May 2020

Moscow's War in Syria

Edited by
Seth G. Jones

A Report of the
CSIS Transnational Threats Project

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

May 2020

Moscow's War in Syria

Edited by
Seth G. Jones

A Report of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

About CSIS

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a bipartisan, nonprofit policy research organization dedicated to advancing practical ideas to address the world's greatest challenges.

Thomas J. Pritzker was named chairman of the CSIS Board of Trustees in 2015, succeeding former U.S. Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA). Founded in 1962, CSIS is led by John J. Hamre, who has served as president and chief executive officer since 2000.

CSIS's purpose is to define the future of national security. We are guided by a distinct set of values—nonpartisanship, independent thought, innovative thinking, cross-disciplinary scholarship, integrity and professionalism, and talent development. CSIS's values work in concert toward the goal of making real-world impact.

CSIS scholars bring their policy expertise, judgment, and robust networks to their research, analysis, and recommendations. We organize conferences, publish, lecture, and make media appearances that aim to increase the knowledge, awareness, and salience of policy issues with relevant stakeholders and the interested public.

CSIS has impact when our research helps to inform the decisionmaking of key policymakers and the thinking of key influencers. We work toward a vision of a safer and more prosperous world.

CSIS is ranked the number one think tank in the United States as well as the defense and national security center of excellence for 2016-2018 by the University of Pennsylvania's "Global Go To Think Tank Index."

CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views expressed herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2020 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.
All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-1-5381-4015-4 (pb); 978-1-5381-4016-1 (eBook)

Center for Strategic and International Studies
1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036
202-887-0200 | www.csis.org

Rowman & Littlefield
4501 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, MD 20706
301-459-3366 | www.rowman.com

Acknowledgments

This report would not have been possible without a broad and selfless team effort. At CSIS, we thank Catrina Doxsee, James Suber, Grace Hwang, Alex Friedland, and Jacob Ware for their help at various periods of the research, writing, and editing. CSIS's iDeas Lab was outstanding in helping design, edit, and produce the report, and a special thanks to Rebecka Shirazi, Jeeah Lee, William Taylor, and Phillip Meylan for their great work. Thanks to Joseph S. Bermudez, Jr. for his outstanding help in producing and analyzing satellite imagery of Russian activity in Syria, which we used in virtually every chapter.

In addition, we thank Sam Charap and Michael Kofman for their thorough and inciteful reviews of the manuscript, which greatly improved the quality of the report by identifying holes (some big and some small) that needed to be fixed. Thanks also to Heather Conley, Jeff Mankoff, and Kathleen Hicks for their knowledge on Russian and broader gray zone activities. At RAND, thanks to Mark Cozad, Dara Massicot, Clinton Reach, and Sam Charap for their willingness to discuss lessons from the Russian campaign in Syria. Finally, we could not have done the research without aid from a range of U.S. and partner governments. We had numerous discussions with current and former officials from U.S. European Command, U.S. Central Command, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the U.S. intelligence community, and other U.S. and partner government agencies. We also had several productive trips to Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon to meet with subject matter experts on the Russian campaign in Syria.

Finally, thanks to Diana Davis Spencer, Abby Spencer Moffat, and the Diana Davis Spencer Foundation for their generous support to this project. We also thank the Sarah Scaife Foundation for their unselfish support.

Contents

Executive Summary 1

Chapter 01: Introduction 4

Seth G. Jones

Chapter 02: Russian Goals and Strategy 7

Seth G. Jones

Chapter 03: The Military Campaign 18

Brian Katz and Nicholas Harrington

Chapter 04: The Punishment Campaign 41

Danika Newlee

Chapter 05: The Diplomatic Campaign 52

Brian Katz

Chapter 06: Implications and Takeaways 64

Jason Gresh, Seth G. Jones, and Edmund Loughran

Appendix: Russian Force Composition in Syria 71

About the Authors 81

Endnotes 84

Executive Summary

This report examines Russia's military and diplomatic campaign in Syria, the largest and most significant Russian out-of-area operation since the end of the Cold War. Russia's experience in Syria will significantly shape its military thinking, influence promotion and personnel decisions, impact research and development for its arms industry, and expand its influence in the Middle East and beyond for the foreseeable future. Yet despite the importance of Russia's involvement in Syria—especially as the United States competes with countries such as Russia and China—there has been little systematic analysis of Russia's campaign in Syria. This research aims to help fill the gap and provides some new analysis and data. It conducts a broad assessment of the Russian campaign—including political objectives, diplomatic initiatives, and civilian targeting—which place the military campaign in a wider context. In addition, it compiles a data set of Russia's civilian targeting and analyzes satellite imagery of Russian activity. Some of the authors of the report also served in the U.S. Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency during portions of the campaign, and they provide an interesting first-hand perspective.

Overall, this report concludes that Russia was successful in achieving its main near-term political and military objectives in Syria, including preventing the collapse of the Assad regime (an important regional partner) and thwarting a possible U.S. attempt to overthrow Assad. The main conclusions can be divided into five areas: Russian goals and strategy, the military campaign, the punishment campaign, the diplomatic campaign, and broader lessons.

Russian Goals and Strategy

Russia directly intervened in Syria beginning in 2015 for two main reasons. First, Russian leaders wanted to stabilize Syria, a strategically-important hub for Moscow in the Middle East that was under threat. Second, Russian leaders assessed that the United States and its partners were attempting to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime and were either attempting to replace it with a friendly government or would leave behind a collapsed state. But these two reasons are insufficient to explain Russian intervention. Moscow's decision was also significantly influenced by its ability to establish a viable military strategy at an acceptable cost. Moscow took a major gamble by becoming directly involved in Syria. It adopted a strategy that combined airpower and ground maneuver to overwhelm a divided enemy. Instead of deploying large numbers of Russian army forces to engage in ground combat in Syria—as the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan in the 1980s—Moscow relied on Syrian army forces, Lebanese Hezbollah, and other militias and private military contractors as the main ground maneuver elements. The Russian air force and navy supported these forces by conducting strikes from fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, ships, and submarines.

The Military Campaign

Russia's military campaign in Syria was successful in achieving Moscow's strategic objectives at a manageable cost in terms of Russian casualties and finances. Russian efforts benefited from having limited objectives and facing rebel groups that failed to coordinate their activities and lacked key defensive assets, such as anti-air weaponry. Russian operations and tactics were also well aligned to its strategic goals, focusing on airpower and special operations forces to enable regime offensives on the ground. Over the course of the war, Russia gradually improved its air-ground integration with pro-regime forces.

Russia's military intervention in Syria can be divided into three campaign phases centered around different but intertwined objectives: stabilizing the Assad regime in core areas of western Syria (September 2015 to spring 2016); conducting offensive operations in the west to recapture Aleppo (spring 2016 to spring 2017); and countering the Islamic State in central

and eastern Syria (spring 2017 to spring 2018). Russia then turned its attention to retaking Idlib Province in northwestern Syria and expanding its presence in northeastern Syria in the wake of the U.S. drawdown and Turkish invasion of the area. While Russia's primary contribution throughout the phases of the campaign remained airpower, battlefield needs precipitated a steady increase in specialized ground forces—including artillery units, forward air controllers, special operations forces, military police, and private military contractors. The Russian military based its command staff and the majority of its aerospace assets at an expanded Hmeimim airfield while enlarging its air and ground assets to new bases over the course of the war.

The Punishment Campaign

According to data compiled by CSIS for this report, Russia used a systematic punishment campaign to escalate costs on the civilian population and undermine support for the opposition. The most visible element of this punishment campaign was marked by large-scale attacks against civilian and humanitarian infrastructure in an attempt to deny resources—including food, fuel, and medical aid—to the opposition while simultaneously eroding the will of civilians to support opposition groups. Russia also conducted a propaganda campaign using both diplomacy and disinformation to target Syria's civilian population. The propaganda campaign attempted to deflect blame for Russian and Syrian attacks against civilian infrastructure, undermine international efforts to hold the Assad regime accountable for abuses, and legitimize an ever-widening civilian target set. Over time, these campaigns became synergistic, and their effects complemented each other to achieve regime goals such as retaking opposition-held territory.

The Diplomatic Campaign

Moscow orchestrated an effective diplomatic campaign that complemented Russia's military efforts. Russia coordinated its political and military efforts reasonably well to facilitate gains on the ground and maximize leverage at the international negotiating table. While the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs negotiated ceasefires and de-escalation agreements in Geneva and Astana, the Ministry of Defense exploited those agreements to rest and refit pro-regime forces and then violate the agreements when feasible. While Russian diplomatic and military efforts were not always perfectly synchronized, they were better orchestrated than the United States and other Western countries, enabling Moscow to link battlefield gains to diplomatic leverage.

Lessons

It will take years to fully understand the lessons from Russia's involvement in Syria. The war is far from over, and Syria is just one campaign in an evolving Russian strategic and military landscape. But there are several broad observations about Russian thinking and actions:

- Russia adopted a light footprint approach in Syria that constituted an evolution in Russian military thinking. Rather than applying a heavy hand, Moscow leveraged air assets, unmanned aerial vehicles, civil-military units (such as military police and "reconciliation" centers), special operations forces, and information assets. For ground operations, Moscow relied on surrogate forces, such as the Syrian Tiger Forces, Lebanese Hezbollah, private military contractors, and militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries. This approach was a major advance for the Russian military.
- Russia will likely build on its Syrian experience when weighing external military operations in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Where ground forces are an option, Russia is more likely to rely on its own special operation forces, state and non-state proxy forces, and private military contractors.
- The punishment of civilians continues to be an important component of Russian military operations. Russia attempted to deny food, fuel, and medical aid to rebels while simultaneously

eroding civilians' will to fight or provide support to opposition groups. Russian leaders concluded that punishment was effective in breaking the will and support of local populations for rebel groups.

- The Russian intervention in Syria was an opportunity to modernize Russia's war-fighting capabilities and use Syria as a live-fire training range to constantly refine its application of force. Perhaps the most important lesson in the technological sphere was Russia's development of advanced command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) field systems on the battlefield, providing data to enable a higher throughput of airstrikes. These systems were integrated into Russia's overarching systems of "reconnaissance strike complexes" (RSCs).
- Russia continually rotated mid- to senior-level leadership to the Syrian theater of operations. Officers received valuable experience on the ground in advisory or leadership roles, which will likely impact Russian personnel decisions and thinking for years to come.

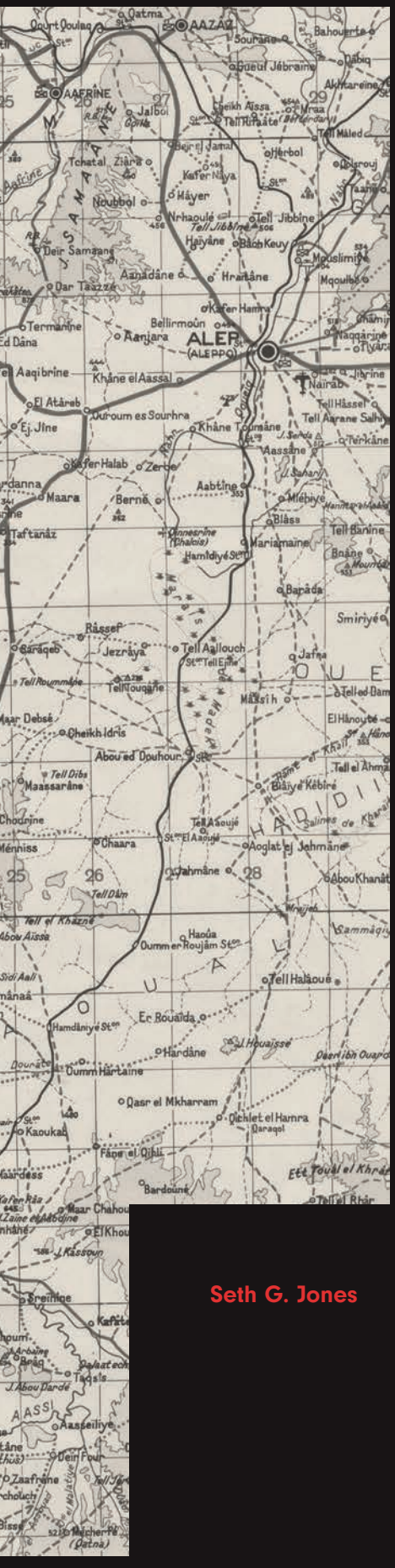
There are also lessons for the United States and other Western countries from the Russian campaign in Syria:

- Russia generally respected U.S. military power and ensured the safety of its forces, complying with U.S. directives about deconfliction lines when the directives were backed by demonstrations of force. However, when the United States was unable or unwilling to back up these statements, Russia often exploited the gap.
- The United States failed to prevent Russia and its partners from conducting human rights abuses. If the United States wishes to deter Russia from conducting humanitarian abuses through diplomatic, economic, or military measures in the future, it must clearly articulate red lines and be prepared to follow through on its threats.
- While Russian political and diplomatic efforts were integrated fairly well with their military operations, U.S. policy and actions in Syria were full of contradictions. Through its diplomatic maneuvering, Russia took advantage of rifts and seams between European countries and the United States, as well as within and between U.S. government agencies.

Russia's campaign in Syria provides an important opportunity to understand Russian strategy, operations, and tactics. Yet it was one campaign at one point in time. The long-term challenge will be to evaluate the evolution in Russian thinking and actions over time and across multiple geographic areas.

Chapter 01

Introduction



A 1943 topographic map showcasing Aleppo and the surrounding area.
SOURCE University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

This report examines Moscow's political-military campaign in Syria in order to better understand Russian strategy, operations, tactics, capabilities, and weaknesses. With the United States' strategic shift to competition with countries such as Russia and China, there is a growing need to assess the actions of strategic competitors.[1] The war in Syria, which the Russian media called Operation *Vozmezdie* (or Retribution), was Russia's largest and most significant expeditionary military operation since the end of the Cold War.[2] Yet there has been limited systematic open-source analysis of Russia's campaign that covers military, diplomatic, and other components of the campaign.

In addition, Russia was successful in achieving many of its military and political objectives in Syria—at least thus far. By 2015, Syrian forces controlled only 10 percent of their territory, according to Russian intelligence assessments.[3] But by 2020, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad retook much of the country from rebel control with help primarily from Russia and Iran, even as the country struggled to respond to the COVID-19 crisis.[4] To be sure, there are still areas of resistance, such as Idlib, and Turkish and Kurdish forces control terrain in northern and eastern Syria. But the battlefield victories in Syria have been undeniable. With Russian air, ground, and maritime assistance, Syrian and partner ground forces retook Dayr az Zawr in the east and Aleppo, Homs, Damascus, and other cities across the country. None of this looked possible in late 2015, when Russian policymakers assessed that the Syrian regime might collapse without rapid and decisive assistance. As Russian leader Vladimir Putin remarked in October 2015, "The collapse of Syria's official authorities will only mobilize terrorists. Right now, instead of undermining them,

we must revive them, strengthening state institutions in the conflict zone."[5]

Moscow used its battlefield successes in Syria to revive its great power ambitions in the Middle East and other regions, including North Africa. Russia now has regional power projection capabilities from Syria, with access to Hmeimim air base and the port of Tartus. Russian diplomats led negotiations on regional issues, including a Syrian peace deal and refugee returns. Every major country in the region—including Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iran—worked with Moscow's diplomats, military commanders, and intelligence officials on regional security issues. The Syrian war also provided Russia's military with an unparalleled opportunity to improve its strike, intelligence, and combined arms capabilities. After a period of military reforms from 2008 to 2012 and a large modernization program, Moscow was able to test its forces in combat. Over the course of the war, thousands of officers rotated through the campaign to gain combat experience and secure promotions.[6] Russia also expanded its arms sales with weapons and systems tested in the Syrian war.[7]

Moscow's experience in Syria will likely shape Russian military thinking, drive procurement decisions, increase arms sales, and influence personnel decisions for years—and perhaps decades—to come.

Research Design

In order to better understand the Russian campaign in Syria, this report asks several questions. What were Russia's goals in becoming directly involved in the Syrian war? What was Russia's strategy to accomplish these goals? How did Russia conduct the diplomatic and military components of its campaign? What are important lessons from the Russian experience, both for Russia and the West? To answer these questions, the report utilizes a combination of qualitative and quantitative information.

First, the research team compiled and analyzed primary and secondary sources on the Russian campaign in Syria, such as statements and writings from Russian officials. The team also examined relevant articles in Russian military journals, such as *Vestnik Akademii Voennyh Nauk*, *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier*, and *Voennaia mysl'*. Second, the report conducted a campaign analysis to examine Russia's military efforts. This involved providing an overview of Russia's primary military roles, missions, and order-of-battle for the Syrian intervention, including key components of Russia's force composition in Syria. The campaign assessment also included a detailed military analysis of the key phases of the Russian military campaign, beginning with the early stages of intervention in 2015, the recapture of Aleppo in 2016, and the campaign against the Islamic State in central and eastern Syria in 2017 and 2018. Third, the report utilized several types of quantitative data. For example, the chapter on Russia's punishment campaign used a quantitative data set compiled from sources such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, AirWars, and Physicians for Human Rights. It also combined original satellite imagery analysis with qualitative reporting from Bellingcat, the Syrian Civil Defence, and various investigative journalists to better understand Russian actions. Fourth, the report incorporated interviews with government and non-government experts in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East.

In addition, some of the authors in this study served in the U.S. government during portions of Russia's campaign in Syria—including in the U.S. Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency—which provided a first-hand opportunity to assess Russian objectives and actions.

Organization of the Report

The rest of this report is divided into several chapters. Chapter 2 examines Russian strategy up to the 2015 decision to become directly involved in the Syrian war and provides some historical context. Chapter 3 analyzes Russian military operations and tactics by conducting a campaign analysis. Chapter 4 outlines the humanitarian implications of Russia's punishment campaign, including humanitarian abuses and Moscow's disinformation campaign. Chapter 5 assesses Russia's diplomatic efforts. Chapter 6 focuses on lessons from the war.

Chapter 02

Russian Goals and Strategy

Vladimir Putin (L) and Bashar al-Assad (R) attend a meeting with Russian military officers at the air base in Hmeimim.

SOURCE Mikhail Klimentyev/AFP/Getty Images

Seth G. Jones

This chapter examines Russia's strategy in Syria. It focuses on the period leading up to Russia's direct involvement in the military campaign in September 2015 and asks two questions. First, what were Russia's primary goals? Second, what was Russia's strategy to accomplish these goals? As used here, a strategy includes a state's plans, methods, and resources to degrade or defeat an adversary on the battlefield.[1] Political and military leaders need to consider how to use their military forces and other resources to defeat the adversary on the battlefield or coerce it to achieve other aims. A strategy forces states to foresee the nature of the war. Does the plan of attack—the proposed strategy—promise success at a reasonable cost?[2] The British soldier and military theorist B.H. Liddell Hart referred to strategy as "the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy."[3]

The chapter argues that Russia directly intervened in Syria beginning in 2015 to degrade or defeat Syrian rebels in order to achieve two primary goals. First, Russian leaders wanted to stabilize Syria, which was under threat, as a strategically-important hub for Moscow in the Middle East. Second, Russian leaders assessed that the United States and its partners were attempting to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime and either replace it with a friendly government or leave behind a collapsed state. Russian officials were influenced by the U.S. military campaigns in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and other countries, where they concluded that the United States had repeatedly demonstrated an ability and willingness to destabilize and even overthrow regimes.[4] Russian leaders were alarmed that Syria might suffer the same fate, particularly since rebels had significantly increased their control of territory in 2015. Consequently, Moscow

attempted to move quickly to shore up Assad and prevent a U.S.-engineered regime change.

In addition, Moscow's decision to intervene was significantly influenced by its ability to establish a viable strategy that allowed Moscow to achieve its primary goals at an acceptable cost.[5] Moscow adopted a strategy that combined airpower and ground maneuver to overwhelm a divided enemy. Instead of deploying large numbers of Russian army forces to engage in ground combat in Syria—as the Soviet Union did in Afghanistan in the 1980s—Moscow relied on Syrian army forces, Lebanese Hezbollah, and other militias and private military contractors as the main ground maneuver elements. The Russian air force and navy supported these forces by conducting strikes from fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters, ships, and submarines. In developing this strategy, Russian political and military leaders looked closely at the positive and negative lessons of U.S. campaigns, such as the Persian Gulf War in 1991, Yugoslavia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011. Still, Russian leaders recognized that directly intervening in the Syrian war was a gamble and would likely be more challenging than any expeditionary campaign the Russian military had attempted since the end of the Cold War.

The rest of this chapter is divided into three sections. The first examines Moscow's primary goals. The second section analyzes Russia's strategy. And the third provides a brief conclusion.

Moscow's Goals

Russia's direct intervention in the Syrian war was primarily motivated to stabilize a strategically important partner and to prevent the United States and its partners from overthrowing the Assad regime and replacing it with a pro-Western government.

Stabilize a Strategic Partner

Syria and the broader region had long been important to Moscow and its ambitions of empire, dating back at least to the period of Catherine the Great. During the Cold War, Moscow's interest significantly increased with U.S.-Soviet great power competition. In 1946, for instance, the Soviet Union supported Syrian independence and provided military aid to the newly-formed Syrian Arab Army. This cooperation continued throughout the Cold War.[6] Successive Soviet leaders developed an important relationship with Hafiz al-Assad, who ruled Syria from 1970 until his death in 2000. In 1971, the Soviets reached an agreement with Assad which allowed the Soviet navy's 5th Operational Squadron (or Pyataya Eskadra) to use the naval facility at Tartus.[7] Tartus helped the Soviet navy project power into the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean as well as balance activities of the U.S. 6th Fleet, based in Italy. Soviet use of Tartus was particularly important because Moscow lost its bases in Egypt following a diplomatic break with President Anwar el-Sadat in the 1970s.[8]

The Soviet military supported Syria during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, providing arms by sea and air to the Syrian military and pressing other Arab states to send military forces to help the Syrians and Egyptians.[9] The KGB also used Syria as an important center for intelligence collection.[10] Overall, the Soviet military deployed between 2,000 and 3,000 Soviet military advisers to Syria by the mid-1970s.[11] As one assessment concluded, Syria's "Ba'ath regime . . . had after all emerged in the 1970s as the USSR's *only steadfast ally* among the major states of the Middle East."[12]

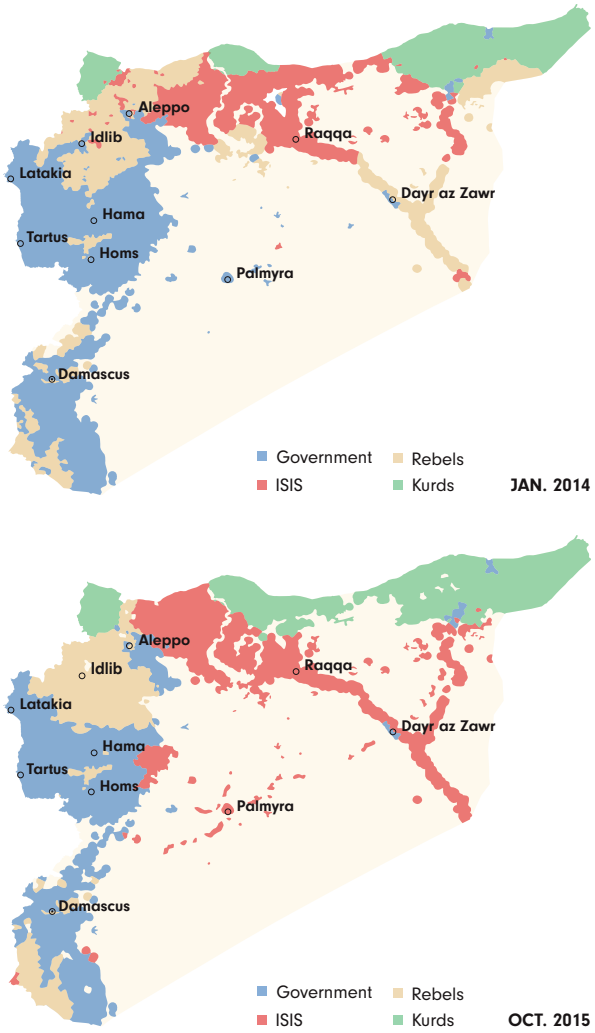
Following the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian military deactivated the 5th Operational Squadron. The Russian navy largely abandoned Tartus, and the naval facility fell into disrepair, though Russian ships occasionally stopped at Tartus for port calls.[13] Russian arms sales to Syria also dried up.[14] The Russian military used Tartus on a limited basis, deploying amphibious assault ships, marines, weapons, and military cargo.[15] Moscow also had at least two signals intelligence facilities in Syria, including one called "Center S" near the Israeli border.[16] Hafiz al-Assad's son, Bashar, became increasingly important to Moscow as the United States conducted military campaigns in the region.

In 2011, the civil war erupted in Syria. By 2015, the war looked grim for Assad, one of the few remaining

governments in the region with which Moscow had good relations. Diplomatic efforts repeatedly failed to resolve the conflict.[17] According to Russian intelligence assessments, Syrian government forces controlled only 10 percent of Syrian territory.[18] The rest was controlled by a decentralized hodgepodge of groups. As Figure 2.1 highlights, Kurdish forces had increased their control of territory in northern Syria. In addition, the Islamic State enlarged its area of control in southern and central Syria and conducted attacks in other areas, including northern Syria. In May 2015, the Islamic State also seized the Syrian city of Palmyra. Finally, there were a range of other rebel groups, such as the Nusrah Front (which had longstanding ties with al-Qaeda), Ahrar al-Sham, the Southern Front, and numerous small groups, such as Firqa 13, Firqa Yarmouk, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, and Fursan al-Haq.[19] Several of these groups, such as the Nusrah Front, expanded their presence in the northwest and southwest, driving back Syrian government forces and threatening major population centers.[20] The Syrian regime controlled limited urban terrain and lost control of such cities as Hasaka, Raqqa, and Aleppo, and even areas around Damascus.

In addition, Russian leaders assessed that Syrian military forces faced significant challenges in retaking territory. "It was a very difficult situation," recalled Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian General Staff, referring to Syrian forces. "There was low morale and high fatigue, as well as a lack of ammunition, materiel, and other types of support."[21] In some cases, the Russian military was forced to repair the Syrian military's "broken equipment on the spot," Gerasimov acknowledged.[22]

In short, Russian leadership believed that the Syrian regime—one of Russia's last major partners in the Middle East—was in danger of collapse.



▲ **FIGURE 2.1** Evolution of Territorial Control in Syria, 2014–2015

SOURCE "Syria and Rebels Battle for Aleppo as Cease-Fire Collapses," *New York Times*, April 28, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/30/world/middleeast/syria-control-map-isis-rebels-airstrikes.html.

Prevent U.S.-Led Regime Change

Russian leaders were also concerned that Washington would overthrow the Assad regime and replace it with a friendly government.[23] Russian fears were based in part on a belief—however erroneous—that the United States eventually intended to overthrow the Russian government.[24] Russian leaders worried about U.S. regime change in Syria based, in part, on the U.S. role in overthrowing regimes in Yugoslavia in 1995, Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011. Russia also assessed that the United States and its partners were involved in the Arab Spring and color revolutions in Eastern Europe and other regions.[25]

Russian leaders complained that the United States and its Western European allies had taken advantage of Russian weaknesses after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union by expanding NATO

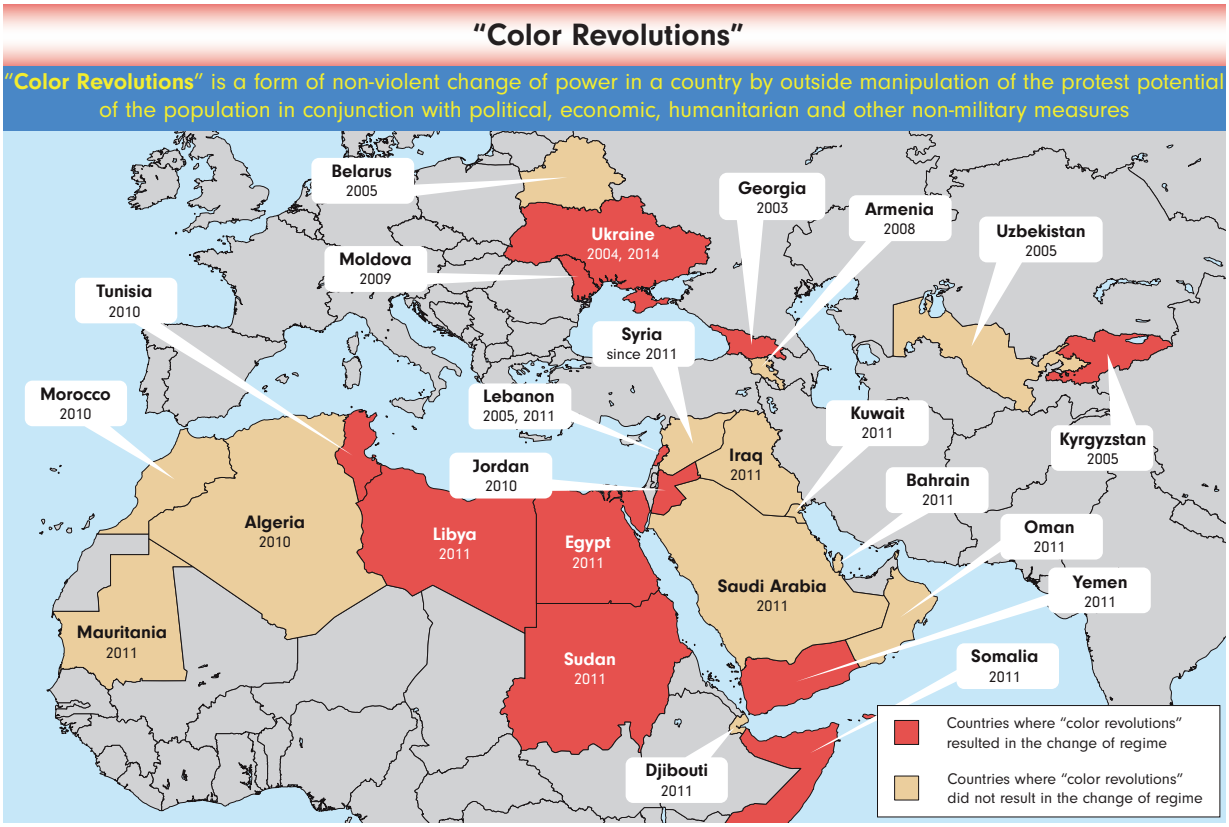
and the European Union to Russia's borders. Russian leaders and military analysts had long been wary of the United States. Former Soviet Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov had argued in a concept that became known as the "Primakov Doctrine" that Russia would oppose a world with a single global center of power led by the United States.[26] Russian military thinkers had long been concerned about the United States, and NATO expansion added to these concerns.[27] As one Russian military leader commented, NATO expansion was directed primarily at Russia: "The new members of the alliance are almost all former parties to the Warsaw Pact and the post-Soviet republics. In other words, since the 1990s, NATO has been expanding strictly to the East, toward the Russian borders."[28]

In addition, Russia's leaders increasingly believed that U.S. political and military efforts had evolved, shifting from a heavy use of conventional forces to what some called a "concealed use of force."[29] Instead of using large numbers of conventional military forces to overthrow a regime or fight insurgent groups, as the United States had done in Iraq, some Russian leaders believed that Washington would increasingly utilize clandestine methods. These types of operations might begin with an aggressive information campaign dedicated to undermining the legitimacy of the target country. The United States tended to use what some Russian officials considered state-sanctioned television propaganda such as CNN, the internet, social media, and non-governmental organizations to create or fuel political dissent.[30] As the security situation deteriorated, the United States would then leverage special operations forces, intelligence units, local militias, and private military contractors as the main ground forces, but not large numbers of U.S. conventional forces.[31] U.S. air force and naval power was still important to strike targets.[32] But this approach was more clandestine, since the United States was overthrowing regimes using *local forces* as the maneuver element.[33] The initial phase of the 2001 war in Afghanistan was an early example of this type of warfare, but it would soon become mainstream.

Russian leaders believed the United States and its partners were behind the Arab Spring and the color revolutions as well as other various movements that developed in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and other regions.[34] Participants in the color revolutions mostly used non-violent resistance, such as demonstrations and strikes, to protest against government incompetence and corruption and to push for democratic reforms. These movements generally adopted a specific color or flower as their symbol. As Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu remarked, "The phenomenon of 'color revolutions' is becoming a significant factor in destabilizing many regions of the world . . . In each specific scenario, the reasons for external intervention were different, but the implementation scheme is universal: information operations, military pressure, change of political leadership, and change in the state's foreign policy and economic direction."[35] Figure 2.2 highlights Gerasimov's conceptualization of the color revolutions, which he believed the United States was manipulating.

In particular, Russian leaders viewed the Libyan Civil War as a textbook case of the United States' new way of warfare and an example of what the United States was trying to do in Syria.[36] U.S. and British ships had fired 110 Tomahawk missiles that struck Libyan radar, missile, and command and control sites. Additional cruise missile strikes destroyed Qaddafi's command and control facility in Tripoli. NATO aircraft conducted a total of 26,500 sorties against the regime's armored vehicles, artillery, and other targets and provided rebels with an opportunity for victory in Libya. In addition, U.S., French, British, and other special operations forces and intelligence operatives conducted direct-action operations; collected intelligence; trained, advised, and assisted insurgent forces; and provided money, lethal, and non-lethal equipment.[37]

For Russian leaders, there were unambiguous lessons for Syria. As Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov remarked, "foreign players [such as the United States] will get imbued with this problem and will not only condemn the violence [in Syria], but



▲ **FIGURE 2.2**
Adapted from Gerasimov's Illustration of Color Revolution

SOURCE Valery Gerasimov, (presentation slides, Moscow Conference on International Security, May 23, 2014). The slides were published in Anthony H. Cordesman, *Russia and the 'Color Revolution': A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the U.S. and the West* (Washington, DC: CSIS, May 28, 2014), https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/140529_Russia_Color_Revolution_Full.pdf.

subsequently repeat the Libyan scenario, including the use of force."[38]

While U.S. President Barack Obama had called for Assad to "step aside" in August 2011, Moscow's fears of a U.S. military intervention rose in February 2015 when Obama vowed to aid rebel groups.[39] "We'll continue to support the moderate opposition there and continue to believe that it will not be possible to fully stabilize that country until Mr. Assad, who has lost legitimacy in the country, is transitioned out," Obama remarked.[40] Throughout 2015, U.S. policymakers debated greater involvement in Syria, including aid to rebel groups. In early 2015, for example, a delegation of U.S. senators led by John McCain visited Saudi Arabia and Qatar to discuss increasing support to Syrian rebels.[41] McCain had also secretly visited rebel leaders inside Syria to discuss the possibility of providing heavy weapons to them and establishing a no-fly zone in Syria to help topple Assad.[42] As McCain remarked, "We need a strategy that can force Assad to leave power and defeat the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq, and that strategy should start with greater support to these Syrian opposition forces, especially vital military training and assistance."[43] Near the end of 2015, McCain and U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham publicly supported the deployment of 10,000 troops to Syria.[44]

These U.S. statements and actions provided additional evidence to Russian leaders that Washington was still interested in overthrowing the Assad regime. Consequently, one of Moscow's major goals was to prevent U.S.-led regime change in Syria. Russian leaders had watched as the United States expanded its power and influence up to Russia's borders and overthrown governments in several of Moscow's allies, such as Libya. They drew a line in the sand in Syria.

Counter Terrorist Groups

Russian leaders periodically remarked that counterterrorism was their primary motivation for conducting military operations in Syria. In a speech at the United Nations in September 2015, for instance, Putin vowed to support the Assad regime against terrorist groups. "We think it is an enormous mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian government and its Armed Forces who are valiantly fighting terrorism face-to-face," he said.[45] Likewise, Gerasimov noted that "if we had not intervened in Syria, what would have happened? . . . A month or two, and by the end of 2015, Syria would be completely under ISIS control. Iraq, for the most part, too. ISIS would continue to gain momentum, spread to neighboring countries."[46]

Russia had suffered several attacks from Islamist extremists linked to—or inspired by—the Islamic State or al-Qaeda, which put its security agencies on high alert. In 2011, a suicide bomber detonated at Domodedovo International Airport in Moscow, killing 37 people. In 2013, there were two suicide bombings in the city of Volgograd perpetrated by jihadists from the Caucasus Emirate. In June 2015, Caucasus Emirate leader Aslan Byutukayev formally pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. In November, Islamic State operatives in Egypt detonated a bomb on Russian Metrojet Flight 9268, killing all 217 passengers and 7 crew members.[47] By late 2015, Alexander Bortnikov, the head of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), expressed heightened concern about the evolving terrorism threat and warned that extremists in Syria were plotting to conduct attacks in Russia.[48]

Russian leaders were concerned about terrorist attacks in Russia, and Russian leaders were interested in targeting rebel groups that threatened to overthrow the Syrian regime (which Moscow collectively referred to as "terrorist" groups). But there is an important counterfactual question: Would Russia have conducted a military campaign if the target country was not a partner of Moscow and if the United States, Moscow's main enemy (or *glavnyi protivnik*), was not attempting to undermine the target country? While impossible to know with certainty, there are several reasons why the answer may have been "no," regardless of terrorism concerns.

First, Russia's primary terrorist threat continued to come from Chechnya and other areas in the North Caucasus, not Syria. The Russians had fought two major wars in Chechnya and subsequently dealt with persistent terrorism from the region. In particular, the Caucasus Emirate, a collection of militant Islamist groups (or *jamaats*), waged a low-level campaign against the Russian state from its base in Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria.[49] There were some foreign fighters that traveled back and forth from Syria to the Caucasus, but the vast majority of jihadists threatening Russia were still located in the Caucasus.[50] Second, Russian leaders conducted virtually no strikes against the Islamic State or other jihadist fighters in Syria, including those linked to al-Qaeda, up through September 2015. The same was true in other areas where the Islamic State seized territory, such as Libya, Egypt, and Iraq, where Russia conducted few or no military operations. Consequently, while Russian leaders were concerned about terrorism—including the possibility that a collapse of the Assad regime could create instability and perhaps even a terrorist sanctuary in Syria—Russia's decision to intervene in Syria was largely driven by broader geostrategic considerations.

Russia's Strategy

Moscow's decision to intervene in Syria also depended on developing a viable strategy to degrade or defeat Syrian rebels at an acceptable cost. If Moscow had failed to cobble together a ground force composed primarily of Syrian and Iranian partners—and instead had relied on large numbers of Russian soldiers as in Afghanistan in the 1980s—it is unlikely that Russia would have directly entered the war. The costs would likely have been too high. Russia lost over 15,000 soldiers with another 35,000 wounded in Afghanistan, a price that was too high for Politburo members.[51] To achieve their primary goals of stabilizing the Syrian regime in a strategically important region and preventing

U.S.-led regime change, Russian leaders adopted a light footprint strategy that included a mix of Russian airpower and non-Russian maneuver elements. This strategy allowed Russia to leverage its air force and navel assets against rebel positions, but to leave the fighting and dying to others.

