

The Authoritarians' War: Assessing Russian Intervention in the Syrian Civil War
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Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War braced the regime during its nadir and helped reestablish President Bashar al-Assad's political dominance over much of Syria just two years later. Despite its importance, Russian intervention did not change the character of the counterinsurgency campaign. Rather, the similarities in Russian and Syrian approaches to counterinsurgency preserved Assad's strategy and optimized Russian intervention, integrating formidable capabilities into an already brutal campaign. Leaders in Moscow and Damascus were aligned in their approaches. Effective patron-client politics facilitated strategic and tactical cooperation and enabled counterinsurgent forces to strike the insurgencies' center of gravity by targeting Syrian civilians. Forced displacement and the intentional slaughter of noncombatants became a primary means for Russia and Syria to achieve key strategic objectives and turn the tide of the war. However, favorable short-term outcomes do not necessarily presage long-term success. The counterinsurgents punished civilians instead of addressing root causes. Assad has largely avoided addressing popular grievances and influential conditions and his brutality has left Syria ripe for insurgent exploitation. Although Assad's short-term success seemingly demonstrates the efficacy of authoritarian approaches to counterinsurgency, the conflict's long-term outcomes remain unclear. As with all insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, it is essential to consider that the results of the Syrian Civil War may change over time.

Russia's 2015 intervention proved a crucial turning point in the ongoing Syrian Civil War. While Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government appeared destined for collapse earlier that year, Russia's deployment of weapons, air support, and specialists rejuvenated the regime's flagging counterinsurgency. This last-minute intervention helped Assad's forces achieve military superiority over domestic rivals by the end of 2017. This article examines Russian and Syrian approaches to counterinsurgency, patron-client politics, and the strategic and tactical character of the Syrian Civil War from 2014—when the rise of Islamist insurgents expanded the conflict to a transnational level—to 2017—when the regime regained dominance over most Syrian battlefields—through the end of 2020, when the regime's survival appeared all but assured.

In general, Russian intervention did not change the character of Assad's counterinsurgency campaign. Russia and Syria have employed authoritarian approaches to

counterinsurgency throughout their modern history. From Afghanistan to Chechnya, the Russians have intentionally punished civilians to undermine insurgent movements. Syria has also employed violent coercion against the Syrian population during campaigns against domestic rebel groups. The allies maintained these approaches throughout the Syrian Civil War.

Approach alignment fostered effective patron-client relations following Russian intervention. By embracing violence against civilians to extinguish popular support for the insurgencies, Russia and Syria reduced strategic friction and promoted tactical cooperation. This synergy allowed Russia to integrate deadlier capabilities into Assad's already brutal campaign, inflict greater suffering upon the population, and ultimately turn the tide against the insurgents.

The short-term results may challenge the typical Western notion of 'good' counterinsurgency. Russia and Syria have achieved notable tactical and operational successes and improved the regime's immediate strategic position while eschewing the population-centric principles that define the counterinsurgency doctrines of the United States and several European powers. Targeted violence against civilians has proven an effective short-term resolution to insurgency in Syria. The regime's short-term success may ignite debate about the most effective approach to counterinsurgency as a result. At the very least, the short-term outcomes of the Syrian Civil War demonstrate the advantages that authoritarian countries like Russia and Syria have over liberal democracies like the United States when waging counterinsurgency.

The long-term effects on Syria's internal stability are more difficult to discern. The counterinsurgents elected to approach the campaign by punishing civilians instead of addressing root causes. Assad largely ignored popular grievances through the end of 2020, while his heavy-handed actions have entrenched and exacerbated common drivers of insurgency. Although regime forces have regained control over much of Syria's territory and population, the country faces a long road to recovery. Many Syrians live in poverty and without access to basic services, while the remnants of insurgent groups still demonstrate potent military capabilities through attacks against regime forces and Syrian civilians. Despite the apparent efficacy of the counterinsurgency and favorable short-term results, it is essential to consider that the outcomes of the Russian intervention in Syria may change over time.

SYNERGISTIC AUTHORITARIAN APPROACHES TO COUNTERINSURGENCY

Permissive political and strategic cultures allow Russia and Syria to take authoritarian approaches to counterinsurgency campaigns. Many authoritarian regimes are largely unburdened

by domestic and international judgement, enabling them to jettison concerns about appropriate use of force, legal norms, and political approval. The authoritarian approach permits counterinsurgents to attempt to resolve the wicked problems of insurgency with preponderant violence and cruelty.¹ Authoritarian synergy facilitated effective cooperation between Damascus and Moscow following Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War.

Before and after Russian intervention, counterinsurgent forces used violence expressly to increase the costs for civilians supporting the insurgency or even simply living in rebel-controlled areas.² The continuity of violence against civilians demonstrates the operational freedom enjoyed by authoritarian regimes waging counterinsurgency. As leaders of two of the most authoritarian countries in the world,³ Assad and Russian President Vladimir Putin were generally free to prosecute counterinsurgency as they saw fit. Although Assad espoused population-centric rhetoric about winning hearts and minds in 2015,⁴ his words were duplicitous. Terrorizing, coercing, and massacring civilians remained integral to the counterinsurgency despite strategic shifts and evolutions in battlefield dynamics throughout the war.

