

THE INFLUENCE OF RUSSIAN MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN THE WAR IN SYRIA

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Abstract

The Russian military intervention in Syria, conducted between September 2015 and March 2016, was one of the crucial moments in the Middle East conflict which has evolved since 2011. It not only prevented the collapse of the regime of Bashar al-Assad but also enabled the initiative to be taken by the Syrian Arab Army. The simultaneous conducting of two military operations by the Russian army, i.e. the Russian involvement in both Ukraine and the Middle East, requires thorough investigations into the course of these operations. Such investigations may provide answers to a number of questions which appear of key importance to Poland, e.g., regarding Russia's logistic and technological abilities to conduct military operations outside its territory, the military outcomes of the Russian intervention, and the potential social opposition to the human losses sustained by Russia as a result of such interventions.

Considering the above, the aim of this article is to outline the Russian military intervention in Syria, and its influence on the course of the war. Special attention was paid to such issues as the causes behind the Russian intervention, the situation on the Syrian war frontlines prior to this intervention, the Russian forces engaged and the resources intended for this military operation, as well as its outcome.

Key words: Russia, military intervention, war in Syria.

Introduction

The civil war in Syria, which has continued since 2011, is one of the bloodiest military conflicts in the contemporary world. Based on data for February 2016, the war has resulted in over 470 thousand deaths, and over 5 million people were forced to leave their homes. Life expectancy shortened from 70 to 56 years, and the overall damage

was estimated at USD 255 billion¹. In 2015, due to numerous failures and depleting resources, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and government militia were facing ultimate defeat. However, the military support provided to the Assad regime by the Russian Federation, which between September 2015 and March 2016 conducted intense air and missile operations, and supplied military equipment to government troops, proved to be crucial. The direct and – as it later turned out – efficient involvement of the Kremlin in the Middle East conflict, enabling the government forces to retake the initiative, came as a big surprise to western commentators. Such terms as *geopolitical tsunami* and *Moscow's strategic gambit* have appeared in the press and several publications.

The following Polish researchers have commented on the Russian involvement in Syria: Tomasz Otlowski – in texts published by the Amicus Europe Foundation, Aleksandra Dzisiow-Szuszczkiewicz – in studies released by the National Security Bureau, and Anna Maria Dwyer – in reports by the Polish Institute of International Affairs. Western publishing houses have also released several books devoted to the war in Syria, including *The Syrian Rebellion*² and *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*³.

Despite the numerous studies being published on the war in Syria, authors claim that this subject matter, given the dynamically-changing situation, still requires intensive investigations and analyses of facts. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to outline the Russian involvement and its impact on the war in Syria, and to provide answers to several specific questions, such as the causes of the Russian intervention, the situation on the Syrian war fronts before Moscow's involvement, the forces and resources provided by the Russian military authorities for deployment in the Middle East, as well as the consequences of Russia's involvement. Among research methods, the analysis and comparison method was used at the first stage of developing this study. It enabled obtaining an array of useful information based on documents and articles, both in Polish and foreign (English and Russian) languages. Compilations by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, the Kazimierz Puławski Foundation, the *National Interest* magazine and Valdia Discussion Club proved particularly useful. Synthesis and generalisation were used as supplementary methods.

The reasons for Russian intervention

The political decision on the Russian military intervention in Syria was influenced by a variety of factors, including external factors and those connected with the strategic culture and perception of threats. One of the most general (underlying) causes was the awareness of the evolving distribution of global powers. As stressed

¹ A. Barnard, *Death Toll From War in Syria Now 470,000 Group Finds*, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/12/world/middleeast/death-toll-from-war-in-syria-now-470000-group-finds.html?_r=0 (28.04.2017).

² F. Ajami, *The Syrian Rebellion*, Hoover Institution Press, May 2012.

³ E. Hokavem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, by Routledge, January 2014.

by Jacek Bartosiak in *Pacyfik i Euroazja. O wojnie [Pacific and Eurasia. About the war]*, following the period of absolute U.S. domination in 1992-2008, we are now experiencing a return to multi-polarity and polycentrism, mainly in economic and financial terms, and partially also in military terms⁴.

In the context of the changing distribution of global powers, the notions of New Yalta⁵ or Yalta 2.0⁶ have appeared several times in the press. These describe Russia's efforts to establish a new division of impact zones in the world, in consideration of the Kremlin's interests, also taking into account the current weaknesses of the western world. The military operation against the Islamic State was meant to give rise to the establishment of a wide coalition in the Middle East, operating under the authority of the UN Security Council. The cooperation between Russia, on the one hand, and the United States and NATO, on the other hand, was intended to improve the relationship between those parties, and to ultimately cause the abolition of economic sanctions and a reduction in western support to Ukraine⁷.

