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Gulf Divides Threaten Anti-Assad Coalition

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WASHINGTON and ABU DHABI — While Gulf Arab countries are united in the fight against the Islamic State group, the addition of Russia's military to the region is threatening to divide the coalition — and potentially kill any chance of a political solution to the crisis in Syria.

It's a situation that could only deepen the chaos in Syria at a time when the United States is re-evaluating its strategy to train and equip Syrian moderates, but remains unwilling to commit fully to counter the military actions of either Syrian President Bashar al-Assad or Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The debate inside the Gulf nations boils down to whether the regional powers believe Russian intervention in Syria will help curb the spread of the Islamic State group, best known as ISIL or ISIS but regionally referred to as Daesh.

On one side of the disagreement are the Saudi, Qatari and the Turkish governments, which are adamantly opposed to Russian intervention in the region. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir described the Russian military moves as an "escalation" at a recent meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The other side is made up of the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Jordan, which view Russia's actions with optimism. That voice can be heard through Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri, who recently said his nation believes "that the (Russian intervention) will impact the fight against terrorism in Syria and help eliminate it."

"Russia is concerned by the resistance to terrorism and the purpose of its intervention is a fatal blow to terrorism in Syria, and its strikes are in line with those of the anti-Daesh coalition in Syria and Iraq," he added.

Driving that divide is the question of the so-called moderate rebels fighting both ISIS and Assad's regime inside Syria.

The UAE, Jordan and Egypt view the groups being hit by Russian airstrikes as extremists, explained Gulf-based geopolitical adviser and analyst Theodore Karasik.

He points out that King Abdullah of Jordan, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed of the UAE and President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi of Egypt all met with Vladimir Putin at the MAKS air show in July and likely laid out their thoughts on the Syrian situation then.

"There has been a lot of complaining from the West that these airstrikes have not only targeted the Islamic State but other groups," Karasik said. "This concept of other groups is very important, because Russia, Egypt, Jordan and the UAE consider other actors in Syria to be extremist, including the Free Syrian Army, because the FSA has been an abject failure."

In contrast, while the US has at least vocally supported some groups fighting in Syria, it has avoided giving them major weapons systems that could help fight Assad or Russian forces. That is more in line with the Saudi-Qatari-Turkish alignment, although there are cracks there as well.

In addition to operations against ISIS, Turkey is at war with the PKK, a Kurdish militant group with a power base inside Syria; at the same time, the US is relying heavily on Kurdish forces to fight against ISIS in both Syria and Iraq. And Qatar has ties with al-Nusra, a group designated a terrorist organization by the US.

As of Friday afternoon, unconfirmed reports were circulating on social media of a potential shootdown of a Russian jet by Turkish forces.

Internally, Saudi Arabia has an ongoing policy fight between deputy crown prince and defense minister Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, crown prince and interior minister Mohammed bin Nayef and Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubeir, said Karasik.

"Mohammed Bin Nayef is upset because the attacks on Saudi-backed groups is a direct threat on the kingdom and causes a direct effect on domestic security in Saudi, these attacks would cause a splatter effect and may cause some of these extremists to go back to Saudi Arabia," the analyst said.

Those internal issues, as well as Russia's full-throated entrance into Syria, means any near-term chance of a political solution that sees Assad leave power has likely ended, said Emma Ashford of the Washington-based CATO Institute.

"In the last six months we've seen increasing contacts between Saudi and Russia, where we started to see leaders having meetings, holding conversations, and there was hope they were moving toward a political settlement," Ashford noted. "This new Russian campaign seems to have killed that. I suspect that [the GCC countries] are scrambling to figure out what to do now that Assad's regime has a lot more power."

John Herbst, former US ambassador to Ukraine and now director of the Atlantic Council's Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center, warns that there is "little hope" for the kind of stable, moderate Syria that the US is seeking, at least in the short term.

"In the longer term, the prospects for the following deal might emerge. Assad steps down and is replaced by someone else from the Alawi community. That successor is chosen in consultation with prominent Sunni families/politicians/business leaders, and these prominent Sunnis likewise become part of a new, transition government," Herbst argues.

"This possibility would emerge once Russia is bloodied by extremist groups regaining the initiative against Assad. Facing the dilemma I describe above, Moscow chooses to give up Assad," he continued. "For this to work, we would have to make sure that the Gulf States and Turkey are turning off all support for the jihadis."

Just how likely a political solution between the Saudis and Russians was, however, is unclear.

"For the Saudis, the main strategic objective remains the fall of Assad's regime — a goal irreconcilable with Russian interests," said Karim Bitar, Arab affairs specialist at the Paris-based Institute of International and Strategic Relations.

