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Saudi-Russian diplomatic dance can't be to liking of Iran, Syria

BY M.K. BHADRAKUMAR

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At some point, surely, the thought would have crossed the mind of long-time observers of the Russian-American relations that these two great powers could be a match made in heaven. Just when it seemed that all was lost and they could be lurching toward a horrific nuclear war, it turned out that Russia and the United States were actually collaborating to negotiate the Iran nuclear deal.

President Barack Obama later admitted he was pleasantly surprised that Moscow adopted a very cooperative attitude.

The two big powers are now exploring how far they could work together to bring peace to Syria. Will the Iran success story repeat itself?

The press release issued after the “trilateral” at Doha on Monday between the foreign ministers of Russia, US and Saudi Arabia noted that there was a “detailed and frank discussion on the existing situation in Syria.”

The Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the three foreign ministers believed “we will eventually be able to make headway on the settlement of the crisis in Syria, while simultaneously working to achieve progress in launching a political process that would be accepted by all Syrian parties and to establish a powerful front to combat the terrorist threat (read Islamic State) in the Middle East.”

From Lavrov's remarks the following emerged:

- Russia sees that the imperative need today is to form a unified anti-terrorist front to fight the Islamic State for which a political dialogue over Syria is useful and necessary.
- Russia favors the inclusion of the Syrian army, Iraqi army and the Kurds in this “like-minded coalition” to fight the Islamic State.
- What is needed is an inclusive dialogue spanning the entire Syrian political spectrum leading to “a political transition period with certain parameters to be agreed by mutual consent between the Syrian government and the opposition.”
- An understanding among the external players who are capable of influencing various parties in Syria (such as Qatar, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan and Iran) is needed first, without which “it is very difficult to expect the political process to begin in earnest and remain stable and successful.”

Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Ministry revealed on Wednesday that a delegation of the main opposition, the Syrian National Group [SNG], has been invited to visit Moscow next week.



Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (L), U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry (C) and Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir

The SNG, which is supported by Saudi Arabia, had previously refused to visit Russia. Its change of heart signals the warm temperature in the Russian-Saudi ties lately.

Curiously, therefore, it was not to Moscow but to Tehran that the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem headed on Tuesday for a reality check on the trilateral at Doha the previous day.

No doubt, the central issue here concerns the Saudi stance – and Russia's perception of it. How far is the Saudi leopard capable of changing its spots? Are the Saudis really buying into the Russian argument on the imperative need of a “like-minded” coalition to fight the Islamic State?

Or, could they be, in turn, nudging the Russians to reconsider their own support for Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, while also exploring a new pattern of relationship with Russia to counter closer US-Iranian ties?

Actually, the GCC foreign ministers' meeting at Doha in the weekend rejected the Russian proposal on the “like-minded” coalition.

On the other hand, how far can Moscow and Tehran continue to hang together on the Syrian issue, while pursuing parallel interests?

Conceivably, the Russians place store on Syria's unity and the preservation of its army and security forces. But then, Iran cannot be oblivious that the ground reality has shifted in the past year – the Assad regime has lost ground and an Iraq-like fragmentation seems inexorably under way.

The logical progression of the Russian approach involving Saudi Arabia will be to enhance Assad's legitimacy by returning Syria to the Arab fold and thereby bring the conflict to an end. Indeed, counter-terrorism agenda is Russia's priority. Russia stands to lose out of continued volatility in Syria.

Whereas, Tehran cannot but factor in that any reconciliation between the Assad regime and the Arab governments (Saudi Arabia, in particular) will most certainly lead to a scaling down of Damascus's dependence on Tehran.

Now, influence in Syria is important for Iran also to maintain its influence in Lebanon. To quote Michael Young, the opinion editor of Beirut-based Daily Star newspaper,

"To presume this will lead to a split between Russia and Iran goes too far. Both want to save Syria's regime, or at least its core. Both welcome a negotiated solution that does so. But what Iran does not want is for a political process to reduce its power in Syria. Russia's priority is different. It wants to sustain its sway in Damascus but above all avoid a failed Syrian state, thereby ensuring that Syria does not remain a reservoir for anti-Russian terrorism."

Significantly, close on the heels of the US-Russian-Saudi "trilateral," Iran announced on Wednesday that it proposed to submit a new peace plan for Syria to the UN, taking into account the apparent international shift in favor of a political settlement.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian put it nicely when he said there has been a "strategic change in the attitude of the regional players with regard to Syria. If four years ago, many of the foreign players considered resorting to war as the solution for Syria, right now many of the players consider resorting to and focusing on a political solution as the most appropriate way to solve the Syrian crisis."

Iran's plan apparently devolves upon a four-point initiative calling for an immediate ceasefire in Syria, the formation of a national unity government, constitutional amendments on minority rights and elections to be held under international supervision.

Amir-Abdollahian said the plan was drafted after "detailed consultations" between Tehran and Damascus. Indeed, the plan has only a remote chance of being found acceptable by Saudi Arabia (or Turkey) but it signals that Tehran and Damascus do not share Russia's enthusiasm regarding a shift in the Saudi approach.

Nor do they seem to visualize the prospect of a "like-minded coalition" to fight the Islamic State. In fact, top Iranian officials continue to condemn the Saudi policies in Yemen and Syria.

The Tehran Times featured a highly critical article today on the nexus between the Islamic State and Turkey (which is a key country in Russia's "like-minded coalition".) It concluded, "Turkey would be the last country to change its mind regarding the toppling of the Syrian government."

The influential aide to Iran's Supreme Leader on foreign policy, Ali Akbar Velayati said on Tuesday in a withering attack on Saudi Arabia, "Certain countries which haven't experienced even the slightest manifestations of democracy, make claims about Syria – certain Islamic states, legal governments and UN members that don't even have democratically-elected presidents or have democracy."

Velayati said, "Their dreams will not come true and their seditious and divisive plots will not yield results in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and other countries".