

Report

Putin's Moment in the Middle East

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Russia says its decision to send arms to Syria does not violate any international agreements [AFP]

Abstract

The Russian decision to intervene militarily in Syria should not have surprised any in the international community. It comes as a natural response to the Sunni revival led by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar in the form of Operation Decisive Storm, and the Salman Doctrine. Also, it comes as a response to the Turkish military intervention in northern Syria, the Iranian nuclear deal, and to the ill planned American departure from the region. The aftershocks of Operation Decisive Storm against the Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh forces in Yemen were felt in Damascus, Moscow, and Sana'a equally. The implications of the nuclear agreement on Russia's energy market, and the possible partnership between Turkey, the West and Iran on transporting energy to Europe via Syria or Turkey, were present when President Putin of Russia made his decision to invade Syria.

The Putin administration saw the Iran deal as a Western rebuke to Russia's expansionist policies in Ukraine, and as a move to punish Russia and to deprive it of one of its most important bargaining issues—Iran. The West, especially Washington, has been adamant about using energy as a soft power against Russia to deprive Moscow from its main source of hard currency to compel Russia to change its behavior with its neighbors. This report delves into the political, economic, and military implications of the Russian operation in Syria. Also, the report sheds light on the possible outcomes and consequences of each factor for the future of Syria and the region.

Introduction

The Russian military intervention in Syria marks Putin's third military attack in the last seven years. Putin invaded the Republic of Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, and Syria in 2015. The three aforementioned countries have one common denominator: water basins essential for Russian naval power and economic growth, so that Russia might

regain its role as a global power. In addition, acquiring water fronts in the three countries minimizes the geostrategic distance between Western Europe, on the one hand, and Russia and the Middle East, on the other. Furthermore, the three incursions secure Russia's semi-complete hegemony over European energy markets, Russia's main economic source, by controlling the water routes adjacent to the continent; also allow Russia the ability to monitor and intervene in any global or regional transition of power Russia deems dangerous; and forcing the US and other regional powers to recognize the rising Russian role in global politics.

Therefore, Putin is flexing Russia's muscles beyond the former Soviet republics and Eastern Europe to signal Russia's ability to deploy troops and equipment outside Russia's boundaries; to indicate Moscow's ability to effect events on the ground in more than one continent simultaneously; to signal the ineffectiveness of economic sanctions against Russia to all the NATO countries; to assert Russia's global role; and to usher in a new generation of tested Russian military technologies after the collapse of the former Soviet Union.

The Russian ability to deploy with efficiency and speed suggests a revival of Russian military power and reflects its desire to resume a new global role similar to its role during the Cold War, when the Soviets deployed in Cuba, Afghanistan, Egypt, and many other countries to balance the US and force their opponents to succumb to their demands. Many factors will affect the success or failure of the Syrian military operation: first, the extent to which the US and other regional countries will surrender to the Russian position and allow it to continue; second, the economic and domestic durability of the Russian Federation, given the current oil prices and level of political opposition to Putin's policies inside Russia; and third, the reaction of regional powers to the operation and their ability to survive its ramifications. This report aims to explain the political timing of the operation, and the immediate and enduring military implications of the Russian intervention in Syria.

The Political Timing of the Russian Military Intervention in Syria: Why Now?

The Russian military operation in Syria attempts to counter the Sunni revival and the Sunni coalition that began to surface after King Salman assumed office in Saudi Arabia. The Salman Doctrine, which called on the Sunni powers to unite and present a counter narrative to the Iranian one, shook the balance of power in the Middle East and presented both Russia and Iran with unprecedented challenges.⁽¹⁾ The Saudi-led coalition's message to both has been that the Arabs are able and willing to define their goals and protect their own security and will not accept outside meddling in their affairs. Therefore, Decisive Storm against the Houthis in Yemen began with a loud bang in

Moscow, Sana'a and Tehran. The message has been that Yemen is not Syria; Syria is not Iraq; Iran will not be allowed to expand in the Arab World uncontested; and Russia will not be permitted to agitate the political and security situation among the Arab countries or between Iran and the Arabs.