In contrast, "Egypt's Sisi is more in line with Putin's policy that seeks to revive the camp of authoritarian nationalism in the face of Islamist movements."

Even if Saudi Arabia wants the fall of the regime in Damascus, it has a "confusing" foreign policy as seen from its intervention in Yemen, said Yezid Sayegh, Syria expert at the Carnegie Middle East Center.

"It does not know what to do or how to do it. The Saudis have reached a limit" when it comes to Syria, he added.

Increased Support

Both the US and Gulf states have supplied equipment to rebel groups inside Syria, although in different ways.

While the Gulf nations have funded several groups, the US has been stingy in its support, with a Pentagon program to train and equip moderate fighters restricted to those who wish to fight ISIS only, leaving out the large swath of potential fighters who are more concerned with the Assad regime.

That program, which cost the US tens of millions of dollars to produce only a small handful of fighters, was formally paused on Friday in favor of a looser equipping program.

Rather than vet every fighter, the Obama administration announced, the Pentagon will vet leaders of various units and then task those leaders to hand out US provided equipment — which, in turn, opens up the risk of that equipment falling into the hands of groups like al-Nusra.

To address those concerns, the program will restrict the flow of sophisticated weapons and supplies.

"We'll be providing more basic kinds of equipment. That's one way we'll try to mitigate the risk because we aren't vetting with each fighter," Christine Wormuth, the undersecretary of defense for policy, told reporters.

"We're certainly not talking about some of the higher-end types of equipment" such as shoulder-fire missiles or portable anti-tank systems known as MANPADS, she added.

That means the gear will not be much help against the heavily armed Russian forces now providing support for Assad's ground troops, including with daily airstrikes and helicopter sorties.

Although it is still unclear whether other Gulf states would want the Syrian rebels they fund to engage Russian forces in battle, Sami al-Faraj, a Kuwaiti security adviser to the Gulf Cooperation Council, said he expected Gulf states will continue to funnel weapons to the opposition groups, he added, but would "not give them with the objective of fighting Russian forces in Syria".

Former Saudi Royal Navy Commander Prince Sultan bin Khaled al Faisal said last week at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies that Russia and Iran have "delusions of grandeur" when they look at their military capabilities.

Describing Moscow's military involvement backing the regime of Bashar al-Assad "is just exasperating the problem" of resolving the civil war.

As for the United States' role in the Middle East, Prince Sultan said, "It can be more forceful."

The United States could "put more pressure on Iran to pull out of Syria and have their subordinates go back to Lebanon, he added, but the Obama administration "has to want to do it" economically, diplomatically and militarily, if necessary.

Russian-led Alliance

While the US-Gulf coalition is facing infighting, another coalition has solidified between Russia, Iran, Iraq and Assad's government.

To US-based analysts, a more formal relationship between Iran, Russia and Syria is not a huge game-changer. After all, they have had some form of relationship in place for quite some time, with Russia and Iran supporting Assad's regime since the rise of ISIS.

The real change is Iraq's shift toward Iran and Russia, a move that seems to create a rift between the US and the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

"We continue to view Iraq as our ally, and we're working with them to fight ISIS together, but it looks increasingly like the government in Baghdad is very comfortable working with the Russians, working with the Iranians, and they may even start to ask Russia to participate inside Iraq for airstrikes," Ashford said. "So it's a very different situation in Iraq."

The most attention-grabbing part of the alliance is the new agreement between the countries, announced Sept. 28, that Iraq will be sharing intelligence with Iran, Russia and Assad's government.

The US obviously shares significant amounts of information with the Iraqi government, raising the specter of US intelligence being passed along to Iraq's new partners – providing a bevy of US strategic and tactical information to Assad's government.

At Sept. 29 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, Deputy Secretary of Defense Bob Work admitted the Pentagon was "caught by surprise" when Iraq entered into the intelligence-sharing agreement with Iran, Syria and Russia.

"Obviously, we are not going to share intelligence with either Syria or Russia or Iran," Work said. "We are in the process of working to try to find out exactly what Iraq has said. Certainly, we're not going to provide any classified information to help those actors on the battlefield."

One Pentagon official, however, said the DoD was not overly concerned, once again due to the existing ties between Iraq and Assad, chalking it up to, essentially, nothing really new.

Frederic Hof, former US special adviser for transition in Syria, also downplayed the intel-sharing agreement as "less about sharing intelligence than it is about putting an exclamation point on Mr. Putin's claim that ISIS can and should be fought only by existing regional governments."

Putin, Hof says, "wants more than anything else to rehabilitate his client: Bashar al-Assad. This 'agreement' is meant to reinforce Russia's pro-Assad position."