

How to defeat Russia's Syria gambit

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With Russia's intervention in Syria, the guessing game, and blame game, is well underway. Some decry our failure to keep Russia out. Some advocate a more forceful US intervention. And still others seek to link our situation to previous US policy failures; it's time to look at the facts, take stock of where we are, and count our blessings.



However much we wanted to take credit for the Arab Spring, rising against Bashir Assad in Syria had no real political leader, and no broader context - it was a popular revolt, largely driven by economic and social issues, against a despotic leader and his avaricious retinue. It occurred at a time of regional instabilities driven in large measure by Iran's hegemonic aspirations against Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Sectarianism was less a cause and more a motif of the struggle. And so our friends and allies aided the uprising, using zealous Sunni fighters to combat Iranian-back Hezbollah and Bashir Assad. In a war among the civilian populous, terrorism was a common and often successful tactic. No wonder the US had such a difficult time working to find and strengthen the moderate Syrian opposition, both military and civilian. But along the way, some of the fledgling Sunni resistance transformed Frankenstein-like into ISIS, driven by former Baathist generals, sucking in tens of thousands of innocents from abroad, and posing a threat not only to its Iranian-backed enemies but to other Sunni fighters, and Sunni states in the region and even beyond. Russia's forceful intervention to assist Assad injects a new and potentially transformative element into regional geostrategy.

Naturally, Russia has gone first after the strongest threats to Assad's regime, the non-ISIS Sunni groups near Aleppo and the western, more prosperous reaches of Syria - the very forces the US and its friends are supporting. For Russia, biding its time against ISIS has a certain logic - by eliminating more Western-amenable opponents, Russia can prevent the emergence of any leadership capable of challenging Assad, this will lead to a foregone but ultimately disastrous reinvigoration on Bashir Assad's regime.

In such circumstances, the US has three alternatives - essentially to back out, continuing minimal airstrikes against ISIS and working to strengthen Iraqi ground forces, whatever their putative relationships with Russia and Iran; to intervene more forcefully against the ISIS, to include substantial ground forces inserted through Turkey into Syria to crush ISIS at its base, deprive it of its economic resources and then work against ISIS strongholds in Iraq, or, as a middle course, create a safe zone in northern Syria,

secured by US airpower and some international ground presence, and nurture a new Syrian leadership.

No course of action is without risk. Maintaining the present activities - the first course of action - risks ceding Russia a new, more powerful role in the Mideast and the Eastern Mediterranean. This isn't helpful to Europe, Israel, or our Sunni allies and friends. It virtually assures Assad's continuation in power, or his replacement by a like-minded authoritarian. And it also assures continued migrant flow toward Europe.

The second course of action is big, expansive, and slow. It risks substantial US ground combat, including losses, in an effort to finish off ISIS in Syria and in so doing strengthen the moderate Syrian opposition, provide assurances to minorities, and generally undercut Assad's ability with Russian help to reestablish control over the region. It also poses a direct obstacle to Russian designs, though of course Russian airpower against ISIS could be effectively coordinated. It would provide bargaining leverage for an eventual diplomatic settlement that includes Assad's departure. It would be complicated by massive civil affairs, refugee and migrant issues.

The third alternative, establishing a safe zone in Northern Syria, accommodating refugees and under protection, building the Syrian opposition in country also has risks. Terrorist organizations like Al Nusra and others can be expected to resist. Russia will be tempted to encroach. Airspace and terrain must be protected, even at the risk of US forces and inadvertent encounters with Russian forces.

Still, of the three, the last alternative, forging a safe area, probably with NATO engagement and participation of both Turkey and Saudi Arabia, offers the best, lowest-cost, and surest means of supporting our allies and regaining some stability in the region. A safe-zone, secured by NATO, assisted by other international organizations, and housing the nascent Free Syrian government and its military arm, provides maximum diplomatic leverage as well as pointing towards the eventual destruction of ISIS.

Make no mistake, Russia's intervention is all advancing Russia's interests - a strong presence in the Mideast, leverage over the US and Europe, and eventually sanctions relief and reestablished influence over Ukraine and Eastern Europe. None of this will promote our values or interests. From our point of view it is simply about making mischief and for this reason there must be no relaxation of sanction against Russia. Putin must be disabused of any hope of gaining leverage over Europe, and greater influence over Ukraine, by his Syrian gambit. Also, we must recognize that the visibility of the recently negotiated Iran nuclear agreement is dependent on the credibility of American power; to go passive now in the face of Russian action is to jeopardize the agreement at the very outset.

Finally, on the home front, every nation must strengthen its efforts to stem the flow of recruits to ISIS. Stabilizing Turkey's border regions is not enough. Rather, new efforts must be undertaken to dissuade vulnerable youngsters from making the plunge into

chaos, terrorism and death. In the US we have been relatively successful - of the tens of thousands that ISIS has recruited, perhaps only 250 have come from the US, and another 60 have been arrested or detained under US antiterrorism laws.

Still, we need better communications with schools, parents and young people. The dangerous consequences of flirtations with ISIS and its recruiters, including US legal consequences, must be taught the same way we teach and promote traffic safety and public health.

In our efforts to strengthen the home front, including through the increasingly well-resourced Countering Violent Extremism Program, we must take care not to feed into the very anti-Muslim narrative that ISIS is spinning. ISIS doesn't just recruit Muslims. By focusing CVE on Muslim-American communities, we risk alienating the very diverse, loyal and concerned Muslim-American communities we are trying to help. Building facilities and sponsoring recreation and community programs is fine, but their exclusive linkage to Muslim-Americans invites suspicion, fear, and anger. We must not repeat the mistakes of World War II, where the internment of loyal American citizens undercut our deepest American values and has remained a major scar on America's psyche.

The Mideast remains a region of vital interests for the US and our allies. However misguided the original invasion of Iraq, we find ourselves today in a new situation. We needn't repeat the mistakes of a decade ago - but neither can we fail to react to the new circumstances and their implications. This is the time for smart American action, in concert with our Allies in Europe and the region.

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