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US and NATO have Syria in their sights

The media is awash with propaganda articles about how President Vladimir Putin is putting the lessons learned in Russia's military intervention in Syria to good use in its war against Ukraine.

The ferocity of these diatribes indicates the degree to which the US Biden administration and its NATO allies see the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to dislodge Russia from Syria, where it played a key role in thwarting Washington's plans to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and isolate Iran using Islamist militias as proxies in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring.

The US *NPR* article headlined "Russia showed its playbook in Syria. Here's what it may mean for civilians in Ukraine" lists Russian airstrikes against civilians in Aleppo and Idlib province as causing widespread loss of life, damage to civilian infrastructure and mass displacement of the population that constituted war crimes.



US and Russian armored vehicles in Syria. [Credit: Russian MoD]

NPR warns its readers that the same murderous tactics, aimed at breaking the morale of the Syrian opposition and dismembering the country, will be used in Ukraine. It cites Robert Ford, US ambassador to Syria from 2011 to 2014, as saying, “They don't hesitate to hit civilian targets. And then the second lesson is they lie about it constantly.”

He added, “Of course, Syria wasn't the first time they used this playbook. They used it in Grozny in that campaign in Chechnya. So, I would assume it's their standard playbook and there will be times they use it in Ukraine.”

In the UK, the Murdoch press's *The Sun* goes further under the screaming headline: “SICKENING EVIL Putin is using the Syria playbook in his war with Ukraine world should expect chemical weapons and hospital bombings.” It alleges that President Vladimir Putin is following the same “battle plan the Russians used in the Middle East and his own territory of Chechnya, which reduced thriving cities to rubble”. This is followed by the claim that the Kremlin was behind a chemical attack by President Assad in Syria August 2013 and had “approved the idea of using banned chemical weapons and let the Syrians carry out those attacks on their own people.”

To make a contemporary connection between the two conflicts, the media have cited *Arabi21*, a Qatari-funded website, that Russia is preparing to recruit “mercenaries” from Syria to support its forces in Ukraine. A Syrian journalist told *Arabi21* that hundreds of Syrian fighters had joined the Russian “Wagner Group” militia, which has fighting forces in Africa.

Media hacks wring their hands over suffering of the Syrian people in “opposition-held” Idlib, skirting around the fact that it is the last redoubt for al-Qaeda-and ISIS-linked Islamists that were the hate figures justifying previous imperialist warfare. Including the nominally liberal *Guardian*, they emit an endless stream of stories about the crimes and atrocities committed by Russia against civilians, helping to create the necessary political climate to further an agenda of war, censorship and domestic repression. In the process the world's journalists conveniently forget US, Israeli or Saudi attacks in various parts of the Middle East—from Iraq to Syria to Yemen—and the US-led bombing of Mosul in 2017, let alone the imperialist powers' infringement of national sovereignty, not least in Syria.

Moreover, their claims ignore, distort and flat out lie about what really took place in Syria as the US and NATO prepare for new wars of aggression in the Middle East to reassert their hegemony in the resource-rich region.

The now 11-year-long Syrian war was Made in America. It began as an effort by the US and its regional allies—the Gulf States, Turkey and Israel—to use protests in March 2011, amid the Arab Spring, to oust Assad, arming Al Qaeda-linked forces such as the Al Nusra Front and promoting a “moderate” coterie of CIA assets and regime dissidents. The media and pseudo-left groups praised these forces, which had little popular support, as “revolutionaries” fighting for democracy even as these Sunni Islamist gangs and militias went on a rampage of killings, wanton destruction, intimidation and theft.

The Syrian government turned to its allies for support. Iran mobilised its forces and fighters from the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah. Russia’s involvement was more limited: it supplied arms and gave Damascus political and diplomatic support to prevent being outmanoeuvred again by Washington, as in Libya. It sought to mediate between the “rebels” and the Assad government, while blocking any United Nations resolutions that could be used as a pretext for military interventions in Syria.

