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Together in Syria
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Time for the United States and Russia to Take on ISIS Together in Syria

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The conflict zone that is Syria continues to fester to the benefit of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). As evidence mounts suggesting the Russian-operated Airbus A321M was brought down in Egypt by an explosion possibly planted by the Sinai affiliate of ISIS—and as a recent Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) report suggests the use of mustard gas by ISIS in August near Aleppo, we seem to be moving into an even more dangerous phase of ISIS capability to conduct terror and combat operations.

The attack on the Russian Airbus in particular makes clear that ISIS has both the capability and intent to undertake significant operations against overseas targets. This is a significant development and an important differentiator that sets ISIS apart from other terrorist organizations. The incident may also be just the beginning. Yesterday ISIS released a video threatening terrorist attacks inside Russia “very soon.”

In the Syrian conflict, the national interests of Russia and the United States and its allies are deeply implicated as well as interwoven. This constellation of interests converges at some points and diverges at others. However the most imminent threat—that posed by ISIS and its dual concentration on the near enemy plus its growing emphasis on the far enemy—is an area where the United States and Russia can and should work together.

Despite the now multi-year international effort to degrade and destroy ISIS, the geographic span of control of ISIS in Syria and Iraq is largely undiminished. The flow of foreign fighters into this conflict zone continues unabated as significant numbers continue to respond to ISIS propaganda and make their way to join the ranks of the organization. Perhaps most troubling, longstanding terrorist organizations ranging from Boko Haram in Nigeria to factions of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan are pledging loyalty to ISIS. In short, ISIS's span of operational activity if not operational control continues to expand, as evidenced in Libya for example.

On-the-ground opposition to ISIS is clearly divided into three camps: Kurdish militia fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria but suffering occasional attack from Turkey; various Sunni militias, some affiliated with Al Qaeda, principally conducting operations against the Syrian government of Bashar Al-Assad—but also conducting some operations against ISIS; and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds force militias now supported by Russian air power. None of these divided forces opposing ISIS is having much effect in reducing ISIS' fighting ability or reducing its span of control.

Perhaps a new approach to combating ISIS needs to be considered: cooperation with Russia and a serious effort by the United States to build a meaningful international coalition to degrade and destroy ISIS. As with Al Qaeda, the destruction of ISIS will require the elimination of its territorial base—in the case of ISIS, the so-called “Caliphate”—and the

destruction of its combat capability followed by an international manhunt to identify and neutralize its leadership and operatives.

In a move that appears to have caught a number of western leaders by surprise, in late August 2015, Russia began the deployment of military forces in Syria at the invitation of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. Shortly thereafter Russia began to conduct air sorties against a number of targets, some from ISIS, but the majority of initial targets were elements of the mainstream opposition to President Assad. After the attack on the Russian Airbus however, one imagines that target selection is changing, as it could and certainly should.

Russia has also established a Joint Operations Center (JOC) in Baghdad for the exchange of intelligence and targeting information on ISIS with participation from Iran, Iraq and Syria as well as representatives of Hezbollah. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, the United States was invited to participate in the JOC but responded “unconstructively.” The United States has heavily criticized the Russian intervention, saying it will only exacerbate the level of violence in the region, weaken the various Sunni groups (including some groups affiliated with Al Qaeda) in their combat operations against ISIS, and increase the number of refugees fleeing Syria and making their way to Europe. In October, the Russians set up a separate intelligence information exchange center in Jordan to coordinate military operations with Russia in Syria.

Seemingly in response to the Russian intervention, the United States has announced the deployment of a small number of special operations advisors to work with Syrian Kurdish militia in northeastern Syria against ISIS, but has thus far declined to participate in any of the above-mentioned intelligence sharing and coordination efforts.

It is time to consider a different approach to ISIS, one that more closely resembles the US-led effort against Al Qaeda after 9/11 and that will require cooperation with Russia. There is no doubt the United States and the West have significant and fundamental disagreements with many aspects of Russia under President Vladimir Putin, not the least of which are the annexation of the Crimea in March 2014, and the intervention and support to separatists in the eastern Ukraine shortly thereafter, Russian cyber activity in connection with both, and Putin’s repression of civil liberties in Russia.

The western response to these actions has been economic sanctions, increased NATO deployments and exercises in eastern Europe and the Baltics, and some effort at political isolation of Russia (exclusion from the G-8 for example). In the international effort against Al-Qaeda, beginning with the US-led operation against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Russian cooperation was essential in terms of making sure the US forces were able to enter Afghanistan and establish operations with the Northern Alliance, but also to support US overflight and basing operations in Central Asia to support the anti-terror operations in Afghanistan.

Certainly there were deep suspicions on the Russian side about US intentions in Central Asia and Afghanistan, but in 2001 Russia focused on the greater threat. Similarly, there has

been episodic cooperation with Russian intelligence on the exchange of information on terrorist organizations and operatives in the intervening years despite deteriorating relations between Russia and the West.

