



DISTRACT DECEIVE DESTROY

Putin at War in Syria

By Maksymilian Czuperski, John Herbst, Eliot Higgins,
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FOREWORD

Russian President Vladimir Putin has jumped from one foreign policy adventure to the next. In 2014, he ordered the annexation of Ukraine's Crimea. Throughout that year, and on into 2015, he oversaw a clandestine war in eastern Ukraine, backing Russian proxies there with weapons, fighters, and entire army units. As that war ground down into stalemate, Putin turned his eyes to Syria, and after a rapid diplomatic campaign and an equally rapid military buildup, he launched air strikes in the war-torn country.

The main Russian campaign in Syria ran for almost six months, from September 30, 2015 to March 14, 2016. While President Putin announced the end of Russia's military operations with much fanfare, the modest forces withdrawn thereafter suggest that by no means is Russia's military role in Syria over. Within the context of the Syria crisis, the Russian intervention served a number of purposes. First, it rescued long-time Kremlin client, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who seemed to be losing Syria's civil war. In the process, it gravely weakened the American-backed rebels who had been fighting him. It distracted international and Russian domestic attention from the Ukrainian quagmire. It also allowed the Kremlin to reposition Russia from an adversary in the wake of Ukraine to the essential partner in Syria, and in turn, lobby—so far unsuccessfully—for the lifting of the sanctions, which the West imposed after Crimea.

The results have been grievous. Russia carried out its air strikes with scant regard for the rules of war: Open-source footage shows the repeated use of banned cluster munitions, and strikes on targets including mosques, hospitals, and water treatment plants. Imagine the outcry if the United States or its allies conducted military operations in this manner. Russia's military campaign allowed Assad's forces to retake lost ground, a task they did with great brutality and immense human suffering. It barely dented the ISIS terrorist group, whose recent territorial losses have largely come at the hands of Kurdish militias backed by a US-led coalition. Far from shortening the war, it exacerbated it—and in so doing, it sent yet more waves of refugees flooding into Turkey and Europe.

Putin cynically claimed that the purpose of the mission was to fight ISIS. Nothing could be further from the truth. Russia rarely targeted ISIS in Syria; we should examine the reality of Russia's role in bolstering Assad, undermining the American-supported Syrian opposition, and prolonging the conflict.

Even during the February ceasefire talks, Russian air strikes killed dozens and displaced tens of thousands of civilians in Aleppo. At the moment the ceasefire was put into effect, more than ten thousand refugees from Aleppo waited on Turkey's doorstep—yet another example of Russia's weaponization of migrants against Turkey and European Union nations.

Russia's bombing campaign in Syria was built upon deception: The myth that Russia was fighting terrorism, that the Assad regime was innocent of atrocities, and that the Syrian uprising (to say nothing of the revolution in Ukraine) was instigated by the United States.

This report will present the reality of Russia's Syrian campaign. Russia launched air strikes on hospitals, water treatment plants, and mosques. Russia used cluster bombs. Russia almost exclusively targeted non-ISIS targets. These are the truths that Russia will not admit, and the truths that must be understood when negotiating with Russia as a potential partner.

We have used the power of digital forensics to expose the details of Russia's aerial and ground attacks in Syria using information entirely from open sources, available to be viewed and verified by anyone. Such an approach empowers individuals not only to discover information about Putin's war in Syria, but also to verify the information themselves. Such an approach is the polar opposite of Russia's opaque disinformation campaign, which relies on ideological narratives over verifiable facts.

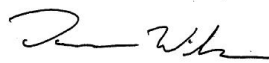
There is also a broader context for Russia's actions in Syria. Putin cultivates an image of unpredictability, because he knows Western leaders' concern about his next steps strengthens his leverage in any engagement with them. Unlike many of Western leaders' assumptions, Putin may very well believe that he has a comparative advantage when navigating a crisis, rather than dealing with the mundane demands of the Russian people in a time of calm on the international stage. In essence, the most important target for his deception may be the Russian people.

Indeed, while Putin's intervention in Syria clearly has foreign policy objectives, the main driver of Putin's actions on the international stage may be domestic. While much of the world views Putin as a strong leader, popular at home, there are indications that he is seriously concerned about his continued

rule. He can no longer count on a social-political bargain with the Russian people in which they enjoy increased living standards in exchange for accepting his authoritarian (and kleptocratic) rule. Rather, he is cultivating a new social contract in which he has positioned himself as the leader who can restore Russian greatness and respect in the world, an attribute that resonates among the Russian people. He is counting on his foreign adventures to bolster his legitimacy as a ruler at home, even as the average Russian's living standard declines.

In this context, our diplomacy—whether over Syria, Iran, arms control—should not inadvertently throw him a lifeline, such as by lifting sanctions or accommodating his 'gains' in eastern Ukraine. Rather, Western diplomacy will only effectively advance its own interests if Western leaders maintain what leverage they do have.

There are no simple or easy options after Putin's Syrian adventure. But Western governments and publics must be armed with the information presented in this report. The real question remains whether Russia will turn back from the path of rivalry, deception, and confrontation that it has chosen, to be a genuine partner for the West once again; or whether Putin has chosen his way. If so, the pattern of distraction, deception, and destruction he followed in Syria is likely to be repeated.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Damon Wilson".

Damon Wilson

Executive Vice President, Programs and Strategy
Atlantic Council

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russian President Vladimir Putin tried to deceive the West when he started his air campaign in Syria, and he tried it again when he declared “mission accomplished.”

According to Putin’s official statements before the campaign, its primary aim was to fight the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS); the main goal was to pave the way for peace talks by defeating “international terrorism.”

Neither claim squares with the facts. Initial Russian Defense Ministry combat reports claimed that ISIS was the only target. Yet analysis of open source and social media intelligence (OSSMINT) quickly revealed that the ministry’s claims were deceptive, and that the Russian strikes were not primarily targeting ISIS. Subsequent research also revealed evidence of the use of cluster munitions and bombs that destroyed civilian targets.

OSSMINT analysis further reveals that Putin’s claim that Russia was “able to radically change the situation in fighting international terrorism” does not match the reality on the ground. The almost six months of Russian air strikes caused only peripheral damage to ISIS: Their positions at the end of the campaign were little altered from those at the start. The strikes also had a limited effect on the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, which launched an attack on more moderate forces just days before Putin announced: mission accomplished.

In fact, the main beneficiary of the Russian air strikes was Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whose

forces were able to retake key areas in and around Latakia and Aleppo. The main losers were the more moderate rebels against Assad, including those backed by the West.

The hallmark of the Russian campaign was disinformation. It accompanied the launch of the campaign; it covered the targets chosen and the weapons used to strike them; it masked the real purpose of the campaign, and the strategic effect that it achieved.

This paper sets out how Russia built up its disinformation campaign, by analyzing what was said and comparing it with what was done. Using OSSMINT, it exposes the false claims that Russia targeted ISIS or defeated international terrorism. It reveals that, far from being a partner in the fight against ISIS, Russia in fact acted as a party to the civil war in Syria, fighting for Assad and against the armed groups—especially those backed by the United States—that oppose both the Syrian leader and ISIS.

This study concludes that Putin’s policy was to distract, deceive, and destroy. The buildup to the Russian air strikes distracted Western and Russian attention from Putin’s Ukrainian operations and the buildup of his forces in Syria. The official campaign reports deceived the world about the mission’s true targets and goals. The operation destroyed the capabilities of the only credible non-jihadist alternative to Assad’s regime, including those elements directly backed by the West. This fits a pattern of behavior already played out in Ukraine. It can be used as a template to predict, examine, and judge his future actions.

“It seems that some people continue to export revolutions, only now these are ‘democratic’ revolutions. Just look at the situation in the Middle East and North Africa.”

VLADIMIR PUTIN

President, Russian Federation
September 28, 2015



Russian President Vladimir Putin addresses the seventieth session of the UN General Assembly in New York, September 28, 2015. *Photo credit: Kremlin.ru.*

BACKGROUND

Before considering how Russia prepared for its air campaign, it is worth considering the events that led up to it.

Syria has long been a key Russian ally and client in the Middle East. The relationship dates back to Soviet times, when the regime of President Hafez al-Assad allowed the Soviet Union to open a naval supply depot in the city of Tartus. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the crumbling of its military, the Tartus base came to be seen as one of the Russian Federation’s key strategic assets: Its only facility in the Eastern Mediterranean and one of only a handful of Russian bases on foreign soil.

