

# Russian Deployments in Syria Complicate U.S. Policy

September 18, 2015 (IN10360)

---

-|

---

-|

---

Carla E. Humud, Analyst in Middle Eastern and African Affairs ([chumud@crs.loc.gov](mailto:chumud@crs.loc.gov), 7-7314)

Steven Woehrel, Specialist in European Affairs ([swoehrel@crs.loc.gov](mailto:swoehrel@crs.loc.gov), 7-2291)

Derek E. Mix, Analyst in European Affairs ([dmix@crs.loc.gov](mailto:dmix@crs.loc.gov), 7-9116)

Christopher M. Blanchard, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs ([cblanchard@crs.loc.gov](mailto:cblanchard@crs.loc.gov), 7-0428)

---

In recent weeks, Russia has moved [military equipment](#) and personnel to Syria, which could potentially be used to resupply the Assad regime or lead to a direct Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war. Russian officials have acknowledged that they are increasing their military presence in Syria and claim that their aim is to pursue counterterrorism objectives that the United States and coalition members share. Expanded Russian security cooperation and military operations in Syria present challenges for U.S. diplomatic and military strategy there.

## Russian Military Deployments and U.S. Responses

[U.S. defense officials stated](#) that Russian activities "suggest it intends to establish some sort of forward air operating base" at Basil al Asad International Airport in Lattakia province, a regime stronghold. A press report citing an unnamed U.S. official said that [recent Russian shipments include tanks and artillery](#) to protect the expanded Russian facilities, as well as armored personnel carriers, hundreds of naval infantry personnel, modular housing units to house about 1,500 people, and air traffic control equipment. On September 18, [a press report](#) said some Russian tactical fighter jets and attack helicopters had arrived. Some reports state that Russia also intends to upgrade its naval infrastructure at the Syrian port of Tartus.

Secretary of State Kerry has spoken with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov to express concern over increased Russian military activity in Syria. On September 18, [Secretary Kerry stated](#) that the United States was prepared to hold military-to-military talks with Russia regarding Syria. Pentagon officials [stated](#) that Defense Secretary Carter and his Russian counterpart had spoken by phone and had "agreed to further discuss mechanisms for deconfliction in Syria."

On September 11, [President Obama said](#) that Russia's strategy of "doubling down on Assad" is "a big mistake," but left open the possibility that "if they are willing to work with us and the 60-nation coalition that we've put together, then there's the possibility of a political settlement in which Assad would be transitioned out and a new coalition of moderate, secular and inclusive forces could come together and restore order in the country." On September 14, [President Putin said](#), "We support the government of Syria in its opposition to terrorist aggression. We have provided and will provide necessary military and technical support and call on other nations to join us." [President Assad has repeated](#) calls for support against "terrorists," while [Israeli leaders have sought consultations with Russia over its plans](#).

## Russia's Motives in Syria

Since coming to power in 2000, Russia's Vladimir Putin has been committed to restoring Russia as a great power, shaping his policies to position Russia as a counterweight to the United States. Following the outbreak of unrest in Syria in 2011, Russia has sought to influence events there through both diplomatic initiatives and military assistance designed to bolster the Syrian government's ability to counter rebel groups. With the situation in eastern Ukraine at a stalemate it appears that Putin seeks to show Russian strength and influence with a policy shift in Syria. Analysts

disagree on how, or if, Russia's Ukraine policy relates to its increased role in Syria, debating whether Putin views the Ukraine intervention as a success to be repeated, or a failure for which Syria could provide a distraction at home and a bargaining chip in negotiations abroad. Russia's recent activity in Syria also may be motivated by an assessment that the Syrian military forces are becoming less capable and that Iranian support may be inadequate to preserve the Asad regime. Moscow's primary intentions may include safeguarding the Asad regime, preserving Russian naval access to Syria, and challenging U.S. policy toward Syria. Putin's recent call for an all-out effort against the Islamic State also may stem from the sizable number of jihadist fighters from the North Caucasus fighting in Syria, who may pose a serious problem for Moscow should they return to Russia.

### **Roots of Russian-Syrian Military Cooperation**

Russian military involvement in Syria dates back to the 1950s, when the former Soviet Union embraced Syrian nationalist rulers as a counterbalance to U.S. regional partners. Soviet and Russian Federation naval forces have accessed a facility at the Syrian port of Tartus since the early 1970s, using it as a logistical hub to enable longer Mediterranean operations. Former Syrian president Hafiz al Asad (1971-2000) regularly hosted Soviet military and economic advisors but resisted attempts by Moscow to leverage its military assistance to gain greater access to shore facilities. Syria eventually became the largest Middle East recipient of Russian equipment and training, with Russia supplying the majority of Syria's tanks, artillery, fixed-wing aircraft, and helicopters. While Russian personnel have since been based in Syria to maintain Russian military equipment and train Syrians, their numbers have fluctuated over time. The number of Soviet and Eastern European military technicians in Syria reached approximately 5,800 in 1983, according to [CIA estimates](#), then gradually declined. By 2006, there were just 2,000 Russian military personnel, according to an [academic study](#). Some reports suggest that Russian personnel numbers further declined to a few hundred, many of whom were withdrawn for security reasons prior to recent redeployments.

### **Outlook and Challenges for U.S. Policy**

On the diplomatic front, U.S. officials continue to insist that President Asad cannot be part of a final solution to stabilize Syria or a counterterrorism partner. [They warn](#) that any and all third party support for Asad will only prolong a conflict that has created opportunities for the Islamic State and other extremist groups. At the same time, U.S. officials have stated that Russia could play a constructive role in ending the conflict and undermining the appeal of extremists by backing a transition in which Asad leaves power but the Syrian state apparatus remains intact. If Russian officials continue to reject the premise of Asad's ouster as a precondition for a transition or counterterrorism cooperation, U.S. officials may confront a more lasting proxy conflict scenario.