Another reason for the geopolitical changes was put forward by Aleksandra Dzisiow-Szuszczkiewicz in *Regionalna rywalizacja o Syrię [Regional competition for Syria]*. She stressed that through its Middle East-oriented policy, Russia does not want to lose the Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad as one of its allies. Along with the economic and political interests, aimed at keeping western influence out of the Middle East, Syria is also one of the key recipients of Russian weapons. In annual terms, factories operating in the Russian defence industry have been sending 7% of their entire military equipment intended for export to Damascus⁸.

Other reasons for the Russian intervention in Syria can also be sought in the energy business and opportunities for exporting natural resources. In 2015, which is when the Russian involvement began, the Russian economy recorded the sharpest GDP drop since 2009. It was caused by sanctions imposed on Kremlin in 2014 by western authorities, *inter alia*, in response to Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine. Sudden drops in the crude oil price were another major factor. At the turn of 2015 and 2016, an oil barrel cost USD 30.00, whereas the government administration assumed it would cost USD 50.00. This triggered the need to adjust

4 J. Bartosiak, *Pacyfik i Euroazja. O wojnie [Pacific and Eurasia. About the war]*, Ed. Jacek Bartosiak, Warsaw 2016, p. 14.

5 *Jalta 2, marzenie Kremla, wydaje się osiągalne dzięki Państwu Islamskiemu [Yalta 2, Kremlin's dream, seems achievable thanks to the Islamic State]*, <http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-zeswiata,2/nowaja-gazieta-czy-na-gruzach-syrii-powstanie-jalta,579275.html> (13.04.2017).

6 F. Ghitis, *Putin wants Yalta 2.0 and Trump may give it to him*, <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/25/opinions/putin-wants-yalta-2-0-and-trump-may-give-it-to-him-ghitis/> (13.04.2017).

7 *Jalta 2, marzenie Kremla, wydaje się osiągalne dzięki Państwu Islamskiemu*, op. cit. (13.04.2017).

8 A. Dzisiow-Szuszczkiewicz, *Regionalna rywalizacja o Syrię [A regional competition for Syria]*, "Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe" [*National Security*], No. 22, II/2012, p. 91.

the Russian budget expenditure⁹. As in the case of sanctions, the Russian party perceived the sudden drop in oil prices as wilful monetary policy management by the USA, in cooperation with Saudi Arabia regulating the pace of crude oil extraction¹⁰. Considering the above, it was the Kremlin's aim to reverse the downward trend or at least curtail it. The military operation in Syria proved to constitute a very effective response. As stressed by Hüseyin Bağcı, a Turkish researcher, in *Strategic Depth in Syria – From the Beginning to Russian Intervention*, it made the crude oil price soar to USD 50.00, which was eventually set at USD 46.00¹¹.

Leaving aside the crude oil price regulation perspective, Syria is viewed by the Russian policy-makers as a significant venue on the Middle East map when it comes to the transfer of strategic resources. This results from the fact that two competitive gas supply lines are to run through the territory of Syria in the nearest future. One is being constructed by Qatar, running through Saudi Arabia, Syria and Jordan, to Turkey. The other one, designed by Iran, is to run from Iraq to Syria, and then to the west, thus by-passing the U.S. allies, i.e. Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The target recipient for both lines is Europe. In this event, the non-Russian gas supplies to EU Member States will depend on Assad's decisions, and Moscow certainly hopes for his gratitude in this domain¹².

The situation on the Syrian war fronts before the Russian involvement

As stressed by Tomasz Otłowski in *Wojna z Kalifatem II: Rosyjska interwencja w Syrii, czyli strategiczny gambit Moskwy* [*The war against caliphate II: Russian intervention in Syria, i.e. Moscow's strategic gambit*], the situation on the Syrian war fronts in the summer 2015 very much resembled that of 2012, indicating that the regime was doomed to end¹³. The critical position of President Bashar al-Assad resulted from several factors. Firstly, on 9-10 June 2014 Jihad fighters conquered the Iraqi city of Mosul, also seizing over 2700 tanks, armoured vehicles, self-propelled guns, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery and other types of modern weapons,

⁹ A. Luhn, *Russia's GDP falls 3.7% as sanctions and low oil price take effect*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/25/russias-gdp-falls-37-as-sanctions-and-low-oil-price-take-effect> (13.04.2017).