The uprisings of the “Arab Spring” came as a rude shock to the Kremlin. In a matter of months, revolutions against long-standing dictatorships broke out in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. In Putin’s eyes, these were not spontaneous revolts, but the work of the United States and its allies:

“It seems that some people continue to export revolutions, only now these are ‘democratic’ revolutions. Just look at the situation in the Middle East and North Africa.”¹

When fighting broke out in Syria after Hafez al-Assad’s son Bashar launched a bloody crackdown on demonstrators in 2011, Russia was quick to accuse the West of fomenting the revolution.

However, Moscow’s chief contribution was to provide the younger Assad with arms and diplomatic cover, blocking UN resolutions against him and brokering a deal which saw him hand over chemical weapons, but left him free to continue conventional attacks on his foes. In the early stages of the conflict, Assad appeared to have the upper hand; and from late 2013, Putin’s overriding geopolitical concern was the situation in Ukraine. Throughout 2014 and the first half of 2015, the Kremlin was fully occupied with the diplomatic and military fall-out of operations in Ukraine. Syria remained an important ally, but Russia had neither the capability nor the need to intervene militarily.

Then, in the early summer of 2015, Assad’s forces suffered a series of major defeats at the hands of ISIS, the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front and US-backed armed opposition groups. Many of these losses were close to Assad’s heartland on the western coastline, and thus close to Tartus. Assad appeared to be on the verge of losing control of the strategic center of Syria, and a motley mix of forces, including both jihadist and US-backed fighters, appeared to be close to a point from which they could threaten Russia’s prized Mediterranean asset.

The double threat to a Russian ally and a Russian base seems to have spurred the Kremlin to action. In August 2015, more than four years after the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Putin’s regime began preparing the ground for military operations in Syria.

¹ Vladimir Putin, address to the UN General Assembly, September 28, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.



Tapir class Large Landing Craft Nikolay Filchenkov of the Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet seen exiting the Bosphorus strait, southbound toward Syria. *Photo credit: Alper Böler.*

DISTRACT BUILDING THE DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

Putin's communications campaign

Three things signalled a shift in Russia's international posture in the course of August 2015. First, amateur ship-spotters in Istanbul began to notice Russian naval vessels transiting from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean, with "pre-fabricated barracks, water tanks, and military trucks; ... [Even] the logos used by Russian troops deployed in Ukraine."² These supplies made their way to the Russian Naval Forces sustainment center in the port city of Tartus.³ Analysis of social-media posts indicated that one of the units involved was the elite 810th Marines

Division, which was based in Sevastopol, and had played a role in the Russian aggression against Crimea.

Second, after months of ceasefire violations, the Russian-controlled militias in Ukraine agreed to a truce, starting on September 1, 2015, the first day of the school year in the former Soviet Union.⁴ While the ceasefire was not wholly enforced, Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) reports from the period show a significant and sustained reduction in violations.⁵

Third, and for the first time in the four years since the Syrian conflict broke out, Russian leaders began speaking publicly of the possibility of a military intervention in Syria.

2 Adrian Lancashire with Bora Bayraktar, "Exclusive: shipwatchers chart Russian hardware heading into Med," Euronews, September 29, 2015, <http://www.euronews.com/2015/09/29/russian-navy-pours-south-through-bosphorus/>; Maria Tsvetkova, Photos show Russian military trucks on Syria-bound ship, Reuters, October 7, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-shipping-idUKKCNOS11IF20151007>.

3 Ed Payne, Barbara Starr, and Susannah Cullinane, "Russia launches first airstrikes in Syria," CNN Politics, September 30, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/30/politics/russia-syria-airstrikes-isis/>.

4 "Ukraine, separatists to strive for full ceasefire from September 1," Reuters, August 27, 2015. <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-ceasefire-idUSKCN0QV29A20150826>.

5 Compare, for example, the OSCE's "Summary table of ceasefire violations, September 1, 2015", <http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/179711>, with its "Summary table of ceasefire violations, August 17, 2015", <http://www.osce.org/ukraine-smm/178006?download=true>.



Putin first heralded the idea of Russian intervention in Syria at a joint press conference with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi on August 26, 2015.

Putin described their discussions in the following terms: “. . . We stressed the need for a broad counterterrorism front in which the key international players and the region’s countries, including Syria, would take part.”⁶

One week later, Putin confirmed that Russia’s intention was to create an “international coalition to combat terrorism and extremism” in Syria. He also fired a warning shot at Western nations that argued that the Syrian civil war was the result of President Bashar al-Assad’s policies and that Assad’s removal should therefore be one of the goals of a settlement: “People are not fleeing from the Bashar Assad regime—they are fleeing from the Islamic State. . .”⁷



On September 13, 2015, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expanded on Putin’s themes in a major set-piece interview, arguing “If you look at what the coalition’s planes are doing, you can get strange ideas. Sometimes, a thought creeps in that there’s more to it than just the purported goal of fighting the Islamic State. I hope I’m not talking out of school if I say that some of our colleagues from the coalition say they occasionally get access to information about the exact location of ISIS units, but the coalition’s commander (of course, the United States) does not authorize an air strike.”

Lavrov continued, “All of our Western partners, without exception, are telling us that they understand perfectly well the nature of the main threat in the Middle East and North Africa. It is not the Assad regime, but the Islamic State.”⁸



The final rhetorical blast came on September 27, 2015, when President Putin

declared before the UN General Assembly in New York that, “it is not about Russia’s ambitions, dear colleagues, but about the recognition of the fact that we can no longer tolerate the current state of affairs in the world. What we actually propose is to be guided by common values and common interests rather than by ambitions.”⁹

6 Russian President Vladimir Putin, “Press statements following Russian-Egyptian talks,” Official Website of the President of Russia (Hereinafter “Kremlin website”), August 26, 2015 16:30, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50184>.

7 President Putin, “Vladimir Putin answered Russian journalists’ questions,” Official Website of the President of Russia, September 4, 2015, <http://en.special.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50234>.

8 “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with Voskresnoye Vremya TV programme,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, September 13, 2015, http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/1744777.

9 President Putin, “Text of address at seventieth session of the UN General Assembly,” Kremlin website, September 28, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.



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Diplomacy or disinformation?

The decision to headline this once-in-a-decade speech with the call for an anti-terrorism coalition focused on ISIS shows how much importance the Kremlin attached to its outreach campaign. Putin's address was clearly carefully drafted to maximize the occasion and to showcase the Russian perspective on the Syrian crisis, as well as to lay the foundation for imminent Russian military action.

At the time of Putin's address, an international coalition already existed; it had been conducting strikes against ISIS in Iraq and Syria for a year. It was led by the United States, and its Syria policy was built on a number of elements: Conducting air strikes against ISIS; supporting the "moderate" groups (chiefly the Kurdish forces and the Free Syrian Army) opposing ISIS on the ground; cutting off the flow of funding and fighters to ISIS; and launching a peace process that would ultimately see Assad leave power.¹⁰

In his speech, Putin agreed that ISIS was the main problem, and he agreed on the need to cut its supply lines. However, he challenged the overall American policy, labeling it both arrogant and ineffective. Instead, he proposed a coalition based on three different elements: Conduct air strikes against ISIS and other (unspecified) "terrorists," support Assad's forces and the Kurds, and launch a peace process that would leave Assad in place as the legitimate ruler.

It is worth asking whether the Kremlin's communication campaign was an attempt at diplomacy, rallying international support for a military coalition with Russia and Assad, or disinformation, presenting a misleading view of the regime's genuine intentions.

In this light, an early indication is given by the repeated references to the West's alleged inefficiency and failure. If the purpose of the campaign had been to solicit Western democratic support for, and potential membership in, an international coalition, it would be reasonable to expect a diplomatic approach acknowledging the efforts made by the existing coalition. To suggest that the United States and its allies were to blame for the crisis hardly seems the best way to win their support.

However, while such rhetoric sits uncomfortably in the diplomacy of persuasion, it has long been an

integral part of Russian disinformation campaigns.

Russian propaganda uses a 4D approach:¹¹ Dismiss the critic, distort the facts, distract from the key point, and dismay the audience.

All four elements featured in the Kremlin's diplomatic buildup to air strikes: dismissing the Western-led coalition as ineffective; distorting the origins of the civil war and the refugee crisis; distracting attention from the Syrian civil war (and also the Ukrainian conflict) by blaming the West for its actions in Iraq and Libya; and seeding dismay with the claim that backing the Syrian insurgency fighting both Assad and ISIS would increase the terrorist threat in Europe.

