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Russian Intervention in Syria: Geostrategy is Paramount

Azmi Bishara | Nov 2015

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Introduction

Russia's military intervention in Syria is the only direct military intervention there by a state from outside the region. Iran was there first, but its intervention took different forms. No state, be it Arab or foreign, has sent experts and fighters against the Syrian regime – direct intervention by foreign states has worked exclusively for the benefit of Assad's regime.

Examining Russia's recent military campaign through the prism of world powers competing with each other in Syria and the wider region is futile. Those who speak on behalf of the conflicting sides consider any foreign intervention that is to their advantage as an act of solidarity, and that which benefits the other side as imperialist intervention. The intention here, rather, is to explore the intervention from the perspective of Russia's own motivations. Sadly, it is not the powers in the Arab world at present that decide who will intervene militarily in our region, they might be able to call for or condemn the intervention, but they do not get to decide.

What has become very clear in Syria is that the states allied with the respective parties there are not differentiated from each other on the basis of their morality. States are supporting one side over the other for reasons entirely disconnected from the Syrian people's cause. Hence the burden of the justice of the cause falls exclusively upon those struggling in Syria, and it is they who will have to answer to history in the future.

Russia's State Interests

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia went through a period of political and social instability that saw it lose even its adjoining and near zones of influence. As if the fall of the Warsaw Pact was not enough, NATO incorporated some of the Eastern European states that were formerly Soviet republics, moving them even further from Russia's

sphere of influence. This occurred in parallel with rapacious EU expansion into Eastern Europe. With its global clout weakened, the new Russian Federation sought to restore its role as major state, first by taking a renewed interest in defending its 'near zones', and then by restoring Russia's global role, which aims beyond adjacent regions into both Asia and Europe.

That Putin's rise to power is associated with a violent policy in Chechnya, which he invaded following his appointment as prime minister by Yeltsin in 1999, is symbolic of this trajectory. That same year, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joined NATO, threatening Putin's nascent efforts to halt the decline in Russia's prestige, and completing a process that began in the period 1989-1994, which saw the peeling off of the Baltic States, the establishment of the Islamic Asiatic states, and the independence of Belarus and Ukraine.

In its effort to restore its role as superpower, Russia did not adopt a global ideology to replace communism, and neither did it become a liberal democracy. Instead, it adopted state, sovereignty, and vital sphere as though they were an ideology. The interests of the state in what came to be seen as its 'vital sphere' became paramount, and taken on an ideological form that now forms part of Russian nationalism. Such ideology can be read as part of Russia's imperial tendencies, one that goes beyond Russian nationalism and creates an inherently self-contradictory composite. The spirit of empires (so to speak) contradicts the nationalist one because it is based on diversity, and if chauvinist nationalism holds sway over an empire, its collapse is only a question of time.

These underlying superpower assumptions go hand in hand with a geo-strategic creed concerning Eurasia. This creed seeks to unite the Slavs and central Asian Muslims from the borders of the Middle East against NATO. At the same time, it seeks to create an

alliance with Iran and states with a similarly nationalist ideology such as Syria and Libya, a strategy that has been systematically explored by Alexander Dugin.²

Russia's first real post-Soviet attempt to limit American expansion within its desired sphere of influence came with the invasion of Georgia and expulsion of Georgian forces from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Russians later made a show of strength by going across the border into other regions of Georgia itself. Paying no attention to the West's series of condemnations of the invasion, or to the US destroyers patrolling the Black Sea, Russia went on to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia's independence from Georgia. In public, this was depicted as a reciprocal response to many Western states' recognition of Kosovo's separation from Serbia in February 2008. While Russian President Dmitry Medvedev used Western behavior in Kosovo to justify Russia's actions, if regions demanded independence on the grounds of their ethnic makeup, Russia itself would be torn apart.³

Unlike the former USSR, or the United States today, in justifying its actions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia the Putin administration – under President Medvedev at the time – did not cloak its intervention with claims of it serving a just cause. Russia is neither intent in spreading communism or democracy, nor in evangelizing for any religion (the relative revival of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia following its marginalization during the Soviet era is nothing more than one component of a revival of Russian identity since the Czarist period). Russia justified its separatist position on the basis of the West's backing for the separation of Kosovo, a justification which bases itself on a national security discourse protecting Russia's vital interests, which had once been defined by the Soviet

² Alexander Dugin, *The Foundations of Geopolitics: the Geopolitical Future of Russia*, trans. Emad Hatim (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, vol. 1, 2004).

