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IS PUTIN'S GAMBLE PAYING OFF?

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The Russian Intervention in Syria:

Is Putin's Gamble Paying Off?

Dr. Talal Nizameddin

Vladimir Putin, Russia's president and supreme leader, pushed the boundaries of diplomacy and the patience of his Western partners and the Muslim world to the limit by defending the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad and prolonging the arguably most tragic conflicts of modern times. The United States, France, Britain, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia lobbied hard for Putin to soften his stance and enable a compromise that would see a transition to a Syria without Bashar Assad at the helm. Indeed the international community, including Saudi Arabia, showed signs of flexibility by proposing a transition phase that included regime figureheads but without Assad at the helm, yet Putin not only rebuffed such offers, but increased Russia's direct role in the conflict and clung on more tightly to Assad.

Moscow gradually increased its level of intervention and support for Assad since 2011, originally through crippling the United Nations Security Council by vetoing key resolutions, printing Syrian bank notes to support a collapsed economy, as well as providing weapons renewal, upgrades, and servicing, as well as technical and intelligence support, culminating in direct military intervention in late 2015.

Russia's own spin for its role in the conflict also evolved in a manner that was intriguing yet exposed a high degree of mendacity. It is important to recall that at the start of the Syrian uprising Putin was still to be reinstated as President and his stand-in Dmitry Medvedev initially expressed his personal lack of sympathy for Assad and expressed his belief of a historic tide

towards democratic change. Medvedev on the whole also reflected that relations with the West were not worth damaging for an expired and unpopular regime.

A CHANGING RUSSIAN LOGIC?

Putin and his allies in the security elite quickly suffocated such sentiments and redirected the course of events in a totally different direction. At first, Putin's cautious line was that he was eager to protect the principle of international law and state sovereignty. At the time there was no ISIS threat and Moscow focused its rejection for change on the basis that it ought to be an ordered internal affair without Western interference.

In 2012 and 2013 the Russian argument for defending the Assad regime increasingly focused on the risk of allowing extremists to fill a vacuum, while maintaining in principle that they were not averse to a moderate opposition taking over from Assad's regime in Syria, if the international community, on the basis of talks in Geneva, could jointly oversee such transition.

Pro-Kremlin media campaigns increasingly justified the unpopular Russian position, both to the domestic audience and the international community, by suggesting that the West and their allies Turkey and Qatar were deliberately feeding and nourishing groups such as ISIS and Jibhat al-Nusra in Syria, and by doing so deliberately stifling any peaceful resolution that would include Russia as a partner.

On the ground Russian support to Syria was decisive by providing crucial military aid to the regime, including servicing and upgrading of MiGs and SS missiles that stalled any progress by the moderate Free Syrian Army. Russia also ensured that the FSA would receive minimal military support from its international supporters, including surface-to-air missiles that could have tilted the balance of warfare, on the basis that it would only fuel the fire of the Syrian war. Putin provided the Saudis and the United States in particular ambiguous implications that he would help convince Assad to move aside at an unspecified time in return for their promise not

to arm the FSA. This then coincided with calculated public insinuations by Putin and his representatives that Russia had no personal liking for Assad and that it was merely acting pragmatically to contain the conflict and reach a behind-the-scenes solutions that would save face for all sides.

An important but parallel military coincidence at the time was the Syrian regime tactic of avoiding confrontation with ISIS and in some cases ceding ground to them while focusing their attack on the FSA, which by 2015 had become demoralized and weakened after 4 years of fighting with little international support. This played into the hands of Moscow by appearing to prove its point that the greatest threat emanating from Syria was not the government of Assad but Islamic radicals.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF AN IRRESOLUTE OBAMA

Russia was emboldened and encouraged to press home its advantage further, because of the irresolute Obama administration in the United States and a divided Europe, whose public opinion had no stomach for a confrontation with Russia over the Middle East. This was further confirmed following the Russian forced takeover of Crimea and its intervention, direct and indirect, in the Ukraine. By 2016 Russian troops were in active service in three new hotspots including Syria without a whimper from the international community. Indeed, Moscow cleverly played the Greek economic crisis and the growing refugee problem to its own advantage by deliberately undermining Germany and the United Kingdom in particular. France, the most vehement supporter of intervention to remove Assad suffered badly from the horrific terrorist attacks in November 2015 by ISIS.