Over the summer of 2015, Russian, Iranian, and Syrian leaders discussed plans to increase their operations in Syria and better coordinate activity. Syrian officials and the then-head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), Qasem Soleimani, flew to Moscow to coordinate direct military engagement in Syria.[52] To facilitate operations, Russia and Syria signed an agreement in 2015 stipulating the terms and conditions for Russia's use of Hmeimim air base, southeast of the city of Latakia (in 2017, Russia signed a 49-year lease for access to Hmeimim and the Tartus naval facility).[53] Moscow negotiated overflight rights with Baghdad and Tehran, so that its aircraft could fly from Russian airbases over Iraqi and Iranian territory.[54]

To prepare for the operation, Russia had to pre-position air, naval, and ground assets in—or near—Syria, including aircraft, vehicles, soldiers, and equipment.[55] Logistics were a serious challenge, and Russia had limited experience in clandestinely transferring substantial numbers of troops out of area. One of the few examples was Operation Anadyr in Cuba in the early-1960s, when the Soviet Union sent troops, aircraft, equipment, and ultimately ballistic missiles to Cuba.[56] In order to manage logistics, Russia established a special combat transportation headquarters within the overall command-and-control headquarters at Hmeimim air base. While Russia delivered some cargo by air, it transported most of the military cargo by sea—what some called the "Syrian Express." Key parts of the route included loading up materiel on ships in the ports of Novorossiysk or Sevastopol, sailing through the Black Sea, and unloading at Tartus.[57]

To facilitate the large movement of materiel, Russia increased its maritime posture at Tartus and expanded its footprint by building additional infrastructure, dredging, and extending the berth in front of the port facilities. Figures 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 provide an overview of Russian and Syrian maritime vessels and infrastructure at Tartus in September 2015, just before the start of the Syrian campaign. Russia, for example, had prepositioned vessels like Krivak-class frigates and Moma-class intelligence collection ships.

Russia's strategy involved two main components: Russian airpower and non-Russian maneuver forces.

Airpower

Russia planned to use well-directed airpower to aid ground forces and overwhelm rebel positions. In Syria, the Russians deployed military and civilian personnel (such as soldiers, operational staff, intelligence analysts, engineers, and translators), equipment, and other materiel by air and sea. The most significant air link was at Hmeimim air base. By the start of the war, the initial Russian VKS task force aviation group laydown in Syria included roughly:

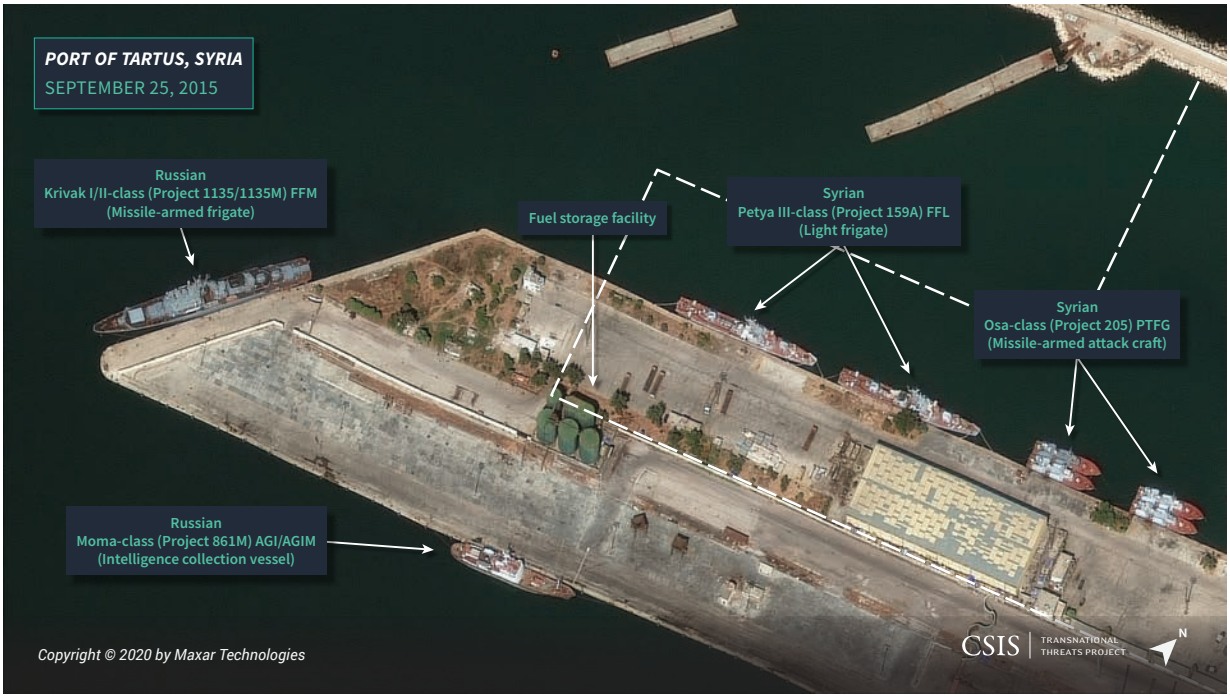
- 12 Su-24M and Su-24M2 frontline bombers
- 12 Su-25SM and Su-25UBM ground-attack aircraft
- 4 Su-34 frontline bombers
- 4 Su-30SM multirole fighters
- 1 Il-20M1 signals intelligence aircraft
- 12 Mi-24P attack helicopters
- 5 Mi-8AMTSh transport helicopters[58]

Moscow also prepared to deploy Iskander-M short-range ballistic missile systems to Hmeimim. Effective close air support would be critical to the ground offensives in cities such as Aleppo, Homs, Dayr az Zawr, Daraa, Damascus, Palmyra, and other locations. Russia also secured permission to fly long-range bombers over Iranian and Iraqi territory.[59]

To coordinate its air-ground campaign, Russia integrated military operations with the Syrian and Iranian governments, including setting up a Coordination Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides (CCROS), headquartered at Hmeimim air base.[60] Russia also helped establish a coordination center in

▲ **FIGURE 2.3.1** Satellite Imagery of Tartus, September 2015

SOURCE CSIS.



▲ **FIGURE 2.3.2** Satellite Imagery of Tartus, September 2015

SOURCE CSIS.

Baghdad, which included liaisons from Syria, Iran, Iraq, and Israel. The center facilitated intelligence sharing and deconflicted air operations.[61] Back in Moscow, the Russians used the National Defense Management Center to organize and coordinate the war effort, including intelligence analysis. The Russians were able to observe aviation, missile forces, and long-range high-precision weapons on screens in real time.[62] Figure 2.4 provides an overview of Russian aircraft and systems at and around Hmeimim air base in September 2015, just before the start of its campaign. The imagery indicates that Hmeimim underwent significant construction to prepare for the Russian incursion, including construction of a new helicopter base, S-300 and S-400 surface-to-air missile (SAM) battery positions, base defense positions, and military storage areas.

Maneuver

The second component of Moscow's strategy involved non-Russian maneuver units on the ground. Unlike Moscow's approach in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which involved a heavy footprint of 115,000 Soviet forces to support the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan government, Russian political and military leaders adopted a vastly different approach in Syria beginning in 2015.[63] Syrian army forces, not the Russian army, would serve as the main maneuver element to take back territory. They would be supported by militia forces such as Lebanese Hezbollah (which received support from Iran's IRGC-QF) and private military contractors such as the Wagner Group (which received training, money, and other aid from the Russian military).[64] These forces would conduct most of the maneuver warfare and hold territory once it was cleared, with help from Russian special operations forces on the ground.[65]

Russian leaders were under no illusions that they faced a daunting task.[66] Yet Russian military leaders nevertheless concluded that there were some Syrian army units—such as the 25th Special Mission Forces Division (often referred to as the Tiger Forces, Quwwat al-Nimr, or تاوُقلا رْمّنلا)—that were capable and could be effective against rebel forces. As Gerasimov recalled, "Some parts [of the Syrian armed forces] were still able to perform key tasks."[67] To aid these ground units, however, the Russians would need to deploy advisers, including special operations forces. In 2013, Russia had announced the creation of a Special Operations Command and Special Operations Forces.[68] The next year, the Russians had effectively used special operations forces to annex Crimea from Ukraine.

These types of forces would be needed in Syria. As Gerasimov later acknowledged, "there is a group of [Russian] military advisors in every [Syrian] unit—battalion, brigade, regiment, or division. Essentially they plan combat operations."[69] While Russia's mix of airpower and maneuver would be similar in some ways to the U.S. model in Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, and Libya in 2011, it was different in one critical respect.[70] As highlighted in Chapter 4, Russia adopted a punishment strategy, not a population-centric one characterized by winning local hearts and minds.[71] Russian and allied military forces were prepared to inflict civilian harm on opposition-controlled areas using artillery and indiscriminate area weapons such as thermobaric, incendiary, and cluster munitions.[72] As the Russians demonstrated in Grozny during the Second Chechen War, a punishment strategy is designed to raise the societal costs of continued resistance and coerce rebels to give up.[73] Russian strategy, then, would include a heavy dose of punishment directed at Syrian rebels and their supporters.

Conclusion

By the end of September 2015, Russia began its campaign with airstrikes in support of Syrian and other ground forces around the cities of Homs and Hama. While Russia had conducted some air operations during the First and Second Chechen Wars in the 1990s and 2000s, as well as in Georgia in 2008, Russian pilots had flown few combat sorties since then.[74]

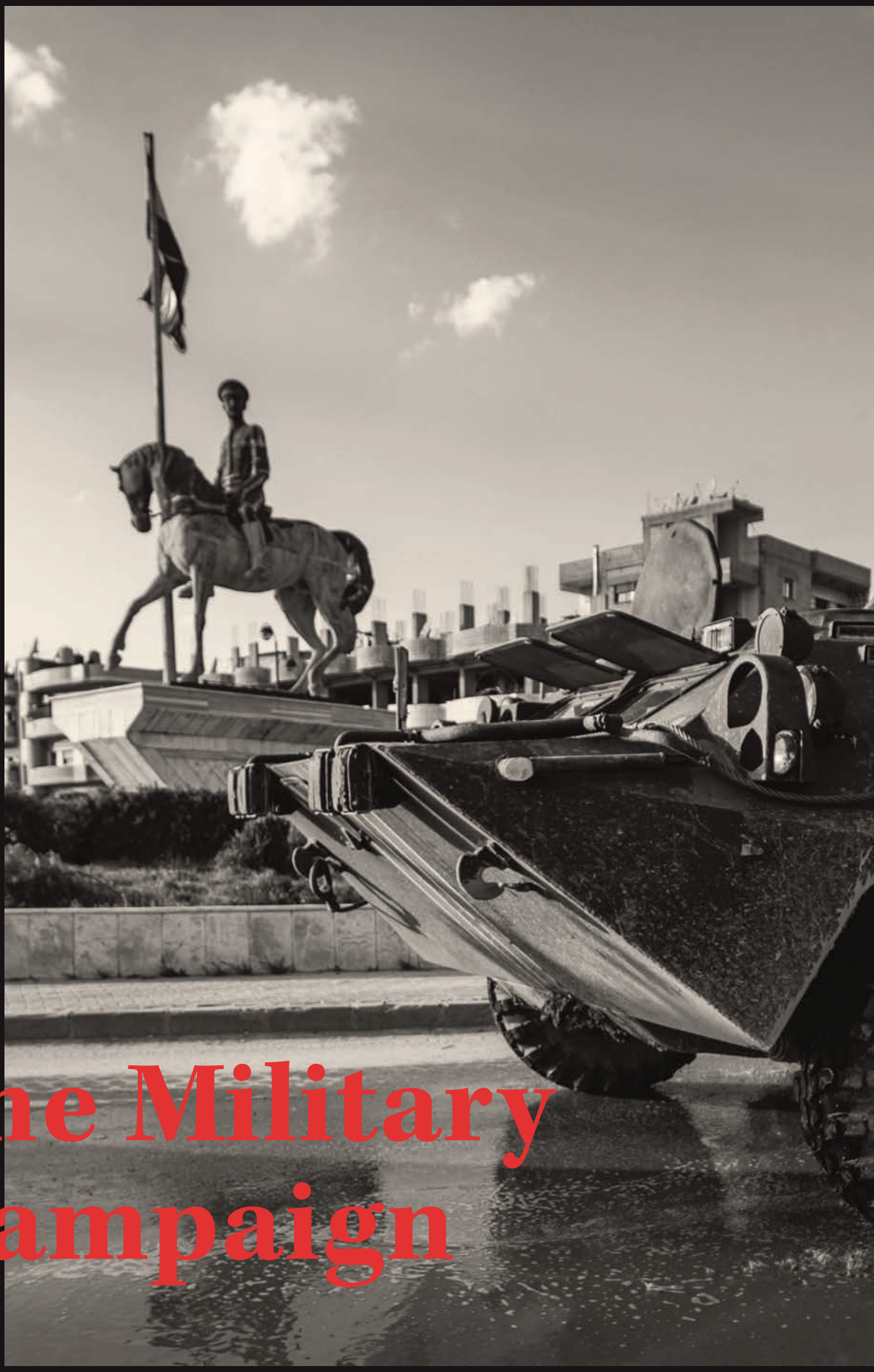
▲ **FIGURE 2.4**
Satellite Imagery of Hmeimim Air Base, September 2015

SOURCE CSIS.

Russia's decision to intervene—including *why* and *how* Russian leaders chose to intervene—needs to be understood through a Russian government lens. Influential figures such as President Vladimir Putin, Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu, and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov were deeply worried that Syria, a major ally in the Middle East, was in danger of undergoing regime change brought about by the United States and its partners. As Gerasimov argued, the history of U.S. intervention in countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya showed "that a perfectly thriving state can, in a matter of months and even days, be transformed into an arena of fierce armed conflict, become a victim of foreign intervention, and sink into a web of chaos, humanitarian catastrophe, and civil war."[75] Moscow decided it could not let that happen in Syria. Russia's decision to intervene in Syria, then, was partly motivated by great power competition with the United States.

In debating a strategy to achieve its main goals, Moscow settled on a combination of airpower and ground maneuver forces using non-Russian soldiers that allowed Russia to enter the war at an acceptable cost. It was still a huge gamble since Moscow had not conducted an out-of-area operation of this magnitude since the end of the Cold War. Russian leaders had closely examined previous U.S., Russian, and other military campaigns in settling on a strategy that involved a heavy Russian focus on stand-off attacks from air, naval, and artillery assets as well as clandestine help from special operations forces, intelligence units, and private military contractors. Still, no plan survives contact with the enemy, to paraphrase Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, the Prussian Field Marshal. Consequently, Russian leaders would have to see how their strategy translated into operations.

Chapter 03



The Military Campaign

A Russian military police armored infantry vehicle (IFV) driving past an equestrian statue of Bassel al-Assad, late brother of Bashar al-Assad, near the Qamishli airport.
SOURCE Delil Souleiman/AFP/Getty Images

Brian Katz
Nicholas Harrington

This chapter examines Russia's operations and tactics by conducting a campaign analysis. Moscow's broad objectives for the Syrian intervention described in the previous chapter—to stabilize the Assad regime and counter efforts by the United States and its partners—provided the strategic framing for how the Russian military defined its roles and missions for the war, the phasing and geography of the campaign, and its operations and tactics in the air and on the ground. The core of Russia's military strategy was for Syrian, Iranian, and Shia militias to conduct the bulk of the ground war, while Russia enabled advances with airpower, intelligence, and fire support.[1] However, the realities on the ground of a decimated Syrian army and an Iranian partner with differing battlefield priorities and similar if not greater influence in Damascus meant Russia would have only limited control over pro-regime campaign planning and would need to introduce more of its own expeditionary forces to bolster overall effectiveness on the ground. Over the course of the intervention, these complexities of combined arms and alliance warfare would compel greater Russian integration into the formulation and execution of pro-regime operations and instill key lessons for the Russian military on how to conduct a limited military and counterterrorism campaign in today's Middle East.

Overall, Russia's Syria campaign was successful in achieving Moscow's strategic objectives—securing the Assad regime in western Syria and gradually reasserting its control over the rest of the country—at a manageable cost in terms of Russian casualties and finances. Russian efforts benefited from having only limited objectives for stabilizing and governing reconquered territory. The Russian military also benefited from facing insurgent groups that failed to coordinate and lacked key

defensive assets. The groups also lacked sufficient will from foreign backers to contest regime advances or risk escalation with Russia. Russian operations and tactics were well aligned to its strategic goals, focusing on airpower and special forces to enable regime offensives on the ground. Russia gradually improved its air-ground integration with pro-regime forces over the course of the campaign to a level sufficient to defeat increasingly beleaguered opposition and Islamic State fighters. Russian targeting and tactics centered on employing heavy, persistent, and often indiscriminate air strikes in urban areas to reduce the will of rebel fighters and civilian populations to resist while focusing precision capabilities on insurgent formations during battle and key standalone targets, such as bases, headquarters, and logistics hubs.

This chapter begins by providing an overview of Russia's primary military roles, missions, and order-of-battle for the Syrian intervention. It then provides a detailed military analysis of the key phases of the Russian military campaign, beginning with the early stages of intervention in 2015, the recapture of Aleppo in 2016, and the campaign against the Islamic State in central and eastern Syria in 2017 and 2018. It concludes with an outlook for future Russian operations in Syria, namely in Idlib Province and the country's northeast.

Russian Roles and Missions

The centerpiece of Russia's military intervention in Syria has been the Russian aerospace forces (VKS), which have conducted an extensive offensive air campaign to enable pro-regime ground forces (e.g., the Syrian army and associated militias, Lebanese Hezbollah, IRGC-QF, and an array of foreign Shia fighters) to regain territory from the Syrian opposition and the Islamic State for the Assad regime.[2] To facilitate Russian air operations and pro-regime ground advances, Russia also deployed a range of ground forces, including special operations and intelligence specialists, naval infantry and military police, artillery and rocket units, air defense batteries, and logistics and combat service support specialists, to advise and enable pro-regime troops. As fighting intensified, Russia also integrated more private military contractors (PMCs) into the campaign, exploiting their similarities to Russian Spetsnaz in terms of skill sets while limiting regular Russian military casualties and providing deniability for some Russian actions.

Additional details of Russia's air, ground, and sea order-of-battle are provided in the Appendix.

Air and Air Defense Forces

Formed in August 2015 to bring together Russia's air, air defense, missile defense, and space forces, the VKS put Russian strategic air assets under one organizational command to enable more effective deployment of airpower for military campaigns.[3,4] For the Syria campaign, the Russian VKS deployed a mixed aviation group of fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft to its primary base at Hmeimim air base in Latakia Province to provide airpower and reconnaissance support to pro-regime forces.[5] Russian airpower in Syria varied throughout the campaign based on battlefield needs, ranging from approximately 20-50 fixed-wing attack and multirole aircraft and 16-40 attack and transport helicopters. Most Russian airstrikes were planned in advance using information compiled from ground, air, and space reconnaissance assets, and Russian pilots enjoyed a largely uncontested, permissive airspace with a minimal surface-to-air threat from opposition and terrorist forces on the ground.[6]

Russia employed multiple generations of Russian combat aircraft, including Su-24 bombers, Su-25SM/UB attack aircraft (third-generation), Su-30SM heavy multirole fighters, Su-34 fighter-bombers, Su-35 air superiority fighters (fourth-generation), and even the Su-57 (fifth-generation) for a short period of time. From September 2015 to January 2018, the Russian VKS carried out over 34,000 combat sorties, with Su-24s and Su-34s serving as the primary strike aircraft, averaging 40-50 missions per day.[7,8] Russian helicopters were also used extensively in ground attack and fire support roles—including the Mi-8AMTSh, Mi-24P, Mi-28N Havoc, Ka-52 Hokum, and Mi-35M systems—as well as for reconnaissance and

Category	Key Personnel / Equipment	Role	Estimated Size
Ground	• **Regular Forces:** naval infantry; airborne units; artillerymen; other ground forces • **Special Operations Forces:** *Komandovanie sil spetsial'nalnykh operatsii* (KSO); Spetsnaz advisers • **Military Police:** Chechen and Ingush fighters • **Private Military Contractors** • **Paramilitary** (engineers)	Direct fires; battlefield reconnaissance; specific assault missions; protection of Russian bases; train-advise-assist; minefield clearing	Approximately 3,000-5,000, with peak as high as 6,000 in 2017
Air	• **Fixed-wing:** Su-24 Fencer/-D bomber; Su-25 Frogfoot close air support; Su-30SM Flanker-H multirole fighter; Su-34 Frontline bomber; Su-35 Flanker-E strike fighter; Tu-22 Backfire bomber; Tu-95 Bear-H strategic bomber; Tu-160 Blackjack heavy bomber • **Rotary-wing:** Mi-24P Hind-F attack helicopter; Mi-28N Havoc attack helicopter; Mi-35M Hind-E attack helicopter, Ka-52 Hocum-B attack helicopter	Ground attack; fire support; reconnaissance; troop transport	20-50 combat aircraft; 16-40 attack & transport helicopters
Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR)	• **Fixed-wing:** Il-20M Coot-A reconnaissance craft; Tu-214R reconnaissance craft; A-50U Mainstay AEW&C; UAVs (e.g., Orlon-10, Forpost)	Reconnaissance support	2-4 named ISR aircraft and 50-70 UAVs
Air Defense	• **Long-range:** S-400 (Sa-21 Growler); S-300V/FM (Sa-12 Gladiator/Giant) (SA-N-20); S-300V4 • **Medium-range:** S-200VE (Sa-5 Gammon) • **Short-range:** Pantsir-S1 (SS-22 Greyhound); Tor-M2U (Sa-15 Gauntlet)	Protection of key bases & airfields	N/A
Naval	• **Surface Ships:** Buyan-class corvettes; Gepard-class frigates; ASW vessels; guided-missile cruisers & destroyers; Adm. Kuznetsov carrier in 2016 • **Subsurface Vessels:** Kilo-class submarines armed w/ Kalibr missiles	Strike support; logistical support; ASW	Several dozen surface combatants on rotation
Logistics	• **Naval vessels:** landing ships; auxiliary vessels • **Aircraft:** Il-76 and An-124 heavy transport aircraft	Transport of personnel, materiel, and weapons into theater	Dozens of ships and aircraft
Electronic Warfare	• **Ground-based:** Krasukha-4; Borisoglebsk-2 • **Airborne:** Vietbsk; Khibiny	Jamming; protecting Russian bases from air reconnaissance	N/A

▲ **FIGURE 3.1** Key Components of Russian Force Composition in Syria

SOURCE CSIS.

transport functions. Russia dedicated a small number of manned airborne intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets into theater, including two legacy IL-20 "Coots" and on occasion the new Tu-214R ISR aircraft. Russian UAVs played a primary role reconnoitering targets for airstrikes and artillery fires by Russian and Syrian army forces, namely the Orlan-10 Forpost UAV.[9]

In Syria, Russia combined its air defense assets with the Syrian military to maximize coverage for the pro-regime campaign while focusing its own dedicated coverage on strategic infrastructure at Hmeimim air base and Tartus naval base. Key air defense systems, including the S-400 (SA-21 Growler), S-300V (Sa-23), and S-300FM (sea-based), provided long-range defense from ballistic and cruise missiles.[10] Other air defense systems were short- and medium-range systems primarily focused on point defense.[11]

Ground Forces

Totaling between 3,000 to upwards of 5,000-6,000 forces during the campaign, Russian ground forces in Syria comprised a mix of expeditionary forces; light armored artillery, rocket, and missile forces; and specialists, including engineers and military police.[12] Russia's expeditionary cadre served primarily to advise and enable Syrian forces and numbered in the several thousand, including recently formed special operations forces from Russia's Special Operations Command (*Komandovanie sil spetsial'nalnykh operatsii*, or KSO) special operation forces, Spetsnaz advisers and intelligence specialists, naval infantry and airborne units, and PMCs.[13] These ground units focused on battlefield reconnaissance for guiding Russian artillery fires and airstrikes, training and advising partner forces, and special security missions, including specific assault missions and securing Russian bases. Russia deployed additional ground units for specialized tasks, including combat engineers and counter-IED specialists, as well as hundreds of military police composed of Sunni Muslim Chechen and Ingush fighters to help stabilize cleared areas and manage de-escalation zones.

Russian artillery and armored units provided organic fire support and force protection to ground operations, including MSTA-B towed artillery batteries and T-90A tanks. Fire support systems were also provided to Syrian units, particularly the T-72B3 tank.[14] Russian rockets, including the advanced TOS-1 Buratino and BM-30 Smerch multiple rocket launch systems (MLRS), and mobile short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) systems, including the Tochka (SS-21) and Iskander M (SS-26 Stone), provided additional fire support and strike capabilities.[15]

Naval Forces

The Russian navy fulfilled two key roles in Syria: support of ground combat operations through surface ship- and submarine-launched missile fires and providing logistical support to the military campaign. Russia's strike-capable naval presence at the port of Tartus and offshore varied based on operational needs, drawing from the Black Sea and Northern Fleets. Key assets included Admiral Grigorovich-class guided-missile frigates, the Marshal Ustinov guided-missile cruiser, Severomorsk anti-submarine warfare (ASW) ship, and Kilo-class submarines. The Grigorovich-class frigate and Kilo-class submarines, in particular, provided occasional strike support from Kalibr family land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs) against opposition and Islamic State targets, including from the Russian navy's Caspian Sea flotilla.[16] The Russian navy also deployed its sole aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov, and an associated carrier strike group to Syria from October 2016 to January 2017. While primarily serving as a symbol of Russia's global power projection capabilities, the carrier did provide some strike support for operations around Aleppo, including sorties from Su-33s and MiG-29KR/KUBRs combat aircraft deployed aboard.[17]

Russian Campaign Analysis

Russia's military intervention in Syria can be divided into three campaign phases centered around different but intertwined strategic objectives: stabilizing the Assad

regime in core areas of western Syria (September 2015 to spring 2016); going on the offensive in the west to recapture Aleppo (spring 2016 to spring 2017); and countering the Islamic State in central and eastern Syria (spring 2017 to spring 2018). This phasing, however, is retrospective and was not the result of deliberate Russian planning and strategy prior to their intervention. Rather, where Russia concentrated its military power was primarily a reaction to pro-regime forces on the ground and determined jointly with Syrian and Iranian partners based on assessed battlefield priorities. Pro-regime strategy, and Russia's combat role with it, reflected a consistent prioritization of stabilizing the Assad regime and defeating the opposition in western Syria over operations against the Islamic State until Aleppo was retaken. While airpower remained Russia's primary contribution throughout the phases of the campaign, battlefield needs precipitated a steady increase in specialized ground forces, including artillery units, forward air controllers, KSO, Spetsnaz intelligence specialists, military police, and, increasingly, PMCs. Russia based command and the majority of VKS assets at an expanded Hmeimim airfield while also expanding its air and ground assets to new bases in central Syria as territory was retaken, including the Tiyas (T-4) and Dayr az Zawr airfields.

Campaign 1

Stabilizing the Civil War: September 2015-April 2016

Campaign Objective: The primary objective of Russia's initial combat entry into the Syrian war in the fall of 2015 and early 2016 centered on stabilizing the key battlefronts against the Syrian opposition and the Islamic State that threatened the Assad regime's control of western Syria. With contested fronts in core regime areas such as Damascus, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, and Latakia defended and stabilized, regime forces, enabled by Russian airpower, could then seize the initiative and move onto the offensive to reassert regime power in Syria's vital western corridor.[18]

Russian Roles and Missions: Russia's primary combat role was airpower, conducting strikes against fixed opposition and Islamic State targets and enabling pro-regime forces to make advances on the ground. By late 2015, Russia began introducing small numbers of special forces, Spetsnaz intelligence operators, and forward air controllers to embed with pro-regime troops and facilitate Russian air support.[19] Russian targeting in this stage of the war prioritized striking Syrian armed opposition groups in core rebel-controlled areas of western Syria, with only periodic airstrikes against Islamic State targets in central and eastern Syria, namely in Raqqa and Dayr az Zawr.[20] Russia's initial deployment of strike aircraft was to Hmeimim airfield, including Su-24M2 bombers, Su-25S attack aircraft, Su-34 fighter-bombers, and Mi-24P attack helicopters. This expanded in early 2016 to include newer advanced aircraft, including the Su-30SM heavy multirole fighter, Su-35S air superiority fighter, and Mi-35M attack helicopter, and to new bases in western and central Syria, such as the Shayrat and Tiyas airfields.[21]

While Russian air forces conducted periodic strikes against rebel strongpoints (such as Idlib and eastern cities in Aleppo Province) and Islamic State facilities, the focused use of Russian airpower to enable pro-regime advances was concentrated in four key contested operational theaters: northern Latakia; the M5 Highway in Homs and Hama Provinces; Aleppo Province; and Greater Damascus.

Theater 1

Northern Latakia: Securing the Coastal Regions, Alawite Heartland

Objective: Among Russia's first battlefield priorities was to enable Syrian forces to reclaim control of Latakia Province, the coastal stronghold of Assad's Alawite sect and, along with neighboring Tartus Province to the south, site of Russia's key military infrastructure in the country, including the port of Tartus and Hmeimim airfield. Pro-regime and opposition forces had engaged in fierce battles since 2013 for control of strategic hilltop towns in northeastern Latakia's Jabal Turkmen

and Jabal al-Akrad ranges, with opposition fighters making significant advances into the province in 2015. Seeing Assad's Alawite heartland and its own strategic interests under threat, Russia sought to employ its airpower advantage to reverse opposition momentum, stabilize regime defense lines, and expand the regime's coastal stronghold buffer. From there, Russia also sought to enable pro-regime forces to retake vital territory in northwest Hamah Province, the Ghab Valley, and adjoining terrain in Idlib Province which fell to the opposition in the summer of 2015.[22]

Figure 3.2.1 provides imagery of Hmeimim air base near the height of the Russian air campaign in Syria. Key additions to the air base between September 2015 and December 2015 include significantly more Russian combat aircraft and attack helicopters, the S-300 SAM battery, expanded support and storage areas, and more base defense positions.

Figure 3.2.2 further details the Russian military aircraft apron at Hmeimim, which included numerous Su-24 strike aircraft, Su-25 ground attack aircraft, Su-34 strike aircraft, an S-300 SAM battery nearby, and other rotary-wing and fixed-wing aircraft.

Operations: From September 30 through the end of 2015, Russian airstrikes consistently targeted opposition positions in northeastern Latakia, particularly those of capable, well-armed groups such as the 1st Coastal Division, Ahrar al-Sham, and Nusrah Front.[23] Russian strikes intensified in Latakia in late November following the Turkish downing of an Russian Su-24M attack aircraft, focusing on the rebels' Turkmen contingents backed by Ankara. Nonetheless, Russian periodic airstrikes alone proved indecisive, as opposition and regime forces continued to swap hold of key terrain in fierce cycles of attacks and counterattacks.[24] The advantage shifted to the regime in early 2016 with the introduction of Russian Spetsnaz and forward air controllers to direct more precise Russian and regime airstrikes on opposition strongpoints.[25]

The Russian-backed regime counter-offensive first moved to seize the strategic fortress town of Salma, which held commanding terrain and put the regime and Russia's Latakia facilities in range of opposition rockets and missiles.[26] On January 12, pro-regime forces including the Syrian Republican Guard, Lebanese Hezbollah, and local militia seized control of Salma with support from Russian advisers, who enabled as many as 200 Russian airstrikes.[27] Having penetrated the opposition's main defensive line, pro-regime forces pressed the advantage to move on Rabia, the last major opposition stronghold in the province, which fell on January 24.[28]

Despite intensive Russian airstrikes in Hama's Ghab Valley and key opposition strongpoints and transit junctures near Jisr al-Shugur in Idlib Province, the pro-regime counter-offensive stalled after seizing Rabia, as dug-in, well-armed opposition forces across Ghab Valley, including Nusrah Front, effectively stymied further advances.[29]

Result: Russian airstrikes, once integrated into operations on the ground, played a decisive role in enabling pro-regime forces to expel opposition forces from Latakia and preserve the regime's coastal Alawite stronghold. In addition to fixed-wing strike aircraft, the introduction of Russian Mi-24 Hind and Mi-35M attack helicopters served as "airborne artillery" for the pro-regime advance, suppressing opposition counterattacks and neutralizing the ground advantage their TOW anti-tank guided missiles previously provided.[30] This airpower advantage was negated, however, once pro-regime forces encountered superior opposition forces spread across well-defended, more expansive terrain in the Ghab Valley and Idlib Province.

Theater 2

Homs and Hama: Securing the Western Corridor

Objective: While stabilizing the defense lines of Syria's coastal region, pro-regime forces sought to further strengthen Assad's control over the vital western corridor connecting Damascus to Syria's other key cities—Homs, Hama, and Aleppo. With Hama and Homs under control by the summer of 2014, pro-regime forces

▲ **FIGURE 3.2.1** Hmeimim Air Base, December 2015

SOURCE CSIS.

▲ **FIGURE 3.2.2** Hmeimim Air Base, December 2015

SOURCE CSIS.

sought to eliminate the remaining opposition pockets still threatening the corridor's M5 Highway in those provinces but faced stiff opposition resistance. Similar to operations in northeastern Latakia, Russian forces in the fall of 2015 sought to employ airpower to enable pro-regime advances and seize opposition territory in northern Homs Province and northern Hama Province adjoining Idlib.

Operations: From September 30, 2015 through the end of the year, Russian warplanes consistently targeted rebel-held pockets near the towns of Talibseh and Rastan in Homs Province and Kafr Zita, Al Latamneh, and Morek in Hama Province.[31] In Homs, Russian airstrikes sought to enable regime troops to finish their two-year siege of the area, while in Hama, regime forces sought to extend control up the M5 Highway to the approaches of Idlib. [32] Russian airstrikes intensified in the northern Homs pocket, in particular in early February 2016 as Russian and regime forces sought to win control of the area before the U.S.-Russian negotiated cessation of hostilities came into effect nationwide.

Result: Despite heavy Russian and regime airstrikes, opposition forces defeated both pro-regime ground offensives and held onto both the Homs and Hama pockets. Well-armed, experienced, and mobile opposition groups were able to avoid destructive Russian air strikes and neutralize regime armored advances.[33] Unlike the regime offensive in Latakia, the combination of less capable pro-regime troops and imprecise air-to-ground targeting due to the lack of Russian forward air controllers prevented significant regime advances. The northern Homs pocket would not fall to the regime until spring 2018.

Theater 3

Aleppo: Setting the Stage

Objective: As Syria's largest city, industrial center, and heart of the Syrian opposition, the city of Aleppo was the principal strategic and symbolic objective for pro-regime forces by the fall of 2015. Fierce battle lines were drawn from regime-held west Aleppo and the opposition-held east, and multiple regime attempts to encircle the opposition stronghold had failed against well-armed and motivated groups. The Assad regime and Iran saw Russia's intervention as an opportunity to shift the military balance in Aleppo, complete the encirclement, and seize control of the city. To do so, Russian airpower focused on three axes: to the east of Aleppo, to clear the Islamic State from key terrain and military facilities; to the north, to cut off rebel supply lines from Turkey; and to the southwest, to reduce opposition pressure coming from Idlib and western Aleppo.

Operations: On the eastern axis, Russian forces sought to support pro-regime efforts to relieve several hundred regime troops who had been besieged by the Islamic State for three years at Kuweires airfield, which held key terrain east of Aleppo and could serve as a launching point for operations to the north of the city.[34] Beginning in mid-October, a month of intensive Russian airstrikes on Islamic State positions enabled pro-regime forces, including the elite Syrian "Tiger Forces" militia and hundreds of Iranian-backed Shia proxies, to advance toward the airfield, finally lifting the siege in mid-November.[35] With the Islamic State cleared east of the city, pro-regime forces could press from there to the north and attempt to complete the encirclement.

Pro-regime focus turned to the strategic terrain north of Aleppo, enabled through Russian airpower and the introduction of elite Russian Spetsnaz and IRGC-QF advisers on the ground. With heavy Iranian, Hezbollah, and Shia militia reinforcements, regime troops first sought to relieve the four-year opposition siege of two Shia villages, Nubl and Az Zahra, and with it simultaneously sever the primary supply line from Turkey into Aleppo from the Bab al Salameh border crossing through the Azaz corridor.[36] After several months of Russian strikes on opposition supply lines and pro-regime advances from Kuweiris, Nubl and Az Zahra fell to the regime in early February.[37] Over a period of two days, more than 100 Russian airstrikes, coordinated with IRGC-QF and Russian Spetsnaz advisers on the ground, enabled pro-regime troops to seize the towns and defeat rebel counter-offensives.[38]

Russian action further weakened the opposition position in northwest Aleppo in mid-January, as Russian airstrikes enabled Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) to make rapid advances, pushing east from Afrin through the Azaz corridor, just north of the Nubl and Az Zahra area regime forces seized the week prior.[39] YPG troops seized the key town of Tel Rifaat, Menagh air base, and other villages, as overwhelmed opposition forces—facing the Islamic State to the east, the regime to the south, the YPG to the west, and continual Russian airstrikes—were forced to concede the area.[40]

While facilitating the regime's strategic gains to the north, Russian forces also conducted repeated airstrikes against rebel strongpoints in the southwest Aleppo countryside. A combination of regime, Iranian, Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shia militia forces with Russian support seized the key town of Khan Touman in late December, but opposition counter-offensives drawing fighters from Aleppo and Idlib were routinely able to stymie further regime gains, even reclaiming Khan Touman in May 2016.[41]

Result: Russian-enabled regime operations in Aleppo in the winter of 2015/2016, particularly the severing of the opposition supply line from Turkey, achieved strategic gains against the opposition and served to prepare the battlefield for encirclement, siege, and seizure of East Aleppo in the coming year. The deepening battlefield cooperation between Russian, regime, and Iranian forces and the integration of air-ground operations in Aleppo created a "proof of concept" that served as the blueprint for future pro-regime offensives in Syria.

Theater 4

Greater Damascus: Expanding the Regime's Buffer

Objective: Multiple regime offensives against the opposition strongholds in the Damascus suburbs, particularly eastern Ghouta, had stalled since 2012, as had pro-regime attempts to push south from the capital into the Free Syrian Army-dominated Daraa Province. In addition to fighting capable opposition, regime forces in the capital also needed to combat the Islamic State, which pushed into central Syria in 2014 and seized Palmyra in May 2015. While prioritizing Russian assistance for offensives in Syria's northwest, the Assad regime also sought to leverage Russian airpower to expand its defensive buffer around the capital against both the opposition and the Islamic State.