Thus, the style and content of the Syrian campaign fit more closely with the Kremlin's tactic of aggressive disinformation, rather than with an attempt at persuasive diplomacy.

The details of the Kremlin's argument support the thesis that Putin's primary purpose was to deceive, rather than to persuade. The claim that Assad's forces were the main bulwark against ISIS sidestepped the fact that, in the summer of 2015, those forces were not fighting ISIS primarily, and were, in any case, performing very poorly. On July 26, Assad admitted that his troops could not hold all of Syria.¹² In the first fortnight of September, his forces were pushed out of their last stronghold in Idlib province¹³ and were losing their grip on Aleppo.¹⁴ Neither defeat came at the hands of ISIS: Idlib was lost to an Islamist-dominated coalition that included the al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front, which is a fierce rival of ISIS; Aleppo was under attack by a mixture of opposition groups. Clearly, ISIS was not the only threat to the Assad regime.

Yet, every time Russia's leaders called for an international coalition to provide close air support for Assad's forces, they did so on the grounds that ISIS was the main problem, and Assad's forces

¹⁰ See for example President Obama's address to UN General Assembly on September 28, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/09/28/remarks-president-obama-united-nations-general-assembly>.

¹¹ Ben Nimmo, "Anatomy of an info-war: How Russia's propaganda machine works, and how to counter it," Central European Policy Institute, May 15, 2015, <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/anatomy-info-war-how-russias-propaganda-machine-works-and-how-counter-it>.
¹² "Assad: Syrian regime is short of troops and losing ground," Channel 4 News (UK), July 26, 2015, <http://www.channel4.com/news/assad-syrian-regime-is-short-of-troops-and-losing-ground>.
¹³ "Assad Loses Final Idlib Stronghold to Al Qaeda-led Insurgents," Associated Press, reprinted in Wall Street Journal, September 9, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/assad-loses-final-idlib-stronghold-to-al-qaeda-led-insurgents-1441816862>.
¹⁴ "Pro-Assad forces losing ground in Aleppo," September 14, 2015, ARA News, <http://aranews.net/2015/09/pro-assad-forces-losing-ground-in-aleppo/>.



US President Barack Obama extends his hand to Russian President Vladimir Putin during their meeting at the United Nations General Assembly in New York, September 28, 2015. *Photo credit: Reuters/Kevin Lamarque.*

the solution. Given the wealth of intelligence at Russia's disposal, both from its own sources and those of Assad, the idea that this was an innocent misunderstanding can be ruled out.

It appears far more likely that Putin wanted to launch air strikes to back Assad, and to distract from this unpopular position, he claimed to be targeting ISIS instead.

Seen in this light, the call for a “broad international coalition,” including both Syria and Iran, also appears disingenuous. The US-led international coalition that was already in place included Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates¹⁵—all of them fiercely opposed to Assad. Putin's vision of an international

coalition asserted that its members should fight in support of Assad. Moscow may have hoped that it could get the United States and European partners to persuade Turkey and Saudi Arabia to acquiesce; but considering this would have required a shift in the foundational aims of the coalition, it is more likely that the Kremlin understood it would be rejected.

Thus, the tone and the content of the Russian public relations campaign both appear to place it in the realm of disinformation, rather than a genuine attempt to persuade. They appear calculated to distract attention from the Ukrainian quagmire, provoke debate, and sow confusion as to Russia's true intentions, rather than to pave the way for a genuinely coordinated international effort.

Indeed, rather than set about the diplomatic effort to change the focus of the international coalition, Russian air strikes in Syria began just two days after Putin addressed the United Nations.

15 “Operation Inherent Resolve: Targeted Operations Against ISIL Terrorists,” Department of Defense, accessed February 12, 2015, http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve.

DECEIVE WHAT WAS SAID AND WHAT WAS STRUCK

The initial phase

Just as the Kremlin pursued its propaganda campaign on Syria, following a “4D” strategy, the Russian military actions deployed pages from the same playbook to distract, deceive, and destroy.

On September 30, 2015, Russia began its air campaign in Syria after receiving a formal request from the Syrian government.¹⁶ Kremlin Chief of Staff Sergey Ivanov stated: “The operation’s military goal is exclusively air support of the Syrian armed forces in their fight against the IS.”¹⁷ As strikes began, Major General Igor Konashenkov, Russian Defense Ministry Spokesman, told the media: “In accordance with a decision by the Supreme Commander-in-Chief Vladimir Putin, Russian Aerospace Forces planes on Wednesday started an operation to deal pinpoint strikes against ground targets of the IS terrorist group in the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic.”¹⁸ Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov advised US reporters, “Do not listen to the Pentagon about Russian [air] strikes; ask the Russian Defense Ministry.”¹⁹

The Syrian state media reported initial strikes “against ISIS dens in al-Rastan, Talbeisa, al-Zaafran, al-Tolol al-Humr, Aydon, Deir Fol, and the area surrounding Salmia in the central region in Syria.”²⁰ However, the locations targeted were not in known ISIS strongholds; instead, they targeted a range of opposition groups mainly in the west of Syria.²¹

On the following day, Igor Klimov, Spokesman for the Russian Aerospace Forces, told reporters: “Over the past twenty-four hours all the tasks set to the Russian air group for making pinpoint strikes on the ISIS facilities in Syria have been carried out in full. The objective control data show that the Russian air strikes were delivered only on the terrorist infrastructure facilities of the ISIS group.”²²

From the first day of Russian air strikes, the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) began publishing video footage of the strikes on its official YouTube channel.²³ The videos generally contained information describing the location and target of the attack, but right from the start, OSSMINT analysts, including Russian expert Ruslan Leviev and the Bellingcat group of investigative journalists demonstrated that the Ministry was providing false information about the targets and locations of the air strikes.

“The objective control data show that the Russian air-strikes were delivered only on the terrorist infrastructure facilities of the ISIS group.”

IGOR KLIMOV
Spokesman for the Russian
Aerospace Forces

Right from the start, OSSMINT analysis showed that the Russian MoD’s statements contained a strong element of disinformation as to what was actually targeted.

In the first video of their air strikes in Syria,²⁴ the Russian MoD claimed that they were targeting ISIS, but OSSMINT analysis pinpointed the exact location of the video in the town of Al-Latamneh,

16 Patrick J. McDonnell, W.J. Hennigan, and Nabih Bulos, “Russia launches airstrikes in Syria amid U.S. concern about targets,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 30, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-kremlin-oks-troops-20150930-story.html>.

17 “Lawmakers authorize use of Russian military force for anti-IS airstrikes in Syria,” TASS Russian News Agency, September 30, 2015 10:54, <http://tass.ru/en/politics/824795>.

18 “Russian planes start pinpoint strikes against IS positions in Syria — Defense Ministry,” TASS Russian News Agency, September 30, 2015 16:21, <http://tass.ru/en/defense/824957>.

19 “Lavrov advises US reporters not to listen to Pentagon about Russian air strikes in Syria,” TASS Russian News Agency, September 30, 2015 22:28, <http://tass.ru/en/politics/825097>.

20 Manar al-Freih and Hazem al-Sabbagh/Barry, “Updated— Russian Airstrikes Against ISIS Sites in Syria Begins,” September 30, 2015, Syrian Arab News Agency-SANA, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=56330>.

21 ISW Research Team, “Russia’s First Reported Air Strikes in Syria Assist Regime with Targeting Broader Opposition,” ISW Research, Updated October 2, 2015, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com.au/2015/09/russias-first-reported-air-strikes-in.html>.

22 “Russian aviation fulfils all set tasks in Syria over past 24 hours,” TASS Russian News Agency, October 1, 2015, <http://tass.ru/en/defense/825379>.

23 Минобороны России (Russian Ministry of Defense), Official YouTube site, September 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQGqX5Ndpm4snEONTjyOJnA>.

24 “Воздушные удары по объектам террористической группировки ИГИЛ,” Минобороны России Official YouTube Feed, September 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiAOJUdWR6M>.



Satellite imagery from Google Earth reveals that the supposed oil storage facility in Al-Thawrah, Syria was actually a grain storage facility located 150 km from this city, at 35.597983, 36.8637443.
Photo credit: (left) Russian Ministry of Defense, (right) Imagery 2016 CNES / Astrium

Hama, where there was no known ISIS presence. The Russian MoD then published a second video of the same site being bombed on October 3,²⁵ this time describing the location as an ISIS command post near Raqqa, which is, in fact, over 200 km away from the actual location of the air strike.

