

## RUSSIA'S FALSE ISIS NARRATIVE IN SYRIA

*President Vladimir Putin is actively misinforming his domestic audience and the international community about Russia's first military intervention outside the former Soviet Union since Afghanistan. Putin has created a false narrative about the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) to disguise the true objectives behind Russia's intervention Syria and is using this narrative to manipulate the international community. Putin encapsulated this false narrative in his UN speech calling for an alternate international coalition against ISIS on September 28, two days before the start of Russia's air campaign in Syria. Russia intervened in Syria on September 30 not to defeat ISIS, but rather to curb U.S. influence in the Middle East and to project Russian military power into the region to a historically unprecedented degree.*

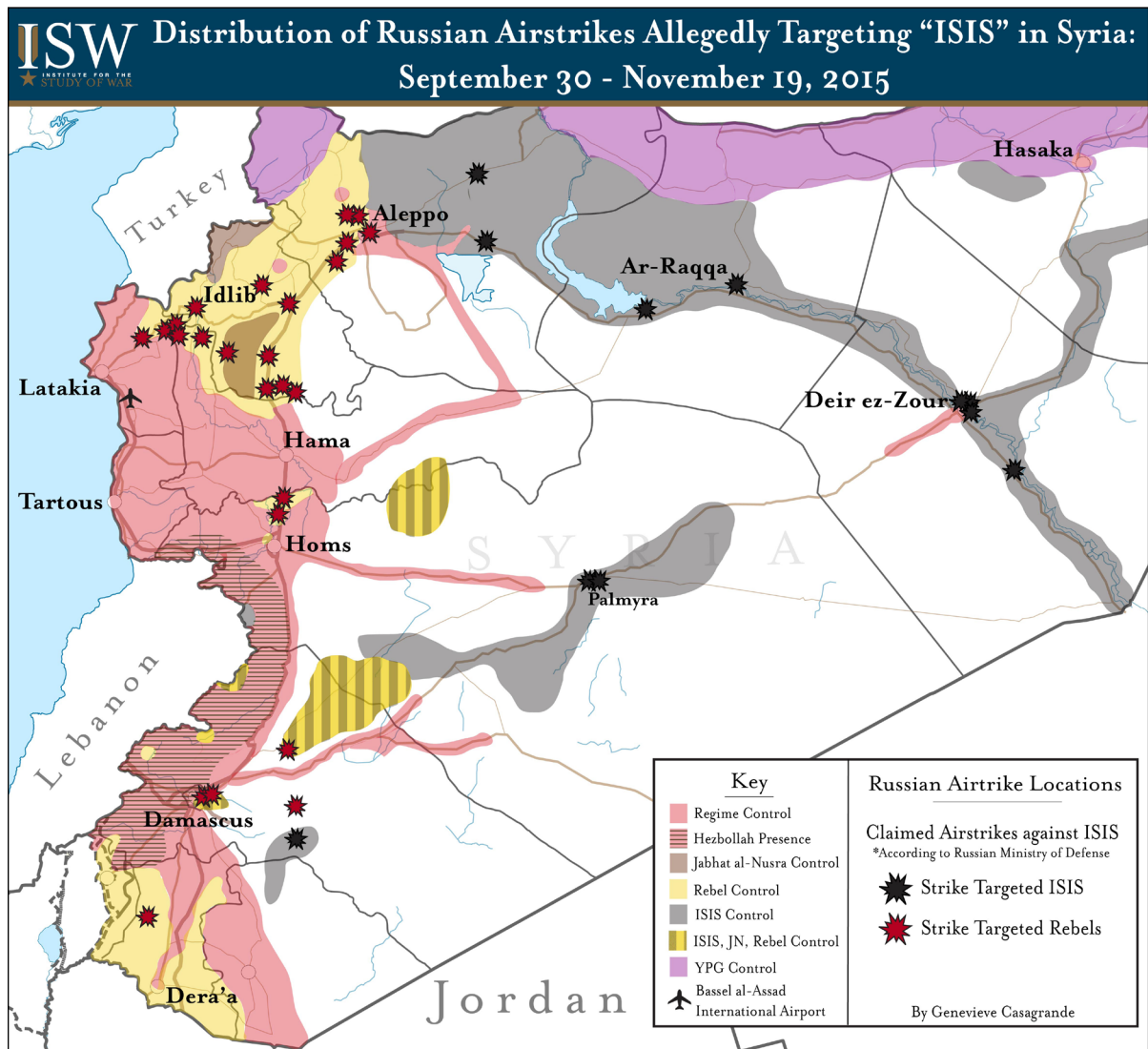
*Russia's air campaign is focused on targeting Syrian armed opposition groups fighting against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad rather than ISIS. Russia has grounded the rhetoric surrounding its military intervention in Syria in the immediate [domestic terror threat](#) posed by ISIS. ISIS includes an estimated [7,000 foreign fighters](#) from the former Soviet Union and [declared its own governorate](#) in Russia's restive North Caucasus region. Moscow does view ISIS as a legitimate security concern, but the dissonance between Russia's claimed objectives and its actual behavior reveals that Russia uses anti-ISIS rhetoric as a pretext to pursue its larger strategic objectives. Russia seeks to preserve the Syrian regime and diminish the influence wielded by the U.S. and its regional allies, which support the Syrian opposition. Regime preservation in Damascus is a core Russian objective that enables Russia to cement its foothold in the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean Sea while simultaneously expanding its influence through partnerships with Iran and the Iranian network of regional proxies. Putin is leveraging disinformation in order to obfuscate his true objectives in Syria and thereby manipulate the U.S. and regional actors into inadvertently helping Russia achieve its goals.*