¹⁰ *Kto kryje się za lawinowym spadkiem cen ropy naftowej* [*What is there behind the sharp drop in crude oil prices*], <https://pl.sputniknews.com/gospodarka/20150828900969/> (13.04.2017).

¹¹ H. Bağcı, *Strategic Depth in Syria – From the Beginning to Russian Intervention*, Valdai Discussion Club, December 2015, p. 12.

¹² M. Kania, *Syria na gazowym szlaku. Dlaczego Rosji oplaca się wojna* [*Syria on the gas-main route. How can Russian military involvement pay off*], <http://wyborcza.pl/1,75399,19647744,syria-na-gazowym-szlaku-dlaczego-rosji-oplaca-sie-wojna.html> (13.04.2017).

¹³ T. Otłowski, *Wojna z Kalifatem II: Rosyjska interwencja w Syrii, czyli strategiczny gambit Moskwy* [*The war against caliphate II: Russian intervention in Syria, i.e. Moscow's strategic gambit*], "FAE Policy Paper" No. 27/2015, p. 2.

largely of American origin. The armaments were then sent to the Syrian Arab Army (SAA)¹⁴. Several days later, i.e. on 29 June 2014, ISIS announced the establishing of a caliphate, spreading to the territories of Western Iraq and Eastern Syria. For Damascus, it was a sign of a new front being opened, triggering the need to allocate adequate forces to combat the Jihad fighters¹⁵.

Secondly, this was when Iran, Assad's biggest ally in the region, cut down its military support, directing its interest mainly to Iraq, which was caused by the military successes of the Islamic State. Tehran also showed a far-reaching caution, given the need to wait for the ultimate approval of the nuclear programme agreement by the West. The excessive military involvement in the region could be negatively perceived by western states and eventually frustrate the agreement¹⁶.

Thirdly, 2015 was the fourth year of the Syrian war. The Syrian Arab Army was exhausted and its limited human resources required soldiers to be continually engaged without any rotational service. According to Tomasz Otlowski, at the very beginning of the conflict, Assad could only use 30% of his military human resources, due to the prevalence of Sunnis in the army and a fear of mass desertions¹⁷. Similar difficulties were also pointed out by Adrien Desbonnet in *Tactical Evolution in Syria 2011-2014*. He claimed that only 65 thousand out of the 220 thousand soldiers which the SAA had at its disposal were considered "trustworthy" troop members. This could be viewed as confirming the reports indicating that desertion occurred in 20-30% of all cases¹⁸. Moreover, right from the start of the conflict, the Syrian army was not prepared to crush internal rebellions in densely populated urban centres. It was mainly formed of mechanised and armoured brigades prepared to defend the country against external enemies, such as Israel. Deploying heavy armour in Homs and Hama resulted in attackers' sustaining severe damages and losing hundreds of tanks¹⁹. According to various sources, by March 2017, the government party had lost over 111 thousand people, including soldiers, policemen, members of para-military organisations and Hezbollah fighters²⁰. In *DefenseOne*, Ben Watson pointed out that by mid-2016, 1000 tanks had been lost per each 2500 tanks deployed at the

14 Amnesty International, *How Islamic State got its weapons*, <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/how-isis-islamic-state-isis-got-its-weapons-iraq-syria> (18.04.2017).

15 G. Wood, *What ISIS's Leader Really Wants*, <https://newrepublic.com/article/119259/isis-history-islamic-states-new-caliphate-syria-and-iraq> (18.04.2017).

16 T. Otlowski, op. cit., p. 4.

17 T. Otlowski, *Pięć lat wojny w Syrii – jak się zaczęło? [Five years of the Syrian war – how it all began]* "FAE Policy Paper" No. 8/2016, p. 7.

18 A. Desbonnet, *Tactical Evolution in Syria 2011-2014*, Centre de Doctrine d'Emploi des Forces, March 2015, p. 28.

19 J. England, *Threat Tactics Report: Syria*, TRADOC G-2, February 2016, p. 3.

20 *Syria Casualties*, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/news/syria-casualties/> (19.04.2017); *Casualties of the Syrian Civil War*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casualties_of_the_Syrian_Civil_War (19.04.2017).

beginning of the conflict²¹. Along with substantial human and heavy armour losses, the Syrian Arab Army had to face the loss of most helicopters, which were among the most important tools used to fight against an enemy employing asymmetric warfare methods. In October 2012 alone, five Mi-8 and Mi-7 helicopters were shot down, along with six fighter aircraft and, in 2013, helicopters were practically eliminated from any further use in fights²².

