



THE UKRAINE CRISIS AND RUSSIAN FORCES IN SYRIA

HAMZA HAŐIL

INTRODUCTION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not only created effects in the context of Eastern Europe or NATO-Russia relations, but also has consequences in regions where Russia has a direct military presence. In this sense, Syria has been one of the countries most affected by the Russian intervention in Ukraine. As the most effective global

actor in the Syrian civil war going on for more than 11 years, Russia's Ukraine intervention has brought direct reflections to Syria.

There are many problems that deeply affect daily life in Syria, such as the problems in wheat and natural gas supply due to the Ukraine crisis. However, the most important effect in the long run would be the possibility of changing the balance of power in the

field. In the Ukraine intervention, with the aim of using the experienced operational troops from Syria, Russia has withdrawn its soldiers from some regions in Syria or has tried to reduce their numbers. Regardless of the strategy underlying the mobilization of Russia's military presence in Syria, it can be said that Russia tends to reduce its military capacity.

Since this situation will create a power gap in Syria, in which the crisis is still continuing, it also raises the question of who fills/will fill the gaps in Russia. The prominence of the Iranian-backed militia at this point strengthens the possibility of reshaping the military balances in the Syrian field. In fact, the increase in Iranian presence in the region may bring about more military engagement by the USA and Israel in the coming days. Such a situation may cause the Syrian crisis to enter a new phase and prolong the current state of war.

RUSSIA'S WITHDRAWAL CLAIMS FROM SYRIA AND DEVELOPMENTS IN THE FIELD

The claims that Russia has begun to withdraw its forces from Syria have found wide coverage in international public opinion. The statements in this direction, especially by the Western media and the Syrian opposition, caused the regime elements to develop a counter-rhetoric. Regardless of all these claims, the developments in the field show that there are some movements in Russia's military presence in Syria. However, it is still too early to describe this military activity as a definite withdrawal and to state that this

withdrawal was made as a military reinforcement to the fronts in Ukraine. Besides, there is no official statement on the subject, and the available data is not enough to present definitive evidence in this direction.

In today's conjuncture, the withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria is perceived as Russia's loss of power. The most important factor behind this perception is the prolongation of the crisis in Ukraine and Russia's having difficulties in reaching its goals.

However, it should be noted that Russia's tendency to withdraw troops from Syria is not a new phenomenon. As a matter of fact, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated in a statement in March 2016, just 6 months after Russia became directly involved in the Syrian civil war, that he "ordered the Russian Defense Minister to withdraw most of the Russian soldiers from Syria".¹ Therefore, the withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria is not the first issue that has come to the agenda. However, the perception created by the timing of the withdrawal due to the Ukraine crisis created the basis for the Russian withdrawal to be associated with the loss of power. Considering that foreign fighters brought from Syria participated in the war on the side of Russia in Ukraine, it is possible that Russia wanted to use its troops with war experience in Syria in Ukraine.

The strongest claims that Russia withdrew some of its troops from Syria in order to reinforce the front lines in Ukraine were made by the Netherlands-based news site *The Moscow Times* and the Israel-based *Debkafle* news site.² According to these

¹ Putin: Russian Troops to Withdraw from Syria. *BBC News*, 14 Mart 2016.

² Russian Forces Abandon Syrian Bases Ready to Fly to Ukraine. *Debkafle*, 6 May 2022.



Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Bashar al-Assad at Syria's Hmeimim base.

claims, Russian soldiers are preparing to go to Ukraine via air by gathering at Hmeymim, Qamishli, Deyr ez-Zor, and T4 air bases. In addition to these, many local sources in Syria also state that Russian soldiers are involved in some action in Syria.

The number of transferring the mercenaries from Syria to Ukraine after some training in Syria by Russia has increased since March 2022. However, the preparation of direct Russian troops to be brought to Ukraine by withdrawing from some points in Syria began in April 2022.

In mid-April 2022, there were claims that Russian soldiers from various positions in Syria would be delivered to the Ukrainian fronts. This includes the Mehin military depots in the eastern countryside of Homs, Hama Military Airport, Nayrab Military Airport in Aleppo, and the city of Palmyra(Tedmur) to

the Hmeimim Air Base, which is a Syrian air-base currently operated by Russia.

Likewise, local sources stated that the Russian forces withdrew from the Hamdaniye and New Aleppo neighborhoods of Aleppo and reached the base in Hmeymim.³ It was stated that the soldiers gathered in Hmeymim were sent to the front lines in Ukraine. The movement of Ilyushin, Antonov, and Tupolev types of cargo and large military aircraft from Hmeymim Air Base towards Russia in this period strengthened the claims in question.

