

Analysis: Russia's military intervention in Syria, one year on

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While Moscow's battlefield support for the Assad regime in Syria has almost certainly prevented the latter's military collapse, what else has the involvement of Russian forces in the country achieved? Tim Ripley reports

The nationwide ceasefire in Syria that began on 12 September remained tenuous as it entered its second week, but the fact that it was brokered by the United States and Russia clearly demonstrates the latter is now a key player in the conflict. This situation is a direct result of Russian president Vladimir Putin's decision last year to despatch Russian combat forces to Syria to assist the troops loyal to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

In the summer of 2015 Assad's government was reeling. Its troops had been routed in Idlib province by opposition fighters and the cities of Hama, Homs, and Latakia looked like they would soon fall. A year later the situation has been reversed: government troops have launched counter-attacks across the country; recaptured Kweires airbase and Palmyra; completed the encirclement of opposition-controlled districts in Syria's second city, Aleppo; taken back several suburbs around Damascus; and are driving opposition fighters from northern Latakia. However, although Assad's grip on power seems secure, his troops are a long way off from anything that could be described as a decisive victory.

Russia's role in swinging the pendulum on Syria's battlefields back in favour of the Damascus government has been multi-faceted. The most high-profile element of the Russian intervention has been the air group of combat aircraft that was sent to Humaymim Air Base in Syria's Latakia province in September 2015, from where it began offensive operations on the last day of that month. International media organisations have been regularly invited to the base to view daily sorties by Sukhoi Su-24Ms, Su-25SMs, Su-30SMs, Su-34s, and Su-35Ss of the Russian Aerospace Forces.

The focus on the offensive strikes by Russian jets, however, overlooks the fact that almost every branch of Moscow's armed forces - including the Russian Ground Forces, Black Sea Fleet, Caspian Flotilla, as well as Long Range Aviation, Air Defence, strategic and tactic airlift units, special forces, and the GRU intelligence organisation - has been involved in the Syrian operation in some way or another.

At the heart of Moscow's mission in Syria have been teams of senior and middle-ranking liaison officers, led by Lieutenant General Alexander Zhuravlev, who were despatched to work in Syrian army and air force headquarters to co-ordinate Russian, Syrian, Iranian, and Hizbullah operations across the country. Several dozen other Russian officers run what is termed the 'reconciliation centre' at Humaymim Air Base, which has played a major part in brokering deals with besieged towns to surrender or switch over to the government side as well as co-ordinating this September's ceasefire terms.

When Syrian and allied troops mounted major attacks, Russian fixed- and rotary-wing air power, artillery, special forces and surveillance assets were in place to provide support. This combination was instrumental in the successful operation against Palmyra in March this year. Perhaps more impressively, on a number of occasions the Russians were able to react quickly to battlefield reverses at the hands of Islamic State fighters, moving their artillery and attack helicopters to provide a back-stop for hard-pressed Syrian troops.

This close integration of Russian and allied forces has been the big surprise of the war, showing that many of the lessons learnt on similar assistance missions during the Soviet era in the 1970s and 1980s have not been lost to the modern-day Russian military.

The Syrian war has also allowed the Russian military to showcase many of its latest capabilities - and some of its not-so-new ones - for the first time in combat situations, including Novator Design Bureau 3M14T Kalibr NK cruise missiles, Mil Mi-28 and Kamov Ka-52 attack helicopters, Su-34 multi-role strike jets, and Tupolov Tu-95 and Tu-160 long-range bombers. Perhaps more significantly, the Russians have shown that they can combine capabilities across service boundaries to create battlefield effect, including using the Forpost unmanned aerial vehicle (a licence-produced version of the Israeli IAI Searcher) to provide real time bomb damage assessment of Kalibr missile strikes launched from Russian warships.

While the Russian military has gained invaluable combat experience over the past year in Syria, the operation has also highlighted that Moscow's armed forces operate a mix of equipment; some of it has 21st Century capabilities, but quite a lot of its hardware still dates from the 1980s or 1990s. Russian combat jets, for example, do not have as many precision weapon options as their Western counter-parts.

Meanwhile, it appears that senior Russian officers are very aware of the shortcomings of their Syrian allies, who seem unlikely to achieve a rapid victory over their enemies. One retired senior officer with strong ties to Russia's current military leaders recently published an article on the website of a military journal lamenting the poor morale in the Syrian Arab Army, the shortage of bombs in the Syrian air force, and the shortcoming within the high command in Damascus. Against this background it would seem that Russia's intervention can only realistically have two limited objectives: stopping the defeat of the Syrian government forces and giving Moscow a seat at the top diplomatic table.

Measured against these goals, the Russian military has delivered the goods for Putin - even if Russia has lost some 20 servicemen killed in action, as well as losing one Su-24 bomber and three rotary-wing platforms: one Mi-28 and two Mi-8 transport helicopters.