³ Azmi Bishara, "A Return to the Cold War or a New, Different International Reality?" *Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi*, 356 (October 2008, 24-9), p. 18.

Union. This is not the discourse of a political ideological camp putting forward—or claiming to put forward—a set of values alternative to those of another camp. Rather it is the discourse of a state based on national security, interests of state, and spheres of influence, no more. In my opinion this is not a return to the two-superpower order.⁴ That order was not simply based on two superpowers, but also on two camps with two different universal projects presumed to be for humanity as a whole.

In view of that, current Russian policy should not be read as one based on a global ideology championed up by a camp of supporters who the nation's President uses to justify his policies, as in the Soviet era. Above all, Moscow's policy is based on a nationalism that rests on state capitalism, and that speaks to nationalist sentiment built on the rejection of Western exploitation. This patriotic nationalist position becomes evident through the lack of any ideologically derived principles driving Russia's position: state interests including national security are what drive current policy. This means that Russia can simultaneously suppress a separatist movement by armed force in one region and champion another separatist movement with armed force in another.⁵ In this sense, the Russian Federation has no fixed positions but only fixed interests, and even these interests can change. This exemplifies Carl Schmitt's concept of the essence of sovereignty, which distinguishes between friend and foe on the basis of the interest of the state; standards that apply to friends do not apply to enemies. Understood in this framework, current debates on the "morality" of double standards would be, for Schmitt, laughable.

Further insight into Russia's trajectory can be glimpsed in its actions in the Arab world. In 2008, the year Russia intervened in Georgia, Syria was just emerging from a period of

⁴ Ibid, p. 19.

⁵ Ibid, p. 21.

diplomatic isolation following the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri. Syria used indirect talks with Israel, via Turkish mediation, to break out of this isolation and worked to renew relations with France, through efforts by Qatar. At the time, Turkey and Qatar were Syrian allies. Turkey's NATO membership, and the US military base and the Israeli mission then present in Qatar were ignored. From a Syrian perspective this was a positive point in favor of an alliance with the two states. That year, the Syrian regime publicly and officially supported the Russian counteroffensive against Georgia. Few now seem to recall that the Syrian move in support of Russian intervention in Georgia came directly from the Syrian president, as if Syria were a superpower that was expected to take a position on events in the Caucasus. Syria did not disguise its desire to use this development in Russian policy to persuade Russia to upgrade its supply of arms to its own military, particularly after the extent of Israeli military and political involvement in Georgia became clear: Israel was providing military support to the Georgian government. Russia however ignored the request and instead worked towards strengthening its relations with Israel.

Evidently, Russia's current military intervention in Syria is not Assad's reward for its supportive stance on Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008. Russia of course has other considerations, in principle not unlike those regarding Georgia, but in an imagined sphere of influence that covers a wider area, and that has to do with a US administration reeling from developments in Iraq, as well as other considerations not yet a priority until Russia's military intervention.

This look back at the development of the Russian-Syria relationship reveals how each state perceives their zones of influence, and how they want the West, the US in particular, to respect their regional and international positions. This applies to the Syrian position in Lebanon, where the Assad regime could not defend a direct military presence after the assassination of Hariri. It also applies to Russia with respect to many adjacent areas in Europe and Asia, and to Iran in Iraq and the Gulf. There is a similarity between these states in their understanding of

national sovereignty, how they understand their vital spheres and spheres of influence, and their right to play a role after the collapse of the bipolar world of two superpowers.

