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Lessons From Syria: What We Can Learn About the Russian Way of War

Nikolas K. Gvosdev

Abstract: The 2015 Russian intervention in Syria allowed the military establishment to test practical applications of a “strategy of limited action” based on the concept of “reasonable sufficiency” as a way to achieve Russia’s political objectives of preventing the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime while avoiding overstretch and a possible quagmire. To avoid having to sustain a wide-ranging occupation of the country, the Russian effort has concentrated on controlling key vantage points, creating a patchwork of de-escalation and reconciliation zones to deprive the opposition of territory, and turning to the private military sector to minimize the risks to its ground forces.

Keywords: Russia; Syria; intervention; strategy of limited action; reasonable sufficiency; mercenaries.

Introduction

In 2014, United States Sen. Lindsay Graham lamented that a country like Russia—with “an economy the size of Italy”—was nevertheless able to play a major role in world affairs, comparing it to “playing a poker game with a pair of 2s and winning.” The implication was that, given its economic base, Russia should not be able to wield the military capabilities it possessed and to project power around the world. The lessons of the Syria operation, however, show how Russia can take its limited assets and constrained budgets and utilize them to great effectiveness. This, in turn, gives Russia a resiliency to conduct military operations while limiting the costs and stresses on its economy and political system. It also reinforced the conclusion that Russia’s ability to project disruptive military power continues to give it relevance on the global stage, even if it lacks the economic wherewithal of other major powers such as the US or China.

Indeed, learning lessons from the Russian experience is critical because the US expectation, when the Russians intervened in 2015, was that Moscow would fail to achieve its objectives and repeat the Soviet failures in Afghanistan. President Barack Obama warned, “An attempt by Russia… to prop up [Bashar al-] Assad and try to pacify the population is just going to get them stuck in a quagmire and it won’t work.” The president’s comments reflected a tendency within the American strategic studies community to situate Russian actions “within the West’s own theoretical framework” rather than to examine the emergence of a new Russian approach to intervention and conflict management.

However, as a number of Russian officials have stated, they studied closely the record of American failures and setbacks in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, the Russian national security establishment (along with China’s), has, as former Undersecretary of Defense Michelle Flournoy noted in the 2019 Drell Lecture, devoted a great deal of attention to
learning from US experiences—both successes and failures—over the last thirty years. In addition, the Russian national security community processed the lessons of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, so that “by avoiding the mistakes of the past Russia has sidestepped a quagmire in Syria, and perhaps framed a working doctrine to avoid becoming ensnared in future asymmetric wars.” That has guided their efforts in formulating a post-Soviet Russian way of intervention and conflict resolution.

Sometimes described under the rubric of “new generation warfare” (NGW), this way of warfare subordinates the use of kinetic power to enmeshing the unleashing of firepower within a larger framework of influence operations. As Nicholas Fedyk describes it, it elevates “the psychological and popular aspects of conflict” by using, whenever possible, non-military measures as a first resort, so as to avoid, whenever possible, boiling over “into full-scale armed conflict.” The delivery of military force must fit within a larger strategy designed to convince an enemy to cease fighting, or, at minimum, withdraw from the desired objective.

Syria is where many of these lessons were tested, and the Syria operation itself, as Dima Adamsky has concluded, “has enabled Russian practitioners to further refine a notion of new generation warfare (NGW)—a set of ideas about the changing character of war that had been circulating in the Russian strategic community (under the current chief of the general staff [ed. Valery Gerasimov]) for several years prior to the start of the operation.” In addition, Syria also served “as a laboratory for testing a range of concepts and weapons of various services, as part of the profound reform of the armed forces which has been going on since 2008.”

The lessons of Syria, in turn, need to be examined because of the perceived success of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to intervene in achieving a number of key Russian strategic objectives. The Russians assess that their action blunted efforts by the US to forge a coherent anti-Assad coalition capable of driving Assad from power; it forged a new balance of power within Syria itself as well as the broader Middle East, returning Russia to the table as a major external player; and it cemented Russia’s ability to forward deploy power outside of the Eurasian region and to expand its zone of influence and denial from the Black Sea across the entire Eastern Mediterranean. Not only was the Assad regime, assessed in 2015 to be on its last legs, saved, but a blow delivered to US prestige and to Obama who himself had proclaimed “Assad must go.” Even if the Russian contribution, in absolute military terms, was relatively minor, and the Assad government might have survived without direct Russian military action, the dividends the intervention paid, in terms of enhancing Russian influence in the region, increased Russian leverage as an external player throughout the greater Middle East. As a 2020 Al-Jazeera report concluded, “Russia’s perceived success in Syria also encouraged other countries in the Middle East to seek improved relations with Moscow.” In other words, even limited and constrained action can have major impacts.

Mason Clark concludes, “The Kremlin identifies Syria as a highly successful—and replicable—operation and conceives of expeditionary deployments as a new addition to the
Kremlin’s policy toolkit.” By showcasing Russia’s ability to deploy limited forces in circumscribed engagements, Moscow demonstrated that it, too, could cast a vote in regional and global issues. Rather than viewing Syria as a sui generis case, in which a host of factors specific to Syria contributed to Russian success, Moscow concluded the lessons of Syria might in fact be applicable elsewhere.

The Lessons

I. Limit Goals and Scope of the Operation

In going into Syria, the Russians, having observed the overreach and overstretch of the US efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, decided to eschew what they viewed as the American expenditure of personnel and funds for massive reconstruction efforts and to reshape political and economic life. Indeed, as Adamsky has noted, “The Kremlin realized that overall intervention might become a deadly self-inflicted blow.” In defining the scope of the intervention, the Russians ruled out “nation-building reconstruction or political transformation” as goals of the operation. Instead, as Dara Massicot pointed out, Russian action was explicitly guided by the strategy of limited action (стратегия ограниченных действий). As Massicot notes, the 2017 edition of Dmitry Rogozin’s Voina i Mir, a dictionary of national security and military terms, defines the term as follows:

The way of conducting war and operations with limited goals, with the deliberate spread of military actions on strictly defined territories, using only a part of military potential and only certain groups of armed forces, selectively striking a certain number of selected objects, targets and groups of troops (forces) of the enemy. It is used in conditions when there is no need to use the entire military power of the state to achieve the goals set, or if one side or the other seeks to avoid the enemy’s dangerous large-scale actions. At the same time, military actions are of a limited nature; they are carried out on a smaller scale, mainly by launching fire strikes and conducting joint air, anti-air, front-line, army and divisional operations.

Rather than envisioning the occupation of an entire country and a complete restructuring of its political and economic institutions, the strategy of limited action envisions a focus on taking possession of what might be seen as the commanding heights, control of which is necessary to be able to shape and manage the politico-security environment. In assessing how the Russians carried out the campaign in Syria, Jānis Bērziņš identified some of these critical items that the Russians focused on, such as strong points, dominant heights, lines of communications, road junctions, transport hubs, water sources, and key settlements. Significantly, this did not require positive control of the entire country, simply that negative outcomes from other areas of the country could be prevented or minimized. However, if guaranteeing those negative outcomes could not come as a result of negotiation, the Russian approach would be to use “scorched earth” tactics.

The success of a limited strategy in Syria was defined, as Robert Hamilton noted, as a
regime just stable enough to achieve its ends, which Anna Borschevskaya further refined as a modicum of stability across most of the country and an end to large-scale fighting. As she also notes, political reconciliation and reconstruction was not the objective of the mission. Charles Sullivan agrees, seeing a Russian definition of success as “reinforcing a weakened state, restoring its control over a tract of geography, and ‘freezing’ the war through a combination of diplomacy and deterrence.” Adamsky defines this end state as “controlled tensions.”