Finally, in early 2015, new Islamic groups were found to be emerging in Syria, their aim being to fight the regime. One of the first moves in this area was the establishing of the Army of Conquest (Jaish al-Fatah)²³ by Salman ibn Adb al-Aziz al Saud, the new king of Saudi Arabia, in consultation with both Qatar and Turkey. This marked a coalition of the following groups: Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, Sham Legion and Liwa al-Haqq, involving several thousand fighters²⁴. Bashar al-Assad viewed this as a signal of the strengthening political cooperation between its enemies who had previously competed with one another for taking control of rebel groups. Turkey and Qatar supported al-Nusra, whereas the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia financed the Islamic front, with Ahrar al-Sham as a member. This unification of previous rivals quickly resulted in the first military successes, including the defeat of Jisr ash-Shugur in the Idlib Governorate²⁵.

The size and type of Russian forces deployed in Syria

The military involvement of the Russian Federation in Syria, considering its character, can be divided into three stages, i.e. the logistic support preceding direct armed intervention, entailing the supply of equipment and ammunition, the direct armed intervention in September 2015, and the engagement of private military contractors from Russia. However, some observers of the civil war in Syria distinguish other lesser stages of the Russian involvement. According to Gen. Yaakov Amidror, Former National Security Advisor to the Prime Minister of Israel, the first stage resulted from the Syrian dependency on Russian armaments. The supplies from Russia initially included ammunition, the stocks of which would shrink quickly, subsequently followed by more advanced weapons systems. The second stage,

21 B. Watson, *Weapons of the Syrian War: Tanks*, <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2016/07/weapons-syrian-war-tanks/129621/> (19.04.2017).

22 A. Desbonnet, op. cit., p. 37.

23 K. Y. Oweis, *Syria after the Russian Intervention*, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Comments 16, March 2016, p. 2.

24 T. Joscelyn, *Al-Qaeda and allies from coalition to battle Syrian regime in Idlib*, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/03/al-qaeda-and-allies-form-coalition-to-battle-syrian-regime-in-idlib.php> (19.04.2017).

25 W. Repetowicz, *Syria – ofensywa Armii Podboju. „Reżim Assada słabnie” [Syria – the Army of Conquest offensive. Assad regime is getting weaker]*, <http://www.defence24.pl/219532,syria-ofensywa-armii-podboju-rezim-assada-slabnie> (19.04.2017).

as claimed by the General, was less pronounced and the precise date of its outset could hardly be determined – at a certain point, the number of Russian military advisors, mainly providing assistance in general and military intelligence operations, simply started to grow in importance. The third stage began after the signing of an agreement between the western countries and Iran on the nuclear programme in July 2015²⁶, following which Russia started to deploy warplanes at selected airbases with the intention of attacking specific targets. The number of land soldiers defending airbases was also gradually increased in that period²⁷.

The scope of equipment supplied to Syria was vast from the very beginning of the conflict. According to Israeli sources, these included T-90 and T-72 tanks, 9A52 *Smerch* heavy multiple rocket launchers, Su-24 and Su-25 aircraft, as well as *Forpost* and *Zastava* unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV)²⁸. Other sources also mention personal weapons, including AK-74M assault rifles, KVSK *Kord* heavy machine guns, as well as UR-77 *Meteorite* mine clearing vehicles and BTR-82A armoured carriers²⁹.

Direct involvement in the conflict began on 30 September 2015 with the first air assaults against rebel positions. On the days immediately preceding the assaults, Russia sent twelve Su-24M2, twelve Su-25 and four Su-30SM warplanes to Syria, along with around twenty Mi-17, Mi-24 and Mi-25 combat helicopters, with 1500-3000 soldiers being deployed to operate these vehicles³⁰. As the operation progressed, the number of soldiers increased to over 4000, and the subsequent reports from Syria made it possible to partly identify their dominating units. These included the 74th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade and the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade³¹. As was stressed in a report by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, within the first three months, Russia used 69 aircraft, dropping over 1400 tonnes of bombs during 5400 combat flights (on average, around 60 flights a day), 145 of which were strategic bomber flights. Apart from the machines listed above, the Su-27SM, Tu-160, Tu-95MS, Su-34 and Tu-22M3 planes also penetrated the Syrian sky. Along with the air forces,

26 C. Morello, K. DeYoung, *Historic deal reached with Iran to limit nuclear program*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/historic-nuclear-deal-with-iran-expected-to-be-announced/2015/07/14/5f8dddb2-29ea-11e5-a5ea-cf74396e59ec_story.html?utm_term=.8637d9dd95d8 (19.04.2017).

