

Russia Should Be More Involved in Middle East

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U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry recently announced that the dramatic situation in the Syrian city of Kobane is not a priority for the coalition that Washington is building to combat the Islamic State. In his view, the main problems are focused in Iraq and will be addressed there.

It is difficult to imagine that the U.S. State Department does not understand the cross-border nature of the problems that have arisen in the Middle East with the appearance of the Islamic State. Rather, Kerry's words probably indicate how little maneuvering room that Western policy still has in the region, and how tortuous the situation is.

There are two main elements to consider. The first is Iraq. After the U.S.-led coalition overturned the regime of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Iraq became a U.S. puppet state and failed its first serious crash test.

The second is Syria, where the regime of President Bashar Assad — for which Washington has

no fond feelings — has spent the last three years fighting a civil war against forces whose idea of democracy is best illustrated by video documenting their beheadings of Western civilians.

When Assad's administration gave the green light to U.S. airstrikes against Islamic State forces on Syrian territory, officials in Russia who only a year before had helped save that regime from becoming the target of similar U.S. airstrikes by brokering a deal to eliminate Syrian chemical weapons chose to turn a blind eye to these developments.

But those who did not turn away expressed frustration: A country that Moscow had viewed as a client state ever since Soviet times had turned its back on Russia despite all efforts to keep it within Moscow's orbit.

But Assad is locked in a war for survival and faces a purely pragmatic dilemma. If it was Russia bombing Islamic State forces in Syria, he would be sincerely grateful for the help. The problem is that it is not Russia, but the U.S. that has come to his aid.

Under different circumstances, Moscow might have taken satisfaction from the fact that Washington was now confronting the very reality in Syria that Russia had so long tried to impress upon an unbelieving West. However, with Russia now tied up in the confrontation in Ukraine, Moscow has little room for boasting, much less for continuing to pretend that it is one of the main parties to the Middle East negotiations.

What's more, all contact with Assad remains a highly problematic and sensitive issue for Washington. There has been some inertia with regard to Middle East policy in recent years, and it is extremely difficult for the West to admit that this tough guy is a worthy successor to his father and is truly worthy of including in any equation for the future of the Middle East.

Hussein was perhaps the only comparable leader who managed to "switch sides" in that way, although he went in the other direction — from enjoying the West's favor to becoming its nemesis.

Traditional U.S. allies Turkey and Saudi Arabia now hang like millstones around Washington's neck.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is not yet willing to have his country help defend Kobane from Islamists, though the Kurds — some of whom voted for Erdogan — are demanding that he intervene.

Apparently though, Erdogan hates the Assad regime even more than the Islamic State and he does not want to upset the balance of forces in the Kurdish question — an existential issue for Turkey.

As a result, Turkey has announced with obvious reluctance that it will permit its allies to use Turkish airports to stage strikes against Islamic State positions. In addition, it will "even" let Syrian opposition fighters train in Turkish territory.

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden acknowledged that he went too far in claiming that Ankara, Riyadh and the United Arab Emirates held responsibility for the emergence of the Islamic State — and the U.S. administration will probably see that apology as a mistake many times in the future.

Biden was right on the money when he attributed the roots of the Islamic State problem to Turkey, and for him to apologize for that later would have been like former U.S. Vice President Henry Wallace apologizing to Adolf Hitler in early 1944. "Excuse me, chancellor," he might have said, "but we didn't actually mean anything against your political agenda. We had planned to send a landing force to Normandy this summer, but now we won't."

That might be something of an exaggeration, but the present problem in the Middle East has direct parallels to the situation in Europe in the first half of the 20th century. And the sooner the political dialogue is stripped of its hypocritical trappings, the fewer the number of people who will suffer until a solution is found.

Of course, Biden's apology was a tactical necessity: The U.S. cannot wage an expanding war against the Islamic State without relying on its traditional allies in the region. It remains a question as to whether Washington can build a wider and more stable system of cooperation that would include Iran and possibly the Assad regime — and the activity of Shiite militant groups in Iraq and Yemen is clearly not making that task any easier.

Biden might be a man of few words, but he has a very clear understanding of the quality of traditional allies, pointing out that, whether the West likes it or not, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are all Sunni states. What's more, their military forces will have to supply ground support in Washington's strategy, even though most of them would prefer not to have to fight an enemy like the Islamic State.

Many people in the West, and especially in Europe, maintain that the Islamic State is not a terrorist organization, but an attempt to follow the teachings of the prophet. And if they were merely members of the growing Sunni diasporas, it would probably take no more than local police to keep them in line. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that the allure of radical Islam is mesmerizing ordinary Western youth as well.

This is a stunning result of the policy of unlimited tolerance that has become the norm in Europe, the handiwork of the happy-go-lucky participants of the student revolution of 1968 who went on to fill the senior ranks of Europe's political establishment.

But the time for naivete is over: anyone who thinks otherwise will wake up tomorrow to find a severed head in their backyard — the deceased victim of a verdict by the local sharia court.

Russia faces a similar situation and has not yet found a failsafe solution to the problem. Ideally, Russia would search for that solution together with the rest of the Western world.

Events in the Middle East concern Russia more than it might seem at first glance: Moscow shares the same anxiety as London or Amsterdam as it awaits fighters carrying Russian passports in their pockets and hatred in their hearts as they return home.

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