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Can Radical Islamists Drive Russia and the West Back to Each Other?

By Ivan Nechepurenko

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Russia and the West have fallen out over the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, but may be reconciled in the future by the spread of raging radical Islamism in the Middle East and Central Asia, some of Russia's most prominent Middle East analysts told The Moscow Times on Tuesday.

On Tuesday, a senior Pentagon official said U.S. airstrikes against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, a self-proclaimed entity that over recent months has managed to capture large swathes of northern Iraq, have had only a limited effect, disrupting the radicals' advance but failing to do much more.

"These strikes are unlikely to affect ISIL's overall capabilities or its operations in other areas of Iraq and Syria," said U.S. Army Lt. Gen. William Mayville Jr., the Joint Chiefs of Staff's director of communications.

ISIL declared an Islamic caliphate at the end of June in an area straddling Iraq and Syria,

imposing hardline conservative sharia law there. The U.S. has so far been unable to do much about the surge of violence, as the Iraqi army that it reportedly spent $15 billion on arming quickly retreated when faced with far more motivated Islamist regiments.

Despite the preoccupation with the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, Russia has also gotten involved in the Iraq crisis, supplying its army with Su-25 fighter jets, Mi-28 attack helicopters and and mobile Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air and anti-aircraft artillery systems.

Common Enemy

U.S. airstrikes in Iraq could continue for months, according to U.S. President Barack Obama, but the fundamental issue is that radical Islamism is a serious threat to both Russia and the West and can only be defeated jointly, said Georgy Mirsky, senior researcher at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations in Moscow.

"The Americans will never blow up the Moscow metro, no matter how dire our relationship is, while these thugs will do it no matter what," Mirsky, one of Russia's most prominent Middle East researchers, told The Moscow Times.

So far, Russia's Foreign Ministry has been relatively restrained in its criticism of the U.S. airstrikes.

Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova wrote on Facebook that the U.S. is "circumventing international law in order to defend its citizens and religious diversity."

Past Cooperation

President Vladimir Putin was the first international leader to call then-U.S. President George W. Bush following the 9/11 attacks in New York City and Washington D.C., offering him Russia's support and assuring him that all existing hostilities between the two countries would be put aside as America dealt with the tragedy.

Russia was influential in establishing in 1996 and later supporting the Northern Alliance — a military front formed to combat the Taliban — and, according to analysts, made a significant contribution to NATO's swift victory over the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001.

"Russia contributed more to the United States' initial victory in Afghanistan than even the more traditional U.S. allies such as Great Britain or Australia," Alexei Arbatov, head of the International Security Center at the IMEMO Institute, told Ekho Moskvy radio on Monday.

But Putin's enthusiasm waned after the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, while the West began to heavily criticize Russia and Putin in particular for the crackdown on oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky and liberal media, as well as the Second Chechen War.

Divisions Over Syria

In recent years, the situation between Russia, the U.S. and the West in general has deteriorated further, with the sides openly clashing over the fate of former U.S. intelligence contractor Edward Snowden and also over the regime of President Bashar Assad in Syria.

On Friday, following the announcement of U.S. airstrikes in Iraq, U.S. Senator John McCain, known for his warmongering stances, called for strikes against ISIL in Syria.

Ironically, in 2012 McCain called for the U.S. to launch an attack against Assad's government forces in Syria, against whom ISIL has been fighting.

According to Mirsky, these situations are largely due to a lack of understanding of the Islamist threat and Islam itself, both in Russia and the West.

"The word Muslim is used interchangeably with the word terrorist, while the situation is much more nuanced. This issue requires a shrewd and flexible policy, while our leaders do not see further than their noses," he said.

New Start in Afghanistan?

Russia and the U.S. will soon have a chance to demonstrate their goodwill. The U.S. will fully withdraw its forces from Afghanistan by the end of this year, leaving the country's fragile leadership on its own with the Taliban.

According to Alexei Malashenko, a Middle East and Central Asia scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center, Russia and the U.S continue to cooperate in Afghanistan and even in Iraq, but they are unable to do so publicly because of the Ukraine conflict.

"Everybody understands that both Syria and Iraq, as well as Afghanistan, are very serious issues, but the problem is that the U.S. today wants to put it all aside, as the public is tired of all these foreign engagements," he said.

Russia risks facing a very big problem in the form of Afghanistan, as international public opinion considers this to be a local problem, while the Ukraine crisis has global dimensions, according to Alexander Shumilin, director at the Center for Analysis of Middle East Conflicts with the Institute of U.S. and Canadian Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences.

"What people think is that the Islamist problem will be there for a long time, while the Ukraine crisis has to be dealt with right now," he said.

Contact the author at i.nechepurenko@imedia.ru

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