Except for critical areas in Syria, the Russian Army has either completely withdrawn from the regions where hot conflicts are rarely experienced or has reduced its military capacity there. At this point, Russian forces at Palmyra Military Air Base in the eastern countryside of Homs withdrew completely

³ Rusya Halep'teki Askerleri Varlığını Azaltıyor ve Hmeymim'e Kaydırıyor, *Enab Baladi*, 21 Mart 2022.

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on 21 April. In addition to the Russian soldiers, Russian helicopters were also withdrawn from the base and deployed to Tifor Air Base in the countryside of Homs.⁴

Iranian-backed militias and Lebanese Hezbollah filled it after the withdrawal of Russia from Palmyra Air Base. On May 20, 2022, about a month after Russia withdrew from Palmyra Military Air Base, Russia largely withdrew its ground troops from this region. The Russian forces, who evacuated the military points in Palmyra, first gathered in the Mahin area in Homs and then moved on to the Hmeimim Air Base. With the withdrawal of Russia from this region, Iranian-backed militias, especially the Fatemiyoun Brigade, took control of the region.

Hmeimim Air Base was the most important assembly center for Russian soldiers before they were taken to the front lines in Ukraine. Russian soldiers who left the military positions in the Turkmen and Kurdish Mountains in the eastern countryside of Latakia and around Keseb on 20 May 2020, arrived at Hmeimim Air Base with a convoy of 30 vehicles. In

addition to around 200 military personnel, armored vehicles also left the region with this convoy. Simultaneously with the withdrawal in this region, some Russian soldiers left the Jurin Military Camp and the Gab Plain region to the south of Idlib and joined the troops in Hmeimim.⁵

Although the Russian presence in some regions, especially in the inner parts of Syria, has visibly decreased, it is not yet possible to make general inferences that Russia has withdrawn from Syria. This withdrawal of Russia is more of a regional feature. Although it is observed that the Russian presence has decreased significantly in the south of Syria and in regions such as Homs, Russia is trying to increase its military capacity in more critical regions in Syria.

Especially after Turkey signaled a new operation to the north of Syria, Russia has intensified its patrols in this region. In addition, Russia strengthened its military capacity in Qamishli, Ayn al-Arab, Manbij, Ayn Isa, and Tel Temir regions with new reinforcements. It is possible to say that the Russian military forces are in a state of mobili-

⁴ Sudden Withdrawal Iranian-backed Militias Capture Palmyra Military Airport Following Pull Out of Russian Troops and Aircraft, *SOHR*, 21 April 2022.

⁵ Suriye'de Sahadaki Rus Güçleri Üslerine Geri Çekiliyor, *Şarkul Avsat*, 22 Mayıs 2022.



Russian President Vladimir Putin visited the Hmeymim Base in Latakia, Syria.

zation in the Syrian field. However, this mobility cannot fully prove that Russia has shifted its military capacity from Syria to Ukraine.

However, it should not be ignored that Russia has not completely withdrawn from some regions where it has reduced its military presence. The clearest example of this is the Russian forces patrolling the Syria-Jordan border with a convoy of 10 vehicles, right after the statements of King Abdullah II of Jordan, who expressed his concerns about the decreasing Russian presence in the south of Syria.

Therefore, even if Russia's military capacity in the region decreases, its effectiveness continues to a significant extent. It is not possible for Iranian-backed militias or Hezbollah to establish influence in some regions, despite Russia. It can be said that this withdrawal process was carried out by Rus-

sia in a controlled manner and within a strategy. Thus, it is too early to claim that Russia, which holds the balances in Syria to a large extent, is in a state of panic due to the crisis in Ukraine and has therefore withdrawn its military presence in Syria.

However, it is possible to say that due to the Ukraine intervention, Russia transferred some of its experienced troops to the front lines in Ukraine or shifted some of its troops to regions in Syria where there was intense war contact.

Syrian opposition sources also raise claims that Russia is inclined to withdraw its military presence in Syria. However, the Moscow or Damascus administrations have made statements denying such claims. Syrian Regime Army Spokesperson Ömer Rahmun made a statement on the subject on May 27, 2022: "Russian bases and points

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in Qamishli, Tel Temir, Ayn Isa, Aleppo, and Idlib have not been evacuated. We talked about these claims with the Russian delegation that visited me today. The delegation stated that the US and the West made these claims deliberately to create confusion, and therefore, Russian soldiers were not transferred. There is a propaganda that the Russian Army, one of the strongest armies in the world, is weak.”

