



INSS Insight No. 861, October 13, 2016

The United States on the Verge of Military Intervention against Assad?

Assaf Orion and Udi Dekel

On October 3, 2016, the US State Department announced the suspension of bilateral talks with Moscow seeking a ceasefire in Syria, and cancellation of a Joint Implementation Center for action against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. State Department spokesman John Kirby said, “The United States spared no effort in negotiating and attempting to implement an arrangement with Russia aimed at reducing violence...Unfortunately...Russia and the Syrian regime have chosen to pursue a military course.” In Moscow, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson placed the responsibility on the United States, and President Putin announced the suspension of the agreement signed in 2000 to destroy plutonium. The United States expressed “disappointment” with this decision.

The background to these developments was the final collapse of the ceasefire in Syria that began on September 12 under an American-Russian agreement, followed by extremely heavy bombing of Aleppo by the Syrian and Russian air forces, in which hundreds of civilians in the city were killed. The international community’s response was confined to mere – though at times severe – protests.

Following a discussion in the UN Security Council, Secretary of State John Kerry criticized Russia and Syria, and called for the immediate grounding of the Syrian air force. Kerry declared, “I listened to my colleague from Russia, and I sort of felt a little bit like they’re sort of in a parallel universe here....How can people go sit at a table with a regime that bombs hospitals and drops chlorine gas again and again and again and again and again and again, and acts with impunity? Are you supposed to sit there and have happy talk...when you’ve signed up to a ceasefire and you don’t adhere to it?” At the UN General Assembly on September 20, 2016, President Obama stated, “No external power is going to be able to force different religious communities or ethnic communities to co-exist for long....In a place like Syria, where there’s no ultimate military victory to be won, we’re going to have to pursue the hard work of diplomacy that aims to stop the violence, and deliver aid to those in need, and support those who pursue a political settlement.”

These statements by the US administration contain both explanations for the failure of their political efforts and alternate courses of action. In addition, they point at the blatant gaps

between the current United States approach and Russia's strategic culture and approach to the use of force.

First and most striking is the Western dichotomy between diplomacy and the use of military force: "either talking or bombing." The strategic approach of Russia and Assad combines the two; military operations, political moves, starvation, and the driving masses of refugees all flow from a single strategic design aiming to ensure the Assad regime's survival, the preservation of Russia's influence in the region, and the undermining of United States influence. The deployment of Russian air power in Syria and Russia's intervention on Assad's side a year ago have tipped the scales in the fighting on the ground and in the political environment. The United States, on the other hand, is focusing its military operations on direct combat against the Islamic State only, while avoiding the use of its military power to improve the conditions for negotiations, or in order to enforce its policy, such as imposition of a ceasefire, protection of civilians, or the prohibition of chemical weapons use.

Second, the administration's well-known policy pattern of "all or nothing" in both the political and military spheres is clearly recognizable. On the political level, President Obama contends that because a solution to the conflict in Syria cannot be solved by employment of military force, there is no point in using such force, except against the Islamic State. This argument deprives the administration of the possibility of useful military leverage for purposes other than an overall and final resolution to the war in Syria. On the military level, the administration for years has presented extreme "military alternatives," such as a land invasion ("boots on the ground"), or hermetic enforcement of extensive no-fly zones in Syria, withal entailing huge costs and unacceptable consequences. More limited practical alternatives have been ruled out by presenting the worst case for the potential prospects, to the point of American entanglement in another war in the Middle East and beyond it (a similar stance is recognizable in the Iranian context – "a deal or a regional war").

The cumulative result of the US policy is that at all times Russia and the Assad regime have a preferable alternative to an agreed and observed ceasefire – to attack all rebels, by framing the contention: "either Assad or a Salafi jihadist state." This means the ongoing crushing military offensive against opponents of the Assad regime and the population around them through the use of absolute air superiority and complete disregard for international law and norms. This trend leads to the continuation of Assad's rule over part of what will remain of Syria and its population, and continued fighting against the remaining pockets of resistance. The image of weakness on the part of the United States in the Syrian theater has far reaching consequences worldwide, including East Asia and Europe. Paradoxically, the lack of willingness on the part of the United States to use limited force makes it more likely that it will have to make extensive use of force in the future in Syria or in other theaters.

