

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2017/03/20/the-great-game-power-politics-or-free-play/print/>

The Great Game: Power Politics or Free Play?

By Michael Brenner

March 20, 2017

As to resolution and reconstitution in Syria, Moscow seems inclined to navigate the turbulent waters without a detailed road map in recognition that the topography will change in accordance with the preferences of other parties. What they will not abide is an autonomous territory controlled by *takfiri* groups. Their own preference looks to be for keeping the country intact (no partition), a degree of decentralization, a regime constituted on the principle of national unity, and free elections. The timing and exact route to reach these ends remains vague.

The Russia perspective on Syria summarized here suggests that a strong pragmatic case exists for Washington to cooperate with Putin to find a formula that could bring a measure of stability to the country. A level-headed interpretation of the situation would focus on these elements: the failure of

Washington to prevent violent jihadist groups from exploiting the rebellion against Assad to advance their own program hostile to the United States; the absence of a countervailing force ideologically acceptable to us; the threat posed to Russia by the expansion of terrorist groups that have Russian affiliates and that have recruited large numbers of fighters from Chechnya and elsewhere; and the opportunity that Putin has opened to find a resolution that squares the circle of our opposing both Assad and the Salafists. That attitude, though, would entail an agonizing reappraisal of the foundation stones of American policy set in place over the past five years. It

also would require modifying the prevailing view of Russia as an intrinsically aggressive state challenging the West from Ukraine to the Middle East, and Putin as a thug. Finally, it would mean facing down Republican leaders and the neo-conservative/R2P alliance that agitates fiercely for escalating a confrontation with Moscow.

The Obama White House recoiled at the very thought of this last but promoted the narrative. Trump lacks the intellectual confidence and political fortitude to take the bold step. Indeed, his principal advisers – Mathis, McMaster, Pompeo, Haley – have voiced overtly hostile views of Russian and Putin. Mathis explicitly has ruled out any substantial military collaboration in acting against terrorist organizations in Syria.

Making sense of this singularly complicated policy field is all the more daunting for the presence of two unusual factors. First, there is the disconcerting reality that a number of the main players are not rational actors – in the literal, nominal sense – since they are inclined toward illogical and/or impulsive behavior. That is true of Erdogan, Crown Prince Mohammed bin-Salman, and Trump. Bibi Netanyahu also shows signs of a loosening grip on reality after years of immersion in Israeli's ultra-nationalist culture with its messianic tinge. He now has composed his own Talmud in which the Persians are cast as the villains who are to blame for all that has befallen the Hebrew people.* As for Washington, Trump's predecessor was surely rational. But Obama's undisciplined administration as a whole exhibited an incoherence that generated actions at variance with each other – and conditions in Syria. Of course, we must take account as well of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and his al-Nusra & Assoc. counterparts. Psychiatric assessment aside, we can say indisputably that emotion rather than mind very often has driven actions. One is hard-pressed to find historical precedents to such a cast of unstable characters engaged in a high stakes game of power politics.

The second characteristic of the situation that distinguishes Syria writ large is the discrepancy between the intensity of the conflict, on the one hand, and the limited stakes for the external parties, on the other. A corollary is the discrepancy in stake between the domestic protagonists – for whom it truly is struggle for life or death, literally and politically, and the outsiders. If all the external parties had stakes of a similar magnitude, they likely would be more sober and prudent in their conduct.

Consider this: whatever transpires in Syria (and Iraq) life in the United States will go on with barely a ripple. Even its core international interests would be only marginally affected. Fluctuations in the present low rate of terrorism might be expected, in one direction or another; that's about it. With some qualification, and not quite to the same degree, one could say the same about Russia.

As for Turkey, the only possible negative repercussion of developments in Syria is a reflux into Turkey of the *takfiri* fanatics it sponsored and whose transit it enabled. They would not constitute, though, a direct threat to either Erdogan's rule or the Turkish state. For Iran, the main impact is on its regional presence. The link to Hezbollah is most important. For in the minds of Tehran's leaders, the major deterrent to a possible Israel air assault on Iran is the threat of

retaliation from Hezbollah missile batteries that the IRI has provided. The IRI's political integrity, though, is not in jeopardy.

Of all the external parties, the KSA is the most exposed. Paradoxically, the one prospective danger that could become tangible emanates from the parties it has been bolstering – the *takfiri* jihadis. An Islamic State could have posed a direct threat across an open border while posing the indirect threat of inspiring and facilitating an internal *Salafist* opposition to the Royal Family. In short, another Osama bin-Laden – far more powerful and closer to home. The same might be said of al-Nusra & Assoc which has all the same features except for the allure.

It is frankly incomprehensible that American officials – from the President on down – should not have been impressing this on the Saudi leadership constantly – in our interest, in their interest, and in the interest of the Middle East.

Instead, contrary to all good sense, the so-called strategists in Washington – medaled or not – are making plans to join in the decimation of the Houthis out of blind hatred of Iran, habitual service to the Saudis – and egged on by the Israeli lobby. All buffered by a thick layer of cultivated ignorance. Their legions of accomplices are all the pundits, think tankers, op ed writers et al who have been misrepresenting the Yemeni civil war as a proxy war against the ISI.

Now the Chinese jump in to do what the U.S. never thought of doing and never was in a position to do: a serious attempt at conciliation at the seeming request of both parties. If successful, Beijing consolidates its relations with Iran and the KSA, and enhances its global reputation as a reliable mediator/underwriter. Washington? Evidently, the Orangutan's blustering attempts to establish “street creds” by spasmodic bombing in all directions have impressed no one. The killing within the past week of scores of Syrian, Yemeni and Somali innocents by Washington's chest thumping leaders did impress the dead, the maimed and the orphaned.

Those acts also have succeeded in tarnishing America's already soiled reputation as an accomplice to an international crime.

As to Iran, were KSA leaders thinking logically, they might see the IRI as currently constituted as an asset. It is not a military threat the way Saddam was. It has no purchase on Sunni fundamentalist sentiment within the Kingdom – although it theoretically might agitate among the KSA's Shi'ite minority concentrated in the oil belt. It is hardly an irresistible model of Islamic democracy. Yet, the IRI's very existence serves the regime by underscoring the key role of the KSA in countervailing Iran around the Gulf; by presenting itself as a vague external danger that rallies Saudis beneath the protective wing of the Royal family; by justifying military ties to the United States; and by heightening Saudi Arabia's perceived importance to Washington.

The result of all this rampant mindlessness is a murderous conflict wherein the external powers seem moved by the admonition: *do your own thing* – and do it very badly.

P.S. It would be nice were there some way to make these judgements without resort to such robust language. Unfortunately there isn't. For it is necessary to highlight the true nature and grievous implications of these acts. Why use weasel words that only perpetuate the opaqueness,

or outright misrepresentations, that our rulers have used so assiduously to veil reality? Is it wrong to write “criminal?” Should we instead write “erroneous” or “mistaken?” When a policy and attendant actions defy all logic, are self-contradictory, at variance with recent experience, and do harm to one’s stated interests and objectives – it qualifies to be called what it is. Anyone else who behaved in this manner automatically would be so labelled; why should our rulers be exempt – especially since the consequences of their misdeeds are so dire?

The two year air campaign that entails indiscriminate bombing of civilian Yemeni targets would have been impossible without American assistance (refueling and intelligence) – even before the current talk of a direct role for U.S. forces began. This is a crime by any objective standard. Were some other government whom we consider unfriendly to do anything similar, Washington would be raising holy hell – throwing around words like ‘genocide’. Not to call criminal acts by their name would be sheer hypocrisy.