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Middle East Threat Must Unite Russia and U.S.

By Theodore Karasik

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There is no doubt that ongoing global security and political challenges are gaining in speed and strength. From the Middle East and North Africa to Eurasia, the changes and challenges are oscillating faster and faster, challenging many analysts and policymakers with key questions of how to contend with various degrees of ungovernable territory, terrorism and insurgency.

This is the time to think about how the U.S. should be dealing with Russia, instead of continuing to play destabilizing games with Moscow over Ukraine. A shift in foreign policy is required by the U.S., or the results may be catastrophic.

Fighting Islamist threats should be the first priority for the U.S. when dealing with Russia — a source of common ground which provides a solid opportunity for a warming of relations between the two countries. In the Middle East and North Africa, the rise of the Islamic State and its affiliates presents an existential threat to both Russia and the U.S.

Washington and Russia need to stop their dangerous games in bankrupted Ukraine because the Islamic State and its affiliates are a much larger threat, especially considering that there are many fighters from the North Caucasus in these groups, who could return to Russia and pose a serious threat. Russia already sees the importance of such a shift in foreign policy.

The sprawling interwoven conflicts of the Middle East entered a new era on Sept. 24 with airstrikes on Syria targeting the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front (the Syrian wing of al-Qaida). U.S.-led airstrikes in Syria, assisted by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain and Qatar, have so far targeted extremist command and control centers as well as heavy weapons such as tanks and armored personnel carriers.

Many Arab states have close relationships with Moscow. It is in the U.S.'s interest to recognize that Russia's input is and will be valuable.

Russia has questioned the legality of U.S. involvement in Syria, but has also asked for a second chance with U.S. President Barack Obama's administration, in what commentators have begun calling "reset 2.0."

Tehran too has shown willingness to work with the U.S. and Western states for several months now. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani met with Russian President Putin in early September, with the latter also keen to improve bilateral ties by means of an "oil for goods" trade deal, a nuclear power deal and increased support for Syria.

In recent months, Russia, along with Iran and Iraq, have engaged in efforts to rehabilitate Syrian President Bashar Assad's image, focusing the international community's attention on mutual interests and mutual threats in the region.

The U.S. has categorically stated that it will not engage with Assad and is committed to his removal; at this juncture in time, such a moralistic position is untenable and works against American interests in defeating the Islamic State and its affiliates.

Russia can help in this regard as demonstrated by last year's chemical weapons agreement with Assad. The U.S. should seize the moment to engage Russia as a key interlocutor and negotiator in the region.

North Africa's proximity to Europe makes it a key outlying region particularly when addressing Russia's interest in Libya. Russia rightly considers the chaos in Libya to be a product of NATO's forced democratization, following a now well-established pattern seen in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The breakdown of civil society in Libya during the past three years has become a cause for concern for Russia, which fears the seizure of materials such as yellowcake uranium by Islamists in the post-Moammar Gadhafi anarchy in the country.

Last month, Russia's permanent representative to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, called for foreign powers to stop using Libya as a battlefield for settling scores, concluding that "Libya is in a state of 'free fall' and needs to be helped."

With China out of favor for its support of Gadhafi, the U.S. and Russia are vying for Tripoli's affections, but it need not be one or the other. Libya can have both if Moscow and Washington

allow it.

In such a scenario, a stable state should be preferable to the outmoded idea of a single patron.

The model emerging in Egypt, where the U.S. and Russia are both involved with defense sales and support, may serve as a model of potential cooperation if American fascination with Ukraine withers away.

Overall, common ground, not differences, must be emphasized. An end to isolationism for Iran must be the next move for the U.S., whose resources are already spread too thin and fighting too many fires around the globe, including in Ukraine.

Heaping sanctions on the Kremlin to force a change of course in Ukraine is counterproductive. The view from the Middle East is that Russia still offers a reliable partnership at the expense of the U.S., which cannot be trusted. Russia and the U.S. must forge a partnership in these extraordinary times.

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