

“The Trump Administration and Syria”

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A famous Jewish joke tells of a pauper who used to buy food and drink on credit, without ever paying his bills. Finally, after one year of default, the innkeeper refused to serve him. The pauper, his face red, banged his fist on the table and said in an ominous tone: “if you leave me no choice, I’ll do what my father did.” The guests went pale. The innkeeper, too, was nervous about the threat. “And what did your father do?” he asked. “Well of course,” answered the pauper. “He went to bed hungry.”

In Syria, successive U.S. administrations have been that pauper. Since 9/11, all the more so since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad shaped his regional image as a paragon of “resistance” to U.S. interests. Abandoning the more balanced policy of his late father, former President Hafez al-Assad, Bashar increased support to a host of anti-Western terrorist organizations, especially Hezbollah in Lebanon. Moreover, he turned a blind eye to the smuggling of arms and volunteers to Iraqi insurgent organizations, including al Qaeda, through the famous ‘ratlines’ on the Syrian-Iraqi border. In response, the U.S. made some feeble threats, but did not back them with credible force. After the beginning of the Syrian civil war, when Bashar bombed his own people, used chemical weapons, and ignored President Obama’s “red line,” the U.S. again did little and left the arena to aggressive Russian intervention.¹

Now, in 2017, as the U.S. is heading for an uncertain future under President Donald Trump, Russia’s and Syria’s presidents, Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad, have already crushed all resistance in the city of Aleppo. Syrian citizens were starved and massacred in droves, and yet the Obama administration did little to help the beleaguered opposition forces, notwithstanding the limited training programs for a handful of vetted rebels. Secretary of State John Kerry’s multiple threats to stop negotiating with Russia over the Syrian Civil

¹ See, for example, Roger Cohen, “Obama’s Syrian Nightmare,” 10 September 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/11/opinion/roger-cohen-obamas-syrian-nightmare.html>.

War seemed as credible as the pauper's threat in the Jewish story.² So far, the U.S.-Russian dialogue on Syria has followed a uniform pattern. The two sides reach an agreement for a cease fire, the U.S. State Department warns that Russia and the Syrian regime will be judged by their commitment on the ground. Then, Putin and Assad violate the agreement. The U.S. withdraws from the table, and leaves the other side to bomb rebels and civilians with impunity. Obama's refusal to intervene was based on his belief in the primacy of diplomacy.³ His successor, Donald Trump, certainly does not share these high-minded ideas, and yet, his policy is anti-interventionist in general and pro-Russian in particular. Specifically, Trump hopes to reach some kind of a 'grand bargain' with Putin on Syria.

And yet, when states are dealing with a resolute, violent rival, diplomacy or attempts to reach 'grand bargains' are ineffective when not backed by credible threats of force. Carl von Clausewitz, the most important military thinker in modern times, has poignantly observed that in a conflict, a side which opts for a peaceful strategy, "must first be sure that his opponent either will not appeal to that supreme tribunal – force, or that he will lose the verdict if he does."⁴ George Kennan, one of the founding fathers of U.S. Cold-War diplomacy, aptly made this observation about the Soviet Union, Putin's cherished role model. The Soviets, Kennan wrote in 1946, were "impervious to the logic of reason" but "highly sensitive to the logic of force."⁵

There are plenty of historical cases pointing towards the same rule: dialogue unbacked by force is worthless against a violent, resolute rival. One should take a glance, for example, on the ways in which Adolf Hitler, Nazi Germany's leader, neutralized his enemies in 1933. The German Social-Democratic Party had controlled a strong and extensive network of trade unions. Only thirteen years earlier, in 1920, it had used its ultimate weapon, the general strike, to save the Weimar Republic from a reactionary *coup d'état*. Nor was Hitler challenged by the left alone. In Bavaria, the local Catholic government consistently parried the orders that came from Berlin. Both Bavarians and Social-Democrats did not lack courage, but they were unprepared to drag Germany into a bloody civil war. Committed to the principles of legality and non-violence, they were confronted by a rival completely undisturbed by such niceties. For that reason, the attempts of the Bavarian Prime Minister, Dr. Heinrich Held, to negotiate with the Nazis for some *modus vivendi* were no more than jokes. Faced with no risk, why should the Nazis have compromised? Indeed, both Held and the social-democrats were quickly overrun.⁶

² Bradley Klapper, "Kerry threatens Russia with end to joint Syria diplomacy", [AP – The Big Story](#), 28 September 2016.

³ Barbara Plett Usher, "Obama's Syria Legacy: Measured Diplomacy, Strategic Explosion", [BBC News](#), 13 January 2017.

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 99.

⁵ George Kennan, "The Long Telegram, February 1946", in Jussi Hahnimäki and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cold War in Documents and Eyewitness Accounts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 110.

⁶ There are numerous studies on the downfall of the German opposition in 1933. See for example: Peter Hoffmann, *History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945*, trans. Richard Barry (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 3-36.

We can see similar dynamics also in the Middle East. In the Lebanese political system, many actors, especially Sunni and Christian forces, strive to disarm Hezbollah and dismantle its state-within-a-state. In 2008, these forces confronted the Shiite organization over a private communications network that allowed it to tap the phones of government officials, and sacked some of its loyalists in crucial positions.⁷ But they were not ready to endanger their communities and drag Lebanon into a second civil war, while Hezbollah was ready to do so. As a result, the ‘Party of God’ won the day after a short confrontation.

The conclusion is clear. The United States will achieve nothing in Syria without credible readiness to use force. This was true for Obama as much as for Trump. The new President is likely to discover that reaching a ‘grand bargain’ with Russia in Syria, or anywhere else for that matter, is meaningless without some kind of threat. The personality in the White House matters much less for Assad and Putin than the gun on the table.