The subsequent reoccupation of much of Syria’s territory by Assad’s military was a byproduct of the massive, damaging and debilitating military strikes enduring by the opposition, rather than the initial purpose of the Russian intervention, which was to stave off Assad’s collapse. Indeed, as Ralph Shield concluded, “Russia’s objectives in Syria are relatively limited. Putin has dispatched Russian military force to preserve the Assad regime but remains uncommitted to the more formidable task of re-establishing Damascus’s sovereignty over the antebellum Syrian state.” Vadim Volovoj concurs: what matters most to the Kremlin is the process, not the result, since involvement in the Syrian civil war has ensured Russia remains a player in Middle East politics and is able to extend its influence against the US without having to have solved the Syrian crisis.

II. Destroy Capabilities Rather than Occupy Territory

Throughout the course of the Syrian civil war, think tanks like the Institute for the Study of War would produce ongoing maps showing what parts of Syria were under the nominal control of the government and opposition groups. When the Russians began their intervention, their initial military campaigns focused primarily on destroying capabilities and fighting formations of the anti-Assad opposition, rather than on occupying territory. [Here, “occupation” is used to mean exercising effective and direct military and political control over a defined area, in terms of establishing a civil or military administration and supervising all aspects of life.] The Kremlin made the decision to become directly involved in the Syria conflict when, in the late summer and early fall of 2015, the opposition forces had acquired sufficient capabilities and momentum to push on Damascus and attempt to dislodge Assad. By focusing on airpower, as well as missile strikes and use of unmanned systems, the Russian task force concentrated on breaking up and degrading opposition military formations and, just as critically, disrupting and destroying their supply routes.

The Syria campaign validated the stress placed on developing capabilities to direct accurate firepower for “blocking routes for delivery of material assets, weapons, ammunition, and replenishment of the enemy” and finding, fixing, and destroying opposition weapons emplacements, especially strongholds in villages and urban areas. Thus, an overview of what platforms the Russians preferred to use in the Syria operation—Su-24 and Su-34 fighter bombers, Su-25 ground attack aircraft, Mi-24 attack helicopters and reconnaissance drones—suggests that “their main application would seem to be guaranteeing the operational freedom of action and freedom of maneuver of Syrian or other troops on the ground, supporting counter-offensives and destroying, disrupting and degrading the ene-
my’s ground forces, even the enemy’s depth position in the area of operations.”

Indeed, the targets of air strikes, drone attacks and even naval gunfire (such as the October 2015 launch of Kalibr cruise missiles from the Caspian Flotilla) were designed to strike headquarters, weapons depots, and convoys as part of this strategy of degrading and disrupting opposition forces.

Adamsky sees this approach as having two stages: halting the advance of opposition forces (and so demonstrate the resilience of the Assad regime) and then to fragment the opposition to “localize, isolate, and dismantle pockets of resistance.” This follows from the Russian strategic precept of “harassment and interdiction” to disorient and demoralize opposition forces and the civilians who support them. The end goal would be to achieve уничтожение (annihilation) of a center of resistance. In addition, the calculated brutality of these harassment and interdiction tactics has been designed to show those who continue to resist that there will be no outside intervention, and, as one on the ground observer commented, “clarifying in terms of how far international ‘friends’ would be prepared to go for other areas.”

However, while liquidation through the application of military force was the traditional approach, General Aleksandr Lapin, who served in Syria, acknowledged that, in a departure from traditional Russian strategy, the military also embraced the use of negotiations to encourage opposition forces to leave neighborhoods or enclaves. Of course, it should be noted that often such negotiations take place in the context of what has been described as “siege and starve” tactics—including the use of indiscriminate firing into areas, without care to avoid civilian casualties or destruction of non-military infrastructure—to create evacuation as the only remaining option. Evacuation would also serve the goal of neutralizing capabilities because agreements for allowing besieged fighters to leave meant abandoning not only fixed positions and bases but also heavier equipment which could not be moved. But the end result of such agreements was to avoid tying down limited Russian military contingents with having to exert positive control over territory and populations; evacuated areas were designed to deny territorial control to the opposition, rather than intended, at least initially, to establish Syrian government control.