In light of inaccuracies identified in the Ministry's information on air strikes in Syria, crowdsourced projects began to analyze and identify all of the locations shown in the Ministry's videos.²⁶ Using the collaborative verification platform Checkdesk,²⁷ users of the site were invited to examine the videos of air strikes and find the locations shown on satellite imagery. All proposed locations were then reviewed and verified through a process known as geolocating,²⁸ in which landmarks visible from the air, such as roads, buildings, and trees, are examined to establish the exact locations shown in many of the air strike videos.

By geolocating the features seen in the Russian air strike video, one can match the same landmarks fusing either a satellite image or ground-level photograph, thus establishing the true location of an event.

The data collected from the verification project were then organized in a database, which included the purported location, actual location, whether or not ISIS was known to be in the area attacked, the verification status of the air strike (false or verified), and other information. Based on these data, it was possible to make a number of findings.²⁹

For instance, a Russian Ministry of Defense video of an air strike [see above], supposedly against an oil storage facility near the town of Al-Thawrah, Syria³⁰ was identified as a grain storage facility near Surman, Syria, approximately 150 km from Al-Thawrah.³¹

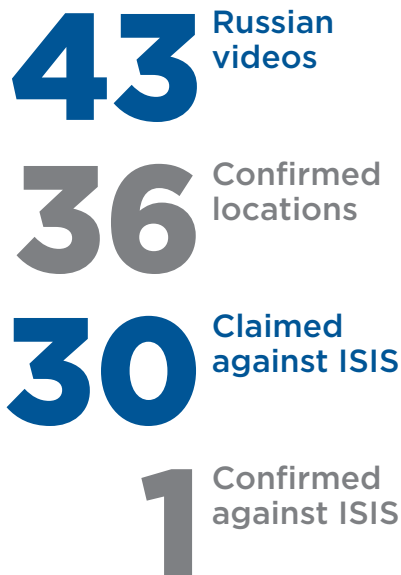
Between September 30 and October 12, the Russian Ministry of Defense published videos of forty-three air strikes. Using the crowdsourced analysis techniques described above, the Bellingcat group and its collaborators identified the exact location of thirty-six of these strikes, then overlaid the locations onto the MoD's own map, identifying which armed groups controlled what parts of the country. The result revealed inaccuracy on a grand scale: Russian officials described thirty of these videos as air strikes on ISIS positions, but in only one example was the area struck, in fact under the control of ISIS, even according to the Russian MoD's own map.

In only six of the initial thirty-six videos did the descriptions correctly reflect both the location and target shown in the video: In fifteen cases, the correct location was given, but the target was misidentified as ISIS; some videos indicated a discrepancy of over 100 km between the claimed air strike location and the actual location.

Thus, over the first two weeks of the Russian air campaign, OSSMINT analysis showed that five-sixths

25 "Уничтожение подземного командного пункта отряда ИГИЛ в районе РАККА самолетами Су-34," Минобороны России YouTube Feed, October 3, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7fqew26a1A>.
 26 "Open Source Evidence on Russian Strikes in Syria, Russian Strikes in Syria: OSINT data from the Bellingcat," October 2015, <https://russia-strikes-syria.silk.co>.
 27 Checkdesk, Verifying breaking news online, <https://meedan.com/en/checkdesk/>.
 28 Many devices with network capability (smartphones, tablets, computers) use integrated global-positioning software (GPS), which is used for popular applications such as Google Maps. A user's location services are turned on by default, which means that every time that a user takes a photograph or a video, the device assigns a GPS determined location to it, known as a "geotag." When these media images are then uploaded to social media and other platforms, the geotag remains embedded in the image and can be identified. Geolocating is thus a powerful and effective tool for tracking individuals and the images they produce. Other organizations that frequently use geolocation in their work include Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Storyful.

29 "Verifying Russian airstrikes in Syria with Silk, two months on," Bellingcat, December 6, 2015, <http://firstdraftnews.com/verifying-russian-airstrikes-in-syria-with-silk-two-months-on/>.
 30 "Авиаудар по нефтехранилищу в районе н.п. ЭС-САУРА," Минобороны России Official YouTube Feed, November 18, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WgYbiCGYy2c&ebc=ANyPxKpgJapS9p4QZSW10ty_9IQMOI2T9SE-p1smpycdYp0CB4f1-XBISDRfZRwbmPtn2YdApIP.
 31 Google Earth screenshot from 35.597983, 36.8637443.



of the Ministry of Defense's claims were wrong. The campaign was not targeting ISIS, and the Ministry appeared to be trying to hide the fact.

The overall impressions are that most were the wrong place. Forty-three posted, thirty-six confirmed locations, thirty Russian claims of ISIS hits, one confirmed as ISIS.

Changing descriptions

The debunking of the Kremlin's claims through open-source information quickly had diplomatic repercussions. Within twenty-four hours of the strikes beginning, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter was asked whether Russia was, in fact, hitting ISIS. He answered, "I want to be careful about confirming information, but it does appear that they were in areas where there probably were not [ISIS] forces."³² On October 2, France, Germany, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States went further, issuing a rare joint statement on the Russian intervention:

"We express our deep concern with regard to the Russian military build-up in Syria and especially the attacks by the Russian Air Force on Hama, Homs and Idlib which led to civilian casualties and did not target Da'esh. These military actions constitute a further escalation and will only fuel more extremism and radicalization. We call on the Russian

32 Helene Cooper, Michael R. Gordon, and Neil MacFarquhar, "Russians Strike Targets in Syria, but Not ISIS Areas," *New York Times*, September 30, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/world/europe/russia-airstrikes-syria.html?_r=1.

*Federation to immediately cease its attacks on the Syrian opposition and civilians and to focus its efforts on fighting [ISIS]."*³³

All twenty-eight NATO nations added their weight to that statement two days later, adding a call for Russia to "promote a solution to the conflict through a political transition;" and by October 7, State Department Spokesman John Kirby felt confident enough to say that over 90 percent of the strikes had targeted neither ISIS nor al-Qaeda affiliates.³⁴

"Greater than 90% of the strikes that we've seen them take to date have not been against ISIL or al-Qaida-affiliated terrorists."

JOHN KIRBY
Spokesperson,
US Department of State
October 7, 2015

Even after the ISIS terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015 galvanized French President François Hollande to echo Putin's call for a "grand international coalition" to fight ISIS, Russia's claims of fighting the terrorist group failed to convince. On November 25, Hollande met US President Barack Obama to discuss their joint action against ISIS, and Obama was categorical in his rejection of Russian involvement as long as it continued its strikes:

*"President Hollande and I agree that Russia's strikes against the moderate opposition only bolster the Assad regime, whose brutality has helped to fuel the rise of ISIL. . . . It's difficult because if their priority is attacking the moderate opposition that might be future members of an inclusive Syrian government, Russia is not going to get the support of us or a range of other members of the coalition."*³⁵

33 "Joint declaration on recent military actions of the Russian Federation in Syria, Press Release, Foreign & Commonwealth Office U.K.," October 2, 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-declaration-on-recent-military-actions-of-the-russian-federation-in-syria>.

34 "John Kirby, Spokesperson, Daily Press Briefing, US Department of State," October 7, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2015/10/248005.htm>.

35 "Remarks by President Obama and President Hollande of France in Joint Press Conference," White House, Office of the Press Secretary, November 24, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/24/remarks-president-obama-and-president-hollande-france-joint-press>.



Following statements such as these, and the multiple OSSMINT reports of inaccurate claims, the Russian Defense Ministry changed the way in which it described its targeting. Between October 13 and November 17, videos showing thirty-four air strikes were uploaded by the Russian Ministry of Defense; OSSMINT analysis identified the locations of twenty-eight of them. In a sharp change in rhetoric, only two videos were described as targeting ISIS, with most videos describing attacks on “militants” or “terrorists,” and in the majority of cases the locations described were the governorates where the strikes took place. However, as before, only a tiny percentage of attacks were in ISIS-controlled territory.

Civilian targets

On November 17, the Russian government declared that the Metrojet airliner, which had crashed in Egypt on October 31, was brought down by a terrorist act.³⁶ ISIS had claimed responsibility for the downing of the aircraft, but the Russian government had, up to this point, rejected the claim. After this announcement, air strike videos posted online by the Russian MoD began to show an increasing number of air strikes in ISIS-controlled areas of Syria, with the majority of those videos purporting to show air strikes on what were claimed to be oil facilities.

