The Evolution of Washington's Position on Syria is Clearly Visible Now

Despite the significant changes in the situation on the ground in Syria that is caused by the Russian intervention aimed at destroying ISIL and other militants, Washington remains confused what sort of politics it should be conducting in Syria. At least the latest meeting of the Secretary of State John Kerry with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has shown that the US is not demanding the immediate Assad's departure. This has become the cause of some serious criticism from Riyadh and Ankara, but frankly, the White House couldn't care less. Apparently, American politicians have finally got to grips with the fact that as long as ISIL is controlling extensive territories in Iraq and Syria, the situation in the Middle East would remain complicated. At this stage the US is more concerned about ISIS, since Bashar al-Assad has already lost the control of half of the Syrian territories due the major ISIS offensive that was launched in the summer of 2014. Those vast areas are now used as recruiting centers and training camps for new terrorists, while Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey are making every attempt to derail each step that Russia or the US take to do something about it.

It is also clear that the US, despite the active anti-Russian propaganda, has clearly condoned the Russian air strikes against militants in Syria. This means that pragmatism has finally prevailed in the White House, since the United States and Russia at certain point may share common goals. It is true that Americans would prefer "moderate" Sunni insurgents or external forces like Turkey to fight ISIS over Iranian regular forces, Hezbollah and Shia militia from Iraq. However, the US has no means to force Russia into bombing the positions of ISIL exclusively, leaving other anti-Assad radical groups, that are being largely referred to as "moderate forces", untouched. Moreover, the United States will try to hand over the control over the territories recaptured to local Sunni forces, in hopes that the rich Persian gulf monarchies would provide financial and economic assistance to restore the destroyed infrastructure of the region.

Washington think-tanks are quick to assume that as the radical forces are getting eliminated, they would hand over the Syrian territories to the control of non-radical forces. Yet, they fail to determine what groups can be labeled less radical than others. Unfortunately, a lot of expert in the US do genuinely believe that there's a way to establish a federal system in Syria with the participation of both the Sunnis and the Alawites. This assumption is based on the fact that if Alawites are integrated in the government body it will reduce the risks of genocide and chaos. What they fail to understand, however, is that with the departure of Assad, with no transition period being allowed to carry out major elections of all branches of the new government, the Libyan scenario will be quick to follow. In a situation when different factions fighting against Damascus are sponsored by external players, they will immediately launch a new struggle for power in this Arab country. In this case, Syria will disintegrate into enclaves: Sunni, Alawite, Kurdish, Druze, etc. In the worse case scenario it can simply fall apart due to total chaos and brutal outbreaks of violence. In addition, American position hasn't evolved enough to allow Iran into playing a key role in ensuring the rule of law in Syria, which is understandable since Washington has been under pressure from Ankara and Riyadh.

While many politicians and diplomats in Washington are clearly prepared to facilitate the destruction of ISIL and initiate the reconstruction of Syria, American military experts are still not convinced that the ongoing conflict in this Arab country can be resolved anytime soon. On the contrary, they believe that there's going to be an aggravation. According to Pentagon, the only possible peaceful solution to the Syrian crisis can be pursued only after the
immediate departure of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the transition of all power in the country to the various opposition groups. But how can one agree to seek a compromise when these groups are engaged in the fierce struggle against each other. As for Russia’s military operation in Syria, the Americans military experts believe that its duration would largely depend on the progress it would achieve in supporting the sitting government. At the same time, they are convinced that Russia will never engage enough forces to secure a complete and utter victory for Assad.

The better part of these experts are okay with the fact that Putin will simply "declare a complete victory" and "withdraw its troops after a number of tactical successes". However, in their opinion, the strategy of Russia’s withdrawal from Syria remains unclear. In addition, they seem to understand perfectly clear that a military intervention - is a tricky thing. Once started every military operation it has its own rules and conditions for withdrawal. For example, the US military operation in Afghanistan has been carried out for over 14 years and has not been finished still. Moreover, President Obama has extended it even further.

Pentagon believes that Russia and the US led coalition can work together only to avoid any possible incidents involving Russian aircraft and US coalition warplanes in Syria. However, a more comprehensive form of cooperation, they say, is unlikely as American and Russian goals in Syria can at times oppose each other. While Moscow and Washington agree on the destruction of the Islamic state, Moscow sees the preservation of Assad’s regime as a real opportunity to solve the Syrian crisis, while Washington is largely convinced that Assad is an obstacle that has to be removed. Moreover, as they state in Washington, a key player in the Syrian civil war is Iran and it’s highly unlikely that this situation will change. Tehran has been pretty active in supporting the Assad government, while providing funding, weapons and advisors. The extent of Iranian support became clear on October 8, when an Iranian special forces general Hossein Hamadani was killed near the city of Aleppo in Syria. This fact forced the Western media to conclude that there was a large formation of Iranian troops stationed in that area, which hasn't been proven by any facts. And most importantly, experts in Washington are convinced that Iran and Russia will coordinate their activities in Syria.

In any case, the US position on Syria is bound to evolve, and should the regular Syrian troops achieve any significant progress "on the ground" against the radical militants, this evolution may be pretty radical. A lot depends on the readiness of Tehran to provide a wider military support to Bashar al-Assad, like sending a powerful considerable military contingent to Syria. It will make certain opposition forces more reasonable, while radical forces will finally understand the inevitability of their defeat along with all the consequences that may follow it. External sponsors will understand it too, since they have been pretty oblivious to that fact.

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