Obama Must Join Putin in the Fight Against Islamist Terrorism

Western concern with Russia in the last few years has largely been about actions in Ukraine. Important though that issue may be, the more significant issue and the greatest threat to world peace is Islamist terrorism. It is this issue that requires heightened world attention.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has indicated the Western lack of clear leadership concerning the threat of terrorist groups to Middle East countries, Egypt, Iraq, and Syria, as well as countries outside the region. He is not alone in this. In a meeting with Putin in the Kremlin on May 21, 2015 the Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi commented on the limits of the United States-led air strikes that began in August 2014 in Iraq, and in September in Syria.

This contradicted the Pentagon insistence that the air campaign is working. General Thomas Weidley, chief of staff for Combined Joint Force Operation Inherent Resolve, even asserted that the militant group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS) was “losing and remained on the defensive.”

The result of the meeting on May 21 was that Putin offered military weapons without preconditions and other aid to Abadi. The intention was to help repel and defeat IS militants who were gaining, capturing the strategic city of Ramadi in Iraq and then Palmyra, a UNESCO landmark site, in Syria. The loss of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, had exposed both the weakness of Iraq’s forces and the limits of U.S. air strikes.

Interestingly, Abadi stressed the importance of Iraqi relations with Russia and remarked that he had disregarded “certain forces” (U.S.?) which suggested he not go to Moscow.

In fact there has been close Russian military and technical cooperation with Iraq as well as increasing bilateral trade that grew tenfold over the last two years. Russia gave Mi-28 attack helicopters to the Iraqi military to use against the IS.

It is not easy to assess the personality of Putin though he has been in power for more than 14 years, after his years as a KGB colonel in Dresden in East Germany and deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. More clear are his original objectives: to build a strong state; to modernize and diversify a competitive economy; to play a larger role on the international political scene and expand Russian influence; to dominate Eurasia; and to act to counter terrorism in Chechnya and elsewhere.

Putin is a tough ruler, physically with his judo black belt as well as politically. He wields authoritarian, if not Stalinist, dictatorial powers, and has both a sense of history and a knack for strategic thinking. Opportunities for serious political criticism are limited. The war in Ukraine disillusioned anyone who thought Russia was moving to a liberal democratic state.

Under him, Russia is not a Soviet Union engaging in a Cold War with Western democracies of Europe and the United States. Putin recognizes he cannot recreate the Soviet Union, but he has tried in different ways to assert Russian influence over the former Soviet territories.

Putin has acted with support from the state bureaucracy, the military, and the security organizations. In particular, a number of his political associates come from a clan of the intelligence and security services, some of whom are guilty of corruption.

But Putin also has courted the Russian Orthodox Church, which accounts for 70 per cent of all Orthodox believers in the world, and sought the revival of the unity of the Orthodox Churches. This is not simply a religious manifestation. It also allows Russia political leverage in neighboring states, including East Ukraine, in which the ROC is significant. Putin even uses religious imagery: “The Crimea has sacred meaning for Russia, like the Temple Mount for Jews and Muslims.”

The United States has recognized the need to aid the troubled Iraqi regime. The Pentagon has said the U.S. will deliver 2,000 AT-4 anti-tank rockets to Iraq. This in particular is intended to help the Iraqi army stop any approaching IS suicide car bombers, who used 30 such bombings with vehicles full of explosives when taking Ramadi.

Similarly for his part, Putin talks of aid to Iraq, including investments in Iraq amounting to billions of dollars. Proposals had previously been made for a $4.2 billion arms deal. Russia had opposed the U.S.-led in invasion of Iraq in 2003, and had, during the rule of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, been investing in the country.

A number of differences with the Obama administration and signs of independence are particularly important. One was a moment when Obama appeared sympathetic towards the Muslim Brotherhood and suspended some of U.S. military aid to Egypt after its leader Mohamed Morsi was deposed on July 3, 2013. In contrast, Putin, in a visit to Cairo in February 2015, symbolically gave his successor President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi a Kalashnikov rifle.

The two countries so far disagree over Syria. Russia, until the last few days, has been a support of the regime of Bashar Assad, Russia’s chief friend in the area and one who allows Russia to maintain its naval base at Tartus.

Russia has played an important role in a number of ways: the

deal by which Assad gave up, or pretended to give up, chemical weapons, in preventing a U.S. strike against Assad, and in being co-sponsor of Geneva II, a conference in January 2014 to bring an end to hostilities in Syria. Another independent action was Putin’s decision in April 2015 to fulfill the contract with Iran signed in 2010 to send 40 S-300 surface-to air-missiles, which Russia views as a purely defensive system. The deal is at the same time lucrative, and illustrates more harmonious relations with Iran. In addition, Russia signed a contract with Iran to build two nuclear reactors.

It is true that Russia at present is suffering economically, largely through falling oil prices and corruption. Yet the economic sanctions imposed on the country, if painful, are not likely to lead to any considerable change. It is much more important and indeed vital for the Obama administration to join with Russia in the common fight against Islamist terrorism.

First published in the