Applying extreme violence against contested and insurgent-held areas has defined Syria's approach to counterinsurgency for decades. The regime kills rebel fighters and coerces the population to degrade bases of insurgent support and demonstrate its omnipotence. Both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad used sheer brutality to displace Syrians living in rebel-held areas during their respective campaigns against the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s and opposition insurgents at the beginning of the Syrian Civil War.⁵

Brutalizing combatants and civilians alike remained the guiding principle of the younger Assad's approach to counterinsurgency even as his strategy evolved throughout the conflict.⁶ The

¹ "Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency", *United States Central Intelligence Agency*, 2012: 16, <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=713599>

² Seth Jones, "Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria: Will It Be a Pyrrhic Victory?", *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 12, no. 9 (October 2019), <https://ctc.usma.edu/russias-battlefield-success-syria-will-pyrrhic-victory/>

³ "Countries and Territories", Freedom House, accessed August 12, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

⁴ Bashar al-Assad, "Syria's President Speaks: A Conversation With Bashar Al-Assad", *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 2 (2015): 64, www.jstor.org/stable/24483482.

⁵ Joseph Holliday, "The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War", *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report 8 (March 2013): 10-19, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/TheAssadRegime-web.pdf>

⁶ Christopher Kozak, "An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria", *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report 26 (April 2015): 11-29, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/An%20Army%20in%20All%20Corners%20by%20Chris%20Kozak%201.pdf>

regime's proclivity for indirect fire from massed artillery and restrained deployment of ground troops often decimated the population along with insurgents in urban areas.⁷ In later years, the regime intentionally employed a myriad of coercive means against its own people to force civilians from rebel-held zones.⁸ Assad intentionally bombed bakeries, hospitals, and schools to prevent insurgents from providing public services, drive Syrian civilians from rebel territory, and ultimately diminish popular support for opposition groups.

Russian counterinsurgency also generally shuns population-centric principles. Inherited from the Soviet approach to counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and honed during the Chechen Wars, the modern Russian approach relies heavily on air and artillery assets to inflict maximum suffering on rebels and local populations while limiting the exposure of infantry and mechanized units to close-quarter combat.⁹ In Afghanistan, the Soviets sought to eliminate support for the Mujahedin insurgents by punishing rural Afghans. Soviet forces used violence as a tool of reprisal against populations suspected of supporting insurgents and intentionally destroyed economic and physical infrastructure in many communities across the country. The Afghan population suffered immensely, as Soviet counterinsurgency operations directly and indirectly killed over one million people and displaced over three million.¹⁰

Russia took a similar approach while waging counterinsurgency in Chechnya. During the Second Chechen War, Russian forces often encircled rebel-held areas before employing prolonged artillery bombardments to pound the enemy into surrender.¹¹ The Russians deployed overwhelming firepower against rebel positions during combat in Grozny and Komsomolskoye in 2000, and displayed little regard for killing or displacing civilians or destroying infrastructure. Both cities were depopulated and virtually obliterated during the fighting.¹² While the Russians took some steps to limit non-combatant attrition,¹³ estimates still place the number of Chechen civilian casualties from 1994-2004 as high as 250,000 with around 300,000 more displaced. In

⁷ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 19-26.

⁸ Kozak, "An Army in All Corners", *Institute for the Study of War*: 11.

⁹ Olga Oliker, "Return to Grozny: 1999-2000", in *Russia's Chechen Wars 1994-2000: Lessons from Urban Combat* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), 42, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1289/MR1289.ch3.pdf

¹⁰ Lasha Tchantouridzé, "Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan: Comparing Canadian and Soviet efforts," *International Journal* 68, No. 2 (June 2013): 334. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24709484>

¹¹ Oliker, "Return to Grozny", in *Russia's Chechen Wars*, 57-58.

¹² Oliker, "Return to Grozny", in *Russia's Chechen Wars*, 79.

¹³ Oliker, "Return to Grozny", in *Russia's Chechen Wars*, 43, 58.

fact, Russian forces were widely reported to have used cluster munitions and other banned weapons in populated areas.¹⁴

RUSSIAN AND SYRIAN COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGIES

The similar Russian and Syrian approaches to counterinsurgency allowed Assad to maintain his strategy following Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War. Since the earliest days of the insurgency, the regime had followed the classic Syrian approach by pairing conventional military operations with punishment of populations in contested areas. Assad's selective deployment of politically loyal military units, cultivation of supportive militia groups, and use of armored forces and indirect fire to clear and hold rebel population centers in 2011 and 2012 reflect the foundational elements of his father's strategy against the Muslim Brotherhood during the uprising from 1979 to 1982.¹⁵ During this campaign, the elder Assad relied on an Alawite-majority force while entrusting family members and close associates with military command to prevent defections. Hafez also cultivated a large and loyal paramilitary network, increasing the size of the counterinsurgency's fighting force and helping to counter the Muslim Brotherhood across the country. The regime used its loyal professional and militia forces to systematically clear insurgents from cities and hold on to the locality, but also displayed a propensity for using artillery to level urban areas when facing determined resistance. Notably, regime forces heavily bombarded Hama during the siege in 1982, killing many civilians and destroying much of the historic old city before retaking it.¹⁶

