

Strategic Info Wars: Syria, Russia and the Balkans

by Andrew Korybko via stan - ICH *Sunday, Sep 13 2015, 8:13pm*

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Russia has taken the lead in supporting Syria this summer, actively initiating efforts to bring a diplomatic resolution to the country's crisis and assemble an inclusive anti-ISIL coalition. The rapid pace at which it's working is due in large part to the looming specter of a joint American-Turkish invasion force which hangs ominously over the Mideast. Disturbed at the success that Russia has had so far in reaching out to the US' traditional Mideast allies, as well as that staying power of the Syrian Arab Army in holding firm against the latest onslaughts against it, the US commanded its media proxies to initiate an intense information war against Syria, hoping to both break the back of its resistance and complicate Russian efforts to assist it.

This hybrid information war manipulates the three disparate but interconnected factors of the refugee crisis, Russian efforts to assist Syria, and the Balkan overflight zones in order to advance American foreign policy and concoct a package of media myths to deepen the destabilization of Syria.

Politicizing A Humanitarian Crisis

The refugee crisis was created in 2011 by the West's regime change campaigns in Libya and Syria, but it wasn't until this year that it really caught the attention of the Western mainstream media. Millions of Syrians had already been displaced by the tumult, with the lion's share of them choosing to remain within the country, but a sizeable minority (also numbering in the millions, and tainted with an anti-government composition) opted to leave their homeland for abroad. Once there, many of these expatriates endeavored to eventually travel to the EU in order to receive its generous social benefits and have an opportunity to work for euros.

The trigger for the latest wave, according to Ghassan and Intibah Kadi, was Turkey's decision to allow the Syrian refugees it was hosting to finally leave their camps and head out to Europe. This massive migration and the no-questions-asked policy of granting Syrian refugees asylum led many non-Syrians to fake their nationality and make the trip as well, further worsening the crisis and adding to its overwhelming numbers. The US has received certain strategic benefits by encouraging this process and guiding it along a premeditated geopolitical path, but no explicit politicization of the situation occurred until the viral photo of Aylan Kurdi began surfacing on the internet at the end of August.

The media vultures have since picked child's corpse clean in order to feed their political narratives, which revolve largely around ludicrously blaming President Assad for the tragedy and using the public outcry over it to 'justify' the UK and France's "anti-ISIL" bombing operations in Syria (the latter of which will likely be announced soon). Furthermore, the anti-government affiliation of many of the refugees flooding into Europe makes for excellent "rebel" recruitment, especially since the US just announced that it will be "revamping" its regime change program in Syria. On top of all of this, the very fact that certain EU states are so accommodating of the refugees creates a strong pull factor that seeks to dismantle Syria demographically by provoking even more emigration among its most youthful and productive segment of the population (which, it must be reminded, could also help

protect the country amidst this terrifying war being waged against it).

Inventing An Intervention

Seeing Through The Illusion:

The next major element of the information war against Syria was obscure Israeli information outlet Ynet's article about a supposed Russian ground intervention being prepared against ISIL. The Twitter posting of Russian military aircraft by the terrorist Al Nusra Front added to the frenzy, which is absolutely ridiculous for two reasons: (1) Israeli - supported terrorists are never a reliable source of information; and (2) Russia has been openly providing military equipment to Syria for years and has never made any pretense to hide such a fact. Despite the obvious falseness of Ynet and Al Nusra's 'reporting', the Western mainstream media went into a frenzy, and the sensationalism quickly skyrocketed to the Secretary of State's attention when Kerry went out of his way to call Lavrov about it.

Addressing The Audiences:

This episode of information warfare wasn't engineered just to waste time and create a week-long media distraction, since there are more important things that it was aiming for. The fake-intervention-turned-'real' by the Western mainstream media was simultaneously directed at the Saudi, Russian, and Syrian audiences. Speaking on the first, the US is apprehensive about the developing relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia, specifically in the context of diplomatically bringing a close to the War on Syria, and it sought to throw a wrench in these efforts by crafting the false story that Russia unilaterally upped the ante and abandoned the secret negotiation framework. Thus, the fake report was also intended to distort the idea behind Russia's anti-ISIL coalition, which isn't to invite a Russian frontline component into the war, but to gather all existing military forces under a coordinated anti-terrorist umbrella.

Russians:

Pertaining to the Russian audience, the US wanted to stoke divisions within the country's political society that have developed since Moscow first pledged its full support to Damascus in its anti-terrorist struggle. There are some in Russia who disagree with this approach and think that it's an unwarranted overextension of the national interest, and the purpose behind this ruse was to strengthen their opposition precisely at the point when Russia is doubling down on its commitment to Syria. While an emboldened "hyper-patriotic" opposition (of the same vein, and likely related to, some of those who agitate for a conventional intervention in Eastern Ukraine) would likely have no effect whatsoever on Russia's relations with Syria, the point is to continue stirring up this new type of anti-government sentiment and testing its receptiveness among the Russian population. Another objective is also to monitor how the fake news spread among the Russian media and how quickly and in what manner the government chose to respond to it. As relates to Russia, the general goal was to attempt a test run of various factors that could provide the US with data that would aid it in perfecting more effective strategies against the country in the future, but as for the immediate impact, it was of course visibly negligible.

Syrians:

Finally, the main target of this hoax was Syria, and the ruse was designed specifically to crash the population's hopes and make them resentful against the government. There are some in the country who feel that Russia could be doing more to assist the Syrian Arab Army, and to them, the news of a

direct Russian intervention was welcome and in accordance with their wishes and expectations. Therefore, when it turned out to be a false rumor, it's conceivable that they would have felt let down and perhaps even upset at Russia for not actually having done this, which could have the manipulated effect of damaging the integrity of the Russian-Syrian strategic partnership among the hearts and minds of the population. In a similar vein, artificially constructed anti-government sentiment could also be spread among the seditious elements of society that would want to spin such an intervention as a 'Russian occupation' or the arrival of 'Russian death squads'.

Along the same token, according to the words of Syrian Information Minister Omran al-Zoubi, "All of this [was] to insinuate the Syrian state is weak and that the Syrian military has weakened to the point of resorting to the aid of friends in a direct manner." It goes without saying that individuals who believe such a train of thought are also more likely to flee and perpetuate the demographic drain being inflicted on the country, which is itself a severe form of asymmetrical warfare. All in all, since it's probable that the US and its allies predicted that the rumor would be dispelled in the eyes of its target audiences before too long, they were likely aiming for a panicked, knee-jerk reaction among the refugee-inclined segments of the population and those receptive to the anti-government rhetoric that would paint the phantom Russian intervention as a 'death squad invasion'. Just like the case with Russia, this rumor alternatively achieved the goal of testing the reaction of the Syrian public and authorities in reacting to the false news, albeit with the intent of putting the finishing touches on a strategy that will likely be rolled out a lot sooner against Damascus than the one against Moscow.

Bringing In The Balkans

Greece:

The last part of the West's latest information warfare package related to Syria dealt with bringing the Balkans into this specific frame of New Cold War tension between the US and Russia. It emerged that the US had asked Greece to deny Russia the right to use its airspace for humanitarian aid shipments to Syria's internal refugees, but somewhat unexpectedly, the caretaker Greek government refused to obey Washington. This is illustrative of two important facts: (1) the US felt confident enough of its ability to exploit Greece's political confusion to push it towards an anti-Russian pivot; and (2) the Greek authorities, despite their temporary nature, understand the strategic national interest in retaining positive relations with Russia in order to build the Balkan Stream pipeline, up to the point that they would dangerously refuse the US' orders. The geopolitical theme that defines this dictate-refusal interaction is the intense struggle between Balkan Stream and Eastring , with the US always ready to disrupt the former in order to advance the latter, while Greece is valiantly proving its ability to withstand Washington's pressure and reaffirm its pipeline pledge to Russia.

Bulgaria:

Bulgaria is the polar opposite of Greece on this matter, since it decided (likely on its own and without being asked) to ban Russian humanitarian aircraft from flying over its territory en route to Syria. It likely did so in order to spite Russia for calling its American-advised bluff and replacing South Stream with Turkish Stream, since Bulgaria is still fuming about how this act utterly destroyed any prospects it ever had of crawling out of its economic backwater status and becoming a semi-normal European economy. While it did backtrack a bit and said it would allow the flights in question to continue on the condition that their contents are inspected beforehand, Moscow dismissed Sofia's humiliating 'offer' and insisted that it had other air routes available , with Iran stepping up to present a viable alternative.

