

Cold War-like conflicts in the region and the Arab dilemma

The Russian veto of the draft resolution condemning Iranian interference in Yemen brings to mind the Cold War era. It is clearly an incident reminiscent of that time, if not more terrifying in its import, which took place in the UN Security Council in the context of the Ghouta attacks. Although the military and humanitarian truce was finally approved after Russia's several earlier vetoes against it, prevailing conditions and circumstances arising from this decision have made its implementation next to impossible. It has become clear that several trouble spots — not just only Al-Ghouta, but areas to the north of Homs and Aleppo, as well as the villages of Idlib, will remain vulnerable to capitulation, mass exodus of refugees or both in 2018.

Causes of Russian unease

Russian Federation should have found comfort in its successes after three years of intense military and diplomatic efforts, and in the fact that it now has two major regional allies, Iran and Turkey. Nevertheless, it is still quite uneasy. Among the reasons for the discomfort is that the US has taken over some regions in the northeast of Syria which are rich in oil, gas and water resources. While Russians have about 20,000 soldiers inside Syria, in addition to other official and non-official militias, the United States has more than 5,000 military personnel in that country, along with Kurdish and other Arab militias in al-Tanif. It was believed that after defeating ISIS, US will draw down its troops. However, Americans have now announced plans to raise 30,000 Kurdish forces that would preserve the security of these areas and block the return of ISIS. This development was challenged by Turkish intervention in Afrin, but more importantly by the Sochi Conference. Russia hurriedly tried to abandon the Geneva track and build a political solution acceptable to Iranians and to reluctant Turks. However, the United States masterminded the absence of Syrian opposition at the Sochi Conference, which led to its failure.

The new face of the conflict is between Russians and Americans, which now overshadows the entire Arab scene

The third reason for Russia's unease is that after its attempt at imposing a political solution broke down the allies of Putin and Lavrov started making several demands. In fact, Russia now has three allies, instead of two — namely Iran, Turkey and Israel. Iran and Turkey have their troops and proxy militias inside Syrian territory, which could face off each other because of their competing interests. As for Iran, it cannot wait to get closer to the Israeli and Jordanian borders, and has already come close to Lebanon. Israel is threatening to wage war, and Russia must prevent it by putting pressure on both sides. If the fighting erupts, no one can predict when it will end and what will its repercussions be. This will certainly upset Russia's position in Syria. In fact, the prospect of an Iranian-Israeli clash is already being discussed in Syria and perhaps even in Lebanon.

The United States is not sitting pretty either; because it doesn't want to get involved in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. It knows that Russians, Iranians and the Syrian regime have an interest in dragging it into the melee just like them. However, Washington is more comfortable in Syria than Russia is and appears to have taken the country "hostage" and has warned it won't release it until after ensuring the security of Syrian Kurds and finding a political solution that ensures throwing militias out of the country.

US-Russia conflict in Arab theatres

In the meantime, Russia is feeling embarrassed at the Security Council because of the siege and killing of civilians, the use of chemical weapons and the political impasse. As such, the scene has changed and Russia has become the figure of domination and hegemony, which is drawing condemnation for exercising its vetoes! Russia confronts such opposition by asserting that it plans a four-fold increase in the strength of its military and wishes to put to test its new weapons, even though Russia is currently fighting those who have no aircraft, artillery, tanks and rockets. Russians know that it is not a question of who has the bigger weapon because power has many facets and the United States has even bigger capacities.

This is the new face of the conflict between Russians and Americans, which now

overshadows the entire scene! Where are Arabs? Well, they are in big trouble. The entire fighting is taking place on their lands and those who are being killed and displaced come from Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq. They cannot seek comfort in the idea that the United States is closer to them than it is to Turkey and Iran.

However, Trump stands with Israel on a variety of issues and central to them are questions of Jerusalem and the peace process. Just like Russia is suffering under the pressure of the veto in Syria, the US suffers under the pressure of the veto regarding Palestine and Jerusalem. Finally, all Arabs don't have the capacity to confront any of the two major sides and start a rivalry or enmity with them. With the exception of Palestine, they cannot agree on the most minor issues. They are unable to find solutions even in cases that are not under the scope of the US-Russian conflict, such as Libya.

The absent Arab diplomacy

Furthermore, their relations with regional parties – such as Turkey and Iran range from bad to worse. There is even no coordination so far with the two parties, even on the issue of Palestine. As for Iran, it has ambitions in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, which are similar to Israel's colonizing ambitions in Palestine. Turkey, which seems eager to lift the siege on Gaza, doesn't feel the need to coordinate its stance with Arabs. It has a good relationship with Israel but has issues with Egypt, over Sudan and on the offshore gas fields, wherein it uses Cyprus as a pretext!

The only relief in this growing scenario of conflict between America and Russia is that the two sides don't really wish to fit each other, as is the case with most nuclear-weapon states. Nevertheless, neither of them is ready to seriously work with the other — even under the aegis of the UN Security Council — to find political solutions to various problems. Even on Yemen, where neither of them have any interests or political gain, they prefer to clash.

The absence of Arabs in resolving issues facing Iraq, Libya, Lebanon and Syria was a tragedy. However, the problem has become even more acute now as these countries have become more susceptible to breaking apart and being colonized by militias belonging to other countries — the latest being Russian mercenaries whom Americans killed in Deir al-Zour.

This article is also available in Arabic.

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