While Hafez decisively put down the Muslim Brotherhood, Bashar failed to reconcile the limitations of his available forces with his preferred strategic approach as the Syrian Civil War dragged on. Like his father, the younger Assad relied heavily on Alawites to form the core of the counterinsurgency, preventing mass defection but constraining the regime to using as little as one-third of its total military force in operations against insurgents.¹⁷ It is difficult to ascertain the effect of combat attrition on regime forces because the government stopped publishing official figures at the end of 2012. However, the Syrian Arab Army had already suffered nearly 8,000

¹⁴ Joss Meakins, "The Other Side of the COIN: The Russians in Chechnya", *Small Wars Journal*, January 13, 2017, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrn/art/the-other-side-of-the-coin-the-russians-in-chechnya>

¹⁵ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 10-19.

¹⁶ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 10-12.

¹⁷ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 14-15.

soldiers killed and an additional 30,500 wounded at that time, representing a sizable portion of Assad's already reduced military.¹⁸

Selective deployment and combat attrition helped give loyalist militias prominent roles in the counterinsurgency, as Assad attempted to augment his limited professional combat forces with paramilitary fighters. This strategy decentralized the regime's control over counterinsurgent forces. As militias became enmeshed with army units, Assad sought to enhance operational capacity by empowering junior officers and militia commanders to pursue broad strategic goals independent of the Syrian Arab Army's chain of command.¹⁹ Some militia groups used their operational freedom to massacre Sunni civilians.²⁰

Assad's selective deployment of Syrian Arab Army units hindered the counterinsurgency's ability to effectively execute clear and hold operations. Like his father, Assad became reliant on artillery and airpower to clear insurgents from population centers. This approach limited regime casualties but ultimately led to the large-scale destruction and depopulation of many urban zones.²¹ In concert with militia atrocities, the regime's efforts to conduct clear and hold operations through air and artillery strikes contributed to the escalation of the insurgency.²² Mass displacement from regime bombardments and paramilitary brutality compounded popular grievances, helped spread localized discontent across a greater geographic area, and prevented regime forces from establishing effective government control over the population. Opposition and jihadist insurgent groups benefitted from the regime's limited military capacity and violence against civilians to gain territory and build support.²³

Early in 2015, Assad changed the counterinsurgency's strategy by replacing large maneuver operations against insurgents in population centers with more judicious campaigns designed to establish and maintain the regime's presence in key cities and the border areas. This new "army in all corners" strategy sought to preserve Syria's territorial integrity, assert regime control over the population, and project an image of political legitimacy domestically and internationally.²⁴ Moreover, the strategic shift indicated Assad's acknowledgement of the

¹⁸ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 28-29.

¹⁹ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 29.

²⁰ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 21.

²¹ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 19-20.

²² Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 9-10.

²³ "Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State", *International Crisis Group*, March 14, 2016, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state>

²⁴ Kozak, "An Army in All Corners", *Institute for the Study of War*: 10-11.

inevitability of a prolonged and difficult struggle for survival. The regime's undermanned forces had become concentrated in the country's south and west,²⁵ facilitating the emergence of extremist factions—including the Islamic State—which exploited the chaos to sweep through much of the country and push the regime to the brink by the end of 2014. Assad had even announced in early 2015 that a political resolution was necessary to conclude the conflict and that he was amenable to dialogue with insurgents.²⁶ The “army and all corners” strategy therefore represented a pragmatic alignment of ways and means to garner more favorable conditions for a political settlement.

Contemporaneously, Assad began working to rationalize his claims of political legitimacy and excuse his increasingly brutal tactics to the international community by casting Syria's insurgent movements as elements of a jihadist constellation and framing the counterinsurgency as a campaign against transnational terrorist groups. His efforts were effective, as Russia soon publicly announced military support for the regime while the discourse in the United States began to begrudgingly paint Assad favorably when contrasted with the Islamic State and al Qaeda affiliates.²⁷

Assad did not replace the “army in all corners” strategy upon the arrival of Russian forces in Syria in 2015. Russia's primary objective was not the immediate reconquest of the country, but rather to support Assad's campaigns to recapture and defend key areas by providing the capabilities needed to gradually turn the tide in the regime's favor.²⁸ Moscow had assessed that ensuring Assad's survival required military intervention and that a potential collapse would adversely affect Russian security interests. Given the unfavorable battlefield dynamics in 2015 and string of diplomatic failures, Russian planners deemed military intervention to be the only feasible resolution.²⁹ Ostensibly to roll back the rampant Islamic State, Russian forces formally

²⁵ Holliday, “The Assad Regime”, *Institute for the Study of War*: 10.

²⁶ Al-Assad, “Syria's President Speaks”, *Foreign Affairs*.

²⁷ Kozak, “An Army in All Corners”, *Institute for the Study of War*: 9.