*Russia has the opportunity to draw an increasingly assertive France, a major U.S. ally, into its proposed alternative coalition in the wake of ISIS's attacks in Paris on November 13. The U.S. is also considering accepting Russian proposals for military coordination against ISIS, and has already embraced a Russian-led political framework to end the Syrian Civil War. Deconstructing the myths that Russia is propagating in the effort to legitimize these options is key to recognizing the risks associated with accepting them. The following sections examine five of the most prominent and problematic Russian myths and demonstrate why adherence to them in the West produces dangerous policy options.*

### MYTH I: RUSSIA INTERVENED IN ORDER TO DEFEAT ISIS

The Kremlin framed its intervention in Syria as a response to the growing threat posed by ISIS, recognizing that the terrorist group posed a joint threat to Russia and the West. This false yet plausible narrative allowed Russia to curtail the West's ability to unite against Russia's efforts to bolster President Assad and project military force in the Middle East. The narrative also created the opportunity for Russia to shed the international isolation and pariah status that followed its aggression in Ukraine despite its continued pursuit of cynical political objectives through violent means. Moscow's decision to disguise its intervention in Syria as a response to ISIS is an example

of the Russian doctrine of [reflexive control](#): the use of disinformation to alter an opponent's perception of events and lead the adversary to respond in a manner that ultimately favors Russia. Russia reinforced its narrative of events through its own legal structures. Putin received permission from the upper house of the Russian Parliament on September 30 to provide "exclusively air support for Syrian government forces in their operation against ISIS." This parliamentary mandate serves in tandem with an alleged official request for assistance from President Assad to give Russia the veneer of a legal foundation for its intervention. Russia's reliance on legal rubber-stamping is designed to mimic Western legalism and enables Russia to deflect criticism for its violations of international norms back onto its adversaries.



The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) regularly releases disinformation in order to portray itself as an effective anti-ISIS actor in Syria. The Russian MoD claimed to strike ISIS in 45 discrete locations across Syria from September 30 to November 19. Credible local reporting confirmed that airstrikes occurred in 36 of the reported locations, although ISW assessed that 25 of these airstrikes targeted Syrian rebel groups rather than ISIS. Source: Genevieve Casagrande, ISW

Russia has tailored its air campaign to address the immediate vulnerabilities of the Syrian regime and to pursue President Assad’s most urgent priorities. Russia launched its air campaign in Syria on September 30 [targeting rebel-held territory](#) in Northwestern Syria, over 30 miles from core ISIS-held terrain. The geographic dispersion of Russia’s initial airstrikes reflected the immediate threat that these rebel groups posed to regime’s heartland in the Alawite-majority Syrian coast. Russian aircraft also provided critical support to a major ground offensive against Syrian opposition groups south of Aleppo City which included heavy participation from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Iranian proxy forces. As the situation stabilized in

