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The myth of partnering with Assad, Russia, and Iran against ISIS

By Jennifer Cafarella

The U.S. and its allies must resist drifting into a flawed partnership with Russia and Iran in Syria in order to defeat ISIS. Russia has launched a diplomatic initiative to persuade the U.S. and others to accept the Syrian regime in return for Russian assistance against ISIS. The devastating terrorist attacks in Paris on Nov. 13 and the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe have added further impetus for this major strategic shift. The apparently easy solution offered by Russia will nonetheless fail. Russia cannot actually deliver the results the U.S. requires in Syria.

Russia's offer appears tempting because it is based on some truth: the anti-ISIS mission is not succeeding quickly enough. One reason for that stagnation is clear. The U.S. lacks a ground partner in Syria: its train and equip program failed, and its partners include a predominantly Kurdish force that can operate only in Northeastern Syria. Russia is offering the chimera of a ground force: the remnants of Assad's army bolstered by Iran and Hezbollah backed by Russian airpower.

Indeed, a ground force is needed. But Assad and Russia are selling more than they can deliver given the strength of pro-Assad military forces. The Syrian regime does not possess enough manpower to seize and hold all of the terrain currently held by ISIS, even with Russian and Iranian support.

The regime's military force was reduced to only [half its pre-war strength](#) by April 2015. Aggressive conscription and recruitment efforts have failed to fill this deficit, as has reinforcement by large numbers of Iranian proxy forces including Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shi'a militias, and Afghan "volunteers" organized by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. (IRGC). Syrian President Bashar al-Assad publicly acknowledged his "deficiency of manpower" and that his forces could not secure all of Syria in July. . This shortfall consistently prevented advances by the Syrian regime despite its clear advantages over the Syrian opposition in firepower and air support.

Russia and Iran [increased](#) their [military support](#) to Assad after his July speech, but this remains insufficient to enable Assad to overcome his combat limitations. Offensive operations supported by Russian aircraft and Iranian ground forces successfully [broke the siege](#) of Kuweiris Airbase east of Aleppo City on November 10. Pro-regime forces also seized some territory from Syrian rebels and Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) south of Aleppo City. These gains nonetheless occurred on secondary, possibly even tertiary, front lines and came at a high cost in material and Iranian officers. Rebels actually advanced on a crucial front line north of Hama City while the regime focused on Aleppo. . The Syrian regime thus does not constitute a viable ground partner against ISIS unless the U.S. or its allies are willing to contribute the necessary ground forces.

There is no way to partner with Russia in Syria without reversing the U.S.'s support for the Syrian revolution against Assad. Russia's air campaign [remains focused](#) on Syrian opposition groups instead of ISIS. Russia shows no signs of abandoning that fight, nor would Assad, even though they would both support operations against ISIS. The U.S. is already on the verge of abandoning Syria's Sunni opposition. The U.S. accepted Russia's political solution to the Syrian war by embracing the

Vienna Framework, which calls for presidential elections in 2018 as an alternate to the removal of Assad. Russia and Iran will almost certainly manipulate this election to preserve Assad or an Assad crony.

Al-Qaeda and ISIS are competing for the allegiance of Sunnis globally, and the sacrifice of Syria's Sunni population in favor of a partnership with Russia and Iran would provide momentum to both terrorist groups. In the short term, this will jeopardize the anti-ISIS. ; The U.S. will have created a much more resilient enemy by ensuring that enemy has popular support. The alienation of Sunnis in Syria, and likely Iraq, will combine with the radicalization produced by the ongoing crackdown on Muslim communities in Europe in the aftermath of the Paris attack. The long-term strategic implications are hard to imagine.

Russia is rightly bringing JN into focus as a parallel jihadist threat that must be eliminated. Russia's rhetoric broadens the scope of the counter-ISIS mission in Syria to include JN, in part to justify air-strikes against Syrian rebel forces linked to JN that pose a major threat to the Syrian regime. While Russia does so for the wrong reasons, it is correct for the U.S. to recognize JN as a near-term threat. JN shares ISIS's desired end state and has a high level of local support amongst anti-Assad groups, which will allow it to spoil any attempted negotiated settlement. The two jihadist groups are currently at odds, but their shared objectives could supersede their differences over time.

The U.S. should not accept Russia's superficial offer to partner against ISIS in Syria but should embrace the need to expand the aperture of counter-ISIS policy. The U.S. should support France and other nations that desire a more vigorous anti-ISIS campaign, and should begin to take measures to counter JN in Syria. The U.S. must not sacrifice broader U.S. national interests in an effort to find a new way forward, however. The U.S. must remain aware of the broader strategic agendas pursued by other actors in the Middle East, including Russia, which has used the current strategic environment to advance its own interests. Russia seeks to form a new anti-ISIS coalition in part to diminish U.S. global influence and eject the U.S. from the Middle East over the long-term. Russia is also solidifying its military ties with Iran, contravening U.S. national security interests. An alignment with Russia risks subordinating U.S. policy to global Russian objectives while simultaneously failing to defeat ISIS. U.S. policy makers must avoid falling into the trap Russia is setting.

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