

Russia's Suspicions of U.S. Make Cooperation on Islamic State Unlikely

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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Kids carrying banners during a protest in Raqqa, Syria, on Friday against U.S. airstrikes on the Islamic State.

The United States and Russia see Islamic State as a common enemy but are failing to overcome deep mutual distrust and agree on how to tackle the threat together, making any role for Moscow in the U.S.-led campaign unlikely, say U.S. officials.

Differences between the former Cold War foes are stark, say the officials. Moscow suspects Washington's ulterior motive is the removal of its ally, Syria's President Bashar al-Assad. Washington refuses to consider working together as long as Moscow insists that U.S. strikes need Syrian and U.N. approval.

Diplomatic efforts, from high-level talks at the United Nations to informal contacts in Moscow, have failed to resolve those misgivings, which echo broader problems in U.S.-Russian relations, already at a post-Cold War low over the crisis in Ukraine, American officials

say.

"The main obstacle to Russian participation is Moscow's position that 'this can only be taken with permission of the Syrian government or through the U.N.,' which is not something we accept," a senior U.S. administration official told Reuters on the condition of anonymity.

"If Russia thinks that somehow they're going to gain some kind of shift in the U.S. policy, that is not going to happen."

Though Russia has no sympathy for Islamic State militants who have seized large tracts of territory in Iraq and Syria and face U.S.-led air strikes in both countries, Moscow's relationship with Syria forms a difficult backdrop to talks over any potential role.

Russia's absence from the anti-Islamic State coalition complicates Washington's calculus, reducing the possibility of U.S. leverage over the flow of Russian arms into Damascus as the U.S.-led campaign moves forward with air strikes in Syria and arms anti-Assad rebels.

Moscow, which has been trying to raise its diplomatic and economic influence in the Middle East, has been a major provider of conventional weapons to Syria, giving Assad crucial support during the nearly four-year civil war and blocking wider Western attempts to punish him with sanctions for the use of force against civilians.

Washington, meanwhile, backs moderate Syrian rebels who are seeking to topple Assad and are likely to play a central role in any future ground campaign inside Syria. The U.S. government accuses Assad of widespread human rights abuses and says it will never ask for Assad's permission for its air strikes.

While this all but rules out military collaboration in Syria against Islamic State, also known as ISIL, U.S. officials still see potential for common cause on another front: aiding Baghdad's battle to roll back Islamic State's gains in Iraq. But there, too, joint U.S.-Russian action appears out of the question.

"The U.S. and Russia share an interest in defeating the kind of violent extremism that ISIL represents," a senior State Department official said.

'Didn't Change Anything

Russian sensitivity about Assad's fate figured prominently in private discussions between Moscow and Washington in recent weeks, say U.S. officials with direct knowledge of those talks. After President Barack Obama announced air strikes against Islamic State forces in Iraq in August, members of his administration began signaling to Moscow that Syria was next, the officials said.

They said Secretary of State John Kerry conveyed the message to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Paris on Sept. 15 on the sidelines of a conference on Iraq, attended by U.N. Security Council permanent members, European and Arab states, and representatives of the EU, Arab League and United Nations. All pledged to help the government in Baghdad.

At that meeting, Kerry offered assurances that the United States would not directly target

Assad or his forces, the officials said. Meeting at the United Nations on Wednesday, just days after the start of the U.S.-led air assault in Syria, the two again discussed the conflict.

"It didn't change anything," a senior U.S. official said.

At a news conference at the United Nations on Friday, Lavrov questioned the legality of the air campaign and also gave the United States a "we-told-you-so" message about the consequences of U.S. policy in the region.

"We are fighting against terrorism consistently, constantly, not just when someone announces a coalition," Lavrov said.

Moscow had long warned of the potential blowback of U.S. support for the anti-Assad opposition in Syria's civil war. Plans to expand American training and arming of moderate rebels have only heightened those concerns.

Behind-the-Scenes Efforts

Despite that, Russia could gain from any U.S. success against Islamic State, which has been joined by fighters from Russia's predominantly Muslim North Caucasus, a region where militants wage daily violence to establish an Islamic state.

The bloodshed there is rooted in two wars that Moscow fought with Chechen separatists after the Soviet Union's fall and these fighters could pose a security risk for Russia if they return to the North Caucasus.

Among two dozen individuals and groups identified by the U.S. State Department on Sept. 24 as foreign terrorists or terrorist facilitators was a Chechen militant group, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar. The designation, which enables Washington to freeze assets and block financial transactions, was seen as benefiting Moscow.

But U.S. officials say Washington has made no specific request to Moscow to join the coalition or work together in the fight against Islamic State. Nor has Russia offered to do so, they said. But they acknowledge Moscow's potential importance in any campaign in the Middle East.

"There's no doubt that Russia is a key player on Syria, on Iraq, and will inevitably be involved in whatever we are dealing with," though it remains to be seen what kind of role that will entail, the senior Obama administration official said.

A group of U.S. and Russian foreign policy experts who regularly advise their own governments met privately in Moscow last week, seeking common ground in the fight against Islamic State, according to a person close to the matter.

The Russian delegation, which included former officials still close to the Kremlin, expressed interest in counterterrorism cooperation, including intelligence sharing. But the talks encountered too much mutual distrust to agree on anything tangible, the person said.

The discussions were held on the basis of what is known as "Track II" diplomacy, an unofficial channel for international conflict resolution.

In Moscow, Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the journal Russia in Global Affairs, said Russia's role in the fight against Islamic State likely would be limited to assisting the Iraqi and Syrian governments. Moscow already supplies weapons to security forces in both countries.

"Russia has no desire, no plan and no interest to be part of any campaign led by the United States," said Lukyanov, who is also head of a Kremlin foreign-policy advisory panel.

"The Russian view is that all this mess to a large extent has been produced by the reckless and crazy policy in its invasion of Iraq," he said, referring to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq that was heavily criticized by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Washington was pleased when Russia, which has often shielded Assad at the United Nations, voted on Wednesday in favor of a U.S.-backed resolution urging governments to help stem the flow of foreign fighters to militant groups, U.S. officials said.

But Matthew Rojansky, a Russia expert at the Wilson Center think tank in Washington, said Obama's U.N. speech the same day in which he warned Putin of further costs of "aggression" against Ukraine may have erased any goodwill.

"From the Russian perspective, everything is linked," he said.

James Goldgeier, a Kremlinologist at American University in Washington, said the obstacles to U.S.-Russia cooperation against Islamic State appear too formidable to overcome soon, but that a change of tack could come if Moscow felt an increased threat to its own security.

"For now, Russia's biggest concern is preserving what little influence it has left in the Middle East," he said. "And that means Syria."

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