

Obama Must Join Putin On ISIS

In his testimony before the U.S. Senate on September 22, 2015, former General David H. Petraeus speaking truth to power remarked that the crises of the Middle East pose a threat not just to regional stability but also to global stability and to vital interests of the United States. This is particularly true of the morass in the vicious Syrian imbroglio into which Russia has now entered in an increased fashion in its attempt to bolster the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Syria no longer exists as a state and the future of the area is unpredictable. Syria has disintegrated after five years of civil war, with 350,000 people killed, millions who have fled or been displaced, and the loss to the regime of Assad of three quarters of the territory of the country. Jihadist fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) seized the city of Palmyra, and threaten the Syrian oil fields. ISIS controls nearly half of Syrian territory. Rebels hold Deraa in the south, and Aleppo in the north of the country.

The central problem now is: what is the most dangerous threat of terrorism and what should be the main priority of the U.S. and Western countries: ending the brutal Assad regime, or defeating ISIS? The problem is complicated by a number of factors of which two in particular give cause for anxiety. One is the support given Assad, economic through billions in loans and credits allowing import of oil and other commodities, political, and military, by Iran. That support will probably increase as a result of Iran's finances becoming available because of the July 2015 nuclear agreement. In addition, Iran has intervened in Syria with hundreds of its elite Quds force of the Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

The second troubling issue, particularly for Israel, is the

continuing support given Assad by Hizb'allah, as well as by Shia fighters from other countries.

The West is undecided on a solution, and in general has called for Assad's departure while giving limited support to anti-Assad rebels, but Russian President Vladimir Putin is clear on insisting on the terrorist ISIS as the enemy to be defeated.

Assad may be a monster but ISIS is far worse, a barbaric Caliphate, an Islamist threat not simply in the Middle East but to world civilization, both ideologically and by the danger posed by jihadists who had fought for ISIS and returned to their own countries. There are now 30,000 such foreigners, among them 250 Americans and 2,400 Russians, who have joined ISIS in Syria.

Over the last year, the air actions by the U.S. and coalition partners attempting to stem and defeat the advance of the Islamic State (ISIS) have not succeeded in preventing the terrorists from gaining more territory in Syria. In the absence of any Western ground troops, apart from Special Forces operations, reliance on the Free Syrian Army has proved to be a disaster. The U.S. plan, at a cost of \$500 million, to train anti-Assad rebels has not succeeded.

As always, Russia's plans or overall strategy in the Middle East are an enigma. It is a puzzlement shared by the United States, Iran, Turkey, and Israel, with ramifications for international politics and stability in the Middle East. Russia has been supportive of the regime of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad since the anti-regime hostility that began in 2011, and has been supplying the regime with weaponry, intelligence, technical aid, and propaganda communications.

In the absence of Western resolve, Putin has taken the initiative. Russian pragmatic actions, tactical in nature, include planes and pilots entering Syria, and setting up an

advanced anti-aircraft battery in Syria. In a remarkable few days the number of Russian fighter aircraft in Syria increased from four to twenty-eight, combat aircraft, ground attack aircraft, and bombers. These have been added to the Russian six attack helicopters and tanks in Latakia. Calculations suggest that about 2000 Russian troops are being stationed in the country, to be added to the 1,700 Russian specialists there.

The conclusion can only be that Putin intends Russia to be a political player in the Middle East, to retain its military assets in Syria, to be recognized as an equal partner in any Middle East negotiating process. His hope is that the international criticism of Russian actions in Ukraine will be lessened, and that the removal of sanctions will assist with Russian domestic concerns and a faltering economy because of the fall in oil prices and the impact of those international sanctions.

Russia is not proposing any ideological agenda, as the Soviet Union did, but it remains determined both to strive for its national interests and to play an international role. Putin has maintained contacts with other Middle East players. Whatever the true nature of Russian intentions, one thing is clear. It is trying to reassert its influence in the international arena after it was suspended from the G-8 leading industrialized countries meeting in March 2014 and the rebuke of Russia because of Ukraine at the G-20 meeting in Australia in November 2014.

At the core of this is Russia's assertion that Assad is the best bulwark against Islamist extremism, particularly the threat of ISIS. The major problem is ISIS and therefore Assad is necessary to fight it in Syria. The future of Assad is of lesser significance.

For its part, the United States is also concerned with the

need to increase its military effort against ISIS, but is both less supportive of the murderous Assad regime and more anxious to support the position of Sunni Arabs. The U.S. announced in September 2015 that it favored a policy of Russia and Iran bringing Assad to a peace conference. The announcement coincided with the visit to Moscow of General Qassem Soleimani, Iranian head of the Revolutionary Guards, to discuss resolution of the Syrian crisis.

One result of this was the sudden journey on September 21, 2015 to Moscow by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and advisers. Israel, like the United States, is concerned by the rapid increase of Russian forces in Syria. It is too strong to talk of harmony between Israel and Russia, but warmer relations have been developing. Israel did not vote for the UN General Assembly Resolution on March 27, 2014, sponsored by the U.S., to condemn the Russian annexation of Crimea, and Putin was not overly critical of Israel's actions in its Operation Protective Edge in Gaza in July 2014.

Israel is also troubled by the conversations between President Vladimir Putin and Iranian military officials who command troops linked with Hizb'allah fighters near the Russian facility near Latakia. Already, Russia has been supplying President Assad with advanced weapons, some of which have been transferred to Hezbollah which has been helping Assad since May 2013. More recently, a joint operation has been formed of Assad forces, Hizb'allah activists, Iranian Revolutionary Guard officers, and Russians.

The threat is greatest for Israel of a combined Assad-Iranian offensive in the Golan Heights. The Moscow visit on September 21 is said to have resulted in an agreement between Putin and Netanyahu on a joint co-ordination mechanism, to prevent "misunderstandings." In part, this is recognition of the reality that Israel has been deploying aircraft over southern Syria for a time, and no doubt exchanges of intelligence on

Israeli and Russian activity will take place.

The urgent need is twofold. The Obama administration must join Putin in pressing for peace negotiations between the parties in the Syrian civil war, in which a solution can be reached, irrespective of any agreement on the future of Assad himself. More important is cooperation between the U.S. and Russia on the elimination of ISIS. On this point Putin is more insightful than Western leaders.

First published in the