

Allegations of Russian Troops Reflect Battle Over Syria's Future

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Smoke rises from what activists said was a military position of forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar Assad after clashes with Army of Islam fighters, on the eastern mountains of Qalamoun overlooking the town of Douma, eastern Ghouta of Damascus, Sept. 13.

Russia is not planning a full-scale military invasion in Syria, but it will protect its main asset — the regime of President Bashar Assad — to the extent it can, analysts told The Moscow Times amid a flood of unconfirmed reports of an increasing Russian presence in the Middle Eastern country.

Despite a common interest in countering the spread of Islamic terrorism in the Middle East, Russia and the West are still at loggerheads over the fate of Syria and are attempting to put pressure on each other instead of solving a shared problem, they said.

While the West sees Assad as an obstacle in the fight against the Islamic radicals, Russia sees him as the main bulwark against the extremists. The West blames Russia for defending Assad

at a time when a democratic change of government could have stopped the spiraling civil war and the rise of the Islamic State and al-Qaida in Syria. Russia claims that the West's support of the opposition strengthened the hand of Islamic militants.

Assad is Russia's main and only asset in Syria, and if he is toppled, then Russia's influence in Syria is gone, said Alexei Malashenko, head of the religion, society and security program at the Carnegie Moscow Center, a think tank.

"Russia's main interest is to keep Assad in power, even if it is only to rule part of Syria's territory. If there is a Russian military presence there, it will be more difficult to topple him — the West already sees it as upping the ante," said Malashenko in a phone interview.

"Nevertheless, having a Russian military contingent there would be insane, we have already had [a drawn-out war in] Afghanistan," he said.

Russian activity has been reported in the Latakia region, the stronghold of Assad and the Alawite religious group that he belongs to.

Experts polled by The Moscow Times ruled out the possibility of Syria returning to its prewar status quo: Assad's forces control only a fraction of the country's territory. Interested parties are therefore currently fighting for influence in postwar Syria.

"The Kremlin's primary motive is that the problems of the Middle East should be solved according to its design — not anyone else's. And Russia's design implies significant Russian influence remaining in the Middle Eastern region," said James Nixey, head of the Russia and Eurasia program at Chatham House, an international affairs think tank based in London.

"Russia's insistence that Assad is part of the solution appears to be holding strong compared to the West's attitude that he is part of the problem," he said in written comments.

No Evidence

No firm evidence of Russian troops participating in any actual combat in Syria had emerged by the time of this article's publication. Numerous news agencies and media outlets have cited unidentified sources as giving fragmented information.

Two unidentified U.S. officials told Reuters on Friday that about 200 Russian infantry forces are "believed" to be stationed at an airfield near the city of Latakia, where they are preparing it for future use, and on Monday, the news agency cited two U.S. officials as saying Russia had positioned seven T-90 tanks and defensive artillery at the airfield.

According to another Reuters report that cited an unidentified Western diplomat, Russia is delivering an advanced Pantsir-S1 (NATO classification: SA-22 Greyhound) anti-aircraft missile system to Syria that will be operated by Russian troops.

Russia has issued an international warning to airlines about navy drills it is conducting 70 kilometers off Syria's shores in the Mediterranean from Sept. 8 to 17, according to a record published on the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration's website. Russia maintains its only Mediterranean naval facility in Tartus on the Syrian coast.

The reason Russia's military presence has come into the spotlight in recent weeks is because the West itself is planning a more active military engagement there, said Yevgeny Satanovsky, president of the Middle East Institute, a Moscow-based think tank.

"What Russia is doing is preventing a Libya scenario for Syria, when then-President Dmitry Medvedev trusted the West to handle it and we now see a country in ruins," said Satanovsky in a phone interview.

"Russia will not have troops on the ground, but it will prevent that scenario," he said.

The U.S. military and its allies continued to bombard Islamic State militants on Friday with 22 air strikes in Iraq and three in Syria, Reuters reported Saturday.

In 2011, Russia supported a UN resolution on Libya that permitted the imposition of a no-fly zone over the country and the use of "all necessary means" — except that of a foreign occupation force — to protect civilians. Russia later accused NATO forces of going beyond that resolution in order to depose Libya's then-leader Moammar Gadhafi.

Speaking to journalists in Vladivostok, President Vladimir Putin said on Sept. 4 that direct Russian involvement in Syria is "not on our agenda," though the Kremlin is "considering various scenarios."

Putin will address the Syrian crisis along with other matters during his speech at the United Nations General Assembly at the end of this month, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told Russian TV station Channel One in an interview on Sunday.

"There were military supplies [to Syria], they are ongoing and they will continue. They are inevitably accompanied by Russian specialists, who help to adjust the equipment, to train Syrian personnel how to use these weaponry. There are no secrets about this," Lavrov said in the interview.

Lavrov said that he could not agree that Russia's approach toward the Syrian crisis "has radically changed."

Deliberate Confusion

Olga Oliker, director of the Center for Russia and Eurasia at the U.S.-based RAND corporation think tank, said that even though it is unlikely that Russia will participate in the Syria conflict directly, it will still support the Assad regime to the extent it can.

"The Kremlin sees it as in its interest to keep everybody confused about what it is doing, whether there is a serious military buildup or not. Confusion is good because it keeps your options open," said Oliker in a phone interview.

Delivering weapons to Syria gives Russia a solid justification for having military servicemen there too. Therefore, Russia can fine tune its presence there in accordance with the situation without giving much public notice, Oliker said.

"Above all, people don't always realize that Russia is very concerned about how the spread of Islamic extremism in the Middle East will affect its own internal security," she added.

U.S. President Barack Obama said in a town hall meeting with U.S. military servicemen and women on Friday that while Moscow and Washington's interests on fighting Islamic terrorism "can converge," Assad is still a bone of contention.

"Despite our conflicts with Russia in areas like Ukraine, this is an area of potentially converging interests, the bad news is that Russia continues to believe that Assad, who is their traditional partner, is somebody worthy of continuing support," Obama told military personnel in televised comments.

"It appears that Assad is worried enough that he invited Russian advisers in and Russian equipment in. That would not change our core strategy which is to continue to put pressure on IS [Islamic State] in Iraq and Syria, but we are going to be engaging Russia to let them know that you can't continue to double down on a strategy that is doomed to fail," said Obama.

Assad's government has suffered a number of painful defeats in recent months. After a two-year siege, rebels from al-Qaida's al-Nusra Front and other Islamic factions seized the Abu al-Duhur military airport from Assad-loyal forces, driving government troops from their last stronghold in the country's Idlib province, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported last week.

Speaking to journalists in Washington, State Department spokesman John Kirby said that reports of Russian military activities received "largely through the media" had prompted Secretary of State John Kerry to discuss Syria developments with Lavrov.

In the phone conversation last week, Kerry told Lavrov that a Russian military buildup in Syria "could further escalate the conflict, lead to greater loss of innocent life, increase refugee flows and risk confrontation with the anti-Islamic State coalition operating in Syria," according to a State Department statement.

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