Russia's Change of Position on Syria: Is it Radical or Tactical?

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Introduction

One year on the direct Russian military intervention in Syria, the first signs of change in the Russian position appeared; a change that the opponents of the Syrian regime were counting on, and hoped to happen, since Russia took the role of a strong ally to the regime, to become its partner in war, and the touchstone that ensured its continuation and survival.

Many assumptions have been made about the causes of the Russian position change, varying according to the different parties who made them and their different beliefs and interests, and perhaps their wishes too, and all these hypotheses agree on one thing, that this change was swift, escalating and unexpected, pushing aside some Russian allies, and granting legitimacy to others, whose legitimacy was previously by Russia.

Realistically, it is hard to predict how big this change is and where would it lead, and what does it aim for, but by examining the political and military developments that accompanied it, and tracking the local regional and international powers reactions, it is possible to draw a general framework for what prompted this change, and predict Russia’s intentions towards Syria in the near and not very far future.

First: first signs of change

On the eighth of last January, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, following a meeting with his US counterpart John Kerry, suddenly declared the halt of combat operations of "the Syrian army" in the east of Aleppo, which was in full swing, justifying that with humanitarian reasons related to getting the civilians out of the city; they also announced that a meeting with the Americans would be held in Geneva two days later, between military experts, to determine the modalities and methods of ending the fighting in the east of Aleppo, and getting all the militants and civilians out.

After getting the opposition out of Aleppo, Moscow called for a meeting on 20 December 2016, which included foreign and defence ministers of Russia Turkey and Iran, resulting in the
statement of "Moscow Declaration", which included a map for a political solution in Syria, by expanding the ceasefire areas to include all Syrian territories and applying to all warring parties, with the exception of Fateh Al-Sham Front (Al-Nusra) and the organization of the Islamic State (Daesh), then reviving the political process. In parallel with these talks, Turkey was hosting very difficult negotiations between Russia and factions of the Syrian armed opposition, which ended by reaching the "Ankara agreement" with its three documents: the first included the terms of the cessation of hostilities between the regime and the opposition, and the second talked about the mechanism of monitoring the ceasefire and the introduction of humanitarian aid to the besieged areas, while the third covered ways to resume the peace negotiations in the Kazakh capital Astana. The agreement was signed on 29 December 2016, followed by a ceasefire on the next day, with a Russian and Turkish guarantee.

**Second: Features of change**

At a time when the Syrian regime and the Iranians insisted on pursuing their military operations, not only in Aleppo alone but in all the Syrian territory, until they expelled every last one of the opposition factions, the Russian President Vladimir Putin, one week before signing the "Ankara Agreement", made a phone call to the head of the Syrian regime President Bashar al-Assad, and told him that the main task at that moment was "to reach a comprehensive political settlement", and revealed that a comprehensive agreement for a ceasefire in Syria was very imminent.

The public Russian-Turkish negotiations with the Syrian armed opposition factions was a clear and explicit recognition of these factions as a party in the negotiations, who would take part in the political negotiations in Astana, despite the fact that some of them was purely Islamic, which was the first time Russia granted legitimacy to the Syrian armed opposition, having previously classifying them, in the vast majority, as terrorist groups.
Russia was "softer" than usual in the ceasefire agreement, and agreed not to exclude any Syrian area in this Agreement, contrary to the desire of Iran and the Syrian regime, who wanted to exclude Damascus Idlib and Alwaar in Homs, with other areas. It was also noted that Russia, Turkey and Iran began the cease-fire negotiations together, ending with a Russian-Turkish agreement, marginalizing Iran in the final agreement, by not naming it as one of the guarantors or supervisors of the ceasefire, and some media sources leaked that Hezbollah was preparing to pack its bags and leave Syria upon Russia’s orders.

On the other hand, Turkish officials emphasized that their country’s position towards the Syrian regime has not changed after the cease-fire agreement and political negotiations, with Turkish military officials stressing that Turkey would have refused to facilitate the withdrawal of the Syrian armed opposition factions from Aleppo, if that would lead to the Syrian regime’s victory.

This ceasefire agreement stand out from previous ones in the absence of the wrangling American Russian agreement, and the presence of two key actors in the Syrian issue; Russia, which is the most important supporter of the regime, and Turkey with its great influence on the Syrian opposition, political and armed, and with the agreement of the parties without differences over the deployment of observers and checkpoints in contact areas, and the approval of a punishment system to those who violate the agreement.

Straight after the ceasefire declaration, and as militias loyal to Iran, on the outskirts of Aleppo, were preparing to enter and dominate the eastern division, Russia announced that it had sent a battalion of Russian military police to provide security in that part of the city, to ensure the safety of humanitarian convoys and hospitals; and this police spread quickly in Aleppo, and prevented the entry of Iranian and regime’s militias, and only allowed the Syrian military and criminal state police to enter, to work under its supervision, and restricted the work of the Syrian intelligence there, and arrested dozens of the regime’s security members who acted without a Russian authorization.
Russia refused - or advised as a diplomatic term- the head of the Syrian, not to come to Aleppo, in response to his strong desire to deliver a victory speech there, as the Russians mostly wanted from this "prevention" to make the Aleppo victory the Syrian state’s victory, not of the regime’s.

