



## Russia May Deploy Conventional Forces to Syria

By Isabel Ivanescu  
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**Key Takeaway:** *Russia may deploy conventional ground forces to Syria to gain leverage in negotiations with Turkey and possibly participate in a pro-Assad regime offensive. Russia and Turkey are pressing one another for concessions in negotiations concerning opposition-held Idlib Province. A Russian conventional military deployment remains unlikely, but various indicators have tripped in the past few weeks suggesting that Moscow could be preparing for one. Such a deployment would mark an inflection in Russia's participation in Syria and an escalation in the conflict between Russia and Turkey.*

**Turkey and Russia are seeking leverage to set favorable conditions for a new round of negotiations about the fate of Idlib Province, as stalemate there persists.** Russia-Turkey negotiations on Idlib on September 16, 2020, did not result in a settlement.<sup>1</sup> Turkey has subsequently reinforced its military positions in the province as Russia and the Assad regime have escalated airstrikes, shelling, and infiltration attempts.<sup>2</sup> Russia likely seeks a Turkish withdrawal from parts of southern Idlib to enable a pro-Assad regime offensive against Salafi-jihadist opposition forces without Turkish intervention. Turkey likely seeks concessions in other theaters of Russia-Turkey competition such as northeastern Syria, Libya, and the Caucasus.<sup>3</sup>

**Turkey's significant military advantage in Idlib gives it the upper hand in negotiations with Russia.** The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) have a division-sized contingent (over 20,000 troops) in Idlib.<sup>4</sup> Turkey also maintains large proxy forces in Idlib, and Salafi-jihadist groups in Idlib would independently resist a regime advance. TSK forces are substantially more capable than their Russian-backed regime opponents; Turkish drone capabilities, for example, have decimated regime forces in limited prior engagements.<sup>5</sup> Turkey also has a military advantage relative to Russia by virtue of being on the defensive in Idlib, having interior lines in the area, and bordering Syria.

**Neither Russia nor Turkey likely desires major military confrontation in Idlib.** Russia fears losses to regime units in which it has invested heavily, such as the 25<sup>th</sup> Special Tasks Division (aka. Tiger Forces) and the 5<sup>th</sup> Corps. Turkish and Turkish-backed forces would also suffer losses, even if at a lower rate, given pro-regime artillery and air capabilities. Turkey would additionally risk losing ground in Idlib and, perhaps more importantly, losing access to Russian concessions it hopes to achieve in negotiations. A deployed Russian conventional unit would thus most likely be intended to compel Turkish concessions in negotiations rather than to participate in combat, although it would be prepared to do so if necessary.

**Limited and inconclusive but still noteworthy indicators that Russia is preparing for a conventional forces deployment to Syria have been tripped.** Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated on September 21, 2020, "there is no need for the Syrian army and its allies to launch any attack on Idlib. It is only necessary to target terrorist sites and eliminate their only remaining outpost on Syrian territory."<sup>6</sup> The apparent dismissal of an offensive operation in the first sentence is offset by the coded language of the second. Lavrov emphasized that Turkey is primarily responsible for the counter-terrorism mission in Idlib and has previously accused Turkey of failing to fulfill its counter-terrorism responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> Moscow has justified prior pro-regime offensives in Idlib as counter-terrorism operations. "[Practicing] joint operations to localize and resolve armed conflicts related to countering

terrorism...in [the] southwest strategic direction” was among the principal stated goals of Russia’s Kavkaz-2020 military exercises, which ran September 21-26.<sup>8</sup>

