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Triangular Politics in Syria: Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia

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During three weeks in September, Russia deployed its air force in Syria to support Bashar al-Asad's increasingly weak and vulnerable regime in the civil war that began following the 2011 rebellion.¹ Officially, Vladimir Putin explained the new Russian intervention as a bid to defeat the Islamic State (IS) in Syria.² However, on September 30, Russia initiated air strikes against the Syrian rebels targeting Asad's regime. A week later, on October 7, Russia fired cruise missiles that again targeted Asad's opposition, rather than IS, from ships in the Caspian Sea, hundreds of miles away. At the tactical level, some argue that the Russian air support was meant to pre-empt the U.S.-led coalition from establishing a no-fly zone in northern Syria.³ Others have argued that the enhanced Russian firepower was a necessary substitute for the crisis of manpower facing Asad's military, which is struggling to find new recruits.⁴ Still others claim that the Russian deployment was intended to shore up Asad's forces in response to the rebels' effective use of BGM-71 TOWs (tube launched, optically tracked, wire-guided missiles), which have been instrumental in their efforts to threaten

¹ Eyal Zisser, "[The Russian and Iranian Military Intervention in Syria](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes* 9:16, September 25, 2015. For a detailed and thorough description of Russia's deployment to date, see: Michael Kofman, "[Russia's Arsenal in Syria: What Do We Know?](#)," *War on the Rocks* [warontherocks.com], October 18, 2015.

² "[Read Putin's UN General Assembly Speech](#)," *The Washington Post*, September 28, 2015; Charlie Rose, "[All Eyes on Putin](#)," CBS News, September 27, 2015.

³ Mikhail Barabanov, "[Why Russia Needs an Exit Strategy in Syria](#)," *The National Interest*, October 9, 2015.

⁴ Maher Samaan and Anne Barnard, "[Assad, in Rare Admission, Says Syria's Army Lacks Manpower](#)," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2015; Ian Black, "[Wake-up call on Syrian army weakness prompted Russian intervention](#)," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2015.

Asad's 'Alawi stronghold along the Syrian coast during recent months.⁵ Therefore, Russia's tactical aims may be complementary rather than mutually exclusive. In any case, there is little argument with the broad assessment that Russia's increased involvement in Syria was coordinated with Iran and designed to prop up the regime. However, beyond this short term aim, there is much less clarity about what Russia is trying to accomplish in Syria over the longer term.

On October 9, Leonid Bershidsky, the founding editor of *Vedomosti*, argued that Russia was using Syria as a training exercise and a showcase for its military hardware.⁶ Indeed, Vladimir Khozin, an aide to Putin, said, "Everything they [Asad's forces] need from Russia's armory will be supplied to Syria."⁷ *The New York Times*, citing Gustav Gressel's October 12 report, appeared to echo that assessment claiming that the operation in Syria was "a testing ground for an increasingly confrontational and defiant Russia under Mr. Putin."⁸

Andranik Migranyan, a Russian analyst, framed the Russian intervention as filling a vacuum in Syria. He argues that Putin has several objectives: to strengthen Asad; "to bolster ground forces in Syria, Iran, and Iraq as they prepare a counteroffensive" against the IS; and "to address the problem of Russian and other extremists from former Soviet republics who are fighting in Syria and may return [to Russia] to cause chaos."⁹ While Bershidsky described the Russian intervention as "low risk," Mikhail Barabanov, Editor-in-Chief of the *Moscow Defense Brief*, described it as "very risky." Barabanov explained that the broad Russian goal in Syria was "righting the boat of US-Russian relations" that was "heavily tilted" in 2014-2015, following events in Ukraine and Crimea. He pointed out that the maneuver had an immediate effect, forcing the U.S. to reinstate military contacts with Russia, which has been suspended in early 2014. Barabanov also emphasized Russia's aim at preventing a repeat of the 2011 Libya intervention, during which the international coalition used a UN-sanctioned "no-fly zone" to topple Qaddafi's regime.¹⁰

Peter Pomerantsev, a Senior Fellow at the Legatum Institute, argues that the Russian offensive in Syria is meant to confuse Western officials and paralyze

⁵ Liz Sly, "[Did U.S. weapons supplied to Syrian rebels draw Russia into the conflict?](#)," *The Washington Post*, October 11, 2015; Anne Barnard and Karam Shoumali, "[U.S. Weaponry Is Turning Syria Into Proxy War With Russia](#)," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2015.

