

The Syrian war: The Russian factor

“**T**he United States of America and the Russian Federation, as co-chairs of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) and seeking to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Syrian crisis with full respect for the fundamental role of the United Nations, are fully determined to provide their strongest support to end the Syrian conflict and establish conditions for a successful Syrian-led political transition process, facilitated by the UN, in order to fully implement the Munich Statement of the ISSG on February 11th, 2016, UN Security Council Resolution 2254, the 2015 Vienna Statements and the 2012 Geneva Communique”¹.

Military and para-military parties, engaged in the hostilities, other than “Daesh”, “Jabhat an-Nusra” or other so-listed by the United Nations terrorist organizations, should inform the United States or the Russian Federation of their acceptance and commitment to the ceasefire not later than 12.00 Damascus time on February 26, 2016. Land and air military actions of the Syrian Arab Republic, the Russian Federation, and the U.S.-led Counter ISIL Coalition will continue against terrorist organizations named by the UN Security Council. The commitment of the parties involved imply the endorsement of the following conditions:

- The full implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, unanimously adopted on December 18, 2015, alongside readiness to participate in the UN-sponsored political process of negotiated settlement;
- The cessation of attacks against armed opposition formations;

¹ U.S. Department of State, *Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as co-Chairs of the ISSG, on cessation of hostilities in Syria*, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington DC, February 22, 2016 [accessed on 8.03.2016].

- To refrain from seeking to acquire new territories during the ceasefire;
- Allowing humanitarian aid access to all people in need of help;
- The proportionate use of force in eventual self-defense;
- Commitment of all parties to the conflict to work upon the release of detainees – especially women and children.

The Russian Federation and the United States declared their preparedness, as co-chairs of the ISSG and ISSG Ceasefire Task Force, to work on insuring the elaboration of appropriate procedures to prevent attacks upon parties involved in the hostilities – covered by the ceasefire. Eventual or potential violations to the ceasefire should be brought to the attention of the Task Force through the co-chairs or the UN Office of the Special Envoy for Syria (OSE), which serves as secretariat. “The co-Chairs confirm that the cessation of hostilities will be monitored in an impartial and transparent manner and with broad media coverage”².

On the same day, the Russian president Vladimir Putin had a telephone conversation with the U.S. president Barack Obama, on the initiative of the Russian side, and published a statement on the occasion, which seemed quite satisfactory for the Russian side³. However the American side could not have shared that mood of satisfaction. The two sides preceded the announcement of the ceasefire declaration by longtime intensive work on the part of Russian and American experts, and above all between the Russian foreign minister Sergiey Lavrov and American secretary of state John Kerry. “Our negotiations had several rounds of closed consultations”. He stressed upon Russian-American cooperation to reach agreement on the cessation of hostilities accompanied by the call on all nations participating in the International Support Group to coordinate their efforts, which could “become an example of responsible actions of the global community” undertaken “against the threat of terrorism, which are based on international law and UN principles”. He ended by the following: “I would like to hope that the Syrian leadership and all our partners in the region and

² U.S. Department of State, *The Annex to the Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as co-Chairs of the ISSG, on cessation of hostilities in Syria*, Office of the Spokesperson, Washington DC, February 22, 2016 [accessed on 8.03.2016].

³ *Vladimir Putin's address following adoption of a joint statement by Russia and US on Syria*, en.kremlin.ru. [accessed on 22.02.2016].

beyond will support the set of actions chosen by representatives of Russia and the US”.

The U.S.–Russia agreement led to the adoption by the UN Security Council of a unanimous resolution (2268) on 26 February 2016. Reminding all UN resolutions dealing with the Syrian crisis, and reaffirming “commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic” as well as to the principles of the UN Charter, in addition to recognizing the efforts of the Secretary-General and his Special Envoy for Syria. The resolution endorsed the Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation as Co-Chairs of the ISSG of 22 February 2016 and the Annex attached to the Statement, and demanded the introduction of ceasefire beginning at 00.00 (Damascus time) on 27 February 2016. The resolution further demanded “the full and immediate implementation of resolution 2254 (2015) to facilitate a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition, in accordance with the Geneva Communiqué as set forth in the ISSG Statements, in order to end the conflict in Syria, and stresses that the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria”⁴.