The hints from Washington, along with American internal criticism warning that a decision on the use of force is approaching, sparked an immediate Russian response threatening escalation, stepped up military action, and severe regional repercussions. To demonstrate its determination, while actually expressing apprehension, Russia announced that it would strengthen its forces in Syria with S-300VM (SA-23) advanced mobile air defense systems.

An alternative approach to the current United States policy crisis and that of the West in general lies in a combined strategy that takes advantage of the United States' superior military power and general superiority. Policy goals may include reducing the scope of violence; saving lives and providing humanitarian aid; stabilizing the population and limiting the refugee flows; restoring daily life at the local community level as far as possible (bottom-up); and promoting conditions for more comprehensive solutions in the future (top-down).

In this framework, by depriving Assad of the tools that provide him with both military superiority over his enemies and a feeling of impunity – the Syrian air force and the Syrian aerial defense system – the United States can demonstrate to the Assad regime and its Russian patron that their alternative to an agreed settlement is no longer unimpeded freedom of military action. Totally destroying the two arrays (AF&AD) is not a difficult or lengthy task for the United States military, and does not require use of ground forces. At the same time, in order to deter the regime from continuing its destructive military campaign and policy and to push it toward ceasefire arrangements and the reduction of harm to civilians, it is possible to begin partial operations that with relative flexibility facilitate risk management; analysis of responses of the pro-Assad coalition, including Russia and Iran; and decisions on follow-up measures. In this framework, the United States can begin by warning the Assad regime against flying in certain areas, and shooting down Syrian aircraft violating this ban. The next level could be attacking and grounding Syrian aircraft taking part in the fighting. Another step could consist of attacking airfields, or neutralizing entire arrays (such as helicopters). Simultaneously or separately, Syrian air defense systems threatening American freedom of action in the air, such as long range ground-to-air missiles and territorial air defense systems, or even the entire defense deployment, can be attacked.

In turn, the Assad regime could try to attack American aircraft, but at the price of risking severe damage to its remaining assets. Cutting back Assad's aerial and air defense capabilities will increase the burden on Russian operations and resources, and impose strategic costs from Moscow. Russia will no longer be able to hide its defiant operations under the Assad regime's skirts. It is difficult to predict all of Russia's responses, but there is little likelihood of its risking a direct conflict with the United States, despite President Putin's known policy of brinkmanship. Russia will therefore probably prefer threats and increased aerial attacks against rebel forces supported by the United States and by the Sunni countries. Another measure that Russia can take is handing S-300/400 advanced ground-to-air missile batteries to Syrian teams or mixed teams.

Israel has several interests in this context, led by minimizing the cumulative damage to the image of United States power in the region and the world – an important element in Israel's national security. In addition, Israel has an interest in preventing the consolidation and strengthening of Iran's posture through its proxies in areas close to Israel. Israel is also eager to prevent the transfer of advanced Russian weapons – especially air defense systems – to Syrian forces commanded by Assad and the pro-Assad coalition, Iran and Hezbollah. In this aspect, Israel is liable to be negatively affected by an American air strike, and must take advantage of its channels of communications with the Russians to minimize this damage. Israel can support the United States in low profile fashion by sharing intelligence and operational know-how in order to allow aerial superiority and reduce risks, without direct participation in the fighting, and in accordance with its current policy of non-intervention in Syria. At the same time, the supply of advanced air defense systems to the Assad forces or Hezbollah might drag Israel into the campaign, should it decide to prevent this by means of a preemptive strike.

At the normative level, it is important for the United States to lead a campaign to put Bashar al-Assad on trial for war crimes and genocide. Israel can play a historic role in this context, and should make its moral voice heard by joining those calling for this measure.

