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WARNING INTELLIGENCE UPDATE

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RUSSIAN DEPLOYMENT TO SYRIA: PUTIN'S MIDDLE EAST GAME CHANGER

Satellite imagery provided by AllSource Analysis confirms the recent arrival of Russian main battle tanks, armored personnel carriers, helicopters, and other military equipment at an airbase in Syria's coastal Latakia province, indicating that Russia has deployed troops inside Syria. Concurrent military exercises inside Russia with the stated mission of training for long-range deployments of airborne troops suggest that Russia may intend to deploy additional forces, possibly further inside Syria. AllSource Analysis imagery of Taganrog Central airbase just east of the Ukrainian border from September 12 shows airborne troops rolling parachutes along a runway along with vehicles and tents more likely configured for sustained operations than for exercises or snap inspections. Russian President Vladimir Putin is seeking ways to support the Assad regime, to thwart a possible buffer zone established by the United States and Turkey, and to embarrass the United States by positioning Russia as the leader of a new international anti-ISIS coalition. Russian mobilization may protect the Assad regime from rapid collapse, but it may also cause greater radicalization among the Syrian opposition. The Russian deployment to Syria is game-changing. It will alter the nature of international negotiations, compromise and weaken the cohesion and efforts of the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, strengthen the Assad regime, and initiate direct Russo-Iranian military operations (suggesting the creation of a de facto Russo-Iranian military coalition, at least in Syria) for the first time. The U.S. and its partners must fundamentally reassess their approach to the Syrian conflict in light of this critical inflection.

PUTIN'S STRATEGIC AIMS

Russian President Vladimir Putin is working to create an alternative anti-ISIS coalition that includes Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime in a direct challenge to the U.S.-led coalition currently active against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. He floated the idea in a speech on September 15 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan at the 2015 summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the post-Soviet military alliance led by Russia.¹ Putin has also discussed sending troops to advise and provide logistical support along Tajikistan's southern border, as the ISIS-affiliated Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) operates in Afghanistan's neighboring Kunduz Province. The Kremlin also recently announced the deployment of paratroopers to Egypt to participate in a major counter-terrorism exercise. Putin's comments at the CSTO summit were likely a preview of his upcoming speech at the UN General Assembly on September 28.²

RUSSIAN OBJECTIVES IN SYRIA

The Russian deployment to Syria likely supports multiple objectives. It enables Russia to pursue the limited objective of securing its military interests on the Syrian Coast, where the

port of Tartus is Russia's only remaining Middle East base and where many dual Russian-Syrian citizens live.³ The deployment of Russian military forces to Syria more importantly provides timely support to the wavering Syrian regime that may preserve Russia's only Arab ally.

Russia views the Syrian regime as the only realistic bulwark against the expansion of ISIS and other militant groups in the Middle East. The Syrian regime has lost control of significant terrain near the Alawite-majority regions of Latakia and Hama provinces. Rebel forces led by Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) seized Idlib City in northwestern Syria in March 2015 and expelled the Syrian regime from all but one of its remaining positions in Idlib Province by early September 2015.⁴ These advances placed anti-regime forces in position to launch offensives into the heartland of the Syrian regime in Alawite-majority regions of Latakia and Hama Provinces.⁵

These setbacks for Syrian regime forces on the ground reflected deeper structural problems. The Syrian Arab Army continues to suffer from persistent shortages of manpower due to overstretch, attrition, and endemic draft evasion that have increasingly led the regime to rely upon fighters from Iranian proxy groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah.⁶ Regime forces are stretched by the dispersed military posture demanded by Syrian

President Bashar al-Assad's determination to maintain his claim as the legitimate ruler over 'all corners' of Syria.⁷ Concerns regarding recent rebel advances fueled a rare wave of public demonstrations against Assad among pro-regime civilians in Damascus, Homs, Hama, and the Syrian Coast, expressing wider discontent regarding the failures of the regime's military strategy.⁸ These conditions have called into question the regime's ability to defend its core terrain - and therefore its long-term survivability.

