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Game Change: Syria, Interrupted

By Jim Kavanagh
January 26, 2017

The recapture of Aleppo by the Syrian Arab Army and its allies marks a turning point not only in the conflict in Syria, but also in the dynamic of international conflict. For the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the rolling imperial engine of regime change via American-led military intervention has been stopped in its tracks. To be sure, it's certainly not out of service, even in Syria, and it will seek and find new paths for devastating disobedient countries, but its assumed endgame for subjugating Syria has been rudely interrupted. And in our historical context, Syria interrupted is imperialism interrupted.

Let's remember where things stood in Syria seventeen months ago. After a four-year campaign, directed by the United States, thousands of jihadis in various groups backed by the US/NATO, the Gulf monarchies, Turkey and Israel, were on the offensive. ISIS occupied Palmyra, Raqqa, and swaths of territory, and was systematically raping, beheading, and torturing Syrian citizens and looting and destroying the country's cultural treasures. Al-Qeada/al-Nusra had triumphantly poured into the eastern part of Aleppo, Syria's largest city (and one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world), were beheading and crucifying their newly-subjugated Syrian captives, and were beginning their siege of the larger and more populous part of that city. Turkey had commenced military operations on Syrian territory against Kurdish forces (who had won significant victories against ISIS), and was enabling the transit of foreign jihadis into Syria and convoys of ISIS oil through its territory. Against these dispersed offensives, the Syrian Arab Army was undermanned and overstretched.

As John Kerry himself later admitted, in a meeting with Syrian opposition, the Obama administration saw the ISIS advance as a positive development: “[W]e know that this was growing, we were watching, we saw that DAESH [ISIS] was growing in strength, and we thought Assad was threatened. [We] thought, however, we could probably manage that. Assad might then negotiate.”(By “negotiate,” Kerry meant “capitulate”—negotiate the terms of his abdication.) For the Serious People in Washington, this—the impending takeover of Syria by ISIS and Al-Qaeda jihadis—meant things were going swimmingly. (Al-Nusra was at the time—and still is, less officially—the affiliate of Al-Qaeda in Syria.) As Daniel Lazare pointed out: “After years of hemming and hawing, the Obama administration has finally come clean about its goals in Syria. In the battle to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, it is siding with Al Qaeda...[R]ather than protesting what is in fact a joint U.S.-Al Qaeda assault, the Beltway crowd is either maintaining a discreet silence or boldly hailing Al Nusra’s impending victory as ‘the best thing that could happen in a Middle East in crisis.’”

You read that right. As one al-Nusra commander said: “We are one part of al-Qaeda...The Americans are on our side.”

ISIS? *We can manage that.*

But Assad was still hanging on, maintaining control of Damascus, the Syrian armed forces, and the vast majority of the Syrian population. It was time for the big dog to jump in and make sure the intended, inevitable result was achieved. Thus, on August 2, 2015, “U.S. officials” told Reuters that “the United States has decided to allow air strikes to help defend against any attack on the U.S.-trained Syrian rebels, even if the attackers come from forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.”

Not many people, and certainly not the mainstream media, took much notice of that announcement at the time. No thang, after all, for the U.S. to announce attacks against a sovereign country. To this day, it’s hardly ever mentioned in narratives of the conflict.

But with that announcement—a pledge to use American planes to shoot down Syrian planes in Syrian airspace *and* fire on Syrian troops who might dare to attack US-approved “rebels” on Syrian territory (something way beyond a “no-fly zone”)—the United States, under President Obama, effectively declared war on Syria. Syria was now under explicit attack by the armed forces of two states—the U.S. and its NATO ally Turkey—along with a panoply of jihadi proxy armies supported by at least four other states – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Israel. The newly-promised direct American military attacks on Syrian forces would be the coup de grâce for the last secular nationalist government in the Arab world.

