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Russia, America, and Syria

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MARK N. KATZ, OCT 17 2012

Arriving early last week for one of Washington's many seminars on Syria, I overheard a small group earnestly discussing the emergence of a new anti-American alliance consisting of Russia, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Hezbollah. The leader of this alliance, in their view, is Russia, and the main battleground between this alliance and the U.S. is Syria.

Moscow and Washington strongly disagree over many issues, including how to deal with the conflict in Syria. Their differences over Syria, however, do not amount to a Cold War-style proxy war between them. There are several reasons for this.

First and foremost: Russia and America are not playing nearly as important a role in the ongoing Syrian conflict as are regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and even Qatar. To the extent that Syria has become a proxy war for outside powers, it is one between Shi'a forces (Iran, Iraq, and Hezbollah) on the one hand, and both Sunni governments (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Egypt) and Sunni opposition forces from outside Syria (such as Al Qaeda) on the other. Even if the U.S. and Russia were not at all involved in the ongoing Syrian conflict, all these regional powers still would be.

Second—and somewhat ironically—the Israeli factor serves to mitigate Russian-American differences over Syria. Since the rise of Putin, Russian-Israeli relations have steadily improved. Moscow understands that while the Israeli government has no love for the Assad regime, Israel very much fears that the downfall of Assad will lead to the rise of a Sunni-led regime in Syria that is even more hostile to the Jewish state. Further, Moscow understands that however much Washington might criticize the Assad regime and Russian support for it, the U.S. government takes Israeli concerns very seriously and is unlikely to pursue policies toward Syria that upset Israel. Washington's sensitivity toward Israeli concerns about political change in Syria, then, provides an opportunity for Moscow to continue backing Assad.

Third: Despite their differences over Syria, Moscow and Washington share a common fear about the rise of radical Islamist forces both there and in other "Arab Spring" countries. Their differences about Syria, then, are not the manifestation of a Russian-American proxy war but a genuine disagreement about how best to thwart the rise of these forces. Russian scholars I have met with have no illusions about the viciousness of the Assad regime. They argue, though, that as bad as it is, its downfall will lead to something worse—both for Russia and the West. The recent killing of the U.S. ambassador to Libya in Benghazi is seen by them as proof of this logic. From the Russian viewpoint, this episode should show Washington that engineering the downfall of Qaddafi has only served to unleash radical Islamist forces in Libya to the detriment of American interests there.

Furthermore, Washington and Moscow genuinely disagree as to the nature of the Sunni powers in the region. Moscow very much fears that Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular are actually supporting Al Qaeda and other radical Sunni Islamists, but have successfully duped Washington into thinking that they are America's allies when they really are not. Pakistan, Russian scholars argue, did this successfully for many years, but Washington has recently come to recognize Pakistan's duplicity in pretending to be America's ally while it was all along backing the efforts of the Taliban, Haqqani Network, and possibly Al Qaeda itself in harming American interests. It is long past time, they argue, for Washington to experience a similar epiphany about Saudi Arabia in particular.

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Despite the tension that arose between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Washington does not share this highly pessimistic (indeed, somewhat hysterical) Russian view of Saudi Arabia and Qatar. By contrast, the U.S. government sees them as allies against, as well as the targets of, radical Islamist groups such as Al Qaeda. Still, the U.S. has urged restraint upon Saudi Arabia and Qatar in aiding Syrian opposition groups for fear that these might turn out to be radical Islamists—much like some of those they aided in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation of that country turned out to be.

In addition, the U.S. sees Saudi Arabia and Qatar (along with Israel) as important allies against Iran. Indeed, the Obama Administration is still trying to persuade Russia to cooperate with it more fully against Iran. This is not something that Washington would bother with if it really did regard Moscow as an implacable adversary.

Finally, despite their differences on Syria, Russian and American foreign policies toward it share something else in common: neither appears to be coherent or effective. As a result, neither Washington nor Moscow is likely to have as much influence over the outcome of the conflict in Syria as are much more determined and focused actors in the region.

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