

THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



“Russia’s End State: Assad Deposed; What Are the Implications for Russia?”

***Strategic Competition Seminar Series, FY25-03
December 9, 2024***

By Pavel Baev, Mark Galeotti, Dmitry Gorenburg, Graeme P. Herd and András Rác

This report is a summary of the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies (GCMC)’s third Strategic Competition Seminar Series (SCSS) virtual seminar for fiscal year 2025 (October 2024 to September 2025). On December 9, 2024, with the Chatham House Rule in operation, 76 individuals, including desk officers from the US Department of Defense, Germany’s Federal Ministry of Defense, GCMC alumni and faculty, other subject matter experts, and Dmitry Gorenburg, Pavel Baev, Mark Galeotti, and András Rác, the four presenters, participated in an ad hoc virtual seminar in response to the toppling of Syria’s Assad government. This summary includes insights shared by the presenters and points that emerged from the discussion. It is intended as an aide memoire of the event for the participants and as means of sharing key points and insights with a wider readership.

Introduction

On December 8, 2024, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad fled Damascus for Moscow, where he was granted asylum “on humanitarian grounds,” as an alliance of Syrian rebel groups led by militant Islamist group [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham](#) (HTS) and its partner, the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), marched into Damascus unopposed. Their surprise offensive began on November 26 in Aleppo and Idlib Provinces in the north, and the speed of the Assad regime’s collapse that ended five decades of family rule stunned observers. The Russian air force carried out airstrikes in northern Syria’s Aleppo and Idlib provinces between November 30 and December 6 against HTS “terrorists” (Russian and US terminology). By December 8, Russia referred to HTS as “the opposition” rather than as “terrorists.”

For Russia, Assad’s fall represents a strategic reversal but cannot yet be characterized as a terminal blow to Russia’s position in the wider region. Russia can reset, adjust, and recalibrate relations with other partners. Moreover, a weaker Iran increases Russia’s relative weight in their bilateral relationship, as they look to sign a strategic partnership treaty in 2025. As Russia withdraws its military observers from the Golan Heights, its relationship with Israel can evolve.

Nonetheless, Russia's client Assad has been defeated. Russia's "permanent"—Putin's words in 2017 when christening them—air and sea bases in Syria have drawn down and may be withdrawn. In the region, not only is Russia's military footprint rapidly reducing and will probably be extinguished, but Russia's reputation and the perception of its reliability are under question.

Russia's Military Footprint

Russia's "Grouping of Forces" (military unit 23944) in Syria is estimated to be corps-sized (12-15,000) and is primarily located in Khmeimim airbase on Syria's Mediterranean coast [Jahangir E. Arasli, "Syrian Fiasco: Implications for Russia and Iran," unpublished note, December 9, 2024]. Russia had other tactical bases, including at the Qamishli Airport in northeastern Syria and Kuweires Air Base east of Aleppo City. Prior to Assad's fall, the number of Russian warplanes at Russia's Khmeimim Air Base had [fallen](#) to almost a quarter of previous numbers, from 80 to between 15 and 20 planes and helicopters. When the rebels captured Aleppo International Airport on November 29, they [seized](#) significant amounts of Russian-made military equipment, including a Pantsir air defense system, BM-27 Uragan multiple rocket launchers, L-39 aircraft, ammunition, and a Mi-8 helicopter. Of the 6 vessels docked, frigate Admiral Gorshkov of Russia's Black Sea Fleet, auxiliary ship Yelnya, and the cargo ship Inzhener Trubin of the Northern Fleet had [departed](#) Tartus in the preceding days.

As of December 8, Syrian rebels had reportedly captured Jableh, which acts as a checkpoint for Khmeimim air base, and rebels had entered the town of Tartus. As of that date, both bases were within the range of rebel artillery and drone strikes. The Chairman of the Defense Committee of the Russian State Duma Andrei Kartapalov stated: "There are no military units that are separated [from the Russian bases]. Everyone is where they are supposed to be by the orders of the command unit, and are carrying out their tasks. There are no problematic issues there at the moment, security [of the Russian military contingent] is fully ensured" ("Senior Russian MP says country's bases in Syria 'secure,'" Interfax news agency, Moscow, in Russian, December 9, 2024). This statement is the best possible reading of the precarious position of Russian military in Syria.

