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What is Russia Doing in Syria?

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The military balance of power in Syria and Iraq is changing. The Russian air strikes that have been taking place since the end of September are strengthening and raising the morale of the Syrian army, which earlier in the year looked fought out and was on the retreat. With the support of Russian airpower, the army is now on the offensive in and around Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, and is seeking to regain lost territory in Idlib province. Syrian commanders on the

ground are reportedly relaying the co-ordinates of between 400 and 800 targets to the Russian air force every day, though only a small proportion of them come under immediate attack. The chances of Bashar al-Assad's government falling – though always more remote than many suggested – are disappearing. Not that this means he is going to win.

The drama of Russian military action, while provoking a wave of Cold War rhetoric from Western leaders and the media, has taken attention away from an equally significant development in the war in Syria and Iraq. This has been the failure over the last year of the US air campaign – which began in Iraq in August 2014 before being extended to Syria – to weaken Islamic State and other al-Qaida-type groups. By October the US-led coalition had carried out 7323 air strikes, the great majority of them by the US air force, which made 3231 strikes in Iraq and 2487 in Syria. But the campaign has demonstrably failed to contain IS, which in May captured Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria. There have been far fewer attacks against the Syrian branch of al-Qaida, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the extreme Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham, which between them dominate the insurgency in northern Syria. The US failure is political as much as military: it needs partners on the ground who are fighting IS, but its choice is limited because those actually engaged in combat with the Sunni jihadis are largely Shia – Iran itself, the Syrian army, Hizbullah, the Shia militias in Iraq – and the US can't offer them full military co-operation because that would alienate the Sunni states, the bedrock of America's power in the region. As a result the US can only use its air force in support of the Kurds.

The US faces the same dilemma in Iraq and Syria today as it did after 9/11 when George Bush declared the war on terror. It was known then that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis, Osama bin Laden was a Saudi and the money for the operation came from Saudi donors. But the US didn't want to pursue al-Qaida at the expense of its relations with the Sunni states, so it muted criticism of Saudi Arabia and invaded Iraq; similarly, it never confronted Pakistan over its support for the Taliban, ensuring that the movement was able to regroup after losing power in 2001.

Washington tried to mitigate the failure of its air campaign, officially called Operation Inherent Resolve, by making exaggerated claims of success. Maps were issued to the press showing that IS had a weakening grip on between 25 and 30 per cent of its territory, but they conveniently left out the parts of Syria where IS was advancing. Such was the suppression and manipulation of intelligence by the administration that in July fifty analysts working for US Central Command signed a protest against the official distortion of what was happening on the battlefield. Russia has now taken advantage of the US failure to suppress the jihadis.

But great power rivalry is only one of the confrontations taking place in Syria, and the fixation on Russian intervention has obscured other important developments. The outside world hasn't paid much attention, but the regional struggle between Shia and Sunni has intensified in the last few weeks. Shia states across the Middle East, notably Iran, Iraq and Lebanon, have never had much doubt that they are in a fight to the finish with the Sunni states, led by Saudi Arabia, and their local allies in Syria and Iraq. Shia leaders dismiss the idea, much favoured in Washington, that a sizeable moderate, non-sectarian Sunni opposition exists that would be willing to share power in Damascus and Baghdad: this, they believe, is propaganda pumped out by Saudi and Qatari-backed media. When it comes to keeping Assad in charge in Damascus, the increased involvement of the Shia powers is as important as the Russian air campaign. For the first time

units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard have been deployed in Syria, mostly around Aleppo, and there are reports that a thousand fighters from Iran and Hizbullah are waiting to attack from the north. Several senior Iranian commanders have recently been killed in the fighting. The mobilisation of the Shia axis is significant because, although Sunni outnumber Shia in the Muslim world at large, in the swathe of countries most directly involved in the conflict – Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon – there are more than a hundred million Shia, who believe their own existence is threatened if Assad goes down, compared to thirty million Sunnis, who are in a majority only in Syria.

In addition to the Russian-American rivalry and the struggle between Shia and Sunni, a third development of growing importance is shaping the war. This is the struggle of the 2.2 million Kurds, 10 per cent of the Syrian population, to create a Kurdish statelet in north-east Syria, which the Kurds call Rojava. Since the withdrawal of the Syrian army from the three Kurdish enclaves in the summer of 2012, the Kurds have been extraordinarily successful militarily and now control an area that stretches for 250 miles between the Euphrates and the Tigris along the southern frontier of Turkey. The Syrian Kurdish leader Salih Muslim told me in September that the Kurdish forces intended to advance west of the Euphrates, seizing the last IS-held border crossing with Turkey at Jarabulus and linking up with the Syrian Kurdish enclave at Afrin. Such an event would be viewed with horror by Turkey, which suddenly finds itself hemmed in by Kurdish forces backed by US airpower along much of its southern frontier.

