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Issue Brief

Implications of Russian Military Strikes in Syria

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Though Russia's military build up in Syria had been going on for quite some time, raising many eyebrows in the Middle East as well as in the West, the Russian Air Force's strikes in Syria caught almost everyone by surprise. Even the US military was given only an hour's advance notice of these strikes. The attacks, purportedly against Islamic State (IS) targets, were announced by the Russian Defence Ministry on September 30, two days after the upper chamber of the Russian parliament gave unanimous consent to President Putin to use the military in Syria to tackle IS and other terrorist groups. The military operation, the first by the Russian Federation in a country outside its region, sent shock waves across the globe and is bound to have serious implications not only for Syria's future, but also for the geostrategic environment of the region.

Russia maintains that its intervention is based on international law, and is being conducted in accordance with the official request from the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. Defending his country's role, President Vladimir Putin has said that it would help efforts to reach a political settlement by stabilizing the Syrian government and creating conditions for such a settlement.

The Western response to the Russian intervention in Syria has been confused, to say the least. Only recently, the US President Barack Obama had held a meeting with President Putin in which the two leaders had proclaimed a shared interest in vanquishing IS. After the Russian strikes, however, the US has adopted an increasingly critical stance. The US Defence Secretary, Ashton Carter, warned Moscow that it would soon start paying the price for its escalating military intervention in Syria in the form of reprisal attacks and casualties. Michael Fallon, the British Defence Secretary, said that the Russian action were making "a very serious situation in Syria much more dangerous." He also announced to send hundred more British trainers to the Baltic states to counter Russian pressure there. The regional heavyweights - Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar - are displeased with the Russian moves, and are said to be in talks on how to deal with the situation resulting from the escalating Russian intervention. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are the major opponents of Assad regime in Syria.

Syria, Iran, Syria's closest ally, and Iraq, which is being ruled by a pro-Iranian Shia party, are the only countries which have welcomed the Russian moves. Defending the Russian military actions, Syrian President has said that the failure of the axis of Syria, Russia, Iran and Iraq would destabilize the entire region. He even invited the US, the UK and France to join this coalition, expressing the hope that if all these countries joined hands, they can be more successful in their efforts against terrorism. Iran's Foreign Ministry has declared that "Iran sees the Russian military operation against armed terrorist

groups in Syria as a step in the fight against terrorism that is in line with resolving the ongoing crisis in the region." Iraqi Prime Minister, Haide al-Abadi, also supported the Russian move and said he would welcome Russian strikes against the IS in Iraqi territory as well.

While all the above mentioned states view the IS as their archenemy, the opposition by some of them to the Russian strikes, which are purportedly meant to destroy the IS, would seem incongruous. This however is understandable when viewed against the broader context of the Syrian crisis and the position of different states vis-a-vis this crisis. Russia and Iran have been the strongest supporters of the Assad-led government, and are believed to have been providing him with military support. Both countries have adamantly opposed any idea about the resolution of the Syrian crisis that requires Assad to relinquish power. Their close ties with the Syrian Republic have a long history, predating the present crisis, or even Bashar al-Assad's ascension to the Presidency.

On the other hand, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the Western powers including the US, the UK and France have staunchly opposed the Assad regime. They have trained and equipped the opponents of the Assad regime. They have been asking Assad to step down, though lately some of them have hinted that they are open to finding a solution to the Syrian crisis that also involves Assad. Their preferred option, however, has been to see Assad removed from power. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have held particularly harsh stance against Assad, insisting that he would have to go. Both remain committed to supporting Syrian rebels fighting against the Assad regime.

These states view the latest Russian moves as meant to bolster the Assad regime by crushing all its opponents, and not just anti-IS. Their fears are reinforced by the reports that the Syrian troops, backed by the Russian air cover, are launching fresh attacks against the rebel forces. This strategy, they argue, will strengthen the IS because several of these rebel groups are fighting against the IS as well. This argument has been made by the German Defence Minister, Ursula von der Leyen, who said that by weakening or eliminating anti-IS rebels "Russia will strengthen the IS and this can be neither in the Russian interest, nor in our interest."

The Russian involvement has thus raised the Syrian crisis to a new level. Russian support to the Assad-led government may result in more support for rebels from anti-Assad powers, which could make the situation even more complex in Syria with both sides having access to a much large reservoir of financial and military support. This may put further strains on the already tense ties between Shia-Iran and Sunni-Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia. Saudi-Iranian hostility has already played out across the region

with disastrous consequences for the people in the affected countries. Increased Saudi-Iranian hostility also means increasing sectarian polarisation in the Muslim world between the two main Muslim sects - Sunni and Shia. And last but not the least, the emerging situation is likely to bring in its wake even more disastrous humanitarian consequences with many more Syrians vulnerable to these consequences.

The divides created by the Syrian crisis also mean that no military action will be able to deliver a definitive solution. There could be no victory for any side on the battlefield. Even if one side wins, its gains would be temporary. Earlier, the militants opposed to Assad, backed by the Western/Arab alliance, failed to secure an upperhand militarily. Both the US-led coalition and the Russian Federation are keen to strike IS and neutralize it. But instead of joining hands, because of their conflicting interests, they are operating separately. It is therefore imperative that all sides - the US, EU, Russia and their regional allies - should expedite their quest for diplomacy. The longer the military option is pursued by all sides, the lesser are the chances of stabilization. IS thrives on war and conflict. In addition to aerial strikes and ground operations, it should be neutralized through a diplomatic offensive.