

Countering Russia in Syria

by Michael Curtis



The tenth anniversary of the conflict in Syria that began on March 5, 2011 has been greeted with deafening silence in Washington, D.C. Though the Biden administration would favor a political settlement of the conflict and is conscious of humanitarian problems of displaced civilians in the area of Idlib, it has not settled on any policy on Syria which appears to rank relatively low in its list of global and regional priorities. At present, it has no intention of drawing another “red line” as was done by the Obama administration.

In contrast it comes as no surprise that the Russian Wagner Group, paramilitary organization, a private military company headed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch and a close friend of President Vladimir Putin, has taken part in the civil war in Syria, as well as in a number of other countries, including Ukraine, Sudan, Libya, Venezuela, Azerbaijan, and Germany. It is, however, a surprise that three human rights groups, from France, Russia, and Syria, have been able in March 2021 to file a criminal complaint, a landmark criminal case, in Moscow over the torture by Wagner of a detainee in Syria.

This provides a rare opportunity for the U.S. and the international community not only to learn more about the activities of Wagner and its deployment across the Middle East and Africa, but also to realize the continuing involvement of Russia in the civil war in Syria, the most important proxy war of our age with its regional and international dimensions.

The Syrian conflict began in March 2011 after an initially peaceful protest in Deraa, inspired by uprisings for reform in neighboring Arab countries, against the existing Ba'athist Arab regime of Bashar al-Assad, originally an ophthalmologist who inherited power from his father Hafez al-Assad. The protests were brutally crushed, propelling Syria into a civil war that has embroiled a mixture of domestic and foreign forces on both sides. The conflict has caused more than 500,000 deaths, and displacement of 13 million, half of the pre-war population.

At the height of the conflict in 2014, forces opposed to the Assad regime controlled most of the country east of the Euphrates and much of the north of the country, and fighting continued in the main cities and threatened Damascus. Assad had lost the provincial capitals of Idlib and Raqqa, and several provinces, in spite of his use of airstrikes, barrel bombs, and chemical attacks. The Islamic State declared areas across the Syrian-Iraq border as a caliphate.

The tide only began to turn in favor of Assad with intervention on his behalf by countries opposing his removal from office, most notably Russia whose intervention in 2015 was crucial. That intervention prevented the collapse of the Assad regime, and helped lead to eliminating or marginalizing of opposition forces, recapturing of East Aleppo, Raqqa, eastern Ghouta, suburb of Damascus, the taking of Baghouz in 2019 that ended the caliphate, and the Syrian-Russian offensive in Idlib in 2020 that caused dissidents to flee to Turkey.

Assad, therefore remains, at least temporally in power, but complications exist, and the country is still divided into enclaves and has a Kurdish presence. One of the most complex concerns are religious differences. Assad is an Alawite , a sect of Shia Islam, which has 500,000 Syrian adherents , 17% of the total population, of which three quarters are Sunni Islam who see them as heretics. Alawites are not simply a secret sect but are , though Arab, also a semi-ethnic group. No longer second-class citizens, the Alawites, in conjunction with the Ba'ath party, secular and nationalist, control the senior military and security, the republican guard, and the air force, though most of the pilots are Sunni.

It is improbable that the case concerning the Wagner mercenary organization will ever come to trial, but it may lead to appraising the Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war and its substantial support for the Assad regime in Syria. That entrance may be explained for a reason of reasons. Possibly, though unlikely, it was the result of the visit to Moscow in July 2015 of General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Quds Force, assassinated in January 2020 by the U.S. in Baghdad, calling for Russia to intervene to save Assad.

Russia has been interested in playing a role in the Middle East, in Syria and in Libya, after its loss of influence following the end of the Soviet Union. It wanted to prevent or halt the spread of terrorism, especially the threat of the Islamist State, IS or ISIS. It acted in the area with an air strike against the Islamists after the UN Security Council on November 20, 2015 unanimously called on all members to "redouble" action against ISIS. It upheld, militarily and politically, the Assad regime, which would have fallen, and indeed the very existence, the territorial integrity, of Syria as a country. In the UN, Russia has protected Assad, vetoing 16 Security Council Resolutions critical of Syria. For its own advantage Russia has used Syria as a testing ground for its new weapons systems, estimated at 600, including the T-14

Armata battle tank, and systems for its air force. It has become a powerful player in the region, politically and in diplomatic arrangements, such as the Astana Process talks.

These talks, in Astana (renamed Nur-Sultan) Kazakhstan, officially launched in January 2017, bring together Russia, Turkey and Iran to seek a cease fire, reduction of violence, and peace talks. They are based on and go beyond UN Security Council Resolution 2254 of December 18, 2015 which calls for a transitional governing body to end the conflict in Syria. Russia organized a series of meetings in Astana including groups close to representatives of Assad, Turkey and Iran-backed militias. Russia devised various military alternatives, and reconciliation deals with local fighters. These meetings suggest to the international community that Russia, and to a lesser degree Turkey and Iran, are the decisive players in any settlement in Syria, and who are willing to act and use military force to change the political contours.

The Astana format was established to help negotiate an end to the Syrian conflict. It did bring together representatives of Assad with some opposition groups who were not demanding Assad's resignation. But it is more a Russian showcase than an effort to create a genuine negotiating process. The most recent meeting of Astana, held in Russian Sochi in February 2021 purportedly on a constitutional process for Syria was deadlocked.

However, in effect, the process has a triple purpose: it has been a means of protecting Assad in power; it has sidelined the U.S. in the area; and it has indicated the bilateral links between Russia and military forces on the ground with consequences favorable to Russia's goals.

Russia is still assisting Assad, calling for the lifting of international sanctions against Syria, and is anxious to oppose jihadists. Its record is clear. After it had been

supplying the Syrian army with arms and equipment, Russia directly intervened in the war in September 2015, the first time in recent years that Russia has been involved in an armed conflict outside the borders of the former Soviet Union. Starting with strikes by its air force against militant opposition groups such as the Syrian National Coalition, the Islamist state ISIL, and al-Qaeda, the al Nusra Front, Russia increased its participation, with special operations forces, and military advisers, fighting to retake territory from anti-government groups, and above all to keep Assad in power against the combination of rebels, jihadists and outside forces. In February 2020 Russian Sukhoi SU-34 planes accompanied Syrian SU-22 fighter jets in bombing Turkish-backed rebel forces in Idlib province.

Russia now has a permanent military presence in air and naval bases in Syria. By agreement in January 2017, it is allowed to expand its naval facility at Tartus, Russia's only overseas base, and can harbor 11 warships, including nuclear ships. It has an air base in Latakia, which has recently become a component of the Russian permanent military contingent stationed in Syria.

Undoubtedly, Russia is now increasingly influential in the Middle East, a part of its overall political ambition. Economically, it is planning economic investments in the country and preparing to make it a vital transit place for its oil and gas shipments.

What should the U.S. now do or intervene to counter Russia in Syria? Should there be a new, effective red line that must not be crossed especially if the Assad regime again uses chemical weapons? Should the U.S engage in airstrikes as the Trump administration did on a number of occasions, on April 7, 2017 and April 14, 2018, to prevent further use of those weapons and to defeat jihadists? It is time for the Biden Administration to formulate its policy on Syria.