Operations: In the Damascus suburbs, Russian aircraft began heavily targeting opposition positions in October 2015, centered on the rebel stronghold of eastern Ghouta, while pro-regime troops continued sieges of opposition pockets south of the city, such as Daraya and Moadamiyah. Russian strikes continued in eastern Ghouta through January 2016, as pro-regime forces sought to weaken the opposition ahead of international-led negotiations for a cessation of hostilities. An alleged Russian strike in late December killed Zahran Alloush, the prominent commander of Jaysh al-Islam, one of Syria's most powerful opposition groups.[42] Despite relatively consistent Russian targeting, the eastern Ghouta operation lacked the same quality of pro-regime forces and concentrated periods of intense Russian strikes as the operations in Latakia and Aleppo, resulting in only marginal gains against a capable opposition.[43]

The Russian air campaign in southern Syria in the fall of 2015 centered on expanding regime control south down the vital Damascus-Daraa highway corridor and weakening the FSA-affiliated Southern Front, the umbrella organization for a number of moderate opposition factions dominant in the south.[44] In December, Russian airstrikes began focusing on a regime offensive to seize the key junction town of Shayhkh Miskin in central Daraa Province.[45] The town fell to the Syrian army in January, enabling the regime to cut off a key line of communication to rebels in the Damascus area. Further regime offensives in Daraa in 2016 stalled, however, during the cessation of hostilities, but the Southern Front was unable to take significant additional ground.[46]

In the fall of 2015, the threat from the Islamic State was as acute to the regime's stability in Damascus as

the threat from the Western Syria-based opposition. After seizing Palmyra, Islamic State forces pushed deeper west in Homs Province, captured the towns of Qaraytayn and Maheen, and threatened both Homs and Damascus. Russian airstrikes on these Islamic State positions began in November and took on new urgency following the Islamic State terrorist attack that downed Metrojet Flight 9268 travelling from Egypt to Moscow. Moscow employed for the first time Tu-22M3 and Tu-160 strategic bombers launched from Russian territory. Despite additional air assets, the Islamic State's small mobile detachments and the Russian air force's lack of dynamic targeting capabilities limited the effectiveness of these strikes.[47] Pro-regime fortunes against the Islamic State changed in March 2016 as Russia shifted more air assets (including Ka-52, Mi-28N, and Mi-35M attack helicopters), artillery, and Spetsnaz advisers forward to the area to support a more capable ground force consisting of Syrian army, Hezbollah, and Iranian-backed militia fighters.[48] By late March, pro-regime forces had reversed Islamic State gains in the Homs countryside and then, enabled by intensive Russian close air support, recaptured Palmyra.

Result: Russia's air efforts in Greater Damascus played a key role in reducing the threat of an Islamic State push on the capital and expanding the regime's security buffer to the south into Daraa and to the north in Homs Province. Russian airstrikes were less effective in facilitating regime gains in Damascus itself, as opposition forces remained well-armed and motivated in eastern Ghouta.

Campaign Assessment

While not necessarily synchronized, Russian air operations in key operational theaters in western Syria helped stabilize the regime's main battlefronts and set the stage for more deliberate offensives against both the Syrian opposition and the Islamic State. Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu accurately summarized Russia's early Syria campaign and operational priorities in a July 2016 speech in Moscow, stating that: "As of today, large groups of fighters have been destroyed in Hama and Homs, and fighters have been driven out of Latakia and from southern and northern Damascus. The primary transport route that connects the capital with the northern part of the country has been opened up. Palmyra and Al Qaryatayn, which have special significance, have been liberated."[49] As Figure 3.3 demonstrates, Russia's early combat efforts were overwhelmingly focused on striking opposition

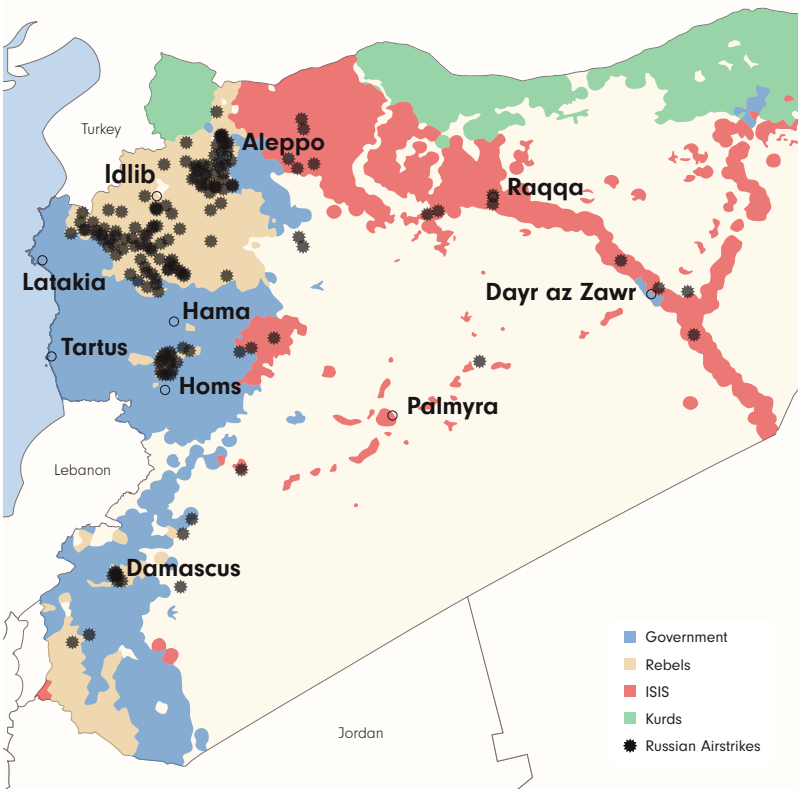


FIGURE 3.3 Russian Airstrikes in Syria: September 30–October 30, 2015

SOURCE Genevieve Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria, September 30, 2015 to September 19, 2016," Institute for the Study of War, October 2016, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Airstrikes%20Maps%20SEPT%202015-SEPT%202016.pdf.

forces in western Syria, not operations against the Islamic State in eastern Syria.

The early phases of Russia's Syria intervention also exposed the weaknesses of the Syrian army, which by 2016 was depleted to half of its pre-war strength, and the need to supplement regime regulars and militia with more capable Iranian and Hezbollah troops.[50] Operations in Aleppo, Latakia, and Greater Damascus also revealed the need for Russian advisers and forward air controllers to embed with pro-regime contingents to better enable ground operations against well-armed, dug-in opposition fighters.

These early lessons on combined arms and alliance warfare were critical for the next phase of Russia's intervention and the conduct of the pro-regime campaign. Exploiting the U.S. and Russian-negotiated cessation of hostilities to rest, refit, and reinforce with foreign militia fighters, the Syrian army was ready to resume major operations by late spring 2016. While Russia sought for this new pro-regime alliance to push into eastern Syria to parallel the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State, Moscow instead acquiesced to the regime and Iran's priority: Aleppo.[51]

Campaign II

Winning the West: The Siege and Seizure of Aleppo: April 2016-April 2017

Campaign Objective: As the U.S.-Russia negotiated cessation of hostilities collapsed by April 2016, the pro-regime alliance's main effort turned to Aleppo. Russia's strategic objective was for the regime to achieve a decisive and symbolic victory over the opposition, enabling the alliance to seize the initiative in the conflict and, with the civil war decided, to begin the push into eastern Syria against the Islamic State. Russia's main military objective was to enable pro-regime forces to capture rebel-held East Aleppo while avoiding the high attrition and risk of a frontal assault.[52] Russia assisted the regime, Iran, and Hezbollah in executing the siege-and-seize strategy they had previously used effectively in Homs and the Damascus suburbs. Having severed the rebels main supply line from Turkey in February, Russian efforts centered on cutting off the last route into East Aleppo from the west, the Castello Road. With the rebel enclave fully isolated, pro-regime troops could begin the main assault while pummeling civilian areas to induce their surrender and evacuation.

Russian Roles and Missions: The Aleppo campaign marked a shift in the level of direct Russian combat support on the ground in Syria. Command-and-control for the campaign fell under a Syrian, Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah joint operations room at Al Safirah military base southeast of Aleppo. The IRGC-QF held overall ground command, and the Russian Aviation Group at Hmeimim orchestrated the air campaign. Russian airpower continued to target rebel strongpoints around the East Aleppo enclave and key terrain north and west of the city while conducting punitive strikes against populations in those areas. To help orchestrate a more concerted pro-regime air-ground and fire support integration, Russia forward deployed KSO, Spetsnaz, and artillery batteries to the main pro-regime battlefronts to direct Russian and regime air and artillery strikes.[53] Supplementing Russia's in-theater strike assets were out-of-area cruise missiles, with Kalibr strikes launched from naval assets in the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas. More useful in enabling pro-regime ground operations were Russian intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets, including an Orlan 10 UAV attachment.

The pro-regime campaign was executed in three main phases: (1) to complete the encirclement of East Aleppo; (2) to intensify the siege of the rebel enclave; and (3) to seize the area through a combination of force and negotiation.

Phase 1

Complete Encirclement: May–September 2016

Objective: Russia and pro-regime forces' primary objective in the first phase of the Aleppo campaign

was to enable pro-regime troops north of Aleppo to push south and cut off the Castello Road, the main west-to-east artery into East Aleppo from Idlib Province and Turkey and the last remaining supply line for the rebels. Russian air and artillery also supported Iranian-led efforts southwest of the city to prevent opposition fighters in the Aleppo countryside from connecting with East Aleppo and breaking the siege.

Operations: Russian air forces began preparing the battlefield in May and June with intensive airstrikes on Castello Road, with Russian strikes in Aleppo exceeding pre-cessation of hostilities (CoH) levels as well as the majority of Russian strikes conducted nationwide on a daily basis.[54] As pro-regime troops made advances south toward the road, led by the highly capable Syrian Tiger Forces militia under Colonel Suhail Hassan, Russian air targeting honed in on specific junctures and opposition strongpoints to enable pro-regime movements and to make the road impassable for opposition and humanitarian convoys.[55] By early July, pro-regime troops moved into artillery range of Castello Road and captured the key Mallah Farms area north of the road, putting almost the entire road under fire.[56] Finally, in late July, a pro-regime push south—led by Tiger Forces and Hezbollah fighters—and a Kurdish advance north from their East Aleppo enclave, Sheikh Maqsoud, enabled regime forces to take full control of the road.[57] East Aleppo was finally encircled. Russian naval infantry and military police took up positions along the road, nominally to assist UN-led efforts to facilitate humanitarian aid into East Aleppo as part of U.S.-Russian negotiations. In reality, however, they were designed to cut off rebels in East Aleppo from supplies.[58]

In early August, rebel forces broke the siege, not along the Castello Road but in Aleppo's southwest. They mounted a major counterattack from the western Aleppo countryside through the Ramouseh area of regime-held West Aleppo, as depicted in Figure 3.4. A mix of Nusrah Front and more moderate opposition forces broke a one-mile gap in the regime's siege lines and seized the Ramouseh Artillery College and industrial district, taking strategic terrain controlling the entry into West Aleppo.[59] Russian aircraft responded with heavy airstrikes on the opposition assault force and potential reinforcements along the M5 Highway in the southern Aleppo countryside while providing direct air support for the several thousand Hezbollah-led Shia militia reinforcements sent to retake the so-called "Ramouseh Gap."[60] Reinforced further by Tiger Forces militia deployed from northern Aleppo and massive Russian air barrages, the pro-regime contingent of Syrian army, Hezbollah, Iraqi, and Afghan Shia fighters were able retake Ramouseh in early September and reimpose the siege.[61]

Result: With massive Russian air support and thousands of Shia militia reinforcements led by elite Hezbollah and Tiger Forces units, pro-regime forces were able to make up for the continuing shortfalls of Syrian army capabilities to maintain control of the Castello Road and retake the Ramouseh area, leaving East Aleppo fully encircled again by late September. While successful, Russia's air operations were not risk-free. Opposition forces in August in the northern Idlib town of Saraqib shot down a Russian Mi-8 helicopter returning to Hmeimim airfield, killing five Russian troops onboard.[62] Russian warplanes retaliated immediately, dropping cluster and incendiary munitions on opposition towns in Idlib and Aleppo.[63] Russia employed similar tactics in the next stage of the Aleppo campaign.

Phase 2

Intensify Siege: September–October 2016

Objective: With East Aleppo fully encircled, Russia's next objective was to enable pro-regime troops to divide the area into more manageable enclaves for clearing and seizure, centered first on the enclave south of Castello Road. Along with Syrian army and foreign Shia militia reinforcements, Russia deployed more key fire support assets forward to the area, including high-end systems, such as the BM-30 multiple rocket launcher and TOS-1A "Buratino" surface-to-surface rocket firing

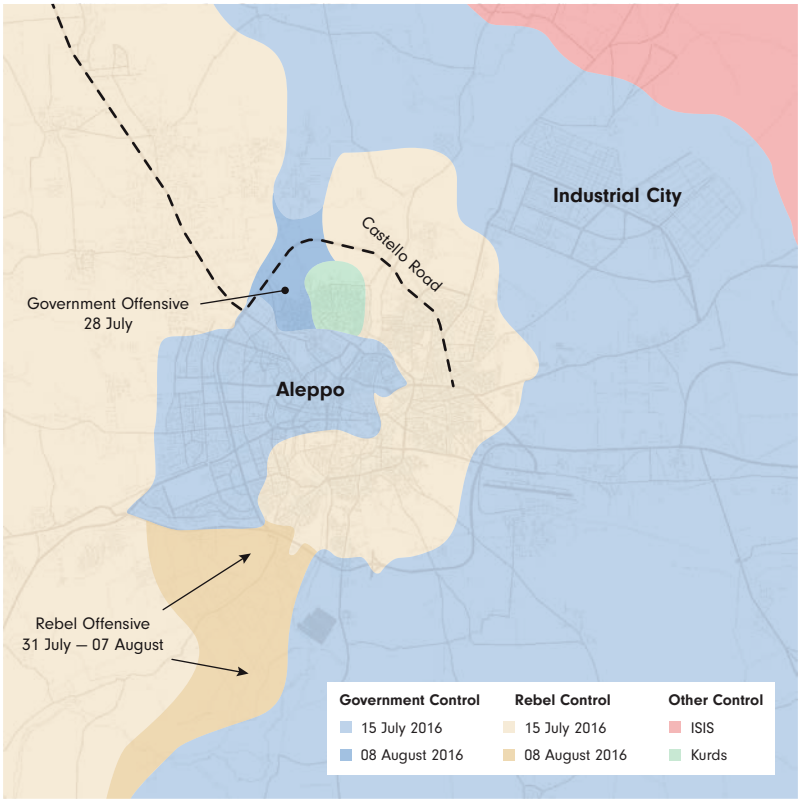


FIGURE 3.4 The Campaign for Aleppo: July 15–August 8, 2016

SOURCE Christopher Kozak, "Opposition Forces Break the Siege of Aleppo City," Institute for the Study of War, August 8, 2016, http://www.iswresearch.org/2016/08/opposition-forces-break-siege-of-aleppo_19.html.

thermobaric warheads, to destroy opposition positions and weaken morale.[64]

Operations: Enabled by increasingly accurate Russian artillery and airstrikes, pro-regime forces in late September pressed the offensive on the northern edge of East Aleppo, engaging in fierce battles and ultimately seizing the Handarat refugee camp, which occupied critical high ground over East Aleppo.[65] Russian fixed-wing aircraft simultaneously continued to strike opposition targets across the northern and western sectors, penetrating opposition frontlines by mid-October.[66]

Russian airstrikes were equally intensive in southwest Aleppo, attempting to soften the ground for future pro-regime advances and to prevent a repeat of when opposition forces were able to break the siege in Ramouseh. A last rebel offensive, focused on the 1070 Housing Project on the southern approaches to Aleppo, temporarily broke through the regime's outer siege line but was retaken by regime, Hezbollah, and Iranian-led militia in late October.[67] Despite Russian air support, pro-regime troops were unable to penetrate opposition defense lines in the south.

Result: From late September to late October, heavy Russian air and artillery strikes enabled pro-regime troops to seize East Aleppo's key northern enclave but made minimal gains across the city's other siege lines due to motivated opposition forces well-entrenched in urban terrain. However, weeks of intensive bombardment targeting opposition headquarters and key civilian infrastructure—including electrical grids, water plants, and hospitals—left the rebels severely weakened. After Russia declared a temporary pause in their campaign in late October, urging a rebel surrender, pro-regime forces launched a final, all-out assault.

Phase 3

Clear and Capture: November–December 2016

Objective: Russia and the regime's objective in November was to capture East Aleppo by the end of the year through a combination of swift, directed ground assaults and negotiated evacuations of opposition fighters and civilian supporters.[68] In addition to air and artillery, Russia increased its special operations and reconnaissance presence on the ground, training and advising Syrian army and militia forces and directing increasingly precise strikes against diminishing rebel strongpoints.[69]

Operations: Pro-regime forces moved first on the northeast district of Hanano, pushing west in an

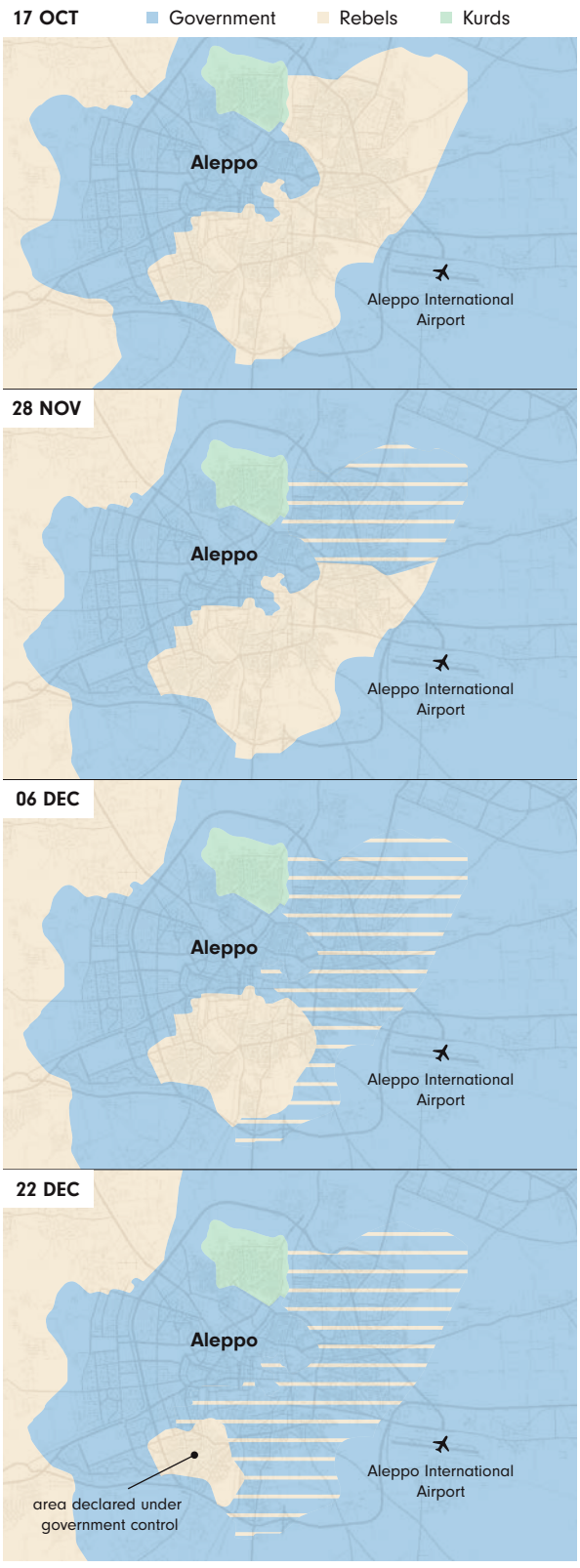
attempt to bisect East Aleppo in half.[70] In late November, intensive Russian strikes on the district, coupled with Tiger Forces-led assaults, compelled opposition forces to withdraw from the area and left the remaining rebel groups in the northern sector exposed to encirclement, prompting a full opposition withdrawal south.[71] The opposition lost one-third of its East Aleppo enclave in this Russian-enabled assault.

Pro-regime troops—including Iranian-backed Palestinian, Iraqi, and Afghan militia—next pressed into the central sector, taking the opposition stronghold of al-Shaʾar and then the historic Old City by December 7.[72] Simultaneously, pro-regime forces backed by Russian firepower pushed into southeast Aleppo's Sheikh Saeed district and forced the opposition to withdrawal from all of Aleppo's eastern districts and fall back in the southern sector, joined by retreating fighters from the Old City.[73] Regime forces held more than three-quarters of East Aleppo by December 12.[74] Figure 3.5 depicts how quickly opposition forces relinquished control over the eastern part of the city from October through December.

Result: Facing slaughter in South Aleppo's more open terrain, insurgents agreed to a ceasefire on December 13 brokered by Russia and Turkey that allowed remaining opposition fighters and civilians to evacuate to Idlib and western Aleppo.[75] By late December, the regime had regained full control of Aleppo.

Campaign Assessment

The siege and seizure of Aleppo for the Assad regime proved to be the pivotal battle in the Syrian Civil War. With the opposition's strategic and symbolic stronghold retaken, pro-regime forces could now contain the remaining armed opposition in northern Syria to the Greater Idlib and eastern Damascus pockets. In addition, pro-regime forces could execute slow but steady sieges backed by punitive Russian air strikes to weaken and eventually retake these areas. In the south, the combination of a U.S.-Russia-Jordan-negotiated ceasefire agreement for the region in 2017 and Western powers' own decision, along with local partners, to end support to armed opposition



▲ **FIGURE 3.5** Loss of Territory by Rebel Groups in Aleppo, 2016

SOURCE "What's happening in Aleppo?" BBC, December 23, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38132163.

groups there obviated the need for another major regime offensive.[76] Thus, by early 2017, the pro-regime alliance could shift focus from the civil war in western Syria to what the Russians had sought before the Aleppo campaign: a push into central and eastern Syria. However, the focus on Aleppo had come at a cost: the loss of Palmyra to the Islamic State in December 2016, after waves of mobile Islamic State units overwhelmed poorly trained regime holding forces.

Russian forces likely took several lessons from the Aleppo campaign and applied them in the eastern offensive. First, the Syrian army had been severely weakened through the course of the war and needed Russian special forces and intelligence personnel to train, organize, advise, and embed with them to be an effective fighting force; the same was true of similar, parallel advisory efforts from Iran and Hezbollah. Second, despite Russia's preference to work "by, with, and through" the Syrian army, coordination with Iran and Hezbollah at the operational and tactical levels was vital to effective ground operations and would be even more critical when fighting mobile Islamic State units. Finally, retaking territory from opposition or Islamic State fighters required tough urban and rural clearing operations that exposed ground combatants to high casualties. Rather than relying solely on Russian military and intelligence personnel, Moscow increased its use of private military contractors with similar skill sets but without official Russian status.

Campaign III

Countering the Islamic State in the East: Spring 2017–Winter 2018

Campaign Objective: Beginning in 2017, Russia's main objective for the campaign into eastern Syria was to clear the Islamic State from key terrain in central Syria that still threatened Damascus. Moscow then aimed to push east to retake Dayr az Zawr, the Islamic State's second largest urban stronghold in Syria after Raqqa, where pro-regime forces had been besieged since 2014.[77] While assisting the Assad regime in reclaiming territory and reestablishing its control in the east, Russia's secondary objective in the campaign was to contain the U.S.-led counter-Islamic State coalition operating parallel to the pro-regime campaign to the north and east of the Euphrates River.[78] Moscow sought to compel Washington into cooperating against the Islamic State as part of broader negotiations over Syria in 2016, seeking parity as Middle East players and counterterrorism partners, but then shifted to a competitive posture once rebuffed by the United States. Moscow sought to limit the growing U.S. footprint in Syria, constrain further gains for the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and ensure eastern Syria's key resources and infrastructure were secured for the regime and its Russian backers.

Russian Roles and Missions: Russian forces had two primary roles for the eastern campaign. First, Russian fixed-wing aircraft, attack helicopters, and reconnaissance UAVs operating out of Hmeimim and an expanding Tiyas (T-4) airfield near Palmyra provided strike, close air, and intelligence support for pro-regime clearing operations.[79] Second, a combination of Russian KSO, Spetsnaz, and PMCs (particularly the Wagner Group) trained, advised, assisted, and enabled pro-regime advances on the ground.[80] These advances were led by the Tiger Forces militia, under Colonel Suheil al-Hassan, and the recently formed Syrian 5th Assault Corps, a Russian-organized, -led, and -equipped force which served as a key Syrian assault unit.[81]

The pro-regime eastern Syrian campaign was conducted in three main phases: the multi-axis offensive to Dayr az Zawr; the lifting of the siege and capture of the city; and the continuing advance south along the Middle Euphrates River Valley. Russian forces provided key enablers for all three phases, including close air support, ISR, and special operations.

Phase 1

Advance to Dayr az Zawr

The pro-regime offensive to Dayr az Zawr was launched along three axes: a northern prong along the western and

southern side of the Euphrates River Valley, spearheaded by Tiger Forces; a southern, Iranian-led prong along the Iraqi border; and the primary, central prong, led by Russian and Syrian forces pushing from Palmyra through the central Syrian Badiya desert, seizing key oil and gas fields. Russian airpower supported each prong, but Russian ground forces—including KSO, Spetsnaz, artillery and mine-clearing specialists, and PMCs—played the most prominent advisory and combat roles in the central prong.[82]

Military Objective: Beginning at T-4 air base in early 2017, pro-regime forces on the central axis first sought to recapture Palmyra, which was lost again to the Islamic State in December 2016, and then push east for 200 km along the M20 highway toward Dayr az Zawr.[83] The main intermediate objectives for Syrian and Russian forces after retaking Palmyra were to seize the crossroads town of Sukhna, located 70 km east of Palmyra, and the key oil and gas fields in the outlying areas of Homs Province. To enable the advance, Russian forces needed to rectify shortfalls in close air support capabilities displayed during the Islamic State's December assault, where poor intelligence and air-ground coordination prevented intensive Russian air operations from effectively countering highly mobile, well-armed Islamic State units.[84]

Operations: After deploying additional air, ground, and intelligence assets to T-4 after the fall of Aleppo, Syrian and Russian forces in early March began operations to retake Palmyra. Following heavy bombardment from Russian fixed-wing aircraft operating from Hmeimim, Russian Mi-28 and Kh-52 attack helicopters, assisted by Russian forward air controllers, neutralized Islamic State defensive positions and interdicted Islamic State fighting vehicles maneuvering around the city.[85]

Russian Spetsnaz advisers and PMCs working with Syrian army and 5th Assault Corps fighters then surrounded and began assaulting the city, leveraging Russian UAVs from T-4 to more quickly generate actionable intelligence for operations and seizing the city on March 2.[86] From Palmyra, Russian-led 5th Assault Corps units backed by Russian airpower moved to recapture key resources and infrastructure from the Islamic State, seizing the nearby Jazal gas fields in March and the major Al Shaer field in April after fierce battles.[87] Pro-regime troops then began the difficult push west up the M20, an area dominated by hills conducive to Islamic State guerilla attacks. These pro-regime forces needed a month to take the town of Arak, which was only 20 km northeast of Palmyra.[88]

In August, pro-regime troops finally reached Sukhna, weathering a major Islamic State counterattack to seize control of the strategically-located town.[89] Along with Iranian and Hezbollah commanders and Shia militia fighters arriving from successful operations along the southern axis, Russian Spetsnaz and Wagner mercenaries spearheaded 5th Assault Corps ground movements, enabled by intensive Russian fixed- and rotary-wing air support.[90] Russian air support proved vital in interdicting further Islamic State ground assaults, compelling fighters to begin falling back toward Dayr az Zawr.[91]

Result: With Sukhna retaken, pro-regime troops advanced along the M20 to the outskirts of Dayr az Zawr by early September to begin lifting the siege. They were joined by Tiger Forces from the northern axis and Iranian and Hezbollah-led Shia militia from the southern axis, after their successful, Russian airpower-enabled offensives along the southern and western sides of the Euphrates and along the Iraqi border.[92] Russia's forward deployment of Spetsnaz and PMC specialists had paid dividends, enabling more precise close air support and better air-ground integration, but came at a cost, with dozens of Russian personnel—including both regular military and PMCs—killed in the advance from T-4.[93]

Phase 2

Seizure of Dayr az Zawr

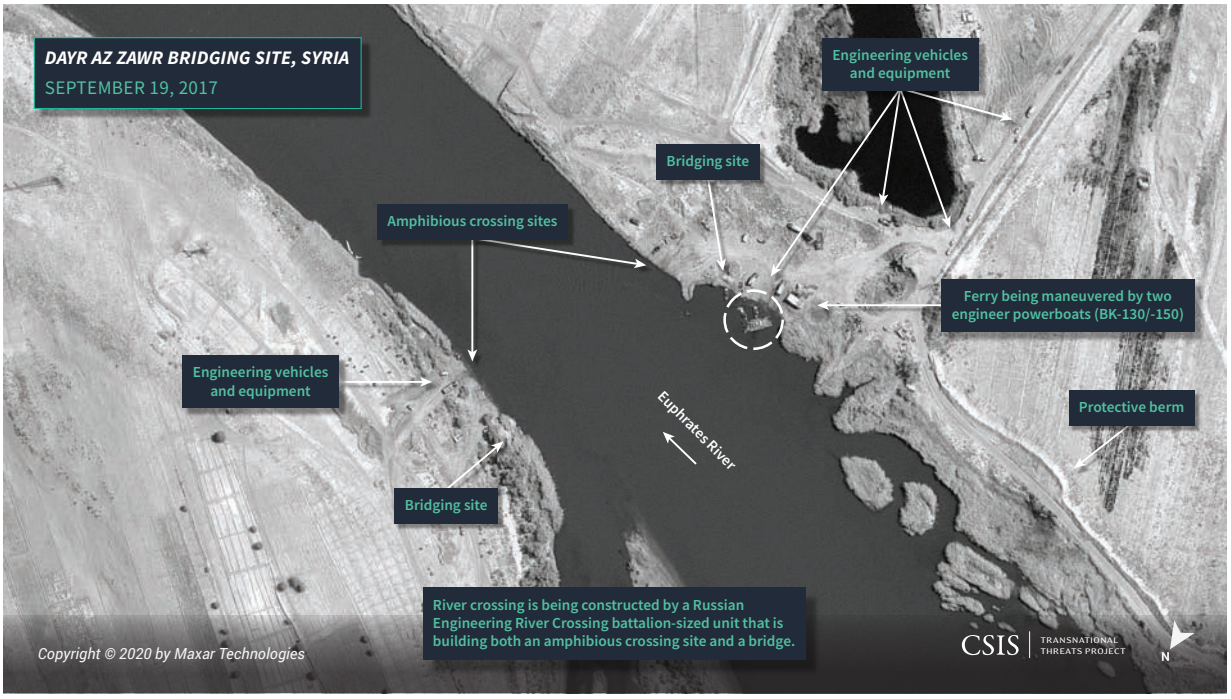
Military Objective: In early September 2017, the primary objective of pro-regime forces was to open a ground line of communication to besieged forces and regime-held districts in western Dayr az Zawr city—namely, the 137th Brigade base and neighboring districts in the northwest and Dayr az Zawr airfield in the southwest. Their goal was then to begin seizing

the rest of the city's Islamic State-held western bank. As the western sector was assaulted, other pro-regime forces then crossed the Euphrates to capture the eastern bank from Islamic State forces while simultaneously checking further advances by U.S.-backed SDF toward the city and nearby oil and gas fields from the north. The Russians provided key maneuver capabilities. Figures 3.6.1 and 3.6.2 provide imagery of a bridging site on the Euphrates River constructed by a battalion-sized Russian engineering unit. Between September 29 and October 5, 2017, the Russians constructed a treadway bridge. This bridging site and others were used by pro-regime units to move forces east to Dayr az Zawr.

For the assault on Dayr az Zawr, Russia surged more advanced strike aircraft into theater, including Su-34 fighter-bombers and MiG-29SMT multirole fighters, to enable the ground advance, assisted by Russian KSO and Spetsnaz to provide forward air control.[94] Russian special operations forces along with PMCs also directly advised and spearheaded Syrian army and 5th Assault Corps operations, joined by Tiger Forces, Hezbollah, and Shia militia fighters.[95] Russian engineers and counter-IED specialists provided additional combat service support.[96]

Operations: With intensive Russian air support, Syrian army forces reached the besieged 137th Brigade base on September 5, then pressed on to relieve adjoining regime-held districts in the city's northwest.[97] Facing heavy Islamic State counterattacks, including waves of suicide bombers, pro-regime troops then moved south to lift the siege of Dayr az Zawr airfield on September 9. These forces were supported by salvos of Kalibr cruise missile strikes launched from Grigorivich-class frigates in the Mediterranean.[98] With 30 Russian combat aircraft flying up to 100 strike missions per day—among the most intensive periods of strikes since the beginning of the Russian intervention—pro-regime troops were able to isolate Islamic State fighters into several pockets in the city and begin crossing to the east bank by mid-September.[99] Supported by Russian attack helicopters and long-endurance UAVs forward deployed to Dayr az Zawr airfield, pro-regime troops successfully crossed the Euphrates using Russian amphibious vehicles and Russia-engineered pontoon bridges on September 18.[100] They secured a bridgehead and began clearing Islamic State-

▼ **FIGURE 3.6.1**
Russian Forces Crossing the Euphrates, September 2017
SOURCE CSIS.



▲ **FIGURE 3.6.2**
Russian Forces Crossing the Euphrates, October 2017
SOURCE CSIS.

held areas on the east bank.[101] Pro-regime forces faced fierce Islamic State resistance on both the west and east banks through October.

On the western side, Tiger Forces with integrated Russian air support slowly cleared Islamic State positions neighborhood by neighborhood while also moving north and west along the Euphrates to clear the remaining Islamic State pockets which had been launching counterattacks on pro-regime supply lines.[102] On the eastern bank of the Euphrates, Syrian army, Hezbollah, and Shia militia forces receiving Russian logistical support from across the river cleared Islamic State-held neighborhoods but were stymied from further advances by Islamic State units reinforced by fighters falling back from the western bank. This resulted in pro-regime forces losing the race to the vital Conoco gas field to the U.S.-backed SDF in late September, which had been a strategic objective of the campaign.[103] By early November, pro-regime forces had retaken the eastern bank and western city center, with the city finally falling on November 17.[104]

Result: The Dayr az Zawr operation represented an unprecedented demonstration of the full Russian order-of-battle in Syria: special operations, intelligence, and combat support specialists; fixed-wing, attack helicopter, and reconnaissance aircraft; and long-range bombers and cruise missiles launched from ships offshore. In an effort to underscore growing Russian military might and parity with U.S. forces in Syria, the Russian Ministry of Defense for the first time in the war acknowledged and promoted the involvement of Russian special forces, broadcast video of Russian air and missile strikes, and embedded Russian and foreign journalists to document their operations.[105] However, Russia's forward deployment for the battle exposed its forces to heavy Islamic State resistance and counterattacks, killing dozens of PMCs and at least seven Russian regular soldiers. At least one senior officer, Lieutenant General Valery Asapov, commander of the Syrian 5th Assault Corps, was killed by Islamic State mortar fire in late September.[106] The Islamic State also continued to counterattack in the central and eastern Syrian desert throughout the Dayr az Zawr operation, including briefly retaking Sukhnah and Qaryatayn and inflicting casualties on pro-regime troops.[107]

While recapturing Dayr az Zawr in October, pro-regime forces simultaneously began the next phase of the eastern Syrian campaign and began pushing south down the Euphrates toward the Iraq border. The battle of Dayr az Zawr provided a preview of what became a defining objective and friction point during the so-called "Race for the Euphrates": fierce competition with the U.S.-backed SDF for control of vital oil and gas fields in the region. In response to a series of Russian and Syrian air and artillery strikes on SDF positions just several miles east of regime forces on the eastern bank and then on the SDF-controlled Conoco field in late September, U.S. coalition officials offered stern warnings to pro-regime forces to refrain from further encroachment.[108] This warning was not always heeded.

