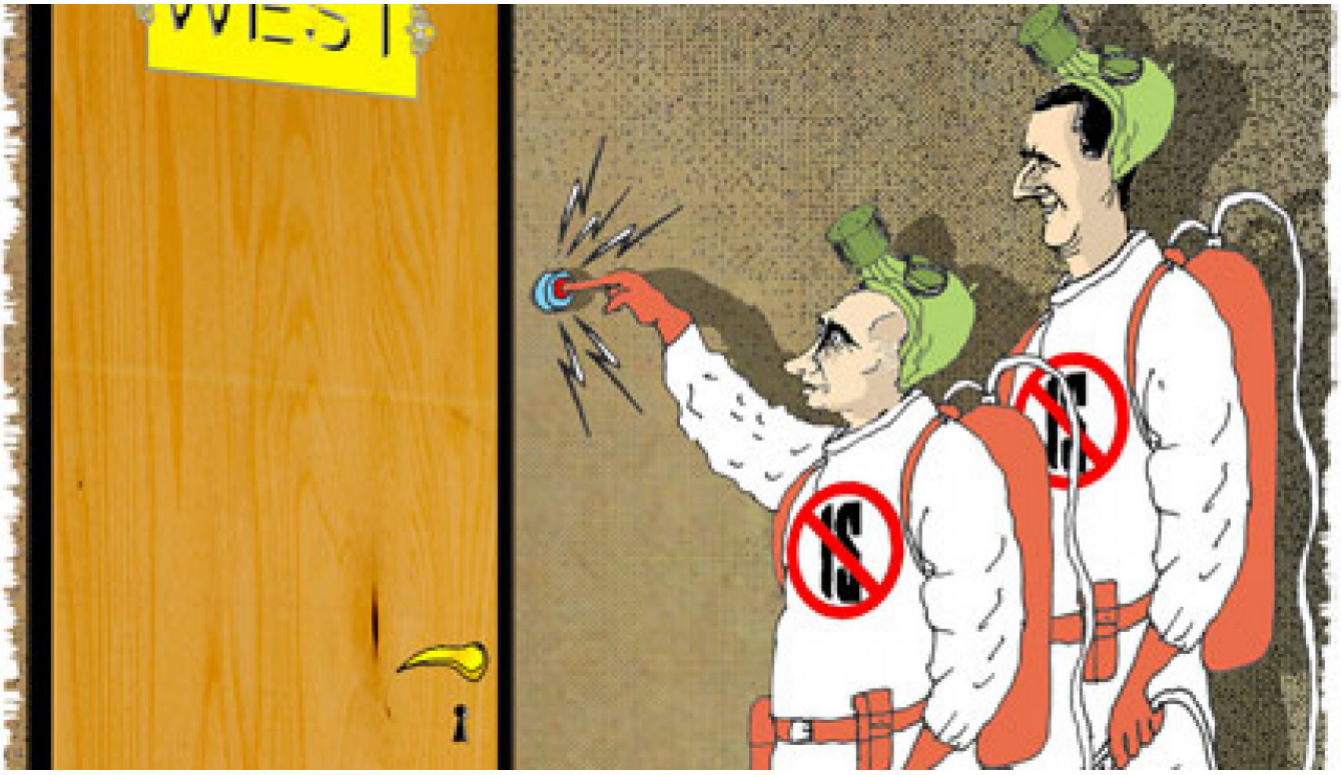
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Can Russia and the West Cooperate in Syria? (Op-Ed)

By Fyodor Lukyanov

September 20, 2015



Relations between Russia and the United States were already bad two years ago. Even before the problems in Ukraine began, Moscow had granted temporary asylum to former NSA intelligence leaker Edward Snowden and disagreements were deepening between the two countries.

U.S. President Barack Obama canceled a visit to Moscow but agreed to attend the G20 summit in St. Petersburg. There were no formal bilateral talks, but the two leaders had what turned out to be a significant but brief 15-minute talk that led to Putin's initiative for Syria to destroy its chemical weapons in a bid to ameliorate the situation for all concerned. Russian-U.S. relations did not improve one iota as a result, but the world had one less problem to worry about.

Washington and Moscow have not ruled out that the two leaders might meet during President Vladimir Putin's visit to the U.S. this month for the next session of the United Nations General Assembly.