The Black Sea state thus revealed a lot about the nature of its contemporary political elite through its obtrusive actions, confirming its leaders' designation as America's premier Slavic stooges in the Balkans. Furthermore, elaborating on the timing and the volunteering nature of Bulgaria's decision, it's likely that it behaved this way in order to curry additional favor with its American patron after Washington's commands were courageously rejected by Athens. Bulgaria wanted to 'thank' the US for sending heavy equipment and Marines to the country professedly to 'protect against Russian aggression', but in reality, such a deployment serves only to facilitate Bulgarian aggression against neighboring Macedonia, which many in the country refuse to acknowledge as a separate ethnos, language, and state. Per the US' strategic benefit, it allows NATO to have one of its 'rapid reaction' headquarters strategically abutting the Turkish, Greek, and Macedonian segments of Balkan Stream.

Geopolitical Significance:

Flying over the Balkans en route to Syria fulfilled a strategic purpose for Russia that more than compensated for the extra length required when compared to its Iranian-Iraqi replacement. It would of course be easiest if Russia could fly its aircraft above Turkish airspace and directly to Syria, but this route is obviously inoperable judging by Russia's previous employment of the Balkans detour, and it's probably because Ankara rejects any sort of Russian-originated aid going to the country. Be that as it may, the Balkans are many times more preferable than their eastern replacement primarily because they keep Russian planes out of the US-led "anti-ISIL" coalition's area of operations.

This may not have been so important one year ago when it wasn't in effect, but with American and other planes nowadays sporadically operating above the country when they so choose and not coordinating their "anti-terrorist" efforts whatsoever with Damascus, the threat remains that some sort of in-air 'mix-up' could occur that takes down one of the Russian planes and creates an international crisis. Such a scenario would be amplified if the Russian pilots were captured by ISIL and beheaded, as this would be sure to generate considerable backlash among the Russian public. Considering the risks thus involved, Russia's insistence to continue providing Syria with humanitarian aid amid these arguably more difficult circumstances testifies to the solidarity of the Russian-Syrian strategic partnership and Moscow's dedication to aiding Damascus in its anti-terrorist struggle.

Concluding Thoughts

Concurrent with Russia's reinvigorated efforts to diplomatically resolve the War on Syria, the US has taken to launching a three-pronged hybrid information war against Syria in order to worsen its domestic situation. The refugee crisis has been politicized and transformed into a novel asymmetrical weapon of regime change against the country, creating a quandary which is impossible for Syria to resolve on its own and which places it in an ever-constant strategic vulnerability. The US and Israel's hoax about a Russian ground intervention against ISIL was a second wave of soft destabilization designed to obstruct the assembling of Russia's anti-ISIL coalition and also undermine faith in the Syrian Arab Army. The most recent ploy related to Syria saw the US trying to unsuccessfully pressure Greece to deny overflight rights to Russian humanitarian aircraft transiting to Syria, but out of nowhere, Bulgaria's voluntary agreement to this scheme (motivated out of a dual desire to please its patron and thank it for the heavy equipment, Marines, and 'rapid response' base its received) has created an unnecessary inconvenience.

Washington's heightened information warfare against Syria at this particular time can be read as a strong statement of how successful it feels Russia has lately been in attempting to resolve the country's problems, as this level of soft destabilization is unprecedented since the crisis first erupted. The US never before tried using the refugee flows out of the country as a means to

encourage its British and French allies to militarily involve themselves in the country, nor has it ever invented a Russian military intervention there (although it notably did so in Eastern Ukraine). Moreover, the US is clearly concerned about the humanitarian aid that Russia is giving to Syria (believing it to be a cover for covert military aid above what has been publicly declared), as it's taken the dramatic step of asking one of the overflight states, Greece, to halt its cooperation with Moscow in order to inhibit it. All of these measures are demonstrable of the US' fear that Russia's physical and diplomatic assistance to Syria has finally moved it to the tipping point of reversing the terrorists' dynamic and enacting a pivotal change in bringing the four-and-a-half-year war to a pro-government conclusion.

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