

# Understanding Russian's military expansion in Syria, or consolidating the Assad regime

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In the end of summer 2015, Russia greatly expanded its military involvement on the side of the Assad regime, including providing serious training and logistical support to the Syrian army. [1] On September 17, 2015, the regime's army started using new types of air and ground weapons supplied by Russia, while satellite photos taken in mid-September showed Russian forces developing two additional military facilities close to Lattakiyya. [2]

Another level of Russia's military involvement was reached on September 30, 2015, when Russian jets conducted its first raids in Syria. In addition to this, Hundreds of Iranian troops have arrived in Syria on September 21 and will soon join Assad regime forces and their Lebanese Hezbollah allies in a major ground offensive backed by Russian air strikes. The military operation would be aimed at recapturing territories lost by Assad regimes to various opposition forces. Most probably, the coming land operations will be focused in Idlib and Hama countryside. [3]

As a reminder, all these actors have been the key actors in the survival of the Assad regime, Russia has long supplied Assad armed forces with the vast majority of their weaponry. The Russian state has continued to ship substantial volumes of small arms, ammunition, spare parts and refurbished material to pro-regime forces. In January 2014, Russia stepped up supplies of military gear to the Syrian regime, including armoured vehicles, drones and guided bombs. [4]

## **The campaign of the "war against terrorism", or saving and consolidating the Assad regime**

The propaganda around the campaign of the "war against terrorism" launched by the Russian state is a way to support the Assad regime politically and militarily and crush all forms of opposition to it. Putin wants the various international imperialist actors in the West to consider Assad as the ruler that can help them in their fight against "terrorism."

This can be viewed in the targets of the Russian raids. On September 30, 2015, Russian jets conducted its first raids in Syria against the village of Zafarana north of Homs as well as near the town of Lataminah northwest of Hama, neither of which are actually the Islamic State (IS) strongholds. In nearby Hama, one group targeted in the strikes, Tajammu al-Izzah, is considered to be an important member of the Free Syrian army (FSA) in the area. It was one of the few in Syria to have received anti-tank rockets and had regularly used them against Syrian tanks and armoured

vehicles across central Syria. On the same day Russia also bombed Talbiseh, al-Mukarama, Reef Homs al-shamali. All of these areas are mainly under FSA control and with also some presence of Jabhat Al Nusra and Ahrar Sham. According to the Syrian Civil Defense Forces, a volunteer emergency responder organization, more than 35 civilian casualties from the Russian airstrike on Homs and Hama have been registered.

On the following days, Russian jets targets included a command post and underground weapons bunker near Raqqa, as well as a weapons store in Maarat al-Numaan. Maarat al-Numaan, in Syria's northern province of Idlib, is not known as an Islamic State base. Most fighters in the area are from Jaysh al-Fatah coalition led by Jabhat Al Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights recorded at least 39 civilians had been killed since the start of the Russian air strikes September 30, 2015, while 14 fighters, mostly IS jihadists but also members of Jabhat Al Nusra, Ahrar Sham and FSA brigades, had also been killed. Britain's defense minister actually declared that only one in 20 Russian air strikes in Syria were aimed at the IS forces. The Russian air strikes have actually hit at least four factions operating under the umbrella of the FSA. [5]

Russian officials have declared that the airstrikes would last around 3 and 4 months.

The objectives of these airstrikes are clear: save and consolidate the political and military power of the Assad regime. Russian President Vladimir Putin actually said on September 28, before the beginning of the Russian airstrikes: "There is no other way to settle the Syrian conflict other than by strengthening the existing legitimate government agencies, support them in their fight against terrorism". In other words crush all forms of opposition, whether democratic or reactionary, to the Assad regime under the so called "war on terror". All authoritarian regimes have used this same kind of propaganda to repress popular movements and/ or opposition groups to their powers: Assad against the popular movement since day 1 of the popular uprising, Sissi in Egypt to repress particularly the Muslim Brotherhoods, but also progressive left and democratic movements such as the Revolutionary Socialists, Movement of April 6, etc... Erdogan against the PKK and various leftist movements, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia against the protesters and popular movements challenging their power, etc...