Decisive Storm ushered in a new hope for many Arabs that outside powers would no longer be allowed to determine the outcome of Arab-Arab politics. A Saudi-led victory in Yemen would mark the first Sunni/Arab triumph since Iraq forced Iran to declare a ceasefire in 1988; and if the Saudi-led coalition succeeded in restoring Hadi and his government, this would symbolise the first victory over Iran's creation and support of shadow governments in key Arab countries. On the other hand, a political or military failure in Yemen would derail the Sunni revival for the foreseeable future and open the gates for Iran and Russia to divide the Sunni Arab countries between themselves to counter any Sunni political rise.

In addition, Putin launched his military operation in Syria to circumvent any Western victory after the Iranian deal and to block Iran, Turkey or any Western European country from translating the nuclear agreement into any economic gains at the expense of Russia, especially in the energy sector.⁽²⁾ Therefore, Putin rushed his military intervention to prevent Turkey from controlling the northern part of Syria and block any possible, Iranian-Western, energy pipeline passage through the Mediterranean in-route to Europe. Putin has been witnessing the excitement of many Western leaders to visit Tehran and begin joint economic and political ventures there. For instance, the foreign ministers and business leaders from Britain, France and Germany have all professed their interests in visiting Tehran or have already visited the Iranian capital since the nuclear agreement was reached in mid-July, 2015.⁽³⁾ Russia feared the emergence of a Turkish/Western/ Iranian economic coalition that would deprive Russia of its main source of cash: energy.⁽⁴⁾ Putin was compelled to launch this military intervention to ensure the survival of the Russian economy, to keep Russia relevant in any future global deal over Syria and to circumvent the domestic uproar against him and his failing domestic economic, social, and political policies.

Furthermore, the Russian entry into Syria has to do with developing events on the ground in Syria after Operation Decisive Storm. Decisive Storm raised the moral of the opposition and helped them gain unprecedented territories in key strategic areas, such as Jiser al-Shughour, Aleppo, Idlib, Daraa and the Southern front.⁽⁵⁾ Putin aims to destroy all these accomplishments and it is up to the Arab-led coalition to continue to present a united front to face Russia's military ambitions in the Arab World.

The reluctance of Western powers has been another factor in Putin's decision to invade Syria. Putin witnessed the hesitancy of the West especially the US to take any decisive

stand or honor any red lines in the Syrian conflict. Therefore, Putin chose to intervene and capitalize on the exhaustion of all the factions on the ground. Putin knows that no faction can decisively win the war. Thus, it will be very easy for Putin to declare a fast and decisive victory given the Western passivity at this stage. Such a victory, if maintained, would be Russia's first since the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Any perceived military victory for Russia in the region would redefine Russia's role in the Middle East and allow Russia to reformulate the region and its alliances in its own image. The Russian moment in the Middle East is similar to that of the US after World War II. Russia will argue that it stabilized the Middle East and therefore it deserves the Middle East as its "back yard."

Therefore, the Russian military intervention can be a game changer and a strategic coup for the Putin administration unless other regional and global players intervene to block Russia from harvesting the sacrifices of the Syrian people and shape the Middle East in Putin's image for years to come.

Putin and the Middle East

Russia has been acting as a spoiler in the Middle East since Putin assumed office in 1999. Putin's role worsened after the Arab spring began. Russia saw the Arab Spring, which resulted in the revival of Sunni Islam in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Tunisia, as a grave risk to Russia's national security. Thus, Moscow committed itself to supporting counterrevolutionary forces, as in Egypt, or by supporting the existing regimes, as in Syria.⁽⁶⁾ Moscow was doing this while counting on the Iranian nuclear issue to remain unresolved and insisting on Russia's right to keep building nuclear reactors inside Iran and beyond.

