



Trump's Real Challenge in the Middle East: Don't Follow Russia and Iran

Jamsheed K. Choksy, Carol E.B. Choksy | Friday, Jan. 6, 2017

The harrowing image last month of a Turkish police officer standing over the Russian ambassador he just shot, while blaming Moscow for the devastation in Syria, captures a key foreign policy challenge for U.S. President-elect Donald

Trump: How can he attempt to stabilize the Middle East by bringing conflicts to a close, rather than letting Russia and Iran lead the region into further cycles of repression and violence under the rubric of fighting terrorism?

Trump's current defense priority—"to crush and destroy" (<https://www.donaldjtrump.com/policies/foreign-policy-and-defeating-isis/>) the so-called Islamic State—plays right into Russian and Iranian machinations, with their selective definitions of terrorism and scorched-earth tactics. The graver dangers to American security from Russia and Iran themselves don't appear to bother Trump (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/20/russia-missing-from-trumps-top-defense-priorities-according-to-dod-memo/>), despite warnings from the Pentagon (<http://breakingdefense.com/2016/01/the-pentagons-four-horsemen-milley-rates-the-threats/>).

The assassination of Russia's ambassador to Turkey did not derail Moscow, Tehran and Ankara from quickly agreeing to coordinate strategy in Syria, without consulting or including the United States, the European Union or the United Nations. If anything, the ambassador's death created more common ground (<https://www.rt.com/news/370831-putin-russian-ambassador-ankara/>) for Russian President Vladimir Putin, who declared that "the only response [is] stepping up the fight against terrorism." But the Ankara shooter didn't belong or pledge allegiance to a terrorist group. He was, in his own



A neighborhood in eastern Aleppo after it was retaken by forces backing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Dec. 14, 2016 (Kyodo photo via AP).

words, avenging the slaughter of civilians in eastern Aleppo by Russian, Iranian and Syrian forces.

Russia's reaction resembles Iran's own thinking about terrorism and Syria's war. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei accuses the U.S. (<http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2016/12/11/497388/Iran-Ayatollah-Khamenei-Ammar-Hakim>) of only targeting certain "terrorists" in Syria, a reference to its attacks on the Islamic State but not on Syrian rebel groups—whether those linked to jihadi movements or not—trying to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Like Moscow and Damascus, Tehran points to Washington's unwillingness to accept Assad's legitimacy and to its support for moderate Sunni rebels and Syrian Kurdish groups as evidence of devious intentions. Even Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accuses Washington of supporting terrorist groups, which to him includes everyone from the Islamic State to Syria's and Turkey's Kurds. Unfortunately many Middle Easterners believe this canard (<https://oig.state.gov/system/files/isp-i-16-10.pdf>).

Moscow and Tehran have common concerns about threats to their rule at home and influence in the Middle East. Their responses have been similar, too, involving armed interventions in Syria, whether directly in Russia's case or through proxies like Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias in the case of Iran.

It is unclear if Trump fully comprehends the ramifications of his ISIS-first strategy, which would effectively go along with all this. In a campaign speech in August 2016, he sketched out his vague counterterrorism plan (https://assets.donaldjtrump.com/DJT_Radical_Islam_Speech.pdf), focused squarely on halting "the spread of radical Islam." To that end, Trump said, the U.S. "could find common ground with Russia."

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During the campaign, Trump also said that he thought Washington's "approach of fighting Assad and ISIS simultaneously was madness, and idiocy." He suggested that Assad and his backers are the only potential partners on the ground in Syria against the Islamic State, "I don't like Assad at all, but Assad is killing ISIS, Russia is killing ISIS and Iran is killing ISIS." Eight days after Trump's election,

Assad said in an interview that the president-elect would be a “natural ally” (<http://sana.sy/en/?p=93484>) if he follows through on his pledge to fight “terrorists.”

But Assad has been a key driver of terrorism in Syria, exploiting divisions within and across religious and ethnic communities for his regime’s own ends. The Iraqi government is guilty of this, too (http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2012/01/04/whither_the_assyrian_christians_of_iraq_99822.html). Other states in the region, like Saudi Arabia, have promoted radical Wahhabi thinking, which forms much of the ideological basis for the Islamic State, in order to spread their influence abroad, with little regard for blowback (</articles/14942/saudi-arabia-s-wahhabi-folly-domestic-crackdown-global-export>).

Militarily defeating al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Iraq, as the U.S. has in the past, didn’t eliminate Islamist extremism, which has found an increasingly receptive audience among marginalized and alienated individuals in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen since the political upheavals that began in 2011. While the Islamic State receives most of the press right now, terrorists from a variety of other Islamist organizations are striking around the world (<http://start.umd.edu/gtd/>).

The violent and heavy-handed solutions advocated and implemented by Russia and Iran will not eradicate terrorism. The Islamic State, al-Qaida and other terrorist groups arising from the Middle East should be eliminated, but that requires more than a military response. The underlying political, social, economic and ideological divides that feed Islamist extremism and violence must also be addressed. Russia and Iran do not have the disposition, means or perseverance to achieve that larger, necessary goal. Instead, their actions in Syria have spawned humanitarian crises and provoked revenge killings, like last month’s assassination in Turkey.

Russia and Iran are buttressing the Assad regime in order to gain their own spheres of influence (<http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN14H12V>). Both countries stand to expand port facilities in Syria into long-term naval bases (<http://www.irantracker.org/iran-news-round-november-28-2016>) if Assad prevails, establishing a greater foothold in the Arab world. Russian arms sales have also increased (<https://sputniknews.com/russia/201701011049181499-russia-tanks-syria/>) with its intervention in Syria. And as more rebel-held territory is recaptured, Iran will regain overland links to Hezbollah, directly threatening Israel and Jordan and further undercutting American clout.

Despite years of anti-Assad rhetoric from Erdogan, Ankara may well be willing to live once again alongside an Assad-controlled Syria in exchange for cooperation in quashing Kurdish aspirations for

self-rule on both sides of the border. Indeed, the cease-fire brokered by Moscow included vague language that could allow U.S.-backed Syrian and Kurdish rebels, not just the Islamic State, to be targeted as “terrorists.”

Trump may have been on target last April when he said that “our friends are beginning to think they can’t depend on us” and “our rivals no longer respect us.” Yet by following the brutal and narrow policies in Syria laid out by Russia and Iran, Trump would cede ground to both countries, while also reinforcing perceptions—which Moscow is actively trying to cultivate—that Russia is a resurgent power. Other Middle Eastern states may be tempted to align themselves more closely with Moscow, triggering a replay of the Cold War in the region, but with Washington’s influence seriously diminished.

Of course, Russia and Iran aren’t going anywhere when it comes to Syria’s war or other flashpoints in the Middle East. But as events have shown, Russia and Iran have fueled terrorism and instability, rather than tamped them down. If Trump is serious about taking on the Islamic State, fighting terrorism broadly, and stabilizing the Middle East, he must not gamble on making Moscow and Tehran his partners.

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