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WORLD | MIDDLE EAST CROSSROADS

## Russia Entry Adds New Fuel to Syria War

Moscow hopes to showcase America's diminishing role in the Middle East



In the aftermath of a Russian airstrike on the Syrian town of Talbiseh Wednesday, men sift through the rubble. *PHOTO: SYRIA CIVIL DEFENCE/ASSOCIATED PRESS*

By **YAROSLAV TROFIMOV**

Updated Oct. 1, 2015 2:18 p.m. ET

**BEIRUT**—By dispatching military forces to Syria—something that the Obama administration has long refused to do—Moscow has advanced its longtime objective of

showcasing America's diminishing role in the region.

But the Kremlin's first expeditionary war in decades is unlikely to bring the four-year Syrian conflict anywhere closer to an end. If anything, by doubling down on the Assad regime's strategy of targeting rebels other than Islamic State, it is bound to reinforce the very Islamist extremists that Moscow purports to fight.

Even with Russia's new support, President Bashar al-Assad's army is too weak and too short of manpower to try recapturing significant territory in the Sunni heartland of northern Syria.

"There is no military solution in Syria for any side," said Hisham Jaber, a retired Lebanese Army major-general who runs a think tank in Beirut. "You just cannot go back to 2011."

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Russians hope to achieve, Mr. Jaber said, is to protect Damascus, the Alawite country along the Mediterranean coast, and the road connecting these parts of Syria—possibly by helping the Assad regime to roll back some of the advances made by rebel forces this year.

Even that, however, is a tall order. After all, Russia is inserting itself into Syria's sectarian conflict after years of military involvement by Iran and by Lebanon's Hezbollah Shiite militia failed to prevent the shrinking of areas under regime control.

So far, the nature of the Russian deployment in Syria looks similar to the limited U.S. force sent last year to Iraq: a few thousand troops mostly involved in air operations and advisers. Russia's head of presidential administration, Sergey Ivanov, ruled out direct

## Russian participation in ground combat on Wednesday.

That kind of casualty-averse U.S. presence in Iraq, despite all the American firepower, didn't prevent Islamic State, also known as ISIS, from seizing the crucial city of Ramadi this year. In Afghanistan, where the U.S. maintains a much larger force, the Taliban also managed to capture and hold for days the strategic city of Kunduz.

"It's ludicrous to think that Russia adding 32 planes would tilt the course of the war," said Basem Shabb, a Lebanese lawmaker from the Sunni-led Future movement. "Russia has no illusion about a quick victory."

That is not to say Russia won't go further in Syria in the future. The powerful governor of its Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, already told a Russian TV channel this week he was disappointed that Moscow wasn't sending combat infantry, and said he is ready to dispatch tens of thousands of Chechen fighters to Syria.

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- Columns by Yaroslav Trofimov (<http://www.wsj.com/news/types/middle-east-crossroads>)

Russia, like the Assad regime, doesn't make much of a distinction between Islamic

State, whose ranks include many Chechens and other Russian citizens, more moderate Islamist rebels backed by Saudi Arabia, Turkey or Qatar, and even more moderate Syrian fighters supported by the U.S. Some of these more moderate rebels said they were targeted by the first Russian airstrikes on Wednesday.

"Some of the Islamic movements that have established themselves in Syria, such as Islamic State, show their barbaric side, while the others hide it for now. But they all come from the same current that doesn't accept the existence of others. They all pose the same danger to the Syrian regime," said Wiam Wahhab, head of Lebanon's Arab Unity Party, which is close to the Syrian regime and to Hezbollah.

In Turkey and the Gulf states, government officials not so long ago talked about establishing a no-fly zone to protect these rebel-held areas or even about launching airstrikes against Syrian regime targets.

That is no longer an option as Ankara or Riyadh can't openly respond to the Russian presence in Syrian skies.

"Until now these countries were dealing with a country that is much easier to oppose

called Iran. Now the stakes are much higher,” said Vali Nasr, dean of the School of Advanced and International Studies at Johns Hopkins University and a former U.S. State Department adviser.

“All the countries that object to Russia’s position, particularly Turkey and Saudi Arabia, have very few options to oppose it. They don’t have the means to make a difference without going to war with Russia.”

Following the Russian intervention, supporters of the Assad regime say they hope that the Turks and the Saudis—and even the Americans—will see the light and enter the new grand regional coalition formed by Moscow, Tehran, Damascus, Baghdad and Hezbollah.

“Iraq, Syria, Iran and Russia are the real major forces on the ground fighting ISIS. Ankara and Riyadh should join the Russia-Iran-Iraq alliance over ISIS,” suggested Seyed Hossein Mousavian, former head of the foreign-relations committee at Iran’s National Security Council who is currently a scholar at Princeton University. “Without Assad, the Syrian military and security forces would totally collapse, which means that Syria would collapse as a nation.”

This is advice that the Saudis, their Gulf allies, and the Turks aren’t about to accept.

“Will they roll over? I don’t think so,” said Andrew Tabler, Syria expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

A more likely way for these Sunni powers to respond to the Russian gambit would be by intensifying covert operations to support and arm Islamist rebel groups fighting the regime in northern and southern Syria, many analysts and diplomats say.

“What we will see is more sophisticated weapons flowing to the rebels,” said Riad Kahwaji, CEO of the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis in Dubai. “I don’t think any side is ready to concede, so we will see more fighting and more battles before we see any political dialogue.”

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