Theoretically speaking, one may argue that Trump does not need such a credible threat of force, because his only goal in Syria is beating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). The Islamic State, supposedly a common enemy of the United States, Russia and the Assad regime, could be smitten by a coalition of all three forces. If Trump is interested in that goal alone, and does not care about the Syrian rebels, Assad’s future, or U.S. political leverage in Syria, he may well be content in beating ISIS and then leaving the country to the Russians.

But such a policy, simple as it may sound, is much less attainable in practice due to recent developments and the general complexity of the Syrian theater. Most of all, there is the Turkish presence. Immediately after the abortive military *coup d’état* in Turkey on 15 July 2016, President Erdogan decided to intervene in Syria with full force. As I predicted in a previous article, the Turkish Army, weakened by the post-coup purges, slugged along the frontlines with ISIS.⁸ Months of heavy fighting elapsed, and the Turkish Army was only recently able to take al-Bab, the major city in the region. Devoid of postwar plans, or reliable Syrian allies who can consolidate civilian authority in Turkish-held areas, Erdogan’s army is stuck in Syria without an easy exit route. Erdogan has recently indicated that in such a situation, he will choose the solution that many before him have chosen when stuck in a quagmire: to double the bet and charge ahead. Turkey, according to the most recent news, is planning to enlarge its area of operations to the East in order to fight the Kurdish YPG (People’s Protection Units), an organ of the PKK (Kurdistan Worker’s Party), Turkey’s arch enemy.

However, the YPG (or the SDF – Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition between the YGP and Arab Syria allies) is Washington’s only reliable ally fighting ISIS in northern Syria. So far, all the other Syrian forces, including the regime, have not shown a strong record in driving the Islamic state out of its entrenched territories. In order to defeat ISIS in Syria, particularly if one wants to capture their capital, Raqqa, without the employment of U.S troops, close cooperation with the YPG/SDF is necessary. This, however, cannot be done without restraining Turkey’s relentless attacks on the Kurds, especially towards Manbij. As Aaron Stein and Rao Komar wrote recently, “a Turkish-led attack on Manbij would slow the Raqqa operation, as YPG

⁷ Robert F. Worth, “Hezbollah seizes Swaths of Beirut from U.S. backed Lebanese Government”, [New York Times](#), 10 May 2008.

⁸ Danny Orbach, “What coup-proofing will do to Turkey’s military: lessons from five countries”, [War on the Rocks](#), 27 September 2016.

forces would likely move from Raqqa defend the frontlines in Manbij.”⁹ Russia and the Syrian regime are de-facto allies with the Kurds in this fight, and there are indications that the Trump Administration plans to augment rather than abandon the partnership with the YPG.¹⁰ Reckless Turkish advances may well escalate relations between Turkey, Russia, and their Syrian clients. A coordinated move against ISIS requires complicated diplomatic maneuvering between mutually-hostile, aggressive players such as Turkey, Russia, and the YPG/SDF. The U.S. will lack the credibility for such moves without a threat of force, for example, by supplying the YPG with heavy weapons and accompanying them with U.S. Special Forces. Neither the Russians nor the Turks will take Trump seriously without a strong military presence in the region.

And if a grand bargain in Syria is impossible without a credible threat of force, the dream to ‘close a deal’ with Putin in the international arena is even more elusive. Recently, certain strategists such as Edward Luttwak, trying to shape the messy realities of the administration’s policies into a more coherent form, recommended that the President play Russia against China.¹¹ Just as former President Richard Nixon made a deal with China and put a wedge inside the communist world, President Trump can do the reverse: ally with Russia in order to check the rise of China. Such a strategy, if adopted, can make the ‘grand bargain’ in Syria, difficult as it may be, a part of a global strategic drive.

However, as Jacob Stokes has recently noted, such a strategy is hard to come by. Sino-Russian ties have steadily improved since the late 1980s, and the two countries are now united by strong mutual interests, the most important of which are to undermine the U.S.-led global order and to re-carve their spheres of influence in East Asia and Eastern Europe, respectively.¹² Even if Trump abandons the United States’ NATO allies in Eastern Europe and the Baltics to appease Russia in exchange for some promises of Russian cooperation in East Asia, the Middle East, or elsewhere, there is a little guarantee that Putin will actually honor them. U.S. abandonment of NATO and its allies in the Russian periphery might have lasting, perhaps irreversible consequences. It will squander the remainder of U.S. credibility in Europe, and might actually encourage China to grab territories in East Asia, just as Russia did in Crimea. The promise of any cooperation Russia might give in return, by contrast, is written on ice. As long as Russia knows for sure that the United States is not ready to employ military force internationally, Putin is not likely to give up on vested interests or turn his back on Russia’s allies in Syria and elsewhere. Why should he?

U.S. policy makers are well-advised to consult the historical record: diplomatic engagements with the Syrian and Russian regimes are worthless unless backed by force. This is a key to President Obama’s failure in Syria, and possibly to President Trump’s future blunders as well.

⁹ Aaron Stein and Rao Komar, “In Syria, Turkey find itself boxed in: what’s next?”, [War on the Rocks](#), 20 February 2017,

¹⁰ Aaron Stein, “De-Conflicting Turkish, Kurdish, and American Aims in Syria”, [War on the Rocks](#), 28 February 2017.

¹¹ “6 out-of-the-box Ideas for Trump”, [Politico](#), January/February 2017.

¹² Jacob Stokes, “Russia and China’s enduring Alliance”, [Foreign Affairs](#), 22.2.2017,

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