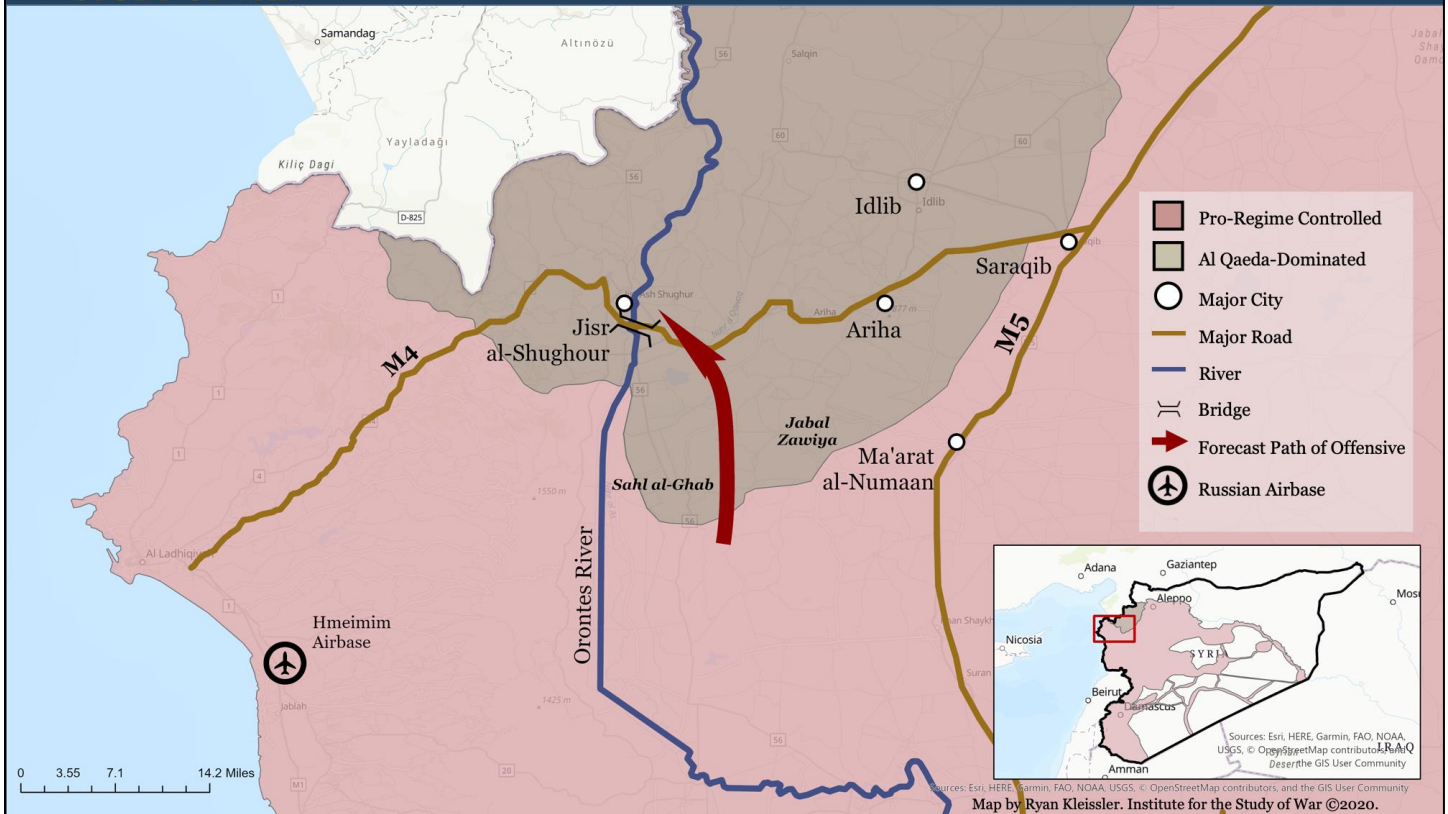
Russian deployments thus far have been limited to headquarters elements, air units, and small numbers of Russian special forces, military police, and Russian private military contractors apart from one exception: the 810<sup>th</sup> Naval Infantry Brigade deployed to establish and defend Russia’s Hmeimim airbase in 2015 and participate in limited offensive operations on nearby front lines. Russia discontinued this effort in 2017 after failing to make gains.<sup>9</sup>

