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Syria

What does Russia want in its war in Syria?

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Ilya Budraitskis interviewed Gilbert Achcar about the Russian military operation in Syria for LeftEast

Ilya Budraitskis: It has been several days since the start of the Russian military operation in Syria and the goals and strategy of this operation are still unclear. The explanation coming from Russian officials is unclear. On one hand they put an anti-ISIS agenda as the main reason of the operation, and on the other they present it, like Putin did at the UN, as an aid to the legitimate government of Assad. What do you think is the real goal of this operation?

Gilbert Achcar: The initial official reason for the intervention was designed in order for Russia to get a Western, and especially American, green light. Since Western countries are bombing ISIS in Syria they were certainly not in a position to object to Russia doing the same. It is under this pretext that Putin sold his intervention to Washington before implementing it, and Washington bought it. At the very beginning, before Russian planes started bombing, the statements from Washington were welcoming Russia's contribution to the fight against ISIS. This was completely illusionary, of course – a pure deception. But I would really be surprised if, in Washington, they really believed that Russia was deploying forces to Syria in order to fight ISIS.

They couldn't have possibly ignored that the real goal of Russia's intervention is to shore up Bashar al-Assad's regime. The fact is, however, that Washington agrees even on this true goal of Moscow's intervention – preventing the collapse of the Assad regime. Since the early phase of the uprising in Syria, the US administration, even when it started saying that Assad should step down, always emphasized that the regime should remain in place. Contrarily to what simplistic critics of the US believe, the Obama administration is not at all in the business of "regime change" in Syria – it is rather the contrary. They just wanted the Assad regime without Assad himself. This is the "lesson" they drew from the catastrophic US failure in Iraq: in retrospect, they believe that they should have opted for the "Saddamism without Saddam" scenario there, instead of dismantling the regime's apparatuses.

This is why Putin's intervention was seen rather favorably in Washington. And there's a lot of hypocrisy in the present complaint by the Obama administration about the fact that most Russian strikes are directed against the non-ISIS Syrian opposition. They are blaming Russia for not striking enough at ISIS: had the proportion of Russian strikes against ISIS been higher, it would have made them more comfortable in their collusion. They would have objected much less to the strikes consolidating the Assad regime. And yet, Washington's hope is that Putin will not only prevent the regime's collapse and consolidate it, but also help in reaching some kind of political settlement of the conflict. For the time being this is more wishful thinking than anything else.

The key goal of Russia's military intervention in Syria was to shore up the regime at a time when the latter had suffered very heavy losses since last summer. Assad himself acknowledged in July the regime's inability to keep holding parts of the territory it had been holding until then. Moscow's intervention aims at preventing the collapse of the regime and enable it to reconquer the territory it lost last summer. This is the basic and primary goal of the Russian intervention.

There is a second goal, however, which goes far beyond Syria, and translates in the fact that Russia sent to Syria a sampling of its air force and launched cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea. This looks like the "Gulf moment" of Russian imperialism. I mean that Putin is doing at a reduced scale what the United States did in 1991 when it showcased its advanced weaponry against Iraq in the first Gulf war. That was a way of saying to the world: "See how powerful we are! See how efficient is our weaponry!" And it was a major argument for the reassertion of US

What does Russia want in its war in Syria?

hegemony at a crucial historic moment. The Cold war was finishing – the year 1991 turned out to be the Soviet Union's last year, as you know well. US imperialism needed to reassert the function of its hegemony in the global system.

What Putin is doing now with this show of force is saying to the world: "We Russians also have an advanced weaponry, we can also deliver, and actually we are a more reliable ally than the US". Putin's macho bullying contrasts a lot with the Obama administration's timid attitude in the Middle East over recent years. Putin is winning friends in the region. He developed relations with Egypt's counter-revolutionary autocrat Sisi, and with the Iraqi government. Iraq and Egypt are two states which were regarded as being part of the US sphere of influence, and yet both of them are supporting the Russian intervention, both of them are now buying weapons from Russia and developing military and strategic relations with Moscow.

This is, of course, a major breakthrough for Russian imperialism in its competition with US imperialism. From this angle, Russia's ongoing intervention should be seen as part of an inter-imperialist competition. More than 15 years ago, I analyzed the Kosovo war as part of a New Cold War. This characterization was criticized at the time; we are fully in it now, it's obvious.

Many say that what we have now in Syria, with the Russian intervention, is a total failure of US policy. A few others believe that there is a hidden US plan to involve Russia in this conflict. And there is apparently a real split in the American elite around the Syrian question. What do you think is the US position in this situation?

