

The Russian-Iranian Gambit in Syria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Russian-Iranian gambit in Syria will only inflame the volatile situation in the war-torn country. Sunni-Alawite animosity runs too deep to foster any hope for compromise. Israel must remain vigilant, and prevent terrorists from getting advanced weapons.

The Russian airstrikes in Syria, the recent Iranian-Russian arms deal, and the coordination between Tehran, Moscow, Damascus, and Baghdad in the war against the Islamic State group all herald a change in the Middle East. The age of the Arab Spring, the disintegration of several regimes in the region, and the introduction of various organizations into the subsequent vacuum has come to its end, and this is the dawn of a new era, the nature of which is still uncertain.

Russia and Iran are taking advantage of the weakness displayed by world leaders and are both trying, through their joint efforts, to expand their global influence and dominance, at least across as much as they can of the Fertile Crescent, which spans Iraq, Kuwait, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Cyprus, and Egypt.

Russia brings its considerable international political clout and advanced military capabilities, mainly air defense systems, intelligence, and a modern air force to this equation, while Iran brings funds, imperative knowledge about the lay of the land, and Hezbollah -- a large, trained, and well-armed fighting force, dedicated to doing its patron's bidding.

Hezbollah has lent the Syrian regime's war a considerable number of operatives, who have been able, in some areas, to tip the balance in Syrian President Bashar Assad's favor, preventing the rebels from dealing his army crushing defeats.

What could be the outcome of a situation in which this coalition remains unchecked?

The Shiites will most likely come to power in Iraq, and as the majority, they will exclude the Sunnis, whose community is concentrated in Baghdad and northwest of the capital, from the government. The Sunnis, who will feel marginalized, will then bolster the only other Sunni force in the area -- Islamic State -- and the jihadi terrorist group will find that it has a larger number of local, albeit reluctant, recruits at its disposal.

The war in Syria will escalate to a fight to the death, because contrary to the hope expressed by external elements, no compromise can be brokered between the Sunnis and the Alawites, namely the rebel forces and Assad's regime. The leverage the Iranian-Russian alliance will lend the embattled president will meet a forceful pushback from the rebels, aggravating the volatile situation further.

Both the Syrians and the Iranians, I believe, understand that the bloody war waged in Syria is truly a fight to the death, and therefore there can be no compromise. The hatred between the Sunnis and Alawites is so intense that the chance of launching a true negotiation, one that could breed an actual agreement, is nonexistent.

I assume that if a solution could be devised in Syria, even one by which the country would be divided into de facto spheres of influence, and even at the price of toppling Assad's regime, both Tehran and Moscow would be willing to endorse it. Iran and Russia are more concerned with installing peace and quiet in Syria and ensuring the regime is sympathetic to their regional interests, than they are with the identity of the individual heading this regime.

Unfortunately, this alternative does not exist. The rebels want more than to just bring Assad to his knees -- they want to end the Alawite regime itself, and that is something neither the Alawites nor Russia and Iran will ever abide.

For Tehran, a solution that excludes the Alawites from power in Syria spells the end of the dream of seeing the Fertile Crescent become a Shiite spectrum stretching from Baghdad to Beirut under Iran's leadership.

Russia, for its part, believes that forcibly ousting Assad would be repeating the mistake made in Libya, where Moammar Gadhafi's regime met a violent end. The results of that uncontrolled collapse are evident today: Libya has become the main arms dealer for every extremist organization, and a gateway for mass migration from Africa to Europe.

Why repeat the same mistake again, Moscow wonders, especially when the alternative to Assad is radical Sunni forces, who are unabashedly trying to increase their influence among the many Muslims living in Russia. Reward these nefarious forces would be imprudent, Russia asserts.

One must remember, however, that Tehran and Moscow's Syrian gambit is driven by global events, and that there are three factors lending it momentum: The absence of an international body to reckon with, the fact the Europe is overwhelmed by the refugee crisis, and weak U.S. foreign policy.

The U.N. has little sway over Russia and Iran's moves in Syria. U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon may be able to lash out at Israel as much as he wants, but he knows very well that no one in Moscow or Tehran takes him seriously. Ban and the U.N. may be shown the appropriate deference, but the U.N.'s response is not something these two allies stop to consider before planning their moves in the Middle East.

European leaders have their hands full with the millions of refugees flooding their borders. Europe is highly unlikely to stand in Russia and Iran's way simply for the Sunnis' sake -- people with whom Europe has nothing in common, and who may become future migrants.

The U.S., for its part, is no longer the forceful opponent it once was. When the American president clearly states that he does not wish to pay the price increased American involvement

in Syria may exact, it is tantamount to tacit consent to the Iranian and Russian aggression, as reflected in their respective deployment in Syria, and their troops' participation in the regime's fight against the rebels, during which innocent civilians are harmed.

U.S. President Barack Obama has effectively conceded, publicly, that Russia and Iran -- two foreign forces -- are part of the solution, not the problem.

Will the Sunni Arab states, which have tried aiding the rebels in the past, try to help them fight the bitter reality forming in Syria? Would Saudi Arabia, the Persian Gulf states, and Qatar come to their senses and cease twiddling their thumbs, to quash the Shiite-Russian scheme? Only time will tell.

The Sunni states will have to decide, sooner rather than later, whether or not they are willing to risk a historic change that would see them lose their grip on the Fertile Crescent to Shiite Iran.

Israel has so far refrained from interfering in the Syrian civil war, and it should continue to maintain this policy. The warring parties in Syria share great animosity toward Israel, and both would like to see it destroyed; therefore Israel has no reason to side with either of them.

Israel must maintain its own interest on the northern border, primarily preventing game-changing weapons, be they Iranian or Russian, from falling into Hezbollah's hands, and preventing Iran from forming a base of operations from which it could attack Israel.

The massive Russian presence in Syrian cannot be allowed to undermine Israel's ability to freely protect and exercise these two interests.

Maintain the ability to counter threats to these interests should be at the heart of the Israeli-Russian security coordination: Jerusalem must not ask Moscow whether it can mount a strike if need be – it should present it as a matter of fact.

Israel's red lines must be clearly drawn, and it should not be afraid to act accordingly. Russia is well aware of Israel's interests and it understands Jerusalem has the responsibility of protecting them. It may prove more complex given Moscow's active presence of north of the border, but it is still necessary.

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