Phase 3

Race for the Euphrates

Military Objective: Using the retaken Dayr az Zawr airfield as the launching point, pro-regime forces in early October 2017 began the 130 km push south down the Euphrates River toward Abu Kamal. Dubbed "Operation Fajr III," the Russian and Iranian co-led offensive had three key goals.[109] The primary military objective was to clear the Islamic State from its final Syrian stronghold along the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV), particularly the town of Mayadin, where Islamic State leadership and elite fighting cadres had entrenched as Raqqa and Dayr az Zawr fell. Second, Iran prioritized gaining control of the Syria-Iraq border town of Abu Kamal before U.S.-backed forces to link its forces in Syria with those in Iraq and create a land corridor connecting Iran to Lebanon through Iraq and Syria.[110] Finally, pro-regime forces sought to extend the Assad regime's control and prevent further gains by the U.S.-backed SDF, particularly over the vital oil, gas, and infrastructure facilities in the MERV region. For the main assaults along the MERV, Russia's primary role was to provide airpower. By the end of November, Russia had deployed 41 combat aircraft to Syria—the high-water mark of the campaign—including attack helicopters stationed at Dayr az Zawr to provide direct ground support.[111]

Operations: Spearheaded by Iran, Hezbollah, and Tiger Forces, and with small contingents of Russian Spetsnaz and PMCs, pro-regime forces launched a two-pronged offensive from the north and west on Mayadeen, surrounding the town in early October.[112] Pro-regime troops seized Mayadeen in mid-October with heavy Russian fixed-wing strikes and attack helicopter close air support, assisted by a surge of Afghan and Pakistani Shia fighters under Iranian command. Tiger Forces consolidated further gains north along the Euphrates.[113] With Mayadeen retaken, pro-regime forces then moved to cross the Euphrates in an attempt to seize the critical Omar oil field on the eastern side of the river. Facing heavy Islamic State counterattacks, pro-regime troops were unable to seize the facility, which instead fell to the U.S.-backed SDF in late October.[114]

In early November, pro-regime troops began a two-pronged advance on Abu Kamal from Mayadeen in the north and the T-2 pumping station to the west near Iraq. They were joined by Shia militia from Iraq for the advance, including Katai'b Hezbollah.[115] With the IRGC-QF and Hezbollah in the lead (including direct planning and guidance from IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani), and Russian SOF embedded to orchestrate airstrikes, Abu Kamal fell to the joint force on November 9.[116] However, Islamic State sleeper cells in the city and waves of frontal assaults on pro-regime positions enabled the group to retake control the following week.[117] But Russian forces were able to interdict further Islamic State reinforcements and enable pro-regime troops to recapture Abu Kamal on November 19. They leveraged forward-deployed strike aircraft and heavy out-of-area assets, including Tu-22M3 strategic bombers from Russia and Kalibr strikes from the Mediterranean.[118]

With the Islamic State's last urban redoubt retaken, pro-regime forces and the U.S.-backed SDF settled into a period of competition in late 2017 and early 2018, conducting raids against Islamic State-held villages in Dayr az Zawr Province while jockeying for further tactical gains along the MERV. Pro-regime ground forces and Russian and Syrian aircraft had begun routinely

crossing east over the Euphrates River, which the U.S. and Russian militaries had negotiated in November as a dividing line between their respective coalitions.[119] Probably motivated by a desire to test U.S. resolve to defend the SDF and by Russian PMCs seeking to gain contracts to defend regime oil and gas fields, Wagner Group and pro-regime forces in late January 2018 began planning an assault on Conoco plant east of Dayr az Zawr, held by the SDF and a small contingent of U.S. special operations forces.[120] In early February, Wagner units, 5th Assault Corps, and other Syrian and foreign Shia militia began massing armored vehicles, artillery, and hundreds of fighters in Dayr az Zawr. On the night of February 7, they crossed to the eastern side of the MERV to begin the assault using Russian pontoon bridges.[121]

After repeated U.S. warnings to the Russian military through their deconfliction line and Russian disavowals of having forces present, around 500 Wagner-led fighters advanced toward the Conoco facility under supporting fires from artillery, tanks, mortars, and multiple-launch rocket systems.[122] In a fierce hours-long firefight, heavy U.S. air and artillery strikes pinned down pro-regime forces near the town of Khasham and devastated the assault force, with estimates of Russian PMC casualties ranging from 100 to 300 killed.[123] The remaining Russian and pro-regime fighters withdrew west across the river during the early morning of February 8.[124]

Result: By early 2018, pro-regime forces had successfully expelled the Islamic State from the key cities and terrain on the western banks of the MERV, benefiting from the U.S. and coalition counterterrorism efforts across the river. Russian air and ground activity became centered primarily around Dayr az Zawr and consolidated regime control there. Iranian-led militia forces took the lead in stabilizing Abu Kamal. While denying any Russian involvement in the February 7 attack, Russian attempts—official or unofficial—to cross the Euphrates largely ceased throughout 2018.

Campaign Assessment

Russian airpower and on-the-ground training, advising, and enabling play a central and crucial role in the pro-regime campaign into central and eastern Syria from 2017 to 2018, successfully clearing the Islamic State from key terrain in central Syria, retaking Dayr az Zawr, and establishing regime-control along the western side of MERV to the Iraq border. Russia developed an effective task organization with Iran for the campaign—Russia leading the central prong, Iran leading the southern prong—and then integrated forces when needed for key operations such as the seizures of Dayr az Zawr and Abu Kamal. Russian forces had gained valuable experience in conducting urban warfare in Aleppo in 2016 and then improved their rural warfare skills against a well-armed, mobile enemy in the desert. Those skills include improved—though still imperfect—air-ground integration enabled through forward air controllers and aerial ISR platforms; the embedding of KSO and Spetsnaz for improved operational and tactical planning and directed fire support for their coalition partners and local militia; and the use of PMCs such as the Wagner Group to replicate some special operations missions while taking on more high-risk ones, such as pressuring U.S.-backed SDF.

The eastern campaign also solidified for the Russian military the Syrian partners whom they would train, advise, and assist in future operations: Tiger Forces and the 5th Assault Corps.[125] With Russian KSO and Spetsnaz embedded with Colonel Hassan's Tiger Forces and PMCs leading the array of Syrian militias under 5th Assault Corps, Russian forces played a critical role in the next major pro-regime offensive of the Syrian Civil War: the seizure of eastern Ghouta and the Damascus suburbs in spring 2018.[126] Beginning in February 2018, devasting Russian and regime airstrikes enabled pro-regime ground troops to isolate and capture remaining rebel-held pockets east of Damascus.[127] Aided by Russian advisers in an eastern Ghouta command center and armed with Russian T-90 tanks, BM-30 Smerch multiple rocket launchers, and Tochka ballistic missiles, Colonel Hassan's Tiger Forces spearheaded the assault on rebel neighborhoods. They retook the area by April.[128]

By the fall of 2018, southern Syria fell back to full regime control with the surrender of Daraa city—the birthplace

of the Syrian uprising—after the withdrawal of foreign support to the opposition and a short Russian air-backed Syrian offensive retaking Daraa and Quneitra Province.[129] Three years after Russia's military intervention into the Syrian war, the Assad regime and its partners had retaken all of Syria along the country's western corridor. The remaining opposition and extremist forces were contained in Idlib Province. At the same time, key cities and infrastructure in central and eastern Syria had been reclaimed from the Islamic State—which would meet its military defeat by U.S. coalition and SDF fighters in Baghouz in early 2019—eliminating the last remaining threat to the stability of the Damascus government.

Current and Future Operations

The Russian military is well-positioned to sustain its footprint of 3,000 to 4,000 forces, with staunch support from the Damascus government; expand and improve ports and basing at Tartus, Hmeimim, and T-4; and develop partnerships with Syrian army and militia forces on the ground. Continuing Russian operations will likely focus on two key areas: Idlib Province, for perhaps the Assad regime's final offensive of the Syrian Civil War, and northeast Syria, where Russian and regime forces have stepped in following the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the invasion of Turkish forces in the fall of 2019. Both operations face significant challenges.

Idlib

Russian and Syrian attention in 2018 turned to Idlib Province and the adjoining areas in Hama and Aleppo Provinces still under opposition control. Pro-regime forces faced a well-armed and highly motivated force in Greater Idlib, which was increasingly dominated by hardliners and Salafi extremist forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). With minimal assistance from Iran and Hezbollah, who sought to downsize their Syrian cadres and viewed Idlib as a lesser strategic priority than areas near Iraq and Lebanon, it fell to Syrian regime and Russian forces to spearhead the offensive in spring 2019.[130] As Syrian army units struggled to make significant progress on the ground, Russia deployed special operations and PMC units to the frontlines to assist and enable their closest partners, the Tiger Forces, which deployed to Idlib after the eastern Ghouta offensive, and the 5th Assault Corps, which were backed by heavy Russian airstrikes.[131]

After months of stalemate, the deployment of Russian special forces, PMCs, Shia militia reinforcements sent by Iran, and persistent airstrikes began to show dividends. Pro-regime forces captured the key rebel town of Khan Sheikoun in September 2019.[132] Syrian forces renewed their assault in December, with Tiger Forces supplied with Russian T-90 tanks and other sophisticated artillery and rocket systems seizing several dozen villages amid heavy Russian strikes on the opposition strongholds Maarat al-Numan and Saraqeb. In early 2020, Russian and Syrian forces with Iranian and Hezbollah support pressed deeper into Idlib, aiming to seize the vital M5 north-south highway connecting Damascus to Aleppo and the M4 east-west highway connecting Latakia to Aleppo and further to northeast Syria and the Iraqi border.[133]

Northeast Syria

Russia also expanded its presence in northeast Syria in the wake of the U.S. drawdown and Turkish invasion of the area in the fall of 2019. Aiming to help reassert the Assad regime's writ in SDF-held areas while enjoying the optics of the assertion of Russian power while the U.S. withdrew, Russian forces moved quickly to take U.S.-vacated facilities and check further Turkish advances.[134] In October, Russia deployed several hundred additional troops, primarily military police, to the area and conducted joint patrols with Turkish forces, according to their negotiated deal to police the area.[135] In November, the Russian military established a new rotary-wing headquarters base at Qamishli International Airport—close to remaining U.S. forces—and reinforced its position with advanced air defense systems, further constraining U.S. freedom of movement.[136] The Russian military continued to occupy strategic and symbolic bases that were vital

to the U.S. and coalition campaign, including bases in Kobani, Manbij, and Raqqa.[137]

Outlook

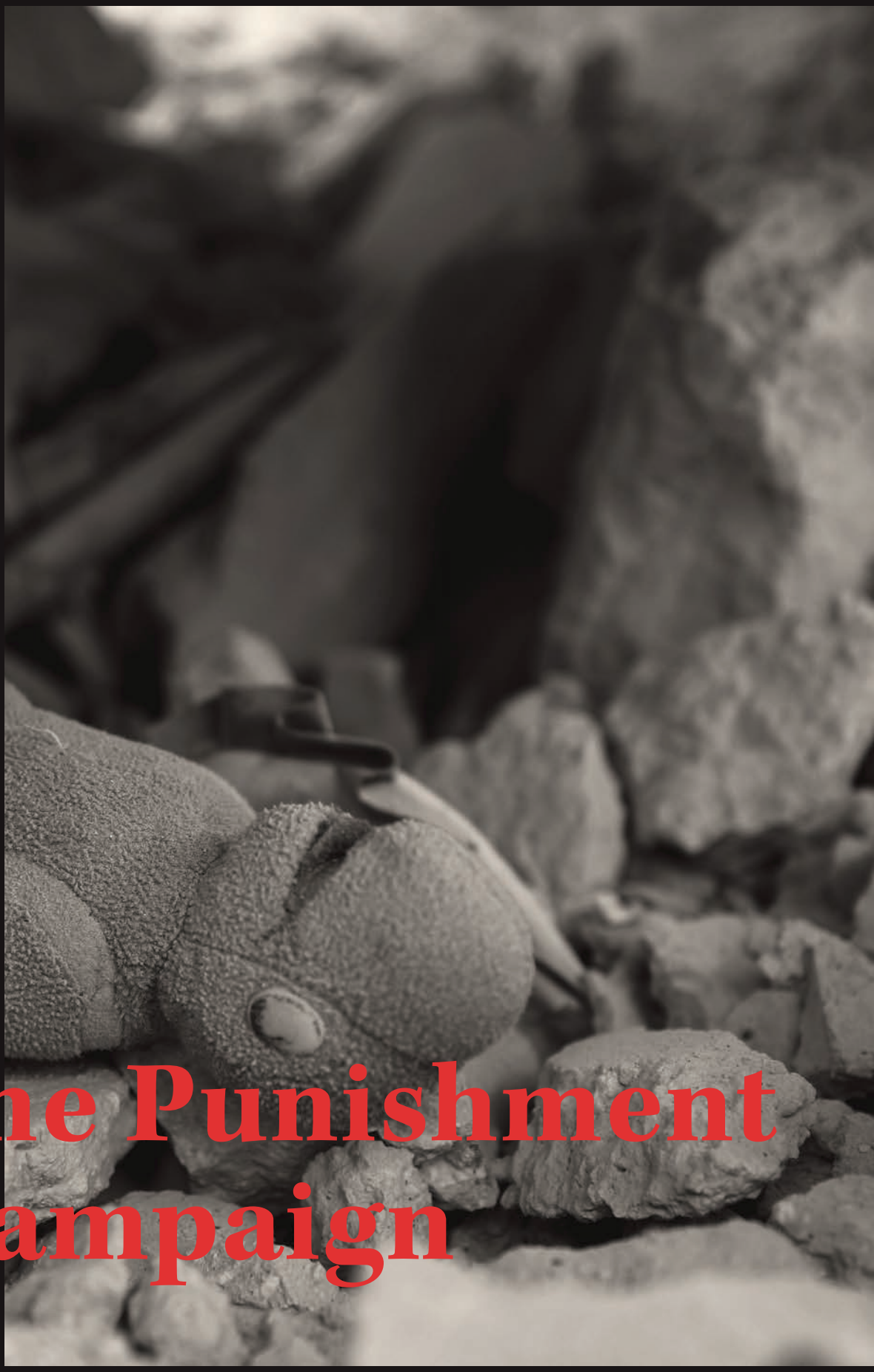
Russia will likely sustain its military footprint and operations in Syria for the foreseeable future, with staunch support from the Assad regime and long-term naval and air basing for Russian forces. Having acquired committed local fighting partners and established logistics lines through its military campaign thus far, Russia in the near-term will be able to continue to provide limited but critical enabling support to pro-regime forces against remaining opposition groups, with sufficient air and ground assets for battlefield needs. In the longer term, Moscow will likely focus its enduring presence on securing core Russian security interests, such as the stability of the Damascus government and Russian basing in western Syria. The sustainability of a long-term Russian deployment in Syria, however, will face several key challenges.

First is a resurgent Islamic State. Despite the military defeat of the territorial caliphate, the Islamic State has already begun reemerging as an insurgency in eastern and central Syria. Russian forces in the short-term will likely confront increasing Islamic State guerilla attacks on pro-regime bases, oil and gas facilities, and vulnerable populated areas in central Syria. If ineffectively countered, Russia and the Assad regime will likely face an extremist-led, perhaps ascendant insurgency in eastern Syria for years to come. As Islamic State forces gain further strength, Russian forces may face attempted assaults in western Syria. In the northeast, pressure on the Islamic State may decrease with the withdrawal of U.S.-led coalition forces and an SDF that has to counter Turkish forces. If the Islamic State is able to resurge, Russian forces may decide to become more directly involved in the fighting.

The second challenge for Russia is persistent instability. While the key cities in western Syria have fallen back under the authority of the Damascus government, pro-regime forces are likely to face continuing and widespread discontent as they attempt to forcefully reassert control. Southern Syria is already seeing signs of a low-burning insurgency fueled by former oppositionists and extremist forces—conditions which are likely to be replicated in Idlib Province after the offensive. Pro-regime forces may face similar stability challenges in northeast Syria, where restive Sunni Arab populations who previously rebelled against the Assad regime may not welcome its return. Russian command will likely face continuing requests from the regime for Russian military support for these operations.

A third challenge is uncertain allies. While facing continual terrorism and instability challenges, Russia may also face the reality of a still-decimated Syrian army and local militia partners who are dependent on Russian support, creating a continuing demand for Russian deployments. Moreover, unlike the key campaign of the civil war and against the Islamic State in eastern Syria, Russia will likely have less support from Iran and Hezbollah, who each seek to maintain an enduring but scaled-down presence in Syria as tensions escalate with the United States and Israel.

Chapter 04



The Punishment Campaign

A toy lies amongst the rubble of a building destroyed by a reported Russian airstike on al-Barra in Syria's northern Idlib province.
SOURCE Omar Haj Kadour/AFP/Getty Images

Danika Newlee

This chapter examines Russia's targeting of civilians in Syria from its intervention in September 2015 through early March 2020. It asks three questions. First, why did Russia implement a punishment campaign? Second, which tactics did Russia use to harm civilian populations in pursuit of its objectives? And finally, what are the implications of this campaign on Russia's ability to achieve its foreign policy goals in the future?

The chapter argues that Russia not only sought to eliminate the Syrian regime's armed opposition, but it also used punishment to escalate the costs to the population and undermine support for the opposition. The most visible element of this punishment campaign was what this chapter refers to as "direct punishment." This type of punishment was marked by large-scale attacks against civilian and humanitarian infrastructure in an attempt to deny resources—including food, fuel, and medical aid—to the opposition while simultaneously eroding the will of civilians to support opposition groups. At the same time, Russia conducted an "indirect punishment" campaign using both diplomacy and disinformation to target Syria's civilian population. This indirect campaign attempted to deflect blame for Russian and regime attacks against civilian infrastructure, undermine international efforts to hold the Assad regime accountable for abuses, and legitimize an ever-widening civilian target set. Over time, the direct and indirect campaigns became synergistic, as their effects compounded each other to achieve regime goals such as retaking opposition-held territory.

The primary tactics Russia used against civilians in the direct punishment campaign were airstrikes, which were often conducted using munitions to increase infrastructure damage. The indirect campaign, on the other hand, relied on a combination of overt diplomatic

actions—such as vetoing UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions—and information warfare conducted by a range of official government outlets and unofficial social media accounts. In order to examine this behavior, this chapter compiled a data set from sources such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, AirWars, and Physicians for Human Rights, all of which closely tracked attacks on civilians throughout the Syrian conflict. It also combined original satellite imagery analysis with qualitative reporting from Bellingcat, the Syrian Civil Defence, and various investigative journalists in an attempt to resolve the attribution issues inherent to this conflict. The case studies and casualty statistics in this chapter refer only to instances where it can be reasonably assessed that civilians were the *target*, not just collateral damage. Attacks on military targets that also caused civilian casualties were common throughout this conflict but were not addressed as part of the punishment campaign.

The rest of this chapter is divided into three sections. The first analyzes Russia's direct punishment campaign against three key civilian target sets: medical facilities; other civilian infrastructure, which includes attacks on schools, markets, and agriculture; and humanitarian infrastructure, including aid convoys and camps housing internally displaced persons (IDPs). The second section examines the indirect punishment campaign, including Russian diplomatic actions and broad-based disinformation efforts. The final section concludes with an analysis of the international response to Russia's punishment campaign and the implications for Russian statecraft going forward.

Direct Punishment: Russian Strikes against Civilian Targets

Russia's strategy against Syrian civilians—attacking them *en masse* in order to instill fear, erode support for the opposition, and eventually force reconciliation with the regime—was by no means new. As noted in Chapter 2, Russia utilized punishment strategies in similar campaigns, such as Chechnya. In October 2016, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry accused Russia of pursuing a "Grozny solution" in Syria.[1] Rather than attempting to deny the atrocities being conducted in Aleppo or counter international outrage, the Russian embassy responded with a tweet: "#Grozny today is a peaceful, modern, and thriving city. Ain't that a solution we're all looking for?"[2]

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), Russia was responsible for 8,289 civilian deaths in the first four years of its campaign in Syria, with nearly 2,000 of those under the age of 18.[3] These deaths were not mere collateral damage but frequently the intended result of direct strikes on civilian infrastructure. From September 2015 through early 2020, Russian airstrikes targeted hospitals, schools, and markets as well as IDP camps and humanitarian aid convoys. Perhaps even more disturbing than the target set were the tactics used against them. Beginning in at least 2016, Russian forces frequently used cluster munitions and incendiary weapons containing thermite and other flammable substances against civilian targets.[4] The following sections examine Russia's direct targeting of civilians—including civilian infrastructure—in more depth.

Attacks on Medical Facilities

The most well-documented category of Russian strikes against civilian infrastructure were those targeting hospitals and other medical facilities. Russian forces did not pioneer these types of attacks. Healthcare was "weaponized" in Syria as early as 2011, when regime forces seized Daraa National Hospital to prevent the treatment of opposition forces, and quickly escalated into direct attacks—often airstrikes—by the regime and its allies on medical facilities and personnel.[5] Russia's entry into the conflict escalated the situation still further, however, with attacks on healthcare facilities increasing in frequency beginning in October 2015.[6] According to Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), 595 attacks took place on 350 separate medical facilities, killing a total of 923 medical personnel from

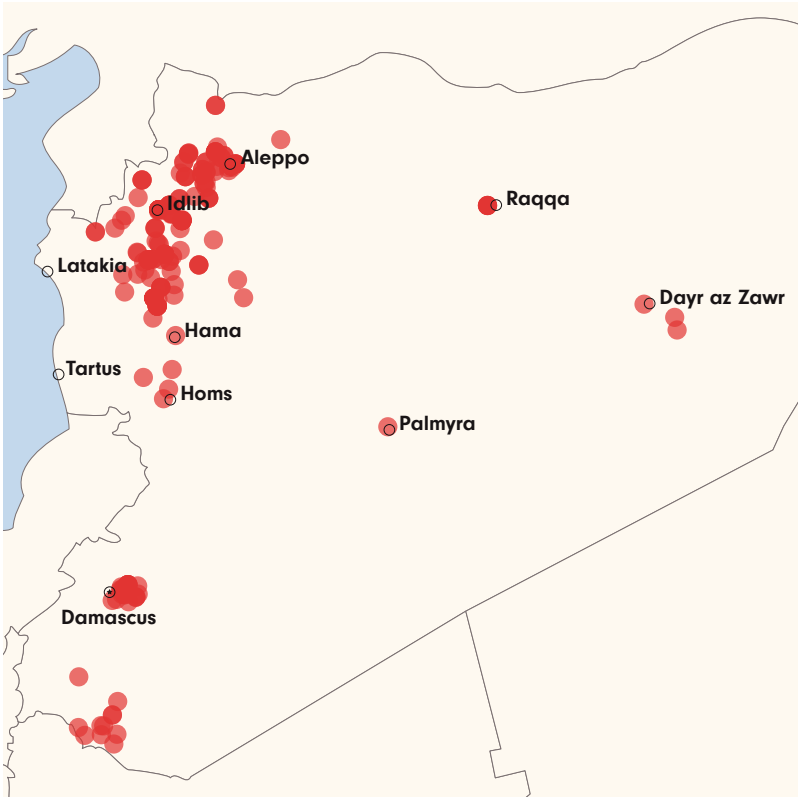


FIGURE 4.1 Attacks on Medical Facilities Likely Conducted or Supported by Russian Forces, September 2015–March 2020

SOURCE CSIS data set compiled for this report, drawing from various sources including AirWars, https://airwars.org/, and Physicians for Human Rights, http://syriamap.phr.org/#/en.

March 2011 through February 2020. Additionally, PHR estimates that the regime and its Russian allies used indiscriminate weapons, including barrel bombs and cluster munitions, in at least 83 attacks on medical facilities.[7] A map of all medical attacks attributed to Russia is shown in Figure 4.1.

In many cases, strikes on hospitals were used in tandem with siege warfare to force more rapid capitulation of the population in opposition-held areas. In August 2016, for example, four years of battle in Daraya came to a close when the civilian population finally agreed to evacuate just one week after the town's last hospital was destroyed by incendiary bombs.[8] That same year, the regime and its allies implemented this strategy on a much larger scale during their battle to retake Aleppo.[9] According to the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), of the 172 pro-regime attacks on hospitals across Syria between June and December of 2016, 73 were recorded in the opposition-held half of Aleppo alone—an average of one strike every three days.[10] As East Aleppo only had 27 hospitals and medical clinics to begin with (of which only 14 were open and had doctors on staff), many facilities were struck multiple times, leading to extended closures and widespread panic among the city's civilians.[11] Though hospital strikes were not the only factor behind the city's eventual surrender, as discussed in Chapter 3, evacuations began from the final pocket of opposition in December 2016—with many civilian survivors in "desperate condition" from untreated wounds and trauma.[12]

Attacks on hospitals largely declined across Syria in 2019, with one significant exception—Idlib Province, where the regime and its Russian allies continued to assault the last stronghold of the Syrian opposition. According to SAMS President Ahmad Tarakji, hospital targeting in Idlib from 2019 to early 2020 *increased* following the pattern set in Aleppo in 2016, where the regime's overarching goal was to displace the population and destabilize the community.[13] In November 2019, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights spokesman Rupert Colville claimed that 61 medical facilities in Idlib were attacked in just six months and that the large-scale nature of the strikes "strongly suggests" that targeting hospitals was a deliberate choice by the regime and its Russian allies.[14] A *New York Times* investigation went a step further, attributing four hospital attacks in May 2019 to Russia, offering evidence from flight spotter logs, video recordings, and intercepted Russian air force radio transmissions. Two of the hospitals mentioned in that report, Nabad al Hayat and Kafr Nabl, had recently relocated to underground complexes in an attempt

to harden themselves against airstrikes. On May 5, both facilities were bombed multiple times, causing significant damage and several fatalities.[15] Such attacks continued across Idlib through the end of 2019. Kafr Nabl, for example, was struck again in July 2019 and a third time on November 6, 2019, while other hospitals remained similarly incapacitated.[16]

These attacks were illegal under international law. Article 18 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, enacted in 1949, notes that civilian hospitals "may in no circumstances be the object of attack."[17] In May 2016, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2286, which condemned attacks against medical facilities and personnel and demanded an end to impunity for those responsible.[18] But these attacks did not end. In September 2019, a report by the UN's Human Rights Council suggested that pro-government forces (including Russian units) "systematically targeted medical facilities" in Syria, which "may amount to the war crime of deliberately attacking protected objects and intentionally attacking medical personnel."[19] Many of the medical facilities hit in early 2019—including all four of those mentioned in the *New York Times* investigation above—had supplied their coordinates to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for deconfliction, prompting UN Secretary General António Guterres to authorize an investigation in August 2019 to determine whether Russian forces were deliberately using the coordinates to target civilian facilities. The likelihood of Russia suffering consequences for its attacks on medical facilities steadily decreased over time as Russia used its position on the UNSC to limit the scope of the inquiry.[20]

Attacks on Other Civilian Targets

Though there was far less international coverage of strikes on civilian infrastructure outside of medical facilities, Russian forces attacked other civilian targets regularly throughout their campaign in Syria. According to a data set compiled by CSIS for this report, there were at least 108 incidents of Russian airstrikes directly targeting civilian facilities—including schools, markets, and mosques—from September 2015 through March 2020.[21] This number counts instances where Russian planes "double-tapped," or struck a single target more than once in a short time frame, as one strike. Double-tapping happened with alarming frequency during the war, which increased both the lethality of attacks and the scale of destruction. Several of the 108 incidents also contained multiple targets. Bombings struck approximately 40 popular markets and shops, 41 schools, and 36 mosques while simultaneously inflicting damage to residential homes and apartments in the surrounding neighborhoods.[22]

Given the limited coverage and difficulties in attribution of attacks against civilian infrastructure, it is likely that the actual number of incidents during this time period was far higher. A report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, submitted to the UN's Human Rights Council in August 2019, suggested that pro-government forces attacked some 70 schools in Idlib Province *alone* from January through July of 2019.[23] While the report did not attribute any of these attacks directly to Russia, the tactics detailed in several of its case studies match those of previous Russian strikes. For example, on May 14, 2019, a fish market and primary school for girls in Jisr al-Shughur were hit nearly simultaneously. Three successive missiles struck the market first, destroying shops and killing at least eight civilians, followed by a fourth strike on the school just minutes later. The same report also noted that pro-government forces set fire to "tens of thousands of acres" of vital crops and farmland using incendiary weapons.[24]

Attacks on Humanitarian Infrastructure

The final set of targets in Russia's direct punishment campaign were those relating to humanitarian aid, including IDP camps and convoys bringing food or fuel to opposition-controlled areas. The first category, IDP camps, were struck frequently from October 2015 through February 2020, with over 46 such attacks attributed to Russia in the CSIS data set. These attacks occurred

▲ **FIGURE 4.2.1** Image of Kafr Nabl Surgical Hospital Before Russian May 2019 Attack

SOURCE CSIS.

▲ **FIGURE 4.2.2** Image of Kafr Nabl Surgical Hospital After Russian May 2019 Attack

SOURCE CSIS.

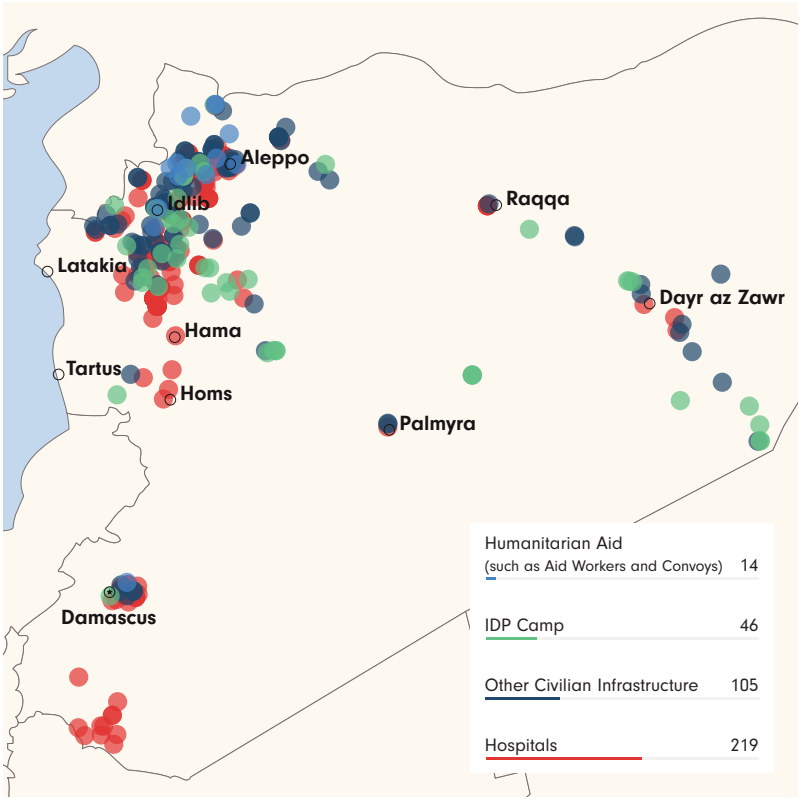


FIGURE 4.3 Attacks on Civilian Targets Likely Conducted or Supported by Russian Forces, September 2015–March 2020

SOURCE CSIS data set compiled for this report, drawing from various sources including AirWars, https://airwars.org/, and Physicians for Human Rights, http://syriamap.phr.org/#/en.

across Syria, with multiple strikes on camps in Aleppo, Damascus, Dayr az Zawr, Hama, Homs, Idlib, and Raqqa Provinces.[25] Many of these attacks reportedly utilized cluster and incendiary munitions and caused high casualties on Syrians forced from their homes by the war, including many women and children. Unlike strikes on hospitals, markets, and schools, which provide a tangible benefit for the regime by depriving opposition areas of the *resources* necessary to fight, Russia's strikes on IDP camps appeared to be part of a psychological strategy to deprive civilians of their *will* to provide support to the opposition. This was evidenced by attack trends during the later stages of the Russian campaign, which showed that Idlib bore the brunt of IDP-directed violence from mid-2019 onward. For example, 19 people were killed in an attack on a compound in Haas in August 2019, and at least 22 more were killed in two attacks on camps in Maaret al-Numan and Qah in November 2019.[26] Idlib's significance as an opposition stronghold increased the likelihood that Russian forces would conduct these types of attacks to erode the resolve of the population, as they had done across Syria since 2015.

Though the CSIS data set suggests significantly fewer attacks took place against humanitarian aid convoys than against IDP camps, those attacks were still important because of their impact on besieged populations. The first such attack attributed to Russia took place on November 25, 2015, when Russian airstrikes hit a Turkish aid convoy taking supplies to refugees in Azaz, a town situated near the Turkish-Syrian border in Aleppo Province.[27] Attacks on aid convoys escalated in late 2015, largely concentrated in northern Syria along the Turkish border. After a slight decline in attacks in early 2016, violence against aid convoys ramped up again once the regime's final offensive against Aleppo began.

Perhaps the best-known strike against a humanitarian aid convoy occurred in September 2016. Russian forces repeatedly struck a Syrian Arab Red Crescent convoy along Highway 60 outside of Aleppo, killing at least 20 civilians (including Omar Barakat, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent's director in Urum al-Kubra) and destroying 18 trucks containing aid.[28] Though Russia's Ministry of Defense denied involvement, a *Washington Post* investigation shortly thereafter linked the attack to two Russian Su-24 bombers that were tracked from Hmeimim air base to Aleppo that evening.[29] The goal of this attack, like all of Russia's strikes against humanitarian targets in Syria, was likely to amplify the effectiveness of the regime's siege by preventing food, medicine, or fuel from reaching opposition areas, thus effectively starving out the population and forcing their

surrender. While intentionally attacking humanitarian relief targets and personnel is a war crime, Russia did not suffer any tangible consequences.[30]

Indirect Punishment: Facilitating and Legitimizing Regime Abuses

In addition to its own attacks against civilians, Russia expended significant effort to ensure that the Assad regime could operate freely against the opposition. The following sections examine how Russia provided diplomatic cover for regime atrocities through its actions at the UNSC while simultaneously conducting a disinformation campaign aimed at denying some abuses, legitimizing others, and attempting to undermine the Western narrative of the Syrian conflict.

Provision of Diplomatic Cover

Russia's status as a permanent member of the UNSC enabled it to block at least 14 separate international attempts to condemn and punish the Assad regime's human rights violations throughout the conflict, thus allowing the regime to continue targeting citizens with impunity. Figure 4.4 provides a timeline of these vetoes.

Russia's often unilateral UNSC actions can be grouped into three categories. The first category was mostly symbolic: helping the Assad regime avoid official international condemnation and retaliatory measures, including sanctions and referrals to the International Criminal Court (ICC). Russia used its veto power for this purpose at least four times early in the conflict. Though Russia succeeded at limiting multilateral actions against Assad, the United States and other countries still imposed unilateral sanctions. Meanwhile, U.S. officials and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights objected to Syrian human rights abuses in the media and other public forums.[31]

The second category of Russian vetoes can be broadly conceptualized as blocking resolutions which would benefit Syrian civilians in terms that were unfavorable to Russian interests. This included vetoing ceasefires—including two resolutions regarding a truce in Aleppo in 2016 and one regarding Idlib in September 2019—and limiting cross-border aid deliveries from Turkey and Iraq in December 2019.

The final category included Russia's six successive vetoes through 2017 and 2018 relating to chemical weapons use by the Assad regime. Prior to 2017, Russia had—at least in its public statements and UNSC votes—portrayed itself as opposing chemical weapons use in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov took an active role in establishing a plan to secure and eliminate Assad's chemical weapons stockpile in 2013. After chemical attacks continued in 2015, Russia voted to adopt UNSC Resolutions 2209 and 2235, which condemned the use of chemical weapons in Syria and established the Joint Investigative Mechanism of the United Nations and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW-UN JIM) to determine the responsible parties.[32] However, once the OPCW-UN JIM began releasing reports attributing blame to the Syrian government for chemical weapons attacks, Russia quickly shifted gears. In early 2017, it vetoed Western efforts to impose sanctions on the Assad regime for previous chemical weapons use. After a sarin attack in Khan Sheikhoun in April 2017, Russia vetoed a resolution demanding that the Syrian government cooperate with an investigation into that attack. In the final months of 2017, Russia vetoed three successive resolutions attempting to extend the mandate of the OPCW-UN JIM. And in April 2018, after the regime conducted another chemical attack in Douma, Russia blocked the creation of a new investigative mechanism to determine responsibility. As a result, the Assad regime was largely shielded from retribution for its chemical weapons use, and it continued to use chlorine and sarin in indiscriminate attacks against civilians through 2019. The United States conducted a limited strike against Syrian targets in April 2018 in retaliation for the Douma chemical attack, but it did not deter future Syrian actions.

Date	Resolution	Overview
October 4, 2011	S/2011/612	Russia vetoes a proposed UN resolution condemning grave human rights violations in Syria and threatening measures against President Bashar al-Assad's government.
February 4, 2012	S/2012/77	Russia vetoes a draft resolution that condemns a Syrian government crackdown on the opposition.
July 19, 2012	S/2012/538	Russia vetoes a Western-backed resolution that threatens Syria with sanctions if it does not stop using heavy weapons.
May 22, 2014	S/2014/348	Russia vetoes a French-drafted proposal for the UNSC to refer Syrian crimes to the International Criminal Court (ICC).
October 8, 2016	S/2016/846	Russia vetoes a text proposed by France and Spain to halt the bombing of Aleppo after presenting a rival draft that urged a ceasefire but made no mention of barring military flights over the city.
December 5, 2016	S/2016/1026	Russia vetoes a resolution that calls for a truce in Aleppo.
February 28, 2017	S/2017/172	Russia vetoes a resolution drafted by Britain, France, and the United States that would have imposed sanctions on Syria over chemical weapons use in the conflict.
April 12, 2017	S/2017/315	Russia vetoes a draft resolution demanding that President Bashar al-Assad's government cooperate with an investigation into the deadly chemical attack in the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun in April.
October 24, 2017	S/2017/884	Russia vetoes a resolution to extend the mandate of the OPCW-UN JIM, the body responsible for determining the culpable actor for chemical weapons attacks in Syria, for another year before it expires on November 17.
November 16, 2017	S/2017/962	The mandate of the OPCW-UN JIM expired after both resolutions introduced at the USNC to extend it failed. The resolution sponsored by the United States received 11 votes in favor, 2 against, and 2 abstentions and failed because Russia vetoed it. The Russian resolution received 4 votes in favor, 7 against, and 4 abstentions.
November 17, 2017	S/2017/970	Russia vetoes a UNSC resolution introduced by Japan to extend the JIM's mandate for 30 days.
April 10, 2018	S/2018/321	Russia vetoes a U.S.-sponsored resolution which would have created a UN Independent Mechanism of Investigation with a one-year mandate to investigate the responsible actors for chemical weapons use in Syria.
September 19, 2019	S/2019/756	Russia vetoes a demand for a truce in northwest Syria because it does not include an exemption for military offensives against UN blacklisted militant groups.
December 20, 2019	S/2019/961	Russia vetoes a resolution to allow cross-border aid deliveries from two locations in Turkey and one in Iraq into Syria for 12 months.

▲ **FIGURE 4.4** Russian UNSC Vetoes, 2011 to 2019

SOURCE "Security Council – Quick Links," United Nations Security Council, http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick/meetings/.

The Disinformation Campaign

In tandem with its diplomatic efforts, Russia also conducted a wide-ranging and pervasive disinformation campaign regarding human rights abuses throughout the conflict. This campaign had several objectives: deflecting blame for Russian and regime attacks against civilian infrastructure; broadening the regime's legitimate target set; and undermining efforts by Western media and NGOs to provide accurate reporting of the situation on the ground. This campaign was largely conducted by official government outlets, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and state media companies RT and Sputnik. Its targets included Western journalists, non-governmental organizations, and often the Syrian people themselves, including refugees in surrounding countries. The following sections analyze the tactics used in the pursuit of each campaign objective.

