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SYRIA, RUSSIA AND THE WINTER OLYMPICS

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Summary

The Syrian conflict is increasingly characterised by the dominance of radical Islamist factions in the opposition and the influence of well-trained and equipped foreign Jihadists. Fear of the ‘free space’ newly consolidated by these groups in northern Syria is driving both US and Russian efforts to broker a political settlement in the short-term. Russia is feeling particularly exposed by its support for the Assad regime as it prepares to host the Winter Olympics in the North Caucasus.

Introduction

The continued rise of Islamist paramilitary elements gives common purpose for the United States and Russia to coordinate action on Syria, from chemical disarmament to brokering a political settlement. For the US, there is increasing concern over the prominence of these groups among the rebels and that a protracted war would end with significant parts of Syria controlled by radical Islamists.

Russia shares this concern, but also fears the growing involvement in Syria of militants from its own restive North Caucasus region. In supporting the Assad regime, Moscow is conscious that it is increasingly being identified as a primary target of international Jihadist groups and that elements of these groups may seek high profile targets within Russia.

This briefing develops analysis on al-Qaida and Syria from the August and September 2013 briefings, but looks primarily from the perspective of Russian concerns, not least as the February 2014 Winter Olympic Games approach.

Islamist Consolidations in Syria

The past six months, and since September, there has been a marked consolidation of power by Islamist elements within Syria, even though there are numerous groups operating with considerable independence. Overall, they are now dominated by two broad alliances, both loosely linked to what remains of the al-Qaida movement but with different orientations. These are Jabhat al-Nusra (or the Al-Nusra Front) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (the Islamic State).

The Al-Nusra Front is strongest in the towns and cities of north-eastern Iraq, including substantial parts of the Euphrates Valley. It has links with paramilitary elements in Iraq and has aligned itself with the current al-Qaida leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, while distancing itself from the extreme violence perpetrated by Sunni jihadists in Iraq in the mid-2000s. It has rejected subordination to al-Qaida-in-Iraq’s leadership and occasionally cooperates with elements of the Free Syrian Army. It portrays itself primarily as a Syrian movement that has aims limited to a purified Islamist state that will replace the Assad regime. As such, it is deeply opposed to the regime and the Alawite community and seeks to impose a rigid, if less corrupt, order.

While many Syrians oppose the rise of the Front, many also acknowledge that those areas it controls are well organised and often effectively administered. Moreover, it exerts control over much of the small yet significant oil resources in the north-east and some of the hydroelectric plants on the Euphrates. It is slowly increasing its influence and appears to be embedding itself in a self-assured manner. This indicates that it is preparing for indefinite administration of this area as much as pushing for the immediate overthrow of the Assad regime.

The Islamic State is to some extent a rival for influence with Al-Nusra, although geographically more significant away from the north-east. It differs from Al-Nusra in two main respects. First, it includes many more foreign fighters from across the Middle East and North Africa in addition to around 9,000 Syrian nationals. Second, its record over the past year has been more radical and violent in its control of territories it has taken over. This latter aspect appears to have alienated far more Syrians than Al-Nusra, even if its prowess in opposing the Assad regime is not in doubt.

Perhaps the most significant recent development is that the Islamic State has been working to change its image and appear more moderate, especially in its administration of towns and villages it now occupies. It is also seeking to present a picture of a movement that is far more focussed on Syria and less on global Jihad than in the past. This may well be disingenuous.

Foreign Jihadis in Syria

Syria has become the latest in a series of protracted wars in which international Islamist movements have allied with, and in some cases taken over, domestic rebellions or armed nationalist movements. It can thus be situated in a continuum from Afghanistan and Lebanon through Bosnia and Chechnya to Iraq, Somalia, Mali and elsewhere in the current century.

