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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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23.04.2020

## ***Russia is About to Face its Biggest Test Yet in Syria***

An American reader tired of corona journalism sent me a plea this week: “There must be plenty of cruelty being unleashed by the gangsters-in-chief across the ‘Mideast’ that simply isn’t making it into the headlines,” she wrote. “Trump et al are either ignoring it or silently condoning it.”

I doubt if Donald Trump is ignoring it, but I do think he’s ignorant of it. And condoning is a bit of a long word for the current occupants of the White House. But here goes.

Russia, we are now led to believe, is losing ground in Libya as its most recent ally, the Libyan-American – and erstwhile friend of Washington – General Khalifa Haftar retreats from Tripoli, losing even the city of Sabratha to the “internationally recognised” government.

The quotation marks are important because Turkey’s men and materiel, including mercenaries from the wreckage of the old Free Syrian Army, have been supporting al-Sarraj’s Tripoli government. The Libyan war, just like the Syrian war and the Lebanese civil war before that, is now a playground for quite a lot of my American reader’s gangsters-in-chief.

The Saudis and the Emirates and Egypt have been supporting Haftar, whose anti-Islamist credentials appeal to the al-Sisis and the al-Sauds of the Middle East. And of course, Moscow has smiled upon Haftar. Once one of Gaddafi’s trusted officers – until he was shuffled off to fight and be captured in the colonel’s hopeless fantasy war in Chad – and then a good friend of the CIA, he was given the ultimate accolade once he re-emerged as the swashbuckling general to save Libya: in 2017, Haftar was freighted out to the Russian

aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetzov as it cruised through the Mediterranean en route from Syria to the Baltic.

It was one of Haftar's finest hours. Courted by the Kremlin, he sat in the carrier's ward room where he staged a video conference with the Russian defence minister. The subject was what you might have expected it to be: collaboration against international terrorism. That, after all, is a matter in which Vladimir Putin counts himself as an expert – whether it be “terror” in Chechenya, “terror” in the Ukraine, “terror” in Libya or “terror” in Syria. There were promises of Russian support over the following months but, save for a few mercenaries, no Russian troops and no Russian hardware based on Libyan soil.

If Libya was a playground, Haftar was more a plaything than a serious contender for a Russian alliance. Moscow was keeping its hand in the sands of Libya – it would have to be consulted by the UN, the US, and the “international community” in any discussion of Libya's future – but it was not associating Russian power with Haftar's Libyan National Army (which now even has an Islamist component).

Sisi and the Saudi crown prince can pin their medals on Haftar if they wish. Putin keeps his loyalty for another army: the Syrian variety now partly surrounding the truncated “rebel” province of Idlib. And, as we all know, there is now a “ceasefire” along the front lines as Turkish and Russian troops now supposedly patrol the east-west Aleppo-Latakia highway through Idlib.

But the Turks are – and this is Russia's suspicion – encouraging those civilians associated with the Islamist and nationalist rebels inside Idlib to block the motorway. The roadblocks are certainly appearing, and are preventing those famous joint patrols. But Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan is not going to fight the Syrian army or the Russians. The death of 37 of its soldiers under Syrian-Russian air attack in Idlib was the most serious event in Turkish military history since the attempted coup against Erdogan in 2016. Warnings like that have to be heeded.

Turkey's real problem, of which the Russians are acutely aware, is what to do with the jihadis and Islamist groups who have been fighting alongside the Assad opposition. They can no longer be trucked off to the deserts of Saudi Arabia to cool their heels in the Empty Quarter for a decade or two – one of the original brainwaves. They certainly won't be allowed to settle down in Turkey, whose southern towns they have attacked. And Turkey, the Syrians suspect, wants to keep those areas of Syria – including hundreds of square miles north and east of Aleppo – which its troops currently occupy.

At present, the Syrian government is quite happy for the nationalist rebels to argue and fight with the Islamists in Idlib, which has been a rubbish bin for all those who have not surrendered to Bashar's forces elsewhere in Syria. Damascus believes – with time and patience – that it will control all of Idlib, although eastern Syria is another matter.

So Russia's stake in Syria remains its only serious alliance in the Middle East. It has assured Bashar al-Assad's survival. Militarily, Soviet air power and a transformed Syrian army cannot lose. But despite the West's concentration – and the media's constant coverage – of Idlib, the Syrian government is far more concerned about the country's economy.

So poor have its people become – those in the majority of the smashed country now restored to the authorities – that the government in Damascus is in danger of losing one of its constant wartime narratives: that Assad and the Baath party alone can protect Syria. It is one thing to “protect” your people from Islamists and Isis – quite another to provide them with food and fuel and money when the war is won. There is even talk in Damascus of how bread subsidies – the most important in the country – might not be maintained. So if Idlib remains a war-front in Turkish and western eyes, it is now a very small part of the government's problems.

The Syrian economy is now even more fragile because its one economic entrepot – for dollar and property investments – is itself collapsing in an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions. As the Lebanese pound crashes down from 1,500 to 3,000 to the dollar in six months, Syrians who could travel to Beirut and pick up cash and goods have found their money trapped in Lebanese banks. Hitherto, up to a third of Syria's private dollar liquidity – perhaps a lot more – was believed to be in Lebanon. But now the Syrian pound, which stood at 48 to the US dollar before the war, and then plunged to 700 pounds to the dollar during the fighting, is worth 1,200 Syrian pounds. Even Assad loyalists are criticising the government for its failure to provide basic services.

This is no mere ephemeral complaint. The foundational bedrock of the Baath party was always touted as the security of the Syrian people. Whether the people believed this – for the party's primary concern was surely the security of the regime – they at least knew that their basic needs would be met. Food, education, healthcare – however far its standards were behind Lebanon or Saddamite Iraq – was provided. Even the war could be fought by the government on the grounds that sectarianism and jihadi “terrorism” could be

overcome. The Baath was ostensibly secular, however much it was dominated by the Alawites.

But Syria's economic pit now haunts the authorities. There were reasons to believe, months ago, that Qatar might intervene to rebuild Syria – a project which would enhance Qatar's territorial power as well as infuriate its Saudi antagonists. Russian businesses could then take advantage of Qatari cash to organise the reconstruction of Syria. Or the Saudis could step up in front of Qatar and take over the renaissance of Syria themselves to the detriment of Tehran; after all, Syria's Iranian ally is in no position to underwrite the economy of Damascus right now.

So the question must now be faced: can Russia rescue the Syrian economy as it rescued the Syrian military? It's one thing to base your Sukhoi fighter-bombers on a Syrian airbase with a generational lease, quite another to pour roubles into a physically ruined nation belonging to a Middle East ally, however loyal he may be.

This is now the biggest question for the Syrian regime and for its Russian saviours. Assad has been loyal to Putin; and Putin to Assad. But the economic survival of Syria – not the bombing of Assad's enemies – is now the greatest challenge facing the country. This, and this alone, is the new test of the relationship between Moscow and Damascus.

**CounterPunch 22.04.2020**