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CASE ANALYSIS

Russia's War on Terror: Pros and Cons

Sergei Strokan | Dec 2015

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Introduction

The September 30, 2015 launch of Russian air strikes on targets inside Syria marked a watershed in international politics. Immediately after the strikes began, speculations arose over what kind of policy the nation's President Vladimir Putin was intending to pursue in the field of Middle East politics. The motives of Moscow's military operation remain the subject of ongoing debate; a debate that has split policy-makers, diplomats, and the expert community into two squabbling camps.

Where one camp regards Russia's moves in Syria as a genuine effort from Moscow to combat terrorism, and is seen as a part of Moscow's own war on terror, others suspect Putin of pursuing a secret agenda in the Middle East. This latter camp holds that, in launching strikes, Moscow aims to eradicate the moderate Syrian opposition so that it might keep Syria's President Bashar al-Assad's crumbling regime afloat. This camp sees reference to any "fight against Islamic terrorists" as pure propaganda.

Russia's official position is that air attacks on Syrian soil aim to counter ISIL in a battlefield far away from Russia as a pre-emptive move to ensure that the group does not begin terrorizing the nation's backyard, and infiltrate ex-Soviet Central Asian republics to Russia's south. This position remains unconvincing to the West and vast parts of the Arab world, including Gulf monarchies.¹

While the two positions on Russia's stated aims seem clear enough at first, confusion has entered the debate first on account of language. While some describe Russia's action in Syria as a "military intervention," others see it as an attempt to forge a joint global alliance against ISIL in the same way as an international anti-terrorist coalition was formed in 2001 in Afghanistan, following the September 11 attacks. Before coming to a conclusion as to the effects of Russian intervention, it is first necessary to understand Moscow's real intentions when it comes to the Middle East.

Looking at the evolution of Russia's politics in the context of the rapid transformations across the Arab world, a clear picture emerges. This paper will show how, in light of

¹ Strokan S. "Antirossiiskii front Sirii" (Anti-Russian Front in Syria). *Kommersant*, October, 19, 2015. <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2835365>

Moscow's political history, the case of the Syrian crisis can be well described as an acid test, and can explain why Russia has made the choices it has, what its 'red lines' are, and what its ultimate goals are at this historic juncture.

Spelling out the Kremlin's Arguments

For Moscow, military operations in Syria are understood as an attempt to achieve two long-term goals:

1. To prevent the spread of the so-called revolutions of the Arab Spring. The toppling of the Middle East's leaders was denounced by the Kremlin from the start; described as a "Western plot" against its former and time-tested partners and allies (Egypt, Libya, Syria). Officials in Moscow have described the airstrikes as part of a "war on terror, targeting ISIL."
2. To stage a spectacular comeback in the Middle East arena following two decades of humiliation under President Yeltsin's Russia when Moscow was seen as a declining power in the region. The aim is to reach a solution in the Syrian conflict that is favorable to Moscow, its potential allies, and partners (Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan).

While there is no crystal ball that will allow us to see Russia's real motives (nor those of all the other major players in the region), one thing is clear: Russia's air strikes on targets inside Syria have raised the stakes in Moscow's policy of engaging the West and major players of the Middle East. It also sent confusing signals to the West and parts of the Arab world over the possibility of re-engaging through multi-faceted cooperation, from political dialogue to trade, ruptured by the war of sanctions.

Despite the Western criticism of Russia's attacks, which many allege are targeting the Syrian opposition, Russia's military officials and observers insist the air strikes have been effective, so far. Further complicating world perception of Russia's actions was the visit of Assad to Moscow just three weeks after the announcement of air strikes. President Assad's meeting with Putin not only signaled a possible end to Damascus' international isolation, but also enabled Moscow to make the most resolute move so far in securing the long-term goals of new Middle East policy. During the meeting, the two leaders discussed Russia's military and political efforts in helping Syria recover from the devastating war, with Moscow pledging to intensify its support. The officials both described their war efforts as an anti-terrorist counter-offensive, and one that was gaining momentum.