⁶ Leonid Bershidsky, "[Russia's Low-Risk Gambit in Syria](#)," *Bloomberg View*, October 9, 2015.

⁷ TASS News Agency, September 30, 2015.

⁸ Steven Lee Myers and Eric Schmitt, "[Russian Military Uses Syria as Proving Ground, and West Takes Notice](#)," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2015. See, also: Gustav Gressel, "[Russia's Quiet Military Revolution, and What It Means for Europe](#)," European Council on Foreign Relations, October 12, 2015.

⁹ "[Syria: Why Russia Went In](#)," The Center for National Interest, October 8, 2015.

¹⁰ Mikhail Barabanov, "[Why Russia Needs an Exit Strategy in Syria](#)," *The National Interest*, October 9, 2015.

their judgment, providing a psychological victory that will break the image of American omniscience and power.¹¹ Adam Garfinkle, the Editor of *The American Interest*, explains Putin's aims in terms of three concentric circles. The innermost circle, or aim, is to reinforce the Asad regime. Garfinkle provocatively argues that Russia's war in Syria may also be intended to destroy the European Union. As the fighting in Syria pushes towards the IS territory in eastern Syria, thousands more Syrians are bound to flee the violence and seek asylum in Europe, exacerbating the European Union's political crisis. The middle circle, or aim, is to position Russia as the decisive arbiter of Syria's post-Asad future, which would provide Russia with important political leverage with Iran and all of Syria's neighbors.¹²

Deciphering Putin's view of the "middle-circle" – the end game in Syria – is perhaps the most difficult challenge. Former U.S. official Richard N. Haass argues that the "real question" is whether Russia views propping up Asad as an end in itself or a means to an end. Haass views the latest Russian maneuvers as a sign that Putin may be interested in a diplomatic process to bring an end to the Syrian civil war.¹³ As Aleksai Makarkin, the deputy head of the Center for Political Technologies in Moscow, pointed out, "Russia wants Assad to get engaged in a political settlement from a position of strength."¹⁴ In the end, as Haass points out, Putin's preferred outcome in Syria, diplomatic or otherwise, is a matter of speculation. However, what is perhaps less speculative is how Russia has, in recent months, managed to position itself as the pivot in a triangular political relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Following Deputy Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman's June 2015 visit to Russia, during which he met with Putin, Saudi Arabia concluded six agreements with Russia in several important areas, including the energy, military, and nuclear fields. The Saudis agreed to purchase the Russian Iskander-M short range ballistic missile system and expressed interest in purchasing Russia's Ka-52K combat helicopters. In addition to the arms deals, the Saudi sovereign wealth fund committed to investing \$10 billion in Russia over the next five years. Further, Saudi Arabia may begin purchasing civilian nuclear technology from Russia. Nuclear cooperation with Saudi Arabia could ultimately be worth \$30 to \$40 billion to Russia, if it materializes. And the Saudis may even have discussed

¹¹ Ben Judah, "[Confused About Russia's Intentions in Syria? Putin Wants You to Be](#)," *Huffington Post*, October 9, 2015.

¹² Adam Garfinkle, "[Putin, Obama, and the Middle East](#)," E-Notes, Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 2015; Adam Garfinkle, "[Russia's Third Circles](#)," *The American Interest*, September 17, 2015; Fred Weir, "At UN, Putin talks tough against IS. Will the West work with him?," *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 28, 2015.

¹³ Richard N. Haass, "[Testing Putin in Syria](#)," Project Syndicate, October 15, 2015.

¹⁴ Anne Barnard and Neil MacFarquhar, "[Vladimir Putin Plunges into a Caldron: Saving Assad](#)," *The New York Times*, October 2, 2015.

providing Russia with the latest advanced technology for oil and gas recovery, which would allow Russia to circumvent Western sanctions on supplying such technology to its state-owned energy firms. These agreements represent a major Saudi policy reorientation in its approach to Russia.¹⁵ The Saudi shift was, in part, an acknowledgement of Russia's ability to shape the outcome in Syria.

