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Syria Civil War: The Russians Are Coming to President Assad's Aid...Or Are They?

As yet there is a shortage of proven facts to sustain allegations of a big new Russian military build-up in Syria, says Patrick Cockburn

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Russian soldiers have joined the ground war in Syria. More Russian supplies are being rushed to Syria to prop the weakening regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Greater Russian involvement will prolong the war in Syria, warns US Secretary of State John Kerry. Russia is reported to be planning to strengthen a Syrian naval base at Tartous.

These are exciting stories bringing back memories of the Cold War, but as yet there is a shortage of proven facts to sustain allegations of a big new Russian military build-up in Syria. This is according to a report by Ruslan Leviev and a team of Russian journalists published on the website Bellingcat that has previously investigated Russian military involvement in Ukraine. Not in doubt is that Russia has been Syria's main military supplier for at least 40 years, and that there have always been Russian military personnel there.

US officials confirm only that Russia has recently sent two tank landing craft, aircraft, and a small number of forces.

Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, said that Russian planes flying to an airfield near Latakia were just carrying "military goods in accordance with existing contracts and humanitarian aid".

Much of the publicity about President Vladimir Putin sending soldiers to Syria stems from a **video of fighting on 23 August north of Latakia**. It shows a modern Russian BTR82A armoured personnel carrier apparently manned by soldiers speaking Russian, but there is some dispute over a few words overheard. One Arabic speaker thought he might have heard "meshoon", slang for "let's go", or the English "shoot". The Russian journalists concluded they could hear the Russian for "More!" and "Come on, [give them] more!"

On 2 September there was a further sign of Russian presence when the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, showed pictures of Russian planes – possibly MiG-29s flown by the Syrian air force – and a UAV surveillance drone over western Idlib province.

Russia has had a base at Tartous since 1971, but until 2013 it was a depot manned by just four military seamen. This year there is evidence of more Russian contract soldiers at the depot, presumably because the Syrian opposition has made advances in nearby Idlib and could threaten Latakia.

Overall, there is little evidence that at this stage Russia has substantially increased its existing mission – providing advice and instruction – probably numbering in the hundreds, plus aircraft engineers and logistics specialists protected by Russian marines.

Mr Assad's forces are weaker this year and have suffered significant territorial losses to Islamic State (Isis) and a jihadi coalition led by Jabhat al-Nusra. This week the army lost a large airbase at Abo al-Dohur, which was the last government stronghold in Idlib province. But the pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says this was out of service – so it is a setback but not a crippling blow for Damascus.

The biggest threat to President Assad is probably where Isis fighters have advanced from Palmyra and are **close to cutting the north-south highway**, linking the capital to cities such as Homs and Aleppo, and the Mediterranean. Isis has also taken the government's last remaining oilfield at Jazal.