Putin has clearly gained from his intervention in Syria in the short term. First and foremost he has bolstered his image in front of his own people and supporters as a bold, uncompromising strongman who has restored a sense of national pride and the extended global reach of his country. Putin, as he boasted in response to then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's criticism

that Russia was deliberately obfuscating on Syria, was at the head of a powerful Russia that was equal to the United States. Indeed Putin made the sinister remark that 'we still have a few cards up our sleeve' for Syria and he was true to his word by directly entering the military fray and tilting the balance drastically in favor of Assad at a time his regime, despite support from Iran and its military proxy Hezbollah, was close to collapse.

Gone are the days when Russia's own disintegration was at stake, as was the case in the 1990s, or during Putin's first two terms when U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, NATO expansion and the colored Revolutions created a siege mentality and a sense that Russia was being surrounded and placed in a geo-strategic lock to limit its actions and influence.

Thanks to Putin's resolve Russia has not only regained the geo-strategic initiative vis-à-vis the United States and NATO, but also, as a result of the massive Syrian refugee exodus, undermined the European Union and, according to some reports, deliberately worsened the situation to destabilize Europe and thus prevent a united stance against Russia over Ukraine, as well as its domineering posture towards the Baltic Republics, Poland and even Finland. Putin not only had much to gain from a fragmented Europe, but he also sought to specifically undermine the strong woman of European politics, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose disdain for Putin and his quest for influence in Eastern Europe and the Baltic Sea had reminiscent undertones of pre-World War One years.

A SUCCESSFUL INFORMATION WAR

Another success for Putin was the media and intellectual war in the West. The Kremlin's narrative, not too different from Tehran and Damascus, was being repeated among sympathizers in the Western media and universities. Writers, such as the U.S academic Joshua Landis, or journalists Robert Fisk and Seymour Hersh echoed the same mantra and world view emanating from Moscow and Damascus, while political parties on the extreme left and extreme right of European politics seemed united in hailing Putin as a hero of modern times who

rescued the West from the Syrian violence and Islamist brutality. Pro-Syrian regime and pro-Kremlin trolls swarmed the internet to espouse the same narrative at different levels, ranging from the ranting rage to pseudo-intellectual arguments based on anti-war sentiments that proposed the ostensibly legitimate point that there was no ready-made guaranteed solution for the Syrian problem. The greatest success for Moscow and Damascus though was uniting these forces to shift the general focus from an uprising against the Assad regime to Islamic terror.

Putin's gamble therefore was paying off at the geo-strategic level, the domestic political level, and the information war level. The Kremlin seemed to have calculated and planned to perfection its Syria actions, except in reality no one could have foreseen Washington's flaccid response, despite a widespread understanding that the West had been suffering from a post-Iraq war syndrome. It was evidently a failure on the West's part to allow Putin such an advantage, particularly in Syria. Putin's early assurances to the West that he would play the role of a constructive partner were all too readily believed by a rather gullible Washington, as it is highly unlikely the Obama administration would have willingly allowed Putin a foothold in the Levant that will prove very difficult to dislodge in the future.

But Russia and Putin do not necessarily have things all their way and a longer term perspective contains potentially negative outcomes. With oil prices stuck well below the minimum \$70 per barrel required to break even and with forecasts expecting little change, the Russian economy has a negative balance. The ruble devaluation has been a struggle to control by the central government and high interest rates deter businesses from investing in a stagnant economy. The standard of living of the average Russian citizen is now declining for the first time since Putin became president, as inflation has made imports increasingly unaffordable. Overall, despite the bluster and the investment in the military, the Russian economy is in trouble and it is partly so directly as a result of Putin's Syrian and other foreign policies that have resulted in sanctions, rapid militarization, and diverted resources into Syria and Ukraine especially, and also by invoking the wrath of OPEC powerhouse Saudi Arabia. By most accounts corruption in Russia has become rampant and officials with close links to Putin are being openly shamed and named, most recently in the Panama Papers scandal.

