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Putin's Use of Force In Syria Unlikely to Go Beyond Airstrikes

By Matthew Bodner

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Residents ride motorcycles near a hole in the ground at a site hit by what activists said was an air strike by forces of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, in Hesh village, Syria, Sept. 27.

By providing Syrian President Bashar Assad's military with material and logistical support, Moscow has committed itself to protecting his embattled regime, which has suffered a series of setbacks at the hands of the Islamic State and U.S.-backed opposition forces.

But it remains unclear just how far Russian President Vladimir Putin intends to go in shoring up Assad — his oldest and most important ally in the Middle East. Russian support, currently limited officially to military hardware and logistical support, might not be enough.

The Moscow Times polled analysts on Tuesday to find out what, if any, threshold exists for a broader Russian intervention, assuming that current measures fail to halt the advance of anti-Assad forces and ensure the survival of the current Syrian regime.

Russia is ready to provide Assad with enough military support to survive, but not to gain control over the whole territory of Syria, said Pyotr Topychkanov, an analyst at the Moscow Carnegie Center think tank.

"Such support may go beyond simple military equipment exports to Syria," Topychkanov said. Though the Kremlin may be flexible on Assad's fate, "the option of an Assad defeat seems to be unacceptable for Moscow," he said.

But General Yevgeny Buzhinsky, a military expert at the Moscow-based PIR Center think tank and a former member of the Russian military's General Staff, said nothing would prompt a full-scale military intervention on Assad's behalf — such an action was simply out of the question.

"I don't believe there will be a Russian direct intervention into the Syria crisis, and by that I mean there won't be anything on land," Buzhinsky said. "[At] maximum, air strikes," he added.

Assistance So Far

Media reports in recent weeks suggest that Russia has been busy beefing up its military presence in Assad-controlled territory in Syria. The buildup has so far been limited to an airbase in Latakia, and a small Russian naval facility at Tartus, some 90 kilometers to the south.

Russian officials have denied that Russian combat troops have been sent to Syria to fight on Assad's behalf, characterizing Russian personnel on the ground as military specialists shipped there to instruct Assad's forces on the use of military hardware provided by Moscow.

Meanwhile, Russian aircraft have been spotted on Assad's airfield at Latakia. Top-of-the-line planes such as Su-30 multi-role fighters, Su-25 ground attack aircraft, and Su-24 fighter-bombers have given rise to speculation that Russian pilots are preparing air strikes.

In a recent interview with U.S. journalist Charlie Rose for "60 Minutes," Putin promised that air strikes would be the furthest Russia is prepared to go in facilitating a resolution to the Syria crisis.

"Our military will not directly participate in combat, it will not fight [in Syria]," Putin said, according to a transcript published by the RIA Novosti news agency. Asked if this applied to air strikes, Putin replied, "I mean war, fighting on the ground, infantry, motorized units."

Special Forces

Maxim Shepovalenko, a former Russian military officer and now an analyst at the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST), a Moscow-based defense think tank, said that Russia was not likely to move beyond air strikes in Syria.

"There will be no troops out in the field, only perimeter defense of the Russian air and naval facilities with a limited force," Shepovalenko said. "I suspect that the newly established special forces command will have its say ... but this is very speculative."

The Reuters news agency reported on Sunday that Russia, Iran, Iraq and Syria had established an intelligence and security cooperation command center in Baghdad to coordinate efforts in the fight against the Islamic State.

Though the threshold for a proper intervention is not clear, said Carnegie's Topychkanov, "it would be lower for special operations forces and much higher for a limited contingent of troops."

Theodore Karasik, a senior adviser to Gulf State Analytics, a consultancy, said special operations forces from all sides in the Baghdad command center could be "deployed against extremists throughout the country in coordination with other participant states."

Red Lines

Russia's threshold for a boots-on-the-ground operation could be greatly influenced by an attack on its positions in Syria at the Latakia airfield — in a region that falls regularly under rebel assault — and the Tartus naval facility.

"I think the red line for Putin here is Russian forces in Latakia and Tartus coming under attack," said Yury Barmin, a Russian political analyst focusing on the Middle East.

"By putting a contingent in Assad-controlled territory, Russia in some sense hopes it will deter rebels from advancing any further. But if they get closer to Russian troops then Russia will have to respond accordingly," Barmin said.

But air strikes and material support for the Assad regime may be all that is required to secure the Kremlin's political objectives in Syria — which Putin said in his interview with Rose consists of facilitating a political settlement between Assad and the "healthy opposition."

"I don't see Assad completely collapsing against the Islamic State," said Ben Moores, a senior analyst at international defense consultancy IHS. "But it is highly possible that Assad simply runs out of resources to sustain an organized resistance."

This is where Russian support factors in to the regime's survival. But with this support comes Russian personnel on the ground in Latakia and Tartus, and "there will be Russian units guarding their airfield and crews," Moores said.

But their guard duties may not be so far removed from active combat operations. In recent weeks, video evidence allegedly showing Russian forces already engaging in combat operations with Assad's forces in the Syrian civil war have been posted on the Internet. "So are we not already at the point where Russia has sent in troops?" Moores said.

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