I did notice that announcement at the time, and wrote about it in the last of a series of articles about Syria, where I said: “Those who wanted a war with Syria in 2013 have finally gotten what they wanted. It will be a dangerous diversion, at least, for the United States, and a certain disaster for the people of the Middle East. And nobody will stop it.” Because, I assumed (along with virtually everyone else, I dare say) the inevitability of what we had seen since the demise of the Soviet Union: that nobody could or would make a *military* challenge to an American military intervention. *The world’s only superpower*, and all.

Two Can Play

I, along with virtually everyone else, was wrong. There was another actor in the world who noticed the announcement, took it as the declaration of war—the intent to finish off the government of Syria—that it was, and decided not to let it go unchallenged. Thus, in September, 2016, Russia accepted the Syrian government’s official request for military help to resist the multinational jihadi-cum-Western-air-power-and-special-forces onslaught. Without saying it this way explicitly, Vladimir Putin was sending Russian armed forces to prevent the final offensive against the Syrian state that the United States had announced it was readying. It is a flagrant and ubiquitous omission to talk about the Russian military intervention in Syria without mentioning the American threat that preceded it.

As Kerry completed his thoughts cited above, Assad didn’t wait for ISIS to threaten Damascus, or for the U.S. to start bombing his army; “instead...he got Putin to support him.”

I was surprised—amazed, really—that Russia would take such bold action. Since the disappearance of the Soviet Union, the U.S. has been geopolitically contemptuous of Russia, with successive American administrations simply ignoring Russia in their calculations about how to go about ruling the world.

Poppy Bush had promised Mikhail Gorbachev that the US would not expand NATO to take in the Eastern European and Baltic states, and he, Bill Clinton, and George W. proceeded to do just that. They took it for granted that Russia—under the leadership of their drunken stooge, Yeltsin, and devastated by the American-induced shock-therapy restoration of capitalism—could do nothing. With his war on Russia’s close ally, Serbia, Bill Clinton (demonstrating that NATO *never was* a defensive alliance) announced that, henceforth, NATO’s judgement trumped all other precepts of international law, and the alliance was free to attack any country on Earth; he, too, presumed Russia could do nothing about it. In Libya, the Obama administration got the Russians (and Chinese) to vote for a “humanitarian” UN resolution, which Obama then both used as an excuse and blatantly flouted to bomb the crap out of Libya for the purpose of “regime change”—assuming, again, that Russia could do nothing about it. G. W. Bush abrogated the ABM Treaty, and he and Obama moved to station “missile defenses” in Eastern Europe that Russia knows very well are weapons designed to enable a U.S. first-strike capability; they assumed, of course, that Russia could do nothing about it.

The first hint of a change in Russia’s stance came in 2013, when Putin adroitly annulled the “chemical weapons” pretext for the attack on Syria that Obama was itching to launch at the time. Although the decisive impediment to that planned aggression was adamant popular resistance, punctuated by the British parliament just saying *No!* (another portentous denial of assumed compliance), Putin earned the lasting enmity of America’s deep-state neocons. Still, this Syrian gambit was *diplomatic* jiu-jitsu by Russia, turning Kerry’s proclamations about Syria surrendering chemical weapons against him; there was no hint that Russia would or could have offered any *military* resistance to the attack the United States would have launched.

That kind of resistance first peeked out in the context of the Ukraine upheaval in 2014, where Russia made clear it would use its military to backstop Crimea’s break from, and Donbass’s

resistance to, the American-instigated, Nazi-infested coup regime in Kiev. (And I use that N-word advisedly. See my take on that here and here.) Still, this resistance was on Russia's home turf, as it were, and Russian armed forces remained in the background. There was no overt Russian military action outside of its borderlands, and no hint that Russia would or could project its own military power, let alone challenge American military action, in a distant venue. It was, and still is, true that the U.S. military is capable of global "power projection" in a way that Russia's (or anybody else's) is not. So it was possible for American planners to continue assuming that however the U.S. military intervened in a far-flung country, there was nothing Russia could do about it. Nobody really got the point that Russia was starting to say: There is some borscht we will not eat.

