

Crisis Brief: Russia Exploits U.S. Withdrawal from Syria

Overwatch Podcast Transcript

Featuring Jennifer Cafarella and Mason Clark



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Crisis Brief is a special edition of the *Overwatch* podcast series intended to provide timely updates on unfolding national security crises. The U.S. military withdrawal from Syria and subsequent Turkish advances are creating a new opening for Russia and its partners. Russian forces have taken over areas vacated by the U.S. as the Kremlin positions itself to reshape Syria's future. ISW Russia analyst Mason Clark joins ISW Research Director Jennifer Cafarella to discuss the latest Russian maneuvers and how they advance Vladimir Putin's broader ambitions in Syria. Additional resources on the situation in Syria, including maps, are available [here](#).

Maseh Zarif

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif, and I'm your host for this episode.

It's 3:00 PM here in Washington, DC on Wednesday, October 16th, 2019. As the United States continues to pull back in Syria, there are growing signs that Russia is stepping in to fill the vacuum. On this crisis brief update, ISW Russia Analyst Mason Clark joins ISW Research Director Jennifer Cafarella to discuss the Russian response and how this current opportunity fits into President Vladimir Putin's broader vision for Syria.

Jennifer Cafarella

Today President Trump indicated that he would support Russia stepping in in Eastern Syria to broker some kind of agreement with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan as US forces withdraw. What does that mean for US interests Mason? What are Russia's goals in Syria and what would the implications be if Russia accomplish those goals?

Mason Clark

So I'll begin with Putin's broader goals in Syria, which are predominantly focused on maintaining a Russian presence in the region as they continue their ongoing campaign to push the US and NATO out of the wider middle East. It's important to clarify that Putin's goals in Syria are broader and support other Kremlin goals around the world, namely dividing NATO, which President Erdogan of Turkey is in many ways doing for him through these divides, as well as the U.S.'s withdrawal from Syria. More broadly, globally, we have seen a sustained campaign by the Kremlin to portray Russia as an international arbiter that can resolve these sort of conflicts in opposition to what they are portraying as the obstructionist West.

They will consistently signal that the United States and the European Union are preventing this sort of conflict resolution. They've done this between North Korea and South Korea, they're attempting to insert themselves into Sub-Saharan Africa as mediators, and their greatest test case is in Syria where they're portraying themselves as the party that was able to come in and lead to the deescalation zones throughout the country and reduce levels of violence. They are currently in the process of expanding this into northeast Syria and betraying themselves as the party that can stop further violence between Turkey and the Kurds and bring the Kurds back into a more unified Syrian government.

Jennifer Cafarella

So thus far, Vladimir Putin has been very successful in Syria. He has helped to stabilize the Assad regime, which in 2015 when Russia intervened was actually on the brink of possible collapse. Putin has not only stabilized that regime, but enabled it to expand its military presence to reconquer parts of Western Syria. In addition, as you rightly note, Russia

has positioned itself as a international mediator in Syria gaining that diplomatic clout. So what remains for Putin to accomplish in Syria?

Mason Clark

Putin has achieved the majority of his goals in intervening Russia militarily in Syria. However, what is largely a question of securing Russian gains and solidifying the processes that are already in motion. He wants to further control stability around Russian basing. This is the main focus of a planned-for offensive operation in Idlib province in Western Syria that is currently on hold with the escalations in northeast Syria. He would like to secure greater financial resources for the Kremlin, both through reconstruction contracts with the Assad regime as well as controlling crucial oil infrastructure in the east of the country through proxies such as the Wagner Group, which is owned by a Putin associate named Yevgeny Prigozhin. A major point of concern Putin has expressed about the Turkish invasion is that ISIS detainees in previously Kurd controlled areas will be released and will begin crossing borders and infiltrating back into central Asia.

And it is important to note that while Putin is not a valid counterterrorism actor, he does not see ISIS in the same way the US does, as an existential threat. He does have goals related to fighting it that are more limited in protecting Russian basing and preventing blow back in Russia due to further terrorist attacks. Putin only prioritizes the ISIS threat in Syria in regards to how it threatens, one, the solidification of Assad's control over areas he controls of Syria, as well as protecting Russian installations and economic interests such as the oil fields in eastern Syria that are protected by Russian contractors. The Kremlin's main goal is to prevent ISIS fighters from threatening Russia by moving out of Syria and back into central Asia, not stamping out ISIS within Syria and stopping the threat of ISIS to the civilian population in the middle East.

Jennifer Cafarella

What is Russia's capability to handle the ISIS problem in eastern Syria? Can we expect the Russians to step in and prevent this ISIS resurgence from occurring?

