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Russia's Intervention in Syria: Implications for Western Engagement

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Summary

The war in Syria has become dramatically more complex since the summer, with Turkey and Russia becoming more directly engaged and several western states extending their bombing campaigns. Russia's direct intervention seeks tactical gains for the Assad regime in northwest Syria in support of its strategic goal of a pro-Russian political settlement to the conflict. Such action makes further Islamic State advances more likely in Syria. Further escalation of British military intervention in Syria would also be likely to fuel the conflict.

Introduction

Since September there have been four significant developments as the war against Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria intensifies:

- Russia has changed the nature of its intervention in Syria by deploying combat aircraft and up to 2,000 support personnel and weapons systems.
- More western states are extending the air war from Iraq to Syria, with the probability that there will be a vote in the UK parliament to support British involvement in Syria.
- The US has changed its strategy of assisting non-jihadist opposition forces in Syria from training them to sending more arms and ammunition.
- Revised US intelligence estimates of IS strength suggests that international support for IS is more than compensating for its losses in spite of the intensity of the coalition air strikes.

Together with the post-July involvement of Turkey in air strikes against both IS and its Kurdish adversaries in Syria, these developments greatly increase the complexity of the war there. This briefing analyses these developments and argues why the UK government should avoid expanded military engagement.

The State of the War

August's briefing reported that, according to US defence sources, in the first thirteen months of the air war against IS, some 15,000 IS supporters had been killed, although these sources did not say how many had been civilians. There was a persistent thread of coalition reporting that precision strikes were effective in minimising civilian casualties. The briefing also reported that the overall strength of IS, including recruits joining the movement from beyond Syria and Iraq, had not diminished. This implied that the losses were being made up by new recruits.

In late September US intelligence sources reported that there had been a substantial revision of the estimated strength of IS, including a revised estimate for foreign recruitment, which was now thought to be around 30,000 since 2011, double the figure estimated in 2014. This indicates that the movement is growing steadily in spite of the forces being ranged against it. Over 50 US military intelligence analysts have formally complained that their earlier assessments of IS strength have been downgraded by their superiors to fit the political narrative of coalition success against IS. Less publicised, the much-vaunted Iraqi government operation to regain control of the provincial capital, Ramadi, has made no progress in the past month in spite of US air support for the Iraqi Army units.

Although independent data on civilian casualties due to coalition air attack remains sparse, the experience of the sustained precision attack by US forces on the MSF hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan, is a stark reminder of the risk of civilian casualties. IS propaganda is replete with reports of such casualties in Iraq and Syria.

Expansion of the Coalition

The US remains the driving force behind the air war and has been aided since August by the use of Turkish bases, especially Incirlik which is barely twenty minutes flying time from war zones in northern Syria. It has been joined in its Syrian operations by Canada, Turkey, Australia and France. Although their roles are small compared with the United States, they are important symbolic components, demonstrating that this is not solely a US operation. There are few indications of the extent of the current involvement of Arab states, but Saudi and Emirati participation appears to have declined substantially, most likely due to their involvement since March in a major air and ground war against the Houthi movement in Yemen. Thus the war against IS is now primarily a western war and can be presented as such by IS.

The Cameron government in Britain and its coalition predecessor have increased UK involvement in Syria in spite of parliamentary opposition expressed in a vote two years ago. Until now, this has comprised RAF pilots flying CF-18 strike aircraft while embedded with the Royal Canadian Air Force, reports of UK Special Forces working in Syria in support of US units, and a UK MQ-9 Reaper drone used in the killing of British citizens working for IS and deemed to threaten the UK through domestic connections.

A parliamentary vote formalising a British role in Syria is expected early in the new session provided the government is confident of victory. This is not currently certain and although some Labour MPs may vote in favour on a free vote, or even rebel from the party if it is not a free vote, there are a number of Conservative MPs dubious about the wisdom of the war. However, the government may be particularly keen to press for a vote as it regards one of the weaknesses of the Labour leadership as being its “softness” on defence. The government’s view also appears to be that the electorate as a whole is marginally in favour of extending the war, primarily on the grounds of “something must be done”.

Russian Entry

Following general support for the hard-pressed Assad regime, Russia moved in September to establish a small task force in regime-controlled territory near the north-west city of Latakia, and then started attacks using strike aircraft and helicopter gunships at the end of the month. Most were relatively old aircraft using unguided bombs but Russia mounted an intensive information campaign to highlight the significance of what it was doing, and

added to this by firing cruise missiles from warships in the Caspian Sea which overflew Iran and Iraq with the agreement of these governments.