The Kremlin said publically that the event was meant as a stark reminder to the rest of the world that Russia stands resolutely behind Syria's legitimate and democratically elected government, and that the West's blubbering talk of "Assad must go" was an unenforceable fantasy.²

World Reaction: Suspicion, Rejection, Pragmatism

The negative reaction of Western leaders to Russia's position, echoed by condemnation in vast parts of the Sunni world, dashed hopes of a wider coalition to fight ISIL militants. Expectations that a common enemy perceived as presenting a civilizational challenge would bring Russia and the West into a coalition, proved to be premature.

With hopes of a coalition quashed, US President Barak Obama announced his strategic plan to launch a general offensive on the de facto capital of ISIL, the city of Raqqa. The offensive would, in addition to the provision of US Air Force support, see the deployment of 20,000 Kurdish fighters and some 5,000 rebels representing the Syrian opposition.

Obama's initiative, which saw an escalation above and beyond anything seen during more than a year of US-led coalition operations just as Moscow entered the fray, aggravated the rift between Moscow and Washington. Russia cannot help but read the US maneuver as a bit of showmanship, and desire "not to be outdone" by the Russians. There is growing evidence that Russia's military operation in Syria placed Obama in political hot water, with his domestic critics alleging that his discombobulated policy towards Syria essentially handed the entire Mideast to Moscow.³ Meanwhile, the world's reaction to Russia's military action has ranged from total rejection, to cautious admittance of possible cooperation, to an attitude of benign neglect. The UAE unexpectedly welcomed Russian involvement, saying publically that the emirate had reservations about the intervention. A senior official in Abu Dhabi, quoted by *Le Figaro*, said if Russia managed to weaken ISIL and al-Nusra, the UAE would consider this a "positive" outcome, adding that whether or not the strikes helped Assad stay in power for longer was largely irrelevant. Abu Dhabi was even willing to cooperate with Russia

² Korybko A., Strokan S. "Assad in Moscow: 'Syrian Lion'" Uncaged", *Sputnik International*, October 23, 2015. http://sputniknews.com/radio_red_line/20151023/1029009253/assad-in-moscow.html

³ Korybko A., Strokan S. "Syria: Russia's War on Terror." *Sputnik International*, October 10, 2015. http://sputniknews.com/radio_red_line/20151010/1028273879/syria-airstrikes-isil-terrorism.html

over the initiative, with an unnamed official saying, "we have no problem in cooperating with Russia, but not with Iran."⁴

This position is telling, and reveals political fault lines that prevented coalition making in the fight against ISIL. The Gulf's position on Iran, and the West's position on Assad (and its Middle East policy goals) mean that what was described in Moscow as a major diplomatic victory, is viewed in predominantly negative terms that served to polarize world opinion. Indeed, after consultations with Saudi Arabia, the Obama administration dropped its initial reservations over Iran, joining the de-facto "group of four" (US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey).

The two-day Vienna talks, held from 29-30 October 2015, evoked cautious optimism, since they brought together Moscow, Iran, Egypt and other key regional players.⁵ The move to broaden the international discussion table was initially met with some resistance from the US, but it eventually acceded to Russia's suggestion for expanded participation. While it was not surprising that Moscow—which initiated the meetings—wanted to make the talks more inclusive, what did catch many observers off guard was Russia and Jordan's agreement to set up a joint anti-terrorist coordination facility in Amman as part of a coordinated response to the escalation in Syria. Up until this point, the Hashemite Kingdom had been a firm ally of the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, but it now looks as if the ISIL threat has prompted the kingdom to be much more pragmatic in its regional outlook.

In sum, since Moscow got involved in the Syrian conflict, existing rifts and changing political configurations became more unstable, and parties moved further away from each other on the one hand, and strengthened alliances on the other.

⁴ Strokan S., Mikheev V. "Two Coalitions against ISIS: What next for Syria?" *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, October 8, 2015. http://rbth.com/international/2015/10/08/two_coalitions_against_isis_what_next_for_syria_49923.html

⁵ Strokan S., Mikheev V. "Russia's all-inclusive diplomacy over Syria." *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, October 27, 2015.

http://rbth.com/international/troika/2015/10/27/rusias-all-inclusive-diplomacy-over-syria_534459

The Second Anti-ISIL Coalition: Myth or Reality

Major Western and regional powers are talking of a US-led coalition against the Islamic State. With no alternative to the idea emerging, it seems likely that a second anti-ISIL coalition is in-the-making, comprising Russia, Iran, and Iraq along with the Assad régime in Damascus. The new coalition has already announced the set-up of a coordination center in Baghdad—which began operating at the end of October—from which to carry out reconnaissance and analysis.

