

As Syria war grinds on, no good options for Putin and friends

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Hafez Assad was a smart man, regardless of what his enemies say about him now, 17 years after his death. When he felt that the Soviet Union was about to fall, he quietly distanced himself from Marxist socialism, introducing investment laws to rescue Syria's tottering Soviet-backed economy.

Months later he realised the United States was going to create and lead an international coalition to liberate Kuwait from the avaricious clutches of Saddam Hussein and that the USSR was collapsing and powerless to stop it.

Assad took the highly unusual step of siding with the George H.W. Bush White House against his long-time rival. That same year, he authorised face-to-face talks with Israel at the landmark Madrid conference after decades of conflict.

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In the 1990s, when Assad's harbouring of Kurdish separatist leader Abdullah Ocalan in Damascus nearly triggered a war with Turkey, the Syrian leader quietly asked him to pack up and leave.

Former US Ambassador Martin Indyk once observed that the canny Assad "calculated risk and opportunity like a computer."

These days, many Syrians are wondering whether Assad's son Bashar will do the same to avoid what seems to be a looming confrontation with the United States after President Donald Trump bombed a Syrian airbase on April

7 over an alleged Syrian chemical weapons attack that killed scores of civilians.

Syria avoided threatened US air strikes in 2013 by surrendering its chemical arsenal, while the price of doing that today is up for bargaining between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Assad's key ally.

Meeting Assad halfway, Trump has softened his rhetoric somewhat after initially calling on the Syrian president to step down.

Speaking to The Wall Street Journal in mid-April, Trump said when asked about Assad's removal: "Are we insisting on it? No!" But the US president reportedly has put three scenarios on the table for Putin to consider.

First, he initiates a political process that stops the war and leads to Assad's departure after a transitional period, which results in a new constitution and a new parliament but keeps the state and its institutions, including the military and security apparatus, intact.

Putin would get to keep geographical Syria and maintain the regime, minus one man only. The Americans would let him march on all territory east of the Euphrates, which includes oil-rich Deir ez-Zor and the Kurdish canton. This has been officially rejected by Tehran, Damascus and Moscow.

The second option is that Russia gets to keep Assad in power and the territory he controls now while "everything east of the Euphrates," where all Syria's farmland, natural resources and oil are located, becomes the US enclave in the country, run by Kurds and other proxies.

Syria would get chopped up into spheres of influence, with the Russian zone west of the Euphrates including a Turkish canton in the north and a Jordanian one in the south, while the United States would embrace a Kurdish enclave in Syria's north-eastern tip.

Syrian refugees in Turkey and



Few options. Russian President Vladimir Putin (C), accompanied by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu (4thL), meets with military chiefs at the Bocharov Ruchei state residence in Sochi. (AFP)

Jordan would be resettled in these territories and the Syrian Army would not be allowed to strike them.

This keeps Moscow and Damascus ruling only a fraction of a country that is largely in ruins and bankrupt with little prospect of international support. This option too has been rejected.

Third, Assad gets to stay and receives international support and re-legitimation, with Russian help of course, providing he rejects Iran and Hezbollah.

The possibility of pursuing this option might very well be on the table if a new war erupts between Lebanon and Israel next summer, as many in the region expect.

If it does, it would be a doomsday war in which Israel would strive to eliminate Hezbollah once and for

all, as it has failed to do since the early 1980s, even if that means destroying Lebanon and parts of Syria.

In the 2006 war between Hezbollah and the Jewish state, the Israeli Air Force largely concentrated its firepower on Beirut's Hezbollah-dominated southern sector and the Party of God's military stronghold in south Lebanon.

Next time around, the Israelis have warned, they will hammer all of Lebanon "back into the Middle Ages" on the grounds that the state is essentially controlled by Hezbollah and Iran.

In April, Israel completed the operational deployment of its highly sophisticated anti-missile defence system that is intended to counter Syrian, Iranian and Hezbollah missiles.

The world will be watching how

Syria responds to this war. Hezbollah expects far more active engagement from Damascus, far beyond the logistical support it received in 2006.

That is clearly no longer enough – not after the crucial role that Hezbollah has played in keeping Assad in power since 2012. Syria would be expected to send arms, food and money to Hezbollah or even join the war on its behalf.