Northwestern Syria, Russia increased the volume of its airstrikes targeting emergent threats posed by ISIS. Russia [forward-deployed helicopters and artillery](#) to bolster pro-regime forces in Eastern Homs Province following an [ISIS advance](#) into the area, which forced Russia to play a more active role defending regime terrain. Russian helicopters and artillery units based in Homs and Hama Provinces also provide support to pro-regime forces against both Syrian rebels and ISIS north of Damascus. Russian warplanes meanwhile supported a [pro-regime offensive](#) to secure the besieged Kuweires Airbase from ISIS in mid-November. Russia will likely continue its reactive targeting of ISIS in areas where the terrorist group poses an immediate threat to the Syrian regime

while maintaining a high tempo of operations in support of pro-regime offensives against the Syrian opposition. Russia also leverages its air campaign in order to advance its strategic objective to challenge and undermine NATO. Russia's establishment of its first airbase on the Mediterranean Sea represents a direct threat to NATO's southern flank. Russia continues to increase its force projection capabilities in the region by deploying advanced hardware that provides little value in the direct fight against ISIS, including [air superiority fighters](#), its most advanced [long-range surface-to-air missile system](#), and its flagship [guided missile cruiser](#). Russian warplanes nominally tasked with targeting terrorists have [violated the airspace](#) of NATO's southernmost member Turkey on multiple occasions in order to assert Russia's freedom of action in and around Syria. Turkey's downing of a Russian bomber on November 24 represented a direct challenge to these force projection efforts. Moscow has nonetheless used the incident in order to cast Turkey and NATO as [obstacles to the destruction of ISIS](#).

his indiscriminate tactics against populated areas. Russia also seeks to deflect Western criticism that it is not targeting ISIS by claiming that it is targeting other terrorist groups in addition to ISIS as part of a larger counterterrorism effort inside Syria. Russia has even invented radical groups that it claims to have targeted to further obfuscate its strikes against the Syrian armed opposition, including a claimed strike against a fictitious group named "[Sham Taliban](#)" (Syrian Taliban) near the Syrian coast. The Russian Ministry of Defense revealed its own control of terrain map (Figure 2) on October 16, depicting rebel-held territory in Northwestern Syria as controlled exclusively by Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, demonstrating Russia's effort to delegitimize a large segment of the Syrian opposition.

Russia's claims are untrue. Although Jabhat al-Nusra does control territory in Idlib Province, Russian air and cruise missile strikes have consistently targeted terrain in Northwestern Syria controlled by other rebel groups including at least five U.S.-backed rebel factions. The U.S. State Department reported that [90 percent](#) of Russian



*Referring to the map, deputy chief of staff of the Russian military Andrey Kartapolov said, "As I hope you can see, we are striking only the facilities of internationally recognized terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra."*