Russia's ability to continue to use these bases for power projection in Mediterranean and Red Seas, Middle East, and North Africa and threaten NATO's southern flank, is in serious doubt. The function of these bases for resupply, rotation of Africa Corps personnel deployed in support of the constellation of Russia-backed military juntas in the Sahel (e.g., Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Central African Republic), and transit will be very difficult to replicate elsewhere. Russia's naval base at the Port of Tartus has storage, maintenance and repair, lubricants, and a Kalibr missile loading crane for Kalibr-capable Russian submarines and surface vessels that dock at Tartus. Russia's Black Sea Fleet (BSF) has one other such crane in Novorossiysk, which took six months to build after the BSF evacuated the port of Sevastopol in Crimea.

It looks increasingly unlikely that Russia can recover its heavy military weaponry from Syria, including capable air defense systems, if forced into a rapid withdrawal, though personnel and aircraft can be evacuated. Traversing the Turkish Straits and Turkish airspace is not a guaranteed option for Russian military and auxiliary vessels. In the event of total withdrawal, Russia needs to develop new naval bases in the region in order to relocate what equipment it can and as a launchpad for power projection to shore up its Africa operations. However, it takes

years to negotiate access, and the control Russia exercised at its Syrian bases would not be replicated elsewhere. Tobruk and Benghazi in Eastern Libya, controlled by Khalifa Haftar, are mentioned as possible alternatives. But Cairo, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi—and the West—would oppose such a move. Port Sudan in the Red Sea is a possibility, but stability in Sudan brings this option into question. Russia might also look to Algeria, its largest arms export market in Africa, which accounts for 80 per cent of all arms exports to the continent.

Russia and the Regional Fallout

The success of HTS is in part due to Russian and Iranian weakness, with Assad’s external sponsors distracted by conflicts in Ukraine and Lebanon, respectively. Russia is overstretched, and the mobility of Iran-affiliated groups was reduced when Hezbollah withdrew its forces from Aleppo, Hama, and Homs for Hezbollah bases in Lebanon (BBCM, “Briefing: Russian commentators look for scapegoats in Syria escalation,” November 29, 2024). Putin disbanded the Wagner Private Military Company (PMC) following Yevgeny Prigozhin’s uprising in June 2023. Is the conclusion in Moscow and Tehran that both states failed together, and that shared strategic defeat brings them closer together, or does the dual debacle destabilize the bilateral relationship? Might Iran’s gamble of October 7, 2023 even bring about that regime’s downfall? What of the regional impact for Russia?

In Syria, Türkiye-backed rebels are victorious, and Türkiye is the clear net beneficiary, alongside Israel, with Iran and Russia the losers. Türkiye can now expand its buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border and push back against Kurdish paramilitary forces. As a result of the events in Syria, Ankara has unrivaled leverage over postconflict reconstruction and stabilization efforts, whereas by contrast Russia lacks financial resources and credibility. HTS has [issued](#) a number of inclusive statements to assuage the fears of minorities and foreign powers, not the least of which is “Syria for the Syrians.” As a result, Turkish pro-government media coverage suggests the rebel seizure of Aleppo could pave the way for the return of millions of Syrian migrants from Türkiye.

On the subject of Turkish-Russo relations in particular, can Erdogan set the terms of HTS-Russian negotiations for Russia to symbolically maintain control of its air and naval base? Ankara’s leverage over Moscow will increase at the end of December, when the Russian-Ukrainian gas deal expires and the only transit route for Russian gas export to Europe is through Türkiye. Syria has not exported any oil, for example, since 2019, and almost all the oil and much of the gas is actually in Kurdish hands. Who secures the concessions Assad awarded Lukoil and Gazprom in return for Russian support? Which illicit groups will manage lucrative drugs exports from Syria? They will not be Russian.

In Russia’s media space, the specter of ideological contagion, whether religious Islamicist or secular democratic, in the shape of foreign fighters and exported “Color Revolutions” will increase. From a Russian perspective, the threat of Syrian fighters with links to Central Asia and North Caucasus returning is real, but the Islamic State (IS) caliphate operating in the North Caucasus is not aligned with HTS. Russia’s threat perception is currently ahead of reality. Since 2022, the “Special Military Operation” (SVO) in Ukraine has become the organizing principle and top priority of the Putin regime. In this period, Russian influence in Armenia, Moldova, and now Syria, has demonstrably weakened. Georgian developments currently run parallel to those in Syria. Russia currently supports the Georgian Dream Party, which uses violence to suppress the Georgian opposition that refuses to accept the November

electoral results. Events in Syria likely heighten paranoia in Moscow, exacerbating its fear of domino effects and reinforcing a perceived need to show no weakness. Might Putin push the pro-Russian ruling party in Georgia to institute a harder crackdown, which may then become self-defeating as the government oversteps?

From September 2015 onwards, Russia offered direct political, logistical, military, intelligence, and propaganda assistance to the Assad regime. This support played a critical role in Syria, and this in turn strengthened Russia's role in the Middle East as it built relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Russian disinformation operations in support of Assad to obfuscate his use of chemical weapons, torture, rape, and deaths in the civil war will now be exposed and uncontested as prisons are opened and corrupted kleptocratic Assad elites flee or are held to account. Such revelations delegitimize now Moscow-based Assad and Russia's reputation, spotlighting Russia's complicity and enabling function in support of a hated regime. The Syria debacle brings into question the reliability of Russia as an ally. It undercuts, to put it mildly, Putin's pretensions [expressed](#) at the October 22–24 BRICS+ summit that Russia is the “informal leader” of the “global majority.” (We [read](#) the Kremlin's manual on how propagandists should tell Russians about the BRICS summit in Kazan—yes, Putin outplayed everyone again.) As Ruslan Pukov astutely [notes](#): “Moscow does not have sufficient military forces, resources, influence, and authority to intervene effectively by force outside the former Soviet Union, and it can operate there, in fact, only with the condescending tolerance of other strong powers and as long as they allow it. After 2022, this is even more evident. It is quite possible to bluff with power and opportunities on the world stage, but it is important not to believe in your own bluff too much.”

Conclusions: Who Is to Blame for Moscow's Strategic Defeat?

In September 2015, Russia's Syria intervention was Putin's “strategic surprise,” as Putin committed Russia's military to coalitional expeditionary warfare outside the historic border of the 400-year-old empire. In February 2022, Putin was the strategic decisionmaker regarding the SVO, gambling on a quick victory. As a result, Russia's military is tied down in Ukraine, and it lacked the reserves and resources to continue to support Assad. Immediate context also tells a story. On December 7, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met US President-Elect Donald Trump and provided an upbeat assessment of prospects for a just and durable peace, with Trump [declaring](#) Zelensky “ready for peace.” On December 8, Trump [posted](#) “Assad is gone. He has fled his country. His protector, Russia, Russia, Russia, led by [\(President\) Vladimir Putin](#), was not interested in protecting him any longer. There was no reason for Russia to be there in the first place. They lost all interest in Syria because of Ukraine ... a war that should never have started, and could go on forever.”

In Russia, though, Putin cannot be blamed. With regard to public sentiment, Syria is not high on the agenda. Russian state-controlled media can therefore scapegoat Assad, which is already happening. For example, Grigory Lukyanov, a researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, [attributed](#) the HTS overthrow of the Syrian government to Assad's failures Assad to address the root causes that led to the Arab Spring in 2011 and the civil war, including “corruption, ineffective governance, nepotism in the civil service and the armed forces. Added to them was the lack of progress in economic recovery, which has been greatly hampered by US sanctions.” These characteristics are a little close to the bone as they appear also to apply to Russia.