Russia's ultimate objective in all of this has been to keep the US distracted and to force it to stretch very thin in the region, in order to limit the US' ability to block Russia from pursuing or achieving its political goals. But after a nuclear deal was reached between Iran and the P5+1, Russia was taken aback and Putin realized that the West had deprived him of one of the most crucial political leverages at his disposal: Iran. By keeping the nuclear issue lingering, Putin had hoped to keep Iran off the European energy market; to keep supplying weapons to Iran and its neighbors; to hold oil prices at a certain level by constantly agitating the situation in the Arab Gulf region; and to distract the West from the Ukraine crisis by keeping it focused on Iran and the tension in the Gulf.

Putin has utilized the Syrian conflict to present Moscow as an indispensable regional middleman and to legitimize Russia's global standing after the Ukrainian debacle; to shore up Russia's credibility; and to pressure the West to concede on many of its

demands, especially for sanctions and against the annexation of the Crimea. Putin has been successful in dodging two major crises in the last two years: the crumbling oil prices, and the harsh economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the West after Russia invaded Ukraine. Putin has been successful in doing that by constantly being ahead of the curve on global politics and masterfully using the tactics of deception and surprise in every decision he undertook by double-crossing his counterparts around the world. His strategy has been to deceive and surprise his nemesis with bold and very well-articulated moves to protect Russia's credibility and image in the Middle East.

Furthermore, Putin has enhanced Russia's credibility and prestige by preserving the ability to successfully mediate and deliver on behalf of his allies. For instance, Russia convinced and pressured the Syrian regime to give up the majority of its chemical weapons to avoid a military showdown with Washington.⁽⁷⁾ Similarly, Russia has been playing a positive and critical role between the West and North Korea. The West has acknowledged that Russia can pressure North Korea to sign a treaty or an agreement regarding its nuclear arsenal or its missiles.⁽⁸⁾ But the West, led by the US, has not been able to bring Israel to agree to a two-state solution or return the Golan Heights or Shiba farms to Syria and Lebanon, respectively. Furthermore, the West has not been able to persuade Israel to sign the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty or respect any global norm regarding the occupation of Arab lands. However, Russia under Putin has been able to deliver its allies to implement and abide by their own commitments. Thus, Russia has been building a reputation as a rising power that values its own prestige and is sensitive about its credibility. Putin has been eager to convince his allies and his nemesis of his serious attempts to rescue his fellow Russian nationals, regardless of their location, and his uncompromising stand on fighting radical Sunni Islam.⁽⁹⁾

In the last five years, Putin has presented himself as an uncompromising force against radical jihadists; a willing and able force to fill the military and political vacuums created by the US and the West at large in the Middle East; a protector of the Christian community and other minorities in the greater Levant region; a fierce defender of Russian interests; a protector of the Russian nation regardless of the location; and not as a trigger-happy player always eager to fire at anyone around the world. On the other hand, the US and its Western allies have invaded, occupied and used force against many countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. America and the West have been using drones relentlessly against soft and hard targets indiscriminately in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen and many other places in Africa. Russia, in Putin's view, stands out as a country that has not used force beyond its sphere of influence since the Cold War ended in 1991, and that distinguishes the Russian position from many in the West. Therefore, Russian diplomats and pundits constantly cite international law and norms to justify and explain their country's behavior.⁽¹⁰⁾

The military invasion of Syria is the first real military and political test of the Putin administration. This is Russia's first real foreign military engagement since the collapse of the former Soviet Union. In Syria, Russia is leading a war beyond its comfort zone and in a land to which Russia cannot claim territorial rights or protection of Russian ethnic groups, as in the Crimea, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and where Russia is most likely to encounter a significant popular resistance from the majority of the locals. Russia can count on the Syrian regime and some other minorities to facilitate its operations, but the majority of the Syrian people view the Russian presence as a colonial mandate against their country.⁽¹¹⁾ Many Syrians believe that Russia's intention is to divide Syria along ethnic and religious lines, thus reviving confessional politics in the Levant in order to redefine and re-engineer the ethnic/sectarian component of Syria.⁽¹²⁾ According to many, Russia's ultimate goal is to secure the existence of an Alawite State alongside the Mediterranean sea to protect Russia's economic interest at the expense of the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic.⁽¹³⁾ Putin wants to apply the Crimean model in Syria by creating and protecting a Russian friendly zone next to the strategically important waters.