²⁸ Joseph Daher, “Three years later: the evolution of Russia's military intervention in Syria”, *Atlantic Council*, September 27, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/three-years-later-the-evolution-of-russia-s-military-intervention-in-syria/>

²⁹ Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019), 12, <https://doi.org/10.7249/RR3180>

entered the conflict to brace Assad's regime and help expand his control over Syria's population and territory.³⁰

Russia's intervention assured Assad's survival by bolstering the counterinsurgency's capabilities. Russian air assets and special forces augmented the Syrian Arab Army and loyal militia groups, which still served as the counterinsurgency's primary maneuver forces.³¹ Almost immediately, Russian aircraft began targeting civilians to forcibly depopulate rebel-held areas, reportedly launching 1,292 combat flights against 1,623 targets in October 2015.³²

Despite Moscow's assertions that the intervention sought to destroy terrorist organizations in Syria, limited action against the Islamic State suggests that the counterinsurgents preferred to target more moderate opposition groups to reduce the number of politically viable competitors to the regime. Some reports indicate that Russian aircraft struck the Islamic State on just 26% of missions in the first quarter of 2016 and on just 17% of missions by the third quarter of that same year.³³ Instead, the counterinsurgency used Russian airpower to strike opposition positions in western Syria, reportedly targeting rebels around Aleppo, Idlib, and Homs more frequently than the Islamic State in Deir ez-Zor, even in the immediate wake of the ceasefire that began on February 27, 2016.³⁴ Human Rights Watch also accused the counterinsurgency of war crimes after airstrikes in Aleppo killed over 440 civilians in September and October 2016.³⁵

The Russian military presence in Syria also shielded the regime from unilateral military intervention by foreign powers, who worried about escalation and potential confrontation with Russian forces.³⁶ Safe from meaningful Western reprisal, Assad increased his barbarism by

³⁰ Joseph Daher, "Three years later: the evolution of Russia's military intervention in Syria", *Atlantic Council*, September 27, 2018, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/three-years-later-the-evolution-of-russia-s-military-intervention-in-syria/>

³¹ Jones, "Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria", *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*.

³² Jones, "Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria", *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*.

³³ Daher, "Three years later", *Atlantic Council*.

³⁴ Genevieve Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria From February 17 - 28, 2016: Pre And Post Cessation of Hostilities," *Institute for the Study of War*, February 29, 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-airstrikes-syria-february-17-28-2016-pre-and-post-cessation-hostilities>

³⁵ "Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo," *Human Rights Watch*, December 1, 2016, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1U90RYv1VINfNJVT82cayKMF9IHTM-kEAR6HRtNdd0t8/edit>

³⁶ Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, "Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 20, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/20/collision-avoidance-lessons-of-u.s.-and-russian-operations-in-syria-pub-78571>

unleashing cluster bombs, incendiary munitions, and poison gas upon Syrian civilians while targeting bakeries, hospitals, and schools.³⁷

Although Russian intervention did not substantively alter Assad's strategic approach to the war between 2015 and 2017, it gave him the necessary capabilities and security to ramp up the degradation of insurgent groups and coercion of civilian populations living under rebel control. Even by early 2016, Russian officials were pleased with the outcomes, believing the intervention had helped the regime gain control over more of Syria's territory and population at relatively minimal cost in Russian blood and treasure.³⁸

RUSSIAN AND SYRIAN COUNTERINSURGENCY TACTICS

Congruent Russian and Syrian approaches to counterinsurgency allowed for tactical continuity following Russian intervention. Assad's forces bombarded populated areas independent of operations against insurgents before and after the implementation of the "army in all corners" strategy. The counterinsurgency maintained the tactic after Russian intervention to forcibly displace civilians living under insurgent control.

Assad's use of massed artillery against populated areas in rebel-held zones dates back to the 2012 siege of Homs, when regime forces encircled and bombarded the city for a month before sending infantry to systematically clear the remains.³⁹ Although pairing indirect fire from massed artillery with ground maneuvers brought operational success in the war's early stages, Assad's forces revised their tactical approach after troop deficiencies ultimately voided the viability of the initial clear-and-hold strategy.⁴⁰ After first taking Homs in 2012, dwindling personnel led the regime to bombard civilians in opposition territory even though no ground troops were available to assault and occupy the zone.⁴¹

Assad has targeted civilians with great effect, employing cluster bombs, barrel bombs, and surface-to-surface ballistic missiles against populated insurgent territory, and specifically against nodes of infrastructure, to undermine insurgents' ability to provide essential goods and

³⁷ Jones, "Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria", *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*.

³⁸ Andrew Roth, "After four months, Russia's campaign in Syria is proving successful for Moscow", *The Washington Post*, February 3, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/after-four-months-russias-campaign-in-syria-is-proving-successful-for-moscow/2016/02/02/7a65d676-9dd0-11e5-9ad2-568d814bbf3b_story.html

³⁹ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 15-16.

⁴⁰ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 16.

⁴¹ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 20.

services.⁴² As large maneuver operations decreased under the more restrained “army in all corners” strategy, tactics designed to forcibly depopulate insurgent territory assumed greater prominence. In concert with targeted siege-and-starve operations and the selective use of chemical weapons, the regime’s bombing of civilians in insurgent-held areas contributed to an enormous increase in civilian suffering.