III. Ending Resistance as the Objective

Shrinking opposition control over territory, preventing the establishment of more permanent control over specific territories and regions and using those as a base for military and political action against the Syrian regime, factors into the third lesson from Syria—that the Russians chose not to focus on political reform or taking on the responsibilities of governance as part of their mission or using this as a metric for defining success. As Charles Sullivan concluded, “From Russia’s perspective, an intervening power should avoid assuming control over a local war effort and becoming involved in the rebuilding of state institutions. Hence, an intervening power should refrain from meddling in local elite politics.” Indeed, in a number of cases the Russians brokered a series of cease-fires and...
conciliation deals” (*itifagaat al-musalaha*) that left local leaders and notables in control of their immediate territory in return for accepting overall government control, or, at a minimum, ceasing efforts against the regime or aiding the opposition. In other words, the Russian goal was to deny these areas to the opposition, rather than try to force reintegration with the Syrian state. These arrangements “facilitated the authority and control of many of these groups over certain geographical areas (mostly in the de-escalation areas) and meant the Syrian government has been unable to exercise hegemonic domination at the local level.”

To the extent that the Russian military has defined specific areas of control in Syria, they are focused on a few pieces of critically strategic real estate. This flows directly from the concept of a strategy of limited action, where “fortified areas and large points of enemy resistance” are bypassed but where lines of communication are secured. Indeed, as Marika Sosnowski’s research has shown, control of roads and other transport infrastructure has allowed the Russians “to facilitate the flow of goods into de-escalation areas which also endeared them with local armed groups and populations. A member of the Russian military operating out of Hmeimen airbase in Latakia said that Russia “has good relations with nonstate armed groups” as a result of those activities.

At the same time, force, and especially indiscriminate force, is employed alongside tactical negotiations in an effort to jury-rig cease-fires and “understandings” with different actors. Even if such arrangements do not last, they, as Samer Abboud has pointed out, “reduce political and military space for the opposition” and hold out to different groups the possibility of extended truce, freeing up Russian forces to focus their attacks on others. This openness to negotiation and to offer truce on easy terms (e.g., to cease attacks on the Syrian government and to cut off support and aid for those groups that continued their anti-Assad campaign) in turn allowed the Russians to build ties and connections to all parties.

While the Russians have hosted political meetings (especially through the Astana process), their intervention has not insisted on developing a new constitutional framework or constructing political institutions. Instead, Lakshmi Priya concludes that the Russian mediation efforts have focused on “a relatively less ambitious process focused on attaining a cessation of hostilities, rather than the forging of a political solution.” Therefore, the emphasis has been on identifying power centers and leaders and either brokering arrangements between them and the central government or negotiating for neutrality. The Russians have not insisted, as part of this process, that an area accept the exclusive control of the Syrian central government, and the Russian approach is not to have to deploy personnel in large enough numbers to force that compliance. The end result of having a patchwork of “cease-fires” and “de-escalation zones” all around Syria allowed the Russians to build leverage and to be able to focus their resources on targeting the most recalcitrant or more capable anti-Assad opposition groups, allowing for concentration of firepower and assets on those groups that refuse truce or reconciliation.

Of particular importance is the use of the tactics of the temporary truce, permitting (or compelling) the evacuation of the civilian population, using air and artillery strikes to
Lessons From Syria

inflict considerable damage, and offering final evacuation of resistance fighters to designated enclaves as a way to reduce the size of the territory under opposition control but without having to commit to a lengthy or prolonged occupation. “Temporary truces” of this type have a long provenance in Middle Eastern history, and it appears that Russian commanders, drawing on this situational knowledge, took these historical precedents and, working alongside their Syrian partners, crafted truce arrangements that would be acceptable to local notables and elites. In particular, the use of evacuation corridors, with the proviso that those who remain are then declared combatants, allows the Russians to both diminish the size of the population in the enclaves but also to then engage in indiscriminate firing and strikes without concern for minimizing damage to civilians, since, in the Russians’ view, there are no civilians left in the area.