With the regime’s and the Lebanese Hezbollah’s continuously breaching the cease-fire, Russia announced its willingness to reduce the number of the Russian troops in Syria, and in the sixth of January 2017 the Russian General Staff announced the withdrawal of the Russian aircraft carrier "Admiral Kuznetsov" and a group of escort ships from the Syrian beaches in the Mediterranean, without declaring the direct reasons behind the move.

All indicators suggest a radical change in the Russian position this time, however, it is necessary to be clear on the reasons for the sudden change in the Russian position with the Syrian war approaching its seventh year, to make sure that this change is strategic rather than tactical and temporary one.

**Third: The reasons for the change, hypotheses**

The Syrian opposition point of views varied on this regard, and different analyses on the causes of change in the Russian position, but the majority of the readings focused on four main possible reasons for this change, some of which has a strong case, and some is less credible, but cannot be ruled out, these views could be summarised as follows:

**a. resentment of the Iranian encroachment**

The first hypotheses of the reasons behind the Russian rapid change in position, is Russia’s fear of the Iranian military expansion on the ground, and its realisation -perhaps delayed- it provided massive air support to the forces of the Syrian regime, while Iran and its militias, Lebanese Iraqi and Afghan, dominated on the ground, which was inconsistent with the
Russian strategy, causing it to intervene on the ground, in parallel with the adoption of a cease-fire, and putting a political negotiation plan to reach a compromise, to draw a line for Iran and the regime, who became an obstacle to Russia’s long-term strategy.

This hypothesis is supported by Iran’s attempt to derail the Russian-Turkish agreement when it prevented opposition fighters from leaving Aleppo by imposing its own conditions, and its militias not respecting the cease-fire in the Valley of Barada in Rural Damascus, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Hawks confirming their desire to continue in a military solution.

In practice, Russia was aware that the Syrian regime no longer has military ground forces sufficient to enter any area controlled by the Syrian opposition, and became convinced through experience, that targeted aerial bombardment of any city would weaken the opposition and allow the Iranian militias to storm and dominate them, making Russia as if it was working for the benefit of Iran. But, at the same time, in reality there is no evidence of Iran implicating Russia, or of any unexpected surprises from the Iranians. The Iranian policy was clear from the beginning of the revolution, which was seeking to dominate Syria, politically, militarily and socially, with the spread of Iranian militias in Syria coming gradually, and not over the final months only, and that the Iranian Shiite “Corridor” that crosses Iraq and Syria was not a secret, and the same applies to the Iranian relative dominance on the political and military Russian decision. This calls to postpone the adoption of this hypothesis without linking it to other more convincing causes.

b. the exploitation of the “lost” electoral time

This hypothesis is based on Russian’s desire to use the time "lost" between the practical completion of the mandate of US President Barack Obama and the next president Donald Trump receiving his duties, a period where American politics, political and military, becomes semi-paralyzed, except for national security. Perhaps, Russia has seen in this “paralyzed” period, a golden opportunity to change the balance of power on the ground, and impose their
will on the conflicting parties, local and regional, and proceed with a political track to resolve the Syrian issue in accordance with their vision, without anybody interrupting them, as long as what they are doing is not a "danger" to US national security.

It is no secret how Russia sought - through its role in Syria- to convince the US administration or bargained on an international role in the Mediterranean, and exploit the Syrian card to lift the economic sanctions against it, and to recognize the legitimacy of the annexation of Crimea, and end the problem of gas transit to Europe, and the problem of Ukraine, and other issues that Russia was seeking to resolve friendly or forcibly.

This hypothesis supports the American reaction which might suggest that there was considerable disagreement between the two countries on all of what Russia was doing, including the United States’ decision on 27 December to ease some restrictions on arming the Syrian opposition, and the decision of the White House in the twenty-ninth of the same month to expel 35 Russian diplomats, in response to Moscow’s electronic operations in the US elections. But the foundations of the solution adopted by this hypothesis, is more flexible than the Russian solution proposed before the rigidity stage of the US administration, and does not have a ceiling as high as one would expect in these types of pressure exertion methods and taking advantage policies, which suggests that such hypothesis is relatively weak.

c. as a precautions

The third hypothesis says that Russia is conducting pragmatic proactive changes to absorb the anticipated reaction of the next administration, and these changes are designed to bring the Russian solution closer, in nature and quality, to the solution that will be imposed by the new US administration.