It was Russia that gave President Barack Obama a get out, following the previously cited chemical attack in Ghouta, near Damascus, in August 2013. The US blamed this on the Syrian government and planned to use it as the justification for a military assault and stepped-up drive for regime-change. With Obama facing opposition at home and abroad to his bombing campaign, Putin offered him a deal to rid Syria of chemical weapons in return for calling off the planned intervention.

Weeks later, the UN chemical weapons inspectorate pointed to multiple sarin gas attacks carried out by “rebel” forces, while Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh provided a detailed account in the *London Review of Books* of how the Obama administration had deliberately manipulated intelligence to falsely blame the Syrian government and military for the attack.

It was only in September 2015, more than a year after the US-backed Maidan coup involving far-right forces ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich and overthrew the Ukrainian government, and amid increasing restiveness among its own Muslim population

and neighbours in Central Asia, that Russia entered the Syrian conflict, in September 2015. This intervention, at the official request of the Syrian government, came as Syrian forces in the northwest faced defeat with Islamist forces threatening the coastal areas, including Assad's key areas of support and the port city of Tartous, Russia's only naval base on the Mediterranean, established in 1971 at the height of the Cold War.

It was Russia's first ever military intervention in the Arab world, while Washington's most recent murderous campaigns include Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, in addition to its coups and behind the scenes machinations including backing for Colonel Gamal Abdul Nasser's overthrow of the British-backed Egyptian monarchy in 1952, the coup against Iran's nationalist government in 1953, Syria in 1957, Lebanon in 1958—the list goes on.

Russia's air power was decisive in defeating the militias. With its 5,000-7,000 forces operating out of an expanded naval base at Tartous and its recently enlarged airbase at Khmeimim, it provided air cover for Iranian, Hezbollah Iraqi and Syrian-regime ground forces that have succeeded in largely confining the Islamists to Syria's north-west province of Idlib, which is controlled by Turkey. Russia's ground forces are there mainly to defend its bases.

Russia's military operations, always intended to be limited in time, scope and tactics, largely focussed on Assad's armed opponents rather than ISIS-linked groups and depended on its tenuous coalition with Iran, Hezbollah and Iraq—the so-called Shia Axis. None of them wanted to see Assad fall at the hands of the local opposition, US or ISIS, a reactionary Jihadist outfit fostered by the US to spearhead a vicious sectarian war in Syria. ISIS only became public enemy number one when, in July 2014, it captured large swathes of Iraq, threatening Baghdad itself.

Moscow was able to secure the Syrian government's control over the main population centres and stabilise Assad's rule, test its weaponry, provide combat training for its servicemen, acquire long-term basing rights in Tartous and Khmeimim. It expanded sales of advanced weapons, trade and investment along with its influence throughout the region, including Turkey, Iran, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan and Lebanon, making Syria Russia's most important regional stronghold.

This was achieved at the relatively low cost of \$4 million a day, 28 Russian lives, and the shooting down of a Russian Su-24 bomber by Turkey in 2015. The greatest loss of life suffered by Russia was when a passenger plane carrying 224 people was shot down over the Sinai Peninsula at the hands of an ISIS-linked cell in Egypt, on October 31 2015.

It is Russia's return to the Middle East as a major geopolitical player at Washington's expense that the US is determined to reverse, as part of its war for regime change now centred in Ukraine. The US and NATO are banking on Moscow having to redeploy some of its forces in Syria to Ukraine, thereby enabling their Islamist proxies in Idlib and eastern Syria to advance on government-controlled territory and the main population centres in Syria, with Turkey's support, to unseat the Assad government.

They, along with Ukraine, have put pressure on Turkey to close the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus straits, which it controls, to Russian warships. Last week Ankara announced it had officially notified Russia of its decision to stop warships crossing the straits, after President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared Turkey's support for Ukraine's sovereignty over its entire united territory. While this has been reported as a defensive move to support Ukraine, it is aimed at preventing Russia's ships leaving the Mediterranean to restock back home.

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