An official, who did not reveal Şarkul Avsat's name and stated that he was the commander of one of the armed elements in the field, stated that the Russian forces would not withdraw from the places agreed with Turkey in the rural areas of Idlib, Hama, and Latakia. The commander said in a statement that “Russian forces are still working at all points, we have not observed a retreat.” On the contrary, he did not confirm the claims that Russia is withdrawing from Syria, saying, “They are visiting the Halfaya Base in the Hama countryside and the Serakib and Maarrat en-Numan points in Idlib.”⁶ However, it should be noted that Russia and the regime sources ignore the activity in the field. The mobility of the Russian military forces

in Syria is not of a nature to be overlooked with superficial explanations. Since the withdrawal of Russia from the region will affect the regime the most in the current conjuncture, the Damascus administration is very sensitive in this regard.

While it was loudly stated by the regime that Russia does not have a tendency to withdraw its military presence in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) started to support this discourse when the possibility of Turkey's operation in northern Syria came to the agenda. The absence of the US presence in Turkey's possible operation areas and the fact that Russia is the only global actor there means that the presence of the SDF in the region is in danger. Therefore, the claims that Russia has started to withdraw from some regions are followed with concern by the SDF.

POWER GAP CONCERNS IN SOUTHERN SYRIA AFTER RUSSIA'S WITHDRAWAL POSSIBILITY

The Russian presence in the south of Syria has become an important issue for regional countries such as Israel and

⁶ Rusya'nın Suriye'den Çekildiği İddialarına Yalanlama, *Şarkul Avsat*, 27 Mayıs 2022.



Jordan, after the claims that Russia is inclined to withdraw its troops from Syria. Since there are no military bases or camps under the direct control of Russia in the south of Syria, it is very difficult to give precise information about the presence of the Russians there. But it can be said that there are some movements regarding the withdrawal of the Russians from the military points in the south of Syria. In addition to the mercenaries affiliated with the Wagner company, 200 soldiers from the pro-Russian 5th Division in the regime army were withdrawn from the south of Syria by Russia. With the withdrawal of Russia from this region, the power gap there was filled by Iranian-backed militias. While Iran had 65 military checkpoints on the Israeli border in 2020, this number has reached 150 today.⁷

Therefore, it is clear that Iran is constantly increasing its presence in the region, although there are speculations about whether or not Russia will withdraw. The fact is that Iran-backed militias will fill the places vacated by Russia, which creates significant threats to the border security of these countries. On May 18, 2022, the King of Jordan, Abdullah II, stated that the Russian presence in the south of Syria is important for the stability in the region. He also drew attention to the fact that Jordan will be adversely affected by the power gap which will increase in the region as Russia focuses on the Ukraine crisis.

The withdrawal of Russia from this region will also have consequences for Israel. As a matter of fact, Israel's most basic priority in Syria is the fight against the Iranian presence in Syria. From this point of view, it

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⁷ Russian Withdrawal Threats to Syria, *Ahram Online*, 28 May 2022.

The Kremlin administration's silence against the Iranian-backed militias filling the regions from which Russia has withdrawn can be read not only through Russia-Iran relations based on pragmatic basics but also through Russia-Israel relations. Israel's attitude toward Russia's intervention in Ukraine disturbs Moscow, and the Kremlin administration may have wanted to retaliate against Israel by allowing the Iranian presence to increase on the Israeli border.



Iranian leader Ali Khamenei and Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Ismail Qaani.

can be said that Iran or Lebanese Hezbollah filling the places vacated by Russia will pose a significant threat to Israel.

Since the claims that Russia has withdrawn some of its military forces from the region have not been fully clarified, it is clear that Tel Aviv is concerned about this situation, although direct official statements have not been made by Israel. Thus, after Putin announced that he would withdraw from Syria in March 2016, then-Israeli President Reuven Rivlin visited Moscow and conveyed his concerns about the issue to Putin. In a statement on his return from Moscow, Rivlin said, "Everyone knows how dangerous ISIS is, but for us Iran is no less dangerous."

If it becomes official that Russia gradually reduces its troops in Syria or withdraws from some points completely, it is likely that similar statements will come from Israel regarding the Iranian presence in the region. However, it may be insufficient to explain Russia's withdrawal from the south of Syria only with a risk factor. This situation may also create some opportunities for Israel. It can be said that with the withdrawal of Russia from the region, Israel will act more comfortably in the Syrian airspace. However, the regime, which is likely to be uncomfortable with Iran, may cooperate with Israel against Iran.⁸ Therefore, although it is possible to say that Israel is uneasy about the

⁸ Jacob Nagel ve Jonathan Schanzer, "Russia's Withdrawal From Syria Is an Opportunity for Israel", *Newsweek*, 20 May 2022.

possibility of Russia's withdrawal from Syria, it is open to discussion that a possible development in this direction will have positive or negative consequences for Israel.