Deflecting Blame for Attacks Against Civilian Targets: To achieve this first goal, Russia generally opted for one of two courses of action. In most instances, the MoD simply issued a categorical denial, often based on impossible-to-substantiate falsehoods. When countering reports of civilians targeted in Idlib, for example, the MoD claimed that "the Russian air force was not carrying out any missions in this part of Syria" despite evidence to the contrary.[33] In instances where attacks drew significant international criticism or media coverage, however, Russia tended to bolster its denials with fabricated evidence to "prove" that its forces were not the perpetrators. In some cases, Russia used this evidence to claim that an attack did not happen at all. After one hospital bombing in 2016, for example, an MoD spokesman presented satellite imagery showing no damage to the hospital in question.[34] However, an open-source investigation conducted shortly after the incident suggested that the hospital was damaged extensively and that the imagery released publicly by the Russian MoD was either altered or taken prior to the attack.[35]

More frequently, however, Russia falsely attributed its attacks to non-regime actors. In April 2018, for example, Lavrov called the regime's chemical attack in Douma a "fabrication." But when international outrage increased, the MoD presented statements purportedly from medics at Douma's hospital which blamed Britain for the attack instead.[36] In response to the humanitarian aid convoy attack in September 2016, MoD officials first denied responsibility. They then claimed a U.S. Predator drone had been present shortly before the attack, released an interview with an "expert" claiming to have evidence that rebels were responsible for the attack, and finally released a drone video supposedly depicting armed terrorists as part of the convoy.[37]

Legitimizing Indiscriminate Violence by the Regime and Russian Forces: To achieve its second goal, Russian outlets undertook a concerted campaign to militarize the victims and the witnesses of the atrocities. In the early days of the campaign, the MoD published videos of its airstrikes on its official YouTube channel, many of which—five out of every six, according to one investigation—were falsely labeled as attacks on "terrorist infrastructure." Instead, they appeared to target towns or facilities used and inhabited by civilians.[38] Meanwhile, Russian rhetoric consistently claimed that Syria's moderate opposition was "allied" with terrorist organizations (including the Islamic State, the Nusrah Front, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham) in order to justify increasingly brutal tactics against them and legitimize even wider swaths of territory as "terrorist strongholds."[39]

Russia also conducted a disinformation campaign against the Syrian Civil Defence, or "White Helmets." Throughout the conflict, the White Helmets played a role as search-and-rescue volunteers in areas targeted by the regime and its allies, saving thousands of civilians while also documenting the worst human rights abuses. For example, the White Helmets publicly released footage of the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack. The Russian government's campaign against the White Helmets began as early as 2015. By 2017, RT and Sputnik—along with thousands of bots and "sock puppet" accounts, which post under multiple fake

identities controlled by a single user—were promoting a narrative that the White Helmets were a terrorist organization linked to al-Qaeda (or sometimes the Islamic State) and thus a "legitimate target" for the regime to attack.[40] By 2018, a Bellingcat investigation uncovered a new twist. Russian media and MoD-linked bodies, including the Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria (RCROSS), claimed that not only were the White Helmets terrorists but that they were also linked to chemical weapons attacks in Idlib, Hama, and Aleppo. The vast majority of such claims explicitly stated that the White Helmets were planning a chemical attack as a "false flag" to provoke the West into attacking the regime.[41]

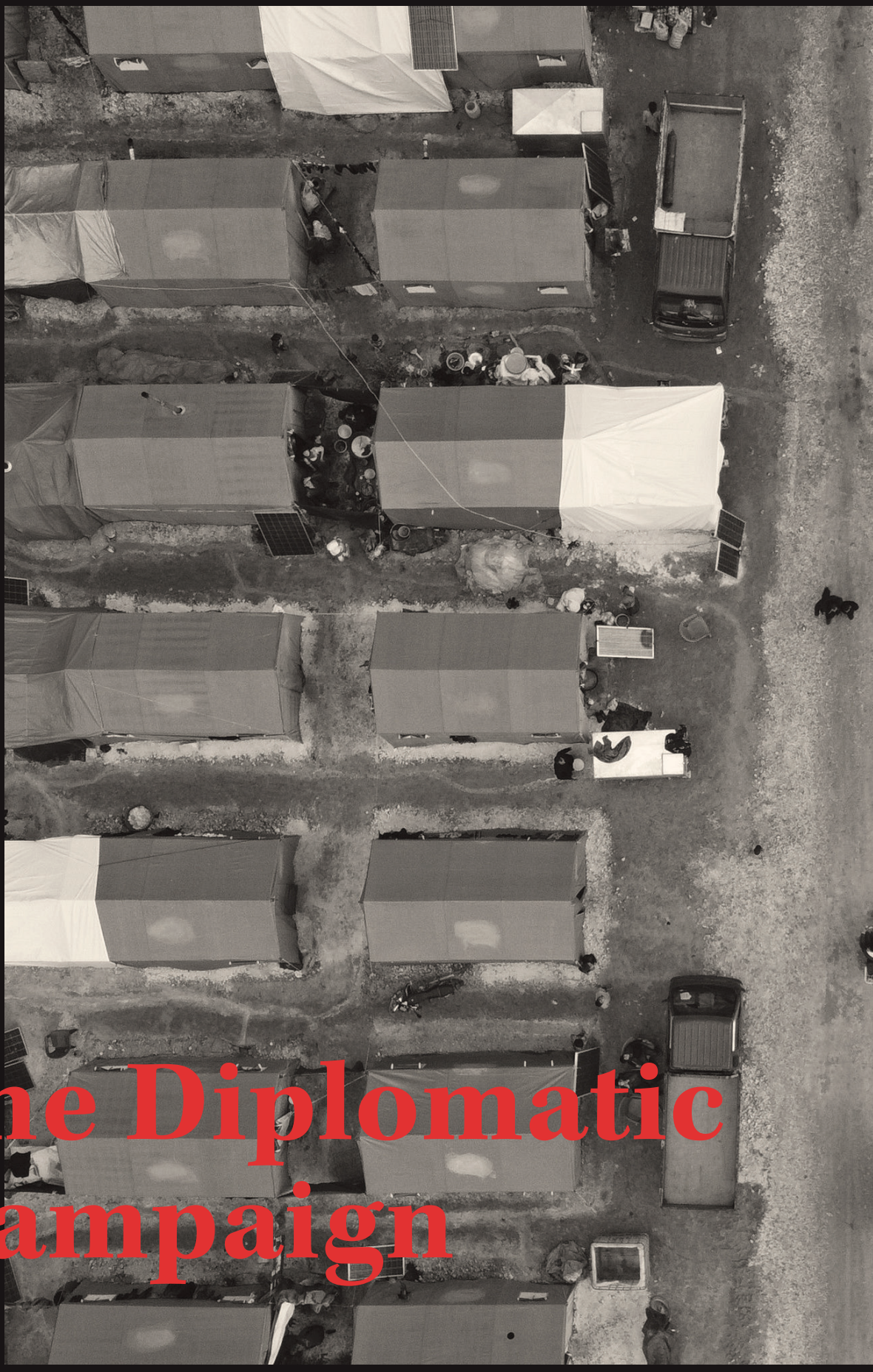
Undermining the Western Narrative of the Conflict: In pursuit of its third goal, the Russian government regularly undermined reporting by Western media and non-governmental organizations. Unlike the campaign against the White Helmets, however, these disinformation campaigns tended to be single-issue oriented and reactive in nature. After both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch released reports about Russian use of cluster munitions in Syria, for example, the MoD released yet another categorical denial: "Russian aviation does not use them."[42] Shortly thereafter, RT appeared to have accidentally released footage showing cluster bombs at Hmeimim air base. Then, after realizing its mistake, RT quickly deleted the video and re-uploaded with the evidentiary frames removed to maintain "deniability."[43] After Amnesty International released similar reporting about the use of incendiary weapons, the MoD struck back by claiming that the report consisted of "fakes and clichés" and accused Amnesty International of releasing false reports to "distract the international community."[44] Meanwhile, when Russia was blamed for strikes on schools in Idlib in 2019, Moscow's Foreign Ministry claimed to be the victim of an "information attack" by international media outlets (including the *Independent* and Al Jazeera) and a "hoax" perpetrated by the White Helmets and UNICEF.[45]

Russian officials also attempted to portray the situation in Syria as returning to normal in its propaganda directed at the international community and refugees. According to the MoD, nearly 644,000 Syrian refugees returned from abroad between 2015 and 2019—a figure nearly three times higher than official reporting from UNHCR, which estimated the total voluntary returnees from 2015 through 2019 at around 217,000.[46] The same MoD report claimed that 1.3 million additional IDPs returned to their homes and suggested that infrastructure rehabilitation and humanitarian assistance were ongoing. These claims presented a false picture of stability that endangered IDPs and refugees.[47] According to neighboring government officials, the UNHCR played a major role in countering this propaganda among refugee populations and was helped along by the fact that many refugees maintained contact with their relatives or friends still in Syria.[48]

Implications

Russia's behavior from 2015 through 2020 suggests a deliberate strategy of attacking civilian targets while simultaneously attempting to diffuse or deflect responsibility. Despite these actions, there were some limits to the efficacy of Russia's disinformation campaign and diplomatic efforts. International outlets—including the United Nations—increased their reporting on Russia's violations of international law and humanitarian norms throughout the campaign. Though attempts to "shame" Russia into changing its behavior were largely ineffective in the short run, Russian credibility will likely be undermined in the long run. As the next chapter highlights, Russia's diplomatic efforts to support ceasefires and de-escalation agreements were critical to its ability to achieve strategic objectives. But by expending significant political capital to avoid accountability for its punishment campaign, Russia may have lost leverage in the future.

Chapter 05



The Diplomatic Campaign

An aerial view showing a newly-created camp for internally displaced people (IDP) near the town of Maarrat Misrin in Syria's Idlib province.

SOURCE Aref Tammawi/AFP/Getty Images

Brian Katz

Moscow orchestrated a diplomatic campaign that complemented Russia's military efforts. Russian diplomacy played a critical role in enabling Moscow to achieve the intervention's strategic objectives: securing President Bashar al-Assad in power and ensuring Russian influence in the Levant for decades to come. Rather than existing on separate tracks, Russia coordinated its political and military efforts to facilitate gains on the ground in Syria and leverage at the international negotiating table. While the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs negotiated ceasefires and de-escalation agreements in Geneva and Astana, the Ministry of Defense exploited those agreements to rest and refit pro-regime forces and then violate the agreements when operations were ready, knowing their rivals and the United Nations lacked any means to enforce them. Russian diplomatic and military efforts were not always perfectly synchronized, but they were better integrated than their rivals, enabling Moscow to link battlefield gains to diplomatic leverage.

This chapter details Russia's use of diplomacy to further its political and military objectives in Syria. The chapter begins with an overview of Moscow's diplomatic involvement since 2012 in international negotiations over the Syrian Civil War. It details Russia's political efforts with the United States to implement a nationwide ceasefire in 2016, assesses Russia's coordination with Turkey and Jordan for so-called de-escalation zones in northern and southern Syria in 2017, and examines how Moscow exploited both of these processes to advance its strategic objectives. The chapter then moves to Russia's use of military diplomacy with the United States, Turkey, and Israel to deconflict and secure Russian battlefield priorities while simultaneously pressuring and constraining the operations of its rivals. The chapter concludes

by identifying common themes and lessons learned across Russia's diplomatic maneuvering.

Political Diplomacy

Russia played a central diplomatic role in the Syrian conflict beginning in 2012 and was vital in preventing any significant, unified international action—other than sanctions—against the Assad regime. While wielding its veto power at the UN Security Council (UNSC) to weaken or block council measures against Damascus, Moscow was at the center of the various UN-led Syrian peace process initiatives beginning in 2012, including for ceasefires for the civil war and plans for a transitional government inclusive of both the regime and the opposition. Russia, however, was unable to gain any acquiescence from the Assad regime to meet the international community's demands. Yet Moscow was also unwilling to press the regime for reform or transition from power, since ensuring the regime's military victory in the civil war and maintenance of unrivalled power in Damascus were important to Russian strategic interests.

Russia's diplomatic efforts during the Syrian peace process and civil war were intended to—and successful in—furthering pro-regime progress on the battlefield and securing Russia's strategic objectives in the conflict. Russia's use of diplomacy to enable its military campaign can be seen most clearly in two phases of the war: the Geneva Process and cessation of hostilities (CoH) agreement in 2016; and the Astana Process and creation of de-escalation zones from 2017 through the present.

Geneva Process and the Cessation of Hostilities

International negotiations for a peace resolution to the Syrian war, the so-called Geneva Process, began in 2012. The Geneva Process involved representatives from over a dozen countries, including Russia, and issued a communique in June of that year laying out the steps for an eventual political transition in Syria.[1] Despite continual diplomatic engagement, the Geneva Process failed to make any significant progress on a peace deal due to the Syrian opposition's demands for Assad to step down from power and Russia's refusal to consider it. However, the diplomatic track shifted dramatically in the fall of 2015, as Russia sought to leverage its military intervention in Syria and Western powers desired a halt to the conflict. In November 2015, the International Syria Support Group met in Vienna and issued a new communique on the need for a nationwide ceasefire and parallel progress on the political track.[2] In December 2015, Russia and the United States coordinated to pass UNSCR 2254, which formally called for a ceasefire to the civil war, constitutional reforms, and UN-monitored elections at a future date.[3] The first item, a ceasefire, became the focal point of a renewed Geneva tack. It resulted in a U.S. and Russian joint statement on February 22, 2016, announcing the establishment of the UN Ceasefire Task Force under UN auspices in Geneva and a nationwide CoH.[4] Up until the CoH announcement, Russia, the regime, and Iranian-backed forces moved aggressively to lock in key battlefield gains, particularly in Latakia, Aleppo, and Damascus, before the CoH came into effect.[5]

After several weeks of relative compliance, pro-regime forces began routinely violating the CoH. They conducted ground operations in the Homs-Hama corridor and Damascus suburbs while conducting airstrikes on opposition strongholds in Idlib and Aleppo.[6] Russian diplomats in Geneva exploited the United Nation's difficulty in monitoring a nationwide ceasefire and adjudicating alleged violations to deny pro-regime strikes while claiming opposition attacks. With Russian diplomatic cover in Geneva, pro-regime forces used the CoH and the opposition and foreign backers' overall adherence to it as a means to rest and refit their worn-down forces—and then direct them in concentrated assaults in key contested areas.[7] Knowing that the United States was desperate to keep the ceasefire intact to reduce violence and deliver humanitarian assistance to besieged areas, Russia was able to keep the United States and other opposition

backers onboard throughout the spring by offering new ceasefires and promising humanitarian access. Yet Russia was unable—or more likely unwilling—to deliver the other pro-regime forces.[8]

Russian diplomatic maneuvering achieved its greatest success—and perhaps the worst failure for the United States—in the summer 2016 negotiations over Aleppo. In an effort to prevent pro-regime forces from capturing opposition-held East Aleppo, U.S. diplomats generated a proposal in which the U.S. military would cooperate with the Russian military against the Islamic State and Nusrah Front in exchange for a full CoH and a stop to the assault on Aleppo. Exploiting U.S. unwillingness to walk away from a potential ceasefire, Russian officials negotiated for over two months with U.S. officials on the terms of the deal, while pro-regime forces—supported by the Russian military—gained critical battleground, seizing control of Castello Road.[9] Diplomatic efforts culminated in September with an agreement to establish a Joint Implementation Center for U.S. and Russian forces which would share intelligence and coordinate operations against the Islamic State and Nusrah Front in exchange for a renewed CoH.[10] The deal collapsed within days, after Russian aircraft struck a UN humanitarian aid convoy headed to East Aleppo.[11] While the United States withdrew from the agreement in early October, Russian and pro-regime forces pressed their assault, seizing all of Aleppo in December.

With the United States and other opposition backers unable to develop any effective enforcement mechanism against pro-regime violations yet still committed to the terms of the CoH, the Russians and the regime continued their military campaign without any significant repercussions while facing a severely weakened opposition. The Geneva Process would continue after the failed effort to implement a CoH, turning its focus to other components of UNSCR 2254 for a new Syrian constitution and unity government. The U.S. side, however, lost most of what leverage it had by ending support to the Syrian opposition in 2017 and by playing a diminishing role in negotiations over the Syrian Civil War.

Astana Process and De-Escalation Zones

With the U.S.-Russian efforts largely over in early 2017, Moscow sought a new forum for international negotiations over the war. Along with Tehran as an ally, Moscow turned to Ankara as its primary negotiating partner. Russia, Iran, and Turkey convened a new international forum in January 2017 in Astana, Kazakhstan, agreeing to create a monitoring group to oversee implementation of UNSCR 2254. The sides made little progress on constitutional reform and political transition. But in May 2017, they reached an agreement to establish four "de-escalation zones" in western Syria for indefinite ceasefires. Two of the zones, which covered northern Homs Province and eastern Ghouta, lacked monitoring or on-the-ground enforcement mechanisms against persistent pro-regime violations and border access to opposition-supporting countries. Through a combination of piecemeal reconciliation agreements for opposition surrender and aggressive ground operations, Russia and regime forces retook both zones by mid-2018. The other two zones, for Greater Idlib and for southern Syria, were more complicated due to respective support for the opposition from Turkey and Jordan.

Greater Idlib Zone

With Russian consent, the Turkish military in October 2017 entered Idlib Province to establish its first observation post.[12] Nominally to monitor the ceasefire and ensure compliance from opposition forces under the Astana terms, Turkey aimed for its outposts in Idlib to serve as a deterrent against pro-regime forces attempting to advance from Hama in the south and Aleppo in the west. Russian forces saw the de-escalation agreement as a means to stabilize threats from Idlib while pro-regime forces concentrated on Dayr az Zawr as well as a means to improve relations with Ankara while pulling it further away from the United States' orbit. Turkey expanded its troop and Syrian proxy presence again in early 2018 and had established 12 outposts by May 2018, which were then incorporated into a buffer zone agreement for Idlib in September

2018.[13] In addition to slowing regime advances in Idlib, Ankara also leveraged the Astana channel and the improvement of its ties with Moscow for its other major security goal in Syria: gaining Russian acquiescence to Turkey's invasion in January 2018 of the northwest canton of Afrin.

Since pro-regime forces had successfully retaken other areas, such as Dayr az Zawr and eastern Ghouta, Syria's leaders sought to launch an offensive in Idlib in the fall of 2018. Moscow agreed, in part because the de-escalation zone had helped stabilize Idlib's front lines. Moreover, Turkish forces had been unable to deliver on their part of the agreement to push extremist groups, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), out of the zone.[14] HTS had grown more powerful, co-opting or eliminating more moderate opposition groups. The de-escalation zone began to collapse in the spring of 2019 as regime and Russian forces launched their offensive. Not wanting to risk escalation with the Russian military, Turkish forces did little initially to contest the assault. But unlike the other de-escalation zones, Russia was unable to coax much of the Idlib opposition into reconciliation and surrender agreements. Indeed, as Russian, Syrian, Iranian, and Hezbollah forces waged perhaps a final offensive for Idlib in 2020, HTS and the remaining opposition fighters continued to resist with reinvigorated Turkish assistance.[15]

Diplomatic efforts between Russia and Turkey over Idlib, however, broke down in February 2020 as hostilities between Turkish and Syrian government forces escalated dramatically. In late February, the Syrian air force conducted airstrikes on opposition and Turkish positions in Idlib, killing 33 Turkish soldiers. In response, the Turkish military conducted an unprecedented series of attacks, including drone strikes, on Syrian military targets, shooting down two regime aircraft over Idlib and striking a military airport in Aleppo, sparking further cycles of retaliatory attacks.[16] While all sides, including the Russian military, surged reinforcements to the Idlib frontlines, Russian and Turkish leaders agreed in March 2020 to de-escalate the situation and prevent direct state-on-state conflict, resulting in a ceasefire deal and agreement for joint Turkish-Russian patrols along the key M4 highway.[17]

Southern Syria Zone

Following the initial agreement for a de-escalation zone in southern Syria that Russia, Iran, and Turkey reached in Ankara, Moscow then moved to negotiate and implement a ceasefire with the United States and Jordan—the two countries with the most influence over the southern opposition. In exchange for halting opposition offensive operations, the United States and Jordan demanded the end of the regime's Daraa offensive and the removal of Iranian and Hezbollah forces from areas near the Israeli and Jordanian borders. Russia, Jordan, and the United States established a trilateral forum in Amman in August 2017 to monitor compliance with the terms of the deal, called the Amman Monitoring Center.[18]

Similar to its diplomatic efforts with Turkey in the northwest, Russia used the Amman forum to establish itself as the key powerbroker and mediator for the Syrian conflict while doing little to enforce the terms of the deal. Syrian forces continued attacks on southern opposition forces through 2017, while Iran, Hezbollah, and Shia militia remained near the Golan Heights. Russia's deployment of 200 military police and more than a dozen checkpoints were largely a symbolic display, and they provided little military and policing utility.[19] Russia also used the agreement to develop closer ties with Jordan and gain acquiescence for Moscow and Damascus's objectives. Exploiting Amman's fears of instability on its northern border and a grudging acceptance that Assad would ultimately prevail, Jordan began ending its support to the opposition in 2018 and negotiating the opposition's surrender with the Russians. The diplomatic effort coincided with a pro-regime offensive into Daraa to defeat those groups that continued to fight.[20] With Russian airpower, Syrian forces retook Daraa City in July 2018 and the rest of Daraa and Quneitra Provinces in the fall of 2018.[21]

Military Diplomacy

Moscow also utilized military diplomacy, including strategic-level forums and operational deconfliction channels to ensure Russian freedom of action on the battlefield, limit risk of escalation with other outside powers, and reinforce its diplomatic maneuvering. Russia viewed military-to-military channels with the United States as a means to delineate respective areas of operation for battlefield campaigns while also using it as a propaganda tool to trumpet U.S.-Russian parity and military cooperation. Russia also established a "hotline" with Israel in the fall of 2015 to deconflict air operations and ensure the safety of Israeli pilots and Russian troops in Syria located near the Iranian, Hezbollah, and Syrian regime sites that the Israelis were striking. While mostly successful, Russia-Israel deconfliction grew increasingly tense as Israel escalated its campaign in Syria. Russia used military deconfliction with Turkey to reduce the risk of confrontation and miscalculation in the congested battlespace of northwest Syria while simultaneously using coordination and de-escalation agreements to opportunistically draw Turkey away from the United States and the NATO alliance—a core Russian objective.

Russian-U.S. Deconfliction: Communication, Courtship, and Conflict, 2015–2020

Deconfliction Channels and Operational Areas: Russia's military intervention into Syria in the fall of 2015 coincided with the expansion of the U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State to roll back the group's territorial gains across northern Syria. While the two sides were not direct combatants, the close proximity, congested airspace, and competing objectives of their respective campaigns compelled them to deconflict operations and delineate battlespace. The first high-level discussion between the U.S. and Russian militaries began in October 2015 when the U.S. Department of Defense and Russian Ministry of Defense held a video teleconference to discuss "safety of flight" issues over Syria. The discussion led to an agreement later that month that enshrined standards and procedures for air-to-air communication and interactions, and the United States and Russia established a formal communication line and deconfliction between the two sides command headquarters.[22]

U.S.-Russian military deconfliction grew to include multiple communication channels at different echelons of command, all with the objective of limiting the risk of direct hostilities and enabling freedom of maneuver. At the strategic level, Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov and U.S. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford maintained a channel for senior engagement. They utilized this channel in particular during times of tension as battlefield campaigns converged, such as in Aleppo in 2016 and Dayr az Zawr in 2017 and 2018. At the campaign level, the Russian commander in Syria and the three-star U.S. general commanding Combined Joint Task Force: Operation Inherent Resolve established a channel for operational battlefield deconfliction. At the tactical level, the 24-hour "hotline" created between Russian military headquarters at Hmeimim air base in Syria and U.S. personnel at the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) in Qatar was the primary, day-to-day line of communication between the two sides.[23]

The U.S.-Russian deconfliction channels were largely successful in reducing the risk to each side's military personnel on the ground and in the air over Syria, as well as their respective allies and proxies. As the U.S.-led coalition expanded its operations on the ground in northern Syria in 2016 with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the U.S.-Russian "safety of flight" channel would be used to negotiate informal but largely respected "operational boxes" and "no-strike zones" to delineate respective areas of ground operations, air transport corridors, and restricted areas for air strikes.[24] While deconfliction efforts helped avert a major accident and direct U.S.-Russian confrontation, Russia leveraged these channels to confuse and disrupt the U.S. side while also aiming to compel greater coordination between the two countries.

"Cooperation" with the United States: From the beginning of its intervention in Syria, Russia sought to entice and compel the United States into greater cooperation in counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State and Nusrah Front.[25] President Putin and other senior Russian officials perceived U.S.-Russian cooperation in Syria as a means for Russia to reduce its international pariah status after the invasion of Ukraine. Russian leaders sought to portray high-level U.S.-Russian discussions over Syria as the meeting of the region's two great powers and potential battlefield cooperation as a sensible way to defeat a common enemy in the Islamic State and al-Qaeda and bring stability to Syria. In 2015 and 2016, Russian military officials proposed numerous arrangements, including sharing intelligence on terrorist groups, formally dividing Syria into areas of responsibility, and synchronizing campaigns and operations against the Islamic State in eastern Syria.[26] Discussions on U.S.-Russian coordination failed to take root with U.S. officials for several reasons. Moscow and Washington had diametrically opposed core objectives in Syria: Russia sought to save and strengthen Assad; the United States sought to defeat the Islamic State and encourage a political transition of Assad from power.

In addition, Section 1241 of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act prohibited the U.S. military from cooperating with Russia because of Moscow's "aggressive activities that threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization."[27] For this reason, U.S. forces in Syria fighting the Islamic State and conducting occasional strikes against Nusrah Front high-level targets could not coordinate operations with Russia. From a military perspective, Russia's campaign throughout 2015 and 2016 was focused on targeting opposition and insurgent forces against the Assad regime in western Syria, not the Islamic State in eastern Syria. So Russia was of questionable utility against Islamic State anyway.[28] Moreover, U.S. military and intelligence officials were concerned that any U.S.-Russian arrangement to share intelligence and targeting information would pose significant counterintelligence risks if Russian officials sought to collect on U.S. tactics, techniques, procedures, sources, and methods.[29] From a policy perspective, Russia's ardent support of the Assad regime and military complicity in indiscriminate attacks and targeting of Syrian civilians meant the United States could not partner with Russia in any significant way on the battlefield.[30] U.S. officials considered some Russian offers to share intelligence and targeting information against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in exchange for Moscow delivering on core U.S. policy demands for the civil war (such as resuming a nationwide cessation of hostilities in the summer of 2016). But Russia's inability or unwillingness to reach a ceasefire and many U.S. officials' objections to cooperation with Russia rendered such discussions a dead end.[31]

Despite Washington's rebuffing of these overtures, Moscow continually sought to portray battlefield cooperation as a necessary and natural division of labor among great powers and recast U.S. reluctance to cooperate to imply the United States was not serious about counterterrorism.[32] When attempts at enticing U.S. cooperation failed, Russian forces in Syria turned to a different tool: coercion.

Provocation, Propaganda, and Conflict: Russia mostly abided by the terms of the deconfliction channels and informal agreements with the United States on areas of operations. At times, however, Russian forces engaged in provocative action and disregarded standard deconfliction procedures to bring the U.S. military back to the negotiating table while testing U.S. limits and resolve in Syria. Russian forces manipulated deconfliction lines, such as crossing into U.S. operating space and delaying or providing no response to U.S. requests via the CAOC-Hmeimim hotline, in order to secure additional agreements from the U.S. coalition as both sides progressed into new battlefield spaces during their campaigns.[33] Simultaneously, Moscow employed disinformation about these events to sow confusion among international audiences, as to who was at fault, and even among U.S. negotiators, as to whether Russian actions were purposeful or genuine mistakes. And when

the U.S. and Russian sides did return to negotiations, Moscow could again portray it as the meeting of great power peers in the region.[34] This routine played out on several occasions throughout the conflict.

In June 2016, the Russian air force launched a series of strikes against the Al-Tanf garrison in southern Syria near the Jordanian border. The garrison was a key site for U.S. and Jordanian forces to train and equip Syrian militia partners to counter the Islamic State.[35] U.S. military forces dispatched aircraft to the area to deter further Russian strikes and issued urgent and repeated requests via the deconfliction channels for Russian forces to cease operations. Russian forces not only refused to respond to coalition requests but returned to conduct another series of strikes when U.S. aircraft departed the area to refuel.[36] The Russian airstrikes on Al-Tanf coincided with high-level negotiations between U.S. and Russian officials in Switzerland, during which Russian interlocutors erroneously claimed that their military had thought Al-Tanf—which by this time was hosting U.S. and Jordanian military forces—was an "ISIS camp" and that the U.S. and Russian militaries needed to cooperate to prevent such misunderstandings.[37]

Al-Tanf emerged again as a flashpoint for U.S.-Russian deconfliction in May 2017, as pro-regime forces began their push into southern and central Syria after the fall of Aleppo. Over the previous year, U.S. and Russian officials had negotiated a 55-km "deconfliction zone" around Al-Tanf, where the U.S.-led coalition continued to expand. The agreement precluded pro-regime forces from entering the 55-km zone, and the U.S. side had been clear on its willingness to use force to secure the zone and the garrison.[38] On May 18, a pro-regime convoy of Syrian and Iranian-backed Shia militia forces entered the zone, reaching within 25 kilometers of Al-Tanf before being struck by U.S. aircraft.[39] U.S. officials warned Russian counterparts using the deconfliction line before, during, and after the attack that the breach would not be tolerated. Russian military officials at times denied the zone had been violated, claimed the units were not pro-regime forces, and then said they were but were there to counter the Islamic State. After weeks of tense standoff, pro-regime forces eventually departed the area in late June but returned again on several occasions to test U.S. and coalition forces.[40]

In northern and eastern Syria, the Russian military employed a similar series of high-risk actions and provocations against the U.S.-led forces as the two coalitions converged along the Euphrates River Valley in 2017. U.S. and Russian forces had reached an informal agreement for the river to serve as a demarcation line for their respective campaigns, with U.S., coalition, and SDF forces operating north and east of the river and Russian-backed, pro-regime forces operating to the south and west.[41] Until the summer of 2017, Russian forces had largely abided by the agreement, albeit with occasional Syrian government and Iranian-backed militia attempts to cross the river. The situation changed dramatically in the fall of 2017, as U.S. coalition and pro-regime forces made advances toward Dayr az Zawr, triggering the "race for the Euphrates" and control of key terrain and economic resources in the region.[42]

By the end of 2017, pro-regime forces, with Russian support, launched regular artillery and air strikes east of the river near U.S.-coalition and SDF positions while claiming they were targeting Islamic State units in the area. The Russian air force had also begun routinely flying over the Euphrates River boundary, on several occasions narrowly avoiding collision with coalition aircraft.[43] Similar to the escalation around Al-Tanf, Russian forces responded inconsistently to U.S. requests to cease activity via the air deconfliction line but leveraged their actions to bring U.S. forces back to the negotiating table to delineate areas of operation and control over key terrain in the Middle Euphrates River Valley.[44] Russian provocations in the area, however, finally crossed U.S. red lines in February 2018, when pro-regime forces, including Russian mercenaries, launched a direct attack on U.S. and SDF positions near the Conoco gas field in the town of Khasham, as detailed in Chapter 3. As pro-regime forces built and readied their assault force east of Dayr az Zawr and throughout the attack, U.S. forces repeatedly warned Russian counterparts via deconfliction channels to

withdraw west of the river. As Russian officials denied the presence of Russian military forces, U.S. forces unleashed a devastating counterattack, killing hundreds of pro-regime forces, including Russian mercenaries.[45]

While it was unclear whether Russian command in Syria directed the assault or merely became aware of Russian PMC involvement through U.S. entreaties to cease attack, Russian forces subsequently understood U.S. redlines for high-risk action. The Russian military again exploited uncertainty over the command and structure of pro-regime forces and Russia's role within it to deny Russian knowledge of, and involvement in, the attack. The use of PMCs to take provocative but deniable actions on the ground, however, would be a key lesson for Russian forces.

Russian-Israeli Deconfliction: Effective Coordination in a High-Risk Environment, October 2015–2020

Along with the United States and Turkey, the other regional power operating in Syria that Russia had to contend with was Israel, which since 2015 had been conducting periodic airstrikes targeting Iranian weapons shipments to Hezbollah. While diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties had strengthened between the two countries over the previous decade, the Russian military and Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had little interaction prior to Russia's intervention, and each military sought to avoid confrontation with the other. With Russia's entry, Israel aimed to continue its air campaign in Syria while avoiding striking Russian personnel. Russia sought to ensure Israeli strikes were not aimed at weakening the Assad regime and avoided Russian troops. In September 2015, during a visit from Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Moscow, Russia and Israel announced an agreement to coordinate military actions over Syria to avoid incidents.[46] The next month, the two militaries established a deconfliction "hotline" similar to that of the United States and Russia. While Moscow publicly trumpeted such "coordination" with Israel—the closest U.S. ally in the region—Israeli officials were more discreet; then-Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon in October 2015 summarized the Israeli position as: "We don't interfere with them and they don't interfere with us."[47]

Russian-Israeli deconfliction efforts were generally successful through 2016 but became significantly more complicated in 2017 for three main reasons. First, after the pro-regime victory in Aleppo, Iranian and Hezbollah forces moved to expand their presence in southern Syria near the Golan Heights, building weapons and intelligence facilities and training Shia militia fighters to create a second front against Israel along Lebanon. Second, Israel had intensified its strike campaign across Syria, continuing to target Iranian weapons transfers to Hezbollah as well as the new Iranian positions encroaching the Israeli border.[48] Third, as Russia expanded its own military presence in Syria through the war, Russian forces and air defense systems were now co-located or nearby Syrian airfields and militaries, such as at T-4 and the Damascus International Airport, that were also locations of Iranian weapons transfers and therefore targets for Israeli strikes.[49] Thus, the Israelis were confronted with the risk of accidentally striking Russian troops or being targeted by capable Russian air defense systems such as the S-300, while the Russians faced a higher tempo and broader scope of Israeli strikes near their locations and limited ability to constrain Iran's provocative activity.

Russia, Israel, and the United States negotiated in 2017 and 2018 to create a buffer, or "No Iran" zone, constraining Iranian and proxy forces from operating within 80 km of the Israeli and Jordanian borders. Russia, however, proved unable to deliver Iran's acceptance, resulting in continued Iranian activity and increasing Israeli strikes.[50] While the deconfliction line continued to function, the risk of mistakes, miscalculation, and potential escalation continued to grow. Tensions reached a crescendo in September 2018 when, following an Israeli airstrike in southern Syria, Syrian air defense forces accidentally shot down a Russian Il-20 reconnaissance aircraft which they mistook for an Israeli aircraft, killing 15 Russian troops.[51]

Rather than provoking escalation, both President Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu sought to defuse tensions, calling the shootdown a tragic accident and spurring the two militaries to enhance their level of communication via the hotline.[52] Russian military leaders privately demanded more advanced warning from Israel before conducting airstrikes but continued to coordinate with the IDF.[53] Publicly, Russian officials have continued to condemn Israel's strike campaign, which Israeli defense analysts as of December 2019 perceived mainly as Russian propaganda aimed at assuaging Iran and the Assad regime.[54] In the long term, IDF officials were skeptical of Russia's ability to constrain Iranian activity but assessed that the deconfliction channel continued to function effectively and had played a key role in enabling IDF freedom of action and safety of flight.[55] At the political level, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials assessed that the Russian-Israeli coordination over Syria was working similarly well, with strong relationships between Moscow's lead diplomats on Syria—Special Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentiev and Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin—and Israeli counterparts at the MFA and prime minister's office.[56]

Russian-Turkish Deconfliction: From Opponents to Partners, 2015-2020

Russian-Turkish relations by 2015 had become deeply strained over Moscow's alliance with the Assad regime and Ankara's support to the Syrian opposition. Tensions escalated following Russia's military intervention in September 2015 and peaked in November following the Turkish air force's shootdown of a Russian Su-24 attack aircraft that approached Turkish airspace from northwest Syria. After ejecting over opposition-held territory, the Russian pilot was killed by local forces, but Russian forces were able to rescue the navigator.[57] Moscow responded immediately and forcefully. Russian forces conducted repeated and heavy airstrikes on Turkish-backed opposition forces in Latakia and Idlib Provinces near the site of the shootdown. Putin called Turkey's actions "a stab in the back, carried out by the accomplices of terrorists" and further retaliated with economic sanctions targeting key parts of the Turkish economy, including restrictions on trade and tourism.[58] After months of severe Russian sanctions, Turkish president Erdogan in June 2016 finally apologized for the shootdown.[59] By August, the Russian and Turkish militaries had agreed to create a deconfliction "hotline"—similar to the Russian hotlines with Israel and the United States—between their general staffs to avoid future incidents.[60]

Putin had humbled Erdogan and had an opportunity to draw Ankara closer into its orbit amid worsening U.S.-Turkish relations over Syria.[61] Russian officials perceived and exploited the strain over growing U.S. support to the Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG. Beginning in late 2014, the YPG became one of the first local U.S. partners to counter the Islamic State during the Battle of Kobani. As the U.S.-led campaign accelerated, the YPG became the lead force of a new multiethnic coalition of fighters called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which spearheaded operations against the Islamic State toward Raqqa and the Euphrates River Valley.

The opportunity to seize the diplomatic opening came in July 2016 when parts of the Turkish military launched a coup against Erdogan, narrowly missing the Turkish president before ultimately failing. Putin was the first world leader to call Erdogan and offer support, resulting in a visit to Moscow the following month and steady improvement in relations, including over each other's operations in Syria.[62] In August 2016, the Turkish military launched Operation Euphrates Shield, its first formal military intervention into Syrian territory, to clear parts of the northern Syrian border of both Islamic State and SDF fighters. But neither Russian nor other pro-regime forces took action to contest or constrain the Turkish incursion. That fall, while Russia and Syrian forces launched their devastating siege and seizure of East Aleppo, the home of numerous Turkish-backed opposition groups, Ankara did little to contest, eventually aligning with Russia and Iran to pursue a ceasefire agreement through the Astana process (after Aleppo already had fallen).[63]

Strategic and diplomatic alignment between Moscow and Ankara deepened as Turkish objectives shifted from ousting the Assad regime to rolling back SDF gains. In January 2018, Turkish forces invaded Syria for the second time with the launch of Operation Olive Branch into the primarily Kurdish Afrin canton in northwest Syria.[64] Despite continuing tensions over Russian support to Syrian operations against Turkish-backed opposition forces in neighboring Idlib, the Turkish assault—which was actually spearheaded by Syrian opposition proxies—received no condemnation from Moscow.[65] From Moscow's perspective, the opportunity to strengthen relations with Ankara and drive a deeper wedge between the United States and Turkey was worth the cost of ceding territory in Afrin.

