

Will Obama respond to Russia in Syria?


Once upon a time, or more precisely September 10, 2014, President Barack Obama spoke of the core principle of his presidency, to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Today, the core has become somewhat miniscule as the U.S., conscious of its failures in Syria as in other Middle East countries, intends to reduce its role and to carry out a more modest policy.

At the same time, Russia has been escalating its role and expanding its military, political, and economic influence in Middle East affairs. On September 30, 2015 it began dealing with ISIS, as well as launching a more general air campaign on behalf of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Russian planes not only bombed ISIS targets, as well as other anti-Assad rebel positions, but also began providing air support for a Syrian ground offensive against the rebels. Russian warships in the Caspian Sea fired 26 long-range cruise missiles at targets more than 900 miles away in western Syria. At present, about 2000 Russian military, more than a battalion size ground force, as well as tanks and artillery, are deployed in Syria, mainly to protect Russia’s air base in Latakia, from which its bombing missions take place.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter at a NATO meeting in Brussels on October 8, 2015, in unusually picturesque language, condemned the Russian military action in Syria, asserting that Moscow was continuing to “wrap itself in a shroud of isolation,” and that it was “tethering itself to a sinking ship of a losing strategy.” Certainly, Russia has problems. Turkey has already complained that Russian planes have entered Turkish airspace without permission. Yet, in what appears to be an empty threat, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has declared that NATO is ready and able to defend

all allies, including Turkey, against any threats. But few others believe that Russia has any intention of initiating a ground war with any NATO country, nor is an air collision between U.S. and Russian planes over Syria likely to occur.

Equally, it is unlikely that the threat of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to stop buying Russian gas and to abandon plans for building a Russian nuclear power plant in southern Turkey is likely to be implemented. Indeed, Russian and Turkish military officials remain in close contact.

It may be, and it is highly likely, that Russia will begin  to suffer casualties in Syria as a result of its intervention, but it is not suffering any “shroud of isolation.” Indeed, the opposite is true, as shown by the present sharing of intelligence between Russia, Iran, and Syria. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has visited Moscow a number of times, and Putin visited Cairo, and the deputy crown prince of Saudi Arabia visited St. Petersburg and signed a number of agreements with Russia.

Ashton Carter argued that the U.S. will not cooperate with Russia as long as it continues to pursue “this misguided strategy.” The U.S. appears unnecessarily puzzled by Russian actions. Obviously, Putin has domestic concerns that influence his foreign policy and his ambitions to have Russia play a more prominent role in international affairs. However, this does not mean agreement with President Obama who on October 2, 2015 asserted that Putin intervened in Syria not out of strength but out of weakness.

The essential problem is that Russian President Vladimir Putin appears to have a strategy, misguided or not, in the Middle East while the Obama administration does not. Putin and Obama agree that there is a need for a change in the current Syrian government, for political reform and constitutional change, which the Syrian people will decide at some point, if the presently failed Syrian state is to recover. But the two

leaders differ over priority in dealing with Syria and indeed in international affairs.

The *New York Times*, now rarely the source of helpful commentary, wondered why Putin was sending “volunteer” ground forces into Syria. Yet it is perfectly clear. Putin has told the world that, while militarily supporting the Assad regime against the rebel factions, his first priority is to eliminate ISIS. The real enemy is international terrorism, and ISIS is the enemy of the whole civilized world. This is more significant than the fear and real danger of a Russian-Iran alliance that will dominate the politics of the Middle East, especially in Syria.

By contrast with Putin, Obama is primarily concerned with the removal of Assad from power, “Assad must go.” As president, he will not deploy any real force for the U.S. to fight and take territory in Syria, but will limit participation to aiding some rebel factions, and, in an imprecise formula, to “squeeze ISIS.” Already, the large \$500 million Pentagon plan to train and equip Syrian rebels has been a disastrous failure. Not least of the consequences is that the terrorist group Nusra, associated with al-Qaeda, has acquired American weapons. Fewer than 80 ISIS people soldiers were killed or captured as result of the training program. Any further U.S. program will be more streamlined, with some air strikes and with anti-Assad fighters obtaining U.S. communications equipment.

The U.S. did have some success in providing support to Syrian Kurdish fighters who have taken some of the territory held by ISIS in northeast Syria. But it is Arabs, not the Kurds, who should be central to the fighting. Admittedly, this is not an easy task. The U.S. and the Western democracies still have to make their way precariously in distinguishing those who should be assisted, the more “moderate” anti-Assad rebels, even a hardline group such as Ahrar al-Sham as well as the Free Syrian Army, from the more radicalized Islamist jihadists.

Russia is no foe of Israel regarding Syria. There is no friction between Russia and Israel over the air strikes in Syria. Israel, conscious of the dangers on both sides, has no adversarial position concerning the civil war in Syria. It is unlikely to intervene in any way except to protect itself against hostile sophisticated weaponry, especially anti-shiping missiles and surface-to-air systems which put Israel ships and the ports of Haifa and Ashdod at risk. An increasing danger is that more of these weapons will be transferred from Syria to Hizb'allah in Lebanon.

This is an issue on which the Obama administration and Putin should agree and cooperate. They may differ on priorities concerning Syria but they should prevent those sophisticated weapons from being transported from Iran via Syria to Hizb'allah, Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza. That would be a desirable U.S. strategy.

First published in the