Estimates of the number of displaced Syrians jumped from close to six-million in early 2013 to 11.5 million just over two years later. Of the 220,000 Syrians estimated to have been killed by early 2015, at least 76,000 were killed in 2014 alone.⁴³ The forced depopulation of insurgent territory helped the regime establish control over perhaps as much as 72% of Syria’s remaining population by 2015, demonstrating progress towards Assad’s strategic goals of dominating Syria’s human terrain and projecting political legitimacy by the time Russia intervened.⁴⁴

Russian intervention enhanced the effectiveness of the counterinsurgency’s tactics by providing greater capabilities for the recapture and defense of key locations and strikes against civilians in rebel-held areas. The first notable tactical improvement for the counterinsurgency was the superior coordination with fire support stemming from communication between Russian specialists embedded with regime forces and an integration center headquartered at Khmeimim Air Base near Latakia.⁴⁵

Russian-led combined arms operations became integral to the counterinsurgency’s efforts to win back territory. Russian specialists notably exploited human and signals intelligence and satellite imagery to direct a bombing campaign in support of regime ground forces battling to encircle Aleppo in mid-2016. Once the city had been surrounded, counterinsurgent airstrikes systematically destroyed rebel positions until resistance collapsed and the regime reclaimed the zone.⁴⁶ Throughout 2017, Russian and Syrian air assets provided crucial tactical support for Syrian ground forces fighting to recapture cities including Homs from opposition rebels and Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor from the Islamic State.⁴⁷

⁴² Holliday, “The Assad Regime”, *Institute for the Study of War*: 24-25.

⁴³ Martin Hartberg, Dominic Bowen and Daniel Gorevan, “Failing Syria: Assessing the impact of UN Security Council resolutions in protecting and assisting civilians in Syria”, *Oxfam*, March 2015, 7, <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/346522/bp-failing-syria-unsc-resolution-120315-en.pdf;jsessionid=119851D9EF90066ADA49564C1D567B5B?sequence=1>

⁴⁴ Kozak, “An Army in All Corners”, *Institute for the Study of War*: 10-11.

⁴⁵ Jones, “Russia’s Battlefield Success in Syria”, *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*.

⁴⁶ Jones, “Russia’s Battlefield Success in Syria”, *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*.

⁴⁷ Jones, “Russia’s Battlefield Success in Syria”, *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*.

The second key tactical improvement following Russian intervention was the counterinsurgency's enhanced capabilities when targeting civilians in rebel-held areas. While Russia's intervention did not introduce new tactics for punishing civilians (regime hospital bombings date back to 2011, while Assad's forces killed over 1,400 Syrians with sarin gas around Ghouta in 2013),⁴⁸ Russian capabilities and international political clout facilitated more brazen and efficient employment of the regime's brutality to make rebel-held areas essentially uninhabitable.

Although Moscow fervently denies such claims, international sources verified 172 attacks on hospitals or other medical facilities in the second half of 2016, 73 of which occurred in insurgent-controlled areas of Aleppo as counterinsurgent forces battled to reclaim it.⁴⁹ Russian air superiority also enabled the regime's use of sarin gas against civilians, notably in the town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province in April 2017.⁵⁰

OPERATIONAL AND TACTICAL SUCCESS

Throughout 2014 and much of 2015, the regime struggled at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels, leading observers—including analysts in Moscow—to assess that Assad faced a serious threat of defeat.⁵¹ The troop deficiencies that unraveled Assad's initial clear-and-hold strategy had also enabled the emergence of more numerous and powerful rebel factions—most notably the Islamic State—which exploited the chaos and scant government presence in much of the country to grow into serious challengers throughout 2014.⁵² Early the following year, the Islamic State conquered Palmyra while an extremist coalition led by Jabhat al-Nusra commenced an offensive in the country's northwest. The head of Russia's General Staff assessed that Assad's regime controlled just 10% of Syrian territory in 2015 and was just months away from falling to the Islamic State.⁵³ While that claim may be dubious, it demonstrates Russia's belief that Assad was at best navigating dangerous waters in the face of several strong insurgent movements.

Russian intervention helped turn the operational and tactical tides by providing counterinsurgent forces more capable means to degrade insurgent fighters and supportive

⁴⁸ Maksymilian Czuperski et al., "Breaking Aleppo", *Atlantic Council*, February 2017, <https://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/breakingaleppo/hospital-attacks/>; Jones, "Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria", *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*.

⁴⁹ Czuperski et al., "Breaking Aleppo", *Atlantic Council*.

⁵⁰ Jones, "Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria", *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*.

⁵¹ Charap et al., *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, 4.

⁵² Kozak, "An Army in All Corners", *Institute for the Study of War*: 10-11.