Despite such factors Putin's popularity ratings remain stubbornly high, although this raises questions over the methodology of some of the polling. Russians are increasingly dissatisfied with corruption and are showing concern for the future of the economy. However, Putin's personal ratings align well with conservative Russian values, which include national pride and historic anti-Western paranoia. How long Putin can ride the crest of such sentiments in the light of economic stagnation is yet to be seen, but more significantly it is worth analyzing if Russia's progressive, business-minded and Western-looking segments of society are willing to stand by and remain passive as they watch their country becoming increasingly isolated and banded with the likes of North Korea, Iran and Syria.

MOSCOW'S RIFT WITH THE SUNNI POWERS

Putin's Syria gamble has not only created a rift with the West but also with the bulk of the Muslim world. Support for the Assad regime has pitted Russia on the Shi'ite Muslim side forces represented by Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah against major Sunni powers led by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and much of the Arab and Sunni world. Turkey is one of Russia's most valuable trading partners and Saudi Arabia holds the key to easing the pressure on Russia by helping to control the flow of oil into the international market. Moreover, Russia itself is home to 20 million Muslims, mostly Sunni, with an estimated 4 million living in Moscow. Most of Russia's neighboring Muslim states also are predominately Sunni. Opinion polls have varied but mostly have shown thus far that the Russian opposition to the Syria intervention in republics such as Tatarstan and Daghestan, although significant in number, does not greatly exceed that of Russian Orthodox compatriots. In part, this is because according to a poll conducted by a Russian NGO, the Anti-Corruption Foundation, that was published by the Washington Post in March 2016, Russian Muslims largely do not see the war in the context of sectarianism but rather as a war against Takfiris (Islamist extremists) and to halt Western expansionism, which aligns with traditional Russian attitudes. The pollsters acknowledged, though, that attitudes could change rapidly as news of Russia's bombing campaign killing innocent Muslim civilians becomes more regular.

This may have been a factor why soon after the poll was published Putin surprised the world again by announcing that Russia would be effectively ending its direct military operations in Syria. There were likely other factors also, including mounting costs, an accumulating loss of combatants on the battlefield, fear of terrorist retaliations, and more general opposition at home. The memory of Afghanistan has not yet faded from the minds of Putin and his colleagues of a similar generation and it was clearly a calculation to quit while ahead. However, Putin did not say this was a complete withdrawal and promised to remain engaged in supporting the Assad regime indirectly and also warned that Russian military forces could easily resume full scale operations if necessary. This was classic Putin subterfuge as the Syrian opposition and many Western observers noted that nothing really had changed in terms of Russia's military influence to keep Assad in power.

Some 4 years ago this author suggested that if "we consider that Putin has staked his political future with the security elite and on popular support based on anti-Western paranoia that rejects internal liberal reforms then the Syrian crisis could fester on for many years yet." During Putin's third term, that began in 2012, Putin has introduced further measures to restrict NGOs, curtailed media freedoms, put in prison brave and vocal anti-system dissidents, such as Pussy Riot's Nadia Tolokonnikova, Alexei Navalny and Petr Pavlensky. The murder of the widely respected Boris Nemtsov in cold blood in central Moscow has added further to the sense that opposing Putin is downright dangerous.

TOWARDS A PARTITION OF SYRIA?

