

5 Years On, Russia's Syria Intervention Poses More Questions Than Answers

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Russia's decision to launch a military operation in Syria five years ago has radically changed Moscow's role in the Middle East.

Russia forced regional powers and the West to reckon with it and forestalled its isolation due to the annexation of Crimea. But now, more than ever, it is time to rethink the results of that

operation. A single triumph can go just so far.

The Russian authorities continue to trumpet the results of the Russian military operation in Syria and claim victory over global terrorism.

This is seen clearly by the article Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu published in the Krasnaya Zvezda newspaper devoted to the five-year anniversary of the operation. It contains the usual catchphrases about the victory over the “enemy of all mankind” — the Islamic State (an organization banned in Russia) — and reports on the success of Russia’s weaponry. But is it possible to revel in this triumph forever?

True, it is thanks to Russian military and diplomatic assistance that Damascus has managed to regain control over a significant portion of its territory.

Nevertheless, the prospects for a political settlement in Syria remain very elusive. The Astana Trio of Russia, Turkey and Iran helped the UN start the work of the Syrian Constitutional Committee.

However, the discussion this set in motion looks set to drag on for a very long time. It is already obvious that constitutional reforms will not begin before next year’s presidential elections, in which President Bashar al-Assad is very likely to run.

Damascus is perfectly happy with the current status quo and has no incentive to engage in a political dialogue. However, without any progress on achieving a political settlement to the conflict, Syria will remain under Western sanctions and will not receive money for the country’s post-war reconstruction. Rather, all the money from Western and other outside donors will go to those parts of Syria that are not under Assad’s control.

Given this state of affairs, Syria will likely remain split into three parts — one controlled by the government, one controlled by Turkey and its proxy opposition forces, and a third controlled by the Kurds and their part of the opposition that is allied with the U.S.

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Although the three sides might strike a deal over Idlib or other individual regions, the West is most likely to establish one or even two semi-autonomous territories, along the lines of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The process of reintegration will take years. The situation in the territory Damascus currently controls will remain potentially explosive in the absence of significant investment.

Even the southern territory that came under government control two years ago teeters on the verge of a second uprising.

What’s more, those territories outside of Assad’s control have no prospects whatsoever for a bright future. Syrian men — pawns in the power politics of outside forces — have had little choice but to eke out their living as mercenary soldiers first in Libya, and now in Azerbaijan.

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its own territory. The result, however, is that a whole contingent of insurgents who have since grown accustomed to fighting are approaching Russia's borders. It hardly matters that they fight for money rather than ideology: Russia carries a large share of responsibility for this situation.

Moscow saved Assad, but it has now become a hostage to the latter's euphoria of victory and its refusal to be flexible in the political dialogue.

Damascus hopes that it can manage without Western investment and that it will receive sufficient funds from Russia and other friends that are willing to cooperate with the Syrian authorities.

As Assad announced in early September, Damascus "is seriously interested in the success of Russian investment in Syria." He said this during a visit to Damascus at that time by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Moscow feels it cannot abandon Damascus, and so it is trying to make the most of a difficult situation and do everything it can to prevent the situation from getting out of control.

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At a press conference in Damascus, Borisov promised that Moscow and Damascus would join efforts to break the blockade of Syria. He noted that as part of the "energy road map" signed in 2018, Russia planned to restore approximately 40 Syrian infrastructure facilities, including a cascade of Soviet-built hydroelectric stations.

Russia also made a serious bid to maintain a long-term presence in Syria with its investment in the development of not only military infrastructure — such as the airbase in Khmeimim and the naval base in Tartus — but also the civilian port in Tartus for which Moscow was granted a 49-year lease. However, despite Moscow's interest in economic cooperation, it does not want to assume the full burden of rebuilding Syria, especially because it would have to deal with Western sanctions in the process. This is why most Russian companies that have begun cooperating with Syria, or that plan to, are careful not to advertise their contacts with Damascus.

Of course, Russia likes to attribute all its problems to Western sanctions, but how long can it use that excuse? Syrians are growing increasingly unhappy with Russian policy, suspecting that Moscow harbors imperial ambitions while doing too little for the people of Syria and only using the country for its geopolitical games.

Moscow is also finding it increasingly difficult to maintain a balance between the interests of its Astana Trio partners. On the one hand, this mechanism of interaction, as well as Russia's separate bilateral contacts with Iran and Turkey, have paid off well in both Syria and Libya.

But on the other hand, Ankara's geopolitical ambitions are growing and Moscow is finding it increasingly difficult to uphold its own interests without quarreling with Turkish President Recep Erdogan. Worse, Ankara's zone of interest is coming ever closer to Russia's borders, as the latest round of violence in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict shows.

Russia's military campaign in Syria was successful at first for the Kremlin. But how can it maintain that positive momentum given the complex geopolitical and economic situation in the world?

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