There has definitely been an ongoing disagreement at the top level in the US with regard to Syria. It is no secret that there was a dispute on the issue of providing support to the Syrian mainstream opposition between Obama and Hillary Clinton, when she was secretary of state, with others in the military and the CIA sharing her view. In 2012, when this debate started, the mainstream opposition, the Free Syrian army, was still the dominant force in the opposition. It is actually this mainstream Syrian opposition's weakness, due to the lack of support from Washington and especially the US veto on its supply with anti-aircraft defensive means, which enabled Islamic "jihadist" forces to develop in parallel and later become more important in the armed opposition to the Syrian regime. Those who advocated support to the mainstream opposition, like Clinton and then-CIA director David Petraeus, now believe that the events proved them right, that the catastrophic development of the situation in Syria is, to a large extent, a result of Obama's wrong policy.

Obama is confronted indeed with a terribly negative balance-sheet of his policy on Syria. It's a total disaster from whichever point of view you look at it, humanitarian or strategic. European Union countries are quite worried about the huge wave of refugees, the outcome of a massive humanitarian disaster. The Obama administration is trying to console itself by saying that Russia is falling in a trap, that it will be its second Afghanistan. It is no coincidence that, in his recent criticism of the Russian intervention, Obama used the term "quagmire" – a term applied to the US in Vietnam, and to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Russia is now said to be getting into a quagmire in Syria. This is wishful thinking again, aiming at sweetening the pill of a major failure.

For the moment in fact major US allies like Germany and France don't seem to have a definitely negative position on the Russian intervention. Do you think that the Russian intervention provoked some split between the US and Europe and could give Russia an opportunity to deal with the European Union apart from the US?

I don't think so. First of all there is no major difference between the French and US positions. They are actually quite similar. Germany's position is slightly different because it is not directly involved in the military action against ISIS. France criticized Russia for targeting the non-ISIS opposition. And the French position is very strict on the issue of Assad. Like Washington and even more categorically, Paris says that he should go and that there can't be a political

What does Russia want in its war in Syria?

transition in Syria with his participation. And this is quite obvious in fact, because if a political transition is to be based on an agreement, a compromise between the regime and the opposition, there is no way at all that the latter could accept some kind of joint government under the presidency of Bashar al-Assad. The position of Washington and Paris is predicated on this. It contrasts with Moscow's, which regards Assad as the legitimate president and insists that any agreement should be approved by him. There is a significant gap between the two positions for the time being.

As I told you, Washington and its European allies are indulging in wishful thinking. They hope that, once he consolidates the Syrian regime, Putin will exert pressure on it to open the way for a compromise whereby Assad would accept to hand power over after a transitional period culminating in elections. Angela Merkel, although she rectified her position the day after, said at some point that the international community should deal with Assad. And we heard the same from quite a few quarters in Europe and the US: "After all, Assad is better than ISIS. We can do business with him. So let's agree on some kind of transition with him." This is self-defeating actually. It only resulted in uniting the non-ISIS opposition against that perspective. The armed opposition includes all the shades of "jihadism", all outbidding each other in their opposition to Assad. There is no way that any credible section of the opposition could agree on a deal involving the continued presence of Assad. His departure is an indispensable condition for any political settlement aiming at stopping the war in Syria. Otherwise it simply won't stop.

Washington issued many hypocritical statements condemning the Russian action, even though they green-lighted it in the first place. The main reason for that is that they don't want to appear openly as supporting the rescue of the Assad regime, and thus alienate the region's Sunnis as they see it. There are actually making use of the Russian intervention to drive a wedge between Moscow and the Sunni-majority countries. The Saudis had begun talks with Russia and were reported to have offered an agreement on increasing oil prices as a reward for a change in Russia's attitude toward Syria. And they are now very disappointed by Moscow's intervention, although they may still be hoping that Putin can ultimately impose Assad's departure.

In the meantime, however, sources like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Muslim clerics of the Saudi kingdom have called for Holy War against Russia's second Afghanistan, in a striking symmetry with the Russian Orthodox Church's description of Putin's military adventure as a Holy War. Note the difference between previous imperialist wars of recent times: war was represented as religious on the Muslim side only. Now, for the first time in a long history, we have a clash of "Holy Warriors"! In this sense, Putin is a "godsend" to the jihadists: the perfect enemy.