The risk of uncontrolled regime collapse may thus have prompted Russia to provide the Syrian regime with increased capability in order either to defend against future offensives by Jabhat al-Nusra and rebel forces targeting Latakia and Homs Provinces, or to conduct counter-offensives that preclude those operations. The deployment also serves Russia's geopolitical objective of building military capability on the Mediterranean Sea that can withstand the collapse of the Syrian regime or its removal through a political transition process. The mobilization of Russian forces alongside the Syrian regime in an ostensible "anti-terrorism" campaign places complex pressures on the existing U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. Russian calls for cooperation in a broad new anti-ISIS coalition which includes Iran and the Syrian regime may gain additional traction with Russian forces on the ground, particularly if Russian aircraft begin flying sorties against ISIS.⁹ The Russian mobilization may be aimed at precluding expanded U.S. action against the Assad regime.

The July 2015 agreement between the U.S. and Turkey granting the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition access to Turkish airbases, incorporating the Turkish Air Force into coalition air tasking orders, and providing for the formation of an "ISIS-free" zone controlled by moderate rebel forces along the Turkish border likely also helped prompt the Russian deployments.¹⁰ Putin may seek to thwart cooperation between the U.S. and Turkey in order to end the prospect of a "safe zone" in northern Syria that could serve as a haven for rebel forces fighting the Syrian regime. Iranian leaders have repeatedly condemned the idea of such a safe-zone as violating the sovereignty of the Syrian state.

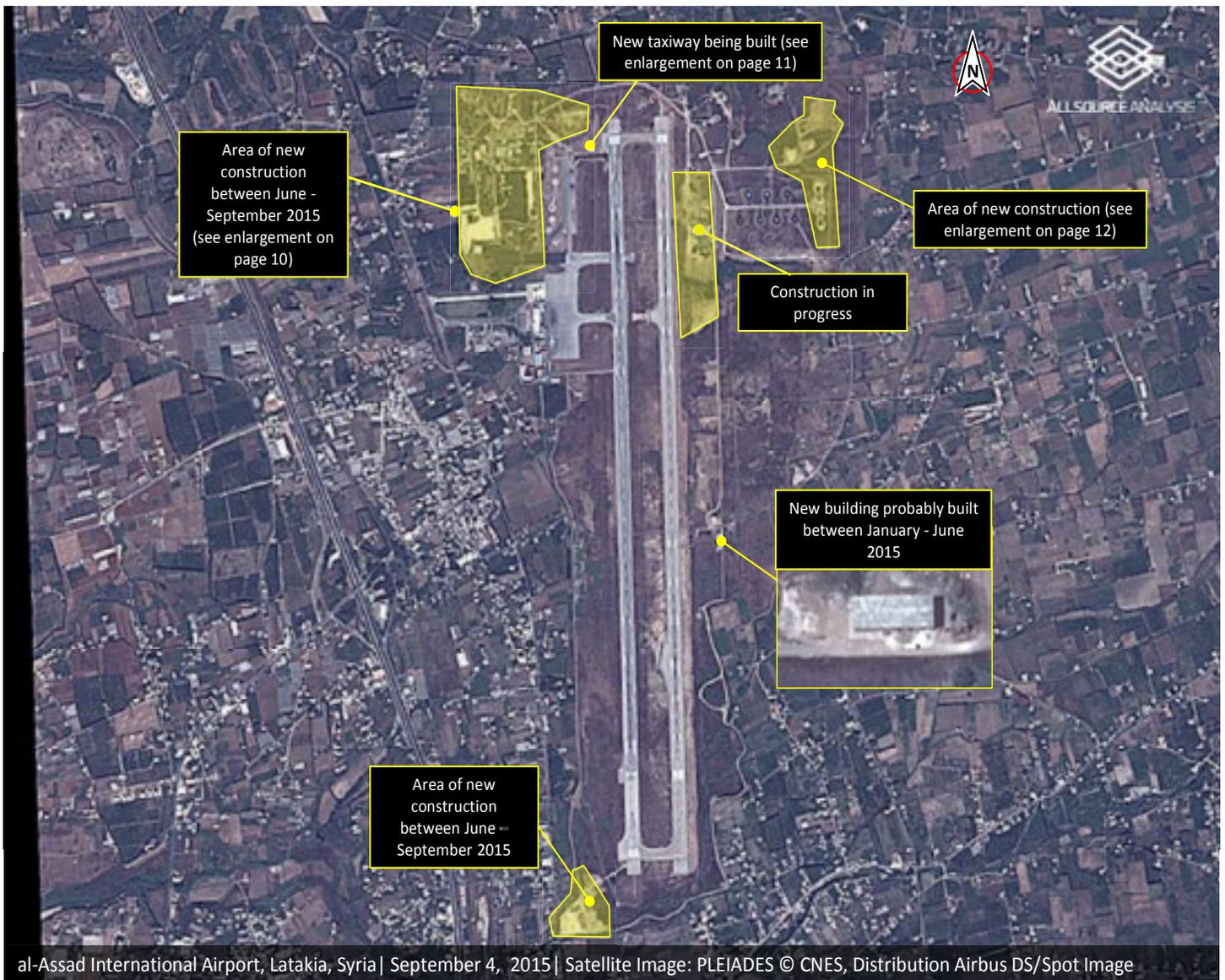
The Russian deployment to Syria also bolsters Putin's leverage over a renewed push for negotiations towards a political solution to the Syrian Civil War, finally. The conclusion of the Iranian nuclear accord on July 14 generated a surge of diplomatic activity aimed at ending the conflict, including a trilateral meeting between U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir in Qatar on August 3.¹¹ These efforts have provided Russia with a forum to protect its interests in Syria and promote its image as a responsible international actor to recover from the damage it caused itself by the crypto-invasion of Ukraine.

