

Towards a Western Retreat from Syria

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The Syria war drags on. Continuing it has become too expensive and too dangerous for its neighbors. Russia, which aims to re-establish itself in the Middle East, is trying to show the United States that it is in their best interest to allow Moscow to resolve the conflict.

The military situation in Syria is turning against those in Washington and Brussels who hoped to change the regime there by force. Two successive attempts to take Damascus have failed and it has become clear that that objective cannot be achieved.



Where NATO has failed to make war, the CTSO is preparing to make peace. The Secretary General of the Organization Nikolay Bordyuzha is setting up a peacekeeping force of 50,000 men, ready to be deployed in Syria.

On July 18th, an explosion killed the leadership of the Council of National Security, signalling the beginning of a vast offensive during which tens of thousands of mercenaries descended on the Syrian capital from Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq. After several days of pitched battles, Damascus was saved when the fraction of the population hostile to the government chose out of patriotism to assist the National Army rather than bid welcome to the forces of the FSA.

On September 26, al-Qaeda jihadists were able to penetrate the interior of the Defense Ministry, disguised as Syrian soldiers and carrying false papers. They intended to detonate their explosive vests in the office of the joint chiefs of the military but did not get close enough to their target and were killed. A second team attempted to take over the national TV station to broadcast an ultimatum to the President but were not able to reach the building as access was blocked moments after the first attack. A third team targeted government headquarters and a fourth was aimed at the airport.

In both cases, NATO coordinated the operations from its Turkish base in Incirlik, seeking to provoke a schism at the core of the Syrian Arab Army and rely on certain generals for the purpose of overthrowing the regime. But the generals in question had long been identified as traitors and marginalized from effective command. In the aftermath of the two failed attacks, Syrian power was reinforced, giving it the internal legitimacy necessary to go on the offensive and crush the FSA.

These failures put a damper on those who had been crowing in advance that the days of Bashar al-Assad were numbered. In Washington, consequently, those counselling withdrawal are carrying the day. The question is no longer how much time the «Assad regime» will hold out but whether it costs the U.S. more to continue the war than to stop it. Continuing it would entail the collapse of the Jordanian economy, losing allies in Lebanon, risking civil war in Turkey, in addition to having to protect Israel from the chaos. Stopping the war would mean allowing the Russians to regain foothold in the Middle East and strengthening the Axis of Resistance to the detriment of the expansionist dreams of the Likud.

While Washington's response takes the Israeli dimension into account, it has stopped heeding the advice of the Netanyahu government. Netanyahu ended up undercutting himself through his manipulations behind the assassination of Ambassador Chris Stevens and through his shocking interference in the American presidential campaign. If the long-term protection of Israel is the goal rather than folding to the brazen demands of Benjamin Netanyahu, a continued Russian presence is the best solution. With one million Russian-speaking Israelis, Moscow will never allow that the survival of that colony to be imperiled.

A glance backward is necessary here. The war against Syria was decided by the Bush Administration on September 15, 2001 during a meeting at Camp David, as confirmed notably by General Wesley Clark. After having suffered several setbacks, NATO action had to be cancelled due to the vetos of Russia and China. A «Plan B» then emerged, involving the use of mercenaries and covert action once deploying uniformed soldiers had become impossible. Given that the FSA has not scored a single victory against the Syrian Army, there have been multiple predictions that the conflict will become interminable and will progressively undermine the states of the region, including Israel. In this context, Washington signed onto the Geneva Accord, under the auspices of Kofi Annan.

Subsequently, the war camp torpedoed this agreement by organizing leaks to the press concerning the West's secret involvement in the conflict, leaks that led to Kofi Annan's immediate resignation. It also played its two trump cards with the attacks on July 18 and September 26 and lost them both. As a result, Lakhdar Brahimi, Annan's successor, has been called on to resuscitate and implement the Geneva Accord.

In the interim, Russia did not remain idle: it obtained the creation of a Syrian Ministry of National Reconciliation; supervised and protected the meeting in Damascus of national opposition parties; organized contacts between the U.S. and Syrian general staff; and prepared the deployment of a peace force. The first two measures scarcely registered in the Western press while the last two were flatly ignored.

Nevertheless, as revealed by Sergei Lavrov, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Russia addressed the fears of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff concerning Syrian chemical weapons. It verified that these were stored in locations sufficiently secure not to fall into the hands of the FSA, be seized by jihadists and used by them indiscriminately. Ultimately, it gave credible guarantees to the Pentagon that the continuation in power of so determined a leader as Bashar el-Assad is a more manageable situation, for Israel as well, than allowing the chaos in Syria to spread further.

Above all, Vladimir Putin accelerated the projects of the CSTO, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the anti-NATO defense alliance that unites Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tadjikstan and Russia itself. The foreign ministers of the CSTO adopted a shared position on Syria and a logistical plan was drawn up for an eventual deployment of 50,000

men. An agreement was signed between the CSTO and the U.N. Peacekeeping Department that these «blue chapkas» would be used in the zones of conflict under a U.N. Security Council mandate. Joint drills between the two are to take place from 8 to 17 October in Kazakhstan under the label of «*Inviolable Fraternity*» to complete the coordination between these two intergovernmental organizations. The Red Cross and the IOM will also participate.

No official decision will be taken in the U.S. during the presidential campaign. Once that ends, peace might become conceivable.

Translation Michele Stoddard

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