You probably know that there was a secret visit of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani to Moscow this summer. The final decision for Russia's intervention was taken after that meeting. Iran played a major role in this decision. So what do you think is Iran's interest in the Russian intervention?

Iran shares with Russia a common interest in preserving the Assad regime, a strategic ally of both countries. For Iran, Syria is a key link in an axis that goes from Tehran to Hezbollah in Lebanon through Iraq and Syria. Syria is crucial for Iran's supplies to Hezbollah. It provides Iran with strategic access to the Mediterranean. And for Russia, Syria is the only country on the Mediterranean which hosts Russian naval and air bases. That is why we are witnessing today in Syria a counter-offensive that combines Assad regime forces, Iran's own and proxy troops, and Russian air and fire support. To all intents and purposes the Assad regime has been completely dependent on Iran for quite some time. Iran is running the show in Syria. And, of course, Russia has a major influence on Damascus as well, due to being its main purveyor of weapons. The ongoing direct Russian intervention has definitely greatly increased the role of Russia. There are some in the West who welcome this increase as happening at the expense of Iran: wishful thinking again!

The Russian media now pretend to portray the situation in Syria like one with legitimate government and "normal" order on one side, and different forces trying to destroy the state and bring disorder on the other

side. But the other point of view is that there has been a deep transformation of the Assad regime during the civil war and one can't say that it is a "normal" state confronting anti-state forces. There was a degeneration of the state and the present Assad regime is a product of this. So what is the real nature of the Assad regime now and how did it change during the years of war?

Let me start with the constant description by Putin and Lavrov of the Assad regime as the "legitimate" government. Well, that's rooted in a very limited conception of legitimacy. You could say, of course, that Assad represents the legitimate government from the point of view of international law, but certainly not from the point of view of democratic legitimacy. It may be the "legal" government by UN standard but it is definitely not "legitimate" as it was never elected democratically. This is a regime that is the product of a coup d'état that took place 45 years ago. It is still in power after a transmission of the presidency by inheritance within the quasi-royal dynasty that rules the country by means of security services and military dictatorship. Syria is a country where there have been no fair elections and no political freedoms for half a century. And this regime has alienated the population even more over the last two decades with its acceleration of neo-liberal reforms leading to the impoverishment of broad sections of the population, especially in the countryside, and a sharp rise in unemployment and the cost of living.

The situation had become intolerable, and that's why the popular uprising happened in 2011. Naturally, this most brutal dictatorial regime would not cope with the mass demonstrations, which were very peaceful at the beginning, in any democratic way like organizing truly free elections: this was out of the question. So the regime's only response was brutal force, which they escalated gradually, killing more people every day and building up a situation that led to the uprising turning into civil war. In addition to that, it is well known that the regime, in the summer/autumn of 2011, released the jihadists it held in its prisons. That was because it wanted them to create armed jihadist groups – the inevitable outcome of their release in a situation of uprising – in order to confirm the lie that the regime spread from the beginning: that it was facing a jihadist rebellion. This proved indeed to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the militants whom the regime released from jails are now leading some of the key jihadist groups in Syria. It is important to be aware of the fact that whatever one can say about the reactionary character of a big section of those who are fighting the regime, it is the regime that has produced them in the first place. More generally, by its cruelty, the regime has created the resentment that bred the development of jihadism, up to ISIS. ISIS indeed is a barbaric response to the regime's barbarism, in what I call a "clash of barbarisms".

There is another aspect to that. The Assad regime is now quite worse than it was before the uprising. It is now not only a dictatorial state but a country in which murderous unrestrained gangsters, the shabbiha as they are called in Arabic, are running the show. And they are terrorizing the population, which is why a major part of the recent wave of Syrian refugees fleeing to Europe came from regime-controlled areas. Those are the very many who can't suffer any longer to remain subjected to those criminal gangsters that the Assad regime has nurtured. The Syrian population has no faith at all in the future of the regime. And therefore all those who could afford it, decided to flee to Europe. Many of the refugees fleeing to Europe, as you could see from television reportages, are not from the poorest parts of the population. There is a significant proportion of middle-class persons among the refugees. They often sold everything they possessed in Syria because they have no hope in coming back! This will have a huge cost for the country's future. Those who remain in Syria are either people who can't do otherwise, or war profiteers.

The situation is very gloomy. No one can blame Syrians for deciding to leave their country for good as it takes a lot of optimism indeed to maintain any hope in Syria's future. Nevertheless, we have seen dramatic situations even worse than that in history followed by recovery, even though it may take many years. The first condition for the cessation of the war and the beginning of any recovery process in Syria is, however, Assad's departure. As long as he is there, it won't be possible to end this terrible tragedy.

