

Putin's Geopolitical Chess Game with Washington in Syria and Eurasia

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Since reassuming his post as Russia's President, Vladimir Putin has lost no minute in addressing the most urgent geopolitical threats to Russia internationally. Not surprisingly, at the center of his agenda is the explosive situation in the Middle East, above all Syria. Here Putin is engaging every imaginable means of preventing a further deterioration of the situation into what easily could become another "world war by miscalculation." His activities in recent weeks involve active personal diplomacy with Syria's government as well as the so-called opposition "Syrian National Council." It involves intense diplomacy with Erdogan's Turkey regime. It involves closed door diplomacy with Obama. It involves direct diplomacy with Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu.

Syria itself, contrary to what most western media portray, is a long-standing multi-ethnic and religiously tolerant secular state with an Alawite Muslim President Bashar Al-Assad, married to a Sunni wife. The Alawite sect is an offshoot of Shia Islam which doesn't force their women to wear head scarves and are liberal by Sunni standards, especially in the fundamentalist places like Saudi Arabia where women are forbidden to even hold a driver's license. The overall Syrian population is a diverse mix of Alawites, Druze and Kurds, Sunnis, and Armenian Orthodox Christians. Were the minority regime of Al-Assad to fall, experts estimate that, like in Egypt, the murky Sunni (as in Saudi Arabia) Muslim Brotherhood organization would emerge as the dominant organized political force, something certainly not welcome in Tel Aviv and certainly not in either Russia or China.¹

According to an informed assessment by Gajendra Singh, retired Indian diplomat with decades of service in the Middle East and a deep familiarity with the ethnic mix inside Syria, were the minority Alawite regime of Al-Assad to fall, the country would rapidly descend into a bloodbath that would make estimates of 17,000 killed to date a mere prelude. Singh estimates, "A defeat of Assad led regime will lead to slaughter of Alawites, Shias, Christians, even Kurds and Druzes. In all, 20 % of a population of 20 Million."²

That would be some 4 million Syrians. That ought to be food for thought for those in the West cheering on a murky dubious opposition "Syrian National Council" that is dominated by the ominous Muslim Brotherhood, and an armed opposition "Free Syrian Army" that has been reported even by the *New York Times* as rife with factional armed splits. Moreover the conflict were it to descend into a Libya-like internal bloodbath, would spill over across the Syrian border into Turkey. Syrian coastal area has a significant Alawite population and a large number of Alawites live in the adjoining Turkish provinces of Hatay and Antakya.

To sort out fact from fiction inside Syria is daunting as media are limited and opposition

spokesmen have been repeatedly caught lying about events. In one recent instance, a UK journalist claimed he was deliberately led into a potential death trap by rebel opposition forces to score propaganda against the Damascus regime. The UK Channel 4 News's chief correspondent, Alex Thomson, told AP that Syrian rebels set him up to die in no man's land near the Lebanese border, saying they wanted to use his death at the hands of government forces to score propaganda points.³ And in one brazen example of political manipulation, BBC was recently caught publishing a photograph it claimed was of a massacre at Al-Houla on 25 May 2012, in which 108 persons are known to have died including 49 children. It turned out the picture had been taken by Italian photo journalist, Marco Di Lauro in Iraq in 2003.⁴

The stakes in this geopolitical chess game are nothing less than survival first of Syria as a sovereign nation, whatever its flaws and defects. More, it ultimately involves the survival of Iran, Russia and China as sovereign nations together with the other BRIC states Brazil, India and South Africa. Longer term, it involves the matter of survival of civilization as we know it and avoidance of a world war that would decimate the world population not by tens of millions as seventy years ago but likely this time by billions.

The Syria stakes for Moscow

Russia's Putin has drawn a deep hard line in the sand around the survival of Al-Assad and Syria as a stable state. Few ask why Russia is warning of possible world war if Washington persists to demand immediate regime change in Syria as Hillary Clinton is doing. It is not because Russia is intent on advancing its own imperialist agenda in the Middle East. It's in little shape militarily and economically to do so even if it had wanted. Rather, it is about preserving port rights to Russia's only Mediterranean naval port at Tartus, the only remaining Russian military base outside the former Soviet Union, and its only Mediterranean fueling spot. In event of a showdown with NATO the base becomes strategic to Russia.

Yet there is more at stake for Russia. Putin and Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, have made clear were NATO and the USA to launch military action against Assad's Syria, the consequences would be staggering. Reliable sources in Damascus have reported the presence of at least 100,000 Russian "technical advisers" in the country. That's a lot, and a Russian freighter carrying rebuilt Russian Mi-25 attack helicopters is reportedly bound for Syria, while several days earlier a Russian naval flotilla sailed for Tartus led by the Russian destroyer, Admiral Chabanenko.

An earlier attempt to send the rebuilt helicopters back to Syria which had earlier purchased them, was blocked in June off Scotland's coast when it sailed under a non-Russian freighter flag. Now Moscow has made clear it will tolerate no interference in its traffic with Damascus. Russian Defense Ministry spokesman, Vyacheslav Dzirkaln, announced that "The fleet will be sent on task to guarantee the safety of our ships, to prevent anyone interfering with them in the event of a blockade. I remind you there are no limits," he soberly added.⁵ In so many words, what Moscow is announcing is that it is willing to face a 21st Century version of the 1962 Cuba Missile Crisis if NATO foolishly persists in pressing regime change in Damascus.

As it has openly emerged that the so-called democratic opposition in Syria is being dominated by the shadowy Muslim Brotherhood, hardly an organization renowned for multi-ethnic democratic tendencies, a victory for a US-backed Muslim Brotherhood regime in Syria, Moscow also believes, would unleash a wave of Muslim-led destabilizations across

Central Asia into republics of the former Soviet Union. China is also extremely sensitive about such a danger, only recently confronted with bloody riots of Muslim organization in its oil-rich Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Province, quietly sponsored by the US Government.⁶

Russia has joined firmly with China since both nations fell into a catastrophic trap over abstaining in the UN Security Council from vetoing the US Resolution. That US resolution opened the door to NATO destruction of not only Mohammar Ghaddafi, but of Libya itself as a functioning country. This author has spoken personally in Moscow and in Beijing since the Libya debacle asking well-informed persons in both places how in effect they could have been so short-sighted on Libya. They both clearly have since concluded that further advance of Washington's agenda for what George W. Bush called the Greater Middle East Project is diametrically opposed to the national interest of both China and Russia, hence the iron opposition to the NATO agenda in Syria for regime change. To date Russia and China, Permanent veto members of the UN Security Council, have three times exercised their veto over new US-sponsored sanctions against Syria, the latest on July 19.

Putin and his Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insist on a strict adherence to the proposed peace plan of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. Unlike what Washington prefers to generously read into it, the Six Point Annan Plan calls for no regime change, rather for a negotiated settlement and end to the fighting on both sides, a ceasefire.

Washington's Janus-faced duplicity

Aligned on the side of violent regime change in Syria are a bizarre coalition that includes, in addition to Washington and its European "vassal states" (as Zbigniew Brzezinski called European NATO members),⁷ most prominently Saudi Arabia, hardly a regime anyone would accuse of being a paragon of democracy. Another lead role against Damascus is being played by Qatar, home to US military as well as the blatantly pro-NATO propaganda channel Al-Jazeera. In addition, the Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is providing training and space to prepare armed mercenaries and others to flow over the border into neighboring Syria.

An attempt by the Erdogan government to send a Turkish Phantom air force fighter jet into Syrian airspace flying provocatively low, apparently in order to incite a "Gulf of Tonkin" incident to fan flames of NATO intervention a la Libya two weeks ago, fell flat when Turkey's general staff issued a statement saying: "No traces of explosives or flammable products were found on the debris recovered from the sea." Erdogan was forced to shift his line to cover face, no longer using the phrase, "shot down by Syria" and instead referring to "our plane that Syria claimed to have destroyed."⁸ NATO has established a command and control center in Iskenderun, in Turkey's Hatay province, near the Syrian border months ago to organize, train and arm the "anything but" Free Syrian Army.⁹ The Obama Administration, not wanting a full Syria war before US elections in November, reportedly also told Erdogan to "cool it" for now.

Most westerners who take their knowledge of world affairs religiously from the pages of the Washington Post or CNN or BBC are convinced the Syrian mess is a clear cut case of "good guys" (the so-named Syrian National Council and its rag-tag makeshift "Free Syrian Army") versus the "bad guys" (the Al-Assad dictatorship with its armed forces). For more than a year western media has run footage, some as noted, not even filmed in Syria, claiming that innocent, unarmed opposition civilian pro-democracy populations are being massacred

ruthlessly in a one-sided butchery by the regime.

They never explain how it would serve Assad to alienate his strongest asset to survival, namely the support of a majority of Syrians against what he has accurately named foreign intervention into sovereign Syrian affairs.

Indeed numerous eyewitness journalist accounts from inside Turkey and Syria including RT have alleged that from the beginning the “peaceful democratic opposition” had secretly been provided with arms and training, often inside camps across on the Turkish side. Professor Ibrahim Alloush from Zaytouneh University in Jordan told RT,

“Weaponry is being smuggled into Syria in large quantities from all over the place. It is pretty clear that the rebels have been receiving arms from abroad and Syrian television has been showing almost daily shipments of arms being smuggled into Syria via Lebanon, Turkey and other border crossings. Since the rebels are being supported by the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] and by NATO it is safe to assume that they are getting their financing and weaponry from the same sources that are offering them political cover and financial backing.”
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One veteran Turkish journalist whom this author interviewed in Ankara in April, just back from an extensive tour of Syria, gave his eyewitness account of the capture of a small band of “opposition” fighters. The journalist, fluent in Arabic, was astonished as he witnessed the head of the rebels demand to know why their military captors spoke Arabic. When told that was their native language, the rebel leader blurted out, “But you should speak Hebrew, you’re with the Israeli Army aren’t you?”

In short, the mercenaries had been blitz-trained across the border in Turkey, given Kalashnikovs and a fistful of dollars and told they were making a jihad against the Israeli Army. They did not even know who they were fighting. In other instances, mercenaries recruited from Afghanistan and elsewhere and financed by Saudi money, including alleged members of Al Qaeda, make up the “democratic opposition” to the established regime of Al-Assad.

Even the ultimate US establishment newspaper, *The New York Times*, has been forced to admit that the CIA has been pouring arms into the Syrian opposition. They reported, “C.I.A. officers are operating secretly in southern Turkey, helping allies decide which Syrian opposition fighters across the border will receive arms to fight the Syrian government, according to American officials and Arab intelligence officers. The weapons, including automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, ammunition and some antitank weapons, are being funneled mostly across the Turkish border by way of a shadowy network of intermediaries including Syria’s Muslim Brotherhood and paid for by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the officials said.”¹¹

The International Committee for the Red Cross now classifies the conflict as a civil war.¹² Peter Wallensteen, a leading peace researcher at the University of Uppsala and the director of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, stated that, “It’s increasingly an internationalized civil war, and as we know from previous history, the more internationalized, the longer the conflict will be...there is a civil war, but now so many weapons are coming from the outside, that there is actually an internationalized civil war.”¹³

According to Mary Ellen O’Connell, a respected legal scholar and professor of law and international dispute resolution at the University of Notre Dame, “The International Committee of the Red Cross statement means that the Assad regime is facing an organized armed opposition engaging in military force, and it has the legal right to respond in kind. The Syrian military will have more authority to kill persons based on their being part of the armed opposition than when Assad was restricted to using force under peacetime rules.”¹⁴ The rebel opposition groups claim it means just the opposite.

While the US State Department makes pious pronouncements of their supporting “democracy” and demanding Al-Assad step down and recognize the dubious and factionalized opposition of the Syrian National Council, an exile group dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, Russia is working skillfully on the diplomatic front to weaken the Western march to war.

Putin’s shrewd diplomacy

Now, no sooner did Vladimir Putin again take the office as Russia’s President on May 7 than he embarked on a complex series of diplomatic missions to defuse or hopefully derail Washington’s Syrian game plan. On July 16 Putin hosted a Moscow visit of Kofi Annan where he repeated Moscow’s unflinching support for the Annan Peace Plan. ¹⁵

Because of the considerable media distortions it’s useful to read the actual text of the six-point Annan plan:

(1) commit to work with the Envoy in an inclusive Syrian-led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people, and, to this end, commit to appoint an empowered interlocutor when invited to do so by the Envoy;

(2) commit to stop the fighting and achieve urgently an effective United Nations supervised cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties to protect civilians and stabilise the country.

To this end, the Syrian government should immediately cease troop movements towards, and end the use of heavy weapons in, population centres, and begin pullback of military concentrations in and around population centres.

As these actions are being taken on the ground, the Syrian government should work with the Envoy to bring about a sustained cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties with an effective United Nations supervision mechanism.

