



About the Author

Dr. W. Andrew Terrill

Dr. W. Andrew Terrill joined the Strategic Studies Institute in October 2001, and is SSI's Middle East specialist.

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Strategic Insights: The Russian Intervention and the Internal Dynamics of Syria

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The Syrian civil war began in March 2011 and has claimed nearly 250,000 lives so far. After over 4 years of internal fighting, the Kremlin has decided to expand its role in this conflict by moving combat aircraft and some ground troops to Syria to support the Bashar al-Assad government. These actions seem like a clear prelude to a direct Russian combat role, although the scope of such an effort is not yet clear. It has started with a limited number of air strikes against the opposition forces fighting Assad. Additionally, Russia is providing the Syrian army with new weapons supplies which that army seems to be absorbing very quickly. The United States has expressed concern about the deployment and is facing the question of how seriously it seeks to oppose increased Russian involvement in this war, and what, if anything, to do about it.

Some strategic context is necessary when addressing this problem. The Russians have intervened in the Syrian civil war to bolster the Assad regime at a time when things are going badly for that government. Since March 2015, various Islamist opposition groups have scored a series of combat victories. Assad is being battered in the north, east, and central part of the country. The Islamic State's (IS) capture of Palmyra/Tadmor in May gives the organization an important strategic foothold about 130 miles northeast of Damascus. Assad, in an unusual display of frankness, stated in June that his military had become less capable because it had been weakened by desertions and defections.¹ This is a serious problem for him since he leads a regime dominated by his Alawite minority sect, which is only 12 percent of the population at most. Some majority Sunni Muslims, as well as non-Alawite minorities such as the Christians and Druzes, favor the regime over the Islamist opposition, but there is still a tremendously limited manpower pool from which Assad is able to replenish the ranks of his military. On several occasions, the regime managed to avoid significant military defeat only through the actions of the Lebanese Shi'ite militia, Hezbollah, which has deployed around 10,000 militiamen in Syria to support Assad, with around 3,000 operating at any one time.²

In establishing its own policy, the United States is confounded by a lack of potential Syrian allies for influencing the situation. Currently, Syria's dominant internal players are the Assad regime, IS, the Nusra Front (which is aligned with al-Qaeda), and other jihadists and Islamists. Some militant Islamist groups fighting the government are not considered jihadists because they are not clear advocates of international terrorism and do not proclaim the

revolution in Syria as an early step in a more far-reaching global program. They also do not have massive numbers of foreign fighters in their ranks, unlike the jihadist organizations. One of the largest and most important of these groups is Ahrar al-Sham (Free Men of Syria).³ Its leader, Hashim al-Shaikh, has acknowledged close battlefield coordination with the Nusra Front, but has indicated that he would like Nusra to distance itself from al-Qaeda central. This statement is vaguely positive, but not nearly enough reassurance to require even a second look at Ahrar al-Sham as a potential ally. Consequently, Washington lacks powerful potential allies in the northern part of Syria, beyond the Kurdish rebels whose strength is mostly confined to their own region. Things are slightly better in the south where there are a few important nonideological/nonjihadi groups, some of whom have members trained in Jordan with the assistance of the United States.⁴ Unfortunately, jihadist groups operate in the south as well. The nonideological groups are important, but they are nowhere near as significant to Syria's future as IS, Nusra, and the other extremists. Moreover, the nonideological groups are not clearly pro-Western or pro-democracy, and it is not clear if they will forcefully resist the jihadist agenda over time.

Washington currently supports a political solution to the war in Syria which does not involve jihadists or Assad but could allow some of the dictator's former associates to participate in a future government. The Russians clearly support Assad, but they have stated that they are willing to work with Syria's "healthy" opposition to find a political solution.⁵ These statements may be propaganda or, more promisingly, Moscow may be indicating some realism about the impossibility of turning the clock back to a pre-2011 concept of the Syrian state. The Russians have also stated that their military actions are to be targeted directly against IS and other jihadists, whom they view as a serious threat. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has stated that supporting the Syrian regime is indispensable to defeating IS.⁶ His colleague, Russian First Deputy Director of Federal Security Sergei Smirnov, has stated that about 2,400 Russian nationals are fighting with IS, and these individuals eventually may pose a terrorism threat to Russia.⁷ Some Russian concerns appear to overlap with U.S. interests, with the greatest differences being over the future role of Assad. The United States is also unhappy to see an expansion of Russian influence in Syria, but this is a double-edged sword for Moscow. Saudi Arabia and most of the other Gulf Arab monarchies fervently detest Assad and will consider Russian efforts to support him to be a direct confrontation against their foreign policy priorities. Relations between Russia and the Gulf could remain poisoned for decades over this decision.

The Russian intervention in Syria therefore is not necessarily a major setback for U.S. policy, but it can evolve into one. Thus, Washington needs to be certain that the Russians understand the type of actions that the United States would consider especially provocative and damaging to bilateral relations. In this regard, Russian aircraft would have no business bombing Kurdish forces, which are fighting IS in areas long abandoned by the Assad regime. Moscow also needs scrupulously to avoid bombing the organizations they themselves have identified as "healthy" and thereby important to a political solution. Moreover, neither the United States nor the Israelis like the idea of Russian aircraft and a strong air defense network so close to Israel. Russia has already agreed to coordinate its military actions with Israel, and it needs to pay strong attention to this obligation.⁸

The United States has only a limited capability to pressure the Russians to withdraw from Syria, but even if this were possible, it may not be the right move. Assad is a vicious dictator, but his one redeeming characteristic is that the IS jihadists are worse. If the regime were to collapse, the war would continue between competing Syrian factions, with IS threatening to emerge as the dominant player in ever larger parts of the country. IS crimes already include mass executions of prisoners and civilians, drowning prisoners in cages, beheading Western hostages, destroying, and pillaging antiquities on what the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization calls an “industrial scale”—executing children, burning prisoners alive, establishing a sexual slavery system based on the oppression of non-Muslim women, and attempting to eradicate various non-Muslim minorities. If Russian actions prevent the Assad government from collapsing at this time, that may be a tragedy. But an IS takeover of most of the country would be a bigger tragedy. Under these horrific circumstances, the best course for the United States may be to try to build on common ground with the Russians and unrelentingly push for a political solution that marginalizes and defeats the jihadists, but also gets rid of the worst aspects of the Assad dictatorship (including Assad himself). Such a result is probably years, if not decades, away, but no other solution seems possible, so it may be time for a pragmatic reaction to the Russian intervention.

ENDNOTES

1. Dion Nissenbaum and Philip Shishkin, “World News: Russian Buildup in Syria Worried U.S.,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 2015, p. A-10.
2. I have previously considered the role of Hezbollah in the Syria civil war in some depth. Please see W. Andrew Terrill, “Iran’s Strategy for Saving Assad,” *Middle East Journal*, Spring 2015, especially pp. 232-235.
3. “Ahrar al Sham playing bigger role in war,” *Daily Star*, September 23, 20145.
4. *New Approach in Southern Syria*, Brussels, Belgium: International Crisis Group, September 2, 2015, pp. 2-6, 23-24.
5. Agence France Presse, “Putin pledges to keep up military support for Assad,” *Daily Star*, September 15, 2015.
6. Ishaan Tharoor, “Why Russia is in Syria,” *The Washington Post*, September 11, 2015.
7. “Moscow says about 2,400 Russians Fighting with ISIS,” *Daily Star*, September 18, 2015.
8. Reuters, “Israel, Russia to coordinate military action on Syria,” *Jordan Times*, September 21, 2015.

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