near Damascus. The bombing raid destroyed arms depots being prepared for hand-over to the HizbAllah. The Israeli Air Force destroyed two key points in the Iranian supply route to the HizbAllah. There was no public comment from Moscow.

Meanwhile, the Russian-sponsored offensive near the Golan Heights continued to escalate since late November. On 1 December, the Syrian and allied units expanded their offensive thrusts between Daraa and Quneitra. Over the next few days, the most challenging battles were over a line of hills stretching just south of Quneitra to the Israeli-Syrian-Jordanian border junction - that is, in parallel and close to the Israeli border. The Syrian-led offensive enjoyed massive air support from Russian aircraft as well as Russian-guided tanks and heavy artillery. Throughout, the Russian fire support officers ensured that there were no “errand” shells across the Israeli border.

The situation further complicated when the local forces of the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar ash-Sham started fighting each other over responsibility for the collapse of their lines. The Islamic State dispatched



several martyrdom-bombers and car-bombs against the Jabhat al-Nusra centers in the Quneitra area - causing heavy damage and numerous casualties. In response, the Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar ash-Sham attempted to provoke the Syrian forces to strike Israel and elicit retaliation by attacking units of the 90th Brigade from very close to the border. The Syrian forces did not react. As well, all Jihadist forces brought their wounded to the Israeli border fence knowing that IDF medical crews will take care of them.

By mid-December, the Syrian and HizbAllah forces were able to contain the heavy fighting to the strategic complex in the area of Tel Douba near Quneitra. The area is very close to the Israeli border. Under extremely heavy Russian bombing, the Syrian forces were able to evict the Jihadist forces from positions near the border town. However, on 21 December, local Jihadist forces and reinforcements arriving from northern Jordan launched a counter-attack on Tel Douba perilously close to the Israeli border. They succeeded to force the Syrian military to withdraw from one of the main outposts in Tel Douba. The Syrians launched their attack on 23 December with the Russians once again providing air and artillery support very close, but not across, the Israeli border.

Meanwhile, Putin continued to hail the cooperation and coordination with Israel. On 30 November, Netanyahu and Putin met in Paris. Netanyahu highlighted the contribution of the Israeli-Russian military cooperation in preventing "unnecessary accidents". Both alluded to the shoot-down of the Russian Su-24 by Turkey. "The events of recent days prove the importance of our coordination, our deconfliction mechanisms, our attempts to cooperate with each other, to prevent unnecessary accidents, tragedies, and I believe that we've been successful," Netanyahu said. In response, Putin praised the "mechanism of cooperation" established by the two General Staffs. He credited Netanyahu for the initiative. "Let me note that the mechanism that has been promoted by you and proposed by you, that presupposes contacts with our military to prevent incidents to or due to the traumatic developments in the region has been efficient," Putin told Netanyahu.

On 11 December, Putin once again hailed the cooperation and coordination with Israel as the type of coordination the Kremlin would like to see with others such as the US and NATO as Russia is escalating the air campaign in Syria. Meeting with the Russian High Command, Putin instructed that they must coordinate their anti-terrorist operations and other actions with the Israeli High Command. "It is important to enhance cooperation with all the countries which are really interested in eliminating terrorists. I am speaking of the contacts aimed at ensuring safety with Israeli Air Force command posts and with the forces of the anti-Daesh coalition led by the United States," Putin said.

The Israeli Air Force struck again on the night of 19/20 December - this time in Damascus. Two Israeli F-15Is launched missiles at a building in Jaramana, an eastern district of Damascus. The building collapsed - killing Samir Quntar (the head of HizbAllah anti-Israel networks in southern Syria and the Golan Heights), Farhan Issam Shaalan (head of the National Syrian Golan Resistance Organization), two Iranian senior officers of the IRGC Intelligence known as Mohammed Riza Fahemi and Mir Ahmad Ahmadi, and several of their aides. They were meeting in order to plan the next round of Iran-sponsored terrorist operation against Israel from the Golan Heights areas recently secured by the Syrian military.

Israeli senior officials considered the operation a proof that Russia does not attempt to prevent Israel from addressing its own critical security issues. The Kremlin shrugged any media effort to challenge the Israeli-Russian cooperation - noting that the two F-15Is were above Israel's Sea of Galilee when they launched their missiles.