36 “Verifying Russian airstrikes in Syria with Silk, two months on,” Bellingcat, December 6, 2015, <http://firstdraftnews.com/verifying-russian-airstrikes-in-syria-with-silk-two-months-on/>; Gwyn Topham and Matthew Weaver in London and Alec Luhn in Moscow, “Egypt plane crash: Russia says jet was bombed in terror attack,” *Guardian*, November 17, 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/17/egypt-plane-crash-bomb-jet-russia-security-service.

However, while there was a marked increase in the number of Russian Ministry of Defense videos showing air strikes on ISIS targets, the videos continued to have misleading descriptions. In at least two of the air strike videos from the post-November 17 period, videos of what the Russian MoD identified as oil refineries were, in actuality, a water treatment plant³⁷ and grain silos.³⁸

On December 4, the MoD published a video claiming to show a strike on a “large ISIS depot” in Idlib governorate.³⁹ OSSMINT analysis identified the precise location shown in the video as being near al-Duwaīr, roughly 6 km northeast of Saraqib. This area is not known to have been under ISIS control at the time of the strike, and the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (İHH) stated that it was a bakery run by their organization with funding from a Qatar Charity. Hüseyin Oruç, the Vice President of İHH, also claimed the coordinates of the bakery had been communicated to Russia through the United Nations.⁴⁰

“. . .Russia’s strikes against the moderate opposition only bolster the Assad regime, whose brutality has helped to fuel the rise of ISIL.”

BARACK OBAMA

President of the United States,
November 24, 2015

In two cases at the end of October 2015, the Russian MoD responded directly to accusations that earlier strikes had damaged civilian buildings—namely, a mosque and a hospital—by asserting that their air strikes had not hit civilian targets. However, in both cases a review of the MoD’s presentations established that the “evidence” put forward by the Russian MoD to disprove the claims was itself falsified.

37 Christiaan Triebert, “Syria’s Bombed Water Infrastructure: An OSINT Inquiry,” Bellingcat, December 11, 2015, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/12/11/syrias-bombed-water-infrastructure>.

38 “Oil Storage Tanks’ Destroyed by Russian Strike Prove to be Grain Silos,” YouTube News Wire, December 3, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNxwX7r4A554pHDwt6ATyRRWRgQRYaHZ>.

39 “Удар авиации РФ по крупному складу боевиков ИГИЛ в провинции ИДЛИБ,” Минобороны России YouTube Feed, December 4, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmfEUXAUecE>.

40 Hüseyin Oruç, “İHH Vice President Hüseyin Oruç talks to TRT World on Russia bombing bakery in Syria,” TRT World, Uploaded November 30, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_AAffu4RHoc.

SYRIA

Al Farooq Omar Bin Al Khattab Mosque

JISR AL-SHUGHUR (IDLIB PROVINCE)

N (35-49-03) W (36-18-56)

October 29, 2015



Local reports and satellite imagery from Google Earth reveal the true location [right page] of the Al Farooq mosque, located at 35.821054, 36.322145. The mosque is covered by a caption in the image [above] provided by the Russian Ministry of Defense. *Photo credit:* (left) Russian Ministry of Defense, (right) Imagery 2016 CNES / Astrium.

On October 1, it was reported that Russian air strikes in the town of Jisr al-Shughur in Idlib had hit a mosque, destroying part of the building and causing the minaret to collapse, resulting in two deaths. On October 30, the Russian Ministry of Defense responded to the allegations in a press conference about the air strikes in Syria.⁴¹ In the briefing, Colonel General Andrey Kartapolov declared “the western media published another “hoax.”⁴² They presented aerial imagery dated to after the attack that was intended to demonstrate that the mosque reportedly damaged in the air strike was completely undamaged.

Although the Russian MoD gave no date for the reported mosque bombing, local activists in Jisr al-Shughur have only reported one mosque bombing in October 2015, therefore the authors of this paper believe it is legitimate to assume the MoD is referring to the October 1 bombing.

Using open-source information, the authors established a number of inaccuracies in the Russian Ministry of Defense’s claims.

The Ministry described the mosque as “Al Farooq Omar Bin Al Khattab mosque,” but this, in fact,

conflates the names of two separate buildings. The mosque highlighted in their aerial imagery was the Al Farooq mosque, whereas the name of the mosque that was bombed was the Omar Bin Al Khattab mosque. From examining videos and photographs posted online by local activists and taken after the mosque bombing, it is possible to show that the Omar Bin Al Khattab mosque was situated in the north of the town, not at the location claimed by the Russian MoD. In fact, on the Ministry’s aerial image the location of the Omar Bin Al Khattab mosque is covered by the caption added to the aerial image.⁴³

In a second press conference on October 31, the Russian MoD defended itself against claims that it had bombed the town of Sarmin, in Idlib, where a hospital and school were damaged. As part of their defense, they included an aerial image they claimed had been created on the day of the press conference itself—that is, after the air strike—showing the hospital building undamaged. However, an analysis of videos and photographs taken by local activists after the air strikes showed a small group of buildings, walls, and poles that had been demolished or otherwise severely damaged in the attack. On the Russian aerial image, purportedly

41 Andrey Kartapolov, “Пресс-брифинг нач.ГОУ ГШ ВС РФ Андрея Картаполова,” Минобороны России YouTube Feed, October 30, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJ3X8NhgV-Q>.

42 Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, Facebook post, October 30, 2015, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1674425756133507&id=1492252324350852.

43 Eliot Higgins, “Fact Checking Russia’s Claim that it Didn’t Bomb a Mosque in Syria,” Bellingcat, November 1, 2015, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2015/11/01/fact-checking-russias-claim-that-it-didnt-bomb-a-mosque-in-syria/>; Image here: https://wp4553-flywheel.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/12105987_1674425452800204_6918160825015014312_n.jpg.



taken after the attack occurred, these structures are all clearly intact. This could only be the case if the aerial image was taken before the air strikes.⁴⁴ In addition to this report from Idlib, a March 3, 2016 report by Amnesty International would go on to present evidence that Syria and Russia were deliberately targeting hospitals elsewhere in Syria.

On December 2, 2015, the Russian Ministry of Defense released a video of what it claimed to be an “airstrike against oil refinery near Khafsa Kabir”⁴⁵ However, this “oil refinery” located near the western banks of Lake Assad was actually a water treatment facility, “producing an average of 18 million litres of daily water daily,” according to United Nation Children Fund Representative in Syria Hanaa Singer.⁴⁶

A comparison of the satellite imagery of the al-Khafseh water treatment plant and the structure in the Russian Ministry of Defense air strike videos immediately reveals that they are one in the same:

44 Bellingcat, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2015/11/04/fact-checking-russias-claim-that-it-didnt-bomb-a-hospital-in-syria/>, op. cit.

45 Минобороны России, “#SYRIA Airstrike against oil refinery near Khafsa Kabir,” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKbA_g-4zEE, Tweet from Twitter account @mod_russia, December 2, 2015 1114, https://twitter.com/mod_russia/status/672131862521905153?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw. The imbedded You Tube link references the video of the purported oil refinery strike.

46 Hanaa Singer, “UNICEF, #ChildrenofSyria, Statement by Hanaa Singer, UNICEF Representative in Syria on air strikes against the al-Khafsa Water Treatment Facility in Aleppo,” December 1, 2015, <http://childrenofsyria.info/2015/12/01/statement-by-hanaa-singer-unicef-representative-in-syria-on-air-strikes-against-the-al-khafsa-water-treatment-facility-in-aleppo/>.

Further analysis from ground-level photographs confirmed that this was indeed a water treatment facility, and not an oil refinery, as claimed by the Russian Ministry of Defense. When comparing satellite imagery (left) to ground-level footage (right), the common features are revealed, confirming the location of the water treatment facility.⁴⁷

Despite these clear examples of Russian air strikes hitting civilian infrastructure, the Russian Ministry of Defense continued to deny hitting any civilian targets. On December 27, 2015, Reuters reported comments made by Colonel-General Viktor Bondarev, Commander in Chief of Russia’s Aerospace Forces to Rossiya 24 television:

“The Military Space Forces have never hit civilian targets in Syria,” and “have never missed their targets, have never hit . . . so-called sensitive places: schools, hospitals, mosques.”⁴⁸

In fact, they had already done exactly that.