⁵³ Charap et al., *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, 4.

populations. In the short-term, the intentional targeting of civilians often effectively separated the population from the insurgents either by forcibly depopulating the rebel-held zones or even turning Syrians against the rebels, who they blamed for their suffering at the hands of the regime.⁵⁴ Russian military and logistical capabilities also improved the counterinsurgency's combined arms operations by deploying more air assets and facilitating more effective communication between air and ground forces.⁵⁵

Tactical and operational success defined the period of Russian intervention and made it a vital phase of the Syrian counterinsurgency. Superior capabilities and logistics improved tactics and operational art and steadied the regime during its nadir in 2015. Tactical improvements empowered a string of operational triumphs in subsequent years, including the recapture of Aleppo, Homs, Palmyra, and Deir ez-Zor, reducing opposition rebel territory to Idlib and a few small pockets in the west while virtually eradicating the Islamic State's territory. By 2017, Russian support had helped Assad reassert himself as Syria's preeminent political leader. Assad's political longevity seemed assured by the end of 2020 largely because the Russians backed the counterinsurgency through perhaps the most complex and violent years of the conflict.

However, Russian intervention was not solely responsible for the counterinsurgency's successes. Several antecedent conditions existing in Syria between 2014 and 2020 also contributed to the result. First, the U.S.-led coalition and U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) shouldered substantial responsibility in the campaign against the Islamic State, which was perhaps Assad's greatest threat at the time of Russian intervention. Although Assad excoriated coalition airstrikes against the Islamic State in Syria, the regime used the coalition's commitment to reallocate significant air assets deployed against Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor to strike rebel positions and civilians in Idlib, Daraa, and Hama.⁵⁶

Second, many of the opposition's international backers began to sever ties as the regime gained momentum throughout 2017. That year, the United States canceled a Central Intelligence Agency program which had supported opposition insurgent groups against Assad since 2013.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Holliday, "The Assad Regime", *Institute for the Study of War*: 20.

⁵⁵ Jones, "Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria", *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*.

⁵⁶ Kozak, "An Army in All Corners", *Institute for the Study of War*: 11, 21.

⁵⁷ John Walcott, "Trump ends CIA arms support for anti-Assad Syria rebels: U.S. officials", *Reuters*, July 19, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-syria/trump-ends-cia-arms-support-for-anti-assad-syria-rebels-u-s-officials-idUSKBN1A42KC>

Jordan also began pressuring Syrian rebels to relinquish the vital Nasib border crossing, which they had held since 2015.⁵⁸

Finally, the insurgency in Syria was a splintered patchwork of diverse groups with differing objectives. The general lack of coordination and centralization between rebel elements led to fighting between groups and allowed the counterinsurgency to more effectively isolate and destroy insurgents.⁵⁹ While these conditions should not eclipse the significance of the tactical and operational successes which followed Russian intervention, their importance should be recognized in the context of the counterinsurgency environment.

APPROACH ALIGNMENT AND PATRON-CLIENT POLITICS

Russia's successful intervention in the Syrian Civil War demonstrates the importance of alignment between host and expeditionary nations' counterinsurgency approaches for both patron-client politics and campaign outcomes. By embracing authoritarian approaches to counterinsurgency, Russia—the patron—and Syria—the client—avoided many of the pitfalls that can compromise counterinsurgency alliances. As a result, approach alignment and effective patron-client politics proved vital to the strategic, operational, and tactical cooperation that yielded favorable short-term results for Assad's regime.

Misaligned counterinsurgency approaches can prevent even the most capable expeditionary powers from helping an allied host government to wage effective counterinsurgency. Although clients and patrons may broadly share the goal of defeating an insurgency, they can still possess fundamentally different interests and may not necessarily have consensus on their approach. King's College London's Walter Ladwig III relates the issue of patron-client politics in counterinsurgency to the classic principal-agent problem: divergent priorities can create friction between partners.⁶⁰ Disparate approaches to waging counterinsurgency can damage patron-client relations and inhibit strategic, operational, and tactical cooperation.

⁵⁸ Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Syrian rebels resist Jordan pressure to hand over border crossing," *Reuters*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jordan/syrian-rebels-resist-jordan-pressure-to-hand-over-border-crossing-idUSKBN1CA116>

⁵⁹ Jones, "Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria," *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*.

⁶⁰ Walter C. Ladwig III, "Influencing Clients in Counterinsurgency: U.S. Involvement in El Salvador's Civil War, 1979–92," *International Security* 41, No. 1 (Summer 2016): 102, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_0025

Recent American counterinsurgency expeditions demonstrate the potentially deleterious effects of misaligned approaches and ineffective patron-client politics in counterinsurgency alliances. Approach alignment is often overlooked or taken for granted in American expeditionary counterinsurgency planning.⁶¹ As a result, the United States has seen several expeditionary counterinsurgency endeavors undermined by the divergent priorities and illiberal tendencies of the host government.

In American doctrine, expeditionary counterinsurgency operations work to confer legitimacy to the host government by preparing it to meet basic local expectations for acceptable governance.⁶² However, host governments' approaches and priorities often differ from Washington's, leading to ineffective patron-client politics and impeding the United States' expeditionary counterinsurgency efforts. Ladwig III notes that host governments in counterinsurgency warfare tend to have certain unscrupulous aspects which often fueled the insurgency in the first place.⁶³ Retired U.S. Marine Colonel T.X. Hammes contends that the United States' insistence upon population-centric approaches to counterinsurgency can cause friction with host governments which often democratize slowly and may prefer more authoritarian measures during counterinsurgency campaigns.⁶⁴ In Iraq, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's sectarianism marginalized many Iraqi Sunni, which helped galvanize support for Sunni insurgencies like the Islamic State. Likewise, Afghan President Hamid Karzai's cronyism largely alienated Afghanistan's population from the counterinsurgency, diminishing popular support.⁶⁵ In both countries, misaligned approaches and priorities meant the counterinsurgency could not confer legitimacy to the host government, and thus could not achieve its strategic objectives.

