

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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### ***What Is Vladimir Putin Doing in the Middle East?***

In the history of American foreign policy, presidents have consistently sought to impede Russian presence in the Middle East. In 1946, President Truman forced the USSR to withdraw from Iran. During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, President Nixon pressured the USSR when it began resupplying Arab clients. After the 1976 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter threatened military force if the Soviets went any farther. In August, Israel began warning the United States that Russia was planning a significant military deployment into Syria to prop up the Assad regime. That deployment has begun. As the *Wall Street Journal* argues editorially, "The decision to intervene seems to have been made during a visit to Moscow last month by Qasem Soleimani, the Iranian general in charge of the Quds Force. The general, who armed anti-American Shiite militias in Iraq, now oversees Tehran's efforts to save Mr. Assad."

How significant is this military deployment to Syria? Russia is now delivering significant armaments to an airfield south of the Syrian port city of Latakia. So far, Russia has delivered half a dozen T-90 tanks, three dozen armored personnel carriers, and 15 new artillery pieces, and has built housing that can accommodate as many as 1,500 people. An average of two Russian cargo planes is flying every day into Syria. As expected, this is all being done to enable Russia to bring in Russian fighter jets based at the airfield near Latakia, and to conduct airstrikes to help Assad remain in power. Recent news reports from several organizations now confirm that Russian fighter jets are in Syria. The coastal region offers Russia additional vital access to the Mediterranean Sea, for Russia already has a naval base in the port city of Tartus, about 60 miles south of Latakia.

Andrew Foxall, Director of the Russia Studies Center at the Henry Jackson Society, argues that Putin's "master plan for Syria . . . is clear: That the Western and Arab countries, which form the present anti-Islamic State [i.e., ISIS] coalition, should join forces with Assad, together with Kurdish and Iraqi troops; Iran, Hezbollah and Russia may also join this alliance. The coalition would obtain a formal mandate from the United Nations Security Council and then defeat the jihadist insurgency. Russia would then bring Mr. Assad to the negotiating table and oversee a political transition that preserves his regime. Mr. Putin plans to address the United Nations General Assembly later this month about this plan." Foxall persuasively contends that Putin is acting so boldly on several fronts because the West's enthusiasm for cooperation is perceived by Putin as a sign of weakness: "If the new rapprochement on Syria goes ahead, Ukraine would be conveniently forgotten. This would risk undermining the West's Ukraine-related sanctions, and provide Mr. Putin with tacit recognition of Russia's annexation of Crimea and Moscow's dominance of eastern Ukraine. Russia would then have triumphed over the world order

imposed by the West after the end of the Cold War. America's enemies, from China to Iran, would see this as an invitation to redefine their relationship with Washington." The key takeaway from Foxall's analysis is that the West, especially the United States, cannot permit Putin to dictate the terms of cooperation in the Middle East. Russia's coercive diplomacy under Putin is now a given, and, therefore, the West must challenge him in his efforts in Syria. Much rests on how the US responds to what Putin is doing currently in the Middle East.

Vladimir Putin has an additional, much larger purpose for what he is doing in Syria. Putin seeks to legitimize the Russia-Iran-Hezbollah hegemony in the Middle East and, naturally, he seeks to lead this "coalition" in the drive to defeat the Islamic State. This base in Latakia is the first step in establishing Russian hegemony in the region. There are several reasons why Putin wishes to establish this new hegemony:

1. In 1972, Russia (then the USSR) was driven out of Egypt by Anwar Sadat. Therefore, the only remaining presence of Russia in the region was Syria. If Assad is driven from power, Russia would have no strategic ally in the Middle East. Putin has witnessed Russia lose so much influence in the world and he is not about to lose his only remaining ally in the region. No matter how corrupt and no matter how brutal and ruthless, Assad is Russia's key to influence. Putin apparently will go to any lengths to keep Assad in power. Hence, this new air base in Latakia.
2. Russia has only one naval base outside of its territory—Tartus, south of the airfield of Latakia. To have a naval base and an airfield in a key area of the eastern Mediterranean would establish Russian presence in this volatile region in a formidable way. It would seem naive to suggest that Russia is only building up its military response to defeat ISIS. Historically, Russia has always had designs on the eastern Mediterranean. In the name of fighting terrorism, it is now establishing one.
3. Several years ago, President Obama drew a red line in the sand concerning Assad using chemical weapons. Assad crossed that line and the president reached an agreement with Russia for Assad to dismantle all chemical weapons. But Assad continues to use those weapons, even though they should have been completely destroyed. They were not. President Obama continues his policy of disengagement from the Middle East and Russia is thereby filling that vacuum.

Putin is deeply committed to preserving the Assad regime and will go to almost any length to do so, including negotiating deals with Iran and establishing Russian bases in Syria. The United States spent \$500 million on a military training program for anti-Assad, anti-Islamic State fighters; it has yielded 5 fighters!!!! The air campaign against ISIS is not going very well. Into this situation steps Putin. He has the key: Organize a coalition around Russia, with the key support of Iran and Hezbollah. Conspicuously absent from this strategy is the United States. As this unfolds, all eyes will be off Ukraine and Putin's annexation of Crimea. Putin is offering a new Russia—a Russia that is a key hegemonic player linked to Iran to defeat ISIS. If this works, Russia will have legitimized its new role—annexing key territory (Crimea and parts of Ukraine)

with impunity and leading a new coalition to bring order and stability to the Middle East. His vision is to settle the Syrian civil war, defeat ISIS and ultimately end the refugee crisis currently plaguing Europe. Vladimir Putin to the rescue!

Putin's plan is arguably grandiose, but he gives every appearance of being deadly serious. I do not know what the United States plans to do about this, but, if Putin succeeds, he will completely alter the balance of power in the Middle East, the eastern Mediterranean and ultimately in Europe. Is Vladimir Putin an indispensable partner of the United States? If the United States, which has now begun negotiations with Putin's government on his ideas, accepts this partnership, we will then be a participant in the re-ordering of the world's balance. It is difficult to see this as a favorable balance for the United States.

See Editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* (14 September 2015); Dion Nissenbaum and Philip Shishkin, "Russian Buildup in Syria" *Ibid.* (15 September 2015); Andrew Foxall in the *New York Times* (14 September 2015); and Charles Krauthammer in the *Los Angeles Daily News* (21 September 2015).