

## Understanding the Russian withdrawal from Syria

During the last half-year Syria has gone through fast and violent alterations both on the battlefield and in the political context. In tandem with Iranian and Hezbollah militia on the ground, Russia carried out massive military operations across Syria, turning the course of events in favor of the exhausted Syrian regime. This strategy to capture territory was carried out in anticipation of the fact that negotiations are under way, desiring to draw the broad outlines of a political settlement. Unexpectedly, Putin has ordered a partial withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria starting March 15, the day the negotiations start in Genève, stating that the objectives that have been set, are generally accomplished. But the fact remains - the Islamic State (IS) - the original declared objective for Russian intervention - is still having a considerable part of Syria under its control, and in the statement about the end of operation in Syria the IS has not been even mentioned. Whether Russia has fulfilled its tasks in Syria or simply retreated, convinced that it is impossible, is today a subject to controversy. But a closer look at the events in Syria and Russia's policy both toward it, as well as Russia's domestic issues, could help to understand what the Russian calculations might mean.

### The pretext for the Russian military campaign in Syria

There are goals that are declared within the framework of propaganda and there are goals that are set within the actual military and political operations, for instance, the fight against international terrorism, which is a global strategic goal of the same order as the struggle for democracy. But all of this is a common declaration, covering specific interests - a constant (which is impossible without military support) presence in the strategically important region.

The interference in the Syrian conflict is the first time Russia is at war beyond its borders since its crushing defeat in Afghanistan. Previously, Russia has never

participated in the west-led occupations in the Middle East in the similar vein as with the Syrian case, and it has even expressed sympathy towards all forms of resistance to occupations. Interestingly, the USSR generally had a low profile during the insurrection of 1982 in Syria, led by a political Islam organization formed in 1920s - the Muslim Brotherhood - against the Hafez al-Assad's regime. Considering the USSR's pressure that Russian Muslims were under during the Soviet time, Russia's reluctance can be impugned. Large profits from the weapons sales to Syrian authorities (by then more than 60% of the Syrian GDP was spent on arms under the pretext of liberation of Palestine)<sup>1</sup> and Russia's occupation with its own internal issues, give some explanations. Nevertheless, since the fall of the USSR, the Russian government has been claiming that the Middle East is close to its neighborhood, so the border defense has become Moscow's primary concern. Besides, the US strategy in the region is a threat and incompetent in Putin's view, as well as dangerous, because it provokes wars in the Gulf States, resulting in Russia losing friendly regimes, such as the Libyan one.

Specifically the fight against the IS, declared by Russia when intervening in Syria, was unrealizable by the current Russian military means. It is an elusive goal, which requires a huge military coalition, hundreds of thousands of troops, a large-scale operation, and not just 50 small aircraft and helicopters applied for pinpoint strikes. And in fact, the Russian president's speech at the UN General Assembly calling for common anti-terror efforts faced a muted reaction. Although, within this global objective, there was another small goal, which is considered as achieved by the Russian Defense Minister: the destruction of the militants, who sympathize with the terrorist underground in Russia. As President Vladimir Putin said: 'it is better if we will fight with them there, than in Russia'. According to the Russian Defense Ministry data, by the time of the withdrawal, more

than 2000 Russian fighters, including 17 field commanders have been eliminated during the Russian military operations in Syria<sup>2</sup>.

### Regaining territory

With Russian intervention aiming to rescue Assad, who was losing more and more territory to the rebels, the spirits of the Syrian army rose at once and it was able to move forward in several fronts. Most of the 910 km Syrian-Turkish border that crosses the East of the Euphrates - an important trade corridor between the countries to date - is controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is propped up by both Russia and the US. Only a 160 km stretch, which lies on the West Bank of the Euphrates, is not under control by the Kurdish forces. Considering that the opposition, Assad's regime, and the Islamic State, the latter of which has under its control a 98 km Jarabulus-Azaz linkage along with a 13 km road stretching from Azaz to Afrin, are eager to control the Syrian-Turkish frontier, this is a dramatic achievement. The rest of the borderland that lies across the Mediterranean and the province of the Hatay within Turkey, is controlled by the Syrian-Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG).<sup>3</sup>

