

COMMENTARY

No.320

Wednesday, 11 November 2015

Putin's Russian Roulette Diplomacy in Syria

Yezid Sayigh

Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut

The Russian military intervention in Syria has generated considerable confusion among foreign governments opposed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's continued rule over the country. Might Russian action be a prelude to reaching a political deal ending the Syrian conflict, and in this case would Russia accept demands for Assad to step down as a pre-agreed outcome of negotiations or of a transitional period? So far there is little to justify such hope, and if Russia's immediate objectives are reached there will be even less. If Putin actively seeks a political solution at all, then it is by forcing a diplomatic version of Russian roulette on the U.S. and its partners in the all-but defunct Friends of Syria coalition: accept the bullet of Assad's role in any transition—with the risk of seeing him stay on afterwards—or refuse, and watch Syria's mutually hurting military stalemate grind on. Either choice is acceptable to both Putin and Assad.

The Russian intervention has already had immediate impacts, appearing to boost morale among Assad regime loyalists and, especially, stiffen resolve in the army. It has also ended any prospect of direct military action by Turkey to create a safe zone in northern Syria, which was already in doubt anyway following the sharp escalation of hostilities with the Kurdistan Workers' Party. Gulf countries have reportedly pledged to provide the Syrian opposition with more capable infantry weapons, but these are not really in short supply in Syria and will have little impact unless the U.S. and its NATO allies lifts their embargo on arming the rebels with Stinger or equivalent advanced anti-aircraft missile systems. Ironically, the start of Russian air strikes followed a call by former CIA Director David Petraeus on 22 September for the U.S. to establish safe zones in Syria for refugees and then shoot down regime aircraft attacking them, but this now seems entirely remote. Foreign governments that were unwilling to compel the Assad regime to end indiscriminate bombing of civilians will not challenge Russia's no-fly zone over regime

areas of Syria. And with the formal termination of the U.S. training program for Syrian rebels, there is little prospect of any kind of direct challenge.

Russia has so far achieved its objectives at remarkably low cost. But this at most restores a tentative equilibrium after six months of regime setbacks on the battlefield. Even if opposition rumours of impending regime offensives backed by Iranian regulars, Iraqi Hashd Sha'bi militiamen, and Hezbollah are borne out, they are unlikely to achieve more than retake some of the territory lost in 2015. Nor, contrary to the expectations of some, is Russia (or Iran) likely to field a major expeditionary force to tip the balance decisively. On 5 October the head of the armed forces committee in the Russian parliament, retired Admiral Vladimir Komoyedov, casually mentioned the possibility of Russian "volunteers" heading to Syria, evoking memories of then Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev's threat to reinforce Egypt against the Tripartite aggression in 1956, but this was not a game-changer then, and is not today.

Some of those opposed to the Russian intervention in Syria argue that it will inevitably expand to include a major ground role, which will then prove to be Russia's second Afghanistan. That certainly seems to be the view of Islamists in Syria and elsewhere in the region, some of whom are issuing new calls for jihad against Russia and Western "crusaders," but this almost certainly exaggerates Russian intentions, or represents wishful thinking by those who would like to see a widening of the armed conflict, believing that this can only work to their advantage.

On the other side, Assad regime supporters also exaggerate Russian engagement. Syrian officials reportedly believe that international conditions are turning in the regime's favour, allowing it not merely to survive, but even to win outright. Possible gains by the army in Hama province and north of Aleppo may encourage false hope much as it did in late 2014, when some loyalists spoke of moving on from recently conquered ground around Aleppo to wrest Raqqa city from the Islamic State. But Russia is unlikely to seek more than the aim Putin described to Russian TV on 11 October: "stabilise the legitimate authority" of Assad. It does not need to do more.

In theory, by raising the stakes in Syria the Russian deployment could trigger a deal. But this is unlikely. Whether or not Putin was even slightly sincere during his TV interview in saying that he wants to "create conditions for a political compromise," the main external powers remain as far apart as ever regarding Assad's status during a transitional period or his fate at the end of one. Many sources have relayed private conversations with credible Russian (and Iranian) interlocutors who confirm their government's willingness to envisage Assad's departure at the end of a negotiated transition, but this remains less than what any of the Syrian opposition's external supporters are publicly ready to accept.

There is good reason for the fixation on Assad's future, but it obscures the no less important need to reach common ground among the external powers in relation to the concrete mechanisms and modalities that might govern a possible transition in Syria. Assad's status is clearly the

linchpin, but even if this can be resolved, a jointly agreed blueprint would still be needed for things like the precise arrangements for power-sharing within a national unity government, command of the army and internal security sector, and management of the central bank. Despite some partial, unilateral efforts in a few national capitals to draft such outlines, however, agreement between the principal external powers remains remote.

This leaves two options for credible diplomacy. One is to put real substance into the ongoing effort by UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura to form working groups that will craft transitional arrangements in four key spheres, and to invest seriously in his parallel proposal to form an international contact group for Syria. But the start of Russian combat missions prompted virtually the entirety of the armed opposition to denounce the working groups as “reproducing the regime,” while persistent divergences among the principal external powers over the membership and functions of a contact group block what could potentially be a useful conflict resolution mechanism.

The last remaining option for useful diplomacy is to build on the limited ceasefire brokered by Iran on 22 September, entailing evacuation of civilians and fighters from the towns of Zabadani, Foua, and Kefraya and a six-month suspension of regime aerial bombardment in Idlib province. Russia’s military intervention clearly does not alter facts on the ground sufficiently to bring about a general political settlement, but it could be just enough to prompt a generalized armed truce encompassing all regime- and opposition-held areas. In theory, this would allow each camp and its external supporters to focus separately on confronting the Islamic State; even if they did little else, a truce would bring needed relief to an exhausted civilian population.

Tragically, however, powerful actors on both sides in Syria have come to depend on the war economy and have little interest in accepting a truce or enforcing one, since their financial survival derives from continuation of the armed conflict. None of the external powers have the political influence or determination necessary to engineer a new trajectory. From this perspective, Russia’s current approach seems all too realistic, although it makes reassertion of the mutually hurting stalemate in Syria inevitable. Roulette game over.

Note: This article was originally published *Carnegie Middle East Centre, Beirut* and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/10/16/putin-s-russian-roulette-diplomacy-in-syria/ij6q>

Dr. Yezid Sayigh, Senior Associate, Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut and a member of the International Advisory Board of MEI@ND. Email: ysayigh@carnegie-mec.org

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views

expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, **MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy**