
False Friends and Misaligned Interests: The Syrian Conflict Deepens

15/02/2016



Even as they take place, participating sides look for gains, seek to edge others into corners, and gain merciful advantages.

That was the nature of talks between Russia and the US held on Friday. Secretary of State John Kerry claimed that the sides had “agreed to implement a nationwide cessation of hostilities in a week’s time.” Not only did Kerry concede this to be “ambitious,” the very fact that ISIS and the Nusra Front played no part in such arrangements rendered such discussions idiosyncratic at best.

The Syrian conflict has become the transforming conflict of Middle Eastern politics, with peace talks a mere pretext for more background fighting between false friends and misaligned enemies. Traditional powers, split by sectarian fault lines and ideological differences, promote the idea that the diplomatic round table is becoming more significant by the day. This charade has become even more colourful, with Kerry doing at the Munich Security Conference what he does best for his country: moralise.

The Russian campaign in Syria, he argues, merely serves to embolden ISIS. “To date,” claimed Kerry on Saturday, “the vast majority, in our opinion, of Russia’s attacks have been against legitimate opposition groups and to adhere to the agreement it made, we think it is critical that Russia’s targeting change.”^[1] That Kerry is still able to identify legitimate moderation amongst any of Syria’s groups shows the accepted lack of wisdom in the White House.

Furthermore, the Russians are said to be rather unclean about it all. (US smart weapons tend to be, goes the suggestion, more hygienic and discriminating in killing, capable of understanding good militants from bad.) The criticisms, coming from Amnesty International, are one thing.^[2] Packaged for the righteousness of Coalition consumption, on the other hand, poses another problem.

Instead of adopting the sanctimonious cant that tends to come out in US State Department briefings, the language

of elimination in the Russian military argot is unmistakable. All militants against the Assad regime are to be deemed questionable and fair game, terrorists being terrorists and all that. They are in for a win, bolstering the Assad regime and securing their base in Syria.

Washington's allies, who tend to treat the stuffed dummy of humanitarianism with open disdain even as they embrace it, are readying for a broader conflict. Even as Western governments berate Russia for not taking enough of an interest in pummeling Islamic State, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Turkey demonstrate an even clearer lack of interest in doing so. Vicious as Islamic State forces are, they are at the very least open about their interests on the religious front, holding the Sunni line against Shia interests.

Saudi deployments in the coalition campaign in Syria have, to date, been minimal, with the bulk of its aerial interests focused against crushing the Shia Houthi rebels in Yemen. Their version of humanitarian strikes has served to ruin a country's infrastructure in an effort to wipe out the Shia foothold.

Turkey, likewise, has shown ambivalence towards ISIS, preferring to keep its own terrorists in check. Ankara and Islamic State have been running an oil trade for some time, at least according to the Russian defence ministry.^[3] The suggestion on the part of Russian sources is even more personal: that Turkey's interest in preserving such a trade are largely due to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's relatives, who have direct trade links to the market.

Some aspects of this business dimension have been acknowledged by US Treasury officials and commentators. "When oil is being bought on the Turkish border," argued Jonathan Schanzer, vice president of research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, "it's highly unlikely that it will be sold anywhere else but Turkey."^[4]

While Russia is accused of bombing good militants (good for receiving Western and Sunni sponsorship), Ankara sanctions bombing raids on Kurdish fighters, one of the few groups who can genuinely claim to have an existential stake in this conflict. Ankara considers the PYD and its YPG seamless links to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). This has put the coalition against Islamic State in a curious situation.

The more coordinated effort by Russian and Syrian government forces, bolstered by greater targeting, improved supply, and spates of intense bombing (510 combat sorties between February 4 and 11 alone), have begun to swing the conflict in favour of Assad.

Ankara and Riyadh, officially glaring on the side while Moscow makes inroads, have been mooting the point for some time: a more open deployment of their forces to back their Sunni interests is warranted. While Riyadh is a less serious contender in this, Turkey has suggested the point. "If there is a strategy (against the Islamic State jihadist group)," posed Turkey's foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, "then Turkey and Saudi Arabia could enter into a ground operation."^[5] Syria, already an animal pen of vicious competitors, risks becoming ever noisier.

As the bloodbath continues its drenching woes, the next phase of the conflict will demonstrate a continuing rule of history: as the diplomats move their ineffectual jaws, the military personnel will continue doing what they do best. Meanwhile, Kerry would best be reminded of his own words. "If people who want to be part of the conversation are being bombed, we're not going to have much of a process."

Notes

[1] <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/feb/13/john-kerry-condemns-russias-repeated-aggression-in-syria-and-ukraine>

[2] <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/12/syria-russias-shameful-failure-to-acknowledge-civilian-killings/>

[3] <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-turkey-idUSKBN0TL19S20151202>

[4] <http://www.ibtimes.com/turkey-russia-iraq-syria-black-market-oil-trade-thats-fueling-isis-dividing-terrorist-2217476>

[5] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/14/turkey-and-saudi-arabia-consider-ground-campaign-in-syria-following-border-strikes>

