

Putin the Liberator: The Retaking of Palmyra

By [Matthew Bodner](#)

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The Monumental Arch in the ancient city of Palmyra before it had been captured by ISIS militants.

Two weeks after President Vladimir Putin declared the "majority" of Russia's military goals in Syria have been accomplished, Moscow and Syrian President Bashar Assad turned their attention from rebel groups in northern Syria to dislodging the Islamic State from the ancient city of Palmyra. After nearly a year under IS control, the Syrian army — with considerable Russian support — retook the city on March 27.

It was a much needed public relations victory for Putin and his military. Since intervening in the Syrian conflict, the Kremlin has been accused of targeting opposition groups fighting Assad instead of fulfilling its stated goal of fighting terrorist groups. That was until a cessation of hostilities went into effect and Moscow announced a partial withdrawal.

Now, it seems, Russia has finally directed its attention to IS, a terrorist group banned in Russia.

Moscow has revealed some information about the types of forces it is using in Syria. Celebrating the liberation of Palmyra from IS on March 28, Russia's Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov said the city "was freed from terrorists yesterday with support from Russian aerospace forces and special operations forces." It was the first time the Defense Ministry has acknowledged that Russia's elite special operators, the so-called Spetsnaz, are fighting in Syria.

Previously, Russian Spetsnaz units were understood to be providing reconnaissance and targeting support to the Syrian military. In addition, Russian regular troops, such as naval infantry, armor, artillery, and logistical units were also known to be present at two bases in regime-held territory. But these forces were deployed mostly for defense of these positions, and saw little, if any combat.

On March 28, the news website Fontanka.ru published an investigative report claiming that Russia was using private military companies. The investigation found that private army soldiers had been awarded medals for bravery and courage in Ukraine and Syria by Putin himself.

It remains unclear, however, just how actively Russians — be they active duty Spetsnaz operators or reserve GRU officers — have been involved in Syrian army ground offensives. One Spetsnaz soldier who died during the offensive is said to have been guiding air strikes.

The Defense Ministry said its aircraft conducted 40 flights and hit 117 targets in the area over a 24-hour period. This is a high sortie rate that throws Putin's claims to have withdrawn the bulk of Russian air forces into doubt. When the operation began in September 2015, Russia flew just 20 sorties a day.

A senior Israeli military official told the newspaper Defense News that Putin retains a significant force in Syria, simply swapping airplanes for helicopters, rather than withdrawing. "He still has a significant force there [with which] he can do almost whatever he wants," the source was quoted as saying.

And Russian ships continue to run supplies to Syria. Reuters, on March 30, published a report suggesting that Russian naval traffic through the Bosphorus — the waterway connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean — showed little indication of slowing. Ships traveling to Syria appear heavily loaded when heading out of the Black Sea, the report said.

All of this indicates Russian involvement is likely transforming, rather than drawing down. "It is safe to say that the Kremlin will stay while the costs are relatively cheap," agrees Russian analyst Yury Barman. "The next stage is probably some kind of counter-terrorism alliance and an advance towards Deir-Ezzor and Raqqa."

For now the Kremlin appears to be relishing its liberation of Palmyra — the kind of victory of which Washington's more hawkish elements dream — and the resulting good publicity, however brief it may be.

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