European nations, pressured by a mounting refugee crisis driven in part by the Syrian Civil War, have already moved into closer alignment with the Russian position regarding the Syrian regime in recent weeks. Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz stated on September 8 that the international community needs to adopt a "pragmatic approach" that incorporates the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad into the fight against ISIS.¹² The next day, British Foreign Minister Philip Hammond announced that President Assad could remain in his position for up to six months in any transition agreement.¹³ Russia has also forged a "common position" on the conflict in order to strengthen its ability to dictate a favorable end state in Syria.¹⁴ The announcement on September 15 that Iran will soon enter the "operational phase" of its political plan to end the Syrian Civil War following close consultation with Russia suggests that the Russian deployment may have been coordinated with Iran in order to achieve maximum political effect on the U.S. and its allies.¹⁵ This coordination may have been one of the main purposes of Qods Force Commander Qassem Soleimani's visit to Moscow.

RUSSIAN STAGING NEAR LATAKIA, SYRIA

An analysis of available satellite imagery and open sources indicates the new buildup of Russian military forces in Syria began in July 2015, and accelerated considerably in late August and September. In late August 2015 the Russian tank landing ship *Nikolay Fichonkov* brought a shipment of advanced BTR-82A armored personnel carriers to Latakia Province after transiting the Bosphorus on August 20.¹⁶ Footage uploaded by pro-regime fighters with the Syrian National Defense Force (NDF) on August 23 included at least one BTR-82A apparently manned by Russian-speaking personnel participating in clashes with rebel forces in northeastern Latakia Province.¹⁷ Syrian state-run newspaper Al-Watan published a report three days later that Russia had begun providing satellite imagery to regime forces and intended to establish a new military base in Jableh, south of Latakia City.¹⁸ These initial claims were quickly followed by reports of intensified Russian activity at the Bassel al-Assad International Airport near Jableh in Latakia Province. U.S. intelligence officials reported that Russian military transport aircraft delivered prefabricated housing for as many as 1,000 personnel as well as a portable air traffic control tower to the airport by September 4.¹⁹

Local Syrian sources noted the start of construction activity to expand the airport tarmac and facilities at the same time.²⁰ U.S. officials later reported the arrival of up to 200 Russian soldiers, including members of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade previously involved in the annexation of the Crimean



Satellite imagery of Latakia's Al-Assad Airport from September 4, 2015, reveals increased construction, possibly in preparation for Russian troop and equipment arrivals.

Peninsula, by September 10 and the delivery of at least six advanced T-90 Main Battle Tanks, 15 howitzers, 35 armored personnel carriers, and prefabricated housing for at least 500 additional personnel by September 14.²¹ A sizeable portion of this equipment was likely delivered by four Ropucha-class and two Alligator-class tank landing ships that transited the Bosphorus between August 26 and September 10.²² Putin and senior Russian officials have continued to assert that Russia is providing “military-technical assistance” in line with “effective contracts” for armored personnel carriers, trucks, grenade launchers, and ammunition.²³ Meanwhile, cargo flights by Russian IL-76 and An-124 airlifters to Bassel al-Assad International Airport continue at a rate of up to two per day, while Russian warships from the Black Sea Fleet are engaged in several rounds of recently-scheduled naval exercises off the

Syrian Coast that are expected to last until October 7.²⁴

Satellite imagery from September 15 provided by AllSource Analysis confirms the presence of seven main battle tanks, 26 BTR armored personnel carriers, Russian artillery, two Mi-24 (Hind) helicopters, two Mi-17 (Hip) helicopters, and numerous trucks at the Bassel al-Assad International Airport. The presence of these vehicles suggests that Russia may intend not only to defend its military bases in Latakia and Tartus Provinces, but also to project force outside of these positions in a counter-offensive posture. This equipment is consistent with the normal complement of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade, suggesting that Russia has indeed deployed ground troops to Syria, and not just equipment to support the Syrian regime.



al-Assad International Airport, Syria | September 15, 2015 | Satellite Image: GeoNorth | PLEIADES © CNES, Distribution Airbus DS/Spot Image

Multiple Russian transport aircraft, as well as helicopters, tanks, trucks, and armored personnel carriers arrived at Al-Assad Airport between September 4 and 15, 2015.

Russian activity in Syria is not limited to Bassel al-Assad International Airport. Local activists report Russian forces have also begun working to expand the Hamidiyah Agricultural Airfield in southern Tartus Province.²⁵ Meanwhile, pro-regime news outlets stated that Russian Naval Infantry advisors also deployed to Homs City and the town of Slinfah in northeastern Latakia Province.²⁶ Syrian opposition sources had previously reported the presence of a Russian “militia” in Slinfah in mid-August to “organize [regime] defensive lines in a professional manner” and had also reported the death of a Russian officer in a rebel missile attack on the town.²⁷ On September 13, activists claimed that fifteen buses carrying Russian military personnel arrived in Hama City and garrisoned its Equestrian Club for use as a military barracks.²⁸ These indications of an expanding Russian footprint suggest that Russian forces will not be

restricted to air operations and will also deploy forward along the Syrian regime’s front line.

POSSIBLE RUSSIAN STAGING FOR FURTHER REINFORCEMENTS TO SYRIA

Satellite images of the Taganrog Central air base in southwestern Russia from September 12, 2015, provided by All-Source Analysis, show clear signs of increased mobilization. Taganrog Central hosts Russia’s 708th Military Transport Aviation Regiment, not an airborne unit.²⁹ Yet the enlarged image shows a set of 22 light utility vehicles arranged in preparation for an operational load plan. The image also shows 23 personnel tents set up directly along the taxiway, indicating that they likely house



Taganrog Airbase | September 12, 2015 | DigitalGlobe Satellite Image

Satellite imagery of the Taganrog Central air base in southwestern Russia shows forces staging for deployment, possibly to Syria.

aircraft maintainers (it is highly unlikely that troops would be bivouacked right on the taxiway considering that Taganrog is a large military facility with hardstand barracks—maintainers, however, usually stay close to their aircraft). The temporary expansion of the number of aircraft maintainers at an airfield generally indicates plans to support a significant increase in air operations for several weeks or months rather than a temporary exercise. Alternately, it is possible that the tents were used for a rapid reaction force or to cover equipment as an operational security measure. Troops packing parachutes are also visible on the right side of the enlarged images, suggesting that they could be preparing to parachute into an exercise or combat or to carry out an airborne supply drop.

The mobilization could be for an exercise, or it could be for a deployment. On September 7, President Putin called a snap inspection of troops in the Central Military District, which

stretches from Russia's Volga region, several hundred miles east of Taganrog, to Siberia. Combat aircraft and some paratroop units from the Southern Military District, where Taganrog is located, were drawn to the inspection in the Central Military District.³⁰ Russia's defense minister said the snap inspection was called to "evaluate the capability of the airborne forces for long-distance deployments and their readiness for landing in unfamiliar zones."³¹ It is unlikely that the airborne troops pictured packing parachutes in Taganrog were preparing for this snap inspection, however. The inspection ended on September 12, the date the image was taken, making it unlikely that airborne troops would be preparing to deploy to the Central Military District at that time.³² All known airborne units involved in the inspection, moreover, are located hundreds of miles east of Taganrog, making that base an unlikely stop over for the readiness inspection.



al-Assad International Airport, Syria | September 15, 2015 | Satellite Image: GeoNorth | PLEIADES © CNES, Distribution Airbus DS/Spot Image

Satellite imagery of Al-Assad Airport on September 15, 2015 confirms the new arrival of Russian tanks and armed personnel carriers to Al-Assad Airport.

On September 14, Russia launched “Center 2015,” its largest military exercise of 2015, involving 95,000 troops and 170 aircraft.³³ The planned exercise is primarily taking place in Russia’s Central Military District, however, the Russian Ministry of Defense revealed at the start of the exercise that some of the drills would stretch into the Southern Military District.³⁴ Russia’s Aerospace Forces commander confirmed that aircraft from the Taganrog base are involved in the exercise.³⁵ It is possible that the exercise is now taking place in Taganrog, and that the airborne personnel at the base are on site to participate. It is also possible that they are staging at Taganrog for further deployment from the base.

Taganrog is also an important base for Russian operations in eastern Ukraine, however, which raises the possibility that Russia is preparing for additional deployments to support Ukrainian separatists. Russia is thought to have used a base 20 miles east of Taganrog Central as a staging post for its covert deployments of troops in eastern Ukraine.³⁶ While “little green men” have not been parachuting into eastern Ukraine, airborne troops have figured heavily in decisive Russian incursions in August 2014 and February 2015, according to a report by Royal United Services Institute.³⁷

Russia and the separatists have significantly dialed back offensive operations this month, likely to divert attention away from the



A new artillery battery appeared at Al-Assad Airport between September 4 and 15, 2015, indicating an increased defensive posture at the base.

war ahead of Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech at the UN General Assembly on September 28, 2015.³⁸ Additionally, Russia and the separatists have not launched a major offensive involving visible contingents of Russian regular troops since February 2015. Accordingly, the current posture of the Russian-backed separatist forces along the front line in eastern Ukraine suggests that the preparations pictured in these images is probably not for a Russian deployment to Ukraine. It is not impossible, however, given that Ukraine's southern port city of Mariupol likely remains a Russian strategic target.³⁹

But the most likely explanation for the build-up at Taganrog is that Russia is staging forces for a deployment to Syria. The Taganrog Central air base, only 800 miles away from Latakia, is perfectly positioned to support Russian operations in Syria.

The next closest known military transport air bases in Russia are over 400 miles farther from Syria.⁴⁰ It is very possible that the airborne troops and the light utility vehicles shown in the images are being sent to Latakia to reinforce airborne troops equipped with such vehicles already in Syria.

CONCLUSION

The reported arrival of fifteen buses of military personnel to Hama City indicates that Russia has already deployed farther inland from Latakia. The arrival of additional main battle tanks, APCs, trucks, and 200 Russian soldiers at Latakia suggests that Russia is preparing to deploy more extensively within Syria. The mission of the Russian troops in Syria remains unclear. A forward-deployed posture in Hama could indicate an advisory mission, a defensive mission of Russian interests along the coast, or ultimately a counter-offensive against anti-regime

elements that threaten Syria's coast. The vulnerable condition of the Syrian regime raises the likelihood that Russian troops will come into direct contact with anti-regime elements, which may cause their mission to shift. Under such circumstances, Russia could feasibly escalate its operations inside Syria based upon ground realities.

Russian support to the Syrian regime may stave off precipitous regime collapse. It may also draw Chechen elements within Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS to seek direct confrontation with Russian forces in Syria. Russian mobilization within Syria therefore runs the risk of generating greater instability and possibly radicalization among opposition elements, counter to the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition's mission. Moreover, Russian military mobilization inside Syria undermines America's goal of a political solution in Syria by reducing Assad's incentive to make concessions and increasing the resistance of rebel groups to participate. It will also highlight the extreme limitations of U.S. military support to the Syrian opposition, reducing the likelihood that anti-ISIS partnerships on the ground will last. Russia's rhetorical anti-ISIS motives will not reverse these negative conditions.

The Russian deployment to Syria is game-changing. It will alter the nature of international negotiations, compromise and weaken the cohesion and efforts of the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, strengthen the Assad regime, and initiate direct Russo-Iranian military operations for the first time. The U.S. and its partners must fundamentally reassess their approach to the Syrian conflict in light of this critical inflection.

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