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Can Russia Unite Iran, Saudi Arabia on Syria?

By Samuel Ramani

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Russia's ability to maintain cordial relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran is a uniquely valuable strategic asset. Iran and Saudi Arabia have been on opposite sides of the Syrian civil war since its inception, and the divergent opinions of these two regional actors have impeded a potential resolution of the conflict.

Bridging the gap between Iran and Saudi Arabia is a daunting task. Alexei Malashenko, a leading expert on Russia-Middle East relations at the Carnegie Moscow Center, said recently that the depth of Russia's relationships with both Iran and Saudi Arabia might be overstated.

He believes that Russia's leverage over Iran has diminished since the nuclear deal, because prior to the agreement, Iran depended on Russia as a bridge between itself and the West. He also expressed doubts over the durability of the Russia-Saudi partnership, due to the links between Saudi Arabia and Sunni extremists in Syria that Russia is trying to eviscerate.

Despite these obstacles, Russia can effectively create common ground between Iran and Saudi

Arabia by invoking the fear of chaos and mass violence that would accompany an Islamic State takeover of Damascus. Iran would view this outcome as the worst possible scenario, because the Alawite community would likely face genocide or ethnic cleansing if the Islamic State took over Syria.

Saudi Arabia is increasingly concerned by the organization's recruitment capabilities.

Russia has a golden opportunity to convince Iran and Saudi Arabia to cooperate on an Islamic State containment strategy. Russia's willingness to deploy ground troops in Syria will appeal more to Islamic State hawks in both countries than the West's exclusive reliance on air strikes.

Convincing Saudi Arabia to at least temporarily shore up support for Assad will be a much more complicated endeavor for Russia. On Aug. 11, after bilateral talks with Russia, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir reiterated that Assad was "not part of the solution in Syria." Saudi Arabia regards Assad's relentless repression of the Syrian rebels as the primary catalyst for the radicalization of Syrian Sunni opposition factions.

In order to co-opt Saudi Arabia into joining its anti-Islamic State coalition, Russia needs to soften its rhetorical support for Assad without compromising its vital strategic interests in Syria. Russia must continue to emphasize that it is only supporting the Assad regime because there is no other reliable anti-Islamic State force in Syria. Putin could also state that Russia does not desire a return to the pre-2011 status quo in Syria, but instead regards Assad as the legitimate ruler of an autonomous Alawite republic.

If Russia succeeds in gaining support for Alawite autonomy, Putin would be able to keep Russian military leverage over Syria intact and also appease Iranian fears of Shiite extermination in Syria.

As Turkey and Germany have accepted the idea that Assad might have a role to play as Syria transitions away from civil war, Saudi Arabia could accept this compromise if the alternative is endless chaos. The burgeoning refugee crisis provides tangible proof that Syria will be a failed state for a prolonged period of time unless an aggressive anti-Islamic State campaign is launched.

Saudi Arabia has faced criticism for accepting very few Syrian refugees, and pressure on the Saudis to loosen their immigration policy will mount if the situation in Syria becomes even more chaotic.

Putin's speech to the United Nations comes at a time when Russia has a unique opportunity to spearhead a diplomatic resolution to the Syrian crisis.

Unfortunately, the temptation of an expedient unilateral military intervention might prove too great, and Russia could miss out on pursuing a multilateral strategy that would more effectively achieve its ends in Syria.

Samuel Ramani is an M.Phil. student in Russian and East European Studies at the University of Oxford.

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