27 Y. Amidror, *Tip of the Iceberg: Russian Use of Power in Syria*, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/371-amidror-tip-of-the-iceberg-russian/> (19.04.2017).

28 M. Antonowa, *What weapons is Russia sending Syria?* <http://www.timesofisrael.com/what-weapons-is-russia-sending-syria/> (19.04.2017).

29 T. Otlowski, *Rosyjskie zaangażowanie w Syrii – jak Moskwa wpływa na region i co na tym sama zyskuje?* [*The Russian involvement in Syria – how Moscow influences the region and why it pays off*] <http://wiadomosci.wp.pl/rosyjskie-zaangazowanie-w-syrii-jak-moskwa-wplywa-na-region-i-co-na-tym-sama-zyskuje-6027693508838529a?ticaid=118d5a> (19.04.2017).

30 T. Otlowski, *Wojna z Kalifatem II*, op. cit., p. 5.

31 M. Цветкова, *Russian soldiers geolocated by photos in multiple Syria locations, bloggers say*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-idUSKCN0SX0H820151108> (19.04.2017).

rocket attacks were also organised by the navy which deployed the *Moskva* cruiser, the *Rostov-on-Don* submarine, the *Dagenstan* guided missile frigate, and three rocket corvettes: *Uglich*, *Grad Swijazsk* and *Veliky Ustyug*, which were used to launch over 100 missiles³². In January 2017, while summarising the Russian involvement in Syria, Gen. Walerij Gierasimow, Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, admitted that the Russian air forces had arranged 19,160 combat flights, conducting 71,000 strikes against terrorists, destroying training camps, ammunition depots and other types of infrastructure managed by the Islamic State³³.

Along with air forces, the Russian Navy and Special Operations Forces were also deployed in Syria. Based on the generally available data, any precise information on the number and type of the involved units can hardly be given. According to some observers, the transfer of equipment and soldiers to Syria engaged around 15 landing ships from the Baltic Fleet, the Black Sea Fleet, the Northern Fleet and the Pacific Fleet³⁴. From among the combat ships, the Buyan-class rocket corvettes, forming part of the Black Sea Fleet, were first to appear on the Syrian coast³⁵. In 2016, a group of Northern Fleet ships joined the Black Sea Fleet, including the *Admiral Kuzniecowa* heavy aircraft cruiser, *Peter the Great* battle cruiser, large anti-submarine destroyers – *Siewieromorsk* and *Admiral Kulakov*, and accompanying ships. As indicated by Russian sources, the group comprised five-six ships and fifteen warplanes on board *Admiral Kuzniecowa*³⁶. The size of the Russian special operations forces was determined at a few hundred soldiers. Their aim was to conduct reconnaissance operations, to protect airfields and military bases, and to guide air attacks³⁷. Film recordings and information regarding the participation of Russian soldiers in direct

32 A.M. Dwyer, *Trzy miesiące rosyjskiej interwencji w Syrii – implikacje wojskowe i polityczne* [*Three months of the Russian intervention in Syria – military and political implications*], the Polish Institute of International Affairs, No. I (1351), 8 January 2016, p. 1.

33 *Russian Aerospace Forces Delivered Over 71,000 Strikes Against Terrorists Infrastructure Since Start Of Operation In Syria*, <https://southfront.org/russian-aerospace-forces-delivered-71000-strikes-against-terrorists-infrastructure-since-start-of-operation-in-syria/> (20.04.2017).

34 *Wojna w Syrii: jak Marynarka Wojenna Federacji Rosyjskiej pomaga Baszszarowi Asadowi* [*The war in Syria: how the Russian Navy is helping Baszszar Asad*], <https://informnapalm.org/pl/wojna-w-syrii-jak-marynarka-wojenna-federacji-rosyjskiej-pomaga-baszszarowi-asadowi-infografika/> (20.04.2017).

35 Д. Маркус, *Поход российских кораблей к Сирии - демонстрация силы или нечто большее?* <http://www.bbc.com/russian/features-37707807> (20.04.2017).

36 *NATO jest przerażone wzmocnieniem obecności rosyjskiej floty na Morzu Śródziemnym* [*NATO terrified of the strengthened presence of the Russian fleet in the Mediterranean Sea*], <https://pl.sputniknews.com/swiat/201610204100006-NATO-flota-Rosja-Morze-Srodziemne/> (20.04.2017).

37 P. Szoldra, *The elite Russian special forces who took over Crimea are doing the same thing in Aleppo*, <http://businessinsider.com/pl/international/the-elite-russian-special-forces-who-took-over-crimea-are-doing-the-same-thing-in/r7kb552> (20.04.2017).

battles were soon disseminated, including preparations for the defeat of Aleppo in which 80-120 Russian commanders were involved³⁸.

As reported by Sergey Shoygu, Russia's Minister of Defence, during the military operation in Syria, the Russian forces tested over 162 types of modern weapons, including Mi-28N and Ka-52 helicopters, and the afore-mentioned Su-34 pursuit aircraft³⁹. However, special attention should be paid to the deployment of the S-400 *Triumph* anti-aircraft weapon system in Syria, inhibiting the conducting of airborne operations in the region and providing the potential for what is known in military nomenclature as anti-access or area denial (A2AD)⁴⁰. A decision on the S-400 deployment was made as a military response to the shooting down of the Russian Su-24 aircraft by the Turkish F-16 in November of 2015. Following this event, the system was placed in the Khmeimim Air Base area, close to the city of Latakia⁴¹. The S-400 system is capable of combating not only aircraft but also cruise missiles and ballistic missiles moving with a speed of up to 4.8 km/s. The range of radar detection and tracing of airborne objects is around 600 km, with the possibility of simultaneously destroying up to 10 targets and guiding up to 20 rockets. The system, therefore, covers the territories of Syria, Cyprus, Northern Israel and Southern Turkey, including the Incirlik Air Base, from where American aircraft attack Syrian targets⁴². The S-400 system provides an example of a single technology which is likely to materially reduce the military involvement of other States.

Bashar al-Assad's regime was also supported by contractual Russian soldiers employed by private military companies. Editors of Reuters came across examples of such involvement and described them in an article entitled *Ghost soldiers*. They claimed that Russian contractors were losing their lives in the battles for both Aleppo and Palmyra. They are said to have closely cooperated with the Russian Ministry of Defence. The wounded were evacuated and treated like soldiers, and they could count on State-awarded distinctions. However, their participation in battles was strictly confidential, and families of the dead soldiers could learn about it only after

38 A. Mercouris, *Did Russian Special Forces Help the Syrian Army Win Aleppo?* <https://counterinformation.wordpress.com/2016/09/06/did-russian-special-forces-help-the-syrian-army-win-aleppo/> (20.04.2017).

39 *Wojsko rosyjskie przetestowało w Syrii ponad 150 typów nowego uzbrojenia [The Russian army has tested over 150 types of modern arms in Syria]*, <http://studium.uw.edu.pl/wojsko-rosyjskie-przetestowalo-w-syrii-ponad-150-typow-nowego-uzbrojenia/> (28.04.2017).

40 More about A2AD see: T. Smura, *Rosyjskie zdolności w zakresie środków izolowania pola walki (A2AD) – wnioski dla NATO [Russian anti-access (A2AD) capabilities – conclusions for NATO]*, <https://pulaski.pl/rosyjskie-zdolnosci-w-zakresie-srodkow-izolowania-pola-walki-a2ad-wnioski-dla-nato/> (28.04.2017).

41 *Jak działa S-400 Triumf w Syrii [How the S-400 Triumph functions in Syria]*, <https://pl.sputniknews.com/wideoklub/201512281738915-jak-dziala-s-400-w-syrii/> (28.04.2017).

42 J. Sabak, *Rosyjskie S-400 w Syrii. Turecka baza w zasięgu*, <http://www.defence24.pl/274412,rosyjskie-s-400-w-syrii-turecka-baza-w-zasięgu> (28.04.2017). Read more in: S. Roblin, *Syria and the S-400: The Most Dangerous Game of Cat and Mouse on Earth*, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/syria-the-s-400-the-most-dangerous-game-cat-mouse-earth-20200> (28.04.2017).

the tragic events had taken place⁴³. Russian sources also speak of similar incidents. In the battle of Palmyra, five Russian contractors are said to have lost their lives, with photographs of military operations showing Russian military equipment being published by Islamic State fighters⁴⁴.

The Slavonic Corps and the Wagner Group appear among the names of entities organising contractors' excursions to Syria. Based on the generally available information, the Slavonic Corps (*Славянский Корпус*) organisation is said to have arranged excursions to Syria in 2013, aimed at protecting energy resource transfer systems. The Wagner Group, in turn, is an entity operating both in Ukraine (Crimea and the Donetsk People's Republic) and Syria. It is estimated that 1000-6000 contractors delegated by this organisation stayed in Syria in 2016, taking an active part in battles⁴⁵.