A newcomer to the second anti-ISIL coalition, led by Moscow, Iraq is making bold commitments. Seen as a US client state, after more than a decade of American military presence following the US ousting of former dictator Saddam Hussein after the US invasion of Iraq, Iraq has pledged to become more active in fighting ISIL and provide intelligence data to Iran, Syria, and Russia.

The two anti-ISIL coalitions are not on speaking terms, despite top-level liaison between the Russian and American brass. Rhetoric from both sides suggests the coalitions are in competition with each other, and both are claiming de facto legitimacy as the main ISIL avenger.

The outcome of the undeclared competition between the two coalitions, however, will not so much determine who wins over the “bad guys,” but rather will set a new pecking order in the region.

For the United States, triumph over ISIL is becoming a matter of re-instating its credentials as the time-honored provider of security for the Middle East. For Russia, it is about securing a pro-Moscow regime in Damascus, fomenting privileged relations with rising regional power Iran, and coming back into global politics as an assertive actor to be reckoned with.

Given the current state of the field, the likelihood of Russia opening up a “second front” in Iraq and the viability of the so-called “anti-ISIL coalition” are being widely debated, as are the motives of the leadership in Baghdad. One argument seems to be the psychological gains of the first round of Russian air strikes on targets in Syria, which have created a sympathetic attitude among the Shia population, who are comparing Russian achievements over a few weeks with the modest gains of the year-long campaign of the US-led coalition.

The general mood among the Shiite majority is reflected not only in social media, such as in Facebook posts showing a photoshopped image of President Putin dressed in the robe of a southern tribal sheikh, but also in the statements of top officials. Hakim al-Zamili, the head of the Iraqi Parliamentary Defense and Security Committee, alleged that a formal request could be sent to Moscow with an invitation to launch air strikes on ISIL inside Iraq. Moreover, al-Zamili suggested that one day the Russia-led anti-ISIL coalition might become a substitute the US-led coalition in Iraq.

However, the veracity of this claim is widely debated, with many pointing to Iraq's internal feuds and divergent interests within Iraq's diverse political and social classes. Yevgeny Satanovsky, president of the Moscow-based Institute of Middle East Studies, for one, thinks such an intervention would be unlikely: "The fact is that the political class in Iraq is disunited, many groups and clans are opposed to inviting Russia, and should this happen, it might provoke a fundamental destabilization."

According to Satanovsky, when it comes to intervention in Iraq, "the problem is that there is no unified country anymore." He is referring to today's landscape, where some areas are controlled by the Kurds, others are administered by the Shiites, still others dominated by the Sunnis, and an increasing area under the rule of terrorists. Indeed, Iraq as it existed some 10-15 years ago no longer exists.⁶

Judging by the statements of Russian officials, at least for the moment, Moscow seems likely to limit its military involvement to the Syrian front. This seems to be a current 'red line,' leaving Iraq and the task of clearing it of Islamist jihadists to other members of the informal Russia-led anti-ISIL coalition.

Russia–Saudi Arabia: It Takes Two to Tango

As Assad's forces reportedly geared up for a new offensive, few could have predicted the visit of Saudi Minister of Defense Sheikh Mohammed bin Salman to Russia's southern city of Sochi to meet Putin. It seems the visit between the officials was to test out the limits and intentions regarding a resolution to the Syrian quagmire.

⁶ Strokan S., Mikheev V. "What are the chances of a Russian second front in Iraq?" *Russia Behind the Headlines*, October, 15, 2015. http://rbth.com/international/2015/10/15/what_are_the_chances_of_a_russian_second_front_in_iraq_50107.html

The October 11 visit was a sensational turn-around in the political landscape: Saudi Arabia and Russia were divided over Syria four years earlier and nothing had changed since then; with the exception of a suspicion that the two nations were conducting a proxy war on the Syrian battlefield. Given the consistent financial and logistical support rendered by Saudi Arabia to certain militant groups of the anti-Assad's opposition, the trip by the son of the Saudi king, allegedly viewed as heir apparent, was a daring enterprise in and of itself.