On this basis, Russia showed little interest in the causes of the uprisings in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan in the first decade of this century. Rather, the only problem it saw was Western backing for socio-political forces in its zones of influence. It was with this same mentality that Russia took a negative stance on all the Arab revolutions, thus explaining its continued opposition to these forces since 2011. In this case, fears over a surge by the Islamists combined with fears over Western influence to form a contradictory position. The West, on the other hand, was afraid to support Arab revolutions because they feared Islamists – fears they share with Russia. The difference between the two positions is that the Western states' single fear of Islamists made them hesitant to back the Syrian revolution, while Russia's fear on both fronts – the West and the Islamists – pushed Russia into taking a strong position backing its ally.⁶

Russia's Military Interests

A true reading of current actions must also take into account the state of Moscow's military after the fall of the USSR. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian military went into decline and lost morale. It suffered problems connected to the shortage of equipment, the proliferation of corruption, and a lack of training and discipline. The invasion of Georgia in 2008 exposed, via repeated operational failures, the major shortcomings of the military. While Russian forces did, in the end, defeat a much smaller opponent, its weaknesses were made plain. A plan was then drawn up to create a modern Russian army by 2020. The plan involved restructuring the existing forces, reducing their size, and modernizing weaponry. This plan marked the biggest operation to build up the

⁶ It might be possible to identify deeper factors such as the distaste felt, from the time of Carl Schmitt, by proponents of the ideology of state and sovereignty for revolutions in general.

Russian army since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and defense spending was significantly increased. It is rumored that 720 billion US dollars have been earmarked to upgrade Russian armaments. With spending set to span ten years from 2010 to 2020, that is 72 billion US dollars per year. When Russia annexed the Crimea in a rapid special-forces operation in March 2014, it was clear that these forces were far better trained than their counterparts in 2008. Russia is, however, finding it difficult to maintain a defense budget equivalent to nine percent of GDP.

Aside from a clear contradiction between Russia's nationalist and the imperialist tendencies, Moscow faces other structural dilemmas. This does not mean problems such as the drop in oil prices, despite the significance of that raw material for the Russian economy, but other issues of a more structural nature such as the decline in the Russian population, which began as early as 1990. Russian population statistics are unprecedented for an industrial, educated society not at war. Death rates are high and births are low, and educated Russians are emigrating in large numbers. These patterns are usually characteristic of developing states. The present population of Russia is 144 million, of which 21-23 million are Muslim. The proportion of Muslims is growing as their birthrate exceeds the Russian average and their death rate is lower. Given these realities, it is hardly surprising that Russia has significant fears around radical Islamist movements. After Chechnya, the Islamist opposition began to grow in Tajikistan.⁷ This is a direct factor in Russian political calculations in the region, something it does not conceal.

In spite of its structural problems, Russian policy shows no signs of lessening intervention in neighboring states. With its direct military intervention in Syria and in undertaking

⁷ Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia in Syria (part 1): Declining Military Capabilities Won't Hold Moscow Back," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 8, 2015. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russia-in-syria-part-i-declining-military-capabilities-wont-hold-moscow-bac>.

direct military involvement outside the Warsaw Pact region, Russia made an unprecedented move, even in terms of the history of the Soviet Union (apart from Afghanistan, which marked the end of the Soviet era). Russia did not send troops to Vietnam or Cuba, and in 1972 Anwar Sadat ordered Soviet experts to leave Egypt, thereby ending the period of Russian military presence, in the form of pilots and experts, in the region. Now, forty-three years later, Russian forces are returning to give more than just technical expertise.

Syria as Geopolitics

Analysis thus suggests that the proximate aim of Russia's policy is to defend the Assad regime, Moscow's ally, from collapse. Saving the regime is not, however, an end in itself. Rather, it is a means of self-assertion and another step toward the goal of becoming a global superpower, this time in the Arab world. If the Syrian regime believes its rescue is the exclusive objective of Russia's intervention, it is wrong. The exertion of Russian influence will at most provide a temporary respite. The mere fact of Russia's military presence in Syria means that the regime is no longer master of its own destiny and no longer even a player on the international stage, since Russia is now its proxy at any international negotiations.