International Imperialist powers have not been different, from the Russian State repressing any forms of resistance in Tchetchenia to its occupation and the USA's various military interventions across the world. Both were and are claiming to fight against terrorism.

The time for this military expansion of Assad's regime allies led by Russia is led by two main reasons: 1) the increasing political and military weakness of the Assad regime and 2) the absence or the lack of any clear policy from Western powers to assist the revolutionaries in Syria.

### **Political and military weakness of the Assad regime**

Firstly on the military level, the Syrian army has been weakened considerably, various estimation pointing out that its numbers fell from 300,000 to as little as 80,000 and had suffered various important defeats these past few months, notably after the fall of the northern towns of Idlib and nearby Jisr al-Shughour in May 2015 falling in the hands of the coalition of the Jaysh al-Fatah, led by Jabhat Al Nusra and Ahrar Sham.

Desertions and lack of will from the Syrian youth to die for a corrupt and authoritarian regime explain mainly the impossibility of the regime's army to recruit new soldiers. A lot of young men

have actually been fleeing for Europe often after having received their call-up papers or being ordered to report for reserve duty. Propaganda for the army in State medias, recruiting posters all over Damascus and recent amnesty for deserters and draft dodgers did not change anything.

Assad actually acknowledged in last July that the army's regime has a shortage of manpower and had to abandon some areas in order to better defend what is called la Syrie utile - Damascus through to Homs and the coastal area around Lattakiyya.

The weakness of the regime's army has led to the creation of a 125,000-strong locally based National Defence Force, which has been trained and paid by the IRI, who also favour the use of Shia militia fighters from Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan as well as Hezbollah. For the supporter of the Assad regime, claiming that Assad defends the State and its institutions it's rather embarrassing... without forgetting that vast majority of destructions of State institutions, including schools, hospitals, et.. are the result of the shelling of regime forces.

On a political level, growing and increasing frustrations have been expressed in the so called "loyalist" region against the Assad regime, especially in the past few months.

In the beginning of September, demonstrations occurred in the two Shi'a villages of Fuaa and Kafriyeh in the province of Idlib, to show their anger at the inaction of the Syrian regime that failed to help them repel the attacks and bombings of Jabhat Al Nusra and Ahrar Sham. According to several media, the protesters reportedly went in Homs and Damascus where they would have blocked the road to Damascus airport for several hours on Monday August 31.

In August, more than one thousand people carried out a sit-in at the roundabout of al- Ziraa in the city of Lattakiyya protesting on the murdering of the colonel Hassan al- Sheikh who was killed by Sulaiman al-Assad - the son of Bashar al-Assad's cousin Hilal Al-Assad who was the leader of National Defence Force and was killed in March 23, 2014. These people aren't supporting the revolution, for now, but they are worth reaching out to because they are tired of the war, tired of the harsh socio economic situation, and sick of the corrupt Assad family running the places it still controls and acting as if Syria was their own property while stealing its wealth. Other demonstrations have occurred in Tartus by family members of soldiers to denounce the way the regime treat their soldiers and demand their return.

In the region of the city of Sweida, majority inhabited by the Druze community where various protests were witnessed to protest against some regime's policies and low services. Very lately, demonstrations and protests broke out following the assassination of Sheikh Wahid Bal'ous, who is a Druze Sheikh and is known for his opposition to the Syrian regime and to the Islamic fundamentalist forces, in an the explosion in Dahret al- Jabal area killing also more 20 persons. Demonstrators protested in front of several regime buildings and smashed a statue of the former Syrian regime dictator Hafez al-Assad in Sweida. [6] Sheikh Wahid Bal'ous was a very popular figure among the Druze population and was leading the movement "Sheikhs of dignity", a group that is committed to protect the Druze in the province and that was also fighting the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat Al-Nusra. Sheikh Wahid Bal'ous was also opposed that the Syrian army recruits men originating from Sweida, to be sent to fight outside the province, which is under the control of the regime and Druze militias. A few days before the death of Sheikh Bal'ous, inhabitants of Sweida, demonstrated demanding more basic services to the regime, including water and electricity. The cleric supported these protests.

## **The absence or the lack of any clear policy from Western powers to assist the revolutionaries in Syria**

This second element is not something rather new, Western powers have been characterised by their inactions and no clear policy since the beginning of the revolution to assist the Syrian revolutionaries.

The allies of the Assad regime have understood this and this is the main reason why their political, military and economic support to the dictatorship of Damascus have been constant and even increased through times. This reality is reflected in the words of Alaeddin Boroujerdi, chairman of the Committee for Foreign Policy and National Security in the Iranian parliament, who declared in June 2015 during a visit in Damascus that Iran's support for the Syrian regime is "stable and constant" and stressed that there were no restrictions or limits to cooperation with Syria and providing support.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stood in UN halls and continuously defended that Assad's regime must not be weakened if Western States is serious about combating "terrorism". Rouhani also declared in an interview on CNN that "everyone has accepted that President Assad must remain so that we can combat the terrorists".

This is actually the sad truth as we can see.

The US president clearly stated in his speech on September 28 at the UN General Assembly his willingness to work with Russia and Iran to find a solution in Syria while emphasising the implausibility of maintaining "a pre-war status quo". [7] On the first Russian airstrikes, U.S. State Department spokesman John Kirby stated that a Russian official informed the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad about the airstrikes and requested that American military aircraft avoid Syrian airspace during Russian operations. Senior Israeli officials also announced that Russia informed Israel about an hour before it conducted airstrikes in Syria. Russian government officials made contact with Israeli National Security Adviser, Yossi Cohen, as well as other senior officials in the Israeli defense establishment. The notice was designed to avoid any confrontation between Israeli and Russian planes. [8]

UK Prime Minister David Cameron declared he was not ruling out Assad's role in Syria's transition, but "what he is very clear about is that Assad cannot be part of Syria's future in the long run". German Chancellor Angela Merkel went in the same direction saying it was necessary to speak to "many actors, among them Assad". Turkish officials have also declared that Assad could play a role in a transition period.

Israeli military sources have confirmed the existence of consensus within Tel Aviv's decision making circles over the importance of the continuation of the Assad regime. Military affairs commentator Alon Ben-David quoted a source within the Israeli Joint Chiefs of Staff as saying: "Although no one in Israel can say this publicly and explicitly, the best option for Israel would be for the Assad regime to remain and for the internal fighting to continue for as long as possible."

These positions were strengthened with the refugee crisis of these past few weeks. The vast majority of television programs, articles and so called experts talking about millions of refugees from Syria had the same discourse: the problem is the IS. Various officials of numerous countries went as far as to say that European states should coordinate with the Assad regime and its allies Russia and the Islamic Republic of Iran to resolve and end the problem of the IS and therefore in their minds of refugees. This is of course forgetting that the root of the problems in Syria is the Assad regime and that this latter is responsible for more of the 90% of refugees leaving the country. [9]

On October 2, 2015, 70 rebel factions and the Syrian National Coalition, in an emergency meeting after the beginning of Russian airstrikes, decided to end cooperation with UN envoy Staffan de Mistura's initiative for "work groups" to study a resolution of the conflict. These groups have completely refused any place for Assad in a transitional period and also rejected the last calls made by the regime officials for negotiation talks under the umbrella of the United Nations. They also condemned Russian airstrikes and accused Russia in participating in the war against the Syrian people.

The objectives of the USA and Western powers since the beginning of the uprising in Syria have never been to assist and help the Syrian revolutionaries or to overthrow the Assad regime. The USA has tried on the opposite to reach an agreement between the Assad regime (or section of it) and the opposition linked to Western and Gulf regimes, which are unrepresentative of the popular movement and completely corrupted.

As a reminder, according to the Geneva guidelines of June 30 2012, agreed to unanimously by the Permanent five 5 members of the UN Security Council, it would be permissible for Assad to serve on the transitional governing body. Indeed, he could preside over it. All that was required was the consent of the opposition delegation. Similarly, delegates representing the Syrian Arab Republic—the regime and the government—could withhold consent to persons nominated by the opposition.

