

International

# With parks, saunas and churches, Russian soldiers in Syria to stay

## Thousands of Russian service personnel now deployed in Syria

**TARTUS:** Looking out over a park planted at Russia's naval facility in the Syrian port of Tartus, the base commander points to a row of trees. "These plants will have time to grow," the Russian says, his eyes shielded from the Mediterranean sun by a desert camouflage cap. Four years after they intervened in Syria in support of President Bashar Al-Assad, Russian military forces are showing no signs of leaving the country. Just the opposite in fact. On a recent Russian defense ministry tour of Syria, journalists from AFP and other media saw Moscow's forces digging in for a long stay - cementing a presence that will have implications across the Middle East.

At the base in Tartus, a sprawling complex on the coast of the eastern Mediterranean, Russian warships and submarines were on full display. But reporters were also shown gymnasiums where off-duty soldiers lifted weights, bakeries serving Russian pastries, traditional wooden saunas known as banyas and even onion-domed Orthodox Christian chapels filled with icons. "Every necessary comfort" is provided to the Russian soldiers, an officer says.

Moscow launched its campaign in support of Assad at the end of September 2015, at the height of a civil war that saw jihadists and other rebels take control of large parts of the country. Russia's intervention marked a turnaround and pro-regime forces have since retaken much of the territory once outside government hands. Officially, some 63,000 Russian servicemen have passed through Syria during the campaign, including soldiers, sailors and pilots who at the peak of a bombing campaign were carrying out more than 100 sorties per day.

Hundreds of private Russian military contractors are also believed to have operated in Syria, with reports of them serving on the front line alongside pro-regime troops. The conflict has been a crucial training ground

for Russian forces abroad and testing opportunity for arms like Moscow's Kalibr missiles and modernized Tu-22M long-range bombers. Some 3,000 Russian service personnel are now deployed in Syria, at facilities like Tartus and the Hmeimim airbase near Assad's home town of Latakia.

### 'Good tactics but no strategy'

Moscow has signed 49-year leases on the two facilities, giving Russia its first long-term military presence in the Middle East. Russian President Vladimir Putin - on a mission to expand Moscow's global influence - has said his forces will stay in Syria as long as necessary. "Our military is there to ensure Russia's interests in an important region of the world," Putin said during one of his marathon televised phone-ins last year. "With these bases, Russia has consolidated its position" in Syria as long as Assad is in power, Russian defense analyst Alexei Malashenko says.

The bases are not the only payoff from Russia's gamble in backing Assad. Alongside Turkey and Iran, it is now playing a crucial role in international talks on the country's future, while developing closer ties with both Ankara and Tehran. Away from the bases, Moscow's presence is being felt across the country. Russian military vehicles patrol along roads where posters show Assad and Putin side-by-side. In the countryside west of Damascus, reporters were shown a Syrian army battalion wearing fresh uniforms and bullet-proof vests being trained by Russian advisers.

In second city Aleppo - where Assad's forces retook full control in 2016 after years of heavy fighting - Russia has provided high-voltage cables and pipes that have brought electricity and running water back to some devastated neighborhoods. Reconstruction efforts have so far been modest, with the international community wary of financing Assad. But the UN estimates the



**TARTUS:** Russian submarines are pictured at the Russian naval base in the Syrian Mediterranean port of Tartus. —AFP

costs of Syria's post-war reconstruction at \$400 billion and Moscow is well-positioned to play a prominent role in rebuilding the country.

Still, challenges remain and Malashenko warns that nothing is certain in Syria. The northwestern province of Idlib on the border with Turkey remains outside government control despite a bloody regime offensive. And

hopes for a long-term political solution are low, despite the UN's announcement this month of the creation of a new constitutional committee. By so clearly backing Assad, Malashenko says, Russia may have left itself vulnerable. "Russia has no other way out. It has good tactics but no strategy," he says. "It is one step ahead, but nobody knows what's going to happen next." —AFP

## An Islamist dilemma after rise of populists in Tunisia

**AL-ALIA:** The annoyance among voters in the hilltop town of al-Alia shows the dilemma facing Tunisia's moderate Islamist Ennahda party as it seeks to win Sunday's parliamentary election after years of sharing power with the secular political elite. Ennahda's fate will not only resonate in Tunisia. Its effort to chart a moderate path is being watched across an Arab world that has for decades failed to peacefully accommodate its Islamist and nationalist movements.