Moreover, they continued to do so. On February 15, 2016, Russian bombs struck facilities run by aid group Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF—Doctors Without Borders) in Aleppo and Idlib. When MSF accused the Russian air force of conducting the strikes, the Russian MoD put out a statement claiming that MSF had published reports about these bombings five

47 Bellingcat, Syria’s Bombed Water Infrastructure: An OSINT Inquiry, op. cit.; Images available here: <https://wp4553-flywheel.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/locatie-khafsa-ii1.png>.

48 “Russia says air force has not hit civilian targets in Syria,” Reuters, December 27, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-idUSKBN0UA05N20151227>.



Satellite imagery from Google Earth [right] reveals that the supposed oil refinery near Khafsa Kabir, Syria [left] is actually the al-Khafsa water treatment facility, located at 36.178345, 38.041224. *Photo credit:* (left) Russian Ministry of Defense, (right) Imagery 2016 CNES / Astrium.

days before the actual strikes, on February 10. The MoD statement further asserted: “this fabrication had been prepared but not realized the day before the meeting of the heads of foreign ministries of Russia and the USA in Munich, the results of which, as the Russian Defense Ministry assumes, are so opposed by Turkey.”⁴⁹ The MSF reports from February 10, in fact referred to other incidents,⁵⁰ and this allegation by the Russian Ministry of Defense was just one of several strange, conspiratorial claims made in their statement on the bombings.⁵¹

Nevertheless, Russia’s officials remained defiant. On March 15—the day the first bombers flew home—Bondarev blustered, “We have shown to the whole world that the training of Russian air pilots is at the highest level. Throughout their stay in Syria there was no bombing raid that missed the target.”⁵²

The evidence disagrees.

Cluster bombs—a case of war crimes?

OSSMINT analyses of the Russian air campaign also lead to a disturbing conclusion: The Russian Air Force appears to have used banned cluster munitions during its Syrian campaign. The use of

such indiscriminate weapons in civilian areas would constitute a war crime.

In December 2015, Human Rights Watch⁵³ and Amnesty International⁵⁴ published reports detailing the use of cluster munitions by Russian forces in Syria. The Russian MoD rejected those claims, reacting particularly strongly to the Amnesty International report by creating the hashtag #FakeAI to attack the report on social media and claiming the report contained: “The same clichés and fakes that we have often disproved earlier.”⁵⁵

Major General Igor Konashenkov, Russian Defense Ministry Spokesman, was quoted as saying:

“As for cluster munitions allegations, the Russian aviation are not using them.”⁵⁶ He continued, “there are no such munitions at the Russian air base in Syria.”⁵⁷

Similar sentiments were echoed by Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who responded to claims made by Human Rights Watch with classic evasion:

49 “On February 10-16, aircraft of the Russian aviation group in the Syrian Arab Republic performed 444 combat sorties engaging 1593 terrorists’ objects,” Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, Air Force Group in Syria, February 16, 2016, <http://eng.syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12078613@egNews>.

50 “Syria: Health system close to collapse in war-torn Azaz district,” Medecins Sans Frontieres, February 10, 2016, <http://www.msf.org/article/syria-health-system-close-collapse-war-torn-azaz-district>.

51 Eliot Higgins, “Russia’s Bizarre, Barely Coherent Defense It Didn’t Bomb Hospitals in Syria,” February 17, 2016, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/02/17/russias-barely-coherent-defence-it-didnt-bomb-hospitals-in-syria/>.

52 “Commander-in-chief: Not a single target missed by Russia’s aerospace group in Syria,” ITAR-TASS, March 15, 2015, <http://tass.ru/en/defense/862482>.

53 “Russia/Syria: Extensive Recent Use of Cluster Munitions,” Human Rights Watch, December 20, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/20/russia/syria-extensive-recent-use-cluster-munitions>.

54 “Syria: Russia’s shameful failure to acknowledge civilian killings,” Amnesty International, December 23, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/12/syria-russias-shameful-failure-to-acknowledge-civilian-killings/>.

55 “Amnesty Int’l Report on ‘Civilian Deaths’ Based on Fakes, Cliches,” Sputnik, December 23, 2015, (updated 21:58), <http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20151223/1032213565/amnesty-intl-report-fake.html>

56 “Press Briefing,” Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, Russian Defense Ministry commented on briefing of Amnesty International and summed up results of operation carried out by the Russian Aerospace Forces in Syria on December 18-23, December 23, 2015, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12072315@egNews

57 Sputnik news, op. cit.



Photo of RBK-500 AO2.5RTM Cluster Bomb casings dropped on the town of Talbisah, Homs, February 2016.
Photo credit: Talbisah Media Center.

“There is no confirmation of that.”⁵⁸ Lavrov also managed to insinuate that there were other possible culprits: “The region is loaded with weapons, which are being brought into Syria and other countries in huge amounts and illegally.”⁵⁹

However, multiple images from journalists and reporters at Russia’s airbase in Syria show Russian aircraft armed with cluster munitions, contradicting the MoD’s assertions.

The evidence includes RT (formerly Russia Today) reporter Murad Gazdiev’s social media posts from Hmeimim airbase showing a Russian jet armed with Razovaya Bombovaya Kasseta (RBK) series cluster munitions⁶⁰ and RBK series cluster munitions stacked next to the runway,⁶¹ and photographs from the Russian government-funded Sputnik network showing cluster bombs on jets and at the airfield.⁶²

Even the Russian Ministry of Defense’s own website showed images of its Syria-based jets armed with cluster bombs.⁶³ In its January 29 response to Russia’s attacks on its report, Amnesty International consulted a munitions expert about the images, stating that the expert “was ‘confident’ that many of them were indeed of Russian aircraft armed with RBK-500 cluster munitions.”⁶⁴

Human Rights Watch stated,

“Based on an analysis of the distinctive physical characteristics of the weapons, Human Rights Watch has confirmed the identification of RBK series cluster bombs being loaded onto aircraft taking off from the base. The evidence was documented both through photographs and videos of Russia’s airbase in Syria.”⁶⁵

58 Robert Bridge, “No proof of Russian cluster bombs in Syria – Lavrov”, RT, October 15, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/politics/russia-syria-lavrov-human-rights-448/>.

59 Ibid.

60 Murad Gazdiev, “Armed #ruaf su-34 taxis just before takeoff.” #syria, Twitter Account, October 8, 2015 4:27 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MuradoRT/status/652082802582781952>.

61 Murad Gazdiev, “#russian air force all-stars lined up at #Latakia airbase. Well, those not out on missions.” #syria, Twitter account, October 3, 2015 7:36 a.m., <https://twitter.com/MuradoRT/status/650318532643811328>.

62 Mark Krutov, “Кассетный обман Минобороны,” Radio Svoboda/svoboda.org, January 7, 2016, <http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/27473581.html>.

63 Ruslan Leviev, “Sputnik, RT and Russian MoD expose cluster bombs at Hmeimim airbase,” Conflict Intelligence Team, January 7, 2016, <https://citeam.org/sputnik-rt-and-russian-mod-expose-cluster-bombs-at-hmeimim-airbase/>.

64 Amnesty International, “‘Cliches and Fakes’: Russia’s Response to Concerns about its Attacks in Syria Fails to Convince,” January 29, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/3296/2016/en>.

65 “Russia/Syria: Daily Cluster Munition Attacks,” Human Rights Watch, February 8, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/02/08/russia/syria-daily-cluster-munition-attacks>.

DESTROY

THE EFFECT OF THE RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN

Putin's announcement on March 14, 2016 that he was ordering the bulk of his forces home startled the world. The announcement was made during a televised meeting with Foreign Minister Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, then posted on the Kremlin website.⁶⁶

"With participation by Russian troops and Russian military grouping, the Syrian troops and Syrian patriotic forces, we were able to radically change the situation in fighting international terrorism and take initiative in nearly all areas to create the conditions for the start of a peace process (...) I feel that the objective set before the Defense Ministry and the Armed Forces is generally fulfilled, so I order the Defense Ministry to begin withdrawing the main part of our military group from the Syrian Arab Republic."

This statement broadly reflected the goals Putin had set out before the UN General Assembly: Support Assad's forces, fight international terrorism and launch a peace process. However, it also reflected the pattern of disinformation that had characterized the campaign.

The statement that the Kremlin, by its actions, was "able to radically change the situation in fighting international terrorism" seriously distorts what its air strikes actually achieved.