In addition to this, the absence or the lack of any kind of "large", organised and decisive military assistance of the USA and/or Western states to the Syrian revolutionaries is another proof of any this lack of will for any radical change in Syria. The Wall Street Journal published an article in January 2015 on this CIA aid saying:

"Some weapons shipments were so small that commanders had to ration ammunition. One of the U.S.'s favourite trusted commanders got the equivalent of 16 bullets a month per fighter. Rebel leaders were told they had to hand over old antitank missile launchers to get new ones—and couldn't get shells for captured tanks. When they appealed last summer for ammo to battle fighters linked to al Qaeda, the U.S. said no".

The plan of Barack Obama's, which was approved by the U.S. Congress of \$500 million to arm and equip 5,000-10,000 Syrian rebels, but was never implemented, was not aimed at overthrowing the Assad regime, as we can read in the text of the resolution:

*"The Secretary of Defence is authorized, in coordination with the Secretary of State, to provide assistance, including training, equipment, supplies, and sustainment, to appropriately vetted elements of the Syrian opposition and other appropriately vetted Syrian groups and individuals for the following purposes:*

1. Defending the Syrian people from attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and securing territory controlled by the Syrian opposition.
2. Protecting the United States, its friends and allies, and the Syrian people from the threats posed by terrorists in Syria.
3. Promoting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria."

Until today this program is a failure. "The program is much smaller than we hoped," conceded the Pentagon's policy chief, Christine Wormuth, saying there were between 100 and 120 fighters currently being trained, while adding that they were also "getting terrific training". [10] A top military general told Congress that the US had successfully trained just "four or five" opposition

soldiers.

The chief of staff of the US-trained Syrian rebel group Division 30 actually resigned from his position and withdrew from the program, on September 19, 2015. Citing problems such as “the lack of sufficient numbers of trainees,” and “the lack of seriousness in the implementation of the project to establish the 30<sup>th</sup> brigade”. [11] The other problem faced with the United States to constitute armed groups in Syria loyal to their interests was and is also thwarted by the reality on the ground. This is because of the decision of a large majority of opposition groups to cooperate with Washington only if they are able to maintain their independence and autonomous decision-making, and if the collaboration includes a clear plan for the overthrow of the Assad regime. [12]

Regional countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have on their side funded various groups, in their far majority Islamic fundamentalist groups that oppose the objectives of the revolution, for their own selfish political interests. Qatar for example have been a key supporter of Jabhat Al Nusra (Al Qaida branch in Syria), while Turkey have supported directly or in a passive way various Islamic fundamentalist groups, such as Jaysh al Fatah coalition led by Jabhat al Nusra and Ahrar Sham and the IS by providing a complete freedom of actions on both sides of borders for a very long period, in northern Syria against democratic FSA forces and especially to oppose any autonomy of Kurdish regions in Syria under the umbrella of the PKK. Private networks of the Gulf Monarchies on their sides have been acting and funding with the approval of their ruling classes various Islamic fundamentalist forces in the perspective of transforming the popular revolution in a sectarian war.

## Conclusion

Many protests and demonstrations have occurred in liberated areas of Syria these past few days to condemn the Russian airstrikes in Syria, targeting mostly as we said civilians and various military groups, but not mainly the IS. Various groups on the grounds have opposed Russian airstrikes. [13] The Local Coordination Committees of Syria condemned Russian airstrikes that are “to assure the survival of the Assad regime” and called “upon all revolutionary forces and factions to unite by any means and respond to the Russian aggression”. [14] The FSA Southern Front also condemned Russian airstrikes and characterised Russian and Iran presence in the country as an occupation. These two last groups called for a democratic Syria as well.

FSA forces have also claimed to have shoot down one Russian jet in Lattakiyya province on October 3, 2015, with FSA forces arresting the pilot after he ejected from the plane. To be confirmed.

Russia’s military expansion, in addition to Iranian’s expansion, is a clear offensive to put a complete end to the popular uprising in Syria by wanting to save and consolidate militarily and politically the Assad regime and to crush all forms of opposition. This is done with the passivity and some acceptance of Western powers, which want to stabilize the region at any price and therefore Assad’s resignation is not a pre-condition to a transition period.

