

**Anthony Tucker-Jones reports on the latest calamities facing Syria and Iraq, which has led to a growing clamour for greater international action**

# MIDDLE EASTERN

Events in the Middle East by the end of 2016 were very much dominated by the war of the cities – most notably Aleppo in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. Both were the scene of fierce fighting against Islamist militants causing yet another enormous flood of panic-stricken refugees. In the UK, Parliamentarians were once again debating the merits of intervening in the Syrian Civil War. The urge to help is understandable as the humanitarian crisis gets worse day by day. However, grand talk of safe havens and no-fly zones is a fallacy as these can only be guaranteed by boots on the ground. Also the reality is that it would be impossible to extend safe havens only to ‘moderate’ Syrians.

Internationally though, the appetite for full-scale intervention remains non-existent. Washington and Moscow already have their hands full pursuing their own geostrategic agendas. While behind the scenes America, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been quietly arming and training the moderate anti-Assad rebels, Russia has very publicly been supporting Assad’s military operations since 2015 with fighter bombers and missiles. However, the US-led coalition has been providing air support for anti-ISIS forces in both Iraq and Syria since 2014. Similarly, both America and Britain have been backing Saudi Arabia’s lengthy air campaign in Yemen against the Houthi. In Britain this has led to criticism that UK defence sales to Saudi are being misused.

Following the collapse of the US-Russian brokered seven-day cease-fire in Syria in September, President Assad very firmly set his sights on retaking Aleppo in the North-Western part of the country. This city sits astride the strategic North-South road that runs south from the Turkish border through Aleppo, Hama on the Orontes River and on to Damascus. Likewise it is on a key route that runs West to the Mediterranean coast and the important Syrian port of Latakia held by Assad’s forces.

Therefore possession of Aleppo is a strategic necessity. President Putin fully appreciates this and Russia used its veto in the UN Security Council to block any moves that could have led to a permanent ceasefire. Assad understandably wants complete victory or to negotiate from a position of unassailable strength.

Putin’s military intervention in Syria began in September of last year after a formal request from Assad for greater help against the extremists. Up to that point Putin had largely restricted himself to honouring ‘existing’ weapons contracts with Damascus. This meant that the Syrian army was kept well stocked following the rising against Assad in 2011. In response to Assad’s plea, Putin deployed advisors, fighter bombers, attack helicopters, artillery and multiple rocket launchers in 2015. Russian warships in the Caspian Sea also launched cruise

missiles at militant targets.

All this Russian equipment was initially used to help pacify the area to the North of Hama. The cynical might argue that such operations paved the way for the Aleppo offensive in the autumn of 2016. Certainly there were allegations that these operations were not selective in which rebel groups they targeted – the stated aim was to counter ISIS – however the Free Syrian Army was also on the receiving end of things. Putin claimed that his military mission had been completed in March 2016, having severely disrupted ISIS’ oil trade and its supply routes most notably South-East of Homs.

Nonetheless, he was suitably vague about withdrawal timetables and although there was a slackening of Russian sorties, Russian-piloted helicopters continued to fly in support of the Syrian army. In addition in July and August long-range Russian Tu-22M bombers, known by their NATO reporting name as the Backfire, attacked targets in Syria. In reality these are likely to have been the newer Backfire B or T-26, which can carry an array of bombs, cruise missiles and missiles.

Putin rather than stepping back at the close of 2016 instead upped the ante by despatching the 67,500-ton aircraft carrier Admiral Kuznetsov to the Mediterranean. This carrier is over 30 years old but is capable of carrying the single seater variant of the Su-27K Flanker. Kuznetsov was the culmination of the Soviet carrier programme during the Cold War and has been kept in service ever since as a symbol of Russian naval power. Britain currently without an aircraft carrier is unable to match such muscle flexing.

President Assad made it clear in October 2016 that Aleppo would be a springboard from which to launch the liberation of the rest of the North of the country. Negotiation was not on the table. “You have to keep cleaning this area and push the terrorists to Turkey



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“This is an important undertaking to eliminate ISIL [ISIS] from where they declared their caliphate... The point is this is the final chapter in fighting ISIL in Iraq.”

# N MELTDOWN



***Iraqi soldiers in the Qayyarah area, 35 miles south of Mosul***

to go back to where they came from, or to kill them. There's no other option."

