



PREVENTING THE UTTER CHAOS: THE RUSSIAN WAY

During recent months Syria has been at the center of everyone's attention. Syria was the litmus test, the moment of truth. The Americans played a wicked trick in Iraq. They then repeated it in Libya. And they were not allowed to pull off another such stunt in the Middle East.

And who has stopped them? Russia has finally found its strength, and its mission: to stand in the way of utter chaos in the Middle East, and to prevent a complete collapse of the principles of international law on a global scale.

The next few months will show whether Russia is up to such a monumental task.

The problem is, Russia is a lone warrior on this battlefield. Its Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) allies rubberstamped some declarations at the summit in Sochi in September 2013—but they did it so very quietly that no one seems to have noticed in the outside world. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has not been much of a help either—excepting of course one not-quite-member, Iran (and it is high time Iran did become a full member!). The BRICS club members seem to approve of Russia's position (well, frankly, not all of them: look at India)—but none of them is taking any action. Everyone seems to prefer the wait-and-see approach.

Everyone is awaiting a definitive outcome. It would have been naive to expect any different sort of behavior. But, as a result, the stakes in the Syrian game have become even higher for Russia than Syria itself is worth, however cynical that may sound.

There are now three key aspects to the Syrian crisis. The first aspect is *chemical weapons*. Predictably, it is also the most pressing. The Americans had spent a whole year preparing to play the chemical trump card. They had even discussed it quietly with Russia, dropping heavy hints about the upcoming rendezvous when the cherry trees in Washington would begin to bloom. Their message was, be prepared. Everything will pan out according to the rules of a Chekhov play: if there is a Syrian chemical rifle on the wall, that rifle will be fired in the final act.

There is no doubt that sarin was used in Guta. But whose sarin was it? Are Assad's troops so inexplicably dumb as to use sarin? Especially against civilians? The much more dangerous and plausible version is that, by drawing his red lines, President Obama had prodded the Islamist rebels into providing him with his carefully planned excuse. And, incidentally, did these rebels manufacture the toxic agent themselves? Be that as it may, Russian diplomacy has identified the only possible way out of this situation. Instead of apportioning blame, it has proposed to cut this Gordian knot by destroying all Syrian chemical weapons.

The second aspect of the Syrian crisis is *reconciliation*. Let us be frank: chemical weapons were just a convenient excuse to invade Syria and depose Assad. That plan has not worked (for now). But what do you think about the scenario whereby a legitimately elected president voluntarily and verifiably destroys his chemical weapons stockpiles—but then faces charges of crimes against his own people? Will that president prefer to be convicted by a court and hanged, or to be tortured and shot as he attempts to flee? What kind of president would ever



contemplate such options, even under the pressure of U.S. forces poised to attack Syria? If we genuinely want (a) the destruction of Syrian chemical weapons, which have become a source of increased tensions, and (b) a peaceful settlement, then Assad must be given safety and security guarantees, as well as guarantees that foreign powers will stop meddling in Syrian affairs. Geneva 2, if it ever takes place, must set in motion the process of domestic Syrian reconciliation. After years of civil war in Syria it has become clear that such a process would be impossible without Assad's participation. What is more, without his participation, there can be no guarantees of Syria becoming free of chemical weapons.


The third aspect of the Syrian crisis is *external*. First Qatar, and then, when the new emir turned out to be less activist than his father, Saudi Arabia generously paid for Assad's head to be brought to them on a plate. They had paid upfront—and now Riyadh is disappointed. Riyadh is furious. It cannot understand why, on this occasion, its hard cash has failed to play the decisive role. But Riyadh has not accepted defeat. On the contrary, it seems to be trying to raise the bets even further—in the Middle East itself, in Paris, in Washington, and also in Tel Aviv. The Saudi royal family and the Netanyahu group have shared anti-Syrian and anti-Iranian interests. They have therefore pooled their capital, stepped up their sharing of intelligence, and ramped up their military coordination.

This petulant belief in the all-conquering power of hard cash (which obviously stems from how things had panned out in Libya), this influx of cash and weapons into the region—all of this is extremely dangerous. Has Saudi Arabia learnt nothing from the 1980s, when its lifeline to the Afghan mujahedeen gave rise to Osama bin Laden? The West is still reeling from the financial crisis, and lives in fear of a new bout of economic malaise; it is not in a position to argue with the rich Arab monarchies. That is a serious challenge for Russia, as well as a chance for its diplomats to shine.

Has Russia won? Is Russia holding all the trump cards in the Middle Eastern game? These are the questions foreign journalists have been asking these days. Yes, Russian diplomats have made a brilliant move on the Syrian chemical weapons. But the game is not over yet. Numerous pitfalls await the Lavrov-Kerry plan and implementation of the UN SC resolution over the coming months.

The Syrian connection is obvious in most of the articles in this issue of *Security Index*. Mikhail **Margelov** analyses Syrian events—and, in the broader context, events in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel, from the point of view of the non-Arab actors, including the West, Iran, and Turkey. Aleksey **Pushkov** offers recommendations for the Russian policy on Syria. Natalia **Kalinina** paints a grim picture of the militarization of the Middle East in recent years. Looking at the impressive figures on arms exports to the region, one is left wondering why Russia has been so unforgivably reluctant to meet Syria's and Iran's requests for the latest defensive missile systems—or perhaps these contracts will actually be fulfilled any time now?

Members of the PIR Center International Expert Group could not ignore Syria in their comments either. Incidentally, the group now includes a new expert from Libya. Born in Tripoli, political analyst Mustafa **Fetouri** knows from his own experience that “the strength of modern philosophy...lies in air support,” as the modern Russian writer Viktor Pelevin puts it in his S.N.U.F.F. novel, arguably the most impressive anti-utopian work in Russia of recent years (see inside back cover).

Syria also comes to mind as one reads another article in this issue, the **round table discussions** focusing on the WMD-free zone in the Middle East. The problem of Syrian WMD is now being resolved without any such zone. In that sense, the United States has implemented its own long-prepared combination no less elegantly than Moscow has. Could it truly be the case that only force, threat of force, or acts of provocation are the sole recipe for ridding the Middle East of WMD? I doubt it. 

Vladimir Orlov