



A New Player in Syria

The hell on earth that is the Syrian Civil War has just descended to a new level of chaos with the entry of Russia into the multi-sided conflict that for several years has pitted various factions of bad guys against worse guys. As of this writing, Russian ships have begun attacking Syrian targets with brand-new Kalibr-NK cruise missiles in support of an aggressive bombing campaign already underway for several days. As this is being written, 26 of the missiles, which have a range of over 900 miles, have been fired thus far, and all have struck within a few feet of their intended targets — an impressive show of technological prowess for the Russian military.



What began as a rapid deployment of Russian forces to protect Russian interests in Syria — the Tartus naval facility that allows the Russian Black Sea fleet to refuel and have access to the Mediterranean, and the Assad regime itself, which has always been a staunch Russian ally — has morphed into an aggressive campaign of shock and awe, Russian style, as Vladimir Putin seeks to show that the United States isn't the only superpower with force projection capabilities.

Since Russia's primary interest is preservation of the Assad government, its warplanes, tanks, helicopters, and guided missiles have been indiscriminately attacking all factions in Syria that pose a threat to the regime, including the allegedly moderate Free Syrian Army, which the United States and its allies have been arming and supporting for some time. What is now taking shape in Syria is looking more and more like one of the many proxy wars between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War — except that, unlike Vietnam or Nicaragua, both American and Russian forces are directly involved in the conflict, with the possibility of military confrontation between the two superpowers very significant.

What started as a nasty civil war in a small country on the other side of the world has now become the potential spark for a major international war. The applause line being bruited by Republican presidential candidates and conservative commentators is that the Obama Administration, by confining itself to half measures in the Syrian intervention, has given Putin's Russia the opportunity to dictate terms in Syria and humiliate the United States. We should have gone into Syria more forcefully, goes the argument, with no-fly zones and all-out bombing of Syrian government forces to compel Assad to step down, like Libya's Gaddafi.

While there can be no doubt that President Obama has bungled the Syrian crisis, the proper course should have been not to get involved in the first place. And if that is true of Barack Obama's comparatively limited actions in Syria, it is just as true for the entire misbegotten Middle Eastern adventure initiated in Iraq by Obama's presidential predecessor, George W. Bush. The ISIS militants now spreading terror and mayhem across the region were built up by former members of Saddam



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Hussein's military — the military that the United States government disbanded upon conquering Iraq and driving Saddam Hussein from power. The new Shiite Iraqi government that the United States brought to power gave ISIS — a Sunni group — its original *raison d'être*, and vast troves of American military hardware seized by ISIS from Iraq's poorly-trained new military have given ISIS formidable military strength.

More than a year of bombing by the United States and its allies have made scarcely a dent in ISIS; indeed, the group has seized the regional capital of Ramadi and large amounts of Syrian territory, including the historic city of Palmyra, in the months since the United States commenced bombing. The rump Iraqi military has made no progress retaking Ramadi, and has virtually no prospect of ever reclaiming Mosul, Iraq's second largest city.

Into this maelstrom have stepped the opportunistic Russians. Their overarching interest is to keep the Assad regime in power at all cost; without the ability to refuel at Tartus, the Russian Black Sea fleet would have very limited reach in the Mediterranean. With the new Iraqi government allied with Iran (another of Russia's closest allies), there is a very real prospect for Russia replacing the United States as the main power broker in the region.

But none of this would have a significant impact on the United States had we not made the fateful decision a quarter century ago under the first President Bush to initiate a policy of interventionism and occupation using as a pretext Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Twenty five years after Desert Storm, the Middle East (including North Africa) is in shambles, with Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Egypt, and Libya in utter turmoil and ISIS threatening to establish its vision of a modern caliphate in all five states. Iran has an advanced nuclear program, and Islamic extremism, fueled by the perception that the West has reignited the crusades, has spread far abroad, to the likes of Mali and Nigeria.

While it is impossible to know how much of this could have been avoided had the United States chosen to mind its own business a generation ago, it has become our business by choice, and we are now faced with the real prospect of being drawn into an even more devastating conflict over matters that should have been none of our concern.

The Syrian and Middle Eastern conflagration epitomizes the perils of involvement in foreign "broils" that many of the Founding Fathers were so keen to warn us against. While the United States may have helped to save Europe from Nazism and Asia from Japanese expansionism in World War II, our intervention then facilitated the rise of Communism in both Eastern Europe and China. And our post-World War II record of interventionism is spottier still. The Korean War may have kept South Korea free of communism, but it also engendered a paranoia in North Korea that has allowed the world's least-free state not only to survive, but also to assemble a nuclear arsenal. The Vietnam War, despite the horrific costs, led to a communist Vietnam anyway. Smaller-scale interventions in Granada and Panama in the '80s and in the former Yugoslavia in the '90s have proven less deleterious, at least in the near term. But no sane observer could possibly characterize twenty five years of constant U.S. militarism in the Middle East — ostensibly to spread democracy to the likes of Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Syria — as anything but a total disaster.

As John Quincy Adams famously warned almost two centuries ago, "[America] goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.... She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself, beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and



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ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force. The frontlet upon her brows would no longer beam with the ineffable splendor of freedom and independence; but in its stead would soon be substituted an imperial diadem, flashing in false and tarnished lustre the murky radiance of dominion and power. She might become the dictatress of the world: she would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.”

Would that Adams’ warning had been heeded.

Photo made from Russian Defense Ministry footage reportedly showing Russian navy ship launching a cruise missile in the Caspian Sea: Distributed by AP Images



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