The high priority target of Russian forces was the so called Azaz-Aleppo Corridor - a lifeline to the opposition-held areas in northern Aleppo - and is, in fact, coordinated with the US, which is employing the Kurdish forces as a proxy to hold the IS within the Syrian boundaries before its final strike to completely destroy the group. Russian air strikes forced people to move to the Shia-dominated towns supporting the regime, Nubl and Zahraa. With this move, Russia together with its allies, put the towns back under the control of the regime and cut off the opposition's supply route Azaz-Aleppo. The opposition-held part of Aleppo was now besieged by three fighting forces: the regime forces from the southern and the northern sides, the

IS from the north and the east, and the Kurdish fighters from the western side.<sup>4</sup>

Simultaneously, Russia's air strikes allowed the PYD to advance on the road that ties the Aleppo city to the Azaz town. By the first week of February, the Kurds, including the YPG and a group calling itself 'Revolutionary Army' forces seized two more towns to the north of the Nubul and Zahraa - Al Khirbeh and al-Ziara, as well as the airfield at Minaq, located less than 7 km away from Azaz.<sup>5</sup> These forces will likely continue to advance northward toward the Turkish border, thereby making it easier for the regime forces to consolidate their positions in and around Aleppo. Under such circumstances, the regime is able to create a buffer between its gained territory and any anti-regime forces based in Aleppo area. The Russian military offensive launched from the southwest of Aleppo and focused on the Idlib governorate, allowed the regime and its allies to encircle the opposition forces based in Aleppo, and to release its supporters within the Idlib governorate. Any prospective ground offensive against the IS would have to collide with the regime or its allies. Considering the advance of the Kurds, backed by both the US and Russia, towards the Turkish border, which could be a *casus belli* for Turkey due to the threat to its territorial integrity, the decision of Russia to pull out could also mean a cautious disincentive of the possible direct confrontation with one of the key players in the conflict. The battles in the south, in Deraa governorate, was no less vital and was conducted in order to secure the Nusaib governorate that shares borders with Jordan. With the help of Russian air strikes, the regime forces have also retaken the border town of Sheikh Maskin, and the town of Athman, which likely creates conditions for the regime to reopen the international road that ties Damascus to Amman.<sup>6</sup>

The primary concern of the Russian military offensive would seem to be to defeat the moderate Syrian opposition and by that to coerce Syrian and international forces into accepting Moscow's terms during peace talks. Russian air strikes have been concentrated specifically in

three regions: surrounding Latakia, in the northern parts of the Aleppo governorate, and in the governorate of Deraa, all of which are free of the IS and other radical groups. The Russian intervention revived the 'regime-vs-extremism' contrast in fact, which allowed Russia to tackle whichever group it considered. All told, Russian Defense Minister reported that the Russian Air Force helped the regime to regain 10 000 km of the Syrian territory with 400 settlements<sup>7</sup>. The main goals of Russian military offensive - to save its ally's regime and regroup its military force - have been achieved. By its withdrawal, Russia is likely demonstrating the end of the unconditional support to Assad, aiming to pressure him to take a more serious stance towards the opposition in the UN-hosted negotiations. Assad himself was informed about the decision the same day when it was actually announced. While Assad insisted on the war with a 'victorious end' regaining all of Syria, Russian diplomats have made it clear that the solution of the conflict lies only in a diplomatic solution. This pushes Assad to concentrate on a single point of the negotiations under the UN aegis to consolidate his control over the territories he was helped to regain, and gives him an opportunity to look more independent, than just a client of Russia. However, the population in these areas is persuasively opposing to the regime, just like it was in the beginning of the uprisings.

### Russia's primary goal

Although the withdrawal announcement came as a surprise, there is a considerable reason to assume that the timing has been accurately chosen for it: during the truce came into effect on February 27. In Putin's own words 'most of the goals in Syria have been accomplished' - some of them have nothing to do with Syria itself. A more important goal for Russia surely was its place in world diplomacy. After the sanctions over Ukraine crisis, the year 2015 began for Russia with a complete isolation, and the recent oil price decline as well as the currency crisis made the situation only worse. Russia could not afford a full or a long-term intervention due to the logistical obstacles and costs. Putin himself said that

it would only last for a several months and that it would not become a second Afghanistan with a Libyan fate. Vladimir Putin in the past two years, has mainly been engaged in foreign policy and the engagement is regarded as successful for Russia in general. The isolation gets excited, because you can play on the contradictions of its participants. The military operation in Syria was exactly such a project. On one hand, it is a continuation of the policy of foreign wars as an agenda set by Russia, which the international community has to respond to. On the other hand, it is an attempt to get out of political isolation, and it has been successful, but it seems that only in the framework of the Syrian project. The meetings after the Russian direct involvement in the Syrian conflict have been long and substantial. Russia has once again become a part of the 'international board' of directors dealing with conflict resolutions, but, in fact, the sanctions remained. So the question of new Russian projects is still open.

