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Russia and the West Must Compromise on Syria

By James Nixey

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With 200,000 dead and 7 million displaced in Syria, with refugees flooding into Europe, it was hard to imagine that the situation in the country could get much worse. However, as Russian forces bombed rebel-held areas around Homs, the situation appears to be escalating into a proxy war between major powers. There is a scenario that could be win-win for all. But unless priorities can be reordered on both sides, we are only likely to see more destruction.

Every time Russia catches the attention of the global media, the question is always "what does Russia really want?" But the answer is always the same: recognition, respect, influence.

Only the finer detail of the motivations changes from misdemeanor to misdemeanor and from conflict to conflict.

In the case of Syria, Russia's specific intentions are to bask in the "glory" of spearheading a supposedly anti-Islamic State international coalition; a deflection of attention away from its prosecution of the war in Ukraine; the prevention of Western-enforced regime change

in Damascus and commensurate retention of a useful patron-client relationship; and finally, relatively low down in the pecking order, acting on the realization that it ought to "do something" about the spread of fundamentalist forms of Islam.

One can quibble with the rankings above, but it is impossible to argue that Russia's motives are pure. Yet it is only if one understands this peculiar sense of priority that Russia's actions make sense.

After all, why, "logically," would a country buckling under the strain of a crippled economy and which has itself been a recent victim of extremist terror, open up a second front of military operations far away from its traditional theater of military engagement in the former Soviet space? And what else, other than ulterior motives to those officially stated, could explain Russia's targeting of Syrian groupings other than Islamic State strongholds?

The bottom line is that for the Kremlin, it is the perceived threat from (and supremacy of) the West, not the genuine threat from the Islamic State, that is the number one concern.

Until that perverse calculation changes — and it is unlikely to under the present leadership — meaningful cooperation between Russia and the West in the Middle East is all but impossible.

Meanwhile, Western interests are, in many respects, no less self-interested. The West's paramount concern is, as it always is, for its own people and their security. With regard to Syria, this translates into a priority of destroying the Islamic State and other terrorist groups that would take the battle to the West.

As we saw in the first few years of the Syria crisis, if the insecurity can be contained within the region, it is terrible, but manageable.

Unfortunately, as they have now discovered, the insecurity cannot be contained in Syria or even its surrounding neighbors. This leads to the second Western priority. The West would like to create a more stable environment within Syria such that the unrest and insecurity and the consequence of huge refugee flows stop.

Finally, the West's third objective in Syria, over the longer term, is a democratic nation. This is not just a moral statement by the West, but a very real analysis that democracies are more stable and have better development paths than authoritarian governments.

The West does care about the lives of Syrians — this should not be discounted — and the West is willing to put some resources behind this. But unfortunately, when measured against self-interest, it inevitably, not least for domestic political reasons, comes behind.

Although Russia and the West have overlapping interests in Syria and the broader Middle East, their priorities are different. As long as this remains the case it is unlikely that progress will be made.

There could be a win-win scenario for all parties if the primary goal were to bring peace to Syria through the creation of a new coalition government (including representatives from the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad as well as the rebels).

For this the West and Russia would need to work together — the West bringing rebels to the

table and Russia, Assad.

If this could be achieved (a big ask even if everyone were to collaborate effectively), it might have knock-on effects of weakening the Islamic State, pushing back international terrorism and lowering refugee flows. With Russia playing a central role, Moscow would also achieve its objective of being at the top table, and being seen to be by its domestic as well as an international audience.

It would finally have the benefit for all parties of being more likely to succeed in achieving any of these objectives — opposing one another is likely to ensure that all fails. Unfortunately, at the moment, that is the path chosen.

The question to ask today is how can the calculations of one or another party (or both) be changed — from the clear failure that will occur if the current strategies continue, to the chance of success if a new collaborative strategy is pursued.

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