In contrast to the United States' recent expeditionary experiences, congruent Russian and Syrian approaches to counterinsurgency helped the allies largely avoid the principal-agent problem, foster effective patron-client politics, and achieve successful results in the Syrian Civil War. The two countries had few reservations about strategies of punishment, purposefully unleashing conventional and banned weapons against non-combatants to eliminate the

⁶¹ Ladwig III, "Influencing Clients in Counterinsurgency" *International Security*, 101-102.

⁶² Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Counterinsurgency*, Joint Publication 3-24 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018), III-2, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_24pa.pdf

⁶³ Ladwig III, "Influencing Clients in Counterinsurgency" *International Security*, 103-104.

⁶⁴ T.X. Hammes, "The Future of Counterinsurgency," *Orbis* 54, No. 4 (Autumn 2012): 583-585, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2012.08.004>

⁶⁵ Ladwig III, "Influencing Clients in Counterinsurgency" *International Security*, 102.

insurgents' sources of support. Effective patron-client politics facilitated Russian integration into Assad's "army in all corners" strategy and allowed Russia to maintain a light footprint throughout its intervention. The counterinsurgency used preponderant aerial and artillery force to brutally demonstrate that the rebels could not provide effective security for the people, helping to reestablish Assad's omnipotent image in the eyes of the population. The improvements in capabilities also led to tactical and operational successes which expanded Assad's control over Syria's population and territory. As a result, even fervent supporters of political opposition begrudgingly accepted Assad's leadership, if only as a means of survival.⁶⁶

LINGERING STRATEGIC QUESTIONS

The outcomes at the strategic level are more ambiguous for the counterinsurgency. At first glance, operational and tactical success had mostly achieved the aims of the "army in all corners" strategy. The regime ended 2017 in control of the cities of Aleppo in the northwest and Qamishli in the northeast and within striking distance of Daraa in the southwest and Abu Kamal in the east.⁶⁷

However, two notable challenges complicate assessment of the counterinsurgency's strategic results. First, the SDF's emergence as a domestic rival and Turkey's entrance into the conflict complicated Assad's plans to regain control of Syria. While Assad was focused primarily in the west, the SDF had established control over northeast Syria—Qamishli being the notable exception—and had taken Raqqa and Syria's largest oil field during the campaign against the Islamic State.⁶⁸ Favoring decentralized governance, the predominantly Kurdish SDF proved unwilling to relinquish the *de facto* autonomy it had claimed, even when facing the threat of conflict with the regime.⁶⁹ Hundreds of Turkish soldiers had also entered Syrian territory in late 2017 to establish a buffer along the border zone in Idlib.⁷⁰ The involvement of powerful foreign states with diverse interests prevented Assad from merely pursuing further military action and forced another protraction in the conflict.

⁶⁶ Ben Hubbard, "Syrian War Drags On, but Assad's Future Looks as Secure as Ever", *The New York Times*, September 25, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/25/world/middleeast/syria-assad-war.html?_r=0

⁶⁷ Sana Sekkarie, "Syria Situation Report: October 10 - 24, 2017", *Institute for the Study of War*, October 2017, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%20SITREP%2010%20-%2024%20OCT%20%28002%29_1.pdf

⁶⁸ Sekkarie, "Syria Situation Report", *Institute for the Study of War*.

⁶⁹ Alexander Bick, "Syria is Sliding Towards Partition", *War on the Rocks*, November 2, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/syria-is-sliding-towards-partition/>

⁷⁰ Sekkarie, "Syria Situation Report", *Institute for the Study of War*.

Second, the long-term effects of Assad's brutality against civilians had transformed Syria into a fertile recruiting ground for extremist groups and opposition insurgencies.⁷¹ The partnership with Russia—an infamous adversary of Islamist movements—further reduced the number of reconcilable rebels with whom the regime could hope to reach a political settlement.⁷² The authoritarian approach to counterinsurgency and intentional slaughter of the population undoubtedly yielded tactical, operational, and even short-term strategic advantages while likely incurring long-term strategic costs. Such a tradeoff is common for counterinsurgents employing an authoritarian approach, as the reliance on coercion often precludes consideration of root causes and appropriate remedies while obfuscating the future price of brutality.⁷³

SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM PROSPECTS FOR INSURGENCY IN SYRIA

The counterinsurgents' authoritarian approach prioritized short-term stability over long-term sustainability. In the short-term, there can be little question that Russian intervention helped the counterinsurgency decimate opposition and extremist insurgents alike. The opposition's loss of Aleppo and Homs and the Islamic State's loss of Palmyra and Deir ez-Zor left the insurgent groups with control over just a small share of Syria's population. Counterinsurgency scholar David Galula famously opined that insurgency is a war for the population,⁷⁴ and thus through forced displacement and improved tactical effectiveness, Assad and Russia managed to deprive the rebels of their center of gravity. As a result, Russian intervention may have catalyzed the inexorable decline of this iteration of opposition and extremist insurgents in Syria.

