

Russia's "Permanent Military Base" in Syria: Moscow just tipped the Balance of Power in the Mediterranean

By [Alexander Mercouris](#)

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Though there has been remarkably little discussion of the subject in the Western media, Russia last week quietly acquired for the first time in its modern history a proper permanent base in the Mediterranean.

Following negotiations between the Syrian government and Russia an agreement dating to 2015 has now been ratified by Russia turning the Russian air base at Khmeimim in Syria into a permanent base. In other words Russia will retain the base at Khmeimim beyond the conclusion of the Syrian conflict, and its presence there has just been made permanent.

That the Syrian government has wanted to grant the base to Russia on a permanent basis has been known for some time. From the Syrian point of view the Russian base not only guarantees Russia's support for the present Syrian government but also provides Syria with a measure of protection it has never had before from Israeli air incursions. These have been a continuous reality for decades with Syria lacking the capability to prevent them. The Russians do have that capability and the Syrians will be hoping that because of the presence of the base they will now use it to protect Syria from Israeli air incursions. As it happens reports suggest that the number of Israeli incursions of Syrian airspace have fallen off significantly since the Russian Aerospace Forces deployed to Syria last autumn, with the Israelis now careful to keep the Russians informed of their flights.

Whilst the Syrian government is known to have been keen to grant Russia a permanent base, the Russians have up to now been less sure. Establishing a permanent foreign base in Syria is for the Russians a major departure from their former policy given the Russian military's overwhelming focus on defending Russian territory rather than projecting Russian military power far beyond Russia's borders.

Some Russian military officials are also believed to have questioned the military utility of a Syrian base, pointing out that the eastern Mediterranean where the base is located is well within the range of Russian ballistic and cruise missiles. Importantly, [judging from comments he made in December last year](#), one of the leading skeptics was none other than Putin himself:

"about the base, opinions differ, you know. Some people in Europe and the US repeatedly said that our interests would be respected, and that our [military] base can remain there if we want it to. But I do not know if we need a base there. A military base implies considerable infrastructure and investment.

After all, what we have there today is our planes and temporary modules, which serve as a cafeteria and dormitories. We can pack up in a matter of two days, get everything aboard Antei transport planes and go home. Maintaining a base is different.

Some believe, including in Russia, that we must have a base there. I am not so sure. Why? My European colleagues told me that I am probably nurturing such ideas. I asked why, and they said: so that you can control things there. Why would we want to control things there? This is a major question.

We showed that we in fact did not have any medium-range missiles. We destroyed them all, because all we had were ground-based medium-range missiles. The Americans have destroyed their Pershing ground-based medium-range missiles as well. However, they have kept their sea- and aircraft-based Tomahawks. We did not have such missiles, but now we do – a 1,500-kilometre-range Kalibr sea-based missile and aircraft-carried Kh-101 missile with a 4,500-kilometre range.

So why would we need a base there? Should we need to reach somebody, we can do so without a base.

It might make sense, I am not sure. We still need to give it some thought. Perhaps we might need some kind of temporary site, but taking root there and getting ourselves heavily involved does not make sense, I believe. We will give it some thought.”

These comments, whilst carefully leaving the option open, suggest a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the idea of a permanent base and an ongoing debate on the subject within the Russian leadership. Presumably it was these doubts and this debate that held up ratification of the base agreement for so long. It is clear that that debate has now been settled, with the agreement finally ratified and with the decision finally made to make Khmeimim into a permanent base.

It should be said clearly that this is a major shift. Tsarist Russia did operate naval bases in the Greek islands and in Piedmont in Italy in the nineteenth century, and the USSR negotiated naval and air facilities at various times with Albania, Yugoslavia, Syria and Egypt, which however all fell well short of being true permanent naval and air bases. The USSR did seek at the end of the Second World War Western agreement for a Russian base in Libya, but unsurprisingly this was refused.

All these previous projects proved ephemeral or stillborn, with whatever temporary arrangements the Russians negotiated with the various Mediterranean powers always reversed whenever these powers realigned towards the West, as they invariably did. The one exception was the Russian naval facility in the Syrian port of Tartus which dates back to 1971. Though it has attracted huge attention during the Syrian conflict, like all the other facilities the USSR acquired in the Mediterranean during the Cold War it is [in no sense a base](#). As even the BBC has been obliged to admit, the facility at Tartus is at best a support and resupply station for Russian ships in the Mediterranean. It is too small to host Russian naval warships of frigate size and upwards, and has [no facilities to host large numbers of Russian sailors or personnel](#) such as a true base would need to do.

The military reality is that since 1943 it is the US Navy which together with its naval allies (primarily Britain and France) has been the overwhelmingly dominant military power in the Mediterranean. Since the Second World War the Mediterranean has been in military terms

an American lake.

The base at Khmeimin however is different from anything that has existed before. Not only does it already host a formidable strike force of aircraft roughly equivalent to that of a US Navy carrier strike group, but it is heavily defended by formidable air defence assets including S400, BUK and Pantsir anti aircraft missiles, and contains a host of radar, electronic warfare and command facilities. It is also defended by a formidable force of Russian ground troops, said to be of battalion strength. Moreover there is talk the base is going to be significantly expanded to make it capable of hosting much heavier strike aircraft, possibly TU22M3s. Khmeimim also forms part of what is becoming a very powerful complex of Russian military bases and facilities in Syria, which obviously include the Tartus naval facility (which may also now be expanded) and a top secret Russian listening post which has long been rumoured to exist somewhere in Latakia province.

In aggregate this is a base complex of a sort the Russians have never had in the Mediterranean before, and one that has now been made permanent.

The Russian base in Syria cannot challenge the supremacy of the US Navy in the whole of the Mediterranean area. However it does have the potential to change drastically political and military perceptions in its eastern half. There is now the prospect of Russian fighters flying over the eastern Mediterranean in regular patrols, monitoring US warships and aircraft in the area, and making Russia's presence felt in the area as it has never been felt before. It is one thing to know in the abstract that Russian ballistic and cruise missiles can reach this area. It is quite another actually to be able to see Russian military aircraft physically present there. The psychological and political impact on the countries that border the eastern Mediterranean (Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Lebanon and Israel) and on the US Navy (in an area where it has long been accustomed to sailing unchallenged) cannot be overstated, and would be tremendous.

All this of course depends on the eventual outcome of the conflict in Syria. By establishing a permanent base there Russia has just raised the stakes, a fact that undoubtedly explains the intensity of the conflict.

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