

## **Airstrikes Alone Won't Work but Russian Ground Troops in Syria Would Kill Putin Support at Home, Experts Say**

### **World**

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**&ldquo;&hellip;in the opinion of one of [the Russian experts] surveyed by the URA.ru news agency , sending Russian ground troops to Syria not only would raise the specter of a new Afghan war but would cut Putin&rsquo;s rating in the polls from its current 86 percent to 14 percent almost overnight.&rdquo;**

By Paul Goble\* for &ldquo;Window on Eurasia&rdquo;; October 1 &ndash; Vladimir Putin has adopted a very risk approach in Syria: One misstep there and he will alienate most of the Muslim world, and the possibility he may dispatch ground troops once it becomes obvious that airstrikes alone won&rsquo;t be enough could cost him most of his support at home, according to Russian experts. Indeed, in the opinion of one of those surveyed by the URA.ru news agency , sending Russian ground troops to Syria not only would raise the specter of a new Afghan war but would cut Putin&rsquo;s rating in the polls from its current 86 percent to 14 percent almost overnight ( [ura.ru/articles/1036265981](http://ura.ru/articles/1036265981)). That places a serious constraint on the Kremlin leader&rsquo;s freedom of action there, the experts say, and means that the West is quite prepared to allow Russia to act in ways that will increase the number of Moscow&rsquo;s enemies in the world while reducing public support for Putin and his policies among Russians. The experts the three URA.ru journalists surveyed were unanimous on three points: Moscow could easily make enemies for itself by this campaign, airstrikes won&rsquo;t be enough and there will be pressure for ground troops first as guards of airbases and later for other uses, and the Syrian war will cause problems for Putin at home if he sends Russian ground troops in. A serving officer in Russia&rsquo;s Central Military District speaking on conditions of anonymity said that airstrikes will not be enough and that ground troops will soon become involved in order to guard the airbases Russia will need to carry out even a limited air campaign. That in turn will result in losses in much the same way that the Afghan war did at the beginning. Veronika Marchenko, head of the Mother&rsquo;s Law Foundation, says that she hopes that Moscow&rsquo;s experience in Afghanistan has taught the Russian government something but that she fears that draftees may be used in Syria, despite their lack of training and chances for success and despite the impact of their service on Russians at home. After all, the Russian government has shown itself quite prepared to ignore its own laws and directives, she continues. It used draftees not only in Afghanistan but also in both Chechen wars. Konstantin Kalachev, head of Moscow&rsquo;s Political Experts Group, says that &ldquo;&rsquo;a second Afghanistan&rsquo; is possible if Russian forces are used in ground operations,&rdquo; something no officials are yet talking about but that will be necessary because airpower alone will not break ISIS whatever anyone thinks. Moreover, he continues, &ldquo;it is obvious that the Islamic State is not struggling so much with the Assad regime as with various Sunni groups.&rdquo; A Russian military presence can serve as &ldquo;a restraining factor&rdquo; but a real military presence would be something else: it would convert &ldquo;the pluses&rdquo; of the situation into &ldquo;minuses&rdquo; almost instantly. Gleb Kuznetsov, deputy director of the Moscow National Institute for the Development of Contemporary Ideology, agrees, He says that a land operation will ultimately be necessary &ldquo;since the Armies of Syria and Iraq are not capable of conducting successful military

operations against ISIS.” The American bases in Iraq and those of Russia in Syria “in fact fulfill the role of so call ‘interventionists’; that is, they demonstrate a presence and provide military-technical help, but ISIS will not be defeated by these groupings. NATO understands this and has no desire to conduct such operations,” Kuznetsov says. “If then such a [ground] operation will not take place then the only thing we can count on is the stabilization of the Alawite portion of Syria and in the end the cutting out of a Sunni state on the territories of Iraq and Syria.” To achieve more would take enormous numbers of ground forces and involve enormous losses, he continues. “The West understands this, but does Russia? And how far are we prepared to go in our support of Assad?” he asks. Leonid Radzikhovsky, a member of the Presidential Council for the Development of Civil Society, says that Russia’s actions in Syria risk costing it enormous support in the region and costing Putin the enormous support he currently enjoys at home. Saudi Arabia has already spoken out against Russia’s involvement because it does not want to see Shiite Iran gain stature as a result, Radzikhovsky continues. If Russia becomes more involved, it will find itself on one side of “an alien religious war,” something which will have far-reaching consequences. Moscow’s policy must be “equidistant from both sides of the conflict,” he argues. “If Russia supports one of the sides, it will gain a mortal enemy in Saudi Arabia and undermine relations with Turkey and other Muslim countries. And it could easily face terrorist acts at home. In Radzikhovsky’s view, it would be ‘pure insanity’ to send ground troops to Syria. Such a step would result in a situation in which Putin’s 86 percent support would decline to 14 percent overnight.

Konstantin Baksheyev, a political consultant, says the only way forward is for Russia and the United States to resume a dialogue something that will inevitably be difficult given the tensions of the last two years. In Syria, he says, “Russia and the US are now formally allies.” But they could become “enemies depending on the actions of the sides.” Radzikhovsky says however that Moscow’s demand that the US end flights over Syria is hardly likely to promote cooperation. “It would be difficult to demand an analogous step from Russia” and thus it is “unwise to speak to Obama in such terms if the goal is an improvement in relations.”

But according to the anonymous military expert, the current situation is “dangerous not only for Russia but also for the US. They think that these guys from ISIS are playing on their side,” but they forget how quickly such people can turn. They should remember what happened in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001.

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\*The commentary above is from Paul Goble’s “Window on Eurasia” series and appears here with the author’s permission. Contact Goble at: [paul.goble@gmail.com](mailto:paul.goble@gmail.com)