



The New Regional Order amid the Aleppo Rubble

By Joe Macaron
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It became obvious in recent weeks that the US-Russian channel regarding Syria has run its course and can no longer be the bedrock of efforts to resolve the Syrian war. Emerging new trends in the Middle East including the growing tensions between Washington and Moscow, the convoluted nature of the Syrian battlefield and the realignment of alliances in the region, have reframed the parameters of that conflict.

Looking back at over three years of US-Russian talks, the mistrust began when both sides became militarily involved in Syria. US airstrikes against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) began as early as September 2014, and the Russian air campaign followed a year later in September 2015. Moscow perceived the US involvement against ISIL as an attempt to shift the military balance of power in favor of the Syrian rebels while Washington was skeptical of the unilateral Russian intervention in support of the Syrian regime particularly after the military setbacks in the first half of 2015.

The most visible reason behind the stalemate in the recent talks was the extent to which the Russian intervention was aligned with the survival of Syrian President Bashar Assad as well as the US inability to draw a line between al-Qaeda affiliate (Jabhat al-Nusra or Fateh al-Sham) and the more moderate Syrian rebel groups. However, the underlying discrepancy stems from the nature of the talks between a primary and secondary party of the conflict. Russia is directly implicated alongside the Iranian regime while the US has less stake, regardless of its ability or willingness to impact the outcome.

As long as the policy debate in Washington is whether the priority should be defeating ISIL or removing Assad, the US role in these talks with Russia will remain discredited. The Syrian opposition does not believe Washington is negotiating on its behalf as much as Assad is entrusting Moscow to do just that. It is true that a portion of the blame falls on the Syrian opposition that failed to offer a united front or a credible governance platform that connects it to the armed groups on the ground, however the primary regional parties of the conflict (i.e., Saudi Arabia and Turkey) are in a better position to negotiate on behalf of and exert influence on the Syrian opposition.

Furthermore, the US can no longer claim the strategic posture of distancing itself from the Syrian internal conflict while it continues to be involved through launching airstrikes, arming various Syrian groups, and negotiating the future of Syria with Russia. US interests are better served if Washington either facilitates talks between Russia and Iran, on one hand, and Turkey and Saudi Arabia, on the other, or shifts tactics to become completely aligned with Saudi and Turkish interests.

However, the US arming of Kurdish groups in Syria is further complicating the relationship between Washington and Ankara, while US-Saudi relations have hit a low after the US Congress recently passed the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA). US interests in the Middle East are no longer aligned with its traditional allies, hence any US President will continue to face the same regional constraints.

Indeed, US policy options in Syria are limited. Previous attempts to bring together the Syrian regime and the opposition have failed as well as efforts to reconcile Saudi Arabia and Iran, which left the US-Russian talks as the only open channel among the warring parties in Syria. Yet, the US can no longer combine the objective of defeating ISIL with exclusively engaging Russia in peace talks. This approach is not only failing to contain the conflict in the short run but is not resolving it either in the long run.

The emerging regional trends could serve as an impetus for the talks on Syria at the expense of US and European influence. Turkey and Egypt, to various degrees, are edging closer to Russia and Iran, while Saudi Arabia is now leading a less confrontational regional policy and Tehran seems comfortable with leaving the diplomatic front seat to Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin is minimizing the risk of confrontation with Turkey and Israel, which allows him to operate in Syria in a friendly regional environment. These trends will solidify the status of Russia as the main power broker in Syria but Moscow alone cannot effect an end to the Syrian conflict without a clear US strategy that either puts pressure on all parties and offers a creative compromise or becomes a primary party in the conflict, the latter being less likely in light of an American public mood wary of getting involved in Middle Eastern conflicts.

It is worth noting that the larger context of the relationship between Russia and the West is also overshadowing the developments in Syria. It is not the first time US-Russian relations hit a low, the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia comes to mind. The West's dilemma in answering Russia's power projection has been to either impose sanctions or engage, yet this formula never resolved the ongoing power struggle between Moscow and the West in Eastern Europe, which has an impact on how both sides approach Syria.

Since the United Nations Security Council failed on October 8 to adopt the French draft resolution on Syria, the US and Western powers have been discrediting Russia's action in Aleppo and describing it as "barbaric...war crime." Meanwhile, Putin reacted with an all-out diplomatic offensive as he shored up his popularity at home. Russian media have been instructed to paint an environment of a looming war with the West, and the Russian government has reportedly ordered all dependents of Russian officials living or studying abroad to return home, even though there is no tangible US threat. As a retaliation to the US merely suspending talks on Syria, Moscow established a permanent base in Syria, suspended nuclear agreements with Washington, and deployed nuclear-capable missiles in Kaliningrad near Poland as well as Russian warships with cruise missiles in the Mediterranean.

Indeed, Putin is seeking to restore Russia's global role and is now laying the ground for the next US administration to be tied up by the new realities Moscow is creating. Russia has the potential now to lead a new regional alliance with Iraq, Iran and Egypt, and to project power in Syria and the Levant.

The options facing Washington in the coming four years are either to stay the course by improving the way it manages these regional conflicts or lead a new wave of confrontation, possibly a Cold War. Out of the rubble of Aleppo, a new regional order is emerging that will take a while to materialize. The way the next US administration reacts to this strategic shift will define the US influence in the Middle East for decades to come.