

What Are the Syrian Options?

Official Washington is in a blind rage over Russia's military intervention in Syria in support of the Assad regime, but the changed dynamic may offer useful options if U.S. policymakers can just look clearly at the crisis, as ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller explains.

By Graham E. Fuller

With the arrival of Russian forces on the scene the Syrian situation has now grown unbearably complicated. Among the totality of players on the scene, Washington hates them all.

The U.S. has long detested Assad father and son; for years it has attempted to weaken and even dislodge them through various stratagems, especially in the George W. Bush years. They have been a leading symbol of resistance to American domination in the Middle East and to expansion of Israeli power; they have been leading supporters of the Palestinians, and maintained the longest standing alliance of any in the Middle East in their ties with Iran, for over 35 years.

And ever since the Iranian Revolution the U.S. has equally vigorously fought Iranian influence anywhere in the Middle East. For Washington, the fall of Assad was actually more about Iran than it was about Syria.

But now, for far more compelling reasons, the U.S. has come to perceive ISIS, (the "Islamic State") as the single biggest regional threat and supporter of jihadi violence. Yet ISIS is also fighting Assad. Washington reluctantly concluded that an ISIS victory in Syria, and its attendant chaos, would be far worse than Assad. Same goes for al-Nusra Front, a major jihadi force battling Assad; it just happens to be closely affiliated with Al Qaeda.

And now Russia is weighing in with significant new military presence in Syria, first and foremost to prevent the collapse of the Assad regime against its fundamentalist enemies. Moscow will now take on almost all opposition to Assad; as such it also strongly seeks to weaken ISIS, which it has greater reason to fear than does the U.S., given Russia's large and restive Muslim population. But Washington doesn't want to see Russia in Syria either, and would prefer to prevent any significant Russian presence in the area.

Other "allies" on Syria include Turkey whose Syrian policies under Erdogan have gone off the rails, as Ankara is now more intent on checkmating the Kurds (even the broad-based moderate liberal Kurdish HDP party at home) than on checking radical jihadi forces in Syria.

And then there is Saudi Arabia whose obsession to overthrow Assad and check Iran has driven it to exploit the scourge of ugly sectarianism in the region to the detriment of nearly everyone. Riyadh has also launched a brutal and unwinnable war in Yemen; indeed, Washington is one of the long-term losers through association with indiscriminate Saudi bombing campaigns in that country, whose refugees will predictably soon also turn up on the refugee screen.

In short, Washington hates everybody involved, except a near-mythical paper force of “moderates” fighting against Assad. While those small groups include individuals who could be desirable in a future post-Assad Syrian regime, more moderate, tolerant, secular and democratic, the “moderates” sadly are negligible military players, as Washington has now been compelled to admit.

What to Do?

Washington has no good choices. Neocon and liberal hawks want the U.S. to weigh in in Syria, deny it to Russia and Iran (and would end up stuck in another quagmire to rival the Iraq and Afghan debacles they created.) But short of taking over all of Syria for a very long time, Washington cannot fix what ails the country and its deepening fissures.

Can Russia and Iran find a way out of war to forge some new compromise regime? Just possibly. The greatest advantage they possess is their good ties with the Assad regime. Both therefore possess far better intelligence and influence on the politics of Damascus that does the U.S.

Assad is deeply beholden to Russia and Iran for his survival. He may indeed resist leaving office, but if *any* foreign powers are capable of arranging some kind of palace coup even by arrangement, it is Moscow and Tehran. But can they do it? Will they do it?

The status quo in Syria is actually undesirable for both Russia and Iran as well since it feeds regional jihadism and breeds instability. Assad’s military collapse to jihadi-dominated forces would cost them their position in Syria. But it would hurt the West as well and would not guarantee an end to civil war.

Both Iran and Russia have publicly stated that they bear no particular love for Bashar al-Assad as such. Indeed, Assad must nurture suspicions about their ultimate intentions as well, but he has nowhere else to turn. But whatever happens, preserving the state structure, with or without Assad, is essential. Otherwise the rampant anarchy of a collapsed state looms.

So we end up back with the same old calculus: that the Assad regime is perhaps the least of all evils, especially since U.S. invasion and long-term occupation of Syria is unthinkable. Indeed, the Russian presence is in part designed to

block just another such U.S. exercise in regime change leading to chaos.

Moscow perceives that as yet another U.S. effort to plant its strategic flag in the region, as in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, or even Ukraine. Meanwhile Iran finds the conflict a dangerous source of sectarian conflict as well. (Ironically, Tehran's position may be slightly sidelined now with the arrival of far superior Russian forces.)

There simply is no good option for Washington. But reestablishment of central government and order in Syria is the first priority. I doubt that military overthrow of the whole regime, even were it possible, could bring genuine order in any foreseeable timeframe.

As distasteful as it might be in Washington, a dominant role for Russia and Iran at least acknowledges that they bring more to the political and military table than anyone else. Our interests in Syria are simply not that divergent from theirs, except for those policy-makers who believe that we can still "have it all" and keep Russia and Iran out.

But even if one accepts a Russian and Iranian role, the hard work of hammering out some vision of a future Syria will be tough. Partition is utterly unrealistic; it would only plant the seeds of future conflicts over turf to come. Russia may well end up in its own quagmire, but I don't see that as a foregone conclusion. Nor would it be good for the U.S.

But how to move from the present country-wide civil war to some kind of negotiations? And who will be included in negotiations? Certainly not ISIS or Al Qaeda. Are some kind of external UN-linked peacekeepers an option? Pakistani or Moroccan troops? Any plan would at least have to start with freezing fighting as it stands.