"Ennahda's sympathizers abandoned it because of its concessions and only its own people are left," said Mohammed Amin, 35, a truck driver sitting under a tree near an Ennahda election stand opposite the town hall. Ennahda's national vote share has steadily fallen since Tunisia's first free election in 2011, raising questions over its strategy and ideology as it seeks to recover from a presidential vote last month in which it came third. Where once it could rely on the support of

Tunisia's socially conservative, less developed interior, it now faces a challenge from populist outsiders who challenge the main parties over poverty. Having disappointed Islamists by rebranding itself a "Muslim democrat" party, and poor Tunisians by joining governments that failed to improve their lot, it is trying to woo back its base. But after years in government making the compromises it saw as necessary to maintain social order and tackle deficits, it cannot easily regain its old, popular image as a party of revolution without rejecting its own recent history.

It has embraced Kais Saïd, a socially conservative law professor who as an independent candidate got most votes in the first round of the presidential election, formally backing him in the Oct. 13 second-round runoff. In doing so, it is also positioning itself against Saïd's opponent, the television mogul Nabil Karoui, who faces trial for tax evasion and money laundering, which he denies. Karoui has for years used his television station and his anti-poverty charity to develop an image as the champion of Tunisia's poor, though his rivals paint him corrupt for his personal wealth and ties to the old ruling elite.

### Concessions

In al-Alia, a party stronghold in one of the regions where its vote has fallen

most steeply, Ennahda activists blamed Karoui for their problems. "He worked for three years targeting poverty and he is what led to the reverses for all parties, not just Ennahda," said party member Mehdi al-Habib. Last week veteran Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi ripped into Karoui at a news conference, promoting the advantages of any future alliance between Saïd and Ennahda MPs. The parliamentary election has long been Ennahda's focus because the party that gets most seats stands the best chance of choosing a prime minister and forming a government, while the president's powers are relatively limited.

Banned before the 2011 uprising, Ennahda emerged afterwards as the strongest party, seen by opponents as reactionary and dangerous, and by supporters as the voice of the revolution. However, its election victory that year with 1.5 million votes, 37% of the total, led secular Tunisians to push back, unnerved by hardline Islamist attacks and the example of Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood had taken charge.

With Tunisia dangerously polarized, and facing an economic crisis, Ennahda adopted moderate social positions and joined secular parties in a series of coalitions that tried to tackle public debt. Party leaders believe those decisions helped avert unrest of the kind that accompanied the Brotherhood's rise



**TUNIS:** Tunisian legislative candidate Basma Khalfaoui (left), the widow of murdered Tunisian leftist leader Chokri Belaid, campaigns in Tunis' Cité Holia district. —AFP

and fall in Egypt, and economic disaster. But they also diluted its identity and tied it to unpopular government policies. By 2014 Ennahda's share in the parliamentary election was down to 28%, with 947,000 votes, and last month its presidential candidate took only 12%, with 434,000 votes. —Reuters

## 'House of torture' puts focus on Nigeria Islamic schools

**KANO:** Horrifying revelations of torture and abuse at a compound billing itself as a Quranic reform school in northern Nigeria have shone a spotlight on Islamic institutes unregulated by the authorities. Last week police in the city of Kaduna raided a building to find hundreds of men and boys - some reportedly aged as young as five - held in atrocious conditions at a facility proprietors described as a religious school and rehabilitation centre. Inmates were discovered chained to metal railings and with their hands and feet shackled together. Some bore scars from alleged beatings while other recounted being sexually abused.

"If they caught you if you want to run away from this place, they would hang you, they would chain you," one of the victims Abdallah Hamza said. The shocking revelations made headlines but activists insisted they were symptomatic of abuses that have long-riddled a system beyond official control. Private Islamic schools - known locally as Almajiri schools - are widespread across mainly Muslim northern Nigeria, where poverty levels are high and government services often lacking.

The authorities have estimated

that there are more than nine million students enrolled at the institutions. "The latest example from Kaduna represented the worst of the system and very inhumane conditions," Mohammed Sabo Keana, team lead at the Abuja-based Almajiri Child Rights Initiative NGO said. "But they are a clear manifestation of what a lot of children go through - including being made to beg on the streets, subjected to violence, sleeping in the worst conditions imaginable and living with terrible sanitation levels."