Moscow's cultivation of relations with Ankara and exploitation of U.S-Turkish tensions over the U.S.-SDF partnership culminated in the summer and fall of 2019 in northeast Syria. Turkish leaders issued public and private warnings to U.S. and coalition officials of another Turkish incursion, this time targeting the SDF's core territory in northeast Syria, which hosted key coalition facilities for the campaign against the Islamic State. U.S. and Turkish negotiators met throughout the summer and early fall to implement a "safe zone" along the Syria-Turkey border, remove SDF forces and fortifications from the area, and conduct joint patrols to enforce the agreement.[66]

The Turkish military launched its third major incursion into Syria following the October 6, 2019, phone call between President Trump and President Erdogan and the U.S. announcement that Turkey would move forward with its operation into northern Syria and U.S. forces would withdraw from the area.[67] Dubbed Operation Peace Spring, the Turkish offensive quickly captured key SDF-held border towns such as Tel Abyad and Ras al Ain as well as territory up to the vital M4 highway before stalling against SDF resistance. Simultaneously, U.S. forces rapidly withdrew from the area, leaving the SDF exposed to Turkish incursions from the north and regime and Russian advances from the west into towns and facilities U.S. forces had vacated.[68]

Abandoned by U.S. forces and facing a Turkish onslaught, SDF leadership had little choice but to turn to Russia and the Assad regime for assistance. In mid-October, Russian and Syrian government forces moved swiftly into northeast Syria, establishing checkpoints along the M4 highway and occupying former U.S. coalition bases in Manbij, Kobani, Raqqa, and Qamishli. Within a day, Russian forces reestablished a Syrian government presence in northeast Syria without firing a shot. Moscow also peeled away the U.S. military's primary Syrian partner and secured a massive propaganda victory, hoisting the Russian and Syrian government flags over bases where the U.S. flag flew just days prior.[69]

While bolstering ties to the SDF, Moscow also moved quickly to exploit the chaos in northeast Syria to improve relations with Ankara—at Washington's expense. While nominally negotiating the terms of a ceasefire with senior U.S. administration officials, Erdogan accepted an invitation from President Putin to meet with him instead in Sochi to find a deal. In late October, the Russian and Turkish leaders announced an agreement for Russian forces to enter the area, remove forces from the designated "safe zones," and conduct joint patrols with Turkish forces to secure the area.[70] Years of military diplomacy to cultivate ties with Ankara, combined with its ability to act quickly when opportunities presented themselves in Syria, enabled Moscow to achieve an unexpected set of strategic victories. The Syrian government reasserted control in key parts of northeast Syria, U.S. forces withdrew from bases and lost prestige and influence, Russia improved ties with the SDF at the United States' expense, and Russia drew Turkey away from the United States and NATO's orbit.

Conclusion

Russia's diplomatic efforts throughout the Syrian war were successful in helping advance Moscow's core strategic aims: keeping Assad in power and gradually reasserting regime influence across Syria. To be sure, Russian political and military diplomacy did not achieve

all of Russia's goals in Syria. The Syrian opposition resisted a political transition that would leave President Assad in power; Turkey and the United States each retained military footprints (albeit a shrinking one on the U.S. side); and Israel continued to conduct strikes in Syria. Russia also lacked control over the Assad regime's decisionmaking and influence over its other key backers, Iran and Hezbollah, hindering Moscow's ability to deliver pro-regime allies on negotiated deals. Nonetheless, Russia's novel blending of military and diplomatic tools and linking of tactical actions to diplomatic leverage played a critical role in securing Russia's long-term strategic influence in Syria while reducing that of rivals such as the United States.

In reviewing Russia's diplomatic campaign, there are several core themes:

- **Employing information warfare:** Pervasive across all political and military diplomatic efforts were Russian information operations—a blend of diplomatic maneuvering, propaganda, and disinformation aimed at justifying its intervention, discrediting rivals, and slowing or paralyzing diplomatic action against Russian and Syrian regime actions.
- **Exploiting Western democracies and international organizations:** In contrast to the democratic, bureaucratic, and legal processes governing policymakers in the United States and Western democracies, Russia's authoritarian decisionmaking process enabled Moscow to react quickly to opportunities in Syria and fuse military and political diplomacy in a unified effort. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia was ideally positioned to ensure its influence over any international effort to resolve the conflict while also providing diplomatic cover for the Assad regime and the war on the ground by blocking any significant measures to pressure Assad from power.
- **Risk tolerance and unity of effort:** While Moscow's military and diplomatic efforts were not perfectly synchronized, they were generally better coordinated than those of the United States and its partners, enabling Russia to link battlefield progress with diplomatic leverage and use the negotiating table to lock in pro-regime gains. Along with better decisionmaking agility, Russia's greater operational risk tolerance and willingness to surge operational activity allowed it to secure greater battlefield accommodations for pro-regime advances.

Chapter 06

Implications and Takeaways

A damaged Roman amphitheater in the ancient city of Palmyra after Syrian troops backed by Russian jets completed the recapture from the Islamic State.
SOURCE Stringer/AFP/Getty Images

Jason Gresh
Seth G. Jones
Edmund Loughran

During a brisk walk on a country road in the early-nineteenth century, the Irish statesman John Wilson Croker and Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington, amused themselves by attempting to guess what sort of country they might discover on the other side of the hills. When Croker expressed surprise that Wellington was so accurate in his guesses, the latter responded matter-of-factly, "Why I have spent all of my life in trying to guess what was at the other side of the hill." Wellington went on to explain, "All the business of war, and indeed all the business of life, is to endeavor to find out what you don't know by what you do; that's what I called 'guessing what was at the other side of the hill.'"[1] As the United States competes with powers such as Russia and China, case studies such as the Russian campaign in Syria offer an invaluable opportunity to understand what is on "the other side of the hill." The strategies, operations, and tactics of adversaries—including their strengths and weaknesses—need to be analyzed and understood.

Following Russia's entry into the war in 2015, the Syrian army and other ground forces—with Russian support—retook successive Syrian cities such as Aleppo, Homs, Palmyra, and Dayr az Zawr. As argued in Chapter 3, Russia's military intervention in Syria can be loosely divided into three campaign phases centered around different but supporting strategic objectives: stabilizing the Assad regime in core areas of western Syria (September 2015 to spring 2016); going on the offensive in the west to recapture Aleppo (spring 2016 to spring 2017); and countering the Islamic State in central and eastern Syria (spring 2017 to spring 2018). By 2020, the Syrian government—with Russian and Iranian support—controlled most of Syria's major cities and retook bases in Manbij and Kobani abandoned by U.S. forces in 2019. Yet Russia still

struggled to clear entrenched rebel groups from Idlib Province in northwestern Syria, as the population also had to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.

Unlike Moscow's approach in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which involved a heavy footprint of 115,000 Soviet forces to fight the Afghan mujahideen, Russian political and military leaders adopted a vastly different approach in Syria beginning in 2015.[2] This approach reflected their observations of U.S.-led operations and other experiences. Syrian army forces, not the Russian army, served as the main maneuver element to take back territory. Syrian forces were supported by militia forces such as Lebanese Hezbollah (which received support from Iran's IRGC-QF, led by Qasem Soleimani) and private military contractors such as the Wagner Group (which received training and other aid from the Russian military).[3] These forces did most of the fighting and held territory once it was cleared, with help from Russian special operations forces on the ground. To support these forces, Russia conducted 60 to 70 air strikes per day on insurgents and their infrastructure, including 120 to 140 strikes per day during periods of high intensity.[4]

Over the course of its campaign, Russia challenged U.S. influence in the Middle East with a limited military footprint. This approach was partially by design but also reflected their limitations in deploying a larger force. As noted in Chapter 2, Russian leaders believed Syria was a strategically-important hub for Moscow in the Middle East, particularly as competition increased with the United States. In addition, Russian leaders assessed that the United States and its partners were attempting to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime and replace it with a friendly government, directly threatening Russian strategic interests. Consequently, Russia seized an opportunity to apply military force to expand its economic, diplomatic, and military power and influence in the region, assessing that the United States would do little to contest this action.

This chapter focuses on two types of lessons. The first centers on Russia, and the second type includes broader lessons for the United States and other Western countries. Both types are, of course, still a work in progress. It will take years to fully understand Russia's involvement in Syria. The war is far from over and Syria is just one campaign in an evolving Russian strategic and military landscape. But key takeaways already exist that can help inform policymakers, military leaders, and others interested in international politics.

Understanding Russia

This section highlights several broad observations: the evolution of Russia's operational art, war-fighting capabilities, military leadership experience, and political influence in the region. While many of these developments may seem new, in some cases they represent a continuation of an evolving trend in Russian military culture.[5] In addition, some advancements, such as the Russian use of partner forces and development of mobile command and control information systems, were likely influenced by Western developments.

Russian Operational Art

Russia adopted a light-footprint approach in Syria that was part of what Russian Chief of the Army Staff Valery Gerasimov referred to as the "'new' approach for achieving political-military goals."[6] Rather than applying a heavy hand, Moscow leveraged air assets, unmanned aerial vehicles, civil-military units (military police and "reconciliation" centers), special operations forces, and informational assets. This approach reflected an emerging concept that Gerasimov termed the "strategy of limited actions" to be executed beyond Russia's borders. It emphasized what Western militaries term a "common operating picture" to enable precision strikes, including a focus on information, surveillance, and reconnaissance systems.[7] For ground operations, Moscow relied on Iranian and Syrian units, including Syrian Tiger Forces, Lebanese Hezbollah, and militias composed of fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Palestinian territory, and other areas trained by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force. Russia's use of proxies and ability to work with partner forces allowed it to utilize a light footprint but constrained

its ability to achieve quick and decisive results in some areas. One example was Russia's prolonged fight in Idlib Province, which relied on Syrian forces, local militias, and Turkish cooperation to execute the operation.

To achieve Moscow's objectives, the Russian Group of Forces was formed around an aerospace-led joint task force which brought together various elements from across Russia's military districts under a three-star general.[8] This structure embodied a joint and combined arms approach that was a continuation of past reform efforts and military campaigns. By designating the aerospace forces as lead, Russia intimated the nature and focus of its military actions. This task force was aptly suited to bring precision strikes to bear based on information received via small advisory teams in the field. Russian special operations forces, military police, and private military contractors continuously informed the overall picture, allowing Russia to develop its unconventional approach to working with partner forces and alongside paramilitary formations, civil councils, and other local entities to achieve objectives. As with Russia's previous campaigns in Georgia and Ukraine, Russia integrated new information into its campaign in Syria. Russian military operations were accompanied by a steady stream of propaganda and information warfare to reinforce their image as a peacemaker while disparaging U.S. and Western actions as destabilizing and counterproductive.

Finally, as described in Chapter 4, Russia conducted a punishment campaign marked by large-scale attacks against civilian and humanitarian infrastructure. Russia attempted to deny food, fuel, and medical aid to rebels while simultaneously eroding civilians' will to fight or provide support to opposition groups. Overall, Russia hit three types of civilian targets: medical facilities; other civilian infrastructure, such as schools, markets, and agriculture targets; and humanitarian infrastructure, such as aid convoys and camps housing internally displaced persons. These tactics were likely designed to break the will of opposition forces. In addition, these tactics, which were reminiscent of Russia's campaigns in Chechnya, suggest that Russia will continue to use punishment strategies and tactics in future campaigns.[9] While Russia will likely continue to target civilians during its military campaigns—and may think that punishment strategies are militarily effective—these heavy-handed actions damage their image as a responsible international actor.

Improvement and Refinement of Russian War-Fighting Technology

The Russian intervention in Syria was an opportunity to modernize Russia's war-fighting capabilities and use Syria as a live-fire training range to constantly refine its application of force. Russia improved its employment of forces in an expeditionary manner and used its naval forces to protect maritime resupply. The means of Russian involvement—via airpower and proxies—led to refinement in both. Russian airpower and targeting improved over the course of the war, and two-thirds of its air force personnel rotated through the Syrian theater to gain experience.[10] Not only did the Syrian campaign impart valuable experience for its pilots, but it generated a database of air sorties to test the limits of its airstrikes, which could then be used to refine technological capabilities with their military industrial base.

Perhaps the most important lesson in the technological sphere was Russia's development of advanced command, control, communications, and intelligence (C3I) field systems on the battlefield, providing data to enable a higher throughput of airstrikes. These systems were integrated into their overarching systems of "reconnaissance strike complexes" (RSCs)—which were designed for the coordinated employment of high-precision, long-range weapons linked to real-time intelligence data and accurate targeting—and were also tested in the Donbass in Ukraine.[11] Russia took advantage of the relatively permissive environment in Syria to test and refine these technologies, integrating them with unmanned aerial systems such as the Orlan-10, Forpost, and Eleron-3SV; electronic warfare; and other intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. In sum, Russia's experience in Syria

highlights its desire to further refine its ability to strike from afar with an increasing degree of precision. But Russian actions are hardly innovative. Instead, Russia is largely catching up to Western military technology and practices.

A Laboratory for Military Leadership Experience

Russia continually rotated mid- to senior-level leadership to the Syrian theater of operations. Officers received valuable experience on the ground in advisory or leadership roles.[12] Senior leadership rotated every six to nine months and sometimes at shorter intervals. A wide array of officers from various branches of military service and military districts participated in the conflict. Many were promoted following their deployment to Syria, and it would be hard to discount the impact of Syrian combat as an important factor in Russian military promotions. Several of these commanders are top contenders to take over from Valery Gerasimov. By frequently rotating its officers, Russia was not only able to expose these officers to a valuable and contemporary experience but also to spread the burden of war-fighting among its ranks rather than concentrate it in one particular military district or service.

Russia's Political Influence in the Levant and the Greater Middle East

In some ways, Russia's military action in Syria merely reflected the arc of Russian involvement from Soviet times, as noted in Chapter 2.[13] Russia had closely observed U.S. actions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and other countries. The Arab Spring and color revolutions heightened Russian concern of regime change and the potential effects of instability in Syria. Russia positioned itself as a guarantor of Syrian sovereignty while accommodating Turkish security concerns. It was ultimately able to exert significant influence over a weak state to achieve its main objectives.

Looking ahead, Russia will likely remain interested in Syria as a military power projection platform. But Russia has neither the capacity nor the desire to get involved in reconstruction efforts and will likely only posture the minimum amount of military assets in Syria to maintain its interests. Moscow may also be cautious about involvement in a long-term military peacekeeping operation in Syria and has not gained much support from other European and Asian countries to support this mission.[14] While the long-term implications of Russia's influence in the region are still uncertain, Russia certainly made a splash with its actions in Syria. The symbolic power of Russia's intervention in Syria matters greatly to other authoritarian states that fear regime change, particularly against the backdrop of a possible U.S. withdrawal from the region.

Moreover, the Russian intervention in Syria demonstrated that Russia is now willing to use force—albeit limited—outside of its traditional and immediate area to achieve its strategic interests. Beginning around 2019, Russia deployed advanced weaponry and private military contractors to Libya in support of General Khalifa Haftar and his eastern Libyan government's assault on the rival UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. While enabling Haftar's ground forces with specialized capabilities such as anti-tank guided missiles, snipers, and air defense batteries, Moscow executed extensive disinformation operations to discredit the GNA and offered to help broker a peace agreement.[15] The United States and the West should take note and keep an eye on other potential flashpoints where Moscow could similarly—and opportunistically—further its interests. Russia has expanded its use of private military contractors and special operations forces overseas, including to other areas like Ukraine, the Central African Republic, Sudan, the Sahel, and Venezuela.

The experience in Syria has been a tidewater in some ways for the Russian military. Russia has developed its military technology to offset needed direct troop involvement in far-flung areas. Where ground forces are needed, Russia is more likely to rely on special operations forces, proxy forces, and private military contractors. Syria has been a laboratory for many of Russia's senior officers to experience a sophisticated and complex security environment. Russia will likely use its Syrian experience

to refine its military strategies, operations, and tactics, and the Russian military will likely make adjustments in the application of force where needed. Unlike the West, which typically looks to the last war in preparing for the next, the Russian military may not overly focus on the Syrian campaign but instead seek to identify lessons from Western military advances as a source of new ideas.

Broader Lessons

There are also lessons for the United States and other Western countries from the Russian campaign in Syria, including in such areas as deconfliction, responses short of conventional war, and the strengths and limits of diplomacy.

Lessons of Deconfliction

Beyond strict tactical and operational takeaways for the Russian Armed Forces, there are important lessons from the U.S.-Russia deconfliction line.[16] As highlighted in Chapter 5, deconfliction lines were primarily lines of communication between the U.S.-led coalition and the Russian Group of Forces. The United States successfully employed them to ensure the safety of U.S. military forces.

Russia generally respected U.S. military power and ensured the safety of its forces, complying with U.S. directives about deconfliction lines when the directives were backed up by demonstrations of force. However, when the United States was unable to back up these statements, Russia often exploited the gap. Beyond simple deconfliction, these lines also served as lines of communication between senior military leaders. In this vein, they provided Russia a channel to influence U.S. and coalition behavior, and Moscow employed them disproportionally when it lacked viable military alternatives. Similarly, the United States could use deconfliction lines to employ strategic messaging and reinforce diplomatic narratives. The respective usage of lines over the years created at times varying degrees of co-dependency. Starting as a tool to ensure the mutual safety of U.S. forces, the United States learned over time how to employ the lines as a deterrent. Russia, concerned about the safety of its forces, also understood deconfliction lines as a tool through which it could influence, critique, and negotiate.

Flexible Policy Responses Short of Conventional War

As highlighted in Chapter 4, Russia adopted both direct and indirect measures as part of its punishment campaign to undermine support for the opposition. While retaliatory military measures by the United States would likely have escalated the conflict, there were likely options below the threshold of conventional warfare which could have put pressure on Russia to change its behavior, such as economic sanctions, information warfare, and diplomatic denunciations. Essential to such a strategy are both communication and credibility, as the Nobel Prize-winning economist Thomas Schelling described in his book *Arms and Influence*.[17]

In the future, if the United States attempts to deter or coerce Russia or one of its partners through diplomatic, economic, or military measures, it must clearly articulate where the line is and be prepared to follow through on its threat. Attacks that are already considered war crimes—such as targeting hospitals and humanitarian convoys or using chemical weapons against populations—should be a starting point for discussion. Once a red line is established, the United States must enforce it, unlike the Obama administration's failure to act against breaches of its chemical weapons red line in Syria. Given the trajectory of the conflict and the regularity of Russian abuses, the United States needs to do a better job of preventing Russia and its partners from conducting human rights abuses in the future.

The Strengths and Limits of Diplomacy

Russia leveraged its diplomatic power to exploit seams in U.S. and Western responses and policies.[18] Two aspects that distinguished Russian diplomacy from U.S. diplomacy was the uniformity among Russian political and diplomatic leaders and the seamless nature in which Russian diplomacy complemented military operations on the ground. Russia also uniformly understood and executed their policy, which contrasted sharply with

the mixed signals and motivations that marked U.S. military objectives with untenable policy positions.

For Russia, diplomatic efforts to lock in ceasefires were merely a means to advance their military objectives and were not designed to achieve peace or lessen suffering for those on the ground. In both the Geneva and Astana channels, Russia positioned itself as a designer and implementer of ceasefires and de-escalation agreements while remaining an active combatant on the battlefield. Moscow systemically and consistently exploited these diplomatic processes for military advantage. In some cases, Russia might intensify military activity, lock in those gains with a ceasefire, temporarily reduce hostilities to rest and refit, incrementally violate the agreements to set the stage for new military advances, and then increase military operations when diplomatic arrangements collapse. Understanding the desire of the United Nations, United States, and other actors for a ceasefire and exploiting the lack of an enforcement mechanism for ceasefire violations, Russia's incremental approach enabled it to advance its military campaign.

U.S. actions in Syria were full of contradictions. The United States and its coalition to defeat the Islamic State were held together by a thin mandate after declaring the caliphate dead in the spring of 2019. U.S. policymakers were opposed to carving up Syria yet were adamantly against a Russian presence in the U.S.-controlled portion of northeastern Syria. While U.S. policymakers said they respected Turkish interests, they also retained a close relationship with Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) until U.S. President Donald Trump's phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in October 2019. While these actions did not present intractable problems to an eventual diplomatic solution, U.S. diplomatic and military officials saw the way forward in starkly different terms.

The shaky foundation and absence of clear priorities on which U.S. policy was built made practical execution on the ground challenging. The mixture of observations from units on the ground and the discussions with U.S. partners via the deconfliction lines opened a unique window for Russia into U.S. and coalition operations. Military posture could often be perceived as contradictory to stated U.S. and coalition goals. This troubling framework, combined with Russian tactical freedom and higher risk acceptance, permitted Russia to test U.S. red lines. Through its diplomatic maneuvering, Russia took advantage of rifts and seams in the European and U.S. alliance, as well as within the United States itself. In addition, Russia positioned its military forces appropriately to exploit gains when and where there were opportunities. Russia frequently continued dialogue with the United States to gain insight—not to reach an agreement (except perhaps an agreement on its terms). Russian leaders may have assessed that they could achieve their objectives by simply waiting for the collapse of the U.S. position itself.

As the Duke of Wellington explained in his desire to better understand what was "at the other side of the hill," Russia's campaign in Syria provides an important opportunity to understand Russian strategy, operations, and tactics. Yet it was one campaign at one point in time. The challenge will be to evaluate the evolution in Russian thinking and actions over time and in various geographic areas. Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov may have said it best in describing the evolution of warfare. "Each war," he said, "represents an isolated case, requiring an understanding of its own particular logic, its own unique character."[19]

Appendix

Russian Force Composition in Syria

Ground

Personnel

Russian military personnel in Syria included regular forces, special operations forces (such as KSO), Spetsnaz, military police, private military contractors (PMCs), and engineers. Table A.1 provides an overview of Russian ground forces deployed to Syria.

TABLE A.1 Ground Forces[1]

Category	Personnel	Role
Regular Forces	Aerospace Forces (VKS) Airborne Troops • 162nd Separate Recon Battalion of the 7th Guards Air Assault Division Naval Infantry • Elite 810th Marine Regiment BSF Ground Forces • 74th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade • 27th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade • 64th Motor Rifle Brigade • 20th NRBC regiment • 17th EW Brigade Artillerymen • 120th Separate Artillery Brigade • 8th Artillery Regiment • 439th Guards Rocket Artillery Brigade	Direct fires; protection of Russian bases
Special Operations Forces	KSO GRU Spetsnaz • 3rd Guards Spetsnaz Brigade SVR Spetsnaz FSB Spetsnaz 431st Naval Reconnaissance Brigade Zaslon Force (2015) USSR Spetsnaz	Battlefield reconnaissance; protection of Russian bases; specific assault missions

TABLE A.1 ▼ continued

Military Police	Chechen, Ingush, and other military police from the *Voennaya politsiya*	Checkpoint security; policing de-escalation zones; other tasks
Private Military Contractors	Wagner Group Anti-Terror Group MS Group Center R ATK Group Slavonic Corps ENOT Cossacks	Assault operations; battlefield reconnaissance; train-advise-assist; secure natural resources
Paramilitary	Russian engineers, technicians, advisers	Reconnaissance; minefield clearing

TABLE A.2 Artillery Systems

Name	Role
Tos-1A	Multiple rocket launcher (MRL)
Tornado-G	MRL
9A52 BM-30	MRL
152mm Msta-B	Howitzer

TABLE A.3 Armor

Name	Role
T-90	Main battle tank (MBT)
T-72	MBT
T-62	MBT
BTR-82A armored personnel carrier (APC)	APC
Rys Armored Vehicles	APC

TABLE A.4 Ground-Based Missiles

System	Role
Tochka (SS-21)	Ground-launched short-range ballistic missile (SRBM)
9k720 Iskander-M (SS-26 Stone)	Ground-launched SRBM

Air

TABLE A.5 Combat Aircraft

System	Variant	NATO Designation	Role
Mig-29	KR/KUBR	Fulcrum-D	Multirole fighter
Mig-29	SMT	Fulcrum-E	Multirole fighter
Su-24	M/M2	Fencer/Fencer-D	Ground attack
Su-25	SM/SM3/UB	Frogfoot	Close air support
Su-27	SM3	Flanker	Air superiority
Su-30	SM	Flanker-H	Multirole fighter
Su-33		Flanker-D	Air superiority
Su-34		Fullback	Frontline bomber
Su-35	S	Flanker-E	Multirole fighter
Su-57		Felon	Stealth air superiority
Tu-22	M3	Backfire-C	Supersonic bomber
Tu-95	MS	Bear-H	Strategic bomber
Tu-160		Blackjack	Heavy bomber

TABLE A.6 Rotary-wing Aircraft

System	Variant	NATO Designation	Role
Ka-52	A	Hokum-B	Attack helicopter
Ka-31	R	Helix	Airborne early warning and control
Ka-27	PS	Helix-D	Search and rescue
Mi-8	AMTSh	Hip	Air assault
Mi-24	P	Hind-F	Attack helicopter
Mi-28	N	Havoc	Attack helicopter
Mi-35	M	Hind-E	Attack helicopter

Air Defense

TABLE A.7 Air Defense Systems

System	Variant	NATO Designation	Role
S-400		Sa-21 Growler	Long-range surface-to-air missile (SAM) system
S-300	V4	Sa-12 Gladiator/Giant	ABM system
S-300	FM	SA-N-20	Naval SAM system
S-200	VE	Sa-5 Gammon	SAM system
Pantsir-S1		SS-22 Greyhound	SAM/anti-aircraft system
Osa-AKM		SA-8-Gecko	SAM system
S-125 Pechora		Sa-3 Goa	Short-range air defense (SHORAD) system
Buk-M2E		Sa-17 Grizzly	Medium-range SAM system
K-300	Bastion-P	SS-C-5 Stooge	Coastal defense missile system

Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR)

TABLE A.8 Fixed-wing ISR Aircraft

System	Variant	NATO Designation	Role
Il-20	M	Coot-A	Communications intelligence (COMINT) / electronic intelligence (ELINT) reconnaissance
Tu-214	R		Reconnaissance
A-50	U	Mainstay	Airborne early warning and control

TABLE A.9 Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)

System	Role	Features
Forpost	ISR	Russia license-produced Israeli IAI Searcher II; high-mounted monoplane wing arrangement
Orlan-10	ISR	Light UAV; employed for target designation and reconnaissance
Eleron-3SV	Airborne	Light tactical UAV; provides day-and-night aerial reconnaissance
Zastava	Airborne	Russia license-produced IAI BirdEye 400; light tactical UAV

Naval

TABLE A.10 Surface and Subsurface Attack, Transport, and Auxiliary Vessels, 2015

System	Role	Variant (Other Information)	Armaments/Features
Admiral Kuznetsov	Aircraft carrier	(project 1143.5)	Missile launchers (12 Granit anti-ship missiles and 60 Udav-1 ASW rockets), Klinok air defense missile system (192 missiles, 24 launchers), and Kashtan CIWS (256 missiles). The cruiser can carry up to 24 Ka-27 multipurpose helicopters, up to 16 Yak-41M supersonic VTOL multirole aircrafts, and up to 12 Su-27K deck-based fighters
Vice-Admiral Kulakov	Anti-submarine destroyer	Udaloy-class (project 1155)	2 quadruple launchers of Rastrub rocket torpedoes, 6-26 mines, 8 launchers of Kinzhal SAM systems (64 missiles), 2 x 100-mm gun mounts AK-100, 4 six-barreled 30-mm machineguns AK-630M, ASW rocket launchers RBU-6000, 2 Ka-27 helicopters
Rostov-Na-Donu (Rostov-on-Don)	Diesel-electric submarine	(project 636.3)	Kalibr cruise missiles
Landny	Frigate	Krivak-class (project 1135)	4 launchers of URPK-5 Rastrub multipurpose missile systems, 2 Osa-MA-2 MANPADS launchers, 2 coupled 76.2-mm gun mounts AK-726, 2 x 4-container 533-mm torpedo tubes, 2 RBU-6000 ASW rocket launchers
Samum	Guided air cushion missile ship	(project 1239)	2 quadruple launchers of Moskit anti-ship missiles, MANPADS Osa-M launcher, 76-mm gun mount AK-176, 2 x 30-mm 6-barreled gun mount AK-630
Zeleny Dol	Guided-missile corvette	Buyan-M- class (project 21631)	Kalibr missile system, a 100-mm artillery piece A-190, Gibka launchers with Igla air defense missiles and the air defense artillery system AK-630-2 Duet
Serpukhov	Guided-missile corvette	Buyan-M-class (project 21631)	Kalibr missile system, a 100-mm artillery piece A-190, Gibka launchers with Igla air defense missiles and the air defense artillery system AK-630-2 Duet
Mirazh	Guided-missile corvette	(project 12341)	6 Moskit anti-ship missile launchers, MANPADS Osa-M launcher, 76-mm gun mount AK-176, 30-mm 6-barelled gun mount AK-630

TABLE A.10 ▼ continued

Moskva	Guided-missile cruiser	Slava-class (project 1164)	16 anti-ship missile launchers (16 P-500 Bazalt missiles; after modernization – 16 P-1000 Vulkan missiles), 1 x 2 130-mm gun mount AK-130, 6 sextuple 30-mm gun mounts AK-630, 8 x 8 B-204 launchers of S-300F Rif SAM system (ammunition load is 64 missiles), 2 x 2 launchers of Osa-MA SAM system (ammunition load is 48 missiles), 2 x 5 533-mm torpedo tubes, 2 x 12 RBU-6000 anti-submarine rocket launchers, Ka-27 helicopter
Smetlivy	Guided-missile destroyer	Kashin-class (project 01090)	2 quadruple launchers of Kh-35 Uran anti-ship missiles, 76-mm twin gun mount AK-726, 2 coupled launchers of Volna SAM system (16 missiles), 5 x 533-mm torpedo tubes (5 torpedoes), 2 ASW rocket launchers RBU-1000
Alexander Shabalin	Landing ship		2 coupled 57-mm gun mounts AK-725, 2 launchers of MLRS A-215 Grad-M, 4 launchers of MANPADS Strela-2, capacity is up to 500 tons of armor vehicles and 225 marines
Alexander Otrakovsky	Large landing ship LLS / (BDK)	(project 775)	2 coupled 57-mm gun mounts AK-725, 2 launchers of MLRS A-215 Grad-M, 4 launchers of MANPADS Strela-2, capacity is up to 500 tons of armor vehicles and 225 marines
Tsezar Kunikov (Caesar Kunikov)	Large landing ship LLS / (BDK)	(project 775)	2 coupled 57-mm gun mounts AK-725, 2 launchers of MLRS A-215 Grad-M, 4 launchers of MANPADS Strela-2, capacity is up to 500 tons of armor vehicles and 225 marines
Kaliningrad	Large landing ship LLS / (BDK)	(project 775)	2 coupled 57-mm gun mounts AK-725, 2 launchers of MLRS A-215 Grad-M, 4 launchers of MANPADS Strela-2, capacity is up to 500 tons of armor vehicles and 225 marines
Azov	Large landing ship LLS / (BDK)	(project 775M)	2 coupled 57-mm gun mounts AK-725, 2 launchers of MLRS A-215 Grad-M, 4 launchers of MANPADS Strela-2, capacity is up to 500 tons of armor vehicles and 225 marines
Saratov	Large landing ship LLS / (BDK)	Alligator-class (project 1171)	1 coupled 57-mm gun mount ZIF-31B, 3 MANPADS launchers, capacity is up to 1,500 tons of armor vehicles and cargo
Pyotr Velikiy	Nuclear-powered missile cruiser	Kirov-class (project 1144)	Granit anti-ship missiles, S-300 FM, Tor missile system
Moma	Intelligence collection vessel	AGI / AGI-class (project 861M)	ELINT-collection vessel

TABLE A.11 Surface and Subsurface Attack, Transport, and Auxiliary Vessels, 2018

System	Role	Variant (Other Information)	Armaments/Features
Severomork	Anti-submarine warfare ship (DDG)	(project 1155)	
Yaroslav Mudryy	Anti-submarine warfare ship (DDG)	(project 11540)	6 x 533-mm torpedo tubes, 2 Vodopad-NK ASW rocket torpedo systems, RBU-6000 ASW rocket launchers, 4 Kinzhal SAM systems, 2 Kortik SAM/gun systems, 100-mm gun mount AK-100 with MR-145 Lev guiding radar, Ka-27 ASW helicopter
Kolpino	Diesel-electric submarine (SS)	New Kilo-class (project 636.3)	6 torpedo tubes of standard 533-millimeter diameter and were originally configured to carry homing torpedoes and 18 SS-N-15A Starfish antisubmarine missiles. One major improvement was the ability to launch Kalibr cruise missiles
Krasnodar	Diesel-electric submarine (SS)	(project 636.3)	Equipped with high-precision Kalibr strike missiles for firing at surface targets (PKR 3M-54 and 3M-541) and ground targets (3M-14 cruise missiles) as well as renovated electronic equipment
Veliky Novgorod	Diesel-electric submarine (SS)	New Kilo-class (project 636.3)	6 torpedo tubes of standard 533-millimeter diameter and were originally configured to carry homing torpedoes and 18 SS-N-15A Starfish anti-submarine missiles. One major improvement was the ability to launch Kalibr cruise missiles
Pytlivy	Escort ship	(project 1135)	4 launchers of URK-5 Rastrub missile system, 2 coupled launchers of Osa SAM system, 2 x 100-mm gun mounts AK-100, 2 quadruple 533-mm torpedo tubes, 2 ASW rocket launchers RBU-6000, Stern heliport for 1 helicopter
Admiral Makarov	Frigate (FFG)	Admiral Grigorovich class (project 11356M)	1 x 100 mm gun, 2 x 30 mm Kashtan CIWS Missiles, 1 x 8-cell VLS for Kalibr anti-ship/land-attack cruise missiles or Oniks anti-ship cruise missiles, 3 x 12-cell VLS for Shtil-1 air defense missiles, torpedoes, 2 x twin 533 mm torpedo tubes, Other, 1 x RBU-6000 anti-submarine rocket launcher, and 1 x Ka-27 or Ka-31
Admiral Grigorovich	Frigate (FFG)	Krivak IV class (project 11356M)	1 x 100 mm gun, 2 x 30 mm Kashtan CIWS Missiles, 1 x 8-cell VLS for Kalibr anti-ship/land-attack cruise missiles or Oniks anti-ship cruise missiles, 3 x 12-cell VLS for Shtil-1 air defense missiles, torpedoes, 2 x twin 533 mm torpedo tubes, 2 x twin 533 mm torpedo tubes, other, 1 x RBU-6000 anti-submarine rocket launcher, and 1 x Ka-27 or Ka-31

TABLE A.11 ▼ continued

Admiral Essen	Frigate (FFG)	Admiral Grigorovich class (project 11356M)	1 x 100 mm gun, 2 x 30 mm Kashtan CIWS Missiles, 1 x 8-cell VLS for Kalibr anti-/land-attack cruise missiles or Oniks anti-ship cruise missiles, 3 x 12-cell VLS for Shtil-1 air defense missiles, torpedoes, 2 x twin 533 mm torpedo tubes, other, 1 x RBU-6000 anti-submarine rocket launcher, and 1 x Ka-27 or Ka-31
Uglich	Guided-missile corvette (FSG)	(project 21631)	1x8 3S14-21631 UKSK 3K14 launchers (Kalibr guided-missile complex (8 3M14T missiles)) – 3R14N fire control system, 2x6 3M-47 Gibka Igla-1M SAM system launchers, 1x1 100 mm A-190-01 – 5P-10-03 Laska fire control system, 1x12 30 mm AK-630M-2 Duet (Stavropol – 1 Pantsir-M 1x 8 launchers 57E6 missiles, 2x6 30 mm), 2x1 14.5 mm MTPU-1 Zhalo
Vyshnii Volochok	Guided-missile corvette (FSG)	Buyan-M class (project 21631)	4UKSK vertical launcher for 8 Kalibr (Onyx) SAM missiles, one 100-mm gun mount A-190M, one 30-mm gun mount AK-630M1-2 Duet, two launchers for MANPADS Gibka, two 14.5-mm and three 7.62-mm machine guns
Veliky Ustyug	Guided-missile corvette (FSG)	(project 21631)	1x8 3S14-21631 UKSK 3K14 launchers (Kalibr guided-missile complex (8 3M14T missiles)) – 3R14N fire control system, 2x6 3M-47 Gibka Igla-1M SAM system launchers, 1x1 100 mm A-190-01 – 5P-10-03 Laska fire control system, 1x12 30 mm AK-630M-2 Duet (Stavropol – 1 Pantsir-M 1x 8 launchers 57E6 missiles, 2x6 30 mm), 2x1 14.5 mm MTPU-1 Zhalo
Grad Sviyazhsk	Guided-missile corvette (FSG)	(project 21631)	1x8 3S14-21631 UKSK 3K14 launchers (Kalibr guided-missile complex (8 3M14T missiles)) – 3R14N fire control system, 2x6 3M-47 Gibka Igla-1M SAM system launchers, 1x1 100 mm A-190-01 – 5P-10-03 Laska fire control system, 1x12 30 mm AK-630M-2 Duet (Stavropol – 1 Pantsir-M 1x8 launchers 57E6 missiles, 2x6 30 mm), 2x1 14.5 mm MTPU-1 Zhalo
Marshal Ustinov	Guided-missile cruiser (CG)	Slava-class (project 1164)	16 Bazalt anti-ship missile launchers, 2 five-container 533-mm torpedo tubes, 2 RBU-6000 anti-submarine rocket launchers, 2 coupled 130-mm gun mounts AK-130, 6 30-mm gun mounts AK-630, 2 coupled Osa-MA SAM launchers, 8 S-300F Rif SAM launchers, Ka-25/Ka-27 ASW helicopter
Orsk	Large landing ship LLS / (BDK)	(project 1171)	1 coupled 57-mm gun mount ZIF-31B, capacity is up to 1,500 tons of armor vehicles and cargo
Nikolai Filchenkov	Large landing ship LLS / (BDK)	(project 1171)	1 coupled 57-mm gun mount ZIF-31B, 2 coupled anti-aircraft machineguns 2M-3M, 3 MANPADS launchers MLRS A-215 Grad-M, capacity up to 1,500 tons of armor vehicles and cargo

TABLE A.11 ▼
continued

Turbinist	Minesweeper (MS)	(project 266M)	2 x 4 launchers of MANPADS Strela-2, 2 x 2 30-mm gun mounts AK-230M (2,000 shells), 2 x 2 25-mm gun mounts 2M-3M (2,000 shells), anti-submarine rocket launchers RBU-1200 (68 depth charge rockets RGB-12), sweeps (contact, magnetic), cord charges, up to 9 mines overload
Valentin Pikul	Minesweeper (MS)	(project 266M)	18 sets of MANPADS Igla, 2 x 6-barreled 30-mm automatic gun mounts AK-630M, 2 anti-submarine rocket launchers RBU-1200, contact sweep GKT-2 (sweeping distance is 260-280 meters, trawling depth 10-200 meters) sound sweep AT-2 (towing speed is 5-12 knots), magnetic sweeps TEM-3 (towing speed is up to 10 knots) with power feeder up to 455 meters long

Electronic Warfare (EW)

TABLE A.12 Select Russian EW Systems in Syria

System	Fixture	Role
Krasukha-4	Ground-mobile	Protected Russian air facilities from Western intelligence platforms (S-band, J-band, X-band)[2]
Borisoglebsk-2	Ground	Offensive ground jammer—disrupted electromagnetic frequencies
Vitebsk	Airborne	Created a canopy around helicopters to protect from anti-air missiles such as MANPADS. Installed on Ka-52 attack helicopters[3]
Khibiny	Airborne	Jammed the guidance systems of ground- or air-based anti-air missiles. Installed on helicopters and aircraft

Munitions

Russian military operations featured a mixed of unguided and precision-guided ground, naval, and air-launched munitions. Key munitions included the following:

TABLE A.13 Munitions

Systems	Role	Guided / Unguided
KAB-250/-500 series	Air-to-ground guided bomb. Variants include: S-E (satellite-guided GLONASS), KR (TV-guided) with thermobaric warhead variant, L (laser-guided), OD (EO correlation TV seeker). Primarily employed by Su-34s	Guided
KAB-1500 series	Guided bombs. Variants include: S-E (satellite-guided), L (laser-guided), and KR (TV-guided)	Guided
Kh-25ML (As-10 Karen) laser-guided missile	Air-to-ground laser-guided missile. Primarily employed by Su-24s	Guided
Kh-29 (As-14 Kredge)	Air-to-surface missile	Guided
Kh-35 (AS-20 Kayak)	Subsonic anti-ship cruise missile. Kh-35U variant capable of striking land targets. Launched from air, surface, and naval platforms	Guided
Kh-55/-555 (NATO: Kent-A/-B/-C family)	Subsonic air-launched cruise missiles. Employed primarily by strategic bombers	Guided
Kh-101	Stealthy long-range standoff ALCM. Primarily employed for Russian long-range strategic bombers in Syria	Guided
Kalibr series	Precision-guided land-attack, anti-ship, and anti-submarine cruise missiles. Variants included 3M-54M/E/TE/AE	Guided
R-73 (AA-11 Archer)	Short-range anti-aircraft missile. Employed by many fixed- and rotary-wing platforms	Guided
R-27 (AA-10 Alamo)	Medium-to-long-range anti-aircraft missile. Variants include: T (infrared-homing), R (semi-active-radar homing), EA (active-radar homing). Primarily employed by Mig-29s and Su-27 fighters	Guided
ODAB-500PM/PV	Fuel-air explosive (vacuum bomb) thermobaric bomb[4]	Unguided
OFAB-250-270	Air-dropped fragmentation high-explosive bomb	Unguided
RBK-500 series	(Including RBK-500-SPBE-D) Cluster munitions to engage enemy vehicles and tanks. Variants include RBK-500 ZAB-2.5SM and other incendiary & cluster bombs (banned by UN.[5]	Unguided
BETAB series	Bunker-busting munitions.	Unguided
FAB series	Air-dropped free-fall bomb. Key variants include FAB-250, Fab-500s such as FAB-500ShN thermobaric bombs, and FAB-1500 HE aerial bombs	Unguided
S-8OFP	Unguided rocket primarily employed by attack helicopters against enemy tanks	Unguided

About the Authors

Seth G. Jones holds the Harold Brown Chair, is director of the Transnational Threats Project, and is a senior adviser to the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He teaches at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and the Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. Prior to joining CSIS, Dr. Jones was the director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation. He also served as representative for the commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, to the assistant secretary of defense for special operations. Before that, he was a plans officer and adviser to the commanding general, U.S. Special Operations Forces, in Afghanistan (Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan). In 2014, Dr. Jones served on a congressionally mandated panel that reviewed the FBI's implementation of counterterrorism recommendations contained in the 9/11 Commission Report. Dr. Jones specializes in counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, and covert action, including a focus on al Qaeda and the Islamic State. He is the author of *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (W.W. Norton, 2018), *Waging Insurgent Warfare* (Oxford University Press, 2016), *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of al Qa'ida after 9/11* (W.W. Norton, 2012), and *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (W.W. Norton, 2009). Dr. Jones has published articles in a range of journals, such as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, and *International Security*, as well as newspapers and magazines such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*. Dr. Jones is a graduate of Bowdoin College and received his MA. and PhD. from the University of Chicago.

