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Does Russia have an exit strategy for the Middle East?

By Paul Iddon

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The Daily Beast recently ran a piece which suggested that Russian President Vladimir Putin is “seducing” Iraq’s Sunni tribes, hoping to win them over as allies in the fight against Islamic State (ISIS) by arming them and giving them other means of support (not unlike, as the article points out, the U.S. Awakening Councils, or Sahwa’s, used during the Iraq War to oust al-Qaeda from Anbar). By doing so Russia could win clout among the Sunnis (who are generally opposed to Russia’s regional allies in Damascus and Tehran) of the region at the expense of the United States.

Since Russia directly intervened in the Syrian war on the side of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad it has relied heavily on air power to give the Syrian military an edge over its opponents. However, as a recent piece in The Guardian by Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen rightfully points out, Russian air strikes are doing little to change things since there have been no meaningful Syrian ground offensives for them to coordinate with. This is due to the fact that the once 220,000-strong Syrian Army is worn out from years of desertions, fighting and general fatigue and is unable to mount the large offensives needed to retake large swaths of Syria. So we, in essence, have a situation whereby Russia is left trying to destroy various armed groups from the air, which is next to impossible.

Additionally, and more notably, the forces now fighting on Assad’s behalf are increasingly more

sectarian. Despite the fact that Syria is a Sunni nation those forces fighting on Assad's behalf are increasingly either Shiite or Alawite or from another minority. Ordinary Sunni Syrians fear Shiite militias like Hezbollah almost as much, or perhaps even more, than they do the likes of Islamic State (ISIS) or Jabhat al-Nusra. Damascus's main patron Tehran bears a large share of the responsibility for the increasing sectarian nature of the forces fighting on Assad's side. It sought to gradually replace the Syrian Army with the National Defense Forces (NDF) militia, a militia which relies heavily on Alawite volunteers. Given its composition such a force would doubtfully have much luck retaking and retaining hold over Sunni-majority parts of the Sunni-majority Syrian state. Something more along the lines of a Sahwa however may have much more success.

Aside from these reported Russian outreaches to Iraq's Sunni tribesmen the Russians have also been claiming they want to win over the Free Syrian Army (FSA) group in Syria as a force to work with against the likes of ISIS (there have been rumours in the Turkish press that the Russians plan to give close air support to a Syrian Kurdish offensive aimed at closing off the remaining part of Syria's northwestern border with Turkey). While Russia has claimed on occasion that it is coordinating air strikes with the group the FSA denies this to be so claiming that Russia is actually bombing them on Assad's behalf. A Russian strategy which does try to win over the FSA and guarantee them an agreeable compromise in return for their ad-hoc coordination against the Islamists would be a smart policy for the Russians to pursue. Russia's clear aim is, after all, to reestablish Syria as a formidable client regime, and that regime's protection and survival depends upon a formidable army that can effectively control the country which is certainly not something the likes of Hezbollah and/or the NDF can ever effectively do. By reaching a compromise with some of the Sunni groups Russia can form the basis for a reinvigorated national army for Syria which could prop-up a, possibly even post-Assad, client regime for Moscow in that strategically-important country which could in turn safeguard Russia's strategic interests and simultaneously combat Islamists.

In Iraq Russia's aforementioned outreach to the Sunnis may well be motivated by the fear that if they are not won over they could become much more closely aligned with Saudi Arabia and/or Turkey. Both of whom have sponsored groups in Syria which Russia is opposed to. Russia may perceive it to be in its own interest to help Baghdad win Iraq's Sunnis over to its side by reversing many of the policies carried out by former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Russia's intervention is often characterized in the west as the beginning of an arrogant and ill-thought out embroilment in the region.

Nevertheless the Kremlin has shown some signs that it has the semblance of a long-term strategy which will yield a beneficial outcome for Moscow's interests in that volatile region.