General Aleksandr Dvornikov saw these tactics as a way to liberate “entire neighborhoods without a fight” and compared the impact of these tactics “to the results of a large-scale operation involving troops and forces.” At the same time, many of the evacuees, if they do not wish to agree to a reconciliation agreement with the Syrian government under Russian auspices, are transported to Idlib province, where, in a zone controlled and monitored by the Turkish military, an effective “dumping ground” for opposition fighters from the other three zones unwilling to be reconciled with the Syrian government” has been created.

IV. Maintaining a Light Footprint

Even as the tempo of the intervention picked up, the Kremlin always kept a careful eye on the number of forces allotted for the Syrian operation, and never let the mission expand. The Russians have maintained a relatively light “official” on-the-ground footprint in Syria, guided by the principle of разумная достаточность (reasonable sufficiency). As Adamsky concludes, “Applied to the Syrian context, the principle means limiting the scale of military intervention to the minimum possible that would still allow Russia to project influence and promote regional goals.” It has also meant carefully recruiting ground forces and military police who can work most effectively on the ground in Syria. For instance, as the Russians moved into areas of Syria dominated by Sunni Muslims, the Russians deployed military police drawn from the largely Sunni Muslim regions of the North Caucasus, especially Ingushetia and Chechnya. As a result, as Marika Sosnowski’s research showed, “Members of the Syrian armed opposition were reportedly surprised at seeing Sunni prayer rites being performed by the Russian Military Police on the road. These very visual displays of religious solidarity proved successful in establishing a level of trust with opposition groups as the police were perceived by many armed groups as non-sectarian and therefore not as risky to deal with as the Syrian government or Iran.”

Greater focus on air power and offshore maritime strikes, utilizing new technologies, and better integration with local ground units (the Syrian government, other Syrian militias, Iranian Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah fighters) allowed the Kremlin to
maximize the impact of Russian combat power while minimizing the number of ground forces. As part of the emphasis on “reasonable sufficiency,” the Syrian campaign enabled the Russian military to become better acquainted with “modern technological warfare” and how to better deliver stand-off strikes that would minimize the exposure of its ground forces. Michael Kofman describes the Russian approach as a “lean strategy” designed to avoid creating large sunk costs (in terms of bases, facilities, and commitments) and allowing for flexibility and changes in tactics and approach. As Kofman and Matthew Rojanksy put it, “Russia pursued an ‘emergent’ or ‘lean’ strategy, based on a flexible approach, a willingness to learn and adapt depending on which tactics works and which did not, an approach characterized by the ‘fail fast, fail cheap’ ethos of startup business, with iterative adjustments to the operation.” Indeed, Russian commanders in Syria pursued simultaneous courses of action, adopting and resourcing successful approaches and discarded those not showing results without a concurrent worry about “sunk costs.”

One way to handle costs has been the practice of using Syria as an ongoing training and exercise operation, rotating personnel in order to hone combat skills while deducting operational costs from the training budget. By 2018, some 48,000 personnel had rotated through Syria, including all the commanders of the military districts, and more than 50 percent of the regimental commanders. Shifting to a light footprint also was a way not to stress the logistical capabilities of the Russian military and to prevent too many forces from going to Syria, diverting them away from other challenges and possible contingency plans. A respect for the principle of reasonable sufficiency allowed the Kremlin to modulate its force structure in Syria so as to prevent overstretch. A light footprint was also important for political purposes. As Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Valery Dzutsati pointed out: “Prolonged direct engagement in the Syrian civil war was not without its risks, though, and Putin must have understood this. First, the Russians soon came to comprehend that deploying some ground forces in Syria was inevitable, to provide security to the Russian military facilities for one thing. Second, they increased Russian tactical military capacity making it more mobile …” Of particular concern was that Russian ground forces not become involved in large-scale urban combat or house-to-house fighting in dense neighborhoods.