Putin's rhetoric further illuminates Moscow's true motives. While he has criticized the Syrian regime and acknowledged the need for political change, Putin has refused to halt support for Assad, stating that support for the regime is part of his war on terror and battle against extremism. Russian support for the Damascus regime dates to before the emergence of armed Islamic fighting groups during the revolution. Russia stood against all the Arab revolutions, even the peaceful January revolution in Egypt, which had no connection to terrorist groups or activities. This does not lessen the importance of the role those groups played in weakening the cause of the Syrian people on the international level, and turning the revolution into a civil war. Russia's actions, however, put Moscow

into hostilities not just with Islamist armed groups, but with all the Syrian opposition. Syrian civilians have been targeted by Russian-made arms since the beginning of the conflict. This forced Russia onto one side of the fray, but also meant that – with Russia on the side of Assad — any question of American intervention was much more complicated.

Russian intervention in Syria complicates the possibility of direct American action, and even the idea of an American-supported safe-haven or no-fly zone. The Russian presence reduces the options for the United States. Undoubtedly, this intervention came after close assessment of the likely American responses, with the expectation of a weak reaction.⁸

The absence of an Obama administration strategy—a lack that enjoys the support of US public opinion—is the main factor in Putin’s strategic calculations for assessing the cost of intervention. This has two aspects: first, the vacuum it left, which left the door open for Russia; and second, the prediction of a tepid American response, making the cost of Russian intervention small in comparison to its benefits.

In this context, some commentators compare Obama’s foreign policy with that of Carter. In fact, nothing could be less accurate. The Carter administration’s foreign policy was very active and effective; during Carter’s term Egypt pulled out of the Arab-Israeli conflict when it signed the Camp David agreement, considered the greatest success of American policy in the region, and the greatest blow to the Arabs in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Not long thereafter, however, the Iranian revolution and its aftermath, led to a sense of disappointment and failure. In 1979 when then head of the Russian intelligence service Yuri Andropov led the Soviet Union to intervene in Afghanistan, the Carter administration

⁸ Michael Singh and Jeffrey White, “Why an Expanded Military Presence in Syria Would Carry Big Risks for Russia,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 2015.
<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/09/08/expanded-syria-presence-would-carry-big-risks-for-russia/>.

responded sharply and used clandestine means. The United States made an alliance with Zia-ul-Haq in Pakistan and with Saudi Arabia under the leadership of King Fahd (crown prince at the time), so that just two weeks after the Russians occupied Kabul the first arms shipment reached Karachi. However, because of his failure to liberate the hostages in Iran, Carter did not receive the appreciation he deserved from the American establishment. His strategy turned Afghanistan into Russia's Vietnam, and Reagan inherited the quagmire. Out of the conflict, Reagan crafted a strategy to confront the Soviet Union.

In contrast, Barak Obama's very hesitant attempt to support the "mujahedeen" in Syria has been weak and unsuccessful. For this reason, if no political solution with the Russians in Syria is reached, Obama or his successor will be forced to change strategy in Syria, and perhaps in the Arab world more generally.

Russia's decision to intervene in Syria can thus be seen as consistent with its broader strategy to solve the conflict in Syria on its own terms. Moscow has endeavored to achieve this through contact with the Gulf States. Putin has and will continue to insist that any peaceful resolution in Syria must be founded on the existing structures and institutions of the Syrian state along with some power sharing between the regime in Damascus and the elements of the Syrian opposition he selects.

With all of this in mind, the aims of the Russian intervention can be summarized as follows:

First, in the short term the military intervention aims to prop up the regime for long enough for Moscow to achieve its desired diplomatic breakthrough. Russia's military presence, then, is meant to shore up the conflict and sting out media coverage meant for international consumption. For this reason Russia's definition of terrorism has remained flexible and subservient to its other major objectives (as has the definition offered by other major states).