Most of the Russian air strikes have been against forces opposed to the Assad regime rather than IS, and indeed IS used the opportunity to make gains on the ground against anti-Assad forces pre-occupied with fighting Syrian Army units. It should be noted that Russia's direct intervention is not entirely unilateral. It may be seen as a reaction to the battlefield advances over the spring and summer of anti-Assad forces trained and supplied by Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia as well as the stated intent of Turkey and the United States to establish a no-fly zone between Aleppo and the Turkish border. By late August, the collapse of pro-Assad forces in their northwest Syrian strongholds began to look a real possibility.

The Russian operations also come at a time of an easing of the intensity of the conflict in eastern Ukraine, and serve to emphasise Putin's insistence that Russia was and is a great power well beyond its 'near abroad'. They also serve to divert attention from problems of the domestic economy brought on by sanctions and the sustained fall in oil and gas prices. More specifically, the Russia offensive is directed at ensuring that Russia will have a prominent role in whatever negotiations eventually bring the devastating civil war to an end. Its long-term motivation remains to make sure that a post-Assad Syria will still be an ally or client of Russia. This aim has increased in importance because of Russian concern that the recent improvement in US-Iranian relations is diminishing Russia's influence in its most important regional ally.

Bearing all these factors in mind, Russia's direct involvement in the war in Syria is not likely to secure anything more than tactical or localised victory for the Assad regime, although its impact will probably be greater than the much larger US-led coalition because of its coordination with Syrian Army troops. It is primarily a political move which will give Russia some kudos in the short term but, when looked at from the perspective of IS, may be a cause for longer term regret. Given that Putin does fear IS' advance, albeit less than it fears the collapse of the Assad regime, there may well be greater Russian impetus for a political settlement in the near term.

IS Policy

Over the past year IS has survived and thrived against a sustained coalition onslaught and has, over the same period, gained many new recruits from abroad. This also comes at a time when groups loosely associated with it have made notable gains in North and West Africa, Afghanistan and Yemen. This all gives an impression of an extreme Islamist entity that is resurgent, with this message constantly expressed in IS propaganda. Indeed it provides one of the two underlying themes, the other being the "success" of the evolving Caliphate in building a functioning state in its core territory of Iraq/Syria.

Thus IS repeatedly presents itself as the true guardian of Islam under attack – in the vanguard of the fight against the encroaching forces of the Crusaders and their Zionist allies. Much of its propaganda is focussed on the portrayal of life in the territory it controls as being well organised, safe and properly Islamist.

Both of these messages may be travesties of reality and detested by the overwhelming majority of Muslims yet they do attract a small but growing number of supporters. This is why IS leaders are almost certain to welcome Putin's involvement. With over 16 million

Muslims in Russia, an active IS affiliate in the north Caucasus and as many as 2,000 Russian citizens already fighting for IS in Iraq and Syria, Russia can readily be characterised as joining the Crusader-Zionist faction.

Such an argument will also be readily made should Britain join the bombing campaign in Syria, and much of the plentiful social media propaganda currently directed at disenchanted young Muslims in Britain will be adapted and developed to this end.

In the longer term, IS would greatly welcome any presence of western ground forces, including Russians, and would look to the chance of capturing foreign troops with all the propaganda opportunities that would then result.

An alternative approach for the UK

The argument in earlier briefings that UK involvement in the air war in Syria would be a dangerous escalation still holds - IS wants war with the West. There is little evidence that air strikes are helping to defeat the movement and instead it is gaining support; further air strikes are likely to add to refugee flows and there will be an increased risk of attacks within the UK. Given the intensity of the war, the policies proposed in the July Briefing still hold:

- Sustained diplomatic efforts to engage Iran in dialogue with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, these being the three key regional proxies to the war.
- Actions aimed at helping curb IS expansion in Libya and Egypt, the former through support for UN reconciliation initiatives and the latter through encouraging the Sisi government to curb the repression which is currently aiding IS development.
- A sustained effort to encourage the Abadi government to engage with the marginalised Sunni minority in central and northern Iraq, which is currently offering much support to IS.

Beyond this, there is an immediate need for much greater support for refugee communities in the Balkans, Turkey, Jordan and especially Lebanon where millions of people are facing a wretched winter. As well as the humanitarian imperative there is the risk of greatly increased bitterness among the vast numbers displaced, giving IS a ready opportunity for more recruitment. Britain has been prominent in underwriting UN programmes of aid and helping in other ways, but there is not only scope to hugely increase its support, but to be far more prominent in providing leadership for greater international action. This should be a priority, not bombing Syria.

Conclusion

The war against IS is not having the anticipated effect and the movement may even be growing in power. It would be highly desirable for the UK government to encourage a fundamental reconsideration of coalition policies and their shortcomings. Meanwhile, the UK should not expand its involvement in the war but should instead concentrate on multiple diplomatic and humanitarian initiatives. IS is now firmly embedded in the territory it controls and will not easily be dislodged and diminished. That will take some years but will be even more protracted if the western coalition continues to prioritise military action.

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