

The reduction of the Russian contingent in Syria

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On March 14, President Vladimir Putin announced that the Russian military operation in Syria had ended in success, and ordered the withdrawal of “the main part” of the Russian military contingent from Syria. The reduction of the Russian military as announced is primarily aimed at changing the image of the Russian military presence in Syria: from conducting intense combat operations to a primarily ‘peacekeeping’ mission supervising the ceasefire. Another objective is to minimise the political and financial costs of the operation, while maintaining Moscow’s ability to further influence the military situation in Syria.

The withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria is only partial (see the Appendix), and is essentially a political operation. Its purpose is to change the image of the Russian military presence, from forces conducting intensive combat operations against the anti-Assad opposition (including bomb attacks which have caused civilian casualties) to a ‘peacekeeping force’, whose main task is to supervise the ceasefire. To this end, the Russians have created a ‘centre for control and monitoring of the ceasefire’ at their base in Khmeymim.

At the same time, Russia is keeping sufficient forces in Syria to maintain its influence on the situation, as well as an infrastructure that will allow it to rapidly reinforce its contingent and resume intense air bombing.

Objectives in the sphere of foreign policy

The withdrawal of part of the forces and the reduction in the intensity of military operations suggests that Russia is not interested in a quick political settlement of the conflict in Syria. The Russians realise that by reducing the military pressure on the anti-Assad opposition, they will weaken its motivation to reach an agreement with the regime. Moreover, Russia has failed to achieve a number of its previously declared objectives, including getting the Syrian Kurdish party (PYD) to participate in the Geneva negotiations, and cutting the armed opposition off from its foreign supply lines. This means that the Russian objective is to maintain the instability in the region and drag out the political talks, in which it intends to play a key balancing role.

The Russian decision also shows that Moscow is not interested in the operation against the so-called Islamic State, and that its fight against terrorism in Syria, which it had declared as a war aim from the outset, was only a disguise for its real intentions. These were, in tactical terms, to save the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and weaken the so-called moderate opposition; and in strategic terms, to force the USA to abandon its policy of supporting the

overthrow of undemocratic regimes, and to recognise Russia as a joint decision-maker on regional and global security questions.

Meanwhile, the clearly advertised 'withdrawal' of the Russian contingent, and the reduction in the intensity of its activities, will help Russia fend off accusations that it has been fuelling the immigration crisis in the European Union, and thus provides an argument to those who favour lifting the EU sanctions.

Objectives in the area of domestic policy

The announcement of 'victory' and the well-publicised return of some of the contingent to Russia are also motivated by domestic politics. Despite an active campaign in the Russian media portraying the intervention in Syria as directly defending Russia against Islamic terrorism, Russian society still has doubts as to the advisability and the sense of the military involvement in far-off Syria. In a difficult economic and financial situation, when the government has had to cut social spending, and in the face of upcoming elections to the State Duma (16 September), the decision to withdraw troops from Syria is intended to help the Kremlin reduce the degree of public discontent.

Appendix

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Russian military involvement in Syria

Starting in September 2015, Russia sent troops to Syria including several thousand soldiers and sailors from the Aerospace Forces, Navy and Airborne Troops. Most of them operate from bases on the territory of the Russian Federation, and the majority of the troops come from the Navy, whose task is to provide logistical security for the Russian contingent's actions on Syrian territory, to provide cover from the Mediterranean (mostly Black Sea Fleet units) and carry out strikes on selected targets on Syrian territory (mostly units of the Caspian Flotilla). Direct protection of Russian bases in Tartus (the naval base) and Khmeymim near Latakia (the air base) is provided by subunits of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (from Sevastopol) and the 7th Air Assault (from Novorossiysk). The core of the grouping, which bears the main operational burden, is the contingent of the Russian Air Force located at the Khmeymim base.

In the initial phase (September-November 2015), the Russian Aerospace Force contingent in Syria totalled 34 combat aircraft, 10 combat helicopters and 11 planes and helicopters for support and security operations. From 17 November, planes based on the territory of the Russian Federation (including strategic aviation, a total of 36 aircraft) were also used; the size of the contingent based at Khmeymim also began to rise steadily. During the peak of the operation, in January-February 2016, there were about 80 planes and helicopters on the territory of Syria; air defence missile launchers, including newest S-400 systems, were also deployed there, as were electronic warfare systems.

The decision to start withdrawing the main part of the contingent on 15 March covers a substantial component of the forces; however, it is not decisive for the conduct of operations at the present stage (under the conditions of a ceasefire). According to the

existing information, within a week the Su-34 and Su-24 bombers will be withdrawn from Syria as will the Su-25 attack aircraft (on 15 and 16 March a total of four formations of these types of aircraft returned to Russia). Some aircraft are still supporting the forces of the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad (on 15 March they were bombing Islamic State positions in the vicinity of the town of Tadmir). Nevertheless after the ceasefire came into force, the demand for the use of bombers and attack aircraft fell significantly.

Despite the planned withdrawal, the bases in Tartus and Khmeimim will continue operating on the current scale. This means that they will be ready at any time to receive additional bombers and attack aircraft from Russia. In the current military situation, however, the main burden falls upon the helicopters, which are the principal direct support for the Syrian army offensive. Uncertainty remains over the continued presence in Syria of 20 multirole Sukhoi Su-35S and Su-30SM combat aircraft, which if necessary could carry out precise attacks on ground targets (*nota bene*, since the start of the operation, the NATO countries' actions have been based on the use of multirole fighters alone, similarly to Russia's), as well as other aircraft (the Su-27SM fighter and the Tu-214R & Il-20M1 reconnaissance and electronic warfare aircraft). From the latest reports, it appears that other elements of the contingent will remain in Syria (subunits of the marine infantry and the Airborne Troops, the air defence, and electronic warfare), as will the Russian trainers and advisers assigned to the Syrian army.