The rotten soup that Russia rejected in Syria is the toxic recipe of regime change via jihadi proxy forces mixed with the assumption of moral superiority, which allows the U.S. and its allies to rearrange countries without regard to the traditional niceties of national sovereignty or international law.

In that context, the Russian military intervention not only, as Kerry said, "changed the equation" in Syria, it was a game-changing move in world politics. To the great consternation of the American imperial regime, for the first time since the Cold War, a country has proclaimed to the world: When it comes to the proactive use of military force in critical conjunctures, two can play.

What's Left

Whether Russian intervention to rescue the actually-existing Syrian Baathist government was a "good" or "bad" thing has been a contentious issue within the left. The answer to that depends on whether one sees the conflict that's been raging in Syria since 2011 (at least) as: a) predominantly an indigenous democratic revolt against a monstrous tyrant, dominated and directed by Syrians in the nation's interest, even if also manned by Syrian and some foreign jihadis and armed, financed, and abetted by the U.S., Turkey, the Gulf monarchies, and Israel; this is the dominant Western narrative, ubiquitously promoted in the media, or b) one of a series of imperialist jihadi proxy wars that, at best, hijacked whatever Syrian democratic elements existed at the outset—a war that is dominated and directed by foreign jihadi and state actors, and that seeks to destroy the last bastion of secular Arab nationalism, in order to create a weak, divided, sectarian non-state that suits those foreign interests; this is a version of events found only in the foreign and alternative press.

I stand firmly in the latter camp. I'm not going to rehash the case, which I and many others made a number of times over the last five years. I will say that I don't see how any leftist could continue to cling to the dominant Western narrative now that we have the American Secretary of State admitting that: 1) the US poured an "extraordinary amount of arms" into Syria to help the opposition; 2) the US wanted to "manage" ISIS, and watched approvingly as ISIS grew stronger and become threatening to Damascus itself; 3) Russia entered the war in order to prevent an ISIS victory, and did so; and 4) the Russian intervention, which "changed the equation," is legal, because Russia is invited in by the "legitimate regime," and the US has no legal basis for intervention, because the US hasn't gotten the UN to swallow the "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine as a substitute for international law.

But there are people still in the first camp, whose sincere commitment to democracy, social justice, and anti-imperialist I do not question. I just disagree with their political judgement. And I vigorously disagree with the rhetorical tactics many of them use to defend it. But that will be the topic of another post.

My position, shared by many people who also hold a sincere commitment to democracy, social justice, and anti-imperialism, requires no denial that that the Syrian Baathist state is a brutish affair. Baathism in Syria, as in Iraq, was the CIA's preferred alternative to communism, and Hafez al-Assad, like Saddam, killed thousands, including leftist dissidents. Both regimes had cozy relationships with American machinations in the region when it was convenient. These are regimes that deserve to be dispatched to the dustbin of history. Nevertheless, there was good reason that I and tens of millions of people around the world objected to the invasion and conquest of Iraq in 2003, which, as we foresaw, led to the demise of the country into sectarian chaos. Neither then nor now would calling us "Saddam's apologists" be sign of anything but the weakness of the speaker's political case.

Nor does this position require any love for Putin-era Russia, which is, thanks to American-sponsored shock-and-awe capitalist restoration, a country mired in its own quicksand of conservative nationalism and scheming oligarchy. As it claws its way up the geopolitical food chain, Russia will undoubtedly engage with bad actors, and engage in bad actions. Still, Russia is not (yet) capable, economically or militarily, of being an imperialist power like the United States, and is the target of aggressive maneuvers by the world's most powerful military alliance (NATO). In fact, its very weakness, as a rising capitalist entity, makes it want to insist on the fair rules of the international order, which the stronger capitalist countries proclaim, but have for so long ignored with impunity.