Along with OSSMINT analysis, studies by various organizations of the situation on the ground in Syria during the period of Russian bombardment gives a clear picture of the actual effects of the Russian involvement. From these analyses, it is possible to draw four key conclusions:

- The Russian bombing had minimal effect on ISIS.
- The Russian bombing directly enabled the Assad regime to advance against other groups around Aleppo.
- The Russian bombing did not disable the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front as a fighting force.
- The Russian bombing weakened the US-backed opposition significantly more than it did ISIS.

⁶⁶ "Meeting with Sergei Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu," Kremlin Website, March 14, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51511>.

Minimal effect on ISIS

The day after Putin announced "mission accomplished," research group IHS published a conflict monitor report⁶⁷ on the changes in ISIS territory between the start of 2015 and March 14, 2016. The report concluded that the terrorist group had lost 22 percent of the territory it held at the start of that period. However, its analysis showed clearly the vast majority of ISIS losses during that period were suffered in the north and north-east of Syria, at the hands of Kurdish forces backed by US-led coalition air strikes. **ISIS territorial losses as a result of Russian air strikes were minimal.**

The IHS report is corroborated by the Carter Center's dynamic map of control.⁶⁸ This confirms that, from September 30, 2015 onwards, ISIS steadily lost ground in the north and northeast, as a result of pressure from Kurdish forces and the US-led coalition. ISIS' territorial holdings in the west of Syria—Assad's stronghold—barely changed.

Advances for Assad

The Carter Center's map also confirms that, once the Russian bombing began, Assad's forces were gradually enabled to advance, reversing their earlier territorial losses. In fact, it is possible to draw a direct link between Putin's bombing campaign and advances by Assad's forces. In the Latakia region, the Institute for the Study of War tracked the advances of pro-government forces between September 30, 2015 and February 5, 2016.⁶⁹ Their study revealed a clear correlation between areas identified as having been bombed in the Russian MoD's own air strike videos, and the areas captured from non-ISIS opposition groups.

Air strikes in the Idlib and Hama regions appear to have brought relatively little success for government forces against non-ISIS forces, with relatively few gains by pro-government forces in the areas identified as having been hit in Russian MoD videos.

⁶⁷ Richard Watson, "Islamic State militants 'lose 22%' of territory," *BBC World News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-35816552>.

⁶⁸ "Tracking the Front Lines in Syria," Ongoing Syria Mapping Project, <http://www.cartercenter.org/syria-conflict-map/>.

⁶⁹ Chris Kozak, "Assad Regime Gains in Aleppo Alter Balance of Power in Northern Syria," Institute for the Study of War, February 5, 2016, <http://understandingwar.org/background/assad-regime-gains-aleppo-alter-balance-power-northern-syria>.

In the Aleppo region, Russian military power enabled crucial gains for pro-government forces, expanding control on the ground southwest of Aleppo city, and cutting off the non-ISIS rebels' supply route to the north with Turkey. Strikingly, these advances appear to have been backed by Russian regular army units firing 152mm-calibre Msta-B howitzers—despite Russian claims that it had no troops fighting on the ground.

Evidence for the presence of these Russian ground forces comes, ironically, from Russia itself. The 120th Artillery Brigade was shown to be operating 152mm-calibre Msta-B howitzers near Sadad in Homs province after a Russian Ministry of Defense map was shown on television—apparently by accident.⁷⁰ According to the map, the 120th Artillery Brigade deployed six Msta-B howitzers near a Syrian Arab Army (SAA) base and artillery range, located at 34°25'55"N 36°54'52"E. As detailed by the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT),⁷¹ these howitzers were not simply gifts to the Assad regime, as Russian soldiers have operated them in Latakia province.

A January video shot about six kilometers east of Slanfah, Syria and over 30 km from the Hmeymim airbase shows Russian soldiers operating Msta-B howitzers.

In the video, commands being yelled in Russian can be heard, with soldiers in Russian uniforms at the base of the weapons.⁷² In another video at the same location, Russian soldiers are filmed operating a Grad multiple rocket launcher system.⁷³

However, while Russian military support did enable limited advances against ISIS east of Aleppo,⁷⁴ the

majority of Syrian government advances were not against ISIS, but against other opposition groups, including the Nusra Front and the US-backed opposition.

Nusra Front and ISIS still fighting

It is important to measure these changes on the ground against Putin's claim of having radically changed the fight against international terrorism. The statement clearly does not hold true in relation to ISIS. In terms of the fighting in western Syria, the other most important group with ties to international terrorism is the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front. A number of Russian strikes do appear to have targeted this group. However, the Russian campaign demonstrably did not lead to the destruction of the Nusra Front as a fighting force.

Indeed, even as Putin announced "mission accomplished," the Nusra Front was advancing on the more moderate (and US-backed) Free Syria Army (FSA), reportedly seizing its weapons and bases.⁷⁵ At the very least, this shows that the Nusra Front has not been defeated, and is still capable of launching aggressive actions and taking new ground—hardly the "radical change in the fight against international terrorism" that Putin claimed.

Heavy losers

In fact, the greatest loser from the Russian air campaign appears to be the most moderate elements of the opposition. They lost significant ground to Assad, especially in and around Latakia and Aleppo; they also have lost ground to the Nusra Front.

Russia's bombing campaign had little impact on ISIS, more impact on the Nusra Front and most impact on the other opposition groups, including those backed by the West.

To call this a "radical change in the fight against international terrorism" flies in the face of all the facts on the ground.

70 "Russian army map shown by TV suggests ground forces in Syria," Agence France Presse via Yahoo! News, November 18, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/russian-army-map-shown-tv-suggests-ground-forces-193204791.html>; Maria Tsvetkova and Alexander Winning, "Army map suggests presence of Russian artillery unit in central Syria," November 18, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-military-idUSKCN0T72VW20151118>; Tim Ripley, IHS Jane's Defense Weekly, "Russia confirms forward deployments in Syria," November 18, 2015, <http://www.janes.com/article/56107/russia-confirms-forward-deployments-in-syria>.

71 Ruslan Leviev, "Russian artillery supports Assad offensive," Conflict Intelligence Team, February 13, 2016, <https://citeam.org/russian-artillery-supports-assad-offensive/>.

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74 "The Campaign for Aleppo: September 30, 2015 - February

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75 "Al Qaeda in Syria seizes bases, weapons of Western-backed group: monitor," Reuters, March 13, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-nusra-idUSKCN0WFOAS>.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATION

The Kremlin’s policy in Syria appears to have served three purposes: Distract attention from its actions in Ukraine and its military buildup in Syria; deceive the international community about the nature of its targets; and destroy the forces that presented the greatest threat to the Kremlin’s client, Assad, especially those forces most closely linked to the United States.

DISTRACT

The central message of Russia’s information campaign—or disinformation campaign—in the run-up to the air strikes was that the whole world should join together to fight ISIS. The message was delivered with what, for Putin, was the most inspiring historical parallel he could invoke: The “anti-Hitler coalition . . . to stand firm against those who, just like the Nazis, sow evil and hatred of humankind.” The victory against Nazism is the defining moment in modern Russians’ shared historical consciousness, and its invocation is therefore a weighty one. Yet there is no indication that Putin meant it seriously. The fact that he launched his air strikes just two days after making the speech is hardly indicative of a man willing to give diplomacy a chance.

Nevertheless, the rhetoric served two purposes: The first was to position Russia as a member of the broad international community in its common effort to defeat ISIS. As such, it provided the foundation for the later Russian argument that the sanctions, which the West had imposed over its actions in Ukraine should be lifted. The argument was not long coming: On the very day that the Russian air strikes began, the Head of the Russian Duma Foreign Affairs Committee, Alexei Pushkov, said that the Western sanctions against Russia would soon be seen to be ‘inadequate’ because Russia was now part of the fight against ISIS.⁷⁶

The second purpose was to distract attention from Russia’s true intentions during the buildup of its military forces in Syria. It is no coincidence that Putin began talking about the possibility of military action there at the same time as OSSMINT analysts

began identifying Russian military hardware moving by sea to Tartus. The high-visibility discussion of Russia joining, or creating, an international coalition distracted attention away from the low-visibility preparations on the ground.

DECEIVE

Once the campaign began, the focus of communications turned to deception, misrepresenting the targets of Russian strikes as belonging exclusively to ISIS. This was done consistently for the first two weeks of the campaign, until OSSMINT made the lie untenable. Thereafter, less precise language was used to describe the targets struck; but still, the Russian Ministry of Defense consistently mislabeled its strikes, and on occasion resorted to outright falsification in attempts to disprove claims that it had struck civilian targets.