REFLECTIONS OF RUSSIA'S PARTIAL WITHDRAWAL FROM SYRIA ON IRAN

Although it is expected that the Iranian Quds Force or Iranian-backed militias will fill the gap that will arise in the region against the possibility of Russia's withdrawal from Syria, it would be incomplete to read this situation only as Iran's strengthening its presence in Syria. Although it is possible to state that Iran will gain many advantages at this point, it can be said that this situation will also bring significant risks for Iran.

In order to evaluate whether it is an advantage or a risk for the Iranian-backed militias to fill the power gap in the regions where Russia has withdrawn in Syria, it is necessary to consider the reasons underlying Russia's easy consent to this situation. In fact, it can be said that the embargoes imposed on Russia after the Ukraine intervention pushed Russia towards being an isolated country.

Therefore, Russia, which has been put into the process of isolation, may have wanted to keep an important regional actor like Iran on its side. In addition, it is considered that Iran may be one of the countries that is likely to fill the gap that will arise in the world energy market with the embargoes applied to Russia. The last thing Russia wants is to lose

its energy card to other countries or have to share the market with them. Such a scenario would not only affect the Russian economy deeply but also damage Russia's global playmaker role. Therefore, Russia's efforts to establish good relations with Iran and share its dominance in Syria with Iran to a certain extent may be based on pragmatic reasons.

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In the light of all these scenarios and possibilities, it is possible to say that the withdrawal of Russia from the region will provide some advantages to Iran in terms of dominance of the area. But it should not be ignored that this advantage may turn into a risk through the Israeli factor. As Iran increases its presence in the region, Israel may begin to engage more in the Syrian civil war. Russia's withdrawal of its troops from the region, which acts as a buffer between Israel and Iran-backed militias, may initiate a new process in which hot conflicts intensify in the south of Syria. This situation may manifest itself in the reshaping of the military balances in Syria.

CONCLUSION

The exact amount of Russia's military presence in Syria is not known, but it is thought to be around 60 thousand. The fact that the hot conflict dimension of the Syrian civil war has decreased to a large extent strengthens the possibility that Russia will withdraw most of its operational troops there. Considering the cost of these soldiers, it would not be surprising if Russia, having intervened militarily in Ukraine, made a controlled decrease in its military capacity there.

However, Russia's decision to reduce its military presence in regions such as Homs and Daraa while increasing its military capacity in some points in northern Syria, such as Qamishli, Manbij, and Ayn Al-Arab with new reinforcements, shows that the Kremlin administration is acting within a strategy.

Claiming that Russia is in a panic mode due to the prolongation of the Ukraine intervention and that Russia is trying to withdraw its troops from Syria urgently does not comply with the facts on the ground and does not comply with Russia's foreign policy priorities. Given Russia's determination to maintain its presence in Syria despite the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it seems unlikely that Russia will withdraw from Syria as a result of Ukraine's intervention.

It can be said that Russia has withdrawn some of its troops from their bases in Syria and moved some of them to different points within Syria without affecting its main power in Syria. Ukraine's being the main focus point of interest for Russia may have had some effects on Russia's activities in Syria. However, this effect is not significant enough to bring radical changes in Russia's Syria strategy.

About the Author

Hamza Haşıl

In 2015, he graduated from Departments of History (major) and Sociology (minor) at Middle East Technical University (METU). He studied Arabic at Kuwait University Philology Center between 2015-2016 after he was awarded with the Kuwait Government's Scholarship. He completed his master's degree in METU Middle East Studies and right now pursuing his PhD studies at the same university. Conducting research on state-building and East Africa-Red Sea geopolitics in the Middle East, Haşıl closely follows the Syrian civil war after the 2011 uprisings. Since June 2018, he has been working as a researcher at ORSAM Levant Studies Coordinatorship. Haşıl has been a commentator on national television channels in Turkey. He speaks English at an advanced level, Arabic at an intermediate level, and Persian and French at a beginner level.



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Center for Middle Eastern Studies

Address : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA
Phone : +90 850 888 15 20
Email : info@orsam.org.tr
Photo : Anadolu Ajansı (AA)