**Russian information operations in Syria and ostentatious exercises preparing to operate in a chemical warfare environment are another ambiguous sign of possible plans for a Russian conventional force deployment.** ISW has observed a recurring indicator that the Syrian regime intends to conduct a chemical attack in Idlib Province with Russian approval. The Russian Center for Reconciliation in Syria baselessly claimed on September 11, September 20, September 28, and October 13 that the al Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) is planning a false flag chemical attack in greater Idlib and subsequently disseminated the claim through Russian and Syrian state media sources.<sup>10</sup> Such claims often precede new pro-regime offensives and have sometimes preceded regime chemical attacks, likely to muddy attribution.<sup>11</sup>

The Assad regime has used chemical attacks to degrade opposition factions and instill fear in civilians upwards of 300 times since the start of the Syrian civil war, but it lacks the capability to move ground forces in before chemical agents have dispersed.<sup>12</sup> Russian doctrine concerning chemical weapons use specifically calls for coordinating ground operations with chemical attacks to immediately capitalize on battlefield effects.<sup>13</sup> Many Russian units involved in the Kavkaz-2020 exercises as well as in contemporaneous snap exercises in Russia’s Western Military District trained in employing unknown CRBN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear) defense capabilities.<sup>14</sup> A Russian mechanized infantry battalion practiced operating in anti-chemical weapon isolation gear including gas masks on September 19.<sup>15</sup> Another Russian battalion-sized element practiced degassing and decontamination of terrain, equipment, and weapons on October 16 in an unrelated snap exercise.<sup>16</sup> Russian forces routinely exercise CRBN defense capabilities, but the scale and nature of these exercises is noteworthy, particularly when coupled with the ongoing information operation in Syria.

**Recent Russian and Assad regime kinetic activity could indicate pro-regime forces are preparing for an assault on Jisr al-Shughour, an area important for the defense of Russia’s coastal base.** Russian airstrikes on September 20, 2020, targeted a command center and several warehouses belonging to hardline al Qaeda-affiliate Hurras al-Din; Hurras al-Din fighters are primarily concentrated around Jisr al-Shughour.<sup>17</sup> The Assad regime shelled a Turkish observation post near Jisr al-Shughour on September 20.<sup>18</sup> Russia also conducted airstrikes on Salafi-jihadist opposition forces near Jisr al-Shughour on October 14.<sup>19</sup> Jisr al-Shughour is a fortified jihadist-held urban center that threatens the security of Russia’s Hmeimim airbase and the Assad regime’s Alawite support base in Latakia Province. Russia considers Hmeimim one of its three permanent bases in Syria and is currently expanding its facilities.<sup>20</sup>

Russia has backed multiple regime attempts to capture Jisr al-Shughour since 2015 through the mountainous terrain to the city’s southwest, but regime forces failed at significant human and reputational cost.<sup>21</sup> More-capable Russian conventional forces may be able to succeed where Assad’s forces could not. Gains by pro-regime forces in southern Idlib from late 2019 to March 2020 have also set conditions for an attack on Jisr al-Shughour from the flatter terrain east of the city, wherein pro-regime forces would seize the Sahl al-Ghab Plain and cross the Orontes River to reach the city. ISW previously assessed—based on pro-regime force posture—that opposition-held areas south of the M4 highway, including the Sahl al-Ghab Plain, are the likeliest target of a forthcoming pro-regime offensive.<sup>22</sup> The map below shows this possible avenue of advance.



**Deployment of a Russian conventional unit to Idlib could dramatically change the military balance in Idlib and likely incline Turkey to accept a less-lucrative negotiated settlement.** A Russian deployment could also allow pro-regime forces to pursue more-ambitious objectives and adopt a new modus operandi in an imminent Idlib offensive if Russia permits its forces participate in combat as well as posturing.