Western media are still talking about a moderate opposition in Syria. And Putin's main counter-argument is that there is no clear border between jihadists and moderates in the armed opposition. Lavrov even said recently that he could talk to the Free Syrian Army but the problem is that it is not clear who its leaders are

and whether it really exists or not. Can you give an assessment of the non-ISIS opposition groups?

There is a whole range of these groups. From the initial armed groups of the Free Syrian Army, which were relatively secular and nonsectarian, to all shades of jihadists up to Al Qaeda's Syrian branch, Al-Nusra. All the jihadists share the program of imposing sharia law and impose it in the regions under their control. However, none of these groups, including Al-Nusra, comes close to the unbelievable barbarism of ISIS, which is a most ugly caricature of fundamentalist state that could have been described as implausible had it been a work of fiction. The non-ISIS Islamic opposition groups represent a continuum of Islamic fundamentalist forces from the Muslim Brotherhood to Al-Qaeda, all of them opposed to ISIS. Nothing of this, of course, inspires optimism for the future of Syria. True, the regime's barbarism has killed much more people than anyone else's, including ISIS. But most opposition forces represent alternatives that are not inspiring at all. However, the precondition to reversing this trend, which is produced by the regime itself as I explained, is to get rid of Assad. It won't be reversed short of that.

There are also the Kurdish forces in Syria, which are the most progressive armed group taking part in this whole battle, if not the only one. Their main fight has been against ISIS until now, while they adopted a somewhat neutral stance between the regime and the rest of opposition. Since last year, they have been, and are still backed by the US through air strikes and weapon delivery. They are essentially engaged in controlling and defending the Kurdish populated areas. In order to play a role in combat beyond their regions, and thus in determining the fate of Syria as a whole, they need to ally with Arabs and other minorities. This is what Washington has been pushing for with some success, first by bringing them to work together with FSA groups, and now with Syrian Arab tribes along the pattern that the US followed in Iraq against Al-Qaeda, and is presently reviving there against ISIS.

Do you think that some kind of coalition can come to the fore in Syria, which could represent a progressive perspective for the future of the country?

To be frank, I am not optimistic at all with regard to the existing forces – all of them. For now the best one can hope is ending the war. Stopping this terrible bloodshed and the destruction of the country is the priority. A progressive alternative will need to be rebuilt from the potential that still exists. Although there aren't any significant organized forces representing a progressive alternative, there still is an important potential composed of many of the young people who initiated the uprising in 2011. Thousands of them are in exile now; others are in jail. And many others are still in Syria, but can't play a determining role in the civil war. We need the war to stop first. Whatever the end of the war can bring, it will be positive from that point of view. But it will take the emergence of a new progressive alternative on the basis of the existing potential in order for the situation to inspire any optimism.

But can one say that stopping this conflict may happen only with some help or some intervention from abroad? Or do you think that foreign interventions, whether Russian or Western, actually prolong the war?

Western intervention has targeted ISIS exclusively until now. The strikes of the US-led coalition are all on ISIS areas, and have completely avoided regime-controlled areas. While very few Russian strikes are against ISIS, the overwhelming majority have been against the non-ISIS opposition in areas disputed between the regime and the opposition. So there is a major difference in this respect. The Russian intervention is indeed prolonging the Syrian civil war. Whatever wishful thinking there may be in the West about Russia's possible role, the fact remains that before the Russian intervention, the regime was exhausted, it was losing ground and looked to be on its way to collapse. This is actually the reason why Putin intervened, as I already mentioned. It would have been a terrible defeat for him if the Assad regime had collapsed.

ISIS's spectacular expansion took place more than one year ago, and neither Russia nor the Assad regime did anything serious to fight it. Putin's main concern, like Assad's for that matter, is the regime's survival. By shoring it up, Putin is prolonging the war. And that is criminal. Eventually, of course, one can only wish that the West's wishful

What does Russia want in its war in Syria?

thinking prove true and Putin force Assad to step down. It is difficult to tell what Putin's perspective on this is. It is true, however, that Russia runs a high risk of getting stuck into a "quagmire", to use Obama's term, if the war doesn't end in the short term. So we shall watch how things will develop. The rosier dream of Syria's ordinary people for now is the end of the war with a deployment of UN forces to maintain order and rebuild the state and the country.

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