

## Global Hot Topics

## Syria: Russian military presence on the rise

Yigit Engin, Alvaro Ortiz and Tomasa Rodrigo. BBVA Cross Emerging Markets Unit and Garanti Economics

The shiny days of the Assad regime are left behind, but the final resolution of the conflict is far from being near. Despite the rebels are gaining momentum and Turkish new military support will help the coalition forces to fight against Jihadists, the increasing presence of Russian military raises some concerns. Yet, recent news indicates that Russia is expanding the regime's airbase in Latakia. There are several reasons for the Russian movement such as defense, deterrence and regional influence. What is clear is that any particular initiative will have to face now the military forces of Russia.

## The increasing presence of Russian forces

Since the beginning of the Syrian war, Russia has supplied the Assad regime with military equipment, weaponry and intelligence. However, the Russian participation in the conflict is increasing and its military deployment in Syria is becoming more evident, particularly since countries like Bulgaria and Greece banned the Russian supply flights to Syria. In fact:

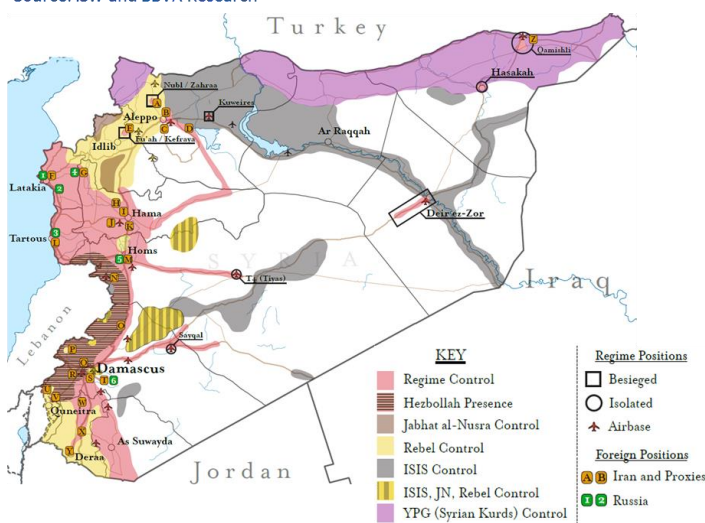
- The Americans suspect that Russia might have deployed construction units to accommodate Russian soldiers.

- Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said (last 13 September) that Russian specialists would accompany the supplied equipment. He also reiterated that Russian military's support to Assad regime would continue.

- The satellite images show the potential expansion of the airbase in Latakia province (Syria).

## Control of terrain in Syria: major actors

Source: ISW and BBVA Research



This would imply that Russia could open an air corridor from Russia to Syria if Iraq opens its airspace to Russia (as Iran will presumably allow Russian planes to cross its airspace). Therefore, Russian military shipments can become bolder in terms of amount and quality in the coming period.

## Reasons behind the increasing Russian presence: defense, deterrence and influence

There are several reasons for the increasing Russian involvement on the Syrian War: defense, deterrence and influence:

- **Defense:** For Russia, the Syrian government is essential to defeat terrorist groups that directly threaten Russia. The Russian support would try to contain al-Nusra (an al-Qaeda affiliate) in the north and to change the balance of power as long as it favors the rebels in Aleppo, Hama and Homs (key cities for Damascus). Last, any rebel attack in Latakia or Tartus, will be contested with increasing Russian support.

- **Deterrence:** By increasing its military presence and deploying personnel, the Kremlin shows that it is ready to afford overseas operations and military aid. Moreover, Russia also signaled that it would not be in a watch and see position whilst Bashar al-Assad is on the brink of losing all of his powers. Hence, Russia is showing the enemies of the regime that the price of a military operation to remove Bashar al-Assad can be high. In this sense, some initiatives such as the Turkish "safe zone" will become more risky.

- **Influence:** Given the increasing weakness of Assad regime and the recent movements by Turkey ("safe zone"), France (which initiated reconnaissance air operations) and Australia (it will join the air coalition), Russia is now announcing that the future of Syria and the Middle East will have to count with the Russian opinion and that they are still able to have presence in several scenarios (Ukraine and Middle East) simultaneously.

## Summing up

As mentioned in our previous note ([Syria: An update of the conflict](#)), the Syrian crisis is far from over and it will have to take into account the proxy participants. Russia has just announced that it wants to participate either in the perpetuation or resolution of the conflict. What is sure is that any initiative by individual countries or coalitions will face now the Russian forces.

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