To varying extent, militants trained in one context have supported Jihadist groups on new fronts, often reciprocally. Many Syrian Sunnis joined the struggle against coalition forces and Shias in Iraq last decade; the largest body of foreign Jihadis in Syria may now be Iraqi. Arab fighters, notably Afghan-trained Saudis and Jordanians, were an important part of the Chechen resistance after 1995. Some Chechens have joined Islamist armed units in northwest Syria since 2012. Unlike during the US-led campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, when they talked up Chechen reinforcement of Al-Qaida-linked factions, Russian officials and media have denied any significant movement of Russian citizens to fight in Syria. This may indicate Russia's unease rather than the absence of a problem.

There are particular reasons why foreign paramilitaries are attracted to Syrian Islamist movements, especially the Islamic State. One is that Syria is at the heart of the Arab Sunni world yet is controlled by minority Alawites. Another is its proximity to Palestine and therefore to Jerusalem – the third of the three holy places in Sunni Islam. A third, which also increases support among Syrians, is the sense that western states have failed to provide adequate support to the Syrian rebels as a whole, with this failure an indication of the perfidy of the “far enemy”.

In overall terms, while the war is at a stalemate and the Assad regime looks more stable than anticipated, the Islamist elements within the rebellion are growing steadily in strength and influence and are now close to dominating the rebellion. Moreover, they now control significant territory, border crossings and some useful revenue streams. They appear to have achieved

stability born out of resilience and commitment. As this increases, Russia may be seen as a more substantial part of the problem.

The Russian Domestic Context

The activities of the Salafist Caucasus Emirate and associated Islamist paramilitaries are scarcely reported in the western media and not often highlighted in the Russian media, yet they cause considerable and persistent concern to the authorities. Since the Second Chechen War spread to the rest of the Russian Caucasus, the Emirate has carried out over 2,200 attacks, killing over 1,500 state officials and 400 civilians.

In normal circumstances, the Caucasus Emirate would be a long-term concern of the Russian authorities and would require a continuation of their hard-line counter-terrorism approach. What sets the current situation apart is that the February 2014 Winter Olympics are being held in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, which is notionally within the Cherkessia province of the virtual Emirate. The Olympic Park is within 3km of Abkhazia, a largely unrecognised republic. While secularly oriented, friendly to Moscow and dependent on Russian security guarantees, Abkhazia is awash with arms.

While most external attention has been on Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan further to the east, the north-west Caucasus has also seen significant activity and the Games themselves present a particular problem for two reasons. First, although considerable efforts have been made to screen workers on the extensive construction sites, infiltration to within the area of the Games is inherently difficult to control.

Second, North Caucasus paramilitaries have, in recent years, made increased use of suicide attacks in their actions against Russia in place of large-scale hostage-taking such as the Moscow theatre siege in 2002 and the Beslan school siege two years later. The 2010 Moscow Metro attack and the 2011 bombing at Moscow's domestic airport, Domodedovo, are recent examples of suicide attacks, killing 39 and 36 people respectively.

Facing this problem, Russia is committing remarkably high levels of security personnel to the protection of the Games. In addition to the widespread use of preventative detention, according to a recent report, Russia is committing 25,000 police and 8,000 other security personnel to Games security, along with 20-30,000 troops on standby.¹ This compares with 12,000 police and security staff and 18,000 troops committed to the London Olympics, a much larger event staged over numerous venues.

Policy Implications

These summaries of current developments in Syria and the North Caucasus point to several conclusions. One is that the evolution of "free space" for Islamists in Syria is a major development that is unlikely to be countered in the near future.

A second is that Russia itself, on the evidence of security preparations for the Winter Olympics, perceives a major problem. Russian authorities have a particular concern that, as they are the main higher-level supporters of the Assad regime (after Iran), they are being increasingly

¹ Mark Galeotti, 'Dangerous Games', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, October 2013.

conceived as deeply anti-Islamist and could soon be seen by extreme Islamists as on a par with the “far enemy” of the United States.

The existence of free space in Syria coupled with the role of foreign paramilitaries makes this connection stronger, given that they include paramilitaries from the North Caucasus. In order to mitigate the risk of its increased identification with counter-Islamist brutality in Syria, Russia may be more willing to pressure the Assad regime to make concessions for peace through the Geneva process in the next three months.

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