The Syrian army with the support of allied foreign militias sought to cut the rebels off by securing key access points and the main roads around Aleppo. Their advance was supported by air strikes and artillery, which inevitably inflicted casualties on the 250,000 residents still trapped in the city. There were allegations that the air raids included the use of bunker buster ground penetrating bombs, napalm and phosphorus.

The suffering of the civilian population caught in the crossfire resulted in calls in Parliament for military intervention. Ironically previously when this was suggested in 2013 the Government failed to get Parliamentary approval for RAF air strikes in Syria. This was after David Cameron had warned of dire

consequences if Assad used chemical weapons, but neither the UK nor US took action after the sarin gas attack at Ghouta. In the meantime, the Syrian people remain angry at the West's unfulfilled promise to stop the regime's bombing and indeed that of Russia.

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said that the priority was to get aid into Aleppo but stated: "And also of course, it is right now that we should be looking again at the more kinetic options – the military options". Britain in fact expanded its role in Syria a year ago. Parliament voted in December 2015 to expand Operation Shader (British support to the Iraqi Government) to include Syria, this though resulted in very limited air strikes by the RAF flying from Akrotiri in Cyprus. Britain's contribution to air operations in Iraq and Syria has been very modest amounting to little

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more than two-dozen aircraft and a dozen drones.

Within the UN Security Council, Russia will never agree to a no-fly zone over Northern Syria. Putin has committed considerable resources to propping up Assad's regime and has no intention of doing anything that would undermine this. Boris Johnson has admitted that getting a coalition of nations willing to support greater intervention is some way off. Even if there were the will to instigate a no-fly zone, ultimately it would not help the opposition fend off Assad's ground forces and his allies. In reality, a no-move zone is what the opposition needs if their gains are to be safeguarded.

To complicate matters, Turkish jets and artillery have been attacking US-backed Syrian Kurdish fighters North of Aleppo. In recent months Syrian Kurds have done much of the fighting against ISIS and have made notable territorial gains, especially in Aleppo province. Turkey is concerned about the influence of the Iraqi Kurds and does not want to see an expansion of Kurdish nationalism in Syria and Turkey. Turkey has been struggling to contain a renewed home-grown Kurdish insurgency ever since the Syrian Civil War started.

Western support for the Iraqi Government as it drives ISIS from its borders is much more considerable. The Iraqi Government launched a campaign to wrestle control of the key Northern city, Mosul, and its 1.5 million people from the grasp of ISIS in October. In this instance America has 5,000 troops in-country, France 4,000 and the UK 1,000 offering support to the Iraqi military.

Securing the city is the first step to reasserting Government authority over Northern Iraq and securing the border with the Iraqi Kurdish Autonomous Zone. French war planes and artillery were reportedly committed to the battle for Mosul. Last year the UK

Ministry of Defence claimed that RAF Tornados and drones had conducted over 1,300 combat missions against ISIS in Iraq. Most of these are in fact believed to have been intelligence flights.

Mosul represents the largest operation launched by Iraqi forces since the 2003 US-led invasion. Tens of thousands of Iraq and Kurdish troops, including special forces were thrown against almost 6,000 ISIS fighters. The Iraqi Kurdish Foreign Minister, Falah Mustafa Bakir talking to Aljazeera said: "This is an important undertaking to eliminate ISIL [ISIS] from where they declared their caliphate... The point is this is the final chapter in fighting ISIL in Iraq".

The current situation in Syria and Iraq cannot be resolved, because America and its allies on the one side and Russia and its allies on the other are both pursuing differing agendas. These in many ways are hang ups from the Cold War – both Syria and Iraq are former Soviet client states that purchased billions of dollars of Soviet weapons. Moscow witnessed the West unseat Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, but did not help him and this time is not prepared to abandon Assad in Damascus. Moscow did its utmost to prop up its allies in Afghanistan in the 1980s in the face of concerted attack by Islamic militants – but the Soviet Army was eventually driven out – today the Russian Army is a completely different institution.

The international talks in Lausanne, Switzerland have not moved things any further forward leaving two key states in the Middle East in a perpetual state of meltdown. The sense of disillusionment with the largely hamstrung West, especially in Syria, is inevitably still encouraging young men and women to join the hard-line militant Islamic groups that hate the West.

**Syrian Government forces tanks drive through Tal Jabin, North of Aleppo**

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