### 'Place of human slavery'

Activists have long pushed the government to reform or end the Almajiri system, arguing that it fails to provide children with the basics of an education. In June Nigeria's presidency said that it wanted ultimately to ban the schools - but insisted it would not be doing so anytime soon for fear of creating "panic or a backlash". Now calls for change look likely to grow in the wake of the latest scandal. In a statement on the case the office of President Muhammadu Buhari - himself a Muslim from northern Nigeria - denounced the facility "as a house of torture and a place of human slavery". "We are glad that Muslim authorities have dismissed the notion of the embarrassing and horrifying spectacle as (an) Islamic School," the statement said.

But it steered clear of mentioning any move to prohibit the schools and insisted that enforcing free compulsory education was a

"panacea". "To stop unwanted cultural practices that amount to the abuse of children, our religious and traditional authorities must work with the federal, state and local governments to expose and stop all types of abuse that are widely known but ignored for many years by our communities," it said.

### 'Stay in line'

Defenders of the Almajiri system argue that it can offer poor families services the Nigerian state woefully fails to provide. Millions of children in the country go without any education despite primary school nominally being free. Retired civil servant Yusuf Hassan runs the Almajiri Foundation in the northern city of Kano that has looked to improve the system. He insisted that most schools are not like the one uncovered in Kaduna and instead blameworthy so-called "rehabilitation centers" where families send relatives considered delinquent or drug addicts.

"Some parents who have children that are difficult to manage at home take them to such rehabilitation centers," he said. "Some of the centers end up chaining the kids because they know they will run away." Hassan blamed a lack of any government medical or psychiatric care to help tackle widespread drug addiction in northern Nigeria and said a first step should be to separate rehab centers from schools. But even some of those who have lived through the brutal treatment meted out in such institutions have argued they can be a force for good. —AFP

## Coming home? 132,000 descendants of Spain's Jews seek nationality

**MADRID:** More than 500 years ago, they faced a bleak choice: convert to Catholicism or be burned at the stake. The only other option was exile. For Jews living in Spain at the time, 1492 was a year burned into historical memory when their community of at least 200,000 people were forced into exile. Now, more than five centuries later, over 132,000 of their descendants have taken advantage of a limited-term offer of Spanish nationality that expired on Monday. The law, which was passed by parliament in October 2015, sought to address what the government has described as a "historic mistake" by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.

Known as Sephardim - the Hebrew term for Jews of Spanish origin - many of the exiles fled to the Ottoman Empire or North Africa and later to Latin America. Under the legislation, those able to prove their Jewish heritage and their "special connection" to Spain were able to apply for citizenship, with justice ministry saying it received 132,226 applications. More than half of them were filed in the past month, when the ministry received some 72,000 applications.

"They said you didn't need a lawyer but without one, it would have been impossible," said Doreen Alhadeff, a resident of Seattle who obtained Spanish nationality for herself and two grandchildren. But it was a long and complex process, that involved demonstrating proof of Sephardic origin through genealogical documents or through the local Jewish community. Those documents then had to be taken personally to Spain to be approved by a local notary - a process Alhadeff says cost her around \$5,000.

"I felt they had taken something important away from my family, and I wanted to get it back," said this 69-year-old who says she remembers hearing Ladino spoken as she grew up, a 15th-century language fusing Hebrew and Spanish that is still spoken today. Others are still waiting to see if their application will be accepted, among them the French writer Pierre Assouline, who has written many books, including one about his Sephardic origins entitled: "Return to Sepharad" - Hebrew for Spain. —AFP

# URGENTLY REQUIRED

For Kuwait Automotive Imports Co. W.L.L.

## Business Development Manager

- Capable of due diligence on projects and new businesses
- Business Environment & Opportunity Assessment
- Working on Financial feasibility
- Excellent Presentation Skills

## FLEET SALES CONSULTANT HEAVY VEHICLES

## FLEET SALES CONSULTANT COMMERCIAL VEHICLES

- Good Product & Presentation Skills
- Schedule Visits by AREA / by SEGMENT / by CUSTOMER
- Utilize Marketing Tools - Brand Folder/Product Information/Testimonials/PR
- Rolling Weekly Plan to Visit Top Customers
- Optimize follow-up Strategy to Win Business
- Assist in Order Planning & Inventory Management

### REQUIREMENTS:

- Minimum 2-5 years' local dealership experience
- Preferably University Graduate
- Excellent English & Arabic communication skills (read, write & speak)
- Age group 25-35

Abou positions should have transferable visa #18 & hold valid Kuwait driver's license. Please mention the position applied for in subject title.

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