Mason Clark

There's a mixed answer to this question and that Russia definitely has the military capabilities on the ground that they theoretically could apply to containing the ISIS threat and specifically helping to detain these ISIS prisoners. However, we have not necessarily seen any indication that they have a willingness to do so. Putin has gone back and forth since the start of the Turkish invasion of northeast Syria, between blaming the Turks for not being able to control the ISIS detainee population and blaming the Kurds for not being able to control the population in light of the Turkish offensive.

What has been missing is any statement in regards to Russia stepping in and actually controlling these populations. There is a large number of Russian military police alongside Assad regime forces due to an agreement that Russia brokered with the Kurds and Russia has previously used these military police units throughout Syria to perform this sort of internal security and they have run detention camps in recently recaptured areas. However, the task of detaining the ISIS fighters that were previously held by the Kurds is a task that is likely beyond the force presence Russia has in northwest Syria and what the Kremlin desires to use in terms of resources in combating this problem that does not directly threaten Russian interests.

Jennifer Cafarella

So we've discussed in previous podcasts that the Turks are pushing southward into Syria, across the Syrian Turkish border, threatening primarily Kurdish towns with of course the intent to ethnically cleanse the Kurds from those areas. You mentioned in an earlier comment that the Russians have interest in valuable oil fields in the East. Explain

how those oil fields and that dynamic factors into what the Turks are doing and the potential for Russia to step in.

Mason Clark

So as a larger background, the way Russia has secured an additional revenue stream for itself in Syria, is it has implanted military contractors such as the Wagner Group on these oil fields where these groups will receive a direct cut of the profits, the numbers that we have seen have been usually around 30 percent of the profits, of an oil field directly to that private military company. So there is a vested Russian interest in not only helping the regime to recapture these oil fields, but allowing Russians specifically to have ownership over these fields. Likely the Russians will attempt to negotiate with the Kurds to allow greater access to the oil fields currently under Kurdish control, so the Kremlin can now gain this additional revenue stream as it continues to attempt to mitigate Western sanctions that are badly hurting the Russian economy.

Jennifer Cafarella

Some of the oil fields are under Kurdish control, as you noted, additional oil fields though are under the control of Arab elements of the US partner force, the Syrian Democratic Forces. So I think this highlights the greater complexity of the implications of the US withdrawal. We are not only abandoning our Kurdish partners and thereby potentially handing these oil fields over for Russia and other actors, to include Iran, to exploit, but the Arab component, which is located farther southeast of the Turkish border towards the Syrian-Iraqi border are also at risk. Russia has expressed in the past an intent to seize those oil fields and is even reaching out, by some reports, to local Arab tribes in an attempt to cut a deal for Russia's private military contractors to move into those fields farther South.

Mason Clark

This is also an area that likely Russia will have a greater chance of exploiting than trying to take over resources that are currently held by the Kurds. The Russian military police in Syria have been specifically drawn from Muslim-majority regions of Russia. They are predominantly Arabic speaking and they have gotten very good over the last three years at carrying out low-level negotiations with Arab partners in Syria to secure exactly these sort of resources for the Russians.

Jennifer Cafarella

So many reports indicate that Russian forces have moved into frontline positions recently abandoned by the United States in Eastern Syria. What Russian forces are those and what significance does that have for Russia's intent?

Mason Clark

The Russians have deployed what they call "military police," which is a specialized branch of the Russian armed forces that they founded back in 2013 specifically for control of reconquered terrain. These military police are designed to carry out stabilization operations and work with local populations to push Russian interests. So far, we assess Russia has only deployed military police units to areas of northeast Syria in which it is broker deals with the Kurds. The reason for this is twofold. One, the Kremlin does not directly trust these private military contractors to carry out these sort of delicate stabilization operations that these military police are designed for. They're going into a territory that is not seen Assad regime troops in years, and they're trying to de-conflict between the Kurds, these Assad troops, as well as the Turks all at once, and Russia does not desire contractors in this situation potentially leading to skirmishes.

Second, Russia still seeks to maintain a level of deniability about the private military contractors as not a direct Kremlin tool. It is tried to distance itself from the Wagner Group and other companies and deny their presence in Syria. Much of the international press is focused on what is going on in Syria currently in response to the Turkish invasion, and it would be very apparent that the Kremlin was directing these contractor operations if they were the first forces in after a deal was brokered between the Kurds and the Kremlin. It would be a notable escalation if we saw Russian

private military contractors deploy to these areas because that would signify, one, that Russia feels that the area has been secured enough by the military police to deploy these less reliable troops or, two, that it intends to carry out more direct combat operations because the military police are not designed to be employed as frontline troops.

Jennifer Cafarella

In this case, then, Russia's deployment of military police as direct, uniformed Russian military forces is further indication of its intent to step in diplomatically to negotiate some sort of agreement with Erdogan and Russia has not, at least get stepped in in a combat role to support the Syrian Democratic Forces in either defensive or the offensive operations that the Kurds have asked for thus far.

Maseh Zarif

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