The short-term success of Assad's authoritarian campaign is also notable because it demonstrates the potential efficacy of violent counterinsurgency while challenging the tenants of the oft-lauded population-centric approach. Russian and Syrian achievements support some scholarly arguments that brutality is central to effective counterinsurgency. International security scholar Jacqueline Hazelton notably contends that deliberate violence against civilians can be

⁷¹ Kozak, "An Army in All Corners", *Institute for the Study of War*: 5.

⁷² Charles Lister, "Russia's intervention in Syria: Protracting an already endless conflict", *Brookings*, October 21, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/russias-intervention-in-syria-protracting-an-already-endless-conflict/>

⁷³ Yuri Zhukov, "Examining the Authoritarian Model of Counter-insurgency: The Soviet Campaign Against the Ukrainian Insurgent Army", *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 18, no. 3 (September 2007): 458-459, https://scholar.harvard.edu/zhukov/files/2007_Zhukov_SWI.pdf

⁷⁴ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, foreword by John A. Nagl (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 4.

vital for governments seeking to defeat insurgencies.⁷⁵ By contrast, population-centric orthodoxy typically seeks to ameliorate the conditions that lead people to take up arms against their government.⁷⁶ Assad's campaign suggests that such efforts may be needless. While it is almost certain that the regime will continue brutalizing Syrian civilians while waging counterinsurgency, future studies could assess the pervasiveness of authoritarian approaches globally, as governments seek short-term resolutions to insurgencies instead of long campaigns to establish human security, political participation, and economic vitality.

The long-term prospects for Syria's insurgents are more ambiguous precisely because the counterinsurgency focused on punishing and coercing civilians, rather than addressing root causes. Though many Arab Spring protesters in Syria did not initially call for Assad's ouster, the regime did not attempt to treat root causes by meeting demands for political and economic reforms. Instead, Assad's violent response to the demonstrations in 2011 sparked outright rebellion, facilitated easier recruitment for opposition insurgent groups, and accelerated extremist proselytization. The regime's subsequent reliance on Alawites and other Shia to staff the military entrenched sectarian divides that further alienated the Sunni majority, while the intentional slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Syrians ensures many will never accept a social contract with Assad.⁷⁷ Though the insurgents lost most of the cities, tens of thousands of internally displaced Syrians remain in refugee camps or detention centers with few prospects for political assimilation.⁷⁸

Assad's neglect of Syria's economic privation offers another grievance which insurgent movements could exploit in the future. Although the regime moved swiftly to rebuild power grids and attract foreign investment as it won back territory in 2017,⁷⁹ the United Nations estimated that 83% of Syrians lived below the poverty line two years later.⁸⁰ Rampant poverty is compounded by high inflation, which has reached historic levels. At points during 2020, the

⁷⁵ Jacqueline L. Hazelton, "The 'Hearts and Minds' Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare," *International Security* 42, no.1 (Summer 2017): 81.

⁷⁶ "Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency", *Central Intelligence Agency*: 16.

⁷⁷ "Exploiting Disorder", *International Crisis Group*.

⁷⁸ Jones, "Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria", *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel*.

⁷⁹ Alexander Bick, "Syria is Sliding Towards Partition", *War on the Rocks*, November 2, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/syria-is-sliding-towards-partition/>

⁸⁰ "United Nations calls for sustained support to Syrians and the region ahead of Brussels conference", *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/cy/2019/03/13/united-nations-calls-for-sustained-support-to-syrians-and-the-region-ahead-of-brussels-conference/#:~:text=An%20estimated%2083%20percent%20of,or%20lack%20of%20sustained%20livelihods>

average Syrian could only afford just over two watermelons with one month's wages.⁸¹ Across regime-held territory, Syrians wait in line for diminishing amounts of increasingly expensive subsidized bread.⁸²

Although successful Russian and Syrian counterinsurgency cooperation and Assad's brutality may have suppressed insurgents in the short-term, the Syrians living in informal settlements and experiencing crushing poverty are ripe for incipient opposition and extremist ideas. The Islamic State's massacre of nearly 40 regime soldiers near Deir ez-Zor on December 30, 2020 demonstrates the lingering will and capacity of Syria's insurgents.⁸³ Despite tactical and operational success following Russian intervention, Assad's long-term position is far from unassailable.

⁸¹ Danny Makki, "Rampant inflation adds to Syria's economic turmoil", *Middle East Institute*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/rampant-inflation-adds-syrias-economic-turmoil>

⁸² Sarah Dadouch, "Syria's bread lines are so long that children have to skip school to wait in them," *The Washington Post*, December 26, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syria-economy-bread-wheat-crisis/2020/12/24/ed6a2d72-3e55-11eb-b58b-1623f6267960_story.html

⁸³ Bethan McKernan, "Syria: dozens killed in Isis bus attack," *The Guardian*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/31/syria-dozens-killed-in-isis-bus-attack>