**The deployment of Russian conventional units to Syria for participation in offensive operations remains unlikely but would mark a major inflection.** A deployment of conventional Russian forces would solidify Russia's position in Syria and give Russia an opportunity to test evolving doctrinal concepts and combat capabilities. However, it would require Russian willingness to resource Syria as a priority effort and tolerate increased risk to force.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/turkey-reinforces-positions-greater-idlib-pressure-russia-negotiations>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/turkey-reinforces-positions-greater-idlib-pressure-russia-negotiations> ;

<http://www.syria.tv/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%A8%D9%91%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%B2%D9%91%D8%B2-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%87-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AC%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9> ;

<http://syria.tv/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A5%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A5%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/erdogan-seeks-upend-kremlin-backed-status-quo-nagorno-karabakh> ; <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/syria-warning-update-syrian-regime-offensive-idlib-may-be-imminent>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/turkey-reinforces-positions-greater-idlib-pressure-russia-negotiations>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/3/battle-for-idlib-turkeys-drones-and-a-new-way-of-war>

<sup>6</sup> [https://arabic.rt.com/middle\\_east/I156I8I-%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AA/](https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/I156I8I-%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AA/) ; <https://www.enabballadi.net/archives/417959>

<sup>7</sup> <https://tass.com/politics/I047227> ; <https://ahvalnews.com/idlib/turkey-has-not-fulfilled-memorandum-idlib-says-lavrov>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russias-kavkaz-2020-military-exercise> ; <http://eng.mil.ru/en/mission/practice/more.htm?id=I23I2963@egNews>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-troops-syria-brigade-crimea-putin-assad-islamic-state/27240966.html> ; <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-marines-position-themselves-in-eastern-latakia/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/militants-planning-to-stage-chemical-weapon-attacks-in-syrias-idlib-russian-military/> ; <https://www.qasioun-news.com/ar/articles/229739/%D9%88%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%85-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8> ; <https://www.radioalkul.com/p34I859/> ; <https://npasyria.com/en/47I25/> ; <https://npasyria.com/en/47474/> ; <https://npasyria.com/en/48I86/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/russia-pre-empts-idlib-offensive-with-smear-campaign-1.769694> ; <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russian-trolls-denied-syrian-gas-attackbefore-it-happened>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/17/695545252/more-than-300-chemical-attacks-launched-during-syrian-civil-war-study-says>

<sup>13</sup> <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/russia-ready-nuclear-chemical-or-biological-weapons-based-war-132872> ; <https://mca-marines.org/gazette/seven-principles-of-soviet-tactical-doctrine/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/russias-kavkaz-2020-military-exercise> ; [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=I23I5039@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=I23I5039@egNews) ; [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=I23I6017@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=I23I6017@egNews) ; <https://rosgvard.ru/ru/news/article/polevoj-vygod-specialistov-rxb-zashhity-voinskix-chastej-rosgvardii-provoditsya-v-irkutskoj-oblastie> ; [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=I23I5457@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=I23I5457@egNews)

<sup>15</sup> [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=I23I5039@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=I23I5039@egNews)

<sup>16</sup> [https://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=I23I9658@egNews](https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=I23I9658@egNews)

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.enabballadi.net/archives/4I7823> ; <https://www.baladi-news.com/ar/articles/65324/%D8%AE%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%B1-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%85-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%84-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A8-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/I84893/> ; <https://stepagency-sy.net/2020/09/20/5-%d8%b7%d8%a7%d8%a6%d8%b1%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%ad%d8%b1%d8%a8%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%b1%d9%88%d8%b3%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%aa%d8%aa%d9%86%d8%a7%d9%88%d8%a8-%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%89-%d9%82%d8%b5%d9%81/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.enabballadi.net/archives/423II5> ; <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/russian-air-force-wipes-out-jihadist-training-camp-in-northwest-syria/> ; <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-bases/russia-establishing-permanent-presence-at-its-syrian-bases-ria-idUSKBNIEKoHD> ; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-syria-airbase/syria-agrees-to-let-russia-expand-hmeimim-air-base-idUSKCN25F2BP>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.hudson.org/research/I5533-the-syria-effect-al-qaeda-fractures> ; <https://www.frstrategie.org/en/publications/notes/war-and-opportunity-turkistan-islamic-party-syrian-conflict-2017> ; <https://english.enabballadi.net/archives/2019/07/jisr-al-shughour-the-city-which-syrian-regime-wants-to-subjugate/>

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/pro-regime-forces-idlib-posture-resumption-offensive> ;  
<http://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/syria-warning-update-syrian-regime-offensive-idlib-may-be-imminent>