

Russia's Military Withdrawal Will Prompt President Assad to "Compromise"?

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Featured image: Vladimir Putin meeting with Bashar Assad at the Hmeimim airbase, Dec 11 2017 (Source: Oriental Review)

Russia has every right to withdraw most of its Aerospace Forces from Syria following ISIS-Daesh's defeat, with one of the most immediate consequences of this move being that it will prompt President Assad into a "political compromise" with the "opposition".

President Putin's [surprise visit](#) to Syria saw the Russian leader announce the large-scale withdrawal of his country's Aerospace Forces from the Arab Republic, signifying that Moscow truly believes that Daesh is defeated and that its original mission in Syria has been accomplished. It needs to be reminded that Russia's 2015 anti-terrorist intervention was initiated by the need to destroy this international terrorist threat, although other more locally active terrorist organizations were also targeted for elimination in the course of events as well.

Contrary to some of the expectations and misleading inferences shared across a few Alt-Media platforms since that time, Russia did not get involved in Syria in order to "save Assad", but to protect the constitutional order of the state and prevent its Libyan-like fall to terrorists. To this end, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov even once [remarked](#) that

"Assad is not our ally, by the way. Yes, we support him in the fight against terrorism and in preserving the Syrian state. But he is not an ally like Turkey is the ally of the United States", further driving home this point in an unforgettable way.

Now that ISIS-Daesh is defeated, there's no "official" reason for Russia's military forces to remain actively deployed in Syria, although President Putin was clear that they'll still continue to remain hosted in the two bases that Moscow has in the country and won't hesitate to act if the terrorists suddenly return. It's at this point where it's important to clarify what Russia means by "terrorists"; unlike Damascus, Moscow's interpretation of this term doesn't extend to the armed "moderate opposition rebels" that are partaking in the parallel international peace processes of Astana and Geneva.

This is a crucial difference in understanding because it determines the legitimate scope of Russia's anti-terrorist assistance to the Syrian Arab Army (SAA). Although Daesh is defeated, the whole northeast of the country beyond the Euphrates is under the control of the Kurdish-

led “Syrian Democratic Forces” (SDF) who are stubbornly intent on “federalizing” the remaining two-thirds of the country with American support. Likewise, there are already four “de-escalation zones” (DEZ) active in the rest of Syria, which essentially function to separate the SAA from the armed “opposition” in these places.

President Assad once famously promised to liberate “[every inch](#)” of Syria, but there’s no way that he’ll be able to free those parts of the country now unless he “compromises” with his opponents. In hindsight, this might be why President Putin [said](#) during last month’s [Sochi Summit](#) with his Iranian and Turkish counterparts that

“It is obvious that the process of reform will not be easy and will require compromises and concessions from all participants, including of course the government of Syria.”

Russia won’t ever target the “moderate opposition rebels” that it signed DEZ deals with and invited to Astana, so Damascus will be compelled to “compromise” with them if it wants to reassert its authority over the territory that they presently occupy.

The same situation applies for the PYD-YPG Kurds, too. The 2000 US troops in northeastern Syria and 10 American bases there make it impossible for the SAA to militarily reintegrate this region, thus necessitating some sort of “decentralization” deal likely modelled off of the one that’s included in the [Russian-written “draft constitution”](#) and possibly seeing DEZs (which the Kurdish-controlled third of the country might eventually be designated) [transformed](#) into “decentralization” units. The SAA’s Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah allies won’t be of much help in any forthcoming liberation operation that Damascus might secretly be planning in these regions because they lack the pivotal airpower of Russia’s Aerospace Forces, which was responsible for turning the tide of war in the first place in late 2015.

They’d also be violating the DEZs that Moscow worked so hard to establish, likely earning each of them a sharp rebuke from Russia behind closed doors or even in public if the situation was serious enough to “warrant” it. President Putin is adamant that the War on Syria begins transitioning from the military theater to the political one, using his proposed [“Syrian National Dialogue Congress”](#) as the template for proceeding to the next step, and he will do whatever is reasonably possible within his and his country’s power to ensure that this happens.

The refusal of Russia to get militarily involved in what it officially views as the “civil war” dimension of the conflict between Damascus and the armed “moderate opposition rebels” following its victory in the international one between the SAA and Daesh suggests that Moscow will now intensify all of its diplomatic efforts towards reaching a “political solution”. There are a few reasons behind all of this, but they can broadly be categorized by domestic and international imperatives that share a common pragmatism.

On the home front, President Putin is delivering on the promise that he made to his countrymen to win their War on Terror, having done so in only a third of his term (~2 years) and without dragging it on indefinitely like the US has done for over 8 times as long. Neither he nor his voters want to see Russia embroiled in what they always fear could become an Afghan-like quagmire by continuing military operations during what they believe to now be a

solely “civil war” context. In addition, downscaling Russia’s involvement in Syria could allow the federal government to redirect hundreds of millions of dollars to domestic projects during President Putin’s expected fourth term, which boosts his populist credentials during this election season.

The other reason behind why Russia will probably focus mostly on diplomatic initiatives at this time is because of the role that this intricate process can play in promoting Moscow’s 21st-century “[balancing](#)” act in becoming the supreme stabilizing force in the Eurasian supercontinent. By withdrawing most of Russia’s Aerospace Forces from Syria and thereby creating the conditions whereby President Assad is prompted into making “political compromises” as a result, Russia expects to enhance its strategic relations with Turkey, the [Kurds](#), [Israel](#), and [Saudi Arabia](#), all with an eye on furthering the prospects of the emerging [Multipolar World Order](#) in this pivotal location at the tri-continental crossroads of Afro-Eurasia.

Furthermore, by withdrawing right after [accusing](#) the US of provocative in-air maneuvers over Syria, Russia is extending an “olive branch” of “goodwill” to its Great Power rival and signaling that it’s eager as always to normalize relations if Washington is ready to reciprocate. The much-sought-after and so-called “New Détente” could finally make progress if Russia and the US reach a “gentlemen’s agreement” with one another over the fate of the Syrian Kurdish “federalists”, as appears to already somewhat be the case with both of them encouraging their on-the-ground partners of the SAA and SDF respectively to refrain from crossing the Euphrates River border between them.

Bearing all of the above in mind, the implications of Russia’s announced military withdrawal from Syria are much larger than simply signifying Daesh’s defeat, but point to a thought-out and far-reaching plan to prompt President Assad into making “political concessions” to the “opposition” as a means of enhancing Russia’s overall “balancing” role in the Mideast, all for the “greater good” of multipolarity. While there’s hope that this process could also yield a breakthrough in relations with the US, such expectations should understandably be tempered by the reality of the “deep state’s” War on Trump, though the prospects of “constructive” US-Russian interaction via the Syrian Kurds – particularly in the event that they succeed in “institutionalizing” their self-declared “federation” in northeastern Syria – shouldn’t be overlooked.

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