Russia's relations with Iran also appear to have improved in 2015. Russia is believed to have played an integral role in brokering the aspect of the nuclear deal with Iran that will lift the arms embargo on Iran after five years, and permit sale of ballistic missile technology to Iran. Further, the Russian intervention in Syria is believed to have been coordinated with Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, which has also played an important role in propping up the Asad regime during the past five years. Finally, it was announced that Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Syria would establish a joint operations center in Baghdad, in late October or November, to share intelligence in the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.¹⁶

Following Russia's military intervention, there were reports suggesting that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, Russia was not supporting Iranian entrenchment in Syria, and that Russia's increased military involvement was intended to scale back or limit Iran's influence in Syria. The most detailed of these reports appeared in the Saudi financed pan-Arab newspaper *al-Hayat*. It referred to statements from Syrian General 'Ali Ayyub that one of Russia's aims was to dissolve the Syrian National Defense Forces, which has been described as the "Syrian Hizballah."¹⁷ Mikhail Bogdanov, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, also reportedly met with the Syrian opposition in France to sound them out on the prospect of a Sunni prime minister with broad executive powers, who would serve under Asad in a transitional government.¹⁸

These reports in the Saudi-backed pan-Arab media should be treated with a healthy dose of skepticism. Russia may indeed be sounding out the Saudis and the Syrian opposition about the terms of a settlement, but that does not mean that it is ready to sideline Iran. In fact, Iran's decision to increase the number of its troops in Syria,¹⁹ at the same time Russia has sent its forces in, may be a sign

¹⁵ Brandon Friedman, "[Russia and Saudi Arabia: Bridging the Gulf](#)," *inFocus Quarterly* 9: 4 (Fall 2015), 30-32.

¹⁶ "West pondering over Russian president's initiatives," *ITAR-TASS World Service*, September 30, 2015.

¹⁷ Ibrahim Hamidi, "[Russia to facilitate the dismantling of the ' Defense Forces'](#)," *al-Hayat*, October 11, 2015.

¹⁸ Ibrahim Hamidi, *al-Hayat*, October 10, 2015; For another interesting, unsourced take, see: Esam Aziz and Samir Altaqi, "[Putin's Plan in Syria and its Chances of Success – What Events on the Ground Tell Us](#)," *Middle East Briefing* 3:99, October 16, 2015.

¹⁹ Loveday Morris and Mustafa Salim, "[Iran backs Assad in the battle for Aleppo with proxies, ground troops](#)," *The Washington Post*, October 19, 2015.

of Russian-Iranian coordination, but perhaps it is also an Iranian insurance policy against Russia marginalizing Iranian influence in Syria. After all, Iran has invested five years of precious blood and treasure there. Russia's sounding out of Saudi Arabia and the Syrian opposition, and suggesting it may dismantle Iran's clients in Syria, may be nothing more than Russian disinformation intended to foster a political climate where both Iran and Saudi Arabia are seeking its favor as the arbitrating power in Syria.

In January 2014, U.S. President Obama outlined a plan for a "new equilibrium" between Iran and the Sunni Arab states in the Middle East. The idea seemed to be that the U.S. would use its post-nuclear deal influence with Iran to facilitate a stable regional balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni Gulf Arab States.²⁰ Ironically, it is Russia, and not the U.S., that appears to be playing the pivot in a post-nuclear deal triangle of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Russia is using its military and political influence in the region to maintain better ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia, respectively, than those two states maintain with one another. To be sure, Russia may not yet have a well defined end game for Syria. But what can be said about Russia's military intervention in Syria is that it allows Putin to dangle the Asad carrot in front of both Iran and Saudi Arabia, exploiting their mutual hostility and conflicting aims in Syria, in order to best serve its own long-term interests, while at the same time enhancing its regional influence and prestige.

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²⁰ David Remnick, "[Going the Distance: On and off the road with Barack Obama](#)," *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2014.

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