Jason P. Gresh is a military fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Colonel Gresh has been serving for the last 12 years as a foreign area officer, specializing in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Colonel Gresh most recently served as chief for the Russian deconfliction cell in the Combined Joint Task Force—Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), where he helped prevent unnecessary escalation between CJTF-OIR and Russian forces in Syria. Prior to this, he served as chief of the Office of Defense Cooperation at the U.S. embassy in Tallinn, Estonia, where he executed various forms of U.S. security cooperation with the government of Estonia. Colonel Gresh previously served at the United States European Command in Stuttgart, Germany, where he served as the Eurasia regional branch chief for J5—Strategic Plans and Policy. Prior to that, he was assigned as the assistant army attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, Ukraine, witnessing Ukraine's Maidan revolution as well as the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine. He has also served in Dushanbe, Tajikistan and Tbilisi, Georgia. Colonel Gresh started his Army career as an armor officer and served with the first squadron, third armored cavalry regiment at Fort Carson, Colorado as well as with the first infantry division in Germany. He holds a MA in

Russian and East European studies from Georgetown University and a BS in civil engineering from the United States Military Academy.

Nicholas Harrington is a research associate for the Transnational Threats Project (TNT) at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), where he provides analysis on asymmetric warfare, gray zone competition, and non-state actor threats worldwide. Mr. Harrington has contributed to TNT publications such as "Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria" (CSIS, 2019), "Iran's Threat to Saudi Critical Infrastructure: The Implications of U.S.-Iranian Escalation" (CSIS, 2019) and *The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat* (CSIS, 2018). Working for Dr. Anthony H. Cordesman, the CSIS Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy, he was a contributing author of numerous publications, including *The Arab Gulf States and Iran: Military Spending, Modernization, and the Shifting Military Balance* (CSIS, 2018) and *The Korean Civil-Military Balance* (CSIS, 2018). Prior to joining CSIS, he conducted research for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as well as the Office of the New York City Comptroller. He holds a BA in government from Dartmouth College.

Brian Katz is a fellow in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). His research agenda focuses on the intersection of intelligence, national security, and technology, including the integration and implications of emerging technologies; adapting intelligence to the future of counterterrorism; and the role of intelligence in policymaking, strategy, and military operations. He also frequently writes on Middle East security issues, counterterrorism, non-state actors, and proxy warfare. Mr. Katz served as a visiting fellow at CSIS from 2018-2019 through the Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellowship program. He joined CSIS after a decade of service in the U.S. government at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Department of Defense. At the CIA, Mr. Katz served as a military analyst for the Middle East, South Asia, and Eastern Europe, including multiple overseas tours. From 2016 to 2017, he served as country director for Syria in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, where he provided policy and strategy advice to senior officials on the Syrian conflict and U.S. military and counterterrorism efforts against the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. Mr. Katz is also an officer in the U.S. Navy Reserve currently serving with U.S. European Command. He holds a BS in economics from Duke University and an MA in international relations and strategic studies from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. He is a previous Center for a New American Security Next Generation National Security Fellow and a recipient of the Secretary of Defense Medal for Exceptional Civilian Service and two National Intelligence Medals.

Colonel Edmund X. Loughran is a military fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), where he supports the center by providing military expertise to its programs and initiatives. Prior to this assignment, he was the senior executive officer to the U.S. Air Force deputy chief of staff for operations. In this role, he integrated senior leader strategic decisionmaking across the staff and provided

counsel on issues impacting readiness and employment of air, space, cyberspace, and special warfare combat forces. Colonel Loughran was born in Walnut Creek, California and received his commission in 1998 from the Air Force Officer Training School after graduating from the University of Maryland. His early career included training as a navigator and an assignment as services officer before being selected to join Air Force special operations as a special tactics officer. He has since led special tactics formations as a flight commander, director of operations, twice as a squadron commander, and as a deputy group commander of both special operations aviation and ground combat forces through multiple operations and deployments across the globe. His qualifications include combat diver, static line jumpmaster, and military freefall parachutist.

Danika Newlee was a program manager and research associate for the Transnational Threats Project at CSIS, where she analyzed global terrorism and insurgencies with a special focus on Salafi-jihadi organizations, foreign fighters, and the Middle East/North Africa region. Prior to joining CSIS, she conducted research for the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) as part of their Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States project, which studies extremists who perpetrate attacks domestically as well as those who travel to join foreign conflicts. Ms. Newlee also worked for the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department as part of its open-source intelligence team, during which time she was responsible for analyzing issues relating to international terrorism and organized crime activity in the region. Ms. Newlee holds a BA in international relations and psychology from the University of Southern California. She also holds an MA in security studies from Georgetown University.

Endnotes

Chapter 01: Introduction

1 See, for example, The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: December 2017), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf; and James Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2018), https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

2 Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has also conducted air operations in Georgia, Ukraine, and Chechnya. During the Cold War, one of the largest air campaigns was in Afghanistan in the late-1970s and 1980s. See, for example, Lester W. Grau, ed., *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1996).

3 Victor Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov: 'My perelomili khrebet udarnym silam terrorizma'" ["Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia Army General Valery Gerasimov: 'We Have Broken the Ridge of the Shock Forces of Terrorism"], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 26, 2017, https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693/.

4 On control of territory, see, for example, Jonathan Spyer, "Syria's Civil War Is Now 3 Civil Wars," *Foreign Policy*, March 19, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/18/syrias-civil-war-is-now-3-civil-wars/; and Charles Lister, "Assad Hasn't Won Anything," *Foreign Policy*, July 11, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/11/assad-hasnt-won-anything-syria/.

5 Vladimir Putin, "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club," (remarks, Valdai International Discussion Club, Moscow, October 22, 2015), http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50548.

6 Valery Gerasimov, "We Broke the Back of Terrorists," interview by Victor Baranets, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 26, 2017, https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/w/o-e-watch-mobile-edition-v1/22715/general-gerasimov-on-the-syrian-campaign/.

7 Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?," *Military Review* 98, no. 2 (March-April 2018): 19, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2018-OLE/Russia-in-Syria/.

Chapter 02: Russian Goals and Strategy

1 On strategy see, for example, Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

2 John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), 2, 28-29.

3 B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach* (London: Faber, 1967), 335.

4 See, for example, Valery Gerasimov, "Tsennost' nauki v predvidenii: Novyye vyzovy trebuyut pereosmyslit' formy i sposoby vedeniya boyevykh deystviy" ["The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying Out Combat Operations"], *Voyenno-Promyshlennyy Kurier* [*Military-Industrial Courier*], no. 8, February 26, 2013.

5 On assessments of Russia's strategy in Syria see, for example, Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *Moscow's Syria Campaign: Russian Lessons for the Art of Strategy* (Paris: Institut français des relations internationales, July 2018); and Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?," *Military Review* 98, no. 2 (March-April 2018): 19, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2018-OLE/Russia-in-Syria/; Adamsky, "Russian Campaign in Syria: Change and Continuity in Strategic Culture," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 1 (2020): 104-125; and Anton Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria* (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analysis, June 2018), https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/COP-2018-U-017903-Final.pdf.

6 Rami Ginat, "The Soviet Union and the Syrian Ba'th Regime: From Hesitation to Rapprochement," *Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 2000): 150-171; Efraim Karsh, *Soviet Policy Towards Syria Since 1970* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1991); and Efraim Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria: The Assad Years* (London: Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1998).

7 Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), "Relations Between Syria and the USSR," (memorandum, Langley, VA: June 1, 1976), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00353R000100290001-4.pdf; and Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment With a Regime in Crisis," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (July 2013): 807.

8 CIA, *Soviet General Purpose Naval Deployments Outside Home Waters: Characteristics and Trends* (Langley, VA: June 1973), https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000309797.pdf; and Gordon H. McCormick, *The Soviet Presence in the Mediterranean* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, October 1987), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/papers/2008/P7388.pdf.

9 William B. Quandt, *Soviet Policy in the October 1973 War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, May 1976), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2006/R1864.pdf.

10 In 1976, for example, Assad expelled half of the Soviet military advisers in Syria after he found out that the KGB in Damascus was providing funds to the Lebanese Communist Party—against Syrian interests. Assad had also cracked down on the Syrian Communist Party. On KGB activity in Syria see Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Mitrokhin Archive II: The KGB and the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

11 CIA, "Relations Between Syria and the USSR."

12 Allison, "Russia and Syria." Emphasis added.

13 Christopher Harmer, "Russian Naval Base Tartus," Institute for the Study of War, July 31, 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder_Russian_NavalBaseTartus.pdf.

14 Andrej Kreutz, *Syria: Russia's Best Asset in the Middle East* (Paris: IFRI, November 2010), 7, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/kreutzengrussiasyrianov2010.pdf.

15 See, for example, Andrew E. Kramer, "Russian Warships Said to Be Going to Naval Base in Syria," *New York Times*, June 18, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/19/world/europe/russian-warships-said-to-be-going-to-naval-base-in-syria.html; and Frank Gardner, "How Vital is Syria's Tartus Port to Russia?," BBC, June 27, 2012, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18616191.

16 Inna Lazarea, "Russian Spy Base in Syria Used to Monitor Rebels and Israel Seized," *Telegraph*, October 8, 2014, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/11148857/Russian-spy-base-

in-Syria-used-to-monitor-rebels-and-Israel-seized.html; "Captured Russian Spy Facility Reveals the Extent of Russian Aid to the Assad Regime," Bellingcat, October 6, 2014, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2014/10/06/captured-russian-spy-facility-reveals-the-extent-of-russian-aid-to-the-assad-regime-2/; and Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), 11-12, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3180.html.

17 Charap, Treyger, and Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*.

18 Victor Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov: 'My perelomili khrebet udarnym silam terrorizma'" ["Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia Army General Valery Gerasimov: 'We Have Broken the Ridge of the Shock Forces of Terrorism"], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 26, 2017, https://www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693/.

19 See, for example, Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

20 See, for example, the U.S. government map of "Areas of Influence, August 2014-2015," published in Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, *Operation Inherent Resolve* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of State, and U.S. Agency for International Development, September 30, 2015), 26, https://dod.defense.gov/OIR/.

21 Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov."

22 Ibid.

23 On this argument, see Charap, Treyger, and Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*.

24 See, for example, Igor Panarin, *Informatsionnaya voyna i kommunikatsii* [*Information War and Communications*] (Moscow: Goryachaya Liniya-Telekom, 2015); Sergey Chekinov and Sergey Bogdanov, "Vliianie nepriamykh dei'stvii' na kharakter sovremennoi' voi'ny" ["The Influence of Indirect Actions on the Character of Contemporary War"], V*oennaya Mysl'*, vol. 6, 2011; Sergey Chekinov and Sergey Bogdanov, "Voennoe iskusstvo na nachal' nom etape XXI stoletiya: problem I suzhdeniya" ["Military Art at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century: Problems and Opinions"], *Voennaya Mysl'*, vol. 1, 2015.

25 See, for example, Gerasimov, "Tsennost' nauki v predvidenii." Also see later statements, such as Valery Gerasimov, "Speech at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Military Sciences," March 2, 2019. The speech was published in English at "Russian First Deputy Defense Minister Gerasimov," MEMRI, Special Dispatch no. 7943, March 14, 2019, https://www.memri.org/reports/russian-first-deputy-defense-minister-gerasimov-our-response-based-active-defense-strategy.

26 See, for example, Ariel Cohen, *The "Primakov Doctrine": Russia's Zero-Sum Game With the United States* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, December 15, 1997), https://www.heritage.org/report/the-primakov-doctrine-russias-zero-sum-game-the-united-states; and Eugene Rumer, *The Primakov (Not Gerasimov) Doctrine in Action* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 5, 2019), https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/06/05/primakov-not-gerasimov-doctrine-in-action-pub-79254.

27 On Russian military thinking see, for example, Evgeny Messner, "Gore i pobezhdennym i pobeditelyam" ["Grief to the Defeated and the Victors"], *Segodnya*, no. 71, 1931; Messner, *Vseminaya Myatezhevoyna [The Worldwide Subversion War]* (Buenos Aires: South American Division of the Institute for the Study of the Problems of War and Peace, 1971); Aleksandr Dugin, *Russkaya Veshch' [Russian Thing]* (Moscow: Arktogeya, 2001); Dugin, *Filosofiya voyny [The Philosophy of War]* (Moscow: Yauza, Eksmo, 2004); Igor Panarin, and L. Panarina, *Informatsionnaya voyna i mir [Information War and the World]* (Moscow: OLMA-PRESS, 2003); Sergey Chekinov and Sergey Bogdanov, "Evoliutsiia sushchnosti i soderzhaniia poniatiia 'voi'na' v XXI stoletii'" ["The Evolution of the Nature and the Content of the Concept of 'War' in the Twenty-First Century"], *Voennaya Mysl' [Military Thought]*, vol. 1, 2017; Chekinov and Bogdanov, "Voennoe iskusstvo na nachal'nom etape XXI stoletiya: problemy isuzhdeniya'" ["Military Art at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century: Problems and Opinions"], *Voennaya Mysl' [Military Thought]*, vol. 1, 2015; Chekinov and Bogdanov, "O Kharaktere i Soderzhanii Voiny Novogo Pokoleniia" ["The Nature and Content of a New-Generation War"], *Voennaya Mysl' [Military Thought]*, vol. 10, 2013.

28 Valery Gerasimov, "Voyennyye opasnosti i voyennyye ugrozy Rossiyskoy Federatsii v sovremennykh usloviyakh" ["Military Dangers and Military Threats of the Russian Federation in Modern Conditions"], *Armeyskiy Sbornik [Army Journal]*, no. 5 (April 16, 2015).

29 Valery Gerasimov, (presentation slides, Moscow Conference on International Security, May 23, 2014). The slides were published in Anthony H. Cordesman, *Russia and the 'Color Revolution': A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the U.S. and the West* (Washington, DC: CSIS, May 28, 2014), https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-"color-revolution".

30 Charles K. Bartles, "Getting Gerasimov Right," *Military Review* 96, no. 1 (January-February 2016): 32, https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Getting-Gerasimov-Right-Bartles/3097a69963f09d108e0abe0757ba71694e2749a0.

31 Gerasimov, presentation slides.

32 Ibid.

33 Gerasimov, "Tsennost' nauki v predvidenii."

34 Alexander D. Chekov et al., "War of the Future: A View from Russia," *Survival* 61, no. 6 (December 2019-January 2020): 29.

35 Sergei Shoigu, (speech on Global Security and Regional Stability, May 23, 2014), http://archive.redstar.ru/index.php/siriya/item/16225-tsvetnye-revolyutsii-ugroza-miru.

36 Gerasimov, presentation slides.

37 Christopher S. Chivvis, *Toppling Qaddafi: Libya and the Limits of Liberal Intervention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); and Karl Mueller, ed., *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2015), https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR676/RAND_RR676.pdf.

38 Sergei Lavrov, "On Syria and Libya," *Monthly Review*, May 17, 2011. The text is an excerpt from "Transcript of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview to Russian Media Following Attendance at Arctic Council Meeting, Nuuk, May 12, 2011," Russian Foreign Ministry, May 13, 2011, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/207142.

39 On President Obama's 2011 comments see "President Obama: The Future of Syria Must Be Determined By Its People, But President Bashar al-Assad Is Standing in Their Way," White House, August 18, 2011, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad.

40 Byron Tau, "Obama Renews Call for Assad to Step Down," *Wall Street Journal*, February 24, 2015, https://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-renews-call-for-assad-to-step-down-1424804546.

41 "John McCain Leads U.S. Delegation of Senators on Tour to Train Syrian Rebels," *Guardian*, January 18, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jan/18/john-mccain-senators-saudi-arabia-tour-syria-rebels.

42 See, for example, John McCain, Twitter post, May 28, 2013, 11:58 AM, https://twitter.com/senjohnmccain/status/339455679800700928?lang=en.

43 Kristina Wong, "McCain Meets Syrian Rebels, Presses for Military Aid to Fight ISIS," *Hill*, July 2, 2014, https://thehill.com/policy/defense/211186-mccain-meets-syrian-rebels-presses-for-military-aid-to-fight-isis.

44 "John McCain and Lindsey Graham Call for 20,000 Troops in Syria and Iraq," *Guardian*, November 29, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/nov/29/john-mccain-lindsey-graham-20000-troops-syria-iraq.

45 "Statement by H.E. Mr. Vladimir V. Putin, President of the Russian Federation, at the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly," United Nations, September 28, 2015, https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/70/70_RU_EN.pdf.

46 Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov."

47 On terrorist attacks in Russia leading up to the Russian intervention, see Global Terrorism Database, the University of Maryland, https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/.

48 Arsen Mollayev and Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Is Feeding Hundreds of Fighters to ISIS—and Some Are Starting to Return," Associated Press, October 28, 2015, https://www.businessinsider.com/ap-islamic-state-on-recruitment-spree-in-russia-2015-10. Also see GRU head Igor Korobov's later comments in A.A. Bartosh, "Trenie' i 'iznos' gibridnoj vojny" ["'Friction' and 'Wear' of Hybrid War"], *Voennaia Mysl* 1 (January 2018).

49 *Imarat Kavkaz / Caucasus Emirate* (London: IHS Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism, 2014).

50 According to Russian intelligence assessments, there were up to 4,500 citizens from Russia or Central Asian in the ranks of jihadist groups in 2015. Since the Syrian war began, an estimated 9,000 fighters from Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia had traveled to Syria and Iraq to fight with groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda over the course of the war. Valery Gerasimov, "Vooruzhennyye Sily Rossiyskoy Federatsii i bor'ba s mezhdunarodnym terrorizmom" ["The Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the Fight Against International Terrorism"], MCIS-2016 Conference, May 2016; Richard Barrett, *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees* (New York: The Soufan Center, October 2017), https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/India/document/papers/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017.pdf. Also see Thomas Sanderson et al., *Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria: Assessing the Threat from*

(and to) Russia and Central Asia (Washington, DC: CSIS, December 2017), 2, https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-speaking-foreign-fighters-iraq-and-syria.

51 Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 13; Barnett R. Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 7; Lester Grau, ed., *The Bear Went Over the Mountain: Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1996), xix; Mohammad Yousaf and Mark Adkin, *Afghanistan–The Bear Trap: The Defeat of a Superpower* (Havertown, PA: Casemate, 1992), 215-216.

52 Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, "How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow," Reuters, October 6, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh/how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006.

53 "Soglasheniye mezhdu Rossiyskoy Federatsiyey i Siriyskoy Arabskoy Respublikoy o razmeshchenii aviatsionnoy gruppy Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiyskoy Federatsii na territorii Siriyskoy Arabskoy Respubliki ot 26 avgusta 2015 goda" ["Agreement Between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on the Deployment of an Aviation Group of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation on the Territory of the Syrian Arab Republic, August 26, 2015"]. The text of the agreement can be found at http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201601140019. Also see "Moscow Cements Deal With Damascus to Keep 49-Year Presence at Syrian Naval and Air Bases," TASS, January 20, 2017, https://tass.com/defense/926348.

54 Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov"; and Charap, Treyger, and Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*.

55 On Russian military preparations in Syria, see Valery Polovkin, ed., *Rossikoe Oruzhiye v Siriskom Konflikt* (Moscow: STATUS, 2016).

56 Graham Allison, "The Cuban Missile Crisis," Belfer Center, Harvard University, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/CMC50/GrahamAllisonThe%20CubanMissileCrisis.pdf; and Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, "Soviet Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Intelligence and National Security* 13, no. 3 (1998): 64-87, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02684529808432494.

57 On Russian military preparations in Syria, see Polovkin, ed., *Rossikoe Oruzhiye v Siriskom Konflikt*.

58 Ibid.

59 Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov."

60 "Russia Learns Military Lessons in Syria," *IHS Jane's Intelligence Review*, 2017; and Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov."

61 Kofman and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?," 14.

62 Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov."

63 Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002), 266.

64 On Russian support to organizations such as the Wagner Group, see James Bingham and Konrad Muzyka, "Private Companies Engage in Russia's Non-Linear Warfare," *IHS Jane's Intelligence Review*, January 29, 2018, https://www.janes.com/images/assets/018/78018/Private_companies_engage_in_Russias_non-linear_warfare.pdf. On Lebanese Hezbollah and IRGC-QF activity, see Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 77-96.

65 On Russian special operations in Syria, see Michael Kofman, "Russian Spetsnaz: Learning from Experience," Cipher Brief, March 15, 2017, https://www.thecipherbrief.com/russian-spetsnaz-learning-from-experience; and Christopher Marsh, *Developments in Russian Special Operations: Russia's Spetznaz, SOF and Special Operations Forces Command* (Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, 2017).

66 Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov."

67 Ibid.

68 On the development of Russian special operations forces see, for example, Vladimir Kvachkov, *Spetsnaz Rossii* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2015). Kvachkov was a former spetsnaz colonel.

69 Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov."

70 Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, November 2002).

71 On punishment campaigns see Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 47-52; Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 31-32; Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Classic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Persia to the Present* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 108; and Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf, Jr., *Rebellion and Authority: An Analytic Essay on Insurgent Conflicts* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, February 1970), 90-131, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2006/R0462.pdf.

72 Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2019* (New York: 2019), https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019#; "Indiscriminate Bombing of Syria's Idlib Could Be War Crime, Says France," Reuters, September 12, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-france/indiscriminate-bombing-of-syrias-idlib-could-be-war-crime-says-france-idUSKCN1LS27J; Sanu Kainikara, *In the Bear's Shadow: Russian Intervention in Syria* (Canberra, Australia: Air Power Development Centre, Australian Department of Defence, 2018), 90; and Brian Glyn Williams and Robert Souza, "Operation 'Retribution': Putin's Military Campaign in Syria, 2015-2016," *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2016), 42-60.

73 Jason Lyall, "Does Indiscriminate Violence Incite Insurgent Attacks? Evidence from Chechnya," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 3 (2009): 331-362, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20684590.

74 Kofman and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?," 6-23.

75 See, for example, Gerasimov, "Tsennost' nauki v predvidenii."

Chapter 03: The Military Campaign

1 Douglas Barrie, "Russian Aerospace Forces Reform and Its Syrian Role: The View from Moscow," International Institute for Strategic Studies, Military Balance Blog, December 6, 2018, https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2018/12/russian-aerospace-reform-syria.

2 Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3180.html.

3 Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2017), 58, https://www.dia.mil/portals/27/documents/news/military%20power%20publications/russia%20military%20power%20report%202017.pdf.

4 Barrie, "Russian Aerospace Forces Reform and Its Syrian Role: The View from Moscow."

5 Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?," *Military Review* 98, no. 2 (March-April 2018): 19, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2018-OLE/Russia-in-Syria/.

6 Anton Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria* (Arlington, VA: Center for Naval Analysis, June 2018), https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/COP-2018-U-017903-Final.pdf.

7 Ibid.

8 Kofman and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?"

9 "Russian UAVs in Syria," Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, http://cast.ru/eng/products/articles/russian-uavs-in-syria.html?sphrase_id=14647577.

10 See, for example, Andrew Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for Future U.S.-Russia Competition*, Appendixes (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3099.html; see also, "Batereya S-300 v Sirii mozhet bklyuchat' bolee chetyrekh puskovykh ustanovok" ["An S-300 Battery Can Include More Than 4 Launchers"], unattributed report, Interfax, October 4, 2016.

11 These systems included the Pantsir-S1 (SS-22 Greyhound) SAM/AA system, the Osa-AKM (SA-8 Gecko) SAM, the S-125 Pechora (SA-3 Goa) SHORAD system, the Buk-M2E (SA-17 Grizzly) medium-range SAM, and the S-200VE Vega (Sa-5 Gammon) medium-to-high altitude SAM system. See, for example, Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military*; and Mikhail Khodaryonok, "Three Layers of Russian Air Defense at Hmeymim Air Base in Syria," TASS, February 2016, https://tass.com/defense/855430.

12 "Syria Conflict: Russia 'to Continue Airstrikes' After Withdrawal," *Newsweek*, March 15, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35812371.

13 Russian KSO forces were observed supporting Assad regime combat operations in the Battle for Palmyra in spring 2016 as well as the push for Aleppo in fall 2016. See, for example, Michael Kofman, "Russian Spetsnaz: Learning from Experience," Cipher Brief, March 15, 2017, https://toinformistoinfluence.com/2017/03/15/russian-spetsnaz-learning-from-experience/.

14 Sebastien Roblin, "Russia Keeps Losing Its T-90 Tanks in Syria for One Reason," *National Interest*, September 4, 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russia-keeps-losing-its-t-90-tanks-syria-one-reason-77961.

15 Sebastien Roblin, "Russia Thoughts Its Tanks Were Unstoppable (And Then Syria Happened)," *National Interest*, November 10, 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russia-thought-its-tanks-were-unstoppable-and-then-syria-happened-94481.

16 Rod Thornton, "Countering Prompt Global Strike: The Russian Military Presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean and Its Strategic Deterrence Role," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 2019): 1-24, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13518046.2019.1552655?journalCode=fslv20.

17 Karla Adam, Michael Birnbaum, and Andrew Roth, "Russia Sends Warships Towards Syria Via the English Channel – and With Them, a Message," *Washington Post*, October 21, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/21/russian-warships-pass-through-the-english-channel-on-their-way-to-syria/.

18 Kofman and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?"

19 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How Russian Special Forces Are Shaping the Fight in Syria," *Washington Post*, March 29, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/03/29/how-russian-special-forces-are-shaping-the-fight-in-syria/.

20 Bellingcat Investigation Team, "What Russia's Own Videos and Maps Reveal About Who They Are Bombing in Syria," Bellingcat, October 26, 2015, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/10/26/what-russias-own-videos-and-maps-reveal-about-who-they-are-bombing-in-syria/; and Jack Stubbs, "Four-fifths of Russia's Syria Strikes Don't Target Islamic State: Reuters Analysis," Reuters, October 21, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-strikes/four-fifths-of-russias-syria-strikes-dont-target-islamic-state-reuters-analysis-idUSKCN0SF24L20151021.

21 Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.

22 Ibid.

23 "Syria Conflict: Russian Airstrikes Kill 45 in Latakia," BBC, October 20, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34580188.

24 Genevieve Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria, September 30, 2015 to September 19, 2016," Institute for the Study of War, October 2016, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Airstrikes%20Maps%20SEPT%202015-SEPT%202016.pdf.

25 Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.

26 Ibid.

27 Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria, September 30, 2015 to September 19, 2016."

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Brian Glyn Williams and Robert Souza, "Operation Retribution: Putin's Military Campaign in Syria, 2015-16," *Middle East Policy* 8, no. 4 (Winter 2016), https://mepc.org/journal/operation-retribution-putins-military-campaign-syria-2015-16.

31 "Syria Crisis: Russian Air Strikes Against Assad Enemies," BBC, September 30, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34399164.

32 Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria, September 30, 2015 to September 19, 2016."

33 Charles Lister, *The Free Syrian Army: A Decentralized Insurgent Brand* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute, November 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/iwr_20161123_free_syrian_army1.pdf.

34 Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria, September 30, 2015 to September 19, 2016."

35 Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.

36 Ibid.

37 Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria, September 30, 2015 to September 19, 2016."

38 Tom Perry, Jack Stubbs, and Estelle Shirbon, "Russia and Turkey Trade Accusations Over Syria," Reuters, February 3, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0VC169.

39 Thomas Schmidinger, "Afrin and the Race for the Azaz Corridor," Atlantic Council, February 23, 2016, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/afrin-and-the-race-for-the-azaz-corridor/.

40 Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria, September 30, 2015 to September 19, 2016."

41 Ibid.

42 "Strike That Killed Syrian Rebel Chief Complicates Peace Talks Push: U.S.," Reuters, December 28, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-alloush/strike-that-killed-syrian-rebel-chief-complicates-peace-talks-push-u-s-idUSKBN0UB1N920151228.

43 Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.

44 Williams and Souza, "Operation Retribution."

45 "Syria Conflict: Troops Battle Rebels for Key Southern Town," BBC, December 20, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35198537.

46 Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria, September 30, 2015 to September 19, 2016."

47 Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.

48 "Russian Tactical Air Group Subject to Withdrawal from Syria Back in Russia—General Staff," TASS, March 28, 2016, https://tass.com/world/865520; and ibid.

49 Quoted in M. Yu. Shepovalenko, ed., *Syrian Frontier* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), 11.

50 John W. Parker, *Putin's Syria Gambit: Sharper Elbows, Bigger Footprint, Stickier Wicker*, Strategic Perspective no. 25 (Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, July 2017), https://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-25.pdf.

51 Kofman and Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?"

52 Ibid.

53 "Defense Chief Praises Russian Military's Success in Syria," TASS, February 22, 2017, https://tass.com/defense/932437.

54 Genevieve Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria: June 18 – July 13, 2016," Institute for the Study of War, July 14, 2016, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-airstrikes-syria-june-18-july-13-2016.

55 Tom Perry and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "'Road of Death' to Aleppo Pounded as Air Strikes Cut Off Rebel Areas," Reuters, June 12, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo/road-of-death-to-aleppo-pounded-as-air-strikes-cut-off-rebel-areas-idUSKCN0YY0PQ.

56 Ivan Sidorenko, "Syria, Aleppo, Mallah Farms – Syrian Army Tiger Forces During Clashes W/ JAN & Zinky Movement #2," YouTube, July 21, 2016, 01:25, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7l7mtijA_n8.

57 Fabrice Balanche, "Kurdish Forces Bolster Assad in Aleppo," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 29, 2016, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurdish-forces-bolster-assad-in-aleppo.

58 Ruptly, "Russia: Russian Soldiers in Aleppo Attacked During Video Conference With Moscow," YouTube, September 13, 2016, 00:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jH2ZTjsPkq0.

59 James Miller, "In Syria, Rebel Victories at Ramouseh Come With a Price," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, August 6, 2016, https://www.rferl.org/a/syria-ramouseh-artillery-base-victory/27903617.html.

60 Christopher Kozak, "Opposition Forces Break the Siege of Aleppo City," Institute for the Study of War, August 8, 2016, https://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2016/08/opposition-forces-break-siege-of-aleppo_19.html.

61 Leith Aboufadel, "Russian Airstrikes Propel the Syrian Army in Southern Aleppo," Al Masdar News, September 8, 2016, https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-airstrikes-propel-syrian-army-southern-aleppo-2/.

62 Angela Dewan, "5 Dead as Russian Helicopters Shot Down in Syria," CNN, August 1, 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/08/01/middleeast/syria-aleppo/index.html.

63 Genevieve Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria: July 14 – August 9, 2016," Institute for the Study of War, August 12, 2016, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-airstrikes-syria-july-14-august-9-2016.

64 "Putin's Gigantic Firebombs Torch Aleppo," Times, September 25, 2016, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/putins-giant-flamethrowers-torch-aleppo-pkmmdrhc7.

65 Tim Ripley, *Operation Aleppo: Russia's War in Syria* (Telic-Herrick Publications, April 2018), Ch. 11 and 12.

66 "Syria Situation Report: September 22 – October 7, 2016," Institute for the Study of War, October 2016, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/September22-Oct7%20EDITS%20COT.pdf.

67 Tim Ripley, *Operation Aleppo*, Ch. 11 and 12.

68 Thomas Grove, "Russian Special Forces Seen as Key to Aleppo Victory," *Wall Street Journal*, December 16, 2016, https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-special-forces-seen-as-key-to-aleppo-victory-1481884200.

69 "Assad Regime Militias and Shi'ite Jihadis in the Syrian Civil War," Bellingcat, November 20, 2016, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/11/30/assad-regime-militias-and-shiite-jihadis-in-the-syrian-civil-war/.

70 "Syria Army Captures Rebel-held Hanano Area in Aleppo," Al Jazeera English, November 27, 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/syrian-army-captures-part-rebel-held-east-aleppo-161126214447646.html.

71 Genevieve Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria: November 8 – December 6, 2016," Institute for the Study of War," December 8, 2016, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-airstrikes-syria-november-8-december-6-2016.

72 Laila Bassam, "Wasteland Revealed After Battle for Aleppo's Old City," Reuters, December 9, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-aleppo-destruction/wasteland-revealed-after-battle-for-aleppos-old-city-idUSKBN13Y20I.

73 Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria: November 8 – December 6, 2016."

74 Laila Bassam and Lisa Barrington, "Syrian General Says Aleppo Offensive in Final Stages," Reuters, December 12, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-general-says-aleppo-offensive-in-final-stages-idUSKBN1410LA.

75 Chris Kozak, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria: November 21 – December 19, 2016," Institute for the Study of War, December 21, 2016, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-airstrikes-syria-november-21-december-19-2016.

76 Gardiner Harris, "U.S., Russia and Jordan Reach Deal for Cease-Fire in Part of Syria," *New York Times*, July 7, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/07/us/politics/syria-ceasefire-agreement.html.

77 Valery Gerasimov, "Remarks by Chief of General Staff of the Russian Federation General of the Army Valery Gerasimov at the Russian Defense Ministry's Board Session," (remarks, Russian Ministry of Defense, November 7, 2017), http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12149743@egNews.

78 Michael Gordon and Ivan Nechepurenko, "Russia Warns U.S. After Downing of Syrian Warplane," *New York Times*, June 19, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/world/middleeast/russia-syria.html.

79 Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.

80 Ruslan Pushkov, "Moscow-based Think Tank Director: Russia's Unexpected Military Victory in Syria," Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, December 11, 2017, http://cast.ru/eng/news/moscow-based-think-tank-director-russia-s-unexpected-military-victory-in-syria.html?sphrase_id=14647577.

81 Gerasimov, "Remarks by Chief of General Staff of the Russian Federation General of the Army Valery Gerasimov at the Russian Defense Ministry's Board Session."

82 Gregory Waters, "The Lion and The Eagle: The Syrian Arab Army's Destruction and Rebirth," Middle East Institute, July 18, 2019, https://www.mei.edu/publications/lion-and-eagle-syrian-arab-armys-destruction-and-rebirth#pt12; and "Detachment of the International Mine Action Centre Has Arrived in Palmyra for Mine-clearing Operation," Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12114862@egNews.

83 Fabrice Balanche, "An Opening for the Syrian Regime in Deir al-Zour," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 12, 2017, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syrian-army-and-allies-bound-for-deir-al-zour.

84 Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*; and Ralph Shield, "Russian Airpower's Success in Syria: Assessing Evolution in Kinetic Counterinsurgency," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 31, no. 2 (April 2018), https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13518046.2018.1451099.

85 Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.

86 "Russian UAVs in Syria," Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, http://cast.ru/eng/products/articles/russian-uavs-in-syria.html?sphrase_id=14647577.

87 Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War: From Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and Beyond," Jamestown Foundation, December 18, 2019, https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-in-the-syrian-civil-war-from-slavonic-corps-to-wagner-group-and-beyond/; and Chris Tomson, "ISIS on Its Last Legs as the Syrian Army Imposes Full Control Over Gas Field in East Homs," Al Masdar News, April 28, 2017, https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/isis-last-legs-syrian-army-imposes-full-control-gas-field-east-homs/.