According to this hypothesis, the Russians accelerated the pace significantly ahead of the next US president receiving his duties, because they were sure that he would oppose their earlier policy in Syria, and would come to power, carrying critical and tough decisions, which was leaked by Israel, prompting the Russians to switch quickly from being a party in the war
to becoming an "acceptable" mediator, reducing the confrontation with the next US administration, and making a compromise possible, having to prove to the Americans their ability to make peace, and that they are effective in the region, and compatible with the minimum US requirements, and deserve trust.

From this point of view, it is imperative that the Russian President Vladimir Putin, should seek establishing a policy based on a minimum US satisfaction, and regional and international coordination and in the "Middle Eastern" specifically, otherwise Russia will face, in the weaker conditions, the return of the Cold War with the Americans, which Russia’s current situation is not good enough to win, or even to face, it won’t mind now that the United States is leading a political solution if Russia has reserved its place in the Middle East through Syria.

d. late awakening

The Last hypothesis may seem to many a "political romance", because it is based on a very late Russian awakening, and a Russian realization that supporting the Syrian regime was a strategic error, leading to the loss of the Syrian people’s sympathy and friendship towards Russia, and the sabotage of its relations with key Arab states, and straining their relationship with Europe and the United States, causing major internal economic crises terrorism and anarchy, which began to affect Russia itself and its interests around the world, and the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Ankara recently is a very clear indicator of that.

It is possible that Russia may have already climaxed in what could be done in Syria, and realized that its proportional and hard earned military achievement was the maximum of what it could achieve, preferring to turn into a political victory-maker, having become embarrassed internally and internationally, and down to slip into the quagmire of prolonged war. So, it began promoting a plan for peace, even against the wills of Iran and the regime, and to ensure their passage, followed by a "message" that it could withdraw its troops from Syria, which meant raising its hand off the regime’s support, and if fighting continued, Russia would not be a part of it, and would stop the Russian Air Force that delivered the "victory" of the
regime and Iran, which necessarily would lead to their collapse again, a peace plan moving a
military solution to a political one, which may comply with the demands of regional and
international powers, starting with the United States, and perhaps this has also been pursued
through consultations for the ceasefire with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Egypt, and looked for
support in the Security Council when it presented its project for a vote there.

It is hard to judge the seriousness of Russia in this hypothesis, but political realism requires
considering all previous problems, and taking other issues related to the dangers of
supporting Iran, and its reliance on sectarian militias, Syrian and non-Syrian, congressed by
the Supreme Leader, and realising its mistake of its infinite clinging to Assad and symbols of
his regime, which could no longer be accepted by the Syrians and other regional and
international powers, which keeps this hypothesis alive.

Fourth: Coping strategies and conclusions

It seems, in theory, that the context of the Russian change this is different this time, to some
extent from the context of the previous changes that the Syrian opposition was talking about;
In all cases, there is still a lot of "mines" ahead of the ceasefire agreement, and ahead of the
Russian solution, and ahead of the Astana Conference; most notably that Tehran and
Damascus are still against Aleppo being the last battle, and still insist on a military solution in
all areas of Syria, as well as the position of the United States, which is still mysterious and
silent.

The change in the Russian position remains better than continuing on their support to
Assad, even if it’s tactical or temporary, and it will often remain so, at least until the fulfilment
of two things; first, the new American president and his team commencing their duties in
office, and second, the approaching date of the Geneva Conference (Appeal), which the
United Nations would like to hold in February 2017, hopping that the Russian-American duo
would finally agree on putting an end to the "Middle Eastern" issue which impacted on all the
countries that had a connection with it.
This does not necessarily require to wait, and the "Syrian opposition" should race against time, and try to dissect every Russian decision and permit deeply, and monitor the situation on the ground carefully, to try to understand what the Russians are doing, and the regime and Iran as well, and examine each part, political or military, during the current and the next stage, and examine the Chinese position too, and try to extrapolate the American Republican position; all this in order to understand the real reason behind the fast change in the Russian position, because naturally every cause of the above mentioned reasons needs a different way to deal with, and being ready and well prepared could achieve the best and greatest gains during the post-cease-fire stage.

So, there are several possible reasons for the change in the Russian position, may be individually or collectively; in all cases it requires different preparations from the Syrian opposition, as if it is the "Russian resentment against Iranian encroachment," or "Russian late awakening " , it is important for the opposition to communicate with the Russians and reach understanding with them on the firm foundations, and provide acceptable appropriate plans that could be embraced by Russia, and facilitate its decision, and provide them with an alternative to the Iranian and Assad ally. The " Russia playing in the American electoral lost time," option or "proactive forthcoming American reaction” one, both require more focus from the Syrian opposition on the United States, as in this case the American decision will be conclusive in all that is coming.

In general, it seems that all parties, now do not have enough time, and they all became aware that none of them have a solo strategic or military or political capability to stop what is happening in Syria. It is not surprising that everyone is seeking a solution, but the "Syrian opposition" should exploit all their skills to ensure that the important Russian change would not turn into a transient tactical change, followed by the unwelcome return to arms.