The resolution evidently appreciated the efforts made by both the Russian Federation and the United States to reach the declared results, i.e. Terms of the Cessation of Hostilities, and simultaneously welcomed the acceptance of them by the Syrian government forces and those supporting it, as pledged to the Russian side, the Syrian armed opposition groups, as pledged to the Russian Federation or the United States. They mentioned armed forces and groups have pledged to abide to the Terms, to which they become from now on participating parties. Finally the UN Security Council “Calls on all states to use their influence with the government of Syria and the Syrian opposition to advance the peace process, confidence building measures, including the early release of any arbitrarily detained persons, measures, particularly women and children, and implementation of the cessation of hostilities”.

For the last 10 months, John Kerry visited Moscow three times, and for the last year Kerry and Lavrov had held 18 meetings. Lavrov stressed “We, on our side, have reiterated that we were never closing ourselves from co-

⁴ United Nations Security Council, S/RES/22268, *Resolution 2268 (2016) Adopted by the Security Council at its 7634th meeting, on 26 February 2016.*

operation and never avoid cooperation. We are always ready to cooperate” on equal basis and respect for mutual interests. So the range of cooperation and interests could not be diminished to the Syrian question.

Following up the March 14th telephone conversation between the two presidents, Secretary of State John Kerry paid a visit to Moscow on 24–25 March (2016). A joint press conference was held together with the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov. The latter spoke through an interpreter: “Today many issues were discussed in detail. We begun by discussing our bilateral relations in great detail, and we have been particularly discussing the key international issues. Speaking about the bilateral affairs, I believe we have seen the growing understanding of the counter-productiveness of the cause towards – swaying of the structure of Russian-American relations, and the rhetoric about the isolation of Russia, as we have seen today, has nothing to do with reality. We highly value the position of President Obama, who highlighted for many times the importance of the respectful and pragmatic dialogue with the Russian Federation, and we highly value the role of the Secretary of State, Mr. Kerry, who practically promotes this dialogue, including during his regular visits to Moscow”⁵.

- The issues discussed, according to Lavrov statement included:
- The continuation of the Syrian political process so that the Syrians themselves come to agreement, with the perspective of initiating direct talks in Geneva between the government delegation and “all the range of opposition groups” in order to ultimately implement UN Security Council resolution 2264. The process has to lead to the establishment of a transitional governing structure, the working out of a new constitution, and carrying out of new elections on the basis of the new constitution.
- Simultaneously, emphasis was laid on parallel coordination of efforts in the fight against ISIS, Jabhat an-Nusra and other related extremist organizations.
- Discussion covered the Middle East and North Africa, including the conflicts in Libya and Yemen. It is further conceived to revive the

⁵ U.S. Department of State, diplomacy in Action, *Remarks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Remarks John Kerry Secretary of State at the Kremlin, Moscow, March 24, 2016*, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/03/255138.htm> [accessed on 25.03.2016].

Palestinian-Israeli talks in compliance with the norms of international law and existing UN resolutions and solution projects. For the region as a whole, a balance has to be found between the interests of both mentioned sides as well as key external parties and players.

- A long discussion took place about Ukraine, and with the exception of details no disagreement were noted, according to the Russian side “about the fact that the Minsk agreements must be implemented, and this has no alternative, including direct dialogue between Kiyiv, Donetsk, and Lubansk, including on such issues as enhancing security and promotion of political process, which means the agreements enshrined in the package of measures about local elections, amnesty law, special status of Donbas to be enshrined in the constitution, and the necessary constitutional reform of Ukraine”⁶.
- The situation in the Korean Peninsula was discussed, highlighting the necessity to diffuse the tension arising in the aftermath of nuclear tests and missile launching.
- The dialogue about global security was continued. The Russian minister said in this respect: “We stated that here there are still disagreements which remain, especially about missile defense system and about the INF Treaty and the NATO expansion. But we agreed to intensify our dialogue and make it more practical and more suitable and stable in order to finally try and solve these matters”⁷. Both sides have agreed to continue the dialogue on the level of foreign ministers and presidents.

On his part secretary of state John Kerry mentioned his extensive talks with both president Putin and foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, bringing to the attention of bilateral cooperation in the field of space and the International Space Station, whereas one American astronaut and one Russian astronaut spent 240 day in space to study the impact of long-term space flight on human body. In Kerry’s opinion, such cooperation could hopefully be practiced in international diplomacy. He pointed out in this respect to American-Russian close diplomatic cooperation on the Iranian nuclear issue and the Syrian chemical stockpiles, which would have been at the

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ Ibidem.

hands of Daesh, and the agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Syria – still holding in spite of infringements. In spite of that, each violation of the ceasefire every case is treated with utmost seriousness by the co-chair in Geneva and the special team in Amman, working on a daily basis. The Syrian people, after five years of suffering and denied basic needs, start to feel some relief. However the improvement is far from sufficient: the humanitarian access, the delivery of essential supplies, should be expanded to reach all parts of the country.