## MYTH 2: RUSSIAN AIRSTRIKES TARGET TERRORIST GROUPS

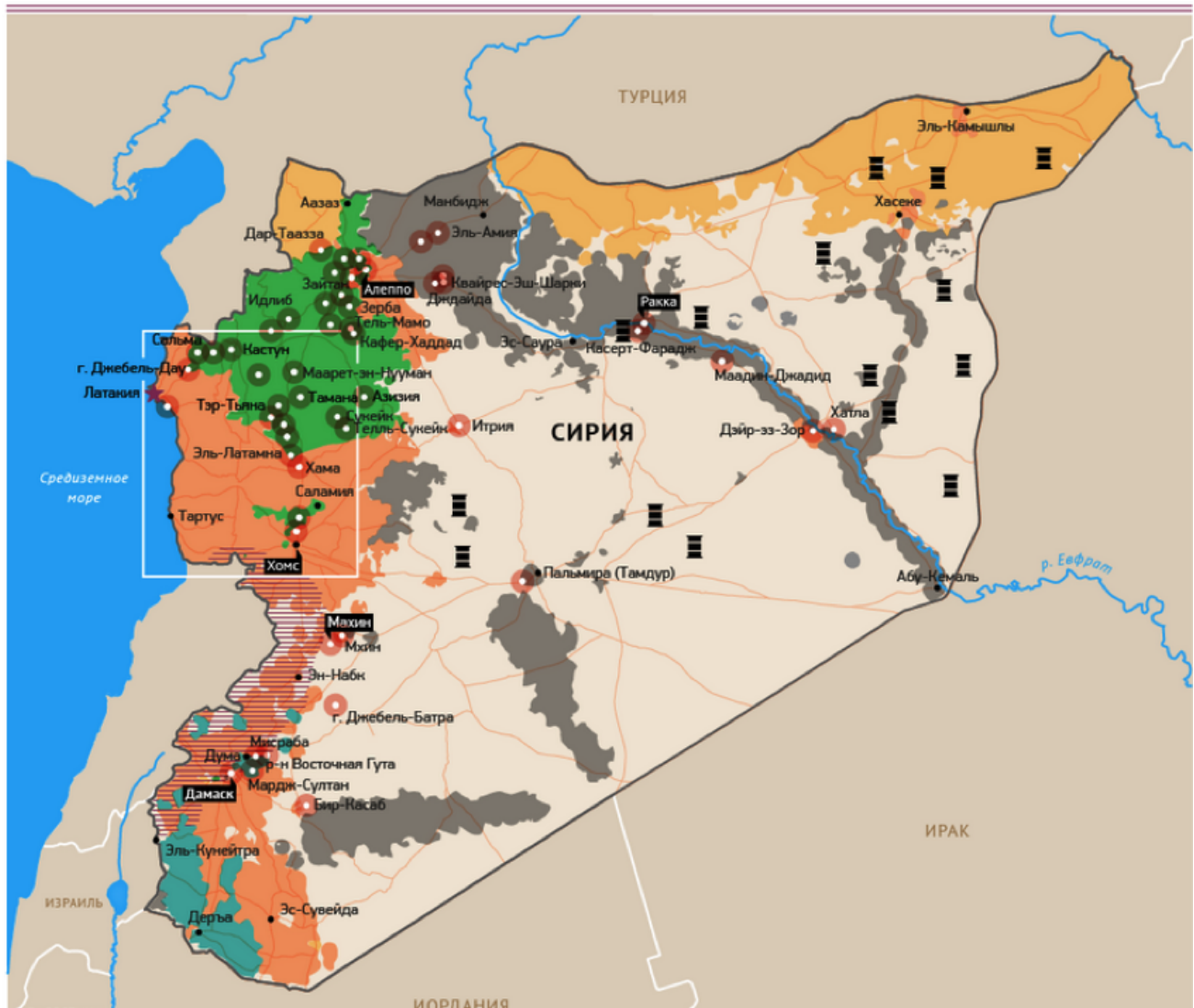
Russia is using disinformation to blur the distinction between terrorists and rebel groups in Syria in order to legitimize Assad's war. Assad has often falsely [characterized the Syrian armed opposition as terrorists](#) in order to justify

airstrikes targeted Syrian rebel positions rather than ISIS or Jabhat al-Nusra during the first week of the Russian air campaign. Analysis of Russian airstrikes by ISW confirms that this trend persists, although the exact proportions have changed marginally. Russia repeated this strategy when it expanded its air campaign into Southern Syria. Russia's general staff claimed that Russia had not targeted



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*This map shows a large concentration of Russian airstrikes (circles) against rebel-held territory in Northwestern Syria falsely portrayed as under the control of Jabhat al-Nusra (green). The map also displays the Free Syrian Army (blue) in Southwestern Syria, the only Syrian rebel group portrayed as a non-terrorist group. The characterization of the rebels in the northwest as al-Qaeda affiliates suggests Russia will continue to target these groups, while the distinction made for the Free Syrian Army serves to deflect criticism that Russia does not discriminate between armed opposition groups.*

Source: RIA Novosti

Southwestern Syria because it was under the control of the moderate rebel “Free Syrian Army,” an attempt to prove Russia’s claimed focus on terrorists in Syria. The Russian MoD later claimed its first strike targeting ISIS in the Southwestern province of Dera’a on November 13 although, local sources reported [Russian airstrikes against rebel-held territory in Dera’a](#) as early as October 28.