If they do meet, they will obviously have only one agenda item: Syria. Russia's decision to continue sending in military equipment and experts to support the Damascus regime has set all of the other players on edge. Washington has warned Russia that it risks international isolation if it continues to support the Syrian regime.

However, other Western powers have not been so categorical, expressing views ranging from "No 'little green men' in Latakia!" to "Let the Russians give it a try — maybe they'll have more success they we've had."

Russia and the U.S. are deeply distrustful of one another right now. And yet both agree that the Islamic State is pure evil and that a united front is needed to combat it. Then why isn't one taking shape?

First, leaders continue out of inertia to classify the Islamic State as a terrorist organization and, accordingly, refer to efforts to combat it as an anti-terrorist campaign. That is not the best definition. It is based on events of the early 2000s and the global fight against terrorism that the administration of former U.S. President George W. Bush declared — and that ultimately led to the current chaos.

What's more, the Islamic State is not a terrorist organization per se, but organized terrorism of a qualitatively new nature and scale. The ultra-radical Islamists led by Abu Bakh al-Baghdadi are essentially a battering ram intent on destroying the entire institutional structure of the Middle East. They want to reshape not only the region's ideological landscape, but also its governments and political systems.

Given the nearly existential threat that the Islamic State poses, it makes sense for members of the international community to combat it with everything their combined arsenals can muster. The West apparently continues to view the situation through the prism of the traditional struggle against terrorism whereas Russia is more inclined toward taking action characteristic of interstate wars.

Second, the two sides disagree over what chance Syria has of continuing with the same structure it had in the past.

The West is primarily concerned with who will control the future of Syria, thus explaining its fixation with removing Syrian President Bashar Assad and conducting talks on power-sharing with the opposition, the resumption of the Geneva process and so on.

However, Moscow has now apparently come to the conclusion that the far more serious question is: What will remain of the former Syria? In essence, the country has already fragmented into different zones of control — or chaos — and it is difficult now to imagine the reconstruction of the former state. That raises the question of which group or territory the international community can league with to stop the Islamic State from advancing.

Before deciding how to restructure and name the new system of authority in Syria and defining the power-sharing arrangement that the various parties must inevitably form, it is first necessary to clarify what part of the existing system will remain.

At present, Moscow has made the not so unreasonable call for the Syrian government

and domestic opposition forces to form a coalition, through means of diplomacy, in order to respond to the massive external threat of the Islamic State — a proposal that can only succeed if the parties are willing to set aside their disagreements and earnestly unite against a common enemy.

Unfortunately, that will not happen in today's Syria. Both the ruling authorities and the opposition are vehemently obstinate. And if outside powers were to force them into a coalition, it would soon collapse and the Islamic State would take Damascus.

However, the situation in the region is so dire that the need for joint action could trump all other considerations. In light of Europe's inability to staunch the flow of refugees flooding in, citizens are ready to find a resolution at almost any cost — as long as it happens beyond Europe's borders.

Washington's position is based on a tangle of conflicting motives, with public statements often at odds with actual beliefs. The strong negative reaction to Moscow's moves stems not so much from the desire to remove Assad as it does from fears that Russia might strengthen its position in the region.

Of course, Putin is acting true to form by making an unexpected decision that radically alters a seemingly unalterable set of circumstances. And of course, he is taking a tremendous risk by initiating a campaign against the Islamic State and becoming deeply involved in Middle East intrigues.

There is the threat of Russian casualties: It is difficult to anticipate how Moscow would respond if, God forbid, one of its troops in Syria suffered the same fate as the Jordanian pilot who was burned to death. Russia is not Jordan and it could not leave such an attack unanswered. But that is the path to escalation and entrenchment. Russian public opinion has shown no aversion to heightened activity in the Middle East, but is it ready for the public executions of its soldiers by enemy forces?

The decision to participate more actively in the Syrian conflict stems naturally from Russia's previous actions. Two or three years ago, Moscow weathered harsh criticisms for its stubborn support of Assad at a time when it looked as if he would shortly be deposed.

The more moderate critics essentially said, "Well, you have proved that nothing can be done without your involvement. But now it is time to capitalize on that success by striking a bargain with the West and washing your hands of Assad." As everyone knows, that did not happen.

And now Moscow has decided to capitalize on that earlier success differently — by demonstrating its ability to ruin the West's plans for Syria, and also actively change the situation. International politics has traditionally favored action over words because action alone can win points and boost status. However, actions can also lead to the opposite result.

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