88 Balanche, "An Opening for the Syrian Regime in Deir al-Zour."

89 Tom O'Connor, "Russia and Syria Target ISIS Territory as Big as Two U.S. States," Newsweek, August 14, 2017, https://www.newsweek.com/russia-and-syria-target-isis-territory-size-two-us-states-650670.

90 Balanche, "An Opening for the Syrian Regime in Deir al-Zour."

91 Lyse Doucet, "Syria War: Meeting Syria's Generals in the Desert," BBC, August 15, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41035961.

92 "Syria Situation Report: August 8-15, 2017," Institute for the Study of War, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%2008%20-%2015%20AUG.pdf.

93 Maria Tsvetkova, "Russia Underplayed Losses in Recapture of Syria's Palmyra," Reuters, March 22, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-casualtie/russia-underplayed-losses-in-recapture-of-syrias-palmyra-idUSKBN16T0S4.

94 Natalkiya Vasilyeva and Philip Issa, "Russia Warns U.S., Says Special Forces Helping Syrian Troops," Associated Press, September 21, 2017, https://apnews.com/c9ca12bd18f94757ba5e69c535f06609/Russia-warns-US,-says-special-forces-helping-Syrian-troops; and Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.

95 Mona Alami, "All Eyes Are on Hezbollah in Syria's Deir ez-Zor," Al-Monitor, October 15, 2017, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/10/syria-war-hezbollah-lebanon-deir-es-zor-regime-is-battles.html.

96 Russian Ministry of Defence, "Chief of Main Operational Directorate Sergei Rudskoy Briefs on Situation in Syria (October 12, 2017)," YouTube, October 13, 2017, 09:52, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6g8D1c_wJIU.

97 "Syria War: Army Breaks IS Siege of Deir al-Zour," BBC, September 5, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41162683.

98 "Syria Situation Report: August 31 – September 14, 2017," Institute for the Study of War, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%2031%20AUG%20-%2014%20SEP.pdf.

99 "Syria Situation Report: September 14 – 27, 2017," Institute for the Study of War, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%2014%20-%2027%20SEP.pdf.

100 Russian Ministry of Defence official, Twitter post, September 18, 2017, 05:43 AM, https://twitter.com/mod_russia/status/909759726140968962.

101 Ripley, *Operation Aleppo: Russia's War in Syria*, online update on Russian operations, November 9, 2017, http://www.timripley.co.uk/articles/Operation-Aleppo/2017-Syrian-Army-Ops-East-Bank-Euphrates-09_11-2017.pdf.

102 Hashem Osseiran and Nawar Oilver, "The Battle for Deir Ezzor Continues," Atlantic Council, October 6, 2017, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-battle-for-deir-ezzor-continues/; and Russian Ministry of Defence, "Sergei Rudskoy Briefs on Situation in Syria."

103 Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "U.S.-backed Forces Capture Big Gas Field in Syria's Deir al-Zor: Senior Commander," Reuters, September 23, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-deir-zor/u-s-backed-forces-capture-big-gas-field-in-syrias-deir-al-zor-senior-commander-idUSKCN1BY0H6.

104 "Syrian Army Takes Control of Al-Husayniyah and Safirah At-Tahtaniyah North of Deir Ezzor, Advances Inside City," South Front, October 16, 2017, https://southfront.org/syrian-army-takes-control-of-al-husayniyah-and-safirah-at-tahtaniyah-north-of-deir-ezzor-advances-inside-city/; and "Syria Declares Victory Over Islamic State in Deir al-Zor," Reuters, November 3, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-deiralzor/syrian-army-attacking-last-deir-al-zor-district-hezbollah-media-unit-idUSKBN1D30IE.

105 "Russia: Special Forces Helping Syria Win Key City," Voice of America, September 21, 2017, https://www.voanews.com/world-news/middle-east-dont-use/russia-special-forces-helping-syria-win-key-city.

106 "The Ride of the Mercenaries: How 'Wagner' Came to Syria," *Economist*, November 2, 2017, https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/11/02/how-wagner-came-to-syria; and "Russia Says General Killed in Syria Held Senior Post in Assad's Army," Reuters, September 27, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-general/russia-says-general-killed-in-syria-held-senior-post-in-assads-army-idUSKCN1C22TW.

107 Bethan McKernan, "Isis Retakes Town 200 Miles Into Syria Government Territory in Surprise Counter Attack," *The Independent*, October 2, 2017, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/2014-isis-syria-war-assad-attack-government-retake-town-al-qaryatayn-a7979491.html.

108 Erin Cunningham and David Filipov, "U.S. Allies Accuse Russia of Strikes in Eastern Syria," *Washington Post*, September 25, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-allies-accuse-russia-of-strikes-in-eastern-syria/2017/09/25/6bcbbab0-a1ff-11e7-b573-8ec86cdfe1ed_story.html.

109 "Syria Situation Report: September 14 – 27, 2017," Institute for the Study of War.

110 Alami, "All Eyes Are on Hezbollah in Syria's Deir ez-Zor."

111 Lavrov, *The Russian Air Campaign in Syria*.

112 "Syria Situation Report: September 27 – October 10, 2017," Institute for the Study of War, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%2027%20SEP%20-%2010%20OCT.pdf.

113 Amir Toumaj, "Russia and Iran Help Capture Syria's Al Mayadin from Islamic State," FDD's Long War Journal, October 19, 2017, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/10/russia-and-iran-help-capture-syrias-al-mayadeen-from-islamic-state.php.

114 "Syria Situation Report: October 10-24, 2017," Institute for the Study of War, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%2010%20-%2024%20OCT%20%28002%29_1.pdf.

115 Ahmad Majidyar, "Syrian, Iranian-led Forces Capture Abu Kamal, Threaten to Confront U.S. and S.D.F.," Middle East Institute, November 8, 2017, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%2010%20-%2024%20OCT%20%28002%29_1.pdf; Qalaat Al Mudiq, Twitter post, November 8, 2017, 01:36 PM, https://twitter.com/QalaatAlMudiq/status/928279843455819777?s=20.

116 Matti Suomenaro and Jackson Danbeck, "Russia: Iran's Air Force in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, November 17, 2017, https://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2017/11/russia-irans-air-force-in-syria.html; and "Briefing by Chief of Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff Colonel General Sergei Rudskoy (December 7, 2017)," Russian Ministry of Defence, December 7, 2017, http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12154005@egNews.

117 "IS Jihadists Retake Nearly Half of Syria Border Town: Monitor," France 24, November 10, 2017, https://www.france24.com/en/20171110-jihadists-retake-nearly-half-syria-border-town-monitor.

118 Ruptly, "Syria: Russian Strategic Bombers Hit IS Targets in Abu Kamal – MoD," YouTube, November 4, 2017, 01:04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2T9vBMmhtw; and Suomenaro and Danbeck, "Russia: Iran's Air Force in Syria."

119 Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, "Collision Avoidance: Lessons From U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Weiss_Ng_U.S.-Russia_Syria-final1.pdf.

120 Ellen Nakashima, Karen DeYoung, and Liz Sly, "Putin Ally Said to Be in Touch With Kremlin, Assad Before His Mercenaries Attacked U.S. Troops," *Washington Post*, February 22, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/putin-ally-said-to-be-in-touch-with-kremlin-assad-before-his-mercenaries-attacked-us-troops/2018/02/22/f4ef050c-1781-11e8-8b08-027a6ccb38eb_story.html.

121 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria," *New York Times*, May 24, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html; and Cristoph Reuter, "American Fury: The Truth About the Russian Deaths in Syria," *Der Spiegel*, March 2, 2018, https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/american-fury-the-truth-about-the-russian-deaths-in-syria-a-1196074.html.

122 Jeffrey Harrigian, "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Lieutenant General Harrigian via Teleconference from Al Udeid Airbase, Qatar," U.S. Department of Defense, (press briefing, February 13, 2018), https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/1441080/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-lieutenant-general-harrigian-via-teleco/.

123 Maria Tsvetkova and Anton Zverev, "After Deadly Syrian Battle, Evidence of Russian Losses Was Obscured," Reuters, February 5, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-usa-insig/after-deadly-syrian-battle-evidence-of-russian-losses-was-obscured-idUSKCN1PU11Y.

124 David Brennan, "'A Total F***Up': Russian Mercenaries in Syria Lament U.S. Strike That Killed Dozens," *Newsweek*, February 23, 2018, https://www.newsweek.com/total-f-russian-mercenaries-syria-lament-us-strike-killed-dozens-818073.

125 Sam Dagher, "Russia's Favorite Syrian Warlord," *Atlantic*, March 3, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/who-is-russias-favorite-syrian-warlord/554774/.

126 Sergey Sukhankin, "War, Business and 'Hybrid' Warfare: The Case of the Wagner Private Military Company (Part Two)," Jamestown Foundation, April 23, 2018, https://jamestown.org/program/war-business-and-hybrid-warfare-the-case-of-the-wagner-private-military-company-part-two/.

127 Samuel Oakford, "Civilian Casualties from Alleged Russian Airstrikes Reach Record Levels," Airwars, March 2, 2018, https://airwars.org/news-and-investigations/civilian-casualties-from-alleged-russian-airstrikes-reach-record-levels-in-eastern-ghouta/.

128 Sam Dagher, "Russia's Favorite Syrian Warlord," *Atlantic*, March 3, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/who-is-russias-favorite-syrian-warlord/554774/; and "Syria Army Announces Eastern Ghouta Free of Militants: State Media," Reuters, April 14, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-ghouta/syrian-army-announces-eastern-ghouta-free-of-militants-state-media-idUSKBN1HL184.

129 Kareem Shaheen, "Syrian Government Forces Seal Victory in Southern Territories," *Guardian*, July 21, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/31/syrian-government-forces-seal-victory-in-southern-territories.

130 Kirill Semenov, "Russia, Iran in Tug of War Over Syria Military Reform," Al-Monitor, June 10, 2019, https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/06/russia-iran-syria-military-reform.html.

131 Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syrian Rebels Say Moscow Deploys Ground Forces in Idlib Campaign," Reuters, July 17, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-russia/syrian-rebels-say-moscow-deploys-ground-forces-in-idlib-campaign-idUSKCN1UD00B; and Anton Mardasov, "What Are Russian Special Operations Forces Doing in Idlib?," Al Jazeera English, August 29, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/russian-special-operations-forces-idlib-190828144800497.html.

132 Stepan Kravchenko and Henry Meyer, "Putin's 'Chef' Preps Soldiers for Final Assault on Syrian Rebels," Bloomberg, September 6, 2019, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-09-06/putin-s-chef-preps-soldiers-for-final-assault-on-syrian-rebels.

133 Bethan McKernan, "Assad Regime Captures Town in Syria's Last Rebel-held Territory," *Guardian*, January 28, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/28/syrian-regime-captures-maarat-al-numan-in-idlib.

134 Shawn Snow, "What It Means for American Bases in Syria to Be Occupied by Syrian and Russian Forces," *Military Times*, October 16, 2019, https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2019/10/16/what-it-means-for-us-bases-in-syria-to-be-occupied-by-syrian-and-russian-forces/.

135 John Dunford, "Map: Russian Expands Air Presence in Northeast Syria," Institute for the Study of War, November 20, 2019, http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/map-russia-expands-air-presence-northeast-syria.

136 Andrew Osborn and Alexander Marrow, "Russia Sets Up Helicopters Base in Northern Syria After U.S. Exit," Reuters, November 14, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-russia/russia-sets-up-helicopter-base-in-northern-syria-after-u-s-exit-idUSKBN1XO0XT.

137 Charlie D'Agata, "Russian Troops Take Command of U.S. Airbases in Northern Syria," CBS, November 17, 2019, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/russian-troops-take-command-of-us-airbase-kobani-northern-syria-2019-11-17/; and Jared Szuba, "Russian Troops Enter Syria's Raqqa, Filling Void of Withdrawing U.S. Forces," The Defense Post, December 10, 2019, https://thedefensepost.com/2019/12/10/syria-russia-raqqa-us-withdraw/.

Chapter 04: The Punishment Campaign

1 Kavitha Surana, "Russian Embassy: Grozny Is the 'Solution' for Aleppo," *Foreign Policy*, October 17, 2016, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/17/russian-embassy-grozny-is-the-solution-for-aleppo-syria-war-john-kerry/.

2 Statement by the Russian Embassy to the United States, Twitter post, October 17, 2016, 07:08 AM, https://twitter.com/RusEmbUSA/status/788018895567413248.

3 "More Than 19000 People Including About 8300 Civilians Killed by Russian Warplanes Since Their Military Participation Began on the Syrian Territory at the End of September 2015," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, September 30, 2019, http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=142258.

4 "Russia/Syria: Flurry of Prohibited Weapons Attacks," Human Rights Watch, June 3, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/03/russia/syria-flurry-prohibited-weapons-attacks.

5 Kathleen Fallon and Natasha Kieval, *Saving Lives Underground: The Case for Underground Hospitals in Syria* (London: The Syria Campaign, May 2017), https://www.sams-usa.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Saving-Lives-Underground-report.pdf.

6 United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* (New York: United Nations, February 2018), https://undocs.org/A/HRC/37/72.

7 "Physicians for Human Rights' Findings of Attacks on Health Care in Syria," Physicians for Human Rights, September 2019, http://syriamap.phr.org/#/en/findings.

8 Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, "Besieged Town of Daraya Agrees to Surrender to Syrian Government," *New York Times*, August 25, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/daraya-syria-assad-surrender.html.

9 On civilian casualties in Aleppo see, for example, Keith A. Grant and Bernd Kaussler, "The Battle of Aleppo: External Patrons and the Victimization of Civilians in Civil War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 31, no. 1 (2020): 1-33, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2020.1672959?journalCode=fswi20.

10 "The Failure of UN Security Council Resolution 2286 in Preventing Attacks on Healthcare in Syria," Syrian American Medical Society, January 11, 2017, https://foundation.sams-usa.net/reports/failure-un-security-council-resolution-2286-preventing-attacks-healthcare-syria/.

11 Maksymilian Czuperski et al., "Breaking Aleppo," Atlantic Council, February 2017, https://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/breakingaleppo/.

12 Ibid.

13 "Doctor Says Syrian Government Is Increasing Bombings of Hospitals," NPR Morning Edition, May 10, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/05/10/722030190/doctor-says-syrian-government-is-rapidly-increasing-bombings-of-hospitals.

14 Emma Farge, "Strikes on Syrian Medical Facilities Appear Deliberate: UN," Reuters, November 8, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-un/strikes-on-syrian-medical-facilities-appear-deliberate-u-n-idUSKBN1XI1JG.

15 Evan Hill and Christiaan Triebert, "12 Hours. 4 Syrian Hospitals Bombed. One Culprit: Russia," *New York Times*, October 13, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/middleeast/russia-bombing-syrian-hospitals.html.

16 Farge, "Strikes on Syrian Medical Facilities Appear Deliberate."

17 International Committee of the Red Cross, *Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War* (Fourth Geneva Convention), August 12, 1949, 75 UNTS 287, 153-221, https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b36d2.html.

18 "Security Council Adopts Resolution 2286 (2016), Strongly Condemning Attacks Against Medical Facilities, Personnel in Conflict Situations," United Nations Security Council, May 3, 2016, https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12347.doc.htm.

19 UNHRC, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*.

20 Whitney Hurst and Rick Gladstone, "UN Query on Syria Hospital Bombings May Be Undermined by Russia Pressure, Limited Scope," *New York Times*, November 14, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/14/world/middleeast/russia-syria-hospital-bombing.html.

21 CSIS compiled a data set of 108 incidents and was able to geo-locate 105 of these incidents. This discrepancy is reflected in the 105 incidents observed in Figure 4.3.

22 CSIS Transnational Threats Project data set.

23 UNHRC, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*.

24 Ibid.

25 CSIS Transnational Threats Project data set.

26 See Malachy Browne et al., "A Civilian Camp in Syria Was Bombed. Here's How We Traced the Culprit," *New York Times*, December 1, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/01/reader-center/syria-russia-bombing-video-investigation.html; and "Syria: Idlib IDP Camp Hit by Deadly Missile Attack," Al Jazeera, November 21, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/syria-idlib-idp-camp-hit-deadly-missile-attack-191121065039126.html.

27 "RS190: Airwars Assessment," Airwars, November 25, 2015, https://airwars.org/civilian-casualties/rs190-november-25-2015/.

28 Nick Waters, "Analysis of Syrian Red Crescent Aid Convoy Attack," Bellingcat, September 21 2016, https://bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/09/21/aleppo-un-aid-analysis/.

29 Louisa Loveluck and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "'Why Did They Wait to Kill Us?': How the Attack on the Aid Convoy Near Aleppo Unfolded," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/09/24/why-did-they-wait-to-kill-us-how-the-attack-on-the-aid-convoy-in-aleppo-unfolded/.

30 UNHRC, "Human Rights Abuses and International Humanitarian Law Violations in the Syrian Arab Republic, 21 July 2016-28 February 2017," March 10, 2017, https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/IICISyria/Pages/Documentation.aspx.

31 See, for example, "Syria Sanctions," U.S. Department of the Treasury, https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/pages/syria.aspx; United Nations General Assembly, "Top UN Human Rights Official Says Member States 'Must Act Now' to Protect Syrian People, as Violent Crackdown Continues, in Briefing to General Assembly," February 13, 2012, https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/ga11206.doc.htm.

32 "Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2019," Arms Control Association, March 2019, https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity.

33 "Syria: Russia Denies Responsibility for Deadly Air Strikes," Deutsche Welle, July 22, 2019, https://www.dw.com/en/syria-russia-denies-responsibility-for-deadly-air-strikes/a-49703098.

34 "Russia Ready to Deliver Strikes on Militants Into Syria From Iraq - General," TASS, October 25, 2016, http://tass.com/defense/908612.

35 Eliot Higgins, "Fact-Checking Russia's Claim That It Didn't Bomb Another Hospital in Syria," Bellingcat, November 9, 2016, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/11/09/fact-checking-russias-claim-didnt-bomb-another-hospital-syria/.

36 "Russia Blames UK for Syria Chemical Attack That Killed Dozens, Many of Them Children," *USA Today*, April 13, 2018, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/04/13/russia-syria-chemical-attack-fabrication-foreign-intelligence-agency/514039002/.

37 Neil McFarquhar, "Russia Denies Any Role in Deadly Convoy Attack in Syria," *New York Times*, September 21, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/22/world/europe/russia-syria-aid-convoy.html.

38 Maksymilian Czuperski et al., *Distract Deceive Destroy: Putin at War in Syria* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2016), https://publications.atlanticcouncil.org/distract-deceive-destroy/assets/download/ddd-report.pdf.

39 See, for example, Sergei Rudskoy, "Speech of the Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Lieutenant General Sergei Rudskoy Before Media Representatives," (speech, Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, August 8, 2016), http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12092560@egNews.

40 Olivia Solon, "How Syria's White Helmets Became Victims of an Online Propaganda Machine," *Guardian*, December 18, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/18/syria-white-helmets-conspiracy-theories.

41 Bellingcat Investigation Team, "Chemical Weapons and Absurdity: The Disinformation Campaign Against the White Helmets," Bellingcat, December 18, 2018, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2018/12/18/chemical-weapons-and-absurdity-the-disinformation-campaign-against-the-white-helmets/.

42 "Russian Defense Ministry Commented on Briefing of Amnesty International and Summed Up Results of Operation Carried Out by the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria on December 18-23," Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, December 23, 2015, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12072315@egNews.

43 Lizzie Dearden, "Russia-Backed Broadcaster RT Cuts Footage Proving Use of Incendiary 'Cluster Bombs' in Syria," *The Independent*, June 21, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-today-syria-war-cluster-bombfootage-censorship-video-vladimir-putin-a7093141.html.

44 "Amnesty Int'l Report on 'Civilian Deaths' Based on Fakes, Cliches," Sputnik News, December 23, 2015, https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201512231032213565-amnestyintl-report-fake/.

45 See, for example, "Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Zakharova Holds Weekly Press Briefing," Sputnik News, October 27, 2016, https://sputniknews.com/politics/201610271046785353-russian-foreign-ministry-press-briefing-october-27/; and "Russia Registered U.S. Attack Drone in Area Where Idlib School Was Attacked – MoD," Sputnik News, October 27, 2016, https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201610271046810904-idlib-school-russia/.

46 "Bulletin of the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides and Refugee Migration Monitoring," Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, September 29, 2019, http://syria.mil.ru/peacemaking_en/info/news/more.htm?id=12254137@egNews; and "Syria Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, November 21, 2019, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions.

47 Louisa Loveluck, "Assad Urged Syrian Refugees to Come Home. Many Are Being Welcomed With Arrest and Interrogation," *Washington Post*, June 2, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/assad-urged-syrian-refugees-to-come-home-many-are-being-welcomed-with-arrest-and-interrogation/2019/06/02/54bd696a-7bea-11e9-b1f3-b233fe5811ef_story.html.

48 Author's conversation with government official, November 11, 2019.

Chapter 05: The Diplomatic Campaign

1 "Final Communique of the Action Group for Syria – Geneva, Saturday 30 June 2012," United Nations Office at Geneva, June 30, 2012, https://web.archive.org/web/20140129025023/http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/%28httpNewsByYear_en%29/18F70DBC923963B1C1257A2D0060696B?OpenDocument.

2 "14 November 2015, Statement of the International Syria Support Group Vienna," United Nations Department of Political Affairs, November 14, 2015, https://www.un.org/undpa/en/Speeches-statements/14112015/syria.

3 "Resolution 2254 (205)," United Nations Security Council, December 18, 2015, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf.

4 "Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as Co-Chairs of the ISSG, on Cessation of Hostilities in Syria," U.S. Department of State, February 22, 2016, https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/253115.htm.

5 Jennifer Cafarella with Jason Zhou, "Russian Dead-End Diplomacy in Syria," Institute for the Study of War, November 2019, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Report%20-%20Russia%E2%80%99s%20Dead-End%20Diplomacy%20in%20Syria%20-%20November%202019.pdf.

6 Faysal Itani and Hossam Abouzahr, "At What Point Is a Cessation of Hostilities Broken?," Atlantic Council, April 19, 2016, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/at-what-point-is-a-cessation-of-hostilities-broken/.

7 Faysal Itani and Reema Hibrawi, "The Aleppo-Geneva Disconnect," Atlantic Council, April 12, 2016, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-aleppo-geneva-disconnect/.

8 Cafarella and Zhou, "Russian Dead-End Diplomacy in Syria."

9 Andrew Tabler, "Judging Kerry's 'Secret' Syria Agreement With Russia," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 15, 2016, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/judging-kerrys-secret-syria-agreement-with-russia.

10 David Sanger and Anne Barnard, "Russia and the United States Reach New Agreement on Syria Conflict," *New York Times*, September 9, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/10/world/middleeast/syria-john-kerry-ceasefire-deal-russia.html.

11 "Syria Aid Convoy Attack: U.S. 'Holds Russia Responsible'," BBC, September 21, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37424871.

12 "Syria War: Turkish Forces Set Up Positions in Idlib," BBC, October 13, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41607822.

13 Tulay Karadeniz and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syria's Idlib Spared Attack, Turkey to Send in More Troops," Reuters, September 18, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-rebels/syrias-idlib-spared-attack-turkey-to-send-in-more-troops-idUSKCN1LY0T9.

14 Aaron Stein, "Prisoners of Idlib: Turkey, Russia, America and the Fate of Syria's Last Opposition Stronghold," War on the Rocks, August 14, 2018, https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/prisoners-of-idlib-turkey-russia-america-and-the-fate-of-syrias-last-opposition-stronghold/.

15 "Syria War: Turkey Will Not Let Syrian Army Advance in Idlib, Says Erdogan," BBC, February 4, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51371462.

16 Ali Kucukgocmen and Ellen Francis, "Turkey Strikes Syrian Planes and Airports, Escalating Idlib Fight," Reuters, March 1, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey/turkey-strikes-syrian-planes-and-airports-escalating-idlib-fight-idUSKBN20O1KN.

17 Vladimir Soldatkin and Maria Kiselyova, "Russia, Turkey Agree Ceasefire Deal for Syria's Idlib," Reuters, March 5, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security/russia-turkey-agree-ceasefire-deal-for-syrias-idlib-idUSKBN20S161.

18 Felicia Schwartz, "Syria Cease-Fire Monitoring Center Established in Jordan," *Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/syria-cease-fire-monitoring-center-established-in-jordan-1503506659.

19 Denis Pinchuk and Tom Balmforth, "Russia to Deploy Military Police on Golan Heights," Reuters, August 2, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-golan-russia/russia-to-deploy-military-police-on-golan-heights-idUSKBN1KN1CD.

20 Suha Maayeh and Nicholas Heras, "The Fall of Daraa: Why Syria's Rebels Continue to Fight Assad," *Foreign Affairs*, July 23, 2018, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-07-23/fall-daraa.

21 Kareem Shaheen, "Syrian Government Forces Seal Victory in Southern Territories," *The Guardian*, July 31, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/31/syrian-government-forces-seal-victory-in-southern-territories.

22 Neil MacFarquhar, "U.S. Agrees With Russia on Rules in Syrian Sky," *New York Times*, October 20, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/21/world/middleeast/us-and-russia-agree-to-regulate-all-flights-over-syria.html.

23 Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, "Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 20, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/20/collision-avoidance-lessons-of-u.s.-and-russian-operations-in-syria-pub-78571.

24 CSIS interviews with former U.S. Department of Defense and State officials, December 2019.

25 Neil MacFarquhar, "Putin Says U.S. Fails to Cooperate in Syria," *New York Times*, October 13, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/14/world/europe/putin-complains-about-us-cooperation-on-syria.html.

26 CSIS interviews with former U.S. Department of Defense and State officials, December 2019.

27 Section 1241 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015 prohibited the Department of Defense from "any bilateral military-to-military cooperation between the Governments of the United States and the Russian Federation" so long as Russia continued its actions in Ukraine and against members of NATO. See *National Defense Authorization Active for Fiscal Year 2015, 113th Congress Public Law 291* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015), https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/3979/text.

28 David Brunnstrom and Denis Dyomkim, "Kerry Meets with Putin About Cooperating Against Islamic State in Syria," Reuters, July 14, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa/kerry-meets-with-putin-about-cooperating-against-islamic-state-in-syria-idUSKCN0ZU25O.

29 Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, "Pentagon Grudgingly Accepts Syria Deal Amid Deep Mistrust of Russia," *Washington Post*, September 15, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-grudgingly-accepts-syria-deal-amid-deep-mistrust-of-russia/2016/09/15/e2ac735c-7a98-11e6-beac-57a4a412e93a_story.html.

30 Weiss and Ng, *Collision Avoidance*.

31 CSIS interviews with former U.S. Department of Defense and State officials, December 2019.

32 Neil MacFarquhar, "Putin Says U.S. Fails to Cooperate in Syria," *New York Times*, October 13, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/14/world/europe/putin-complains-about-us-cooperation-on-syria.html.

33 CSIS interviews with former U.S. Department of Defense and State officials, December 2019.

34 Weiss and Ng, *Collision Avoidance*.

35 Andrew Tilghman, "Russia's Attack on U.S.-backed Rebels in Syria Puzzles, Frustrates the Pentagon," *Military Times*, June 23, 2016, https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2016/06/23/russia-s-attack-on-u-s-backed-rebels-in-syria-puzzles-frustrates-the-pentagon/.

36 Ibid.

37 CSIS interviews with former U.S. Department of Defense and State officials, December 2019.

38 Weiss and Ng, *Collision Avoidance*.

39 Shawn Snow, "US Forces Increasing Combat Power at Tanf, Preparing for a Fight with Pro-Syrian Regime Militias," *Military Times*, June 1, 2017, https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/06/01/us-forces-increasing-combat-power-at-tanf-preparing-for-a-fight-with-pro-syrian-regime-militias/.

40 Ryan Brown, "Syrian Regime Forces Enter Buffer Zone Surrounding US Base," CNN, October 4, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/04/politics/syria-russia-us-assad-at-tanf/index.html.

41 "Syria War: US Says Flares Fired at Russian Jets," BBC, December 14, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42358150.

42 "Middle Euphrates River Valley, Syria," International Crisis Group, April 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list/flashpoints/middle-euphrates-river-valley.

43 Oriana Pawlyk, "F-22s Fire Warning Flares at Russian Jets in Coalition Territory," Military.com, December 14, 2017, https://www.military.com/daily-news/2017/12/14/f-22s-fire-warning-flares-russian-jets-coalition-territory.html.

44 Robert E. Hamilton, "Russian and American De-confliction Efforts in Syria," Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 19, 2018, https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/04/russian-and-american-de-confliction-efforts-in-syria-whats-the-endgame-in-the-civil-war/.

45 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria," *New York Times*, May 24, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/24/world/middleeast/american-commandos-russian-mercenaries-syria.html.

46 Maria Tsvetkova, "Israel, Russia to Coordinate Military Action in Syria: Netanyahu," Reuters, September 21, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-israel/israel-russia-to-coordinate-military-action-on-syria-netanyahu-idUSKCN0RL10K20150921.

47 Dan Williams, "Israel Quiet Over 'Hotline' With Russia on Syria," Reuters, October 22, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-israel-analysis/israel-quiet-over-hotline-with-russia-on-syria-idUSKCN0SG1G320151022.

48 Seth G. Jones and Max Markusen, "The Escalating Conflict With Hezbollah in Syria," CSIS, *CSIS Brief*, June 20, 2018, https://www.csis.org/analysis/escalating-conflict-hezbollah-syria.

49 Lauren Blaxter and Nick Grinstead, "Israeli Strikes in Syria, 2017 – May 19, 2018," ACLED, May 25, 2018, https://www.acleddata.com/2018/05/25/israeli-strikes-in-syria-2017-may-19-2018/.

50 Dan Williams, "Assad Advance Spurs 'Urgent' Russia-Israel Talks on Syria Buffer," Reuters, July 23, 2018, https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-israel/assad-advance-spurs-urgent-russia-israel-talks-on-syria-buffer-idUKKBN1KD0PA.

51 Vladimir Isachenkov, "Putin Seeks to Defuse Downing of Russian Plane Off Syria," Associated Press, September 18, 2018, https://apnews.com/49ff908bba924ee1a43b5a6db3917bcd/Putin-seeks-to-defuse-downing-of-Russian-plane-off-Syria.

52 Ibid.; and "Israel, Russia to Review Syria Hotline After Plane Downed," Associated Press, September 21, 2018, https://apnews.com/6dd53d3da4914b79bcad8a9257abcbeb.

53 Alexander Fulbright, "Russia Said Demanding More Notice Before Israeli Strikes in Syria," *Times of Israel*, October 24, 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/russia-said-demanding-further-heads-up-before-israeli-strikes-in-syria/.

54 CSIS research interviews with analysts from the Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv, Israel, December 17, 2019.

55 Ibid.

56 CSIS research interviews with Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, Jerusalem, Israel, December 18, 2019.

57 "Turkey's Downing of Russian Warplane—What We Know," BBC, December 1, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34912581.

58 Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia Expands Sanctions Against Turkey After Downing of Jet," *New York Times*, December 30, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/31/world/europe/russia-putin-turkey-sanctions.html.

59 Sabrina Tavernise, "Seeking to Improve Ties With Russia, Turkey Apologizes for Downing Warplane," *New York Times*, June 27, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/28/world/europe/russia-turkey-erdogan-putin.html.

60 Paul Antonopoulos, "Russia, Turkey to Establish Military Hotline," Al Masdara News, August 11, 2016, https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russia-turkey-establish-military-hotline/.

61 Shaun Walker and Jennifer Rankin, "Erdoğan and Putin Discuss Closer Ties in First Meeting Since Jet Downing," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/09/erdogan-meets-putin-leaders-seek-mend-ties-jet-downing-russia-turkey.

62 Damien Sharkov, "Putin Calls Erdogan to Voice Support for Order in Turkey," *Newsweek*, July 18, 2016, https://www.newsweek.com/putin-calls-erdogan-voice-support-order-coup-turkey-481307.

63 Patrick Wintour, "Sponsors of Syria Talks in Astana Strike Deal to Protect Fragile Ceasefire," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/24/syria-talks-astana-russia-turkey-iran-ceasefire.

64 Bulent Aliriza and Zeynep Yekeler, "Understanding Turkey's Afrin Operation," CSIS, *Critical Questions*, January 25, 2018, https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-turkeys-afrin-operation.

65 Ibid.

66 Lara Seligman, "Kurdish Leader Fears Threat from Turkey," *Foreign Policy*, September 23, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/09/23/in-syrian-safe-zone-kurdish-leader-sees-threat-from-turkey-ilham-ahmed-interview-syria/.

67 "Statement from the Press Secretary," The White House, October 6, 2019, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-85/.

68 Ben Hubbard, Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, and Patrick Kingsley, "Abandoned by U.S. in Syria, Kurds Find New Ally in American Foe," *New York Times*, October 13, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/world/middleeast/syria-turkey-invasion-isis.html.

69 Ben Hubbard, Anton Troianovski, Carlotta Gall, and Patrick Kingsley, "In Syria, Russia Is Pleased to Fill an American Void," *New York Times*, October 15, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/15/world/middleeast/kurds-syria-turkey.html.

70 Kareem Fahim, Karen DeYoung, and Missy Ryan, "Russia and Turkey Reach Deal to Push Kurdish Forces Out of Zone in Northern Syria," *Washington Post*, October 22, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/turkeys-erdogan-meets-with-putin-in-russia-to-discuss-syrian-operation/2019/10/22/764abcea-f43f-11e9-b2d2-1f37c9d82dbb_story.html.

Chapter 06: Implications and Takeaways

1 Louis J. Jennings, ed., *The Croker Papers: The Correspondence and Diaries of the Late Right Honourable John Wilson Croker*, Vol. III (London: John Murray, 1884), 275.

2 Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the Fall of the Taliban* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002), 266.

3 On Russian support to organizations such as the Wagner Group, see James Bingham and Konrad Muzyka, "Private Companies Engage in Russia's Non-Linear Warfare," *IHS Jane's Intelligence Review*, January 29, 2018. On Lebanese Hezbollah and IRGC-QF activity, see Nader Uskowi, *Temperature Rising: Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Wars in the Middle East* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 77-96.

4 Victor Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennykh sil Rossii general armii Valeriy Gerasimov: 'My perelomili khrebet udarnym silam terrorizma'" ["Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia Army General Valery Gerasimov: 'We Have Broken the Ridge of the Shock Forces of Terrorism'"], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 26, 2017.

5 Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, "Continuity in Russian Strategic Culture: A Case Study of Moscow's Syrian Campaign," *Security Insights*, no. 48 (February 2020), https://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/mcdocs/files/College/F_Publications/secInsights/security_insights_48.pdf.

6 Valery Gerasimov, Power Point Slides from the Russian Ministry of Defence's Third Moscow Conference on International Security, Moscow, May 23, 2014. The slides were published in Anthony H. Cordesman, *Russia and the "Color Revolution": A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the US*

and the West (Washington, DC: CSIS, May 28, 2014), https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/140529_Russia_Color_Revolution_Full.pdf.

7 Valery Gerasimov, "Vectors for the Development of Military Strategy" ["Vektori Razvitiya Voennoy Strategii"], *Krasnaya Zvezda*, March 4, 2019, http://redstar.ru/vektory-razvitiya-voennoj-strategii/.

8 Douglas Barrie, *Russian Aerospace Forces Reform and Its Syrian Role: The View from Moscow* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, December 2018), https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2018/12/russian-aerospace-reform-syria.

9 On punishment campaigns, see Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 47-52.

10 "Two Thirds of Russian Air Force Personnel Received In-Theater Experience in Syria," TASS, August 11, 2018, https://tass.com/defense/1016930.

11 Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, "Russian Lessons from the Syrian Operation and the Culture of Military Innovation," *Security Insights*, no. 47 (February 2020), https://www.marshallcenter.org/MCPUBLICWEB/mcdocs/security_insights_47_-_adamsky_-_russian_lessons_from_the_syrian_operation.pdf.

12 "Fighting in Syria Has Made Russia's Military Better," *National Interest*, October 21, 2019, https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/fighting-syria-has-made-russias-military-better-89851.

13 "Fighting in Syria Has Made Russia's Military Better," *National Interest*.

14 Vladimir Mukhin, "SCO Prepares 'Peace Mission' Against Terrorists," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, April 24, 2018, http://www.ng.ru/politics/2018-04-24/2_7219_shos.htlml.

15 Wolfram Lacher, "Drones, Deniability, and Disinformation: Warfare in Libya and the New International Disorder," War on the Rocks, March 3, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/drones-deniability-and-disinformation-warfare-in-libya-and-the-new-international-disorder/.

16 There were technically two deconfliction lines used between the United States and Russia. The first was the air deconfliction line, established in late 2015 in reaction to the initial Russian air strikes and codified by a memorandum of understanding between the parties. The second was a ground deconfliction line, which was formed in mid-2017 at the joint agreement of Generals Dunford and Gerasimov in reaction to the proximity of their respective ground units in Syria.

17 Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966).

18 M. Yu. Shepovalenko, ed., *The Syrian Front* [Syriiskii Rubezh] (Moscow: The Center for Analysis of Strategy and Technology, 2016), 28.

19 Gerasimov, "Tsennost' nauki v predvidenii."

Appendix: Russian Force Composition in Syria

1 Igor Sutyagin, "Detailing Russian Forces in Syria," Rusi Defence Systems, November 13, 2015, https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-defence-systems/detailing-russian-forces-syria.

2 David Stupples, "How Syria Is Becoming a Test Bed for High-Tech Weapons of Electronic Warfare," The Conversation, October 8, 2015, https://theconversation.com/how-syria-is-becoming-a-test-bed-

for-high-tech-weapons-of-electronic-warfare-48779; as seen in Andrew Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), Appendixes, 190, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3099.html.

3 "KRET Electronic Warfare Systems Provide Reliable Defense for Russian Aviation," KRET, September 30, 2015; as seen in Radin et al., *The Future of the Russian Military*, Appendixes, 190.

4 Maksymilian Czuperski et al., *Breaking Aleppo* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2017), https://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/breakingaleppo/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/BreakingAleppo.pdf.

5 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "After Appearing on Russian Jets, Incendiary Munitions Make A Resurgence in Syria," *Washington Post*, June 23, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/06/23/after-appearing-on-russian-jets-incendiary-munitions-make-a-resurgence-in-syria/.

COVER PHOTOS (Putin) KREMLIN.RU, CC BY 3.0; **(Kremlin)** IAN WALTON/GETTY IMAGES; **(T-72)** DMITRIY FOMIN/FLICKR; **(Su-24)** ALEXANDER MISHIN, CC BY-SA 3.0

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

1616 Rhode Island Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20036
202 887 0200 | **www.csis.org**

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD

Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

4501 Forbes Boulevard
Lanham, MD 20706
301 459 3366 | **www.rowman.com**

ISBN 978-1-5381-4015-4
90000
9 781538 140154