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Europe, not the United States, pays the price of failure in Syria

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Russian President Putin has decided that Syria is part of Russia's near abroad, no less than Ukraine it seems, a territory where some vital national interests are at stake. He has predicted the fecklessness of Western powers well. Whether he is deploying his arsenal in Syria to fight Daesh or to bolster Assad, by moving massive military presence into Syria he has made himself the one player that counts and has put himself in a position to call the shots. He does not have a strategy to end the conflict. But he has one that he thinks will guarantee Russia's influence in this pivotal country while the West has no strategy to confront him.

Europeans have been waiting for American leadership on Syria for the last four years. Some were ready to move against Assad after he used chemical weapons against civilians. The French were most committed to Obama's red line, but Kerry and Lavrov found a way out with the agreement on Assad's chemical arsenal, which was welcomed by all as a relief. The fact that Assad was saved and his ability to continue striking remained intact was deemed regrettable, but European countries thought they could live with the problem. Daesh was a minor concern back then which a few brave fighters from the Free Syrian Army could deal with. But this inaction had consequences, which are now felt acutely across Europe.

The debate in Europe has since revolved around all the "good reasons" for keeping Assad in place and containing the conflict. A growing number of Jihadis moving back and forth to join Daesh seemed manageable with extra security measures at home and bombs on Iraqi and Syrian territory. It was still possible to tell public opinion that containment would work.

Conditions for refugees in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon were unsustainable by all standards. International agencies were warning that the 4.5 million refugees, the figure announced by the UNHCR, were in fact closer to seven and that aid was dwindling. But the refugees lost hope and they began to flee to Europe, some dying at sea but most are making it to the northern shore. About a quarter of them fled the areas controlled by ISIS, while some 70% are seeking refuge from barrel bombs which Assad's forces drop every other hour on civilian areas. The failure of the containment policy is now felt by the mayors of cities across Europe. They are asked to find emergency housing for the refugees and attend to their vital needs. The inhabitants of the most remote areas of Sweden, Germany, France and other countries have to deal with those who fled Syria. Governments are under pressure from extreme right-wing groups who have found the ideal issue on which to wage their campaigns against

governments and gain popularity.

There is no reason to believe that this will stop and the Russian intervention will most certainly cause a surge in the fighting and in the flight of more civilians who are poised to swell the population of refugees flowing into Europe.

President Obama has certainly made a historic mistake by underestimating the Syrian conflict. When told that chaos is devastating the region and that Syria is looking increasingly like a mix of Rwanda, Somalia and Afghanistan, the truth is that the United States can still choose to say that it prefers withdrawal and that it sees Russian domination of Syria as less damaging for its own interests. Obama's presidency will be tainted with the Syrian tragedy, but ultimately the United States does not have to deal with uncontrolled masses of refugees at their borders. And the growing security risk from radicalised westerners fighting inside ISIS ranks seems more remote for the United States than it does for Europe.

Syria has become the cancer eating away at Europe's credibility. The solution to the conflict is undoubtedly complex. It cannot be a hasty decision to go to war for regime change as was done in Libya. But continuing to depict a Manichean dilemma between rushing into a war without a stabilisation plan, and ignoring systematically the causes of a five year poisonous conflict - whose consequences will only grow - is difficult to comprehend.

Europeans must recognise that their interests are not the same as those of the US. The refugee crisis is the most startling proof that the security of Europe is inseparable from that of the Middle East, and that European leaders can't afford to turn their back on this conflict. Syria is no less than the Balkans a European vital interest, and Europeans are entitled to press the United States on an issue that threatens their domestic stability. Public statements will not be enough. They need to have a distinct European proposition that is both realistic and bold.

First, Europe must clearly point to Assad's overwhelming responsibility for the refugee crisis and state unambiguously that he has no place in a transition arrangement. In the midst of a fierce military campaign by Russian, Iranian and Assad forces, soft language that suggests compromise without the prospect of anyone reciprocating will only weaken the position of the Western governments, strengthen the regime's intransigence and the entrenchment of its constituency, and increase the despair of the moderate armed groups as well as the millions of ordinary Syrians who want to see some humanity brought back to their country. Western weakness will prolong the conflict.

More than at any time in the last four and a half years, civilian protection is urgently needed. While Turkey had established a de facto no-fly zone for more than two years over a narrow strip of land along its border, this strip has now been eliminated by the Russian air force that defied this buffer zone protecting minimal Turkish interests and a few tens of thousands of Syrian families.

Protecting Syrians from the regime's indiscriminate aerial bombs is the only significant game changer that will make a political solution possible. Military experts agree that a no-bombing zone could be imposed from ships in the sea or from Turkish territory, and does not require a

wide-ranging air campaign to destroy the regime's air defence system in order to be enforced. A no-bombing zone would be the first step which can begin to address both the root causes and the consequences of the crisis. It will save lives, slow the refugees' exodus, allow moderate civilian structures to more easily take root and evolve, and break the cycle of radicalisation.

The escalation in Russia's intervention, far from making the no-bombing zone option obsolete, gives it added strategic value. In discussing Syria with Putin, Europe and the Unites States need to make clear that the Syrian regime will pay a military price for Russia's direct support until Russia and the regime engage in a real negotiation about transition. A no-bombing zone might open hitherto unsuspected opportunities for military and security arrangements on the ground that would precede the political negotiations. The Syrian opposition, both political and military is highly aware of the increasing danger that Daech represents as they are the first victims of its crimes. Under certain conditions in which Western powers commit seriously to protecting civilians and an end game without Assad, the armed opposition could be persuaded to agree to a freeze on the battle lines with the regime forces in order to turn its weapons against Daesh as a priority, while the loyalist army does the same in the areas under its control. A de facto burden sharing would create the necessary ground force to fight Daesh. No one in Syria wishes to see Daesh replaced by Jabhat Al Nusra and rational opposition forces realise that the only way to create an indigenous capacity to stabilise the country is by bringing the Free Syrian Army and the remaining units of the "loyalist" (national) army to work in the same direction. This will set the stage for rebuilding Syria's national army and security, a pre-requisite for a political settlement that would have any chance of being implemented.

About the author

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