Complex diplomatic issues are unavoidable. Given the state of American politics, in virtual perpetual election mode of extravagant posturing, the necessary dispassionate examination of these alternatives seems unlikely. But we can't get to even that stage without acknowledging that simply hating everyone involved isn't a policy either.

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Secrecy of Obama's TPP Trade Deal

The “free trade” advocates managed to jolt the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement back to life and declared success, but now must walk the giant TPP trade deal past the Congress and other legislatures. Michael Winship explains why he thinks the “monster” should die.

By Michael Winship

Every time you think that beast called the Trans-Pacific Partnership – TPP for short – is finished, it comes back like a bad penny; or in this case, trillions and trillions and trillions of bad pennies.

A few weeks ago, talks in Maui collapsed and the massive trade deal, affecting some 40 percent of the world's economy, seemed close to death. But no amount of stakes through the heart or flaming torches or even witch-dissolving buckets of water can seem to keep this behemoth down.

There they all were at the Westin hotel in Atlanta on Monday, the trade representatives of a dozen Pacific Rim countries, grinning ear-to-ear at a press conference announcing that after eight years and several days of extra, non-stop finagling, the fix was in.

So now, as we head toward the climax of this horror story, it's going to take all of us villagers storming the monster's lair with our pitchforks to bring TPP down.

Like all manmade, fantastical creatures, this TPP thing has been conceived in secret. Top secret. You could even go to jail for divulging its contents. Few have been able to see the actual text, all 30 chapters of it, except for some 600 “cleared advisors,” the majority of whom are from big business, and even they have been restricted in what they're allowed to examine.

In May, one of the non-business cleared advisors, Michael Wessel, wrote in [Politico](#) that he and his colleagues were also “prohibited from sharing publicly the criticisms we've lodged about specific proposals and approaches. The government has created a perfect Catch 22: The law prohibits us from talking about the specifics of what we've seen, allowing the president to criticize us for not being specific. What I can tell you is that the administration is being unfair to those who are raising proper questions about the harms the TPP would do.”

In fact, political scientists Michael Colaresi and Nathan Jensen polled fellow political scientists for [The Washington Post](#) and found that their comments

“suggest that secrecy has little impact on helping the U.S. get a better deal. Instead, it helps insulate the government from interest-group pressure, whether from business on the right or environmental and labor groups on the left.”

Most of all we know so far has been the result of Wikileaks and a twelve-page summary issued by the US Trade Representative when the deal was announced on Monday.

The American Prospect's David Dayen said, “There appears to be improvements around the edges: preventing tobacco companies from using the investor-state dispute resolution process, a lower exclusivity period for high-cost biologic drugs. But these are pretty small. The main structure of the agreement was already in place, one designed to protect incumbent profits and sacrifice U.S. jobs, with very dubious claims about labor and environmental standards that have simply never been enforced in other trade agreements, including by this administration.”

So, if upheld and obeyed, there are bans on child workers and pledges to allow collective bargaining in countries that have brutally oppressed organized labor. Conservation groups are happy about measures to fight wildlife poaching and overfishing. But there are also patent and market exclusivity rules that restrain competition, worries about food safety, a snare of complications for intellectual property and internet freedom, rules that could allow multinational corporations to run roughshod over the regulations of allegedly sovereign nations and much more.

“For us, any TPP is making things worse,” Peter Maybarduk, director of the the access-to-medicines program at the public interest group Public Citizen, told The New York Times. The pharmaceutical industry in particular “will have many more tools with which to defend its monopoly business model.”

The good news is, there's stilltime. Many, many details still need to be worked out before the entire TPP text must finally be revealed. Weeks and months will pass before a harshly divided Congress confronts the monster, it may not be until April of 2016, amidst our presidential election year. What's more, as we all know, “The public is demonstrating a lot of dissatisfaction with the traditional ways of doing things in Washington.”

So former diplomat Clyde Prestowitz told The American Prospect. “This deal is not going to reduce economic inequality in the U.S. Rather it is going to add to it. If some of the presidential candidates pound away at that fact, it is possible to foresee a wave of public frustration and anger leading to defeat of the TPP in the Congress.”

Even though, in a squeaker vote this summer, Congress gave President Obama fast-track authority that only allows the House and Senate to vote up or down on TPP without changes or amendments, they still could vote no on this whole monster of a mess.

Most of the presidential candidates are opposed, including Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, and now, even Hillary Clinton, although she was an advocate when she was secretary of state. "As of today, I am not in favor of what I have learned about it," she told the *PBS Newshour's* Judy Woodruff on Wednesday, "I don't believe it's going to meet the high bar I have set."

And don't forget the 11 other countries that are party to TPP, their legislatures have to sign off, too, and there's tremendous opposition in many of those nations (not to mention upcoming elections in Canada and Japan). Members of our Congress opposed to this deal, like New York Democrat Louise Slaughter, are working closely with their opposite numbers abroad.

Yes, big business will bankroll yet another enormous public relations campaign to push this agreement through, and as the Center for Responsive Politics' Open Secrets blog reported this week, "Over eight years of negotiations, 487 clients paid lobbyists to meet with or contact lawmakers and administration officials to discuss the trade pact. Clients who reported lobbying on TPP accounted for nearly thirty percent of all lobby spending."

But as we're fond of saying, the best way to fight organized money is with organized people. Time to mobilize one more time and finally take this rampaging monster down for good.

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<http://billmoyers.com/2015/10/07/the-trade-creature-walks-among-us/>