Second, this intervention is a message for Turkey and the West alike. In my opinion, preparations for direct military intervention went into effect when action began to set up

a safe haven in northern Syria and rebels received backing to take control of Idlib governorate. Turkey and allies of the Syrian people were very slow to achieve anything on this level, leaving space for Russian intervention.

Third, amidst the current turmoil Russia is strengthening its diplomatic positions, making it difficult to take any decision on Syria without Moscow's express participation. In fact, ever since the intervention in Syria diplomatic contacts between the West and Russia have increased, particularly after a cooling of relations, and efforts to impose a Western embargo following the intervention in Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.⁹

Because the aim of direct intervention is to prevent regime collapse, the main strikes have been directed at areas controlled by the armed opposition adjacent to regime-controlled areas. These are not strikes against Islamic State group (ISIL) targets, since ISIL do not control areas next to government strongholds apart from a few around Aleppo and Deir al-Zor. The first Russian strikes were directed at areas adjacent to those controlled by the Syrian Army, specifically in the northwest where it began bombing the Salma region and what is known as the Turkmen and Kurdish mountains in Lattakia (a new designation in itself). These were carried out to route the opposition and quash the threat it posed to the Syrian Army's land base in Humaimam and to the coastal plain in general. There were also strikes along the front in the countryside to the northwest of Hama (Kafr Nabudah, al-Tamanah, and Khan Shaykhun), and against the villages of the Ghab plain; all on order to hinder opposition efforts to take control of the whole Ghab plain, particularly the village of Jurin, which is considered the gateway to the coast from Hama. Air raids have also focused on rural areas south of Idlib, aimed to breach opposition defenses and help regime forces recapture large amounts of territory in Idlib

⁹ Nikolay Kozhanov, "Russia's Military Intervention in Syria Makes It a Key Regional Player," Chatham House, October 2015. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/russias-military-intervention-syria-makes-it-key-regional-player>.

lost in recent months, as well as to reopen the Damascus-Aleppo highway. This effort failed, however, because opposition brigades defeated the latest assault on the northwest rural hinterland of Hama.

It seems that the Russian president has a strategy. Following his intervention in Ukraine and annexation of the Crimea, he is forging ahead and to a large extent controlling the incendiary issue of Syria. Putin is trying to hold the key to the solution by means of this intervention; by contrast the Obama administration lacks a Syria strategy entirely. The Russian president has thus been able to create facts-on-the-ground guaranteeing him a place in any final settlement of the war in Syria. Putin has reinforced the position of Assad's forces, which had been under significant threat in the months before Russia intervention. He is now trying to ensure a role for Assad during the transitional period, while Western and Arab leaders have striven to avoid that possibility. It is not necessarily that the West has failed to develop a military and political strategy to remove Assad, but rather that they insisted to have a readymade alternative before any action is taken.

The Russians see Assad's participation as essential. To explain this they might invoke the West's negotiations with Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic over the course of two wars: in Bosnia in 1996 and in Kosovo in 1998, where Milosevic remained in power despite the repeated killing of Bosnian civilians and Albanians in Kosovo at the hands of Serbian forces, including the infamous Srebrenica massacre in 1996. However, such a reference would merely be demagoguery. No one rejects talks with the Assad regime to reach a political solution. What is unacceptable is his participation in the transitional period following negotiations. That is a practical matter, not only connected to the magnitude of his crimes. The Syrian president's remaining in power during a transitional period means its failure. The Syrian president is a dictator, and dictators do not share power with anyone. Therefore, no transitional period aiming to transfer power will succeed if he is in government. Nobody in Syria can imagine Assad remaining in power without authority.

The demagogic position that approves of and then downplays the problem of Assad's presence fails to distinguish between the negotiations and the transitional period.

