



## NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

### STRATEGIC TRENDS

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#### **The effects of Russia's Military intervention in Syria and on the Jihadist world**

Russia's military intervention in Syria has introduced a new dynamic into an already complex conflict. It is clear that, since the beginning of the Russian air strikes, Putin's priorities in Syria are different from those of the International Coalition because Russia's military operation prevents the fall of Assad's regime. After six weeks of operations, pro-regime forces have made small territorial gains north of Homs, south of Aleppo, and in the Hama's Shal al-Ghab region. The Russians have also assisted ground forces in retaking territory from ISIS as far east as Kweirs Airport.

Despite Russia's efforts, ground forces composed of the Syrian Army, Hezbollah and Iranian military personnel, did not achieve the victories one might have expected. There are many factors that could explain this outcome, but we have to consider that local reports and US official statements indicate that the Russian airstrikes have primarily targeted Syrian opposition groups in areas far from ISIS. Syrian opposition factions will likely seek the protection of strong partners in the fight against the regime and its allies and, at the moment, these partners are al-Nusra (Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate) and Ahrar al-Sham.

This trend could increase al-Qaeda's influence in Syria and thus will likely benefit directly from Russia's military intervention, by presenting itself as fighting a second "jihad" against Russia. This has been confirmed by some Free Syrian Army leaders who claim that Syria will become another Afghanistan.

In fact, one of the reasons for the minimal territorial gains of the pro-Assad regime forces, so far, is the use of US BGM-71 TOW anti-tank guided missiles used by Free Syrian Army rebels. Since the Russian intervention, the use of this weapon on the battlefield has increased by 850%. Furthermore, it is possible that man-portable air-defence systems (MANPADS) may soon be sent to Syria to counter Russian aircraft.

It is probably too early to say if there is an emerging a global “jihad” against Russia, but there are some important indicators that could support this scenario. The Islamic State’s offshoot in Egypt has claimed responsibility for downing the Russian charter plane A321 that broke up over the Sinai Peninsula on the 31st of October 2015, killing all 224 people onboard.

Even if the credibility of the claim by the Islamic State branch remains unconfirmed, White House officials said that Russia’s intervention in Syria will backfire badly on Moscow and possibly spark a wave of terrorist attacks, drawing comparisons with the disastrous Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Unlike that decade, however, Russia cannot assume that it will remain isolated from a backlash against it and that the conflict will be confined to Syria. A case in point is the release of a video in which ISIS calls for attacks on Russia in response to the latter’s bombings in Syria.

This video appeared on social media around the same week of the November 12 terrorist attacks in Beirut and the attacks in Paris, both of which were claimed by ISIS. This threat could probably have some connection with the many fighters of Russians nationality who have joined the Islamic State. In fact, in February 2015, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) said that some 1.700 had travelled to Syria to join the Islamic State. That was before Russia sent warplanes, along with artillery and tanks, to support Assad’s regime. Now Chechen and other Russian-speaking volunteers in Syria are vowing to attack Moscow’s troops and the former’s leaders are calling for the targeting of civilians in Russia.

We can conclude that if the Russian military intervention in Syria is perceived as a “holy war” against the Sunni community, the consequences will be an increase in terrorist attacks by foreign fighters against Russia and its interests around the world.