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Is Putin Planning to Sell-Out Assad?

By Mike Whitney

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Moscow's geostrategic objectives in Syria are the polar opposite of Washington's. Grasping this simple fact is the easiest way to get a fix on what's really going on in the war-torn country.

What Washington wants is explained in great detail in a piece by Michael E. O'Hanlon at the Brookings Institute titled "Deconstructing Syria: A new strategy for America's most hopeless war". Here's an excerpt:

"...the only realistic path forward may be a plan that in effect deconstructs Syria....the international community should work to create pockets with more viable security and governance within Syria over time...

Creation of these sanctuaries would produce autonomous zones that would never again have to face the prospect of rule by either Assad or ISIL....

The interim goal might be a confederal Syria, with several highly autonomous zones... The confederation would likely require support from an international peacekeeping force....to make these zones defensible and governable....The autonomous zones would be liberated with the clear understanding that there was no going back to rule by Assad or a successor."

(“Deconstructing Syria: A new strategy for America’s most hopeless war“, Michael E. O’Hanlon, Brookings Institute)

Forget about ISIS and Syrian President Bashar al Assad for a minute and, instead, focus on the terms “autonomous zones”, “creation of ...sanctuaries”, “safe zones” and “a confederal Syria.”

All of these strongly suggest that the primary aim of US policy is to break Syria up into smaller units that pose no threat to US-Israeli regional hegemony. This is the US gameplan in a nutshell.

In contrast, Russia does not want a divided Syria. Aside from the fact that Moscow and Damascus are long-term allies (and Russia has a critical naval facility in Tartus, Syria), a balkanized Syria poses serious threats for Russia, the most significant of which is the probable emergence of a jihadi base of operations that will be used to deploy terrorists across Central Asia thus undermining Moscow’s grand plan to integrate the continents into a giant free trade zone from Lisbon to Vladivostok. Russian President Vladimir Putin takes the threat of terrorism very seriously, which is why he has been working around-the-clock to engage leaders from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran, the Kurds and Syrian opposition groups in negotiations to put an end to the fighting and reestablish security in Syria. It’s worth noting that there’s been an effective blackout of these crucial negotiations in the western media, mainly because they make Putin look like a peacemaker who is respected among other world leaders and who is making every effort to stop the spread of terrorism. Obviously, that doesn’t jibe with the media’s portrayal of Putin as the new Hitler, so they’ve simply omitted the meetings from their coverage.

The differences between the US and Russia are irreconcilable. Washington wants an end to the nation-state system and create a new world order, while Putin wants to maintain the current system in order to preserve national sovereignty, self determination, and multi-polarity. This is the basis of the clash between Russia and the US. Putin rejects unipolar global rule and is working as fast as he can to build a coalition capable of resisting persistent US intervention, manipulation and aggression. This is no small task, and it involves a great deal of discretion. Putin does not have the wherewithal to confront the US Goliath at every turn, so he must pick his fights carefully and operate largely in the shadows, which is what he is doing.

In the last few months, Putin has convened meetings with all the main players in the Syria drama, and has made remarkable headway in resolving the crisis. The main sticking point now, is whether Assad will remain as president or be removed as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the US demand. Putin is resisting this outcome for many reasons. First, he doesn’t be seen as betraying an ally which would seriously hurt his reputation as a reliable partner. Second, he can’t allow himself to comply with a “regime change” doctrine that eschews international law and that could eventually be used against him in a future coup. Allowing foreign leaders to pick and choose who is a “legitimate” leader and who isn’t is a prescription for disaster, as is evident in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan and now Yemen. Finally, Putin cannot simply hand Washington an easy victory on a matter of this magnitude although, in the end, Assad will probably be gone.

So, what’s been going on behind the scenes?

Back in June, Putin met with the Saudi Crown Prince and Defence Minister Mohammad bin Salman in St Petersburg and started working on an “international legal framework for creating a coalition to fight terrorism in the region.” Soon after, he met with the heads of opposition groups and high-ranking officials from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The goal was to implement the so-called Geneva communiqué that was ratified in June 30, 2012. In brief, Geneva provides for:

Establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers that could include members of the government and opposition, and should be formed on the basis of mutual consent.

Participation of all groups and segments of society in Syria in a meaningful national dialogue process

Review of the constitutional order and the legal system

Free and fair multi-party elections for the new institutions and offices that have been established.

As you can see, Geneva does not resolve the central issue, which is: “Does Assad stay or go?” That question is not answered definitively. It all depends of composition of the “transitional governing body” and the outcome of future elections.