## MYTH 3: RUSSIA WANTS TO WORK WITH THE SYRIAN ARMED OPPOSITION

Russia insists it seeks to coordinate with Syria’s armed opposition and incorporate “moderate” and “patriotic” opposition groups into a political settlement with Assad regime. This component of Russia’s disinformation

campaign aims to cast Russia as a cooperative actor and further disguise its targeting of rebel groups. President Putin claimed on November 13 that Russia's air force had acted on target [intelligence](#) provided by the moderate Free Syrian Army, an allegation he said "proved" Russia was not targeting the "so-called moderate opposition or the civilian population." Russian state media continues to report on visits to Moscow from leading members of the Free Syrian Army, although the Syrian opposition consistently denies these claims. Those members of the opposition that do admit to having open contact with Moscow have little or no control over either the armed or political opposition. Russia's claimed contact with the FSA is designed to present the U.S. and its allies as perpetuating the Syrian Civil War by refusing to cooperate with the Assad regime.

Russia seeks to undermine the international legitimacy of Syrian opposition groups in tandem with its military efforts in order to preserve the regime. Russia claimed to support the participation of the "whole spectrum of opposition forces" in a [peace dialogue](#) with the Syrian regime after international talks in Vienna on November 14. Despite this claim, Russia has pushed global and regional powers to agree on two lists that categorize non-state armed actors in Syria as: 1) terrorists, who can be targeted after an eventual ceasefire; or 2) legitimate opposition groups, who can participate in any future peace dialogue. Russia's false characterization of all opposition groups in Northwestern Syria as Al-Qaeda suggests that it is all too willing to sweep most opposition groups under the targeting mantle regardless of their actual affiliation. Moscow will continue to insist on the formation of lists to bolster its narrative that it only seeks to target terrorists and that the U.S. and its allies are aligned with radical groups.

Russia's air campaign against Syrian rebels has accelerated the depletion and delegitimization of Syria's moderate opposition, a trend that Bashar al-Assad began at the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Three rebel groups pledged to al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra beginning on September 23, 2015 amidst reports of increased Russian presence in Syria. Russia's targeting of Syrian rebels diminishes the value of remaining distinct from terrorist groups, which provide resiliency but prior to the Russian air campaign carried the risk that the groups would be targeted or lose support from the U.S. More groups are likely to join the al-Qaeda affiliate if they continue to be bombarded. Russia's

involvement not only accelerates the radicalization of the armed opposition, but strengthens al-Qaeda in Syria. If left unchecked, Russia may eventually make true its narrative that terrorists are the only significant opponents to Assad and succeed in destroying one of the U.S.'s most powerful levers in the Syrian Civil War.

#### **MYTH 4: RUSSIA'S COALITION - BUILDING EFFORTS ARE ABOUT FIGHTING TERRORISM.**

Russia has called for an international coalition to combat ISIS since September 2015 but Russia's efforts to build such a coalition suggest that it intends to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its allies and give broader legitimacy to its axis with Iran and Assad. Putin called for international military coordination against ISIS and terrorism in the Middle East "similar to the [anti-Hitler coalition](#)" in the World War II during his UN speech on September 28. Russia's proposed coalition would rival rather than reinforce the existing U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. The Kremlin claims the legitimacy of its intervention in Syria from its alliance with the Assad regime, which it refers to as the country's "[lawful authority](#)." Russia insists that [Western anti-ISIS efforts are illegitimate](#) because Assad has not given the West permission to operate in Syrian airspace. Russia's campaign to pull regional actors such as Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Israel into its counterterrorism axis is part of a larger effort to weaken Washington's ties with traditional U.S. partners in the Middle East. Russia's decision to establish a joint Iranian-Syrian-Iraqi information [coordination center](#) in Baghdad in the buildup to its air campaign demonstrated its intent to threaten U.S. partnerships and bolster the international legitimacy of the Assad regime under the guise of building a counterterrorism coalition. Russia has frequently expressed its [willingness to conduct airstrikes in Iraq](#) if requested by the Iraqi government, an escalatory step that would [curtail U.S. operations](#) in the country. Russia may eventually use the pretext of anti-ISIS efforts to expand its regional military footprint to Iraq or [Egypt](#).

