Was Putin’s Withdrawal from Syria a True Surprise?

Putin’s announcement that Russian forces will be withdrawn from Syria has caused both shock and confusion amongst pundits and journalists across NATO’s media. Indeed the full reason behind Russia’s withdrawal may only be known by few individuals. However even those of us who are not ‘in the known’ should not be completely surprised by the announcement.

The Russian government had already outlined the time frame of the operation in Syria when it began in last October. A Member of the Russian parliament, Alexei Pushkov, stated that the projected time-frame for the operations would be 3-4 months. The announcement to pull out was right on schedule, just slightly over the initial 4 months stated. Russians are wary of being bogged down in long and expensive wars, especially after the one that the Soviet Union waged in Afghanistan. Since the US is backing Al-Qaeda in Syria just as it did in Afghanistan, Russia was careful not to repeat the same scenario twice. Therefore there was a very strict timeline with very specific objectives.

Those stated objectives were not as ambitious as those of America's never-ending War on Terror, and according to Putin, those objectives have now been achieved. Russia’s contribution has already changed the situation on the ground. ISIS is no longer advancing, in fact it’s in retreat. The border town of Azaz which used to be the main supply route from Turkey to Syria for Al-Qaeda and ISIS has now been cut off. This is something the Syrian airforce couldn’t achieve on its own and the main reason why Syria asked Russia for assistance. When Syrian jets attempted to target the supply route, lying near the Turkish border, Turkey’s air defenses would harass Syrian jets. In one case a Syrian aircraft was shot down. The idea was that Russian warplanes would take on the role instead, as Erdogan was unlikely to risk shooting down a Russian plane. Unfortunately he proved eager to take such a risk. Nevertheless, Erdogan could only get away with it once. It did not prevent Russia from conducting their airstrikes and blocking the supply route to Azaz that was feeding ISIS and Al-Qaeda. With the supply route to the radical militants blocked, the full return of Aleppo to the control of the Syrian military was only a matter of time.

Russia’s enemies may be lulled into a false sense of high morale over Putin’s withdrawal announcement, but it will not take long until they realize that Russia is not going to withdraw her forces completely. The Russian air force is still currently conducting air strikes against ISIS in Palmyra to support the Syrian military offensive. Russian warplanes are going to continue flying sorties and bombing ISIS. Russia is also preserving its presence at the coastal bases that they have occupied for 30 years. So far Russia has only pulled out some warplanes and ground forces. The advanced AA defense systems, the S-300s and S-400s, will remain in Syria along with modern T-90 main battle tanks. The fact that those systems remain in place mean that Russia has left the door open for its return.
The withdrawal announcement occurred on the eve of Peace talks in Geneva. Putin stated one of the objectives behind the Russian push was the strive for “the peace process to begin”. In other words, Russia sought ways to get an upper hand in the negotiations. The prospect of Russia coming back at any given moment could force those nations that sponsored terrorists throughout the war to finally back down. In the meantime, Syrians are fighting for utter and complete victory.

*Maram Susli also known as “Syrian Girl,” is an activist-journalist and social commentator covering Syria and the wider topic of geopolitics. especially for the online magazine“New Eastern Outlook.”*