Kerry continued to inform about a turning point in the talks reached at a four-hour talk with president Putin: “We agreed on a target schedule for establishing a framework for a political transition and also a draft constitution, both of which we target by August”. The details of the transition would be undertaken during the following Geneva talks; the best ways of ending the war in compliance with both UN Security Council resolution 2254 and the Geneva 2012 Communiqué. High appreciation was accredited by the secretary of state to the Special Envoy Stefan de Mistura.

In addition to Syria, John Kerry pointed to other topics involved in the talks with Lavrov and Putin:

- “The appalling terrorist attacks in Brussels” as a violent reminder of the tasks ahead – i.e. the fight implicated in the idea of resolving the Syrian conflict, in order “to focus all our attention on defeating and destroying Daesh and those who share its abhorrent aims”⁸.
- The Ukrainian question, whereas he declared the United States full commitment to Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, with Crimea included. During the Putin–Obama telephone call, the Kerry–Putin talk and Kerry–Lavrov negotiations, the American side emphasized the validity of the Minsk agreements, which must be “fully implemented without delay”. Critical next steps mentioned by Kerry were the restoration of OSCE monitors, negotiations on election modalities for Donbas.
- All sanctions against Russia would be lifted – as it was pledged by president Obama – when Minsk provisions are completely implemented, including the withdrawal of all fighters and weapons from Ukraine’s sovereign borders.

⁸ Ibidem.

- Expression of hope of the release and return to Ukraine of Nadiya Savchenko.

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To return to relevant earlier events, Russia's armed intervention in Syria begun on September 30, 2015. It seemed as yet another Kremlin's move led by Putin in a series that included Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, and southeastern Ukraine in 2014–2015. The question rises as if Putin's Russia is pursuing the goal of regaining great power status, which was lost during the Gorbachov–Yeltsin times.

Back in 1971, president Hafez al-Assad granted Moscow in accordance with an agreement the right to use the port of Tartus for naval purposes of the Black Sea fleet. His son Beshar, on a visit to Moscow in 2005, renewed the Syrian offer of facilitating the Tartus port for larger ships, simultaneously gaining the cancellation of three-fourths of Syrian debt towards Russia⁹. At that stage it was conceived as one of the alternative footholds for the mentioned fleet in case of loosing Sevastopol. In 1911 the so-called Arab Spring reached Syria and soon transformed into a bloody civil war involving the intervention of regional and world powers. In addition to the mentioned maritime aspect of Syria for Russia, Syria is also rich of gas deposits and above all a transfer state in that field, since oil storage facilities are located in the nearby port of Baniyas. Besides, plans were at an advanced stage for the construction of gas pipelines through Syria to the Mediterranean Sea depots. Qatar is mostly interested in such projects – in 2009 Beshar al-Asad refused to sign such an agreement with Qatar. This was an act of loyalty towards Putin, since the bulk of Russian state foreign currency incomes comes from oil and gas (and in the light of falling prices of these items on the world market). The value of Syria in Russia's strategic calculations had been on the rise. Still so after receiving a 50-years lease and investing heavily in the reconstruction of Tartus port facilities.

During the forthcoming period we had to observe circumstances that led to the Russian Federation's involvement in resolving the chemical weapons' crisis and the averting of the United States attack on Syria in

⁹ J. Valenta, L.F. Valenta, *Why Putin Wants Syria*, "Middle East Quarterly", Spring 2016, p. 5.

2013, and later staging the Russian military operation on the side of Syrian government forces. One of the motives of Putin was related to the Libyan case, whereas the Russian Federation was persuaded to support a UN Security Council resolution aimed at preventing a humanitarian disaster and slaughter of civilians in Libya. It appeared for the Russian side that the U.S.-backed NATO intervention was aimed at toppling the government of Muammar Qaddafi. The Russians became hitherto convinced that they were deliberately misled¹⁰. On those grounds, the Russian Federation decided to block any UNO resolution sanctioning the Assad government.