The outcome of the Russian military involvement in Syria

Intensive raids organised by the Russian armed forces, targeted at rebels and the Islamic State, continued for six months, i.e. from September 2015 to March 2016. In the meantime, many significant changes occurred on the front lines in Syria, and the initiative was taken by the Syrian Arab Army. By February 2016, as a result of the raids over 2000 anti-regime fighters, 1400 civilians had been killed. Based on the Syrian Human Rights Watch data, 4 700 civilians had lost their lives by the end of 2016, along with 2 987 Islamic State fighters and 3 153 members of rebel groups. 200 facilities of military significance had been destroyed, together with 174 oil refineries and 111 oil convoys. This was also when the Syrian Government regained control over an area of 12 360 km² and "liberated" 499 local community members⁴⁶.

The scale and effects of the Russian involvement were also presented at the end of 2017 by Gen. Sergey Surovikin, the former Commander of the Russian Army in Syria. He claimed that in 227 days, over 32 thousand terrorists were eliminated, 394 tanks destroyed, and 67 thousand square kilometres of the Syrian territory liberated from the Islamic State group⁴⁷.

43 М. Цветкова, А. Зверев, *Ghost soldiers: the Russians secretly dying for the Kremlin in Syria*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-insight-idUSKBN12Y0M6> (10.04.2017).

44 В. Дергачев, Е. Згировская, *Российские наемники в боях за Пальмиру*, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/03/22_a_8137565.shtml (20.04.2017).

45 И. Рождественский, А. Баев, П. Русяева, Е. Сурначева, *Russian private military company 'spotted' in Syria*, http://rbth.com/defence/2016/08/26/russian-private-military-company-spotted-in-syria_624521 (20.04.2017).

46 *Russian Aerospace Forces Delivered Over 71,000 Strikes Against Terrorists Infrastructure Since Start Of Operation In Syria*, <https://southfront.org/russian-aerospace-forces-delivered-71000-strikes-against-terrorists-infrastructure-since-start-of-operation-in-syria/> (20.04.2017).

47 *Rosja wycofuje wojska z Syrii. Dowódca chwali się sukcesami [Russian troops retreat from Syria. The Commander boasts about his successes]*, <https://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-ze-swiata,2/rosja-wycofuje-wojska-z-syrii-byly-dowodca-chwali-sie-sukcesami,797719.html> (30.03.2018)

The Russian involvement also contributed to defeating Aleppo and cutting the rebel supply routes from Turkey. With the support of Russian airpower, the ancient city of Palmyra, situated in the western region of Syria, was taken from Jihad fighters. In January 2016, on the southern front, the Sheikh Miskeen military base was seized by Assad's army. Jordan, in turn, decided to close the route at the Syrian border, which had previously been used by the opposing forces to receive armament supplies. As was stressed in *Syria after the Russian intervention*, the Russian operation contributed to shattering the rebel forces into smaller groups, preventing their further efficient cooperation. The successes achieved on the northern front are likely to enable the government forces' attack on Idlib, which is one of the last unoccupied governorates in this region of the country. On the one hand, the Russian involvement was limited to organising air attacks, participating in special forces flights and providing military supplies. Russia did not send any regular land troops or squadrons that would help Assad seize large urban centres. For this reason, by April 2017, the opposing fighters had still kept hold of parts of Homs and Damascus⁴⁸.

The Russian intervention also had a direct impact on the Syrian refugee crisis. In July 2015, i.e. before the commencement of attacks, the number of refugees was estimated at 4 million. In October 2015, a significant increase in the number of Syrian residents fleeing the war zone was recorded. In January 2016, their number grew to 4.6 million, and it exceeded 5.5 million in September 2017⁴⁹. According to Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, the former Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Russian attacks on civilian targets, along with the use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs by the Assad regime, should be viewed as a strategy "weaponising" the refugee crisis to destabilise Europe⁵⁰. A similar view is shared by representatives of Ankara's authorities. The growing number of refugees puts a significant burden on the Turkish economy. In August 2017, over 2.7 million Syrians sought asylum in Turkey, and the government spent around USD 25 billion on assistance to immigrants⁵¹. Despite the criticism of the Russian party for escalating the refugee crisis, and the shooting down of the Su-24 Russian warplane in November 2015, the relationship between these two countries should be considered pragmatic. In October 2016, a meeting between President Putin and President Erdogan took place in Turkey, during which an inter-governmental agreement on constructing the Turkish Stream pipeline was signed. In 2017, meetings between the two leaders were continued, providing grounds for

⁴⁸ K.Y. Oweis, op. cit., pp. 3-4.

