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Lavrov — U.S. Should Back Syria's Assad in Fighting Islamic State

By The Moscow Times

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A man holds up a sign in memory of U.S. journalist James Foley during a protest against the Assad regime in Syria in Times Square in New York August 22, 2014. Foley, who was abducted in Syria in late 2012, was beheaded by a masked member of the Islamic State group last week.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Monday urged Western and Arab governments to overcome their distaste for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and engage with him to fight Islamic State insurgents.

In comments likely to irritate Washington, Lavrov said the United States had made the same mistake with Islamic State as it had with al-Qaida, which emerged in the 1980s when U.S.-backed Islamist insurgents were fighting the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

"I think Western politicians are already realizing the growing and fast-spreading threat of terrorism," Lavrov said, referring to Islamic State advances in Syria and Iraq.

"And they will soon have to choose what is more important: a (Syrian) regime change to satisfy personal antipathies, risking deterioration of the situation beyond any control, or finding pragmatic ways to unite efforts against the common threat."

Russia has been Assad's most prominent international backer in the civil war that broke out in early 2011 and in which the U.S. and the West, as well as many Gulf and Arab states, backed the rebels seeking to oust him.

Islamic State has now emerged as the strongest rebel faction, capturing large areas of both Syria and Iraq and declaring a caliphate on the territory it controls.

"At the start the Americans and some Europeans rather welcomed (Islamic State) on the basis it was fighting against Bashar al-Assad. They welcomed it as they welcomed the mujahideen who later created al-Qaida, and then al-Qaida struck like a boomerang on Sept. 11, 2001," Lavrov said.

"The same thing is happening now," he said, adding that the U.S. had only started fighting the group after it began rampaging across Iraq and approaching the capital Baghdad.

The U.S. has conducted more than 90 air strikes against Islamic State in Iraq, and Washington is considering taking its fight against the militants to neighboring Syria.

Damascus said on Monday it must be involved in coordinating any air strikes on its territory.

Backing this stance, Lavrov said: "If... there are plans to combat Islamic State on the territory of Syria and other countries, it is indispensable that it is done in cooperation with legitimate authorities (there)."

Having long been denounced by Washington and others for protecting Assad, Lavrov made clear that Russia now feels vindicated.

"At one time we were accused of supporting Bashar al-Assad and preventing his overthrow.... Now no one is talking about that," he said.

The Americans and Europeans were now starting to acknowledge "the truth they have long recognized in private conversations: namely that for the region and for the interests of the West, the main threat is not the regime of Bashar al-Assad but the possible threat of seizure of power by terrorists in Syria and other states of the region."

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