### Parallel goals

Whatever the main reason for the Russian intervention, the main achievements are of various kinds. As every other war in the Middle East, the Syrian war has its economic background. Arab Spring created opportunities for Moscow. What Russia does have to offer is arms and energy. In the light of Russia's support to its allies and victories in Syria, the regional states began to look at Moscow for the prospect of military sales. According to SIPRI data, Russia accounted for 25% of global arms exports in the recent five-year period, of which a considerable part is exported to the Middle East states.<sup>8</sup> There is an opinion among western experts, such as Michael Kofman and Stephan Blank that Russia might be thinking of establishing a coalition of states that are pro-Russian and anti-American, and among Iran, Iraq and Syria. The instrument to employ here is energy and arms deals.

Furthermore, Moscow's interest in the region is partly due to its remarkable oil and natural gas reserve concentrations. Russia is a country with a worldwide reputation as

a gas and oil supplier, which is an important instrument in making foreign policy. Now Russia has a potential to access Syrian fields with the prospects that Russia may be able to control oil and gas transportations. Syrian authorities, in their turn, have expressed their hope that Russian companies will develop the country's offshore oil and gas deposits which have enormous potential. Banayas city of Tartus is one of the oil-richest reservations in the Mediterranean area and there are already a number of bilateral contracts between the countries, with the first phase worth \$88 million.<sup>9</sup>

There are already considerations regarding the 'Revived Syria' project. When the war ends and Syria walks out of the conflict, the one who will invest in the rebuilding process, will become a share participant in the project. Preferences will be given to Russian companies' contributions. Thus, Russia wins an ally, a state in which it can make payback investments. But if Syria is divided into parts, it would be regarded as a defeat for Putin, both global and at home, the latter being more important. The disunited territorial integrity of Syria in the aftermath of the conflict, which is the worst case scenario, could jeopardize the internal order of the Russian Federation. This is why Russian leadership is concerned with the territorial integrity of Syria. But Russia should be careful what it wishes for, because Israel can create obstacles on the way of Syria's rebuilding, while it is eager to gain control over the Golan Heights border, which could be possible in case of a separated Syria. In 2006 Israel expressed its worries regarding that Russian arms sold to Syria end up in the hands of Hezbollah. Since then, Moscow has been cautious to act in the Middle East with respect to Israel's interests. For instance, when Putin was quite serious in selling S-300 missile systems to Syria back in 2013, and after Israel raised concerns that such a system would allow Syrian government to cover all of Israel, Moscow suspended the deal. In turn, there is a Russian-Israeli cooperation conducting a joint aerial reconnaissance of Syrian air space. The control over the enemy's air space has long been a center of security strategy doctrine of Israel.<sup>10</sup>

### Taking advantage of the IS threat

Alongside with securing its small port in Tartus waters, which now may become a naval base, military and air base in Latakia and adjustment of its client network, using the IS threat, Russia has also intensified militarization of the Central Asian states, Black and Caspian Sea regions. Crimea is also turning into a military bridgehead. In the Caucasus region, Dagestan and Armenia are being transformed into border areas under special control<sup>11</sup>. This might be regarded as Putin's nostalgia for the bygone former Soviet republics. Nevertheless, with this move he has killed several birds with one stone, namely - a military fortification on the borders to Russia, further dependence on Russia of economically unstable and vulnerable Central Asian countries due to the IS escalation, as well as what is visible with the naked eye: the position of these military objects surrounding Turkey. The reassessment of the Russian-Turkey relations does not seem as following Turkey's downing of a Russian jet over Syria. The geographic location of Turkey ensures that Ankara can have a much greater impact on national interests of Russia regarding the former Soviet areas - Ukraine, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Ankara is, at the same time, improving its relations with Kiev even in terms of military exercises. Turkey's mobilization and ground operations against Kurdish militias in Syria could easily lead to the direct confrontation with Russian forces, in which the US could repeat its experience with Argentina in times of General Galtieri<sup>12</sup>, namely - leaving Erdogan alone with Russia. Russian authorities seem to take into account Saudi Arabia's growing cooperation with Turkey, which might also prove Russia's decision to withdraw from Syria in order to minimize one of the irritants in the Russian-Saudi relationship. Thus, to strengthen and demonstrate Russia's military potential and intelligence is not a less important goal of the Russian involvement in Syria.

