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The Return of the Syrian Army

By Robert Fisk
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While the world still rages on at Russia's presumption in the Middle East – to intervene in Syria instead of letting the Americans decide which dictators should survive or die – we've all been forgetting the one institution in that Arab land which continues to function and protect the state which Moscow has decided to preserve: the Syrian army. While Russia has been propagandising its missiles, the Syrian military, undermanned and undergunned a few months ago, has suddenly moved on to the offensive. Earlier this year, we may remember, this same army was being written off, the Bashar al-Assad government said to be reaching its final days.

We employed our own army of clichés to make the case for regime change. The Syrian army was losing ground – at Jisr al-Shugour and at Palmyra – and so we predicted that the whole Assad state had reached a “tipping point”.

Then along came Vladimir Putin with his air and missile fleets and suddenly the whole place is transformed. While we huffed and puffed that the Russians were bombing the “moderate” rebels – moderates who had earlier ceased to exist according to America’s top generals – we’ve been paying no attention to the military offensive which the Syrians themselves are now staging against the Nusra Front fighters around Aleppo and in the valley of the Orontes.

Syrian commanders are now setting the coordinates for almost every Russian air strike. They were originally giving between 200 and 400 coordinates a night. Now the figure sometimes reaches 800. Not that the Russians are going after every map reference, of course. The Syrians have found that the Russians do not want to fire at targets in built-up areas; they intend to leave burning hospitals and dead wedding parties to the Americans in Afghanistan. This policy could always change, of course. No air force bombs countries without killing civilians. Nor without crossing other people’s frontiers.

But the Russians are now telling the Turks – and by logical extension, this information must go to the Americans – their flight coordinates. Even more remarkable, they have set up a hotline communications system between their base on the Syrian Mediterranean coast and the Israeli ministry of defence in Tel Aviv. More incredible still is that the Israelis – who have a habit of targeting Syrian and Iranian personnel near the Golan Heights – have suddenly disappeared from the skies. In other words, the Russians are involved in a big operation, not a one-month wonder that is going on in Syria. And it is likely to continue for quite a time.

The Syrians were originally anxious to move back into Palmyra, captured by Isis last May, but the Russians have demonstrated more interest in the Aleppo region, partly because they believe their coastal bases around Lattakia are vulnerable. The Nusra Front has fired several missiles towards Lattakia and Tartous and Moscow has no desire to have its air force targeted on the ground. But the Syrian army is now deploying its four major units – the 1st and 4th Divisions, Republican Guards and Special Forces – on the battle fronts and are moving closer to the Turkish border.

Russian air strikes around the Isis “capital” of Raqqa may or may not be hurting Isis, although the Syrians like to boast that they have plenty of intelligence coming to them from the city. Interesting, if true, because Isis personnel are specialists in torturing to death “agents of the

regime” and it would be a brave man to pass on information to Damascus. Yet travellers’ tales can be true. There’s a regular civilian bus route from Raqqa to Damascus – buses have an odd habit of crossing front lines in most civil wars – and if passengers prefer not to talk to journalists, they will talk of what they have seen when they get home.

All this is only the beginning of Mr Putin’s adventure. He is proving to be quite a traveller to the Middle East – and has already made firm friends of another pillar of the region, that President-Field Marshal who scored more than 96 per cent at the polls and who currently rules Egypt. But the Egyptian army, fighting its little war in Sinai, no longer has strategic experience of a major war. Nor, despite their dalliance in the air over Yemen, Libya, Syria and other targets of opportunity, do the present military authorities in Saudi Arabia, the Emirates and Jordan have much understanding of how a real war is fought. Libya’s own army is in bits. Iraq’s military has scarcely earned any medals against its Islamist enemies.

But there is one factor which should not be overlooked.

If it wins – and if it holds together and if its manpower, which is admittedly at a low level, can be maintained – then the Syrian military is going to come out of this current war as the most ruthless, battle-trained and battle-hardened Arab army in the entire region. Woe betide any of its neighbours who forget this.