Who is Derailing Syrian Reconciliation?

As Russia's warplanes are destroying anti-government forces in Syria, while relying on the Syrian armed troops, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and the Lebanese "Hezbollah", and Shia volunteers from Afghanistan and Pakistan, a number of influential international and regional players are desperate to get their foot in the door to prevent the utter and complete defeat of ISIL and other radical Islamist groups in Syria. Among these players one can easily find the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

While Tehran could have made a greater contribution to support the ongoing offensive of the Syrian army, in just two weeks of fighting it has already lost more than a dozen generals and senior officers of the Revolutionary Guards in the area to the south of Aleppo. There's a clear need to get the regular units of the Iranian army deployed in Syria. Local Kurd forces have also made an impactful contribution to fight against ISIL.

The situation is further aggravated by the passive actions of the Iraqi army units and certain Kurdish troops that allow ISIL to maneuver its forces between Syria and Iraq. This indecisiveness, that is cause by the absence of trained high-ranking officers among Kurds and in the Iraqi armed forces, is further aggravated by the policies of Washington. The White House is forced to take into account Ankara's position while evaluating the possible alliance with the Kurdish militia. This has led to completely uncomprehensive attempts to create a rebel force where Kurds will be playing a supporting role. The Kurds, in turn, are waiting for some promises from Washington about the prospects of getting an autonomy, while this is the very step that the White House cannot make in the light of Erdogan's victory on the parliamentary elections in Turkey. For this reason a full-scale attack on the city of Raqqa has been slowed down. But it's of critical importance for Damascus today to maintain the momentum in the large scale offensive it launched.

The fighting capabilities of anti-Assad forces are determined by financial support they are getting. This has already forced Saudi Arabia to dramatically increase the spendings on the war in Syria. In addition, with the direct encouragement and participation of Ankara, the intensity of oil smuggling operations in Syria has also been increased. This should lead Moscow, Damascus and Tehran to the conclusion that the oil infrastructure controlled by terrorists should become the target of savage air and ground attacks, which must greatly affect the fighting capabilities of Islamists in both Syria and Iraq.

The Vienna format negotiations are widely regarded in the West as a failure. The United States and Saudi Arabia have already done everything they could to derail these talks, while Russia refuses to tolerate any one-sided decisions and unilateral actions within the Vienna format. As it has been noted by Russia's Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova:

>On the eve of the forthcoming ministerial meeting, the United States rushed to initiate the operation of three working groups: on the opposition, resistance to terrorism and humanitarian aspects. Importantly, no preliminary consultations on the time and venue of the sessions have been held with the Russian side. We believe this is a clear attempt to make the Vienna format unilateral and divide its participants into leaders and those who are following in their wake. We cannot accept such rules of the game... none of the proposed working groups include delegates from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Italy or the EU. The door has
been closed to these parties, which were invited to join the Syria Support Group largely thanks to Russia’s insistence. The format of participation has been limited arbitrarily.

To cut the long story short, it should be noted that Western countries have decided to go on with these negotiation only due to Russia’s military operations in Syria. They are hardly interested in a peaceful solution that will take into consideration national interests of all the players involved. In essence, the Vienna format differs from all the previous formats in the number of countries attending the talk, and there’s a number of states that the West and the Arabian monarchies have previously ignored. The fact that Iran has joined the negotiations is a clear diplomatic victory for Moscow. Yet, as the future of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is still being disputed, any positive outcome of these talks can be easily derailed by the West.

There’s no use hoping that at some point Riyadh and Doha will turn their backs on their Syrian war plan, since they have already invested tens of billions of dollars in it. This means that the basis for constructive talks could be created only when the regular Syrian troops score a considerable number of victories on the battlefield.

The compromise with the West and the Arabian monarchies can be reached if all parties agree to hold presidential elections in Syria without the participation of Bashar al-Assad, while all the representatives of the Syrian government will be provided with guarantees from the international legal bodies that they are not going to be prosecuted in any way. Should this scenario be pursued, Syria’s president will have to hand over a majority of his powers to the elected prime minister, while Moscow and Tehran will be allowed to maintain their military presence in Syria for the time being.

It is clear that a number of points of this compromise remains unacceptable for Saudi Arabia. At least for now, while pro-Saudi Islamists are still trying to counterattack and secure they control over Idlib.