The Context of the Crisis

Russia's strategy in Syria only exists insofar as the United States lacks one. Taking advantage of waning US influence in the region, Putin is also developing relations with his counterpart in Egypt Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Relations between Russia and Israel are also growing ever stronger; *Haaretz* summarized Netanyahu's visit to Putin—a visit organized in less than twenty-four hours—with the headline, "With Moscow visit, Netanyahu Signals Era of post-American Middle East."¹⁰

Russian intervention will not end the war that erupted in Syria as a result of the regime's pre-meditated declaration of war on a popular civil revolution. Neither side, moreover, is capable of surviving this vicious war without strong external support. External support, moreover, has turned this war into one that largely resembles the Cold War period conflicts in Angola, Vietnam, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, where wars raged for more than a decade in some cases. Nor is there any love lost between the Assad régime and Putin himself, whose great deal of posturing during this war is certainly not geared for either Assad, his generals, or their supporters. I do not think that Putin leaves much of an impression on Syrian fighters, with his judo or ice hockey skills. They are not really interested in images of him bare-chested on horseback. Rather, these images and much of Putin's rhetoric around the war is aimed at Russians longing for the return of the superpower.

There are two important internal checks on intensive Russian military intervention in Syria: first, Ukraine, where in spite of the ceasefire in Eastern Ukraine, Russian forces are

¹⁰ Lord Michael Williams of Baglan, "Putin's Gamble in Syria," Chatham House, October 2015. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/putin-s-gamble-syria>.

still concentrated in war zones; second, transporting tanks and heavy weaponry for a single battalion is a very difficult task for already exhausted Russian forces. It would be difficult for the Russian mission in Syria to continue either as long or on as wide a scale as Russia's intervention in Afghanistan. For both of these reasons, in addition to the international constraints, Russia's intervention can be read as a lead up to negotiations on the basis of the balance of forces in a way that preserves Russian interests and the Syrian regime. This implies that there is a wide space to act against the Russian intervention if the will exists among the forces supporting the Syrian people.

As for the other forces active in the region, it is clear that Israel and other states consider the Russian intervention in Syria preferable to the unilateral Iranian influence on Assad's administration.¹¹ Supporters of the regime in Syria welcomes a Russian intervention over an Iranian one, in particular given Iran's sectarian religious priorities, which do not sit well with the secular nature of Syrian society.

Circles very close to Israel in the United States are divided, however. There is some support for Russia—some of which focuses on gloating over the inconvenience to Turkey, given that Russia's intervention in Syria is a strategic headache for Turkey and payback for its strategy that gambled on extremist Islamist militias and distanced itself from the West. For its part, Turkey has also played down its difficulty in overthrowing Assad, as expressed by Ahmet Davutoglu in 2012, that he expected Assad to fall within weeks; a sentiment echoed by Erdogan in September of that year.¹²

¹¹ Many Gulf States deal with the Russian intervention from a perspective of how the Russian-Iranian relationship is developing. Despite their refusal to negotiate with Iran on Syria, they are not opposed to talks with Russia. In my view, this regional rejection of Iran is one of the reasons for Iran's weakness.

¹² R. Krespin, "Russian Intervention Shatters Turkey's Neo-Ottomanist Dreams For Syria." The Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), October 19, 2015, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/print8805.htm>.

Other thinkers close to Israel and the Zionist movement, however, support a more activist US policy in the region and are calling for military intervention against Assad and ISIL simultaneously. They warn against an indifferent and hesitant response to Iran's decision to send forces into the Eastern Mediterranean, the legitimization of its military interventions in other states, and the legitimization of Russian intervention in the Middle East. This camp sees a lack of response as a failure for Obama's policy generally, and specifically as a failure in his assessment of the current situation.¹³ Allowing Iran to intervene like a superpower in other states, the camp holds, is a terrible mistake that will cost the United States and its allies dearly in the months and years to come.