ISIS's attacks in Paris on November 13 have provided the opportunity for Russia to pull a NATO ally into its alternative coalition. Russia's lower house of parliament issued a statement on November 17 echoing the Kremlin's

call for a counterterrorism coalition while simultaneously [blaming the U.S.](#) for the “permanent destabilization of the Middle East” and for indirectly causing the Paris attacks through its “short-sighted and selfish” regional policy. Russia has attempted to align itself with France since November 13 by accelerating its air campaign in Syria in tandem with France’s expanding anti-ISIS air operations and [evoking comparisons](#) between the Paris attacks and the downing of the October 31 downing of Metrojet flight 9268 over the Sinai Peninsula, which it previously [refused to call a terrorist attack](#). The Kremlin maintains close ties with former French President and opposition leader [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) and far-right leader [Marine Le Pen](#), both of whom have [gained momentum](#) in the wake of the Paris attacks. Russia supports opposition factions in France as part of its larger effort to support far-right and Euroskeptic parties across Europe to foster a weaker EU that is less aligned with Washington. France’s possible military coordination with Russia in Syria would be a major achievement for Moscow that would deepen divides in NATO and possibly even diminish the EU’s united opposition to continued Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine.

## MYTH 5: WESTERN COOPERATION WITH RUSSIA WILL DEFEAT ISIS AND END THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR

The current conduct of Russia’s military campaign in Syria demonstrates that debilitating ISIS does not constitute a priority objective for Putin. Western efforts to align with Russia are thus unlikely to add significant momentum to the anti-ISIS fight. Moscow continues to prioritize the preservation of the Syrian regime above its counterterrorism interests despite the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13 and its subsequent public assessment that a [bomb planted by ISIS](#) had downed a Russian airliner in Egypt on October 31. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov asserted on November 18 that that the attacks in Paris and Sinai rendered Western demands for Assad’s departure “unacceptable” as a “[precondition for joining forces](#) in the fight against terror.” Russia desires Western military coordination against ISIS in Syria in order to grant Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime the cover of international legitimacy in their campaign to destroy the Syrian armed opposition. Western support for a nominal

Russian-led peace settlement would likewise add legitimacy to the position of Assad and his backers. Russia has attempted to feign neutrality in the Syrian Civil War by insisting that it does not care if Assad remains in power. Russian calls for the [Syrian people to decide the fate of Assad](#) through new elections nonetheless constitute support for an [illegitimate electoral](#) process that the Syrian regime has employed in the past to grant itself a veneer of democratic legitimacy. France has opened the door for military coordination with Russia in Syria despite their continued divergence on the future of Assad. French President Francois Hollande agreed to [share information](#) with Russia on the disposition of terrorist and armed opposition groups in Syria and indicated his intent to coordinate strikes against ISIS with Russia after a November 26 meeting with Putin. Putin vowed to “[avoid targeting](#)” the “healthy” opposition groups but there is no indication that he will subordinate the air campaign’s strategic objective of regime preservation to anti-ISIS efforts. Putin has previously characterized Syria’s “[healthy](#)” [opposition](#) as political and armed opposition groups that he claims could partner with Assad. Syrian rebels will continue prioritizing their four-year fight with the regime before countering ISIS, however, ensuring they remain the focus of Russia’s air campaign. French coordination with Russia would add the appearance of legitimacy to Putin’s false anti-ISIS narrative even as he continues to target the Syrian armed opposition.

Amidst Russia’s disinformation about targeting ISIS, Putin has admitted that Russia’s military intervention in Syria seeks to “stabilize” the Assad regime in order to “[set the conditions to seek a political compromise.](#)” Putin intervened on Assad’s behalf to force the U.S. and its allies to yield to a “compromise” wherein the U.S. and its partners accept the preservation of Russia’s client regime. Like the failed “Minsk” ceasefire agreements for eastern Ukraine, a Russian-led settlement would likely change little on the ground and Russia would likely continue to target the large majority of Syrian rebels unwilling to agree to a deal that preserves the Assad regime. U.S. alignment with a resolution rooted in the narrow interests of Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime would drive a further wedge between Washington and its allies in the Middle East, further diminishing the U.S.’s ability to affect positive change in the region.

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*Layout by Casey Jaquez.*