The Syrian Kurds say that their People's Protection Units (YPG) number fifty thousand men and women under arms (though in the Middle East it is wise to divide by two all claims of military strength). They are the one force to have repeatedly beaten Islamic State, including in the long battle for Kobani that ended in January. The YPG is lightly armed, but highly effective when co-ordinating its attacks with US aircraft. The Kurds may be exaggerating the strength of their position: Rojava is the safest part of Syria aside from the Mediterranean coast, but this is a measure of the chronic insecurity in the rest of the country, where, even in government-held central Damascus, mortar bombs fired from opposition enclaves explode daily. Front lines are very long and porous, so IS can infiltrate and launch sudden raids. When in September I drove from Kobani to Qamishli, another large Kurdish city, on what was meant to be a safe road, I was stopped in an Arab village where YPG troops said they were conducting a search for five or six IS fighters who had been seen in the area. A few miles further on, in the town of Tal Abyad, which the YPG had captured from IS in June, a woman ran out of her house to wave down the police car I was following to say that she had just seen an IS fighter in black clothes and a beard run through her courtyard. The police said there were still IS men hiding in abandoned Arab houses in the town. Half an hour later, we were passing though Ras al-Ayn, which the Kurds have held for two years, when there was the sound of what I thought was shooting ahead of us, but it turned out to be a suicide bomber in a car: he had blown himself up at the next checkpoint, killing five people. At the same time, a man on a motorbike detonated a bomb at a checkpoint we had just passed through, but killed only himself. The YPG may have driven IS out of these areas, but they have not gone far.

Innumerable victories and defeats on the battlefield in Syria and Iraq have been announced over the last four years, but most of them haven't been decisive. Between 2011 and 2013 it was conventional wisdom in the West and much of the Middle East that Assad was going to be

overthrown just as Gaddafi has been. In late 2013 and throughout 2014, it was clear that Assad still controlled most populated areas, but then the jihadi advances in northern and eastern Syria in May revived talk of the regime's crumbling. In reality, neither the government nor its opponents are likely to collapse: all sides have many supporters who will fight to the death. It is a genuine civil war: a couple of years ago in Baghdad an Iraqi politician told me that 'the problem in Iraq is that all parties are both too strong and too weak: too strong to be defeated, but too weak to win.' The same applies today in Syria. Even if one combatant suffers a temporary defeat, its foreign supporters will prop it up: the ailing non-IS part of the Syrian opposition was rescued by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey in 2014 and this year Assad is being saved by Russia, Iran and Hizbullah. All have too much to lose: Russia needs success in Syria after twenty years of retreat, while the Shia states dare not allow a Sunni triumph.

The military stalemate will be difficult to break. The battleground is vast, with front lines stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean. Will the entrance of the Russian air force result in a new balance of power in the region? Will it be more effective than the Americans and their allies? For air power to work, even when armed with precision weapons, it needs a well-organised military partner on the ground identifying targets and relaying co-ordinates to the planes overhead. This approach worked for the US when it was supporting the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 and the Iraqi peshmerga against Saddam's army in northern Iraq in 2003. Russia will now hope to have the same success through its co-operation with the Syrian army. There are some signs that this may be happening; on 18 October what appeared to be Russian planes were reported by independent observers to have wiped out a 16-vehicle IS convoy and killed forty fighters near Raqqa, Islamic State's Syrian capital.

But Russian air support won't be enough to defeat IS and the other al-Qaida-type groups, because years of fighting the US, Iraqi and Syrian armies has given their fighters formidable military expertise. Tactics include multiple co-ordinated attacks by suicide bombers, sometimes driving armoured trucks that carry several tons of explosives, as well as the mass use of IEDs and booby traps. IS puts emphasis on prolonged training as well as religious teaching; its snipers are famous for remaining still for hours as they search for a target. IS acts like a guerrilla force, relying on surprise and diversionary attacks to keep its enemies guessing.

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Over the last three years I have found that the best way of learning what is really happening in the war is to visit military hospitals. Most wounded soldiers, eyewitnesses to the fighting, are bored by their convalescence and eager to talk about their experiences. In July, I was in the Hussein Teaching Hospital in the Shia holy city of Karbala, where one ward was reserved for injured fighters from the Shia militia known as the Hashid Shaabi. Many had answered a call to arms by the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani after IS captured Mosul last year. Colonel Salah Rajab, the deputy commander of the Habib battalion of the Ali Akbar brigade, who was lying in bed after having his lower right leg amputated, had been fighting in Baiji City, a town on the Tigris close to Iraq's largest oil refinery, for 16 days when a mortar round landed near him, leaving two of his men dead and four wounded. When I asked him what the weaknesses of the Hashid were, he said that they were enthusiastic but poorly trained. He could speak with some authority: he was a professional soldier who resigned from the Iraqi army in 1999. He complained that his

men got a maximum of three months' training when they needed six months, with the result that they made costly mistakes such as talking too much on their mobile phones and field radios. IS monitored these communications, and used intercepted information to inflict heavy losses. The biggest problem for the Hashid, which probably numbers about fifty thousand men, is the lack of experienced commanders able to organise an attack and keep casualties low.