The Return to Confessional Politics

The Russian military intervention in Syria will have grave social and political complications for the region. The Russian military intervention, if allowed to stand in Syria, will redefine sectarianism and will revive the mandate system, imposed by the United Kingdom and France between 1830-1940s, in the Levant for decades to come. It will revive the French colonial past in the hearts and the minds of many in the region, and it will deepen the conflict between all the ethnic and religious groups inside the Syrian Arab Republic. Putin's decision to revive confessional politics in the Levant is based on his ambition to conquer the area for a long time. Russia, as a rising Imperial power, is in need for divide and conquer in the Levant at this stage in its history.

However, Russia will face resistance from many corners in Syria and the region. Many Syrian per-military groups have already professed their intentions to unite in order to defeat the Russian forces and to quell Russia's colonial goals in their country. The majority of the Syrian people reject the Russian plan to divide their country along ethnic and religious lines. The policies of the French and their colonial past still divides many neighborhoods in the Levant until now.⁽¹⁴⁾ The French divided the Levant into ethnic minorities and encouraged the socioeconomic divisions among them in the Greater Syria area. Russia is doing the same by siding with the Alawites and Christians at the expense of everyone else and preventing any democratic transition from taking place in the country. The Russian intervention may entice the French, the British and the Turks to come to the Levant and provide protection to other minorities and ethnicities.

The Sykes-Picot agreement and the Versailles Treaty divide the Arab World along ethnic and religious lines. The people of the region have been suffering from these Western-imposed ideas since WWI. The Arab Spring has been the first indigenously-engineered socioeconomic and political move to counter the colonial past and end the Sykes-Picot influence. However, Russia, some regional powers, and many Western countries have vetoed the aspirations of the locals by supporting the counterrevolutions or accepting the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by certain regimes against the democratic forces in their own countries to protect the status-quo. The Western inaction in Syria suggest that the majority of the Western countries are leaning toward reviving confessional politics in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, over any transition to democracy.⁽¹⁵⁾

Encouraged by its success in supporting the counterrevolutions in the Arab World and by the West's failure to commit to any clear policy, the Putin Administration began testing the resolve of its opponents on all fronts. Beginning with Ukraine and now Syria, the Putin Administration is not wasting any time in challenging the West and pursuing its own interests regardless of the cost. Putin wants Russians and their descendants to feel safe, proud and protected irrespective of their location. The Moscow patriarchy has blessed the Syrian operation and provided religious cover to the Russian government to pursue similar policies to protect Russians and Orthodox Christians in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The significance of this blessing on the Syrian case could be seen in Russia providing protection to the mixed Russian community in Syria.⁽¹⁶⁾

Many Syrian top brass, especially Alawites, are married to Russians, and they hold key positions in the Syrian Army. Many of them could face crimes against humanity or war crime charges. Putin's intervention in Syria could be explained through this prism, too. Putin desires to extend protection to the Russian Syrian community so that they face no harm in any future transition. Russia will attempt to destroy any material evidence that implicates Russia, Putin, or any of the Syrian top brass who are married to Russian women in the massacres, chemical attacks, and systemic ethnic cleansing of the Syrian population that occurs before any global peace conference is convened to end the war.

Therefore, Putin extends Russia's hand to all of the counterrevolutionary forces and assists them in violently putting down popular movements in order to protect the old regimes. Putin prefers conflict over stability in the Middle East so Russia can continue to export arms to the region and keep oil prices high. Putin's confessional politics, at its core, goes hand in hand and serves the clash of civilizations ideology put forth by neoconservatives and their ilk in the Western media against the Muslim World after the 9/11 terror attacks in New York. Putin is eager to widen the clash and utilize it to serve his narrow interests in order to justify any brutality he uses against Muslims and their supporters and to counter and challenge the constant reconciliatory attempts by the Obama Administration to reduce the tension between the West and Islam. The Obama

Administration is keen on reducing the tension in the Middle East in order to pivot to Asia; the Putin administration is determined to block that from happening and to derail any easy exit of the US from the Middle East.

Putin's Legacy

President Putin wants to be remembered as the Russian leader who restored the credibility and the prestige of the Russian people and the Russian State. He wishes to be known as the Russian leader who defeated the Jihadi movements around the world and ended their threat and the one who stood to the West and the one who helped resurrect the Russian state and brought it back to the Middle East.

Putin's political vision stems from his own complex. The Putin complex consists of his distrust of Sunni Muslims; his desire to regain the political and military stature of the former Soviet Union and punish all who assisted in its collapse; and to extend protection to all Russian national regardless of their location. Putin considers Sunni Muslims as arch-enemies of the Russian people due to their stand with the West to defeat the Soviets in Afghanistan, and their attempt to break away from Russia and seek independence in Chechnya and Dagestan in the last two decades.⁽¹⁷⁾ Therefore, Putin has sided with the secular counterrevolutionary forces in the Arab Spring countries and has been defining all the democratic movements in the Arab world through the narrow prism of political Islam and as "Western-supported chaos" that has led to terror, instability, and violence.⁽¹⁸⁾ "Look what you have done" were his words at the United Nations General Assembly on September 30, 2015.⁽¹⁹⁾ Putin's reduction of the democratic movements that swept the Arab World since December of 2010 to Western-engineered madness is an insult to the region and an intellectually degrading description of all the sacrifices in the Arab World.

Putin is doing all of this to bolster the image of Russia in the region among certain countries. Also, to provide Russia with an unprecedented public relations opportunity rarely experienced in the Arab World about credibility. Western leaders have sacrificed many of their own allies and have not honored many of their commitments in the Middle East. Putin provides a different approach and introduces a strong and different model of relations to the region. Thus it is no wonder that many Arab leaders have been visiting Moscow in the last few months. Putin's credibility and Obama's indecisiveness paved the way for many Middle East leaders to travel to Moscow and discuss opportunities for cooperation and coordination. For instance, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Ben Salman visited Moscow several times in the last six months and discussed arms sales, a possible Saudi investment in Russia, and several joint economic and military ventures.⁽²⁰⁾ In addition, Egypt, Jordan, and other Gulf States are entertaining the possibility that Russia

might supply them with arms and assist them in solving regional conflicts more than any time before.

Therefore, Putin is trying to midwife the birth of a new Russia in the Arab World and he hopes meanwhile to transform Russia to a credible global power using that. Thus, part of the Syrian operation is to introduce a new generation of Russian military technology to the region. Putin wants the Russian technology to win over American and Western technologies. Putin is not going to accept the perception of defeat on any front in the wars he has been launching. Putin is most likely not to abandon Syria or Ukraine the way Mikhail Gorbachev abandoned Afghanistan without a clear victory, and he will not demoralize the Russian army the way the US undermined its army in Vietnam.

Putin knows that victory in Ukraine and Syria will bring back to Russia the prestige of the old days. Putin is mindful of the days when Russian technology was capable of defeating the American technology on the battle field. For instance, the Egyptian-Israeli war of 1973, better known as the October War, was won technologically by the Soviets, who provided the Egyptians with surface-to-air missiles (SAM) that shut down many American-made Israel fighter jets and destroyed many American-made tanks on the frontline.⁽²¹⁾ Egyptian soldiers carried many of these missiles on their shoulders and were able to maneuver comfortably, having an edge over the Israeli army for the most part. The inability of the Israeli army to have total supremacy in the air and on the ground is a testament to Russian technology and military planning back then. The US revenged its technological defeat against the Soviets in Afghanistan. The Pentagon provided the Mujahedeen with the Stinger missiles and the Soviets were defeated and were forced to withdraw from the country.⁽²²⁾

