

Russia in Syria: Playing for high stakes

Russia, a staunch ally of Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, has launched a wave of airstrikes in defence of its significant economic, military and geopolitical interests in the country. While the Syria campaign has helped Russia to project itself as a global player, it also presents significant risks.

Diplomatic involvement – staunch backing for Assad

In line with long-standing ties between the two, dating back to [Soviet times](#), Russia [vetoed](#) four UN Security Council resolutions on Syria in 2011, 2012 and 2014. However, it has consistently denied being ['wedded'](#) to Assad, and [allegedly](#) suggested in 2012 that he could step down as part of a peace deal. Neither this proposal nor Russia's offers to host peace talks between the Assad regime and rebels in [2012](#) and [2013](#) were accepted; on the other hand, in 2013 Russia and the USA successfully concluded a [deal](#) on the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons. Russia also persuaded the USA to agree to Iran's presence at preliminary meetings in Vienna to prepare for peace talks between the Syrian government and opposition forces. While there is [consensus](#) on the schedule (talks are due to begin on [25 January 2016](#)), and the aim of a political transition with elections in mid-2017, Russia is still at loggerheads with the USA and others over Assad's role (Russia [insists](#) he should be involved in the transition, his fate to be decided by 'the Syrian people') and the groups to be included in peace talks, with some rebels supported by other parties branded as 'terrorists' by Moscow.

Military involvement – air strikes on Syrian rebels

Even before launching air strikes on 30 September 2015 at the Syrian government's request, Russia was already involved in the conflict, not only as Syria's main arms supplier but also through the presence, as early as 2012, of [Russian personnel](#) manning air defence systems in the country. An estimated [34](#) Russian planes are now based in Syria, supported by [submarines](#) and 10 ships, and performing as many as 140 sorties a day. This compares with over 150 US and 38 French planes. Plans for Russia to take over a [second airbase](#) near Homs suggest that it may intend to expand its military presence.

The number of Russian military personnel in Syria is estimated at between [2 000](#) and [4 000](#), including troops defending Russian bases as well as military advisors and trainers assisting the Syrian army. The Kremlin claims that none of its own soldiers are fighting on the ground, but there have been [reports](#) of a Russian artillery unit deployed in the combat zone. In addition, an unknown but probably small number of [volunteers](#) have joined the ranks of the Syrian army – three of them were [reportedly](#) killed recently.

Russia claims that it only attacks ['terrorists'](#). However, it is not part of the US-led anti-ISIL/Da'esh coalition, and some of its [initial airstrikes](#) targeted [US-backed](#) moderates, the [Free Syrian Army](#) (FSA). Since then, it has [offered](#) to cooperate with FSA, an offer received with some [scepticism](#), although Russia has recently [announced](#) that it shares intelligence with the group. Russia is also bombarding allegedly [moderate](#), ethnic Turkish rebels in northern Syria backed by Turkey, and Saudi-backed Jaysh al-Islam, whose leader was apparently [killed](#) in a Russian airstrike. The number of airstrikes against ISIL/Da'esh has increased since the organisation was [linked](#) to the crash of a Russian passenger plane in Egypt, but [three quarters](#) of targets are still in areas where non-ISIL/Da'esh rebels are fighting government forces, suggesting that despite Russian anti-ISIL/Da'esh [rhetoric](#), the main goal is still to support the Assad regime.

Syrian civilians have been hard-hit by the Russian campaign, with [1 288](#) reported deaths over three months – disproportionately high compared to the 655 ISIL/Da'esh and 924 rebel group casualties, or the [680-975](#) killed in a much larger number of US-led strikes in Syria and Iraq over 14 months. Russian airstrikes have [exacerbated](#) the humanitarian crisis by targeting [hospitals](#) and other civilian infrastructure, displacing over [130 000](#) Syrians. Meanwhile, the military impact is disputed, with pro-Assad forces making only limited [gains](#). Unless Russia sends in ground troops (something which Putin has [ruled out](#), and to which 70% of Russians

are opposed, according to a recent [poll](#)) its involvement is [unlikely](#) to turn the tide, but could suffice to strengthen Assad's hand in forthcoming talks.