Now Russia and its allies, principally Syria and Iran, are conducting air and ground combat operations against ISIS in Syria and, probably in the near future, Iraq. Isn't it time for the United States to leverage its enormous counterterrorism and military capabilities to support and eventually lead, this international effort against ISIS? ISIS if left unchecked and with a focus on "the far enemy" is arguably a much more dangerous terrorist organization than Al Qaeda ever was and it is only a matter of time before ISIS or its surrogates conduct significant operations in Europe or the United States. And the longer the ISIS "Caliphate" executes a span of control in Iraq and Syria they will continue to draw recruits and foreign fighters from Muslim communities around the world.

Certainly there would be challenges in any US effort to cooperate significantly with Russia in Syria and Iraq against ISIS, not the least of which is that we could find ourselves potentially fighting alongside Assad's Syrian army and further alienate our Sunni allies in the region, principally the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In our view, we should focus on the common enemy and defer a decision on Syria's political future until such time as ISIS is "degraded and defeated"—and before ISIS is capable of conducting operations against the United States and Europe.

There are many potential advantages to using the opportunity of cooperation against ISIS as a means to improve relations between the United States and Russia. Relations between the former superpower rivals have reached dangerous post-Cold War lows, with Russia issuing lightly veiled threats of the use of nuclear weapons in Europe and standing accused by the US of being in violation of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. With increasing numbers of military exercises being conducted in close proximity over the Baltic Sea and proximate to Russia's western border, the risk of an incident or accident is increasing especially as many channels of military-to-military deconfliction are no longer functional.

Although some deconfliction protocols have been agreed in the narrow airspace of operations over Syria, given the complexity of the environment with US and Russian ground forces embedded in some degree with various militias, the risk of a sortie causing a US or Russian casualty cannot be ruled out. If there is no other rationale for building a partnership in the Middle East with Russia in the fight against ISIS, reducing the chance of one or the other side causing casualties to the other and adding to already tense relations between the US and Russia, seems a worthy objective.

Turning to the situation on the ground in Syria in combat operations against ISIS, Russia's ally if not surrogate Iran, has an effective ground combat capability as does the US ally the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Logically, operational coordination and reinforcement and support from the United States for the YPG, could be a starting point for on-the-ground coordination between the US and Russia. Iran on the other hand is problematic in that its proxy force, Lebanese Hezbollah, is launching missile attacks from

Syria into Israel, a US ally, which has substantial and legitimate security concerns. Beyond the safe haven that Syria offers to Hezbollah, there are weapons depots there for Hezbollah to pillage—and there is the possibility of obtaining advanced weapons technology as well as enhanced cyber capabilities from Russia. Bottom line: the US should act to empower the YPG, but to blunt the impact and aspirations of Lebanese Hezbollah as they relate to Israel and to the United States.

This type of a dramatic change in approach carries with it some risk and challenges. Nonetheless there is opportunity now, with a bit of vision, to unite the disparate factions fighting ISIS and create a truly effective air and ground combat capability to destroy ISIS, a truly lethal and heinous organization. Heightened American military support could help bring about that end but conveying it may first require a measured recalibration of the US military mindset in addition to the application of US military resources in a range of different forms.

Historically the United States has excelled at planning for conflict with a nation-state adversary but, over the last fifteen years, the pendulum has of necessity swung away from that posture and towards a more decentralized model—a “team of teams” as General McChrystal called it—designed to defeat a networked non-state adversary. But whereas Al Qaeda at the time of the 2001 attacks was a parasite feeding off a host country, ISIS is presently both parasite and para-state. As such, ISIS is a hybrid enemy. Because it controls territory and (among other things) its members have an address, a hybrid approach which incorporates traditional military instruments with networked response measures may best help to degrade and defeat ISIS.

Moreover, one thing sorely lacking in US-Russian relations is confidence and trust building. Despite challenges in the post-Cold War era, there have been examples of meaningful US-Russian cooperation, particularly in counterterrorism. There are indications Russia may be open to this idea. In addition to Putin’s comments at the UN General Assembly in September, just this month a senior group of retired Russian former intelligence and military officials met with an equivalent U.S. group and called for the U.S. and Russian military and special services to cooperate against the common enemy ISIS. Russian action against ISIS presents an opportunity for the United States to reinvigorate that tradition albeit in a highly circumscribed context that neither obscures nor excuses the many geopolitical transgressions that Russia has recently committed. Again, keep in mind that in ISIS the two countries share a common threat to their respective national interests and national security.

Against this background it is in both US and Russian interests to work together against ISIS in Syria. The argument is reinforced by the fact that Russian involvement in Syria does not remove the United States from ISIS’ target-hairs. On the contrary ISIS seems bent on bringing the threat to the United States so it would be better to take them on overseas before they hit hard closer to home. And, over and above purely national interests, we also have a responsibility at the global level to take meaningful and effective action to address the transnational threat posed by ISIS before it gets any worse.

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Issue Brief by Dannenberg, Cilluffo & Cardash (November 2014)

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