The first way that the Russians coped with this problem was to have the Russian task force focus on redeveloping the combat capabilities of the Syrian army. As Ruslan Pukhov has concluded: “Russia has managed to foster a very productive symbiosis between its expeditionary forces and Syrian government troops. … The revitalized Syrian units were often bolstered by a small but highly capable contingent of Russian support personnel and elite Spetsnaz troops.” In addition, not only were Russian soldiers embedded within Syrian units, but high-ranking Russian officers also eschewed a purely advisory role to take part in operations, including, in some cases, commanding Syrian units. This has meant that despite the relatively low number of Russian forces deployed to Syria, the intervention allowed a number of senior-level figures—including colonels and generals—to gain valuable combat experience.
Yet the Russians also found that relying on Syrian, Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and Hezbollah fighters to provide the bulk of the “boots on the ground” had limitations. Therefore, whenever additional or specialized ground forces were needed, the Russians turned to private military companies or other proxies (such as the forces assembled by Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov, the so-called Кадыровцы (Kadyrovtsy)), limiting as far as possible the exposure of uniformed members of the Russian armed forces. As in the US, Russian public opinion seems to draw a very clear distinction between “soldiers” dying for the Motherland versus contractors who signed up and took the risks. Indeed, recruiting fighters for Syria allowed the Russian government to encourage people who might otherwise cause trouble in Russia to come to Syria instead. In turn, losses sustained by private military companies (PMCs) in Syria created no discernable reaction in Russian public opinion, and thus, given the low number of “official” service casualties, the Putin administration was able to mitigate any possible negative domestic repercussions arising from a long-term deployment in Syria. Use of private military contractors helped to minimize uniformed Russian casualties and also helped to reduce the financial burden of the overall expedition.

Mercenary use in Syria—with some estimates that at least 2,000 contractors were hired for operations in Syria—was not an exigency forced on the Russian military by low manpower levels (as the use of PMCs by the US to supplement auxiliary personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan). Instead, as Berzinš concluded, these contractors could be successfully “delinked” from the Russian armed forces and to give the Russian government plausible deniability. As he pointed out, “These mercenaries can act as if they were locals, part of the enemy’s armed forces, police, or whatever necessary. They will often engage in sabotage, blackmailing, subversive activities, terrorism, kidnapping, or any other activity that is not considered regular warfare.”

Private military companies fill gaps in Russia’s deployable expeditionary force and also help to give the Kremlin some distance between these operators and the government should complications occur. As Pukhov noted:

Russia has managed to obviate the need for deploying large numbers of troops on the ground by bringing in private military companies. These companies consist of well-paid mercenaries, most of whom are retired Russian servicemen. The difference from the similar practice in the United States is that the Russian private military companies are not relegated to supporting roles. They are used as highly capable assault forces, and their personnel are often embedded with Syrian units to augment those units’ fighting ability. This approach has proved very useful both militarily and politically, as it minimizes the political cost of direct military intervention.

The Syria operation allowed the Russian military and security services to test and refine the use of mercenaries and other private contractors as part of its overall strategy. As Molly Dunigan and Ben Connable have noted, this has given the Kremlin more options to engage in limited operations around the world. Functioning as the “tip of the Russian
foreign policy sphere,” Russian PMCs have been deployed not only in Syria but also in Libya, the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Mozambique, Sudan, Yemen and Burundi—as well as in Ukraine. Thus, “This symbiosis represents the Russian government’s tacit acknowledgment of its ground-power weaknesses, and its own strategic decisions to overcome such weakness with a smaller number of special operations units and state-controlled mercenaries working in tandem.”