Omar Abdullah, an 18-year-old militia volunteer, was in another bed in the same ward. He had been trained for just 25 days before going to fight in Baiji, where his arm and leg were broken in a bomb blast. His story confirmed Colonel Rajab's account of enthusiastic but inexperienced militiamen suffering heavy losses as they fell into traps set by IS. On arriving in Baiji, Abdullah said, 'we were shot at by snipers and we ran into a house to seek cover. There were 13 of us and we didn't realise that the house was full of explosives.' These were detonated by an IS fighter keeping a watch on the house; the blast killed nine of the militiamen and wounded the remaining four. Experienced soldiers, too, have been falling victim to traps like this. A bomb disposal expert in the ward told me he had been examining a suspicious-looking wooden bridge over a canal when one of his men stepped onto it and detonated a bomb that killed four and wounded three of the bomb disposal team.

The types of injury reflect the kind of combat that predominates. Most of it takes place in cities or built-up areas and involves house-to-house fighting in which losses are high. Syrian, Kurdish and Iraqi soldiers described being hit by snipers as they manned checkpoints or being injured by mines or booby traps. In May, I talked to an 18-year-old Kurdish YPG fighter called Javad Judy in the Shahid Khavat hospital in the city of Qamishli in north-east Syria. He had been shot through the spine as his squad was clearing a Christian village near Hasaka of IS fighters. 'We had divided into three groups that were trying to attack the village,' he said, 'when we were hit by intense fire from behind and from the trees on each side of us.' He was still traumatised by finding out that his lower body was permanently paralysed.

For some soldiers, injuries aren't the only threat to their survival. In 2012, in the Mezze military hospital in Damascus, I met Mohammed Diab, a 21-year-old Syrian army soldier who a year earlier in Aleppo had been hit by a bullet that shattered his lower left leg. After making an initial recovery he had gone back to his home village of Rahiya in Idlib province, which was a dangerous move since it was under the control of the opposition. Hearing that there was a wounded government soldier in the village, they took Diab hostage and held him for five months; they even sold his metal splint and gave him a piece of wood to strap to his leg instead. Finally, his family ransomed him for the equivalent of $1000 but his leg had become infected and so he was back in hospital.

In one sense, the soldiers and fighters I spoke to were the lucky ones: at least they had a hospital to go to. Thousands of IS fighters must have been wounded at Kobani, where 70 per cent of the buildings were destroyed by seven hundred American airstrikes. In Damascus, whole districts held by the opposition have been pounded into rubble by government artillery and barrel bombs. Since March 2011, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 250,124 Syrians have been killed and an estimated two million injured out of a population of 22 million. The country is saturated by violence. In September I went to the town of Tal Tamir outside Hasaka City, near where Javad Judy was shot. Islamic State had retreated, but people were still too terrified to

return to their houses – or those houses that were still standing. A local official said he was trying to persuade refugees to come back. Their reluctance wasn't surprising: the previous week an apparently pregnant Arab woman had been arrested in Tal Tamir market. She turned out to be a suicide bomber who had failed to detonate the explosives strapped to her stomach under her black robes.

The Russian intervention in Syria, the greater involvement of Iran and the Shia powers, and the rise of the Syrian Kurds has not yet changed the status quo in Iraq and Syria, though it has the potential to do so. The Russian presence makes Turkish military intervention against the Kurds and the government in Damascus less likely. But the Russians, the Syrian army and their allies need to win a serious victory – such as capturing the rebel-held half of Aleppo – if they are to transform the civil war. Assad won't want his experienced combat units to be caught up in the sort of street-by-street fighting described by the wounded soldiers in the hospitals.

On the other hand, the Russian air campaign has an advantage over that of the Americans in that it has been launched in support of an effective regular army. The US never dared to attack IS when it was fighting the Syrian army because Washington didn't want to be accused of keeping Assad in power. The US approach has left it without real allies on the ground, aside from the Kurds, whose effectiveness is limited outside Kurdish majority areas. The crippling weakness of US strategy in both Iraq and Syria has been to pretend that a 'moderate Sunni opposition' either exists or can be created. For all America's fierce denunciations of Russian intervention, some in Washington can see the advantage of Russia doing what the US can't do itself. Meanwhile, Britain is wrestling with the prospect of joining the US-led air campaign, without noticing that it has already failed in its main purpose.