Some commentators think that the key to confronting Russia's new policy is to strengthen and intensify US-Turkish coordination; to take on Russia, and not just in Syria but wherever their interests intersect against Russian influence in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, especially because of Turkey's need to diversify its sources of energy and to find states not directed by Russia in that region. This requires a change in US policy toward Turkey and a change in Turkish policy orientation from the east toward the west, and to the United States in particular.¹⁴

These observers say that when Estonia and Latvia came under Russian pressure a year ago, NATO gathered all its political strength and resources to support the security of those two states. Russian air provocations in their airspace came to an end. Turkey

¹³ Robert Satloff and James F. Jeffrey, "Misanalysis Makes a Mess," *The American Interest*, October 2, 2015, <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/10/02/misanalysis-makes-a-mess/>

¹⁴ Lt. Col. John R. Barnett, "Putin's Syria Adventure is an Opportunity for Washington and Ankara," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 6, 2015. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/putins-syria-adventure-is-an-opportunity-for-washington-and-ankara>.

expects no less, because it is the state most affected by Russia's bellicose intervention to the south of its borders.¹⁵

One of this camp, Israel lobbyist Dennis Ross who is generally close to Washington's Middle East policy-making circles, refers to Putin's belief in power politics and sees any cajoling as entrenching Putin's stubborn position. The response, he says, must be through the use of US power diplomacy, including the creation of safe havens for refugees and training Syrian opposition so they are able to confront the regime and ISIL. Ross stresses the need to involve the Turks in order to secure these areas and prevent any infiltration by ISIL elements, and to involve the Saudis, Emiratis, Qataris, and Kuwaitis in order to provide funding for refugees in those regions.¹⁶ This is by no means a unanimous position, however, and others call for an American position that leaves Russia to get bogged down in a new morass, without active intervention.

Layered onto this state politics is the international hot topic of refugees. The millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon will turn into an explosive and destructive issue if the question of their wellbeing is not resolved soon. The bitterness of Syrians living in the camps of neighboring states and a new generation of youth growing up in the context of repression and humiliation in inhuman conditions will not only make weak states vulnerable, but may present challenges to their own development and prosperity, in particular Lebanon and Jordan.

¹⁵ Ravel K. Baev, "Russia's Syrian entanglement: Can the West sit back and watch?" Brookings, October 9, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2015/10/09-russian-military-experiments-syria-baev>.

¹⁶ Dennis Ross, "Play By Their Rules," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 11, 2015.

Conclusion

Earlier in this paper I stated that the rightness of the position of either of the two conflicting sides in Syria does not derive from who their allies are, as tends to be the opinion of many policy analysis centers worldwide. Rather, the Syrian opposition has two points on its side that make it a preferable option to the regime. First, the oppression inflicted on the Syrian people over recent decades and the viciousness of the dictatorship in Syria; and second, the fact that the regime itself chose military methods to oppress the Syrian people, thereby transforming a civilian uprising into civil war.

The war in Syria has turned into a battle between powers fighting geo-strategically, and there is no longer any clear case for support based on morality or values. Today, it is thus up to the opposition to distinguish itself from the regime. If the opposition puts forward a democratic alternative to dictatorship, then that implies it is capable of governing Syria. Unfortunately, there is also the risk of the war ending with a settlement, even if the opposition presents such a program, as has been the case with many civil wars that ended with settlements and quotas, which have not proven effective. Until the opposition is able to crystalize around a clear solution, the Russian intervention and the Syrian regime risk becoming mere elements in a geo-strategic resolution between major powers.

The balance between international powers in Syria at the moment prevents any side from imposing control. This means that no side can put an end to the violence by imposing factional rule on the country as a whole. The possible alternative for all of Syria is a democracy based on citizenship and equality for all Syrians. In view of the balance of international forces inside Syria, any other proposal—religious, sectarian, or other—would be limited to a specific region. The military forces currently in Syria prevent such a solution. Moreover, any geo-strategic solution would not meet the demands of those who rose up for change in 2011.

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