In the United States, nobody expects a weakened regime to get involved and as far as the Americans are concerned, neutrality would be more than satisfactory but it is highly unlikely that Damascus would do that anyway.

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Can the US pressure Russia to relinquish Assad?

Viewpoint



Abdulrahman al-Masri

The US missile attack against a Syrian regime airbase undoubtedly introduced a new dynamic to the 6-year-old conflict in Syria. The attack, which came in response to a chemical weapons massacre suspected of being conducted by Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces against opposition-held Khan Sheikhou is not merely symbolic.

This first deliberate military attack against the Assad regime by the United States does not necessarily indicate a change of course in Washington's Syria policy. However, it does provide the United States with leverage lost during the Obama administration.

The 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles fired at the airbase ended the military inaction of the United States in Syria and marked a significant alteration in strategy. The April 7 attack quickly ruled out the option of the Trump administration cooperating with the Assad regime in countering terrorism and placed the willingness to use military force on the table.

The strike inevitably resulted in confrontation with Russia and is the cause for an increase in tensions between Washington and Moscow. As US Secretary of

State Rex Tillerson put it after meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, US-Russian relations have hit a "low point." He also stated that Assad should not have any role in the future of Syria and that Moscow was capable of pushing for his departure.

Russia has propped up Assad and kept his regime alive throughout the Syrian war. The question is how feasible it is that we see Russia renouncing Assad.

Clearly, the United States is reassuming a leadership role on the international stage, particularly in the competitive battle of influences in the Middle East. Russia's growth of effective influence in Syria, particularly since Moscow intervened militarily in 2015, is the result of American inaction.

The new US role seems to be derived from an understanding that the US-led coalition cannot eradicate the Islamic State (ISIS) from Syria and counter al-Qaeda while the Assad regime remains in power. Washington has finally recognised that the brutality of the Assad regime and growing jihadism in Syria are two realities that keep each other in business. This is combined with an apparent interest of the Trump administration to push Iran and its proxies out of Syria.

US allies view Washington's new role in Syria as cautiously positive. Gulf allies, in particular, have a keen interest in having US support and leadership to counter growing Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

Tehran and Moscow share a long history of rivalry; however, their interests converged in Syria because of their mutual opposition to the American-led international order. The Russians have been reportedly in conflict with the Iranians over their end goals in Syria particularly on issues related to Tehran-backed sectarian, non-institutionalised militias.

Both the United States and Russia share the objective of a unified, stable post-war Syria. The result of US-Russian talks on Syria will be largely dependent on how capable the Trump administration is at stimulating divergence between Tehran and Moscow.

Pushing the Russians to conflict with the Iranians will not be enough for the United States to bring the Syrian war to an end. Washington has to seek more leverage in Syria and the region.

In order to influence the outcome in Syria, the Trump administration must put an end to the Assad regime's air force by attacking all active airfields while increasing support to nationalist-oriented rebels in cooperation with regional powers, including Gulf states, Turkey and Jordan.

Grounding Assad's air force would provide military advantage for the pro-opposition camp, which would create conditions for effective measures to politically end the Syrian war. Once Assad is no longer able to target opposition-held areas by the air, an actual ceasefire is reachable and thus a meaningful negotiation for political transition.

Washington must pronounce a clear strategy to rejoin the equation to balance Russian influence.

Of all actors involved in the Syrian war, Assad is the least interested in peace. He hopes to win the war against his opposition by military means. Accordingly, to establish a meaningful political track, Assad should not simply be invited to attend the political talks and be expected to hand over Damascus to a transitional body according to the Geneva communiqué. Assad should see his military option abolished and be given no other option but to participate meaningfully in talks and end the war.

It is possible to ultimately counter al-Qaeda affiliates and ISIS, in which the Syrian rebels' nationalist, democratic narrative – that is anti-Assad – is essential in the fight against jihadist factions and eventually for the creation of a stable Syrian state.

If the United States wants to reassert itself as an influencer in the region, Washington must pronounce a clear, robust strategy to politically and militarily rejoin the equation to balance Russian influence and uproot unleashed Iranian expansionism.

White House national security adviser H.R. McMaster got it right: Time has come to have a "tough discussion" with Moscow, he said. At the end of the day, it is up to the Russian calculus to decide between the United States and Iran.

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