The different world imperialist powers and regional bourgeois regimes, in spite of their rivalry, have a common interest in the defeat of the popular revolutions of the region, and the most obvious example is that of Syria. The multiple peace initiatives on Syria, supported by all the global and regional powers without exception, had the same objectives since the beginning of the revolutionary process in 2011: to reach an agreement between the Assad regime and an opportunistic faction - linked to the Western States, Turkey and the Gulf monarchies - of the opposition coming together in the Syrian Coalition.



The issue is not refusing any kind of solution to an end of the war, yes the Syrian people have suffered too much and most of them want a form of transitional period towards a democratic Syria, but any kind of “realist solution”, as officials and analysts like to speak, on a mid and long term can not include Assad and other criminals with blood on their hands of the regime, otherwise we will see a continuation of the military conflict in Syria. Assad and his various partners in the regime must be held accountable for their crimes, and a similar process could be put in place as well for the crimes of the Islamic fundamentalist forces and other groups as well. In addition to this, we have to understand that to expect any kind of minimum change, not only Assad should be overthrown but the whole team of officials controlling security services, the army and various state apparatus. The patrimonial nature of the Syrian regime needs to be included in any understanding for real change.

All revolutionaries must oppose this new imperialist military intervention in Syria to save a crumbling dictatorship and which is resulting in new civilian casualties and suffering. The interventions of Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and various Iraqi Shi’a fundamentalist groups have only caused more deaths in Syria, in addition of crushing a popular uprising. In the same time, even though less important, we also oppose the interventions of Gulf monarchies and Turkey in the past, which were for their own self interests and to change the nature of the revolution into a sectarian war and they supported Islamic fundamentalist groups that attacked, and continue to do so in many regions, revolutionaries, civilians and soldiers from the FSA.

We must also support the delivery of arms and weapons with no political conditions attached from the West to democratic sections of the FSA and of the Kurdish forces to fight and struggle against the Assad regime and Islamic fundamentalist forces.

Finally and most importantly, internationalists from throughout the world should continue to support the pockets of hope that still exist and resist in Syria composed of various democratic and progressive groups and movements opposing all sides of the counter-revolutions, the Assad regime and Islamic fundamentalist groups. They are the ones still maintaining the dreams of the beginning of the revolution and its objectives: democracy, social justice, equality and no to sectarianism.

As written on a placard by a revolutionary in the city of Zabadani :””Revolutions don’t die, even if slaughtered. They’re the land’s fertilizer and give life even after a while”

**Joseph Daher**

October 4, 2015

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**P.S.**

\* Syria Freedom for Ever. Posted on October 4, 2015:

<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2015/10/04/understanding-russians-military-expansion-in-syria-or-consolidating-the-assad-regime/>

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**Footnotes**

[1] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11845635/Vladimir-Putin-confirms-Russian-military-involvement-in-Syrias-civil-war.html>

- [2] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/22/us-mideast-crisis-russia-bases-idUSKCN0RM21520150922>
- [3] [http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/01/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iranians-idUSKCN0RV4DN20151001?mod=related&channelName=worldNews&utm\\_source=Facebook](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/01/us-mideast-crisis-syria-iranians-idUSKCN0RV4DN20151001?mod=related&channelName=worldNews&utm_source=Facebook)
- [4] <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/will-russia-intervene-syria>
- [5] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/03/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-idUSKCN0RX0FX20151003>
- [6] <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2015/09/31121/>
- [7] <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/assad-mass-murderer-rational-dictator-187936298#sth.ash.DTHu4OtC.dpuf>
- [8] <http://iswresearch.blogspot.it/2015/09/russias-first-reported-air-strikes-in.html>
- [9] See onr ESSF (article 35845), [Terror – The Islamic State, or the main reason for the millions of refugees from Syria?](#).
- [10] <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/sep/16/us-military-syrian-isis-fighters>
- [11] <http://uk.businessinsider.com/division-30-syrian-rebel-chief-of-staff-quits-2015-9>
- [12] See onr ESSF (article 36016), [Syrian Geopolitics: an analysis of the International coalition intervention led by the USA](#).
- [13] See on ESSF (article 36017), [Statements from Syria – Russian imperial aggression unites the Syrian opposition](#).
- [14] <https://www.facebook.com/LCCSy/posts/1238711152822685?fref=nf>