Similar commitments would be sought by the Envoy from the opposition and all relevant elements to stop the fighting and work with him to bring about a sustained cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties with an effective United Nations supervision mechanism;

(3) ensure timely provision of humanitarian assistance to all areas affected by the fighting, and to this end, as immediate steps, to accept and implement a daily two hour humanitarian pause and to coordinate exact time and modalities of the daily pause through an efficient mechanism, including at local level;

(4) intensify the pace and scale of release of arbitrarily detained persons, including especially vulnerable categories of persons, and persons involved in peaceful political activities, provide without delay through appropriate channels a list of all places in which such persons are being detained, immediately begin organizing access to such locations and through appropriate channels respond promptly to all written requests for information, access or release regarding such persons;

(5) ensure freedom of movement throughout the country for journalists and a non-discriminatory visa policy for them;

(6) respect freedom of association and the right to demonstrate peacefully as legally guaranteed.¹⁵

There is no demand in the Annan Plan for Bashar al-Assad to step down before any ceasefire, contrary to what Hillary Clinton repeats after insisting the US also backs the Annan Plan. The Annan Plan calls for a diplomatic solution. The US clearly does not want a diplomatic solution. It wants regime change and evidently widening war across the Shi'ite-Sunni divide of the Muslim world.

Moscow and Beijing just as clearly want to draw the line and prevent chaos spreading from Syria. On July 19, again Russia and China, both veto members at the UN Security Council blocked a new US-backed resolution on Syria they insisted was designed to open the door to a Libya-like military intervention into Syria. The resolution had been drafted by British Foreign Secretary William Hague, and would have opened the door for a Chapter 7 resolution of the UN Security Council on Syria. Chapter 7 allows the 15-member council to authorize actions ranging from diplomatic and economic sanctions to military intervention.¹⁷ The Hague resolution demanded that the Syrian government in 10 days pull out all its heavy weapons from urban areas and return troops to barracks. Nothing was said about disarming the "Free Syrian Army." Washington claimed it would only be interested in economic or diplomatic sanctions, not military. Of course. Hmmm...

Putin has more than a little leverage to use with Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan. Erdogan was in Moscow just prior to the July 19 UN Security Council vote to discuss Syria with Putin.¹⁸ Turkey is the second-largest buyer of Russian natural gas, some 80% of its natural gas coming from Russia's state-controlled Gazprom. ¹⁹ Turkey's entire "energy hub" strategy of playing a key role in gas flows from Eurasia, the Middle east to Europe depends on gas from Russia and Iran. One year ago a \$10 billion pipeline deal was signed between Iran, Iraq and Syria for a natural gas pipeline from Iran's huge South Pars field to Iraq, Syria and on to Turkey, eventually connecting to Europe.²⁰

Putin had also gone to Tel Aviv on June 21 to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu.²¹ Russian influence inside Israel is not minor. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union some six million Russians, mostly Jews, have emigrated to Israel over the past two decades. Ultimately Israel cannot be overjoyed at the prospect of a Muslim Brotherhood-run Syrian opposition coming to power in neighboring Syria. While few details emerged of the content of the talks, it is clear that Putin delivered the message that a "destroyed, disoriented and broken up Syria would not help Israel. Syria has the second, most well-organized Muslim Brotherhood organization after Egypt," according to former Indian Ambassador K. Gajendra Singh.²²

Then on July 11, Putin and Lavrov invited Abdel Basset Sayda, the new head of the US-

backed opposition organization, Syrian National Council, to Moscow for “talks.” Sayda, who is from the Kurdish Syrian minority and has lived twenty years in Swedish exile, is a curious figure as opposition spokesman, from the Kurd minority in Syria, a man with little or no active political experience, clearly chosen mainly to hide the dominant Muslim Brotherhood profile of the SNC. Russia reportedly made it clear to Sayda they would continue to block any attempts to oust Assad and that the opposition need seriously adhere to the Annan Plan and negotiate a settlement. Sayda for his part made clear no negotiations until Assad is gone, a stance that is feeding the bloodshed.²³

There are signs in all the bloodshed and escalation of violence that Putin reached some quiet deal as well with Obama to keep war off the table until Obama is past the November elections. Russia recently agreed to reopen supply lines for US military supplies in Afghanistan at the same time Washington orchestrated an “apology” for the recent killings of civilians in Pakistan with its drones.²⁴

Veteran roving journalist Pepe Escobar recently summed up the situation in all its grim reality:

“Turkey will keep offering the logistical base for mercenaries coming from “liberated” Libya, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Lebanon. The House of Saud will keep coming up with the cash to weaponize them. And Washington, London and Paris will keep fine-tuning the tactics in what remains the long, simmering foreplay for a NATO attack on Damascus. Even though the armed Syrian opposition does not control anything remotely significant inside Syria, expect the mercenaries reportedly weaponized by the House of Saud and Qatar to become even more ruthless. Expect the not-exactly-Free Syrian Army to keep mounting operations for months, if not years. A key point is whether enough supply lines will remain in place – if not from Jordan, certainly from Turkey and Lebanon.”²⁴

Notes

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