Apart from probing Moscow's resolution in backing the ruler of Damascus, Prince Mohammed bin Salman sought the answer to a crucial question for the desert kingdom: what are the limits to cooperation between Russia and Saudi's arch-rival, Iran? The meeting between Putin and Prince Mohammed bin Salman produced verbal consent to pursue "common goals in Syria," understood broadly as combating terrorists and achieving national reconciliation.

A post-factum comment by Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov sounded unexpectedly optimistic. He claimed that Moscow and Riyadh shared the goal of "ensuring the triumph of national reconciliation in Syria so that all Syrians, regardless of their nationality or religion, will feel masters of their land."⁷ This upbeat assessment could be misleading, however, since until now the two actors maintain divergent interpretations of just who "all Syrians" are.

The positive outcome of the meeting in Sochi cannot be discounted. It kicked off discussion of a possible political solution. To mitigate Saudi Arabia's concerns that Russian air strikes were targeting mostly anti-Assad rebels, Moscow has offered to establish close cooperation between military command centers and security services in order to eliminate any doubts that the targets of the Russian Air Force are indeed ISIL militants, the al-Nusra Front, and other terrorist organizations.

On other sticking points, Moscow and Riyadh have found common ground. The Saudis accept the concept of preserving the territorial integrity of Syria and admit that government institutions, including the armed forces, should be kept intact during any shift in leadership to ensure a stable future for the country. The main unsettled issue

⁷ Strokan S., Mikheev V. "King's move: Saudi Prince playing chess in geopolitics with Putin." *Russia Behind the Headlines*, October 15, 2015. http://rbth.com/international/2015/10/15/kings_move_saudi_prince_playing_chess_in_geopolitics_with_putin_50113.html

remains the fate of Assad himself: Saudi Arabia insists that he must step down in order to free the stage for a transition of power in Syria, while Russia maintains that this is wholly unnecessary, even undesirable.

One thing is clear: Assad is a formidable stumbling block and neither side is able to abandon its' rigid stance. Moscow cannot dump Assad because it would mean admitting that it had been supporting the wrong party for the past four years. For its part, Riyadh is fixed on toppling Assad for the sake of long-borne plans to install a Sunni ruler in Damascus.

Nevertheless, the frank discussion held in Sochi was useful at least in terms of securing good communication between members of the two coalitions. At least, both sides are in tune when it comes to ISIL, whose spiritual warlords have pledged to destroy the House of Saud, viewed by the group as infidels and a corrupted dynasty.

The other potential driver of the rapprochement could be economic interaction and trade, and multi-billion dollar investment projects, for instance, building nuclear power plants, something that Russia has done successfully elsewhere in the past.

Conclusion

Russia's policy in the Middle East, while trying to be maximally assertive, is full of contradictions that at the moment prevent it from regaining strategic initiative in the region.

Moscow's major achievement amid the crisis can be seen as its gradual abandonment of the image of a declining power, and talking on equal footing with the US in the international arena. The country is mobilizing its position as a country belonging equally to Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam.

What has so far prevented Russia from taking full advantage of this unique position, is its unequivocal support of the regime in Damascus, which has denied the very idea of any political change in Syria. Under such circumstances, the lack of strategic vision means Russia has been unable to connect with much of the Sunni world. The anti-Russian attitude in vast parts of the Islamic world could be neutralized to some extent,

however, if Moscow could exert greater pressure on the Syrian leadership, demanding more flexibility from Assad.⁸

As the Middle East undergoes one of the most dramatic upheavals in its history, marked by the re-configuration and re-alignment of its major players, one thing is certain: no option can be excluded. Amid this uncertainty, regaining its positions in the Middle East will remain, for Russia, an uphill battle.

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⁸ Naumkin V *et al.* "Rossia I Bol'shoi Blijnii Vostok" (Russia And The Greater Middle East). Moscow, Rossiiskii Sovet po mejdunarodnym delam (Russian International Affairs Council). № 9, 2013. P. 30.

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