

Russian Role Could Help in Syria

Despite the alarms in Official Washington about Russia's increased military role in Syria, this expanded commitment breathes new hope into a possible political settlement of the conflict and could help reverse Islamic State gains, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The recently increased Russian involvement in Syria ought to be viewed as an opportunity, more so than as a threat or as something that needs to be countered. Although Moscow's current involvement is only an extension of its longtime relationship with the Syrian regime, it represents just enough of a change to serve as the closest thing we are likely to have to a peg on which to hang some needed rethinking about the Syrian conflict.

The need for such rethinking is reflected in the fact that everyone, including the Obama administration, seems to recognize that the current trajectory of this civil war is unpropitious, notwithstanding disagreements over what to do about the situation.

The most important principle in any revision of policy toward the war needs to be that the untoward effects of this war will be ameliorated only insofar as peace is established in Syria, or as close as Syrians and the international community can come to establishing something passing for peace. It is the continuation of the war, much more than any particular outcome of the war or any particular political configuration of Syria, that is the source of most of the trouble that is worth worrying about.

This is true of at least three major types of trouble. One is the possible spread, quite possibly inadvertent, of instability and combat beyond Syria's borders. The war has, for example, increased the chance of a new war between Israel and Lebanese Hezbollah, given Hezbollah's substantial involvement in the Syrian war and Israel's reactions to Hezbollah activity in Syria.

A second problem is the increase in violent extremism, as represented chiefly but not entirely by the so-called Islamic State or ISIS. It was the outbreak of the Syria war that enabled ISIS to spread its activity, suddenly and significantly, beyond its birthplace in Iraq. This should not be surprising; physical chaos and power vacuums have long been favorable ground for terrorist and other extremist groups.

A third problem, which has become the chief crisis of the day for Europe as well as an issue for the United States, is the surge of migrants fleeing the war for

the West.

The needed focus on tamping down the war, rather than trying to tilt the outcome of it at the risk of further escalation, requires getting away from at least three unhelpful patterns of thought that have prevailed in discussion and debate about Syria. One is the dictum that "Assad must go."

Note that the aforementioned varieties of trouble stem not from the mere existence of the Assad regime but instead from the war that emerged from confrontation between the regime and its opponents. That is true of any spillover of armed conflict across international borders. It is true also of the expansion of ISIS outside Iraq, which occurred only after the Syrian war got under way.

And it certainly is true of the migration of refugees. However much the migrants coming from Syria may have disliked the regime, it was only the physical danger and disruption of war that motivated any significant numbers of them to undertake perilous journeys to Europe.

The Assad regime certainly has many undesirable and even despicable characteristics, but so do many other regimes elsewhere in the world, and despicability alone is not grounds for escalating an internal war to try to influence the result. We also should note that some of the most despicable things this regime has been doing are, again, part of the war itself and do not predate the war. Before the war began, the regime was not indiscriminately barrel-bombing civilian neighborhoods.

Those who are especially solicitous about Israel should also note that Israel had enjoyed decades of relative stability along the Golan front with the devil the Israelis know, the Assad regime. It is only with the war in Syria and the loss of regime control of parts of that front that significant and immediate security questions related to Syria have more recently arisen for Israel.

The perpetuation of the Assad-must-go mentality is rooted in notions, found most conspicuously in neoconservative and liberal interventionist thinking, about democratization and liberalization being one-way processes and likely to result from any stirring of a political pot. This thinking has come to be applied especially to the Middle East because of the vain hopes attached to the neocon project known as the Iraq War and because of more broadly held hopes of what would come from the Arab Spring.

Another root, given the alliance between Damascus and Tehran, is the idea that anything associated with Iran must be bad. Neither of these roots provides a realistic basis for formulating policy toward the Syrian war.

The one respect in which one could plausibly argue that the very character of the Assad regime is a basis for instability and the border-crossing consequences that can result from it is that the sort of authoritarian rule the regime represents will never be the foundation for political consensus in the way that Western liberal democracies know it. But that is a long-term consideration. Right now there is a fire to be contained; discussion of what sort of political arrangements might be kindling for fires in the future is, for the time being, a digression.