Putin and Netanyahu held a phone conversation on 22 December. They agreed, according to Russian senior officials, "to further coordinate their actions to fight terrorism in the Middle East." The two also discussed the Syrian crisis. "Vladimir Putin stressed that there is no alternative to the launch of intra-Syrian negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations, as well as to the continued and uncompromising fight against the Islamic State and other extremist groups acting in Syria," the Russian officials said. Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov refused to comment on whether Israel coordinated with Russia the target-killing of Quntar. "There is a working mechanism of information exchanges between the General Staffs. It is the military who should be addressed with this question and asked if there had been any prior notifications on that score," Peskov said.

Arab very senior defense and intelligence officials are convinced that there begun a new era of close cooperation between the intelligence services of Russia and Israel to the detriment of the Jihadist forces. They insist that Israel's recent bombing of HizbAllah weapon depots and convoys, as well as the target-killing of Quntar and his group, should be attributed to "a Russian collusion" with Israeli intelligence. An Iranian apprehension of a Russian-Israeli collusion against cross-border provocations is reflected in the practical reaction to Quntar's death. Tehran nominated a Lebanon-born Qods Force senior called Raafat al-Bakkar as Quntar's successor - thus ensuring that Tehran, rather than the HizbAllah, be able to supervise and control his actions as demanded by Moscow.

Moreover, Arab officials are now convinced that the target-killing by the Russian Air Force of Jaish al-Islam leader Zahran Alloush and seven other senior Jihadist commanders from the Damascus area is a result of intelligence cooperation with Israel. The Russian Air Force brought down a building in the Udaya area north of Marj al-Sultan Air Base in Damascus city just as the senior commanders were sitting for a secret meeting about the future of their Jihad in the Damascus area. According to these Arab senior officials, the target killing of Alloush, a special protégé of Saudi intelligence, is the first spectacular outcome of the Israeli-Russian intelligence cooperation. Indeed, in the early morning hours of 26 December the Russian Air Force conducted another major target-killing raid - destroying a building near al-Zorba, south of Aleppo along the M5 Aleppo-Damascus Highway, during a meeting of the regional commanders of Jabhat al-Nusra, Harakat Ahrar ash-Sham, Harakat Nouriddeen al-Zinki, Jaysh al-Islam, and Liwaa Suqour ash-Sham. Harakat Ahrar ash-Sham leader Ahmad Abu al-Baraa who chaired the meeting and all attendees were killed.

Undaunted, the Obama White House continues to try hard to undermine the Israeli-Russian anti-Jihadism cooperation. The primary instrument is Obama's incessant pressure on Netanyahu to agree to a new rapprochement with Erdogan. Washington pressure persists even though the viability of the initiative has been doubted by Israeli senior officials with extensive experience with Ankara. The Israeli officials believe that Obama's initiative is aimed SOLELY to ensure Israeli gas supplies in order to alleviate the possible Turkish shortage of gas should the Russians cut the supplies in retaliation for the shoot-down of their Su-24. By the end of 2015, Obama was still pressuring Netanyahu to go along despite doubts and misgivings of Netanyahu's own defense and intelligence seniors, and vocal opposition coming from Erdogan's own coterie.

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Bashar al-Assad's Assessment

Back in early December, Bashar al-Assad assessed the impact of the Russian intervention on the entire region. He contrasted the impact of the US-led bombing with the Russian ones. "Since the US-led coalition launched



air-strikes against militant targets in Syria in September 2014,” the various Jihadists “were expanding, expanding freely. ... Russia, for its part, has managed to achieve much since September 30, when it launched its aerial campaign in Syria. The [Islamic State] and al-Nusra started shrinking thanks to Moscow’s involvement.” Most important, however, has been the Russian contribution to the bolstering of the Syrian state and populace. “The Russian role is very important. It has had a significant impact on both the military and political arena in Syria,” Assad explained. “What is definite is that the Russian support to the Syrian people and government from the very beginning, along with the strong and staunch support of Iran, has played a very important part in the steadfastness of the Syrian state in the fight against terrorism.” The Russian intervention is far from being altruistic. Russia is confronting and defeating in the Middle East Jihadist threats to Russia and beyond. “The Russians,” Assad concluded, “want to protect Syria, Iraq, the region, themselves and even Europe. I am not exaggerating by saying they are protecting Europe today.”

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

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About the Author of this Issue

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