Riyadh is very concerned with the increasing military presence of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Syria. In general, even if Assad agrees to step down, this doesn’t change anything for Saudi Arabia. Should the Iranians military presence be carried on in Syria, the situation will start to develop according with the Lebanese scenario, when the Alawite and Christian forces will develop an independent military group, the one that would be exactly like the Lebanese Hezbollah.

In addition, Riyadh cannot accept the creation of any form of “black lists” that will clarify which groups in Syria can be labeled as terrorist, which is implied by the Vienna format. Should this happen, Saudi Arabia will have no legitimate military allies in Syria. Should a Saudi representative put a signature under such a list this would mean a refusal to carry on the logistical support of the Islamist alliance Jaish al-Fath, the backbone of which is Jabhat al-Nusra that has already been recognized as a terrorist organization by the US State Department. Therefore, one can successfully negotiate with Riyadh only from the position of strength.

As for Ankara, despite of the personal hatred that the Turkish President has for Bashar al-Assad he understands perfectly clear that strengthening of the Salafi element in the Syrian political life does not meet his strategic interests.

One must take into the consideration the possible Turkish ground operation against ISIL. Ankara is sending clear signals that if the military operations against ISIL is carried out at the same rate, it will not refrain from military actions aimed at protecting Turks in the region and its own interests along the Turkish-Syrian border. This "message" has been primarily addressed to Russia that has been bombarding anti-Assad forces in the region. To show that it has not been playing games, Turkey has redeployed a total of 11 thousand special forces operatives along the border, that are prepared to engage at will. Even the slightest concessions in the matter of protecting Turks in the border areas is equivalent to the betrayal of the vision of “Greater Turkey” for Tayyip Erdogan. In Ankara they fear that should Turkey stop bothering with the protection of Turks, they will pay no heed to it.

In these circumstances, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has stated yet again that he is planning the introduction of no-fly zone over Syria. Erdogan has also clarified that Turkey will not tolerate the advancement of Kurdish forces along the western bank of the Euphrates River, which could lead to the creation of a "Kurdish corridor" near the Turkish southern borders. In turn, Turkish Prime Minister of Turkey Ahmet Davutoglu stated in an interview with CNN that Turkey can send its ground troops to Syria in order to fight ISIL.

Naturally, the full-scale military ground operation in Syria can only be carried out by the US and Turkey together. But there’s a chance that this operation will be reduced solely to the maintenance of channels of Islamist logistical
networks in Syria (including supporters of the ISIL) and the supply of smuggled oil to Turkey.

To put it plainly, the possible Turkish military operation in Syria will pursue two main goals: the saving of ISIL units that are now getting defeated in the province of Aleppo and the elimination of any possibility of a quasi-state Kurdish autonomy being created. But there's no way Ankara could pursue this goal alone, since the majority of Turks won't support the ground operation in Syria. Any large scale military engagement with any form of pretext will undoubtedly force Ankara into answering awkward questions, like the nature of the support it has been providing to the Islamic State. In other words, Ankara offers Washington an exchange: the latter abandons the idea of Kurdish autonomy and the use of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDS) as a primary striking force, while the former will launch a full-scale invasion.

As for Qatar, while it has formally reduced the level of the financial support it has been providing to terrorists in Syria, it has employed a different scheme to ensure that the money allocated for those criminals will still reach them. Now the funds are being transferred by the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs and Qatar Red Crescent Society. Yet, all transfers are still being controlled by the Emir family and the spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood - Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Formally, the money are being collected in Doha's large shopping malls and then sent to help Muslims around the world. These "donations" are then boosted by "gas dollars" from the Qatari Treasury. Then Jabhat al-Nusra and its affiliates are getting fancy paychecks, otherwise this group would have ceased to exist under the Russian air strikes.

Usually, these money are withdrawn from Swiss banks accounts by various offshore financial institutions, and then they are delivered to Istanbul, where special couriers are waiting to get them delivered to Jabhat al-Nusra militants. That is why there is no defeating such groups without conducting a thorough international investigation into the activities of the Qatari Islamic charity funds. After all, we're talking about the violation of a number of UN Conventions and the financing of international terrorism.

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