Erdogan’s support for the rebels makes for a safer stab-in-the-back betrayal narrative. Under this portrayal, Putin has been humiliated by Erdogan three times in Syria: first, when the 2020 ceasefire deal was broken; second, when in a phone conversation on December 3, Erdogan, who made the call, reassured Putin about the limited goals of the rebel offensive; and, third, and ongoing, as Moscow has to beg for Ankara’s help in evacuations and withdrawals. Russian military bloggers also look to how the “Sandbox” (Russian military nickname for Syria) was used by the Russian General Staff to launder and rehabilitate the reputations of Russian generals who had failed in the SVO (e.g., General Sergei Kisel, General Aleksandr Chayko, and Colonel General Andrey Serdyukov). It is a short step from blaming Russian military high command to its commander in chief.

Russia’s current emerging narratives—in effect, when one door closes, another opens, and others are to blame and have lost more—will be seriously challenged if military withdrawal turns into a Saigon-type rout. A bloody and chaotic retreat will break into public consciousness, and the sense of an unravelling of edge of empire and now-deceased Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny’s critique of Putin as the “old man in the bunker” will become more widespread. On December 19, Putin will appear in his annual Direct Line phone in. If Putin feels the need to indulge in “Oreshnik-style” (a new Russian ballistic missile that can travel at Mach 10 and which Putin touts as a game-changer in his confrontation with the West) demonstrative grandstanding in order to compensate for the loss in Syria, his position will become weaker not stronger.

GCMC, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, December 10, 2024.

About the Authors

Dr. Pavel K. Baev is Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO). He is also a Senior Non-Resident Scholar at the Brookings Institution (Washington, D.C.) and a Senior Research Associate with the French International Affairs Institute (IFRI, Paris). Dr. Baev specializes in Russian military reform, Russian conflict management in the Caucasus and Central Asia, energy interests in Russia’s foreign policy, and Russian relations with Europe and NATO.

Dr. Mark Galeotti is Director of the London-based consultancy Mayak Intelligence, an honorary professor at the University College London School of Slavonic and East European Studies, a senior associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, and a senior non-resident fellow at the Institute of International Relations Prague. He is an expert and prolific author on transnational crime and Russian security affairs. His latest books include: *Putin’s Wars, from Chechnya to Ukraine* (London: Osprey, 2022); *The Weaponisation of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War*, 2022 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2022).

Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg is Senior Research Scientist in the Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs division of the Center for Naval Analysis, where he has worked since 2000. Dr. Gorenburg is an associate at the Harvard University Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and previously served as Executive Director of the American Association of the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS). His research interests include security issues in the former Soviet Union, Russian military reform, Russian foreign policy, and ethnic politics and identity. He currently serves as the editor of *Problems of Post-Communism*.

[Dr. Graeme P. Herd](#) is a professor of Transnational Security Studies in the Research and Policy Analysis Department at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. His latest

books include *Understanding Russia's Strategic Behavior: Imperial Strategic Culture and Putin's Operational Code* (London and New York, Routledge, 2022) and *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, ed. Graeme P. Herd (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021).

Dr. András Rác (andras.racz@gmail.com) is a senior research fellow at the Center for Order and Governance in Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia of the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). From September 2019 to December 2020, he was a senior fellow of the Robert Bosch Center for Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, and Central Asia. Previously, Rác was associate professor at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest and non-resident research fellow of the Estonian Foreign Policy Institute in Tallinn. Rác earned his PhD in modern history from Budapest's Eötvös Loránd University in 2008.

The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany is a German-American partnership and trusted global network promoting common values and advancing collaborative geostrategic solutions. The Marshall Center's mission to educate, engage, and empower security partners to collectively affect regional, transnational, and global challenges is achieved through programs designed to promote peaceful, whole of government approaches to address today's most pressing security challenges. Since its creation in 1992, the Marshall Center's alumni network has grown to include over 16,000 professionals from 157 countries. More information on the Marshall Center can be found online at www.marshallcenter.org.

The Clock Tower Security Series provides short summaries of Seminar Series hosted by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. These summaries capture key analytical points from the events and serve as a useful tool for policy makers, practitioners, and academics.

The articles in the *The Clock Tower Security Series* reflect the views of the authors and are not necessarily the official policy of the United States, Germany, or any other governments.