

# Arab Countries' Conflicting Views on Russian Intervention in Syria

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The Egyptian pundit Ahmed Moussa, one of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's most prominent and passionate supporters, has recently become the target of a great deal of both local and international mockery. During a recent episode of his television program, Moussa displayed a video ostensibly showing Russian airstrikes against ISIS hideouts, declaring emphatically: "Russia isn't playing! The Americans have spent a year and half fooling around!"

Moussa went on to claim that his program supported the Egyptian government by outing American agents working against it. However, the impressive video turned out to be nothing more than a clip from the video game Apache: Air Assault.

Yet the Sisi-led government largely agrees with Moussa's views on the effectiveness of Russian airstrikes against ISIS. Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry welcomed the Russian military operations, alluding to the strong Russian desire to fight terrorists and limit their advances in Syria. A number of Egyptian journalists and intellectuals also consider the Russian intervention a response to what they consider the American collusion with terrorists in recent years providing support for Putin's policies by legitimizing his military intervention in support of the Assad regime. By playing with heightened emotions, these individuals seek to mold Egyptian public opinion into support for the official government position – even as the government itself refuses to confront reality.

The pertinent question is: why does the Sisi government support the Assad regime?

Arriving at the answer does not require a great deal of effort. First of all, the majority of those applauding the Russian strikes—the most prominent of whom are the members of the Egyptian President—opposed the January 25 revolution. They consider the events of Tahrir Square what Sisi described as a conspiracy to "disassemble and reconfigure the Egyptian state." Thus the defeat of the dictatorial Assad regime could have negative consequences for the Egyptian regime.

Sisi also has a direct interest in supporting Putin, who is providing Egypt with ongoing, unconditional weapons deals. This stands in contrast to the United States' weapons transfers, sometimes conditional on requirements for respect for human rights and political reform. When the United States froze approximately \$1.3 billion in military aid due the massacre of protesters in Cairo's Rabaa Adawiya Square by government forces and perceptions that Sisi was moving further away from democracy, the freeze set off alarm bells in Cairo that the military aid from Washington was no longer secure and could be suspended in the event of political instability. Consequently, Putin

became more suitable alternative for Sisi.

At the same time, the Egyptian government is trying not to incense its supporters in the Gulf who oppose the Russian intervention in Syria. Consequently, Egypt is attempting to de-link Moscow's intervention from that of Iran – the Gulf States' biggest enemy in the region. The Egyptian Air Force's participation in the Gulf's war on the Houthis in Yemen sent the message that Cairo's support for Putin did not necessarily entail support for Iran.

But while the Gulf States, and particularly Saudi Arabia, want the elimination of ISIS, at the same time they cannot allow the continuation of the Assad regime due to its connection to Iran and Hezbollah. The Gulf leaders' position on Assad is unyielding, given that their countries contain Shiite minorities sympathetic to Iran – minorities prone to cause disturbances as a result of the mistreatment they receive from Sunni leaders.

A clear example is the Gulf states' interference in the uprising of majority Shiite Bahrain during the early months of the Arab Spring. Afraid that the democratic demands of Bahrain would embolden other Shiite minorities, Saudi Arabia intervened militarily to strangle the nascent revolution. For the Gulf States, any Shiite political movement is a red line in a conflict of Sunni versus Shiite, a view bolstered by Iran's very real attempts to expand its influence in the region, which themselves represent the opposing narrative of the conflict: that of Shiite versus Sunni.

ISIS serves as the region's unifying element: Saudi Arabia bases its policies on the consideration that ISIS as a terrorist organization while Shiites consider ISIS an infidel organization which must be eliminated. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia views the region's Shiite movements and their government sponsors such as the Assad regime the greatest threat to the Gulf States and the entire Middle East. The region is replete with different religions and religious communities, all of whom possess an expansionist ideology that threatens to exacerbate the crisis and transform it into a religious war. Of course this possibility does not only threaten the regimes but rather all of the people of the region—people who have already suffered more than their fair share of tragedy and cannot endure the burdens of war.

During a speech at the annual Arab-US Policymakers Conference on October 15, the former head of the Saudi Arabian intelligence directorate Prince Turki bin Faisal Al Saud expressed his indignation toward everyone from Maliki's Shiite government in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen to ISIS and the regime of Bashar al-Assad—all of whom, in Prince Turki's estimation, are leading the region toward the ultimate danger of sectarianism. Prince Turki argued that "fighting sectarianism is far from easy... [and a] friend to Bashar al-Assad is an enemy of the Syrian people and to those who would help them. Unfortunately, Iran, and, now, Russia, have aligned themselves with Assad against the Syrian people. This is not just politically unwise, it is morally wrong... the more than 300,000 Syrian souls who perished because of Assad will continue to haunt Khamenei and Putin."

Generally, the Gulf States' policy is based on the concept that "the friend of my enemy is my enemy." Therefore, in the eyes of Gulf leaders, the Alawite-Shiite alliance represents a threat to the Gulf with its large Shiite minorities. In their minds, every victory for Assad in Syria represents an Iranian-Shiite expansion into the region, thus portending disastrous geopolitical consequences.

Russia wants Assad at the negotiating table in any transitional period, an issue upon which the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), under Saudi Arabian leadership since the Arab Spring, is unlikely to capitulate on. This situation has left the United States confused as to the most appropriate way to resolve the crisis. For Obama, the best solution continues to be limited to avoiding confrontation with any of the parties to the conflict, in an effort to not exacerbate the current crisis or create a new one.

Thus the threads of conflict in the region have multiplied and become more intertwined and complicated in light of the conflicting positions on the Russian intervention in Syria—an event which warns that the future will be darker than the present, given the difficulty of predicting all of the possible scenarios. Perhaps the coming days or years will

reveal the outcome of the region's current crisis and the extent of its impact of the world as a whole. ❖

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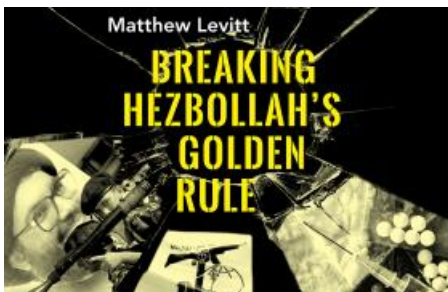
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