A major crisis broke on August 21, 2013, when reports came on the possible use by the Syrian government forces of the use of chemical weapons against rebel positions, causing the death of 1,300 civilians. This was tantamount to breaching the Obama-declared “red line”, assuming automatic American military action against the regime¹¹. The accusation was rejected by Putin and some Western sources, regarding them as an attempt on the part of anti-Assad parties to provoke U.S. intervention¹². On August 27 American destroyers were approaching Syrian coasts ready to attack strategic government positions.

Vladimir Putin, being sure that Obama would not risk confrontation with Russia, enhanced the navy presence in the area, while the Russian foreign ministry warned of the serious consequences of an eventual American strike. significantly Mikhail Aleksandrov, head of the Baltics section of the Moscow Institute funded by the Russian ministry of foreign affairs and one of his advisors, suggested a Russian invasion of the Baltic states claiming that “half of the population of Latvia and Estonia will meet the Russian troops with flowers as it was in 1940”¹³. The *New York Times* published an op-ed article written by Putin in an attempt to diffuse the tension. In Iran the Revolutionary Guards were put on alert. Diplomacy, deterrence and various forms of pressure helped to bring about a deal based on an agreement to liquidate all stockpiles of Syria’s chemical weapons. In case of the

¹⁰ R. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, New York 2014, p. 530.

¹¹ J. Valenta, L.F. Valenta, op.cit., p. 9; “The Washington Post”, August 22, 2013.

¹² *ABC News Service* (New York), August 22, September 6, 2013 – as quoted: J. Valenta, L.F. Valenta, op.cit., p. 9.

¹³ *Lithuania Tribune* (online), August 29, 2013 – quoted by: J. Valenta, L.F. Valenta, op.cit., p. 10.

downfall of the Syrian government, some or most of these materials could have fallen in the hands of the so-called Islamic (Daesh) – as Obama later stated in an interview¹⁴. Syria's Assad was thus rescued.

For Russia, Iran had proved to be an ally and major client for weapons' systems, nuclear power plants and mutually conceived pipeline projects. However, Iran was subjected to an international system of sanctions due to its nuclear programme. The conclusion of the 5+1 on July 14, 2015 paved the way for the lifting of these sanctions and for Iran to join and normalize its relations with the international community. In addition to easing Iran's economic position and widening its space of maneuvering, the agreement was a game-changer. The Russian president and foreign minister were highly helpful for Obama and secretary of state Kerry in bringing about the deal. Against such a background, Putin who waited for the right moment made the decision of military intervention on the side of the Syrian government. By August and September 2015 the rapid buildup of Russian air and naval facilities in Syria. Putin decided on September 30 to launch air strikes in Syria on anti-government positions, described all as terrorists. The message to the American side was delivered by a Russian military attaché to the U.S. embassy in Baghdad that the strikes shall take place within one hour. Both Putin and Obama met at the UN headquarters on September 28, 2015 – and although the details were not revealed, the timing of Russian intervention was not disclosed to Obama.

In his bid to restore Russia's great power status, Putin – having in mind limited resources, and later shrinking in the light of falling oil and gas prices – concentrated upon a gradual attainment of quite few objectives. One of them was the Russian presence in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean eastern coast; thereby gaining foothold and access to the Middle East. The declared motive was mainly the fight against Daesh and terrorist groups. Hence, Russia became a part of a formal and informal coalition covering the Syrian Arab Republic, Islamic Republic of Iran, Hizbollah and some Iraqi paramilitary formations. The Syrian conflict was at the first stage an internal dispute, transformed into a regional one with the involvement of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the side of Sunnis, then an international coalition was convened with some of them attacking the-then newly

¹⁴ *President Obama's Interview on Syria and Foreign Policy*, "The Atlantic", April 2016.

established so-called Islamic State on Syrian soil centred at the town of Raqqa and the covering parts of Iraq centred at the town of Mosul. The hitherto regional conflict was thus further internationalized with the access of Russia to the armed conflict.

Fighting terrorism seem to bring U.S.A and Russia together on the world arena, although the Ukrainian issue keeps them apart. It looks as if the Middle East is placed at a high priority in American strategy in spite of the shift of top priority to China and the Far East¹⁵. The shift from the Middle East is not conceived as an abrupt move, but a gradual one – keeping an eye on the interests of regional allies such as Gulf states headed by Saudi Arabia. To add, Turkey as a NATO ally is heavily involved in the Middle Eastern and current Syrian affairs. Furthermore, the fallout of the Syrian war had generated waves of refugees to Europe far exceeding its capacities to absorb. The management of the refugees crisis brings to the European ally many complicated problems. The United States should be sensitive of these issues in the process of implementing their perspective strategy. Hence the European Union, U.S.A and Russian Federation together seem to form a tripartite alliance in dealing with Daesh, an alliance which could be described as precarious, delicate or partial, temporary, or ad hoc partnership.

“Putin is right to support the sustenance of Alawite governing structures, particularly in the western part of Syria, as the only viable alternative to the country’s takeover by the Islamists. But keeping Assad in power will not ease the situation. Bashar [Assad] must clearly step down in favor of another Alawite ruler and any such future agreement has to be underwritten by the U.S. administration, the EU, Russia, and leading Arab states”¹⁶.

The next stage in the Russian strategy in Syria came on March 14, 2016, when Putin declared the withdrawal of the major part of the Russian contingent in Syria. This came as a sign to the Syrian government to be more flexible at Geneva talks, after it was showing a triumphant posture and referring to ‘red-lines’ including the fate of president Assad. Thereby, Putin showed that the Russian involvement would not go as far as to defend the

¹⁵ See: *Obama’s World: Judging His Foreign Policy Record*, “Foreign Affairs”, September/October 2015, vol. 94, no. 5; *The Post-American Middle East*, “Foreign Affairs”, November/December 2015, vol. 94, no. 6.

¹⁶ J. Valenta, L.F. Valenta, op.cit., p. 15.

preservation of the existing governmental structure and personalities. The political goals conceived by the Russian leadership for Syria were to uphold and strengthen the hitherto exhausted Damascus government, strengthen its position at the Geneva peace talks, the consolidation of Russia's stance at these peace talks and simultaneously its international position as a major world power, the strengthening of Russia's position in the Middle East viewed as a successful come-back (eg. the case of Russian-Egyptian relations during the presidency of Sisi). Putin's Russia intends to improve its position vis a vis USA and the European Union (in the long run), as well as to gain concessions in the question of Ukraine and the lifting of sanctions¹⁷.

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy udziału Rosji w nowej fazie konfliktu syryjskiego. USA i Federacja Rosyjska doszły do porozumienia w kwestii powstrzymania wymiany ognia między wojującymi siłami rządu i „umiarkowanej” opozycji w Syrii, począwszy od godziny 12.00 czasu damasceńskiego dnia 26 lutego 2016 r. To porozumienie zapoczątkowało nową rundę rozmów w ramach procesu genewskiego, które z przerwami pozostają w toku do dnia dzisiejszego. Autor zajmuje się zaangażowaniem rosyjskim w wymienionej wojnie. Wraca też do wcześniejszych etapów obecności rosyjskiej w Syrii, a także do tła rosyjskiej polityki bliskowschodniej i międzynarodowej w okresie przywództwa Putina.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna syryjska, Rosja, USA, proces genewski, rosyjska polityka bliskowschodnia

¹⁷ For an assessment of American Middle Eastern policy in general geostrategic terms see: G.A. Fawaz, *Obama and the Middle East. The End of American Moment?*, New York 2012; see also: A.M. Dwyer, *Rosyjskie zaangażowanie wojskowe w Syrii – nowy etap* [Russian military engagement in Syria – a new stage], “Biuletyn Polskiego Instytutu Spraw Międzynarodowych” [Biuletin of the Polish Institute of International Affairs], 18th March 2016, No. 23 (1373).

Абстракт

Статья рассказывает о участии России в сирийском конфликте в его новом этапе, начиная с серьезного военного вмешательства в конце 2015 года и снижения интенсивности несколько месяцев спустя. США и Россия достигли соглашения о сирийской войне о прекращении перестрелки между противоборствующими силами правительства и «умеренной» оппозиции, начиная с 12:00 по дамасскому времени 26 февраля 2016 года. Это соглашение положило начало нового раунда переговоров в рамках Женевского процесса, которые с перерывами продолжаются и по сей день. Статья посвящена участию России в упомянутой войне. Обращает внимание на более ранние стадии российского присутствия в Сирии, а также на фон ближневосточной и международной политики России в период правления Путина.

Ключевые слова: война в Сирии, Россия, США, женевский процесс, политика России на Ближнем Востоке

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