Putin is facing the same test right now. Can he secure the Russian re-entry into the club of the most influential powers around the world and legitimise Russia's policies and position as he begins to carve a new role for Russia in the twenty-first century? Or will the Syrian debacle diminish Russia's chance to any invitation to the G7, and end Russia's aspiration to play any major role in global politics? The Russian military intervention will provide an answer to this in sooner or later. The Russian military intervention will demonstrate whether Putin rushed his military operation, or Russia is ready for such a move.

Judging from the first real test of Russian military technology, Russia failed in its first experiment. The inability of the Russian military to precisely fire missiles from the Caspian Sea to hit targets in Syria demonstrates the fragility and the limitation of Russian technology. According to many reports the four missiles landed in Iran.⁽²³⁾ Henceforth, Putin cannot claim or brag to be the one who revived Russia and transformed it from a regional to super power.

The Political Implications of this Operation

The Russian military intervention could delay the American withdrawal from the Middle East and could convince the US to revitalize and enhance its alliances again. For instance, the American decision to delay the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan is but the first reaction to the Russian military intervention in Syria. But, the question remains, is this a strategic shift in the US' policy or just a reaction. In addition, the Russian military intervention, could provide the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and other Arab countries the opportunity to rethink their steps as they begin to formulate their alliances after the Iranian nuclear deal. The potential for Iran to be weakened is very strong, especially if Russia fails to have a decisive victory in Syria at the speed it intends.

In addition, Syria could become Putin's Afghanistan. All it takes is the downing of a few airplanes, the destroying of a few tanks, and the capturing of a few Russian soldiers. If a decision to supply Stringer missiles or their equivalent to the fighters on the ground is made, then Russian air supremacy would be compromised and its value for the Syrian regime would be diminished. Once that happens, Putin will have monumental pressure at home and will bring the Afghanistan experience back to every Russian home. Consequently, Russia's dreams of ruling over the Levant will be dashed faster than any power could have anticipated.

Therefore, the Arab leaders who rushed to Moscow ought to wait and see the resolve and ability of the new rising power. Is the Russian hardware rusty? Can they pull a fast victory in Syria? Or will they be drained from the first round? Time will tell if Russia deserves its invitation to the G7 or if Russia merits the Sunni trust it has been working so hard to defeat at every opportunity. The turn of events in Syria will demonstrate whether Russia will be forced to abandon Syria and Ukraine based on its military performance or if Russia will be able to define the power structure of the Middle East, Ukraine and beyond as the US continues its ill planned withdrawal from the region.

Conclusion

The Russian military intervention came as a response to Operation Decisive Storm, the Salman doctrine, to the Turkish military intervention in Syria, to Iranian nuclear deal and the Western rush to rehabilitate Iran politically and economically at the expense of Russia. Putin wants to enhance Russia's political and military credibility, prestige and standings around the world, thus boosts Russia's bargaining position with the West and minimises Russia's isolation, and deligitmisation, and if possible position Russia as a strong alternative to the United States in the Middle East during these sensitive and troubling times.

Putin's shrewd political adventures gained him a reputation as a credible and reliable leader willing to defend any terrain Russia and its allies deemed essential for their national security. Putin's ability to alternatively deliver or drag his heels gained him a stature rare in the West in this day and age: to stand up and defend what he says. Many Western powers have compromised their interests and their own red lines in favor of nominal gains and in the name of not rushing things. Putin, however, seems to be the only leader who is willing to honor his own red lines and willing to fulfil his commitments when it comes to defending his allies. The US and other Western powers have underestimated the resolve and persistence of the Russian leader and his commitment to advancing Russia's global role, and failed to construct a cohesive policy to deal with Russian military and economic ambitions in the Middle East and beyond. Putin's policies of deception and surprise have been defining the moment in the Middle East!!!

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End Notes

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