Humanitarian involvement

According to September 2015 official figures, of the 12 000 Syrians living in Russia, [2 000](#) have been given temporary asylum. However, thousands more are in [limbo](#), either pending award of temporary asylum status or following its expiry. Faced with bureaucratic hurdles and a lack of employment opportunities, 7 000 Syrians (in 2015) chose to transit via Russia on the way to western Europe, many of them to [Norway](#), which argues that they should stay in Russia, where they are not in danger.

What is at stake for Russia? Risks and opportunities

Economic. in 2012 Russia had economic interests in the country [estimated](#) at US\$20 billion, including US\$4 billion in outstanding arms contracts, as well as oil and gas [production](#) and exploration activities. Continuation of a pro-Russian regime in Syria would make it easier to resume these once civil war ends.

In the shorter term, an escalating crisis in Syria could benefit Russia's hydrocarbon-dependent economy by [pushing up oil prices](#) (although with crude oil at below US\$40 a barrel, there is no sign of this happening yet).

Russia's Syria campaign is relatively cheap at an estimated [US\\$4 million](#) per day (US\$1.4 billion per year, 3% of Russia's defence budget), but could become more expensive if it increases its military intervention.

Military. Russia has an obvious interest in holding onto its naval facility in Tartus and the recently added Latakia air-base, its only bases outside the borders of the former Soviet Union. Tartus is particularly useful as it enables Russian ships in the Mediterranean to be serviced without having to return to Russia via Turkey.

Operating beyond the borders of the former USSR for the first time in post-Soviet history, Russia's [newly upgraded](#) military stands to benefit by acquiring valuable operational experience and trying out weapons [previously untested](#) in combat such as the Sukhoi Su-34 strike fighter. The campaign is also good publicity for the country's defence industry, whose exports were worth [US\\$15 billion](#) in 2014.

On the other hand, with Russia and the US-led coalition backing opposing sides, Syria could turn into a [proxy war](#), or even a direct one. Russia and the USA have [agreed](#) to communicate on their movements, but the risk of a clash has grown since Turkey [downed a Russian plane](#): Russia has [installed](#) S-400 air defence missiles capable of shooting down hostile planes over Syria, while both the [United States](#) and [Russia](#) have deployed planes capable of air-to-air combat (as opposed to only hitting ground targets). However, the most likely outcome may be a [quagmire](#) from which Russia cannot extricate itself without losing credibility.

Domestic politics. Syria serves as a useful distraction from economic recession, helping to maintain Vladimir Putin's approval rate at over 80%. According to a November [poll](#), 55% of Russians support airstrikes.

However, this could change quickly if casualties (estimated to date at 3 to 4) start mounting; the authorities' apparent attempt to label the first reported Russian death in Syria as a [suicide](#) points to the sensitivity of the issue. Holiday-makers will probably be [upset](#) by bans on travel to Turkey and Egypt, two favourite destinations, and consumers hurt by an embargo on Turkish foodstuffs, expected to raise inflation by [0.1-0.2%](#) in 2016.

International politics. Syria is Russia's closest ally in the Middle East, and a key part of its plans to consolidate its growing presence in the region while countering US influence. Cooperation on Syria helps to cement ties with Iran, while sending a strong message to potential allies (such as Egypt, which signed a preliminary arms deal worth US\$3.5 billion in 2014), that Russia is a useful partner.

The geopolitical benefits reach beyond the Middle East. [Dismissed](#) by Obama in 2014 as a mere 'regional power', Russia is now presenting itself as an essential partner in solving international problems. After being [blackballed](#) by G20 leaders in Brisbane, Putin's success in breaking out of diplomatic isolation was illustrated by his [triumphant appearance](#) at the November 2015 summit a year later; today, even [NATO](#) is considering resuming contacts with Russia. Putin has used Syria to score points against arch-rival, the USA, [pouring scorn](#) on the failed attempts to export democracy to Arab countries.

Terrorism. The [downing of a Russian passenger plane](#) and the ISIL/Da'esh [threat](#) to spill Russian blood 'like an ocean' illustrate the danger of a terrorist backlash. While Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has [declared](#) his support for Russia's Syria campaign, many of the country's mostly Sunni Muslims (500 000 according to one [estimate](#)) may sympathise with ISIL/Da'esh; one Chechen rebel group has already [pledged loyalty](#) to the organisation, and the future return of Russian jihadists – estimates of whose numbers range from [2 000-7 000](#) – will only aggravate the risk of future terrorist attacks, especially in the volatile northern Caucasus.