⁴⁹ Quick facts: What you need to know about the Syria crisis, Mercy Corps, <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria-turkey/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis> (29.03.2018)

⁵⁰ L. Dearden, *Russia and Syria 'weaponising' refugee crisis to destabilise Europe*, *Nato commander claims*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-and-syria-weaponising-refugee-crisis-to-destabilise-europe-nato-commander-claims-a6909241.html> (29.03.2018)

⁵¹ S. Tisdall, *Refugees are becoming Russia's weapon of choice in Syria*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/16/refugees-are-becoming-russias-weapon-of-choice-in-syria> (29.03.2018)

discussions about Syria's future and ultimately leading to an agreement being reached in Astana, establishing safe zones in Syria. These events indicate that, despite major differences between Russia and Turkey as regards the Assad regime, both countries have decided to cooperate in order to increase their mutual chances of achieving their own interests in the region, while reducing the western⁵².

Conclusion

The Russian involvement in Syria, which began in 2015, has frustrated the military plans for removing Bashar al-Assad from power, thus eliminating the Sunni groups supported by Saudi Arabia and Qatar from political domination in Syria. This has let Russia achieve the principal objective of its military operation, i.e. preventing the fall of one of its last allies in the Middle East. Air support enabled government troops to focus on the construction of the corridor connecting Damascus and Aleppo, and then recovering subsequent lands controlled by the rebels and Islamic State. Nevertheless, responding to the question of whether the Russian involvement will actually contribute to the Syrian Arab Army's victory appears very problematic. Reducing the military operations to air strikes and missile attacks, combined with the provision of supplies, but without any regular engagement of land troops, has not caused the complete defeat of the Free Syrian Army troops and Jihad fighters that still occupy towns and cities in the Idlib Governorate in the northern regions of the country, areas located north of Homs, a part of Damascus and southern governorates. The issue of the future involvement of the United States still remains open, as the use of chemical weapons in April 2017, followed by the accusation that the attack was organised by the Assad regime, led to the American missile attack on the Shayrat airbase⁵³.

In December 2017 in the Khmeimim Air Base in western Syria, Vladimir Putin announced the commencement of the Russian army's retreat from Syria. However, this hardly means that all the Russian troops will leave the Syrian territory. Two military bases, i.e. the Khmeimim Air Base and the Russian naval facility in Tartus, are expected to act as the foothold for subsequent operations and support for the Syrian Arab Army. At the beginning of 2018, two events took place which put the previous successes of the Russian army into question. The first one concerned the mortar attack on the Khmeimim Air Base in which, according to various sources, 7 planes were destroyed and 2 Russian soldiers were killed. The second one was the

⁵² M. Chudziak, S. Kardaś, W. Rodkiewicz, *Rosja – Turcja: partnerstwo z rozsądkiem [Russia – Turkey: a partnership of convenience]*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2016-10-12/turcja-rosja-partnerstwo-z-rozsadku> (29.03.2018)

⁵³ E. Rosenfeld, *Trump launches attack on Syria with 59 Tomahawk missiles*, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/06/us-military-has-launched-more-50-than-missiles-aimed-at-syria-nbc-news.html> (28.04.2017).

American rocket shelling aimed at Assad supporters in Deir ez-Zor, in which several Russian contract soldiers from the Wagner Group lost their lives. These incidents question the future Russian involvement in Syria, and its scale. Recurring attacks may eventually encourage the Kremlin to strengthen military base protection and to conduct retaliatory strikes engaging special troops and air forces⁵⁴.

In military terms, the scale and efficiency of the Russian involvement in Syria, including the use of new technologies such as cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles etc., encourages further study on such issues as the Russian revolution in military affairs, the opportunities for conducting operations outside State borders, the technical anti-access (A2AD) capabilities, the potential of private Russian military companies, and the safety privatisation level in Russia.

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⁵⁴ M. Menkiszak, K. Strachota, P. Żochowski, Rosyjskie straty pod Dajr za-Zaur – problem dla Kremla [Russian loses in Deir ez-Zor – a problem for Kremlin], <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2018-02-19/rosyjskie-straty-pod-dajr-az-zaur-problem-dla-kremla> (30.03.2018).

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