The Syria-Russia alliance is not revolutionary proletarian internationalism. It is an alliance, within the framework of the traditional Westphalian state paradigm, *and* within the post-WWI framework of international law, that has had a real net positive effect in the context of today's geopolitics. Without Russian military intervention, al-Nusra and allied jihadis would have been rampaging through the streets of Damascus. Saving Syria from that fate is a result I welcome as a leftist.

Again, at the time of the Russian intervention (and still)—especially with the threat of imminent American military attacks on Syrian forces—military action was the *only* way to stop the jihadi regime-change train, and Russia was the *only* geopolitical actor capable of intervening with the necessary force. Russia was responding, decisively and legally, to an invitation to defend an independent sovereign state.

"Non-violent" kinda-sorta-pacifist progressives may not like it, but this is a situation that is being determined by armed force. Revolutionary leftists may not like it (I sure don't), but there is no left political force on the scene capable of mounting any serious resistance to either the Syrian state or the foreign-driven jihadi invasion-cum-"rebellion"—itself a foreign intervention.

It's also true, of course, that foreign military intervention, however legitimate its goals, can fail miserably. Having been deliberately provoked into doing so, the Soviets certainly intervened on

the right side—Can anyone now doubt it?—in defending the secular Afghan government in 1979 against the proxy jihadi war of the day—which was the seed war of subsequent imperialist-jihadi adventures. Because the “foreignness” of the Soviet soldiers and women’s education was more jarring than the “foreignness” of the “Afghan Arabs” and beheading teachers, and/or because the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, *et. al.*, supported the “rebellion” with money. Intelligence, logistics, and sophisticated arms (including anti-aircraft weapons), the result was, and still is, a disaster—for everybody.

So it was that Obama—who entangled the United States in seven wars and kept sending American soldiers back into wars he “ended”—predicted that the intervention would trap Russia in a “quagmire.” Except it hasn’t. The relatively small Russian contingent has acted effectively and with remarkable restraint in the face of severe provocation. Things can always go haywire, but so far, whether anyone likes it or not, the Russian intervention has been successful. Russia has even turned Turkey into an ally, for the moment at least.

The fatal flaw of “the Russians are getting into another quagmire like Afghanistan” argument is...Afghanistan. And Iraq. And Libya, etc. The Russians and the rest of the world now know how foolish and counterproductive it would be to send tens of thousands of troops to save Syria. The Russians and the rest of the world also now know how destructive the American project of regime change via jihadi proxies is, having seen its results in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. Only deluded and arrogant American exceptionalists—conservative militarists and liberal humanitarian interventionists alike—haven’t learned that lesson.

There is no revolutionary skin in this game, and leftists should be the last to rationalize away the principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention, as well as the prohibition against aggressive and “preventive” war. As Jean Bricmont has pointed out, these principles became the bedrock of international law, and their violation the greatest war crime, not because of abstract bourgeois theorizing, but because of the experience of the Second World War (where Germany claimed to intervene in defense of beleaguered minorities in Czechoslovakia and Poland), and of colonialism—a system in which stronger states justified the plunder of weaker ones under the guise of a civilizing mission. As Bricmont remarks: “The last thing the newly decolonized countries wanted was intervention from the old colonial powers.”

As Bricmont also points out, “just about everything that the United States is doing everywhere in the world” violates these principles, and therefore the fundamental structure of international law. Now, much of that is cheered on by liberals and some leftists as “humanitarian intervention” and the “responsibility to protect.” As used by American liberals, and by “anti-Assadist” leftists who present Assad as an arch-fiend for whose elimination the world is responsible, these concern-saturated phrases are nothing but new-fangled slogans for missionary imperialism. Within the “rules-based” world order as conceived by American politicians and ideologists today, as Bricmont observes: “It is obvious that such ‘interventions’ are only possible on the part of strong States against weak States,” and that “even all strong states are not equal among each other.”

Really: Can Russia, China, Iran and their friendly states call themselves “the international community,” declare that the undemocratic, misogynist, head-chopping regime of Saudi Arabia just “has to go,” put their favored armed factions of Saudi dissidents and international jihadi

brigades on their payroll, set up bases for them in Yemen where they are supplied with advanced tactical weapons, and demand that the Saudi government withdraw itself from, and turn over to these “rebels,” whatever territory they’d like to occupy? Is that the way the “rules-based” international order works now? Or is this prerogative reserved for the US and its favored allies?

It is amazing how blithely the entire American political and media elite—with liberals in the lead—have constructed this alternate-reality version of the rules of international law, and become legends of righteousness in their own minds. The American left should have no truck with this.

Lion King

A good historical analogy can clarify a present situation. In this case, it’s best to avoid the temptation of associating Syria today with a precedent loaded with progressive internationalism. I find nothing more ridiculous than attempts to make the jihadis in Syria reincarnation of the international brigades in Spain. And the Russians are not Cuba in Angola. We need a case that involves nothing more than widely-accepted and good-enough principles of national sovereignty, non-interference, and anti-colonialism—in which there is no good guy for the left.

The best I’ve come up with is a situation that conventional liberal history recognizes as one of the more outrageous and ominous crimes of the twentieth-century. It was an attack by a country that was the seat of Western civilization on one of the world’s poorest and most despotic regimes, ruled by a dictator who styled himself King of Kings and Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and had his own self-aggrandizing religious cult: That despot, Haile Selassie, was nonetheless feted for his resistance to Italian fascist imperialism.

Is Bashar al-Assad a worse tyrant than Haile Selassie? Does Syria deserve less protection from Washington-Riyadh-Tel Aviv’s twenty-first century imperialism than Ethiopia did from twentieth-century Rome’s? Who’s afraid of “Selassie apologist”?

Timeline Review

The jihadi-imperialist threat to the Syrian state has been interrupted, but it is decidedly *not* over. Syria has already been devastated, and the U.S. and its allies have enough resources to keep the pot boiling for a long time.

The most positive recent development has been Turkey’s seeming turn, propelled by the predictable blowback, away from the jihadi game. Without Turkey’s help, ISIS and other jihadi elements will lose important supply lines. But Erdogan is the epitome of a fickle friend, and can turn back on an American dime tomorrow.

Any lessening of regime-change aggression against Syria, as Donald Trump seemed to favor in his campaign rhetoric, would be a serious blow to the jihadis, and would probably lead to Saudi and Qatari support for them drying up. But anyone who trusts anything that Trump says right now should wait a few minutes. Even if he backs off on Syria, Trump’s cabinet choices make

clear that he will likely ratchet up aggression against Iran and the Palestinians, or maybe go back and take Iraq's oil.

Besides, imperialism is a mandatory bi-partisan project. Congress has already voted 375-34 in the House, 92-7 margin to continue the Pentagon training for Syrian insurgents, and, for the first time, to supply them with anti-aircraft missiles. Let's see if Trump and "Mad Dog" Mattis put a stop to that. My bet: Despite what some wishful-thinking paleo-conservatives think, Donald Trump is not going to oversee a less imperialistic American policy in the world.

What has happened, and is probably irreversible, and will be exacerbated by the presence of Trump, is that the incoherence, failure, and utter ridiculousness (from the perspective of reasonable standards of global peace and security) of American policy is now on embarrassing display.

It's important to recognize that the strength of Russia in Syria is more political than military. The U.S. itself has many more military assets in the region than Russia, and there are *16 other countries* flying combat aircraft in Syria. The American-led anti-Syria alliance draws on forces and facilities in the neighboring countries of Jordan, Israel, and Turkey. Indeed, the latter two have the significant armed forces that have directly attacked Syria, and shot down a Russian plane. Not to mention the global logistics and arms-supply network (even Croatia's in the act) backed by the enormous financial resources of Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

It was not just American, but also UK, Danish, and Australian air forces, that accidentally-on-purpose bombed Syrian army positions at the Deir Ezzor airport on September 17th, killing about 100 Syrian soldiers and wounding 110 more, in an operation that was an acknowledged violation of regulations, and just happened to support an ISIS offensive on the airport. There are more planes and weapons arrayed in the America-led coalition than in the Russian contingent.

That attack on Deir Ezzor was, by the way, exactly the kind of attack Obama had promised a year before. This time it was destined to be a one-off, because the Russians were there to prevent it from happening again. It's thought, in fact, that it was a Pentagon tantrum designed to sabotage the Kerry-negotiated cease-fire—which it did—and, as Gareth Porter says, meant as "payback" to Russia for its "poke in the U.S. eye." That means it was a direct defiance of civilian command. Let's see how Donald deals with Mad Dog when that comes up again.

The fundamental problem is that there's an inverse relationship between America's military power and its political strength. That centrifugal tension derives from the increasingly obvious discrepancy between America's publicly-declared motivations and objectives, and the actual motivations and objectives—which cannot be publicly declared, but which the results of American actions make harder to hide.

In the Syrian case, it plays out like this: Russia supports the Syrian state against the jihadis. That's what it says it's doing, and that's what it is doing. You can support that or oppose it, and it's clear what you're supporting or opposing.

The US, on the other hand, is supporting: reactionary religious monarchism, the destruction of secular nationalism, Zionism, Turkish neo-Ottoman ambitions, capitalism and neoliberal globalism, oil and gas drilling and pipeline rights, etc. But the American (and European) people aren't going to want to fight, die, or give up their Social Security and Medicare for any of that. So the government of the U.S. cannot say what it's actually doing, and wraps it up in a bullshit fairy tale about democracy and humanitarianism, which its client regimes in Europe and its global media agents promote around the world incessantly.

This story only sells as long as people accept the legitimacy of the source—which means as long as they have enough material comfort, and as long as they only get the story from approved sources. But that's over. All of it. People no longer have, and will not be getting back, lives of increasing material comfort, and they are no longer limited to, and won't be swallowing whole, the blather that's intoned by multi-million-dollar news anchors (which is why there will be continuing futile attempts to shut down, or steer people away from, alternative media).

In Facebook world, Russia and Syria are *in a relationship*.

The United States? Well, it has Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, al-Nusra (“bad” al-Qaeda), Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (“good” al-Qaeda), ISIS, the Free Syrian Army, the Army of Conquest, the Kurds, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, the rest of “Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve,” Refugee Nation, and Croatia? *It's complicated*.

Whose Timeline would you want to get involved in?

To be more “successful,” the U.S. will have to drop all the doo-dads that are dressing up the imperialism, and be more explicitly ruthless. It will have to drop the pretension of fighting for democracy and humanitarianism or respecting international law, and just be, like: “Let's just take the oil.” Precisely what our new president promises.

We've exhausted the Smooth Operator; time to try the Huckster. Different salesman, same product.

But that shift will introduce further political weakness, at home and in the world, forcing more reliance on dangerous military aggression, undermining further the “world's bestest, diversest, peace-lovingest democracy” political-ideological foundation that's absolutely crucial for stable imperial rule. The United States will start losing Europe, and from there, even *Hamilton* won't save it. That's exactly the conundrum you hear John Kerry struggling with in that remarkable audio tape.

It's increasingly clear that the United States can achieve nothing but destruction, in Syria or anywhere else.

But it can achieve that, and as a failing and flailing enterprise, it may double and triple down on its destructive impulse. Even if, and precisely because, it has now met some effective resistance in Syria, it may engage in dangerous provocations designed to put those international actors capable of military resistance—Russia and China—back in their assigned places.

Sorry, there is nothing very hopeful in this scenario. It's nouveau great-power geopolitics in which there is no left or progressive force of any significance. We are going to have to do some unfriending, and make a lot more bad and unfortunate choices.