



Syrian stalemate

The Middle East continues to be an arena for great power competition and rivalry

THE DIZZYING events of the past few weeks, in which an imminent American military strike against Syria was delayed pending congressional approval and then indefinitely shelved by a US-Russian deal to quarantine and ultimately dispose of Syria's massive chemical weapons arsenal, have highlighted anew a number of enduring features of modern Middle East politics.

As has been the case for more than two centuries, the Middle East continues to be an arena for great power competition and rivalry. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union inaugurated a very brief, and largely illusory, period of American hegemony, beginning with Mikhail Gorbachev's acquiescence to the American-led 1991 Gulf war against Iraq, a longtime Soviet ally.

Vladimir Putin has been determined to avoid a replay of those events, and the more recent sidelining of Moscow while another longtime regional ally, Muammar Gaddafi, was toppled by NATO military intervention. Russia's success in staving off US military action against Bashar Assad's regime marks its return to Great Power status. Nonetheless, this does not transform Russia into the new hegemon, or return the region to the days of the Cold War, in which local wars carried the potential of morphing into a Soviet-American conflagration. The Obama-Putin deal should not be seen only in zero-sum game terms, and carries at least the potential for enhancing international prohibitions against the use of weapons of mass destruction and legitimizing military action to punish violators. The proof will be in the pudding.

Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, nearly a century ago, no regional hegemon has emerged, which can bring order to the region, and none is on the horizon. Great Britain and France had their fleeting, but oft-difficult, moment of dominance between the two world wars. From 1945 onwards, various bids for all-Arab leadership, mostly emanating from either Egypt or Iraq, ran up against countervailing local and international forces. The recent New York Times op-ed by two influential Saudis calling for the League of Arab States to shoulder its regional responsibility by organizing a massive force to intervene in Syria and oversee a transitional regime was utterly divorced from the reality of a weak and divided Arab state system.

Turkey has made a concerted bid for regional leadership during the last decade, evoking descriptions of neo-Ottomanism, but currently finds itself with limited influence and at odds with most of its

neighbors. This includes the ruling Egyptian military, which detested Recep Tayyip Erdogan's support of the now-deposed Mohamed Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood. Ankara's early abandonment of Assad in favor of the Syrian opposition failed to produce the desired results, left Turkey with few options, and opened it up to harsh domestic criticism.

Thanks primarily to its alliance with the Assad family business, Iran has projected power into the eastern Mediterranean region to an extent not seen since late antiquity, just prior to the rise of Islam in the 7th

century. American reluctance to unsheath its sword against Syria was certainly noted with satisfaction in Tehran, which will be watching closely as to whether the framework for dismantling Syria's chemical weapons arsenal is translated into action.

More generally, a US-Iranian dialogue on Iran's nuclear program may soon be renewed, which could include discussions on Syria as well. The nightmare scenario for Sunni Gulf monarchies – a US-Iranian "grand bargain" at their expense – is not in the cards, but both the Saudis and Israelis will be watching closely. More generally, Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian tensions have become far more salient than in the past.

However, the prospects for a grand Sunni alliance (Turkey, Egypt and Arab monarchies) to combat Iran and its allies are as remote as the "grand bargain" scenario.

The Syrian state that emerged out of the wreckage of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent French mandate lacked the requisite social and political cohesion. Hafez Assad (1970-2000) combined an iron fist and considerable political skills to stabilize the country, which became an important regional actor in its own right. But the country's centrifugal tendencies and pre-existing sectarian and communal loyalties have now reemerged with a vengeance, and the struggle to determine the future of an unraveling Syrian polity is now in full swing.

For the time being, the violent stalemate in the civil war seems likely to continue, and a path towards political resolution remains absent. Assad can breathe easier for the moment, and Syrian rebel hopes for a *deus ex machina* in the form of American intervention have dissolved. Tragically, the millions of displaced Syrians will continue to suffer and, even worse, the number of dead (110,000) and wounded (untold) will continue to climb. ■

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