Five years on and the Syrian conflict threatens to become a quagmire without an end in sight. Moscow is clearly in need of an exit strategy that would maintain its global leverage and its reputation while pulling out of military involvement. Then as now the best option for Russia is, aside from convincing Assad to step aside and pass on the leadership to a Moscow-friendly regime associate, to impose a de facto partition of Syria. Assad is showing no signs of stepping

down and by inviting both the Iranians and the Russians into Syria the wily Alawite leader has created a new mechanism to balance the two powers off each other to maintain a degree of influence in the conflict. Before inviting the Russians the Syrian regime had become increasingly frustrated and concerned that the Iranians were aggressively pushing their personal agenda and overriding Damascus in important military decisions on the ground.

Assad's main tactic for survival in the past five years has been "either Assad or chaos." This is not new. When Assad faced the prospect of being directly blamed for the murder of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon in The Hague, the Syrian leader sent a very explicit threat to UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, who warned Assad to cooperate. The Syrian leader's response was defiant: "If I am indicted I will set the region ablaze from the Mediterranean to the Caspian." This was not an empty threat. Damascus pulls useful strings among Kurdish fighter groups and its intelligence forces have deeply infiltrated Islamist factions - including ISIS. Syria also is closely allied with Iran and its powerful proxy in Lebanon, Hezbollah.

Undoubtedly Putin has shown us that alongside his ruthlessness he possesses a high degree of intelligence and political sense. Putin and his entourage have likely calculated that removing Assad is a risky enterprise that may create a new opening for the West to enter the Levant and push Russia out of the region, with no returns on its investment and with a seriously tarnished credibility in the region. Therefore, for the time being, Russia will continue to support Assad. But, as I argued four years ago, while attraction grows of a divided Syria as the most feasible endgame. According to this scenario an Alawite state would be created in the northern mountains and on the Mediterranean Sea, securing Russia's foothold and naval facilities, as well as a dependent and loyal ally. The establishment of a Kurdish state in Mesopotamia could conceivably create another Russian-friendly entity, while the center of Syria would be handed over to the opposition, backed by Turkey, the Saudis, and their allies. The division of Syria could also result in the creation of a small Druze state on the Lebanese-Israeli border, which again could create another neutral minority.

But despite its attractions such a scenario is a long way off. Allowing a Kurdish state to be established will not be tolerated by Turkey and the demographic realities on the ground make it difficult for the Alawites to create a safe contiguous state. Last but not least, a division will not guarantee an end to the fighting nor acceptance by the Sunni majority. Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the West continue to work towards a united Assad-free Syria that evolves into a moderate democratic state. Looked at more closely, therefore, it is apparent that Putin has driven himself into a cul-de-sac in Syria with no easy way out. Russia's best bet for the moment is to consolidate its gains, bide its time, and stabilize the situation in the hope that the will of the international coalition supporting the Syrian opposition will eventually break. This in part explains Russia's keenness for the ceasefire agreement in Syria to succeed and Putin's announcement of a military withdrawal from active operations by Russian forces.

But this is only a pause for breath and the next round of fighting over Syria will likely be more intense with a winner-takes-all approach. Assessing Russia's gamble in Syria is very much in the eye of the beholder. Some see the glass half full, with Russian power in the world at an all-time high and Putin's popularity among his people still strong. Others see the glass half empty, as the Russia economy flounders and Putin personally becomes embroiled and potentially discredited following the Panama Papers disclosures which reveal a systematic theft of the country's riches, worth billions of dollars, with the Russian president as the lynchpin of key protagonists. While it is true that Russia and Putin have ostensibly a bigger say in world affairs, ironically both are also more isolated than ever since the demise of the Soviet Union. Intervention in Ukraine is undoubtedly a major factor, but Putin may find that his decision to directly intervene in Syria in support of the Assad regime will come back to haunt him as it becomes obvious that the current situation in Syria is unsustainable and the economic and security implications are too costly. For Putin the ability to stay in power is the best answer to critics who question his Syria gamble regardless of the broader and longer term damage on Russia itself.

Dr. Talal Nizameddin is the author of *Russia and the Middle East: Towards a New Foreign Policy*, (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

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