

Global Hot Topics

Syria: Russia partially withdraws its main warring units

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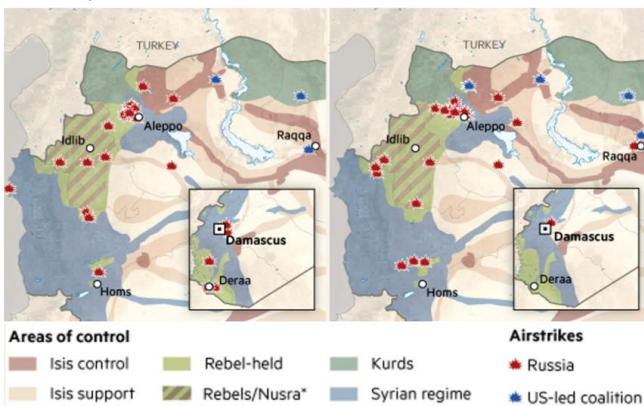
Just one day after the Geneva Peace Talks for Syria were restored, Russian President Putin announced that Russia had sufficiently achieved its goals in Syria since beginning airstrikes in September and that the main part of the military group in the country will gradually withdraw. However, Russia's air base in Latakia will continue to operate, as will its naval facility in Tartus. This latest "known unknown" by Russia could be perceived as a way to earn a diplomatic leverage rather than a Russian defeat in Syria. All in all, the withdrawal would have geopolitical implications for Russia, Syria, Iran, Turkey and the EU.

Pre-ceasefire

February 24-26

Post-ceasefire

February 27- March 4



The Russian latest surprise...

Russian President appeared on Russian TV gathered Foreign Minister Lavrov and Defense Minister Shoigu and asked them to report on Russia's operations in Syria. First, they informed to the President on the achievements:

- **On defense issues, Moscow has achieved most of its goals according to Shoigu:** the rebels (mainly al-Nusra) have been driven out of Latakia where Moscow has an airbase, the communication line between Aleppo and Damascus has been restored, the rebel lines in the north of Aleppo have been cut, the center of the country (Hama and Homs) has been cleared from the rebels, a ground operation in northern Syria has been prevented and the ISIS has lost ground.
- **On the diplomatic front, Lavrov remarked the**

importance of the diplomatic strategy. Thanks to these decisions, including the latest agreement with President Obama, today **intra-Syrian talks between the Government delegation and delegations of multiple opposition groups have finally been launched in Geneva.**

Given these achievements, President Putin announced the plan for withdrawal in which the main army units in Syria will be called back in five-month period. Yet, **the naval base in Tartus and the airbase in Latakia (Hmeymim airbase) will function as before.** These bases will be protected from land, air and sea i.e., **Russian S-400 surface-to-air missiles will continue to function in order to impose a no-fly zone over Syria** and Russian maritime movement in the Eastern Mediterranean will continue. Russia will also continue to monitor the cessation of hostilities with its air units. On the diplomatic front, President Putin ordered Lavrov to intensify the Russian Federation's participation in organizing the peace process to resolve Syrian problems.

Why now? some explanations on the latest "known unknown"

Why now? Analysts consider several options¹. First, President Putin maybe telling the truth: the goals are met and at this stage, this is the most that Russia can get. Second, Putin may be bluffing, softening critics on latest actions on Syrian and gaining time (i.e Ukrainian strategy as there is not deadline in the plan). Third, Russia may be trying to get out of a quagmire with some "victory" before the situation starts to deteriorate (i.e "Cash in" strategy). Last, the decision can be part of secret negotiations with the US for Russia to pressure Al Assad on Geneva negotiations.

In a nutshell, Russia is in a position to obtain the maximum benefit now, but maybe not later, and it is time for diplomatic efforts increasing the pressure on Damascus to reach a consensus in Geneva talks. Meanwhile, the Kremlin leaves important degrees of freedom to snapback:

- The fight against the ISIS and JN would continue. Therefore, there is a huge uncertainty on whether the pro-regime forces would continue their march against JN in Latakia, Idlib and Aleppo with Russian support or not.
- There is no concrete promise regarding the end-date of the withdrawal. Thus, the timing in the plan implies that the Kremlin may accelerate or decelerate the withdrawal of the troops in accordance with the changing course on the ground.

Some potential implications

If maintained, the Russian decision has an implication for the rest of the players. Assad position weakens and the discussions on the configuration of the new Syria could accelerate in Geneva talks. This would allow to concentrate on fighting ISIS and Nusra, which if successful, could alleviate the refugee's pressure. Iran would have to increase the pressure by land if they want to maintain the actual situation. Turkey will experience some relaxation on his border with Syria and the probability of a new military "accident" will diminish.

¹ Interpreting the Russian Withdrawal from Syria. A.Lund Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

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