



Russian Ambitions, and Israeli Opportunities, in the Partition of Syria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: There is a contradiction between the ultimate purposes of Russia and Iran in their intervention in Syria. Putin's concern for Assad's survival could give Israel some policy leverage, if Israel astutely navigates its way through the situation. This means that Israel should not be tempted to support Saudi-led efforts to unseat Assad or otherwise bring about a decisive outcome in Syria's civil war.

The (limited) scope and nature of Russian military operations in Syria indicate that Moscow has actually come to terms with the reality of a country irretrievably carved into separate domains. President Putin has taken action to save the rump "regime state" from collapse.

Attempts to portray this as representing a bold and ambitious new posture, and as a transformative moment in regional and international affairs, tend to ignore basic realities on the ground. Putin's decision was driven by fear, not hope.

Putin's fear for Assad's survival could give Israel some policy leverage, if wisely used.

This understanding needs to be grounded in a broader observation about the nature of the Russian choice of action. Military interventions are among the most risky – and controversial, internally and internationally – of all strategic ventures. With people at the Russian helm of state who remain acutely aware that the intervention in Afghanistan played a major role in hastening the demise of the Soviet Union, it would be fair to assume that there was little enthusiasm within the Russian leadership for the option they ultimately settled for. That they did so anyway does not prove that Putin has become a dominant player in world politics. It indicates, rather, that Putin came to the conclusion that he had no choice.

By mid 2015, strong indications began to pile up as to fatigue and fragilities in the ranks of the Syrian regime's armed forces, which have been in almost constant battle for more than four years; and now faced new and dynamic onslaughts. The fall of Palmyra in May, after heavy fighting with Islamic State forces, won significant international attention. The takeover was followed by a typical display of IS disdain towards all human norms and standards, and the wanton destruction of much of its unique archeological sites. Equally if not more dangerous were the signs of decline in Syrian military moral, and the disintegration or surrender of entire units on both the northern and Golan fronts.

With Russian advisors embedded in Syrian units at the operational level, and deeply involved in the conduct of the war, Moscow was well positioned to draw conclusions. By June 2015 it was engaged in an intense effort to deflect the danger of collapse. Interestingly, the Russians' first choice was to try and reach an understanding with the main driving force behind the intensified campaign to destroy Assad's regime – namely, Saudi Arabia; and specifically, Defense Minister Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who injected a new spirit of active hostility to Iranian ambitions into all aspects of Saudi policy, from Yemen to Syria.

On the assumption that containing the so-called Baghdadi "Caliphate" is a common interest, the Russian leadership made – and continues to make – an intense and unprecedented effort to engage with the new Saudi leadership. Putin has by now met twice with the Prince – in Moscow in June, and in Sochi in October. Clearly, Putin does not view the Saudis as irrelevant. For him they are a crucial interlocutor. This is all the more so since they hold the key to oil prices. Increased production by the Saudis is the main reason for the present low prices of oil (\$45 a barrel), which threaten the future of the Russian economy.

Still, the June meeting failed to produce an effective agreement, despite talk of a "Yemen for Syria" deal being on offer. As the situation continued to deteriorate (and with Moscow increasingly worried, and willing to warn the Gulf Arabs that their own survival might be at risk) Putin turned to more drastic measures, based on military consultations with Iran – Assad's other key ally. In retrospect, it is clear that the presence in Moscow of Qassem Suleimani, head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, was essentially aimed at setting the stage for coordinated (albeit not combined) intervention.

Particularly against the background of the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, Russian actions also reflect a familiar pattern of disdain and distrust regarding the US and the West, along with an inevitable degree of grandstanding. Take, for example, the first -ever firing of the Russian Kalibr NK long-range cruise missile, their answer to the Tomahawk, at what were purportedly IS targets. This was meant as a demonstration of Moscow's swagger.

The disinformation mills were also set in motion, describing panic and demoralization in Baghdadi's capital, Raqqa. Russian propaganda focused upon western "cooperation with terrorists", i.e. Syrian rebels of all colors, as opposed to their own noble motives. Given the

meager results of the coalition campaign so far, it is not difficult for Putin to pose as more resolute and effective than the competition.

Note, in this context, the telling remark made yesterday by the newly-elected Prime Minister-designate of Canada, Justin Trudeau. He said that Obama "understands" why Trudeau has to stand by his campaign promise to pull the Canadian contingent out of combat operations against IS.

Once the dust has settled, however, it is bound to be increasingly clear that the location and scope of the Russian (and Iranian) intervention are far from sufficient to resurrect Syria as a unified state under Assad's rule. At best, the intervention is designed, together with Hizbullah's intensive involvement, to secure the north-south links between the remaining segments of the rump regime state, and perhaps improve somewhat the "Line of Control" (to borrow an Indian-Pakistani term) in Assad's favor.

This is also the best that international mediation efforts, led by Staffan De Mistura, can achieve. There are no grand solutions; merely a rationalization of realities on the ground and the occasional alleviation of some suffering in contested areas. (This was recently negotiated for the besieged, largely Shi'a communities of Faw'ah and Kafrayyah in the north, and the population exchange arranged with the town of Zabadani). The effective partition of Syria is by now beyond the capacity of any power, internal or external, to undo in the foreseeable future.

Against this background, proposals have been floated recently in Israel (and elsewhere in the West) to counter the Russian intervention by supporting a powerful push to unseat Assad and to bring about a decisive outcome in Syria. Such ideas are misguided, for several reasons.

Firstly, while Assad's regime indeed may be despicable in moral terms (– and the spectacular horrors inflicted by IS on their captives are easily matched by the Syrian regime gassing and fire-bombing of its own people!), nevertheless moral judgments should also take into account the probable consequences of one's actions. In the case of Syria (and Lebanon) these would include, in the case of any push for a decisive outcome, mass slaughter on a scale exceeding anything we have witnessed so far.

Secondly, in regional terms, it may be tempting for Israel to align itself with key Sunni players such as Saudi Arabia (somewhat less so when it comes to Erdogan's Turkey), as well as with key powers in the West. But it is even more important to take into account the perspectives of our (also Sunni) peace partners, and particularly Sisi's government in Egypt, who take a much more cautious view as to the consequences of Assad's possible collapse.

Thirdly, it is rarely wise to opt for the impossible. Assad's removal from power is certainly possible; but it is quite impossible to predict with any degree of validity what will take the regime's place in the land once known as the Syrian Arab Republic. With uncertainty already mounting across the region (and within Israel's borders) there is no reason to add to the chaos.

Moreover, clear-eyed review of the situation leads to the realization that Russia and Iran may be acting in close coordination, but their interests do not really cohere. For Moscow, Assad is a client to be saved from the gallows. For Iran, Syria is a key stepping-stone on the road to destabilizing Jordan; and, as Ayatollah Khamenei has ordered, to "turning the West Bank into the next Gaza." This would greatly enhance, not reduce, the risks for Assad – precisely what the Russians are working to avoid. This contradiction between the ultimate purposes of Russia and Iran can serve Israel's long-term interests, if Israel astutely navigates its way through the situation.

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