It is instructive to note that this pattern of deception appears not to have been related to the calls for an international coalition. Those calls largely faded away once the bombing campaign began (although they were briefly resurrected after the Paris attacks), but the pattern of deception continued throughout the operation, right up to Putin’s claim that the campaign had radically changed the fight against terrorism. We can conclude from this that Russia’s stated goal was not the same as its actual goal, and that its actual goal was one which it wanted to conceal.

DESTROY

The Kremlin’s actual goal can be deduced from the way in which Putin declared “mission accomplished, “as well as the timing of the announcement. When he ordered the first planes home, Assad’s forces had retaken key areas, including Latakia and much of the ground around Aleppo. However, ISIS had advanced west of Palmyra and made—admittedly small—gains north of Aleppo and east of Homs. The Nusra Front, meanwhile, launched an offensive against the FSA just days before Putin’s pullout. In fact, if Assad was the main beneficiary of the Russian air strikes, the main victims were not ISIS and Nusra, but the other fighting groups, notably those supported by the West.

That is unlikely to be a coincidence, especially as it furthered clear Russian foreign policy goals. The Kremlin’s strategic narrative on the pro-democracy

⁷⁶ “Пушков: антироссийские санкции неадекватны на фоне борьбы России с ИГ,” RIA-Novosti, September 30, 2015, <http://ria.ru/world/20150930/1294123815.html>.

movements of the Arab Spring has always been clear: They were instigated by the United States, which was attempting to “export revolutions” (in the words of Putin’s UNGA speech) and thus gain power and influence, just as it orchestrated the revolution in Ukraine. Following that logic, any group supported by the United States or its allies would have appeared as a potential US proxy in Syria. And Syria is a country which Russia has always viewed as a strategic ally and asset, while it continues to portray the United States and its allies, especially NATO, as a strategic danger.

It therefore seems logical to conclude that the Russian air campaign had two main objectives: To reverse Assad’s battlefield defeats, and to destroy the capabilities of the Western-backed opposition, so that it could no longer pose the threat of creating a pro-American entity in Syria. And indeed, the results of the mission have been exactly that. Assad’s hold has been strengthened; the hold of the opposition groups closest to the West has been seriously weakened. ISIS and the Nusra Front live to fight on; but that, apparently, is beside the point. Putin has declared that his mission is accomplished, and it may well have been; but if so, then his mission could not have been to defeat ISIS.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

An emboldened Russia

For Washington, and for the West generally, the policy implications of Moscow’s thinly-disguised intervention on behalf of its Syrian client are quite serious indeed. Putin has emerged from Syria—a conflict that many analysts had predicted would become a quagmire—with minimal losses, increased domestic support, and enhanced international influence. He has upheld an ally; he has prevented the danger of a pro-Western entity arising in Syria. Above all, he has done so in an arena where the United States was also operating, and managed to conduct his own operation largely according to his own desires.

As such, he is likely to emerge emboldened from his Syrian operation. There is a significant danger that Putin could now try to expand his influence in other areas where the United States is also engaged. Ukraine, where the fighting has never entirely died down, is the most immediate concern, but not the only one. Moldova is still struggling with its own separatist movements and political polarization; so is Georgia; and Montenegro has not yet formally entered NATO (and thus, in the Kremlin’s view, the US sphere of influence). Putin can be expected to take advantage of any instability in those countries to

test American resolve, and to shape the geopolitical landscape to his own advantage.

A zombie negotiation

Russia’s influence will remain critical in the Syria peace process. Putin’s action has gravely weakened the most credible (in Western eyes) alternative to Assad’s tyranny. At the same time, the Obama Administration’s perceived inaction, and its acceptance of Russia as co-convenor of the Geneva peace process, have created the impression that it is at best half-hearted about the outcome. From the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the administration has feared an Iraq-like entanglement. It has sought to compensate self-induced operational paralysis with courageous rhetoric: Assad should step aside, there is a chemical red line not to be crossed, Assad’s mass murder is a recruiting bonanza for ISIS, and so forth. There is a significant danger that President Obama’s reluctance to protect Syrian civilians may make a content-free process in Geneva attractive to him. If all the administration seeks is a procedural bridge over Syria’s troubled water—one stretching from now until the inauguration of the new President at noon on January 20, 2017—it may see value in what Professor Steven Heydemann has labeled “a zombie negotiation—impossible to kill off even as it wreaks havoc.”⁷⁷

A choice between Assad or ISIS?

Even a zombie negotiation may not, however, forestall what seems to be the ultimate diplomatic outcome sought by Russia: a binary choice forced upon Washington and the West between its client—Bashar al-Assad—and the self-proclaimed “Caliph” of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This objective was telegraphed by those parts of the pre-intervention information operation calling on the West to support the Syrian Army’s fight against ISIS: A fight that only broke out when ISIS attacked army units to win the things—oil fields, weapons caches on air bases, priceless antiquities—ISIS wanted. Otherwise it was largely live-and-let-live, with ISIS and Assad’s armies each training their respective fire on other rebel groups. For Assad and Baghdadi, having one another as the sole enemy left standing is the ideal situation. For Assad, it is a potential ticket back to polite society. For Baghdadi, it is a recruiting bonanza: Assad, Russia, and the West arrayed against him. For Russia, it is the diplomatic brass ring.

⁷⁷ Ambassador Frederic C. Hof, “Peace Negotiations: Fish or Cut Bait?”, *Huffington Post*, February 3, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ambassador-frederic-c-hof/peace-negotiations-fish-o_b_9153678.html.

US and Russia power struggle

For Washington, however, it would be problematic to be forced by a Russian (and Iranian) military campaign into an anti-ISIS alliance with the very war criminal it had long called upon to step aside. For Moscow, it would be victory defined: The defeat in Syria of what it alleges to be a global regime change and democratization campaign featuring Iraq in 2003, Libya in 2011, Ukraine in 2014, and now Syria. This was the point of Russia's military intervention in Syria: To help the Assad regime and ISIS remove the non-regime and non-ISIS alternatives to each, and in the process, remove the only force in the conflict that was both pro-democracy and pro-American.

THE OPTIONS

There are no good options in Syria. Risk is involved with any action—or inaction. The United States retains an interest in defeating ISIS, which gives it reason to continue its military operations against it. But it also has an interest in protecting the moderate opposition. For that it needs to send a clear message to Moscow that any further attacks on this opposition will prompt the United States to strike Assad's force—a capability with sea- or land-based missiles. This approach might encourage Moscow to take its own slogan of “mission accomplished” more seriously.

Elsewhere the United States might also consider what it could do to mitigate the Syrian refugee crisis.

The United States should look urgently for ways to increase its engagement on the migrant issue, and to support the most affected countries in Europe and the Middle East, including by backing those politicians who are most exposed—notably German Chancellor Angela Merkel. NATO has already begun operations against human traffickers in the Aegean: That work should be expanded and extended to cover migrant flows coming from Libya. Washington

and its allies should also press more forcefully for countries in the region—notably the Gulf States—to assist in the humanitarian operation, as they are already assisting in military operations. The West has repeatedly been told that it should “fix” what it “broke” in Libya; a similar message should be passed to regional powers.

At the same time, Washington needs to recognize that Russia under Putin is more than just the “regional power acting out of weakness” that Obama once dubbed it. Russia is, indeed, fundamentally weak, with an ageing population, a collapsing economy and a stifling political system; but its leaders are likely to come away from Syria with the sense that they are strong. Moreover, there are worrying indications that their long-held rhetoric of a US-driven policy of “exporting revolutions” may now be translating into action—most notably the Crimean annexation.

It will thus be critical for the United States to signal its commitment to the security and stability of its allies, both within and beyond NATO, and to urge those allies to play their part as well. The current reassurance measures in Europe are a welcome beginning; they should be upscaled in the current set of countries, and extended to new ones. At the same time, it will be important to calibrate such deployments so that they cannot be mistaken for offensive preparations.

The prerequisite for these, and other, initiatives, however, is to accept the fact that Russia has opted for geopolitical confrontation. Its behavior in Crimea, and its efforts to distract, deceive and destroy in Syria, show clearly that it is no longer content to play second fiddle in the international ensemble: It wants to play its own leading role, no matter how much discord this causes. For the past two decades, Western policy towards Russia has been one of pragmatic engagement. After Syria, it would be pragmatic to discuss containment again.

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