Concluding Thoughts

So, in contrast to the predictions that Syria would be “Putin’s Afghanistan,” where a large land-based Russian force would be ground down by insurgent attacks, and that Putin would risk popular unrest at home as casualties mounted, the Russians focused on delivering strikes to disrupt and degrade Assad’s opponents and used their lessons to great effect. As Pukhov concluded: “It is safe to say that Syria has not become a repeat of the Soviet Union’s failed campaign in Afghanistan. The Russian intervention has all but achieved all of its key goals.” Pukhov went on to predict: “The availability of these experienced commanders, a record of a successful and victorious military campaign, and the lessons learned from using air power, modern technology, and special operations forces will provide a major boost to the Russian military machine for years to come.” Kofman concurred with this assessment, noting that “by 2019, the Russian military appeared to be institutionalizing the lessons of Syria and developing a strategy of “limited actions” for defending its interests abroad in an expeditionary context.” It seemed that Russia was refining a strategy for overseas intervention, based on the four lessons of Syria, that would allow for the projection of Russian power without risking fiscal or military overstretch.

However, the conduct of the 2022 Russian military invasion of Ukraine calls into question how many of the lessons of Syria were internalized in the Russian military—or whether the lessons of Syria could be scaled up to a much larger ground operation fighting against a middle power. Russia did not engage in the type of campaign in Ukraine that the lessons of Syria would have predicted. Moreover, unlike with a much smaller force in Syria, where the Russians had air superiority and a reasonably effective supply and logistics chain, the operation in Ukraine has revealed continuing, persistent gaps and problems. Finally, it appears that the political and intelligence calculations on which the 2022 Ukraine operation were based—a quick campaign, minimal resistance, even that significant portions of the population might even welcome Russian forces—were fatally flawed. After the first weeks of the Ukraine invasion, it did appear that the Kremlin began to shift tactics, taking into account some of the lessons of Syria. Overall command of the Russian forces in Ukraine was unified under a single figure, first entrusted to the aforementioned General Dvornikov, and now, apparently, to Dvornikov’s successor, also a veteran of the Syrian intervention, General Gennady Zhidko. There has been an attempt, as a result, to try and replicate “many of the policies it adopted in Syria.”
The Syria campaign enhanced the reputation of the Russian military, especially when contrasted with the seeming inability of tactical successes by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan to lead to strategic outcomes. That reputation is now called into question by much greater signs of failure in Ukraine. So, whether the lessons of Syria represent the future evolution of the Russian military, or whether it was a one-off with no real impacts on how the Russian armed forces plan to wage war and pacification campaigns, is now an open question. In comparing the lessons of Syria with the performance of the Russian military in Ukraine, analysts will have to make a judgment as to whether the successes in Syria can compensate for the clearly inherent weaknesses displayed by the Russian military operation in Ukraine. This is, as Jeffrey Edmonds concludes, the “beginning of understanding and properly preparing for Russian military power—or the lack thereof.”

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Endnotes


18. Quoted in Massicot, op. cit.


32. Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Valery Dzutsati, “Russia’s Syria War: A Strategic Trap?,” Middle East Policy XXV, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 45.


40. Abboud, Syria, 198.

41. Borshchevskaya, Russian Way of War, 27.


43. Borshchevskaya, Russian Way of War, 28, 30.

47. Sosnowski, “Negotiating statehood,” 1401.
56. Souleimanov and Dzutsati, “Russia’s Syria War,” 45.
59. Pukhov, op. cit.
61. Kofman, 50.
64. Pukhov, op. cit.
66. Pukhov, op. cit.


69. All of this is discussed in greater detail in an interview given by Ruslan Pukhov. In particular, he notes the lack of clear air supremacy, Ukraine’s own military capabilities, and the political choice in the early weeks of the war to prioritize efforts to secure a change of government as complicating the Russian approach. See Petr Skorobogatyi, “Ukraine: Gladiatorskie Boi,” PRISP, August 4, 2022, http://www.prisp.ru/anlitics/11005-skorobogatyi-ukraina-gladiatorskie-boi-0408.


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Books: Feldman, Lily Gardner, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 20-33


For multiple notes referencing the same work, please use the following shortened note form after the first reference. Feldman, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation, 73-78.

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