However, critics have a more skeptical view - 'Russia can only sustain its policy toward Syria as long as conditions in Russia allow it to do so'. The question that has been discussed in terms of the impact

of low oil prices and sanctions can be the failure of the Russian government to develop and modernize the economy - is not the only factor that Russia cares about. The North Caucasus and Central Asia regions have often been considered by Russian and foreign experts as vulnerable regions in estimation of the scope of the threat that IS poses to the Russia's national security. The security forces of the Central Asian republics - a very relative concept as they cannot cope by themselves with a powerful invasion the IS escalation. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which is an affiliate of the IS is an extremely serious and underrated threat as well. And to throw these states to their fate - is not an option for Russia. Because then, it will have to fight against extremism directly on the perimeter of Russian borders. As for the North Caucasus, indeed, Russia has never been able to completely eliminate jihadists in the region, though it has been acting brutally and overcommitting its internal forces and relying on Chechnya's president Kadyrov. For Moscow it is now of a vital importance, bearing in mind Central Asia, to focus on ensuring the success of its Syrian operations, as it believes that if opposition in Syria led to the IS rise and power acquisition there, it can reach and destabilize southern and northern parts of Russia along with its neighborhood in Central Asia. Expressing concerns that the domestic security could be undermined if experienced Russian fighters from a transnational network would return back home, Russian authorities managed to generate a permanent state of emergency framing its support to the Syrian government as national security interests. In this regard, it seems that president Putin's attitude regarding outside interventions, which in his mind in the future could serve as a pretext for the international community to intervene in Russia, which has a poor democratic experience, reflects concerns about the country's domestic affairs and sovereignty, which Putin was likely defending in Syria. Hereby, Russia sends a clear message to the West and its coalition that no outside state has the right to decide internal affairs of another one.

### Conclusion

During its military campaign in Syria, Russia has achieved quite a lot. It undermined the Syrian opposition, stabilized the Assad's regime and produced a peace process on more favorable conditions for Assad. All of it does not look very promising since the people of Syria, even those who initially were supporting the regime, now seem to be deeply frustrated in and opposing, which matters as peace talks are taking place. In parallel Russia has managed to fulfil its own goals in the areas of its national interest. Changing the counters of the five-year-old war and its surrounding geopolitics, Russia has coped to break out from the international isolation as a result caused by the Ukraine crisis. One can speculate that the hasty withdrawal is risky for Russia as it could be excluded from the desired partnership, while others are keeping their forces on the ground, but the country still retains a considerable part of its forces and air defense systems in Syria, which should not be overlooked. Putin's announcement to deploy Russian forces from Syria does surely not mean the end of the conflict, as some predicted, not even lesser airstrikes, because the main Russian air defense system S-400 along with other smaller systems still remain in Syria and airstrikes are continuing at about the same rate as before. Besides, orders were made to defend Russian military bases in Syria from land, air and sea and continue to operate on the regular basis, which implies that some decent amount of soldiers will be kept in Syria. So, the 'partial' withdrawal would rather imply some political moves rather than military. By declaring a pullout in times of relative truce and current negotiations, Russia, firstly, seeks not to lose the hard paved way back to the table where global affairs are discussed, because if the peace negotiations lead to a permanent peace, then Russia will be in a more favorable position, if not, then it would mean that the whole idea of the invasion in Syria was a wrong decision, and Russia could be facing a discretization of its own regime. Secondly, by having less forces in Syria, Russia ensures itself against unpredicted clashes with the Saudi-Turkish players on the Syrian ground, and

if the conflict prospers, then Russia is not among the instigators. In this regard, the timing for withdrawal seems to be well measured. Indeed, Moscow never clearly stated its goals in the Middle East, but one thing is clear - as long as there is a Russian presence in Syria, Moscow has its desired leverage of influence at the diplomatic table, something that it has been trying long to achieve and, from now on, will obviously do anything to retain.

*Fariza Dzorthova is ERASMUS intern at the AIES.*

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Dr. Langweg 3, 2410 Hainburg/Donau  
Tel. +43 (1) 3583080  
E-Mail: office@aies.at  
Website: www.aies.at

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