

Russia announces partial withdrawal from Syria

By Bill Van Auken
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Some of the warplanes deployed in the nearly six-month-long Russian intervention in Syria arrived back on Russian soil Tuesday, the day after President Vladimir Putin announced that the “main part” of his country’s forces were being withdrawn from the conflict.

The central task undertaken by the Russian armed forces had “on the whole, been fulfilled,” Putin stated. “With the participation of the Russian military... the Syrian armed forces have been able to achieve a fundamental turnaround in the fight against international terrorism and have taken the initiative,” he added.

The Russian president said his country’s intervention had created the conditions for the initiation of the “peace process,” and that the withdrawal of its forces would send a “good signal” to both sides: the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad and the so-called rebels who have been backed and armed by the US and its regional allies.

Putin’s announcement came nearly three weeks into a US-Russian brokered “cessation of hostilities” that has substantially reduced the level of armed conflict in the country.

Russia is maintaining its two main bases in Syria, its Hmeimim command center and air base in the northwestern province of Latakia, and its naval base, inherited from the Soviet Union, in the Mediterranean port of Tartous. It was reported in Russia that 1,000 Russian troops would remain in the country out of the roughly 4,000 that had been deployed there. Also remaining behind is Russia’s advanced S-400 air defense system.

Putin cast the Russian intervention as a struggle against “terrorism,” and Russian Deputy Defense Minister Nikolai Pankov, speaking Tuesday at a

ceremony at the Russian airbase in Syria, said that those forces remaining in Syria “have the task of continuing to strike terrorist targets.”

It was reported Tuesday that Russian warplanes carried out airstrikes in support of Syrian troops advancing on Palmyra. The city, famous for its Roman ruins, fell to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) last May.

While both Moscow and Washington claimed that their respective interventions in Syria were aimed at combating terrorism, they were pursuing different and diametrically opposed aims. In the case of the Obama administration, the goal was regime-change. It sought the ouster of the Assad government and the imposition of a more pliant Western puppet regime in its place. In pursuit of this aim, it, together with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, funneled billions of dollars worth of aid and armaments to a “rebel” force that was dominated by the al-Nusra Front, Syria’s Al Qaeda affiliate, and related Islamist militias.

As for Moscow, its aim was to preserve its one remaining Arab ally in the Middle East. Of no small importance was the prospect that a Western puppet regime in Syria would bow to Qatari demands—rejected by Assad—to lend its territory for a gas pipeline directed toward Western Europe. Such a development would undercut the profit interests of Gazprom, Russia’s largest corporation, and the ruling class of capitalist oligarchs that Putin represents.

Also of concern to the Russian government was the participation in the ranks of al-Nusra and similar groups of thousands of Islamist fighters drawn from Russia’s Caucasus region. Moscow fears that a US-backed client regime in Damascus will help funnel such separatist forces back into Russia to serve as Western proxies in a campaign to destabilize and

ultimately dismember the Russian Federation.

While there was a defensive element to Moscow's intervention, which was directed at countering a concerted campaign by the US and its NATO allies to militarily encircle and subjugate Russia, there was nothing progressive about it in terms of resolving the Syrian crisis in the interests of the Syrian working class and oppressed.

Even in terms of Russia itself, Putin's oscillation between military adventures and diplomatic entreaties to Washington has done nothing to impede US imperialism's march toward global war.

Putin's announcement of the staged withdrawal combined with his assertion that it was meant as a "signal" to both sides has prompted speculation that the military drawdown was directed at compelling the Assad government to subordinate itself to the "peace process" brokered by Washington and Moscow.

Talks have resumed in Geneva, with UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura shuttling between meetings with Syrian government representatives and a "rebel" negotiating council cobbled together by the Saudi monarchy.

Differences between the Putin and Assad governments have begun to emerge in relation to the talks in Geneva. While Syria's foreign minister, Walid al-Moallem, declared on the eve of the talks that Assad's position as president was a "red line" for the government, and the president would not negotiate his status, it is far from clear that Moscow agrees. As long as a new regime in Damascus is amendable to upholding Russia's regional interests, the Putin government is evidently prepared to accept Assad's departure.

Friction was already evident over last month's declaration by Assad that, regardless of a ceasefire, his forces would continue combating "terrorists" and that retaking all Syrian territory was "a goal we are seeking to achieve without any hesitation."

That statement prompted something of a rebuke from Russia's United Nations envoy, Vitaly Churkin, who declared in an interview with a Russian newspaper that Assad's statement "obviously contradicts Russia's diplomatic efforts." Churkin warned that if Damascus failed to align its policies with these efforts "there will be a difficult situation, one that will also involve them."

The Syrian government was anxious to dispel any notion that Putin's decision to withdraw Russian forces was carried out unilaterally or as part of an attempt to pressure Damascus to compromise with the Western-backed forces. The state news agency SANA published multiple articles asserting that the drawdown had been "coordinated" between Putin and Assad.

Another potential factor in Putin's decision to order a military drawdown is the increasingly tense situation created by Turkey's intervention in Syria. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov charged Tuesday in a television interview that "Turkey has started to declare it has a sovereign right to create some safety zones on Syrian territory." He said that Turkish troops are "digging in a few hundred meters from the border inside Syria" in what amounts to "a sort of creeping expansion."

A longstanding supporter of the Al Qaeda-linked militias that form the backbone of the insurgency against Assad, Turkey has intervened with the aim of preventing Syrian Kurdish forces from consolidating their grip over an autonomous territory just south of the Turkish border.

Last November, Ankara organized the deliberate ambush of a Russian warplane carrying out airstrikes against Islamist militias south of the Turkish border, leading to the death of one pilot and posing the immediate threat of an armed conflict between the Russian military and a member of NATO. The incursion of Turkish forces into Syria only heightens that danger.

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