Clearly, this is the result that Putin wanted. Here’s how Lavrov summed it up two days ago:

“I have already said, Russia and Saudi Arabia support all principles of the June 30, 2012 Geneva communiqué, in particular, the need to preserve government institutions, including the Syrian army. I believe its participation in the effective struggle against terrorists is truly essential.

I have already said that though we hold identical positions on the settlement of the crisis, we also have our differences, and one of them concerns the destiny of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. We believe that all issues of settlement, including the parameters of the transitional period and political reforms, should be resolved by Syrians themselves. The Geneva communiqué reads that these issues should be resolved by consensus between the Government and the entire spectrum of opposition forces.”

You can see by this statement what Putin really wants. He wants to “preserve government institutions, including the Syrian army” to avoid another Iraq-type nightmare scenario. (Note: Remember what happened to Iraq after Bremer disbanded the army.) What he doesn’t want, is to create a power-vacuum that leads to another failed, balkanized hellhole that serves as a breeding ground for terrorists that will eventually come knocking on Moscow’s door. He doesn’t want that at all. That only serves Washington’s objectives, not Russia’s.

Also, the whole idea of a “transitional governing body” and “free and fair multi-party elections” gives Putin a way to back away from Assad without looking like he’s throwing him under the bus.

Some will probably criticize this and say that Putin is “selling out a friend and ally”, but that’s not entirely true. He’s trying to balance two opposing things at the same time. He’s trying to maintain his commitment to an ally while accommodating Saudi Arabia so they agree to help him to end the hostilities. So, yes, there is a bit of triangulation involved, but what choice does he have? In practical terms, he can either strike a deal fast or allow the window of opportunity to slam shut.

Why?

Because Washington doesn’t want a deal. Washington wants war. Washington cannot achieve its goal of breaking up Syria and redrawing the map of the Middle East if peacemaker Putin prevails. Let’s put it this way: If Putin gets Saudi Arabia on board, then a good portion of the funding for jihadi groups will dry up, the Syrian Army, assisted by Iraqi and Kurdish forces, will have greater success on the battlefield, and ISIS will be annihilated.

How does that serve Washington’s interests?

It doesn’t. And even if Assad is removed, the process (Geneva) is such that the next president is not going to be a hand-picked US stooge, but someone who is supported by the majority of the Syrian people. Needless to say, Washington doesn’t like that idea.

The only glitch to the plan is that Putin must move very fast. The US has already gotten the green-light from Ankara to launch its drone attacks and bombing raids from Incirlik air base in Turkey, which means the conflict is going to intensify in the weeks and months to come. Also, Turkey’s hardline President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appears to be using the US aerial attacks as cover for stealing Syrian sovereign territory in the North and declaring it a “safe zone”. Get a load of this clip from an August 11 article in the *International Business Times*:

“A group of ethnic Turkmen fighters arrived in Azaz, Syria, on Monday afternoon to launch the first phase of a joint U.S.-Turkish initiative to establish an Islamic State group-free “safe zone” in the country, two soldiers fighting in northern Syria told International Business Times via Skype. Tanks carrying the fighters entered through the Bab al-Salama border, crossing from southeastern Turkey into the town of Azaz, Syria, setting off a wave of attacks by the Islamic State militant group, also known as ISIS or ISIL, in the town of Marea, which forced the al-Qaeda extremist group Jabhat al-Nusra to retreat.

“At first everyone thought the tanks were filled with Turkish soldiers, but it was the Turkmen,” one of the rebel fighters said.

The soldiers, interviewed Tuesday by IBTimes, were trained in Turkey and are in one of the biggest moderate-opposition rebel coalitions in the country. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they are in combat. Shifting alliances among rebel groups in the country have left them fearing retribution if they identified themselves on the record. One of the soldiers, a commander, recently attended talks with the Turkish government in the capital city of Ankara regarding the Turkish-U.S. plan to create a safe zone in the northern part of the country.”

(“Turkey, US, Syrian ISIS-Free Safe Zone: Turkmen Brigades Move Into Syria, Al-Nusra Moves Out, Soldiers Say“, IBT)

So, Turkish tanks loaded with troops that have been armed and trained by Turkey, cross the border into Syria where they are expected to clear and capture territory up to and perhaps including Aleppo?

That sounds a lot like an invasion to me; how about you?

Bottom line: If Putin wants to prevent Washington from splitting up Syria and transforming it into a terrorist breeding ground, he’s going to have to move fast; get the Saudis on board, put an end to the bloodshed, and implement Geneva.

It’s not going to be easy, but he seems to be on the right track.