Probably the one possible development that is most likely to make the chaotic Syrian situation even more chaotic, as some members of the U.S. Congress evidently have come to recognize, would be a collapse of the regime with an ensuing political and administrative vacuum. A similar recognition may underlie recent comments from the Obama administration suggesting that, although the administration cannot bring itself to abandon the Assad-must-go formulation, the timing of his departure is negotiable.

Another unhelpful pattern has been persistence of the unfounded faith in developing a "moderate" opposition with enough unity and armed clout to be the nucleus of a force that would defeat both the regime and ISIS. If earlier events had not been enough to do away with that faith, then surely it ought to be dispelled by the embarrassing acknowledgment the other day by the top U.S. military commander for the region that the number of fighters that the United States has been able to put into the fray for this purpose can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

The reason for this result is not perverse foot-dragging by the administration. One reason for it is the unresolved tension between the objectives of fighting the regime and fighting ISIS. Another reason is the inherent difficulty of vetting "moderates" amid a civil war, the waging of which is an inherently immoderate act.

(And if some fighter who had passed through a U.S.-supported vetting, training, and equipping program were later, say, to be involved in a terrorist attack against a U.S. target, some U.S. critics pushing now to expand such programs more rapidly would not hesitate to lambaste the administration for that terrorist result.)

Assertions of a woulda coulda shoulda variety, as one finds in the incessant drum-beating about Syria by the *Washington Post* editorial page, that if only a program to develop a moderate force had been implemented earlier with more gusto the result today would be better, is cheap talk that is unsubstantiated either by the experience of either this civil war or other ones.

With the latest Russian moves another unhelpful thought pattern comes into play, which is the tendency to view any Russian activism or extension of influence abroad as undesirable and something to be countered. This tendency is firmly rooted in old Cold War habits and has infused much thinking about other matters involving Russia, including in Europe.

A corrective to this tendency, as far as the Middle East is concerned, is to reflect on how vastly different the Cold War circumstances were from what prevails today. Beginning with the financing of the Aswan high dam in the 1950s, the USSR was making major inroads in the Middle East, not only in Syria but in Egypt, Iraq, Libya, South Yemen, and elsewhere. The Soviet activity had implications for strategic postures as well the global ideological competition. That activity was worth worrying about, and worth countering.

But today Russia is not a superpower, there is not a global ideological competition with Moscow, and the Russian presence in Syria pales in comparison with the much broader U.S. posture, including military posture, in the Middle East.

There has been much speculation about Vladimir Putin's motives underlying the latest Russian moves in Syria. Of course we should not necessarily take what his government says at face value, and of course not all of the Russian motives are congruent with U.S. interests. But the situation regarding Syria is not zero-sum, and the United States needs to be open to ways in which the Russian posture, even with underlying motives divergent from our own, may help to bring closer possibilities for ameliorating the Syrian mess.

One thing that enhanced Russian involvement in Syria means is that Russia will be absorbing more of the costs, and more of the opprobrium associated with collateral damage, from efforts that involve at least in part the containment of ISIS. To the extent this shifts some of a burden from the United States, that is a good thing.

Russian aims are surely not purely anti-ISIS aims, but Russia has at least as much reason to worry about the group as the United States does. The United States has no equivalent to the concentrated, predominantly Muslim populations of the North Caucasus.

Another thing the Russian involvement means is that Moscow, to limit the extent and duration of its own costs, has that much more of a stake in stabilizing Syria and in tamping down the conflict sooner rather than later. A further implication is that greater Russian support for the Assad regime may yield greater Russian leverage over that regime with regard to any moves toward peace.

An overall conclusion is that the Russian moves mark an appropriate occasion for U.S. policy toward Syria to pivot away from feckless attempts to engineer a particular military outcome on the ground and toward greater emphasis on multilateral diplomacy aimed at finding a political resolution of the conflict. Russia will necessarily be heavily involved in any such effort.

Talks between U.S. and Russian defense ministers for purposes of military deconfliction on the ground are fine, but talks between the foreign ministers will be even more important. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran also will necessarily be fully involved. None of this implies that the prospects for a political resolution of this war any time soon, even apart from the ISIS problem, are very bright; they aren't.

The apparent intractability of some of the positions taken by rebel groups, even as they accept in principle a political solution, are discouraging. But exploring every opportunity for diminishing the current fire in Syria is more likely to ameliorate the problems this conflict has caused than will adding more fuel to the fire.

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