
A MAJOR UNEXPECTED NEW REALITY IN SYRIA: WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

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By Vijay Prashad / AlterNet March 16, 2016

Unexpectedly, Russias Vladimir Putin announced early this week that the bulk of his armed forces would withdraw from Syria. Putin says Russia attained its objective in this intervention. What were its aims? They were three, and each has been substantially met.

To bolster the government of Bashar al-Assad.

Last summer, the Assad government had been deeply weakened. The morale of its forces was low, evidence of which was the grave difficulty in attracting new recruits. In desperation, Assad turned to Iran and Russia, both of which cooked up the intervention in secret. Russian aircraft came and began to pummel the proxy armies of the Gulf Arab states, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey. These had begun to make serious gains, particularly in the northwest of the country. Russia broke the back of this advance, providing confidence to the Syrian army and its allied militias.

Although these forces loyal to Damascus did not take large tracts of territory, they did seal off the resupply channels for the proxy armies that led into Turkey and Jordan. Iranian Special Forces operated near Aleppo to give a boost to the Syrian army, which had been bogged down around the city for almost two years. The government of Bashar al-Assad is now in substantially better shape than it was at Martyrs Day (May 6) last year.

To put pressure on the regional coalition that stood opposed to Assad.

Devastating airstrikes by Russia hit the proxy armies hard, with leadership of several of these units now dead (including of the main Saudi proxy) and with pessimism growing amongst the fighters. It was this deep sense of disorientation that sent the proxy armies to Saudi Arabia last December, when they formed the High Negotiations Committee . This HNC was designed to coordinate the opposition when it met in Geneva with the government for peace talks. The fractious state of the opposition had prevented a common agenda being put on the table.

But now their unity came at the wrong time; they joined together from weakness, not strength. Refusal to go to Geneva came from fear that they were being brought to surrender not to discuss terms for a ceasefire. They would eventually arrive at Geneva, but with great reticence. Threats by Saudi Arabia and Turkey that they would intervene themselves provided an indicator of their frustration. Russia had succeeded in tying the Saudis and the Turks into knots.

To bring Russia to the table as a major player.

The United States recognized immediately that the Russian entry into Syria had changed the map. Regime change was off the table. There was no way the West could now bomb Damascus. Any such attack could escalate, since it would draw the Russians into the equation. That Russia still holds Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine [] the sanctions and the trials of the Russian economy [] the weakness of the West. It simply does not have any weapons in its arsenal to reverse Russian policy.

Economic pressure on Russia continues, but its commercial and military outreach to China has lessened its burdens. It was this reality that seeped into the White House, which is why Secretary of State John Kerry agreed to have Russia as a full partner in the negotiations around Syria. The Geneva meeting was more about Russia and the United States than about the Syrian adversaries. It was these powers that came up with the cessation of hostilities plan. Both Russia and the United State manage vigilance over the cessation of hostilities, an indication that Russia would be seen as a partner for stability rather than an adversary. Whether this will translate into other theaters of tension is another matter. In Syria, it is now clear that the United States sees Russia as part of the solution, not the problem.

Fascinatingly, Russia has now closed the question about its role vis-à-vis ISIL. When Russia entered, it was accused of not bombing ISIL. At that time, Russia used the danger of ISIL to proceed with its own aims, which had more to do with proxy armies of the region than with ISIL. Once these proxies were weakened, Russia decided to decamp. No sense in letting Syria become a quagmire, as President Obama warned last year.

Saudi Arabias blindness.

Russia had few troops on the ground in Syria. It did its part from the air. Syrian troops, Iranian troops, Iraqi and Lebanese militias did the fighting on the ground. The fiercest fighters amongst these came from the Lebanese militia [] from the Iranian Special Forces. Saudi Arabia wanted to punish them for their crucial role in bolstering the government of Assad. The

weakest link was the government of Lebanon, whose sectarian political arrangement is as fragile as its finances. If it could bring pressure to bear on Lebanon, Riyadh thought, that would weaken Hezbollah.

Saudi Arabia first cut off its promised aid (\$4 billion) to the Lebanese military. This money was crucial to Lebanon, a country with grave balance of payments problems. Over a million Syrian refugees live in this country of four million. There has been meager support from the international community for Lebanon's finances. Lebanon cannot manage to both provide major humanitarian relief and to protect its precarious borders, where the al-Qaeda affiliate (Jabhat al-Nusra) has taken up residence and from where car bombs drive to assault residential areas of Beirut. The cut by the Saudis is vindictive, but also dangerous. It leaves Lebanon adrift.

But this was not all. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates began to deport any Lebanese national their surveillance found to be sympathetic to Hezbollah. Fear set in among the Gulf-based Lebanese diaspora, whose remittances assist Lebanon's finances. The Gulf states have made it a habit to periodically deport Lebanese nationals they accuse of ties to Hezbollah. But this time the context was significant. [] Gulf Arab states decided to crack down on Hezbollah, directed, it appears, from the Saudi kingdom.

Saudi Arabia went to the Arab League meeting in Cairo to demand that the League denote Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Until 2011, the Arab League had been a largely prone organization, civil to its members and unwilling to take contentious positions. Part of this was that the Arab League was split into two; the Arab nationalist states (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Libya) and the Gulf Arab states (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE). In the fog of 2011, the Saudis and their allies shoved out Libya and then Syria, while subordinating Egypt after the coup of General Sisi in 2013. The seats for these powers were now taken by people with much less authority and far less confidence to challenge Saudi Arabia. The kingdom saw the Arab League as its pliant instrument.

Disappointment met the Saudis when they insisted on putting Hezbollah on the terrorist list. They got their way, eventually, but not before Algeria, Iraq, Tunisia and Lebanon registered their unhappiness with this maneuver. Hezbollah is a major political party in Lebanon, a part of the delicate balance of power in that country. Iraq's government and Hezbollah are partners in Syria. Algeria and Tunisia, unhappy with the Saudi march across North Africa, have long itched to indicate their own dissatisfaction. The Saudi delegation stormed out of the meeting, but returned when they realized that despite these dissenters it would get its way.

Why has Saudi Arabia now gone after Hezbollah? After all, Hezbollah has been involved in Syria for the past five years. Unable to take on the Russians and come to terms with altered reality, Saudi Arabia has decided to target Hezbollah, hoping that this will pique the enthusiasm of the United

States (via Israel). But the U.S. is in a bind. It is pledged to UN Security Council resolution 1701, which is about the management of the Lebanese-Israeli border. UN peacekeepers maintain that border, working closely with Hezbollah, on its terrain. The UN cannot denote Hezbollah a terrorist organization if it means to maintain the integrity of its 1701 operations. This gives the U.S. [] already sees Hezbollah as a terrorist group (under Israeli urging) [] to escalate the situation. Saudi Arabias tantrum cannot be taken seriously in Washington. Nothing good will come of it.

Russia will now remove a substantial section of its military force from Syria. But it will remain at its naval and air bases, monitoring the ceasefire and watching to see if it needs to intervene once more. It has made its point. At the same time the Russians have placed air-defense batteries along the northwestern section of the Syrian border, which has prevented Turkish air incursions into this sector. These batteries will not be removed. They are monuments to the new reality.

Kaynak/Source: