



195

JUNE
2013

RUSSIA IN SYRIA AND THE SHAPE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Francis Ghilès, Senior Research Fellow, CIDOB

For more than a year now, Western leaders have been calling on the Syrian president Bashar al Assad to step down. Until a few months ago, this was often spelt out as a pre-condition to reaching any long term agreement between the forces loyal to the regime and myriad opposition forces –with hard line Islamists funded by Qatar and Saudi Arabia playing a prominent role–, which are battling it out in the streets of cities across the country. More recently however, Western leaders have dropped that pre-condition and the many red lines which they proclaimed would force them to intervene (the latest being the use of gas against the civilian population), have vanished as quickly as they have appeared.

At the turn of the year, senior US and European politicians hit the Moscow trail as they realised that only by reaching agreement with Russia might a catastrophe be averted. Repeatedly raising expectations about the consequences of what they might do if Syria crosses this or that redline only to fudge the answer has done nothing to enhance the credibility of the repeated threats of David Cameron and François Hollande. President Barack Obama’s lukewarm decision to lend armed support to the Syrian opposition following confirmation that that al Assad had used nerve gas and the virulent opposition of Russian President, Vladimir Putin’s to such a move has upped the stakes in a conflict which has cost at least 100,000 lives and seen, according to UNHCR, over 1.6m Syrian flee their native land to nearby Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq but the virtually impossible task of crafting a compromise between the US and Russia at the G8 summit in Northern Ireland points to grim weeks ahead.

Russia’s recent shipping of advanced anti-vessel missiles to Damascus demonstrates its commitment to the Syrian government, the depth of which is best illustrated by Vladimir Putin in his body language when he gave a joint press conference with the British prime minister in Downing Street before the G8 summit. P-800 Onyx missiles –also known as Yakhout missiles– are fitted with advanced radar which would help to push any hostile naval activity further away from the coast. Meanwhile the Russian president delivered a very stern warning to Benjamin Netanyahu when the latter visited Moscow on 14 May: attacks on Syria

by Israel, were they to escalate, would be considered attacks on Russia. Israeli raids on targets near Damascus were a strong warning to al Assad not to overstep certain marks, as had been the deployment of Patriot missiles in Turkey last year. Unfortunately the rockets launched on Beirut late in May suggest there is yet somewhere else the rulers of Syria can hit. Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq are feeling the strain of the Syrian war; other neighbouring countries might draw in were matters to get worse.

Why is Vladimir Putin supporting Syria so strongly? Moscow's strategic interests in the Mediterranean include energy exports and naval policy: the second has not changed since the days of Empress Catherine the Great who extended the Russian empire to the warm waters of the Black Sea in the late 18th century. Russia's access to the Eastern Mediterranean through the Bosphorus is vital to its shipping and naval activity. During the winter months when its northern ports are frozen (global warming permitting), important shipments of oil travel to the Mediterranean. Allowing the maintenance of the only Russian military base in the mare nostrum in Tartus, the heartland of the Alawi region in Syria is a zero-sum game which Western leaders might consider if they wish to convince Putin to be party to any future settlement.

Russia's interests are even more significant where natural gas is concerned: Gazprom is an important supplier to Turkey, Greece and Italy and did put in a bid to gain control of Greece's gas transmission system, until it withdrew it in early June, in suspicion of Brussels restrictions. Moscow is carefully monitoring developments in Israel and Cyprus's new found gas resources. Current Russian elites have interests in Italy, Cyprus, Greece, Turkey and Israel, where more than a million "Russian Jews" have settled.

Russia demonstrates by its deed –as it transfers ever more sophisticated weapons to Syria and Hezbollah, including threatening to transfer to Damascus two batteries of highly accurate anti-aircraft S-300 missiles– its commitment to avoiding a major upset in the balance of power in the region. But does mounting chaos in a country which has to some extent morphed into a fragmented state really serve Russia's long term interests? The savage repression meted out to millions of his countrymen by Bashar al Assad means that even were he to retain the control of Latakia and Tartus, Russia would be backing a man other groups in Syria will fight to the finish. Nor can the possibility of al Assad's regime collapsing overnight be ruled out.

All parties to this dangerous game of Catch 22 are now caught up in regional, national, religious and ethnic conflicts, some going back centuries, others fired up by the fallout of the Arab Spring which none are in a position to control. The US and its major European ally, the UK, are learning the hard way that their ruinously expensive wars in Afghanistan and Iraq failed to secure these countries as stable and reliable partners. As major powers and regional ones sleep walk into a catastrophe, might it be too late for a serious US and EU conversation with Russia? Given the Syrian regime and the opposition's dependence on external support, an eleventh hour attempt to nudge the two sides in the direction of politics rather than away from them might be worth a try.