

World War Z: Why Russia Fights DAESH Zealots

Written by Matthew Crosston

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MATTHEW CROSSTON, DEC 1 2015

America has made little progress in Iraq and Syria, something Russia is determined to change apparently. The Obama administration maintains that a lasting political solution requires Assad's departure, but facing Russian military involvement, Iranian ground troops, Hezbollah military units, many armed jihadist groups, and the world's worst humanitarian crisis, the United States confronts a convoluted situation that it seems unable to solve on its own. Because of these seemingly immutable facts, louder voices are demanding that the US basically leaves the 'Syrian mess' to the Russians and let it be a de facto 'Afghanistan Redux.' More careful consideration, however, reveals that analysis to be misplaced and faulty.

This camp's basic logic rests on how 'full-spectrum' talks would demand the bringing together of so many sworn enemy groups (internal and external) that herding cats would prove more feasible. But there is also sinister realpolitik going along with these arguments: namely, that America should not counter Russian involvement but rather sit back and enjoy watching Russia get sucked into a conflict that might be the only real chance to significantly weaken Putin.

While no one should be surprised to hear that major global powers consider their own interests when becoming involved in the conflicts of other states, there is something disturbingly naïve with the above-mentioned arguments: Western commentators have too often brazenly declared across the Middle East and Post-Soviet space Machiavellian strategies in public while still hoping the nobler yet quieter motivations of freedom-enhancement were believed. Alas, they are not. Consequently, it does America no good to 'hang back' from Syria while Russia does all the dirty work, hoping the Russian Federation receives a devastating blow to its global power as President Obama talks eloquently about Syrian democracy. The only thing this does in real terms is create an environment of diplomatic insincerity that does far more damage long-term to American legitimacy than the possible advantages of a 'weakened' Russian state. On the ground, Russia's reputation would still be rewarded for making the effort while America and the EU would look rather craven and manipulative.

These are not, however, the most serious errors in strategy. The premise that Russia would get sucked into a Syrian quagmire just as America has in Iraq and Afghanistan misses one very elementary but profound point: Russia is *not* in Syria to establish 'freedom and democracy' for the Syrian people. Rather, it just wants to return the region to a more recognizable status quo where the preferred regime is in place and the potential of radical Islamism seeping into Russia's southern flanks is markedly reduced. This is what makes the often-heard Western criticism about Russian air strikes hitting not just DAESH[1] strongholds but also well-known rebel areas somewhat odd: Russia has never wavered on its principal position that the key foreign policy element to be handled in Syria is 'fighting terrorism'. Russia was never interested in seeing the now stagnant 'Arab Spring' reach Damascus. And while it has also freely stated that there is no formal state love or personal preference for keeping Assad in power, Russia *does* demand that whatever regime is in place needs to be as committed to preventing radical Islamist groups from operating as Assad was.

This was always a sharp point of contention for Russia since the early days of the anti-Assad uprising. Russia never felt comfortable with the boast that the United States knew who actually made up the various 'rebel groups' and was equally certain that America was recklessly funding and arming people that could either be replaced by radical Islamists or be co-opted by them. Given that the rise of DAESH in the region is at least partially seen in Russia as a consequence of American strategy gone awry in Iraq and Syria, its skepticism cannot be so easily dismissed. Under

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such political chaos, Russia was quite happy with throwing its support behind Assad, no matter how heinous his own authoritarian rule might be. While it may have been unfortunately true that everyday Syrians would be hurt by a continued Assad tyranny, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs felt that would at least be an internal Syrian affair and not immediately destabilizing to the global community. The same could not be said for the resulting chaos if the Assad regime fell to a hodge-podge of amorphous rebel groups mixed with jihadists who dreamt of apocalyptic Caliphate fantasies.

This is the strange reality often missed in the West: Russia's passion about eliminating radical jihadists is as fervent as American claims for promoting democracy. Thus, there is not really a Russian 'political' goal in Syria that mirrors the American one. Russia does not need a strong Assad or a competent Assad regime: it simply wants a return to the previous status quo where it had close ties to the governing regional powers and carte blanche permission to eliminate Islamic jihadists seen as legitimate threats. Therefore the criticism that Russia's 'strategy' is doomed to fail because there really are not any groups to bring to the table to forge a pluralistic Syria is hollow. The reality is that Russia is not in the region to be the personal guarantor of such a goal. This level of 'optimal fantasy diplomacy' is what Russia usually criticizes the United States for and believes brings more problems than solutions. Ultimately, Russia only wants to make sure its larger regional interests remain intact and, concurrently, no jihadist groups have the ability to spread beyond the region and attack its people.

If America had its 'Vietnam syndrome' for at least a generation – where getting stuck in a complex and horrifically violent conflict dramatically influenced its foreign policy and military thinking – it is fair to say Russia has had its own 'Chechen syndrome', which for the same amount of time had influenced Russian strategic conflict thinking in much the same way. It has always drawn a direct line between the Chechen wars of the 1990s to 9/11 to the Taliban to the Madrid train attacks to the Boston Marathon Bombing to the Sharm el Sheik civilian airliner crash to the Beirut-Paris-Kenya attacks. For Russia this has always been a single elongated fight meant to unite the modern world in a death-match against zealots. It has always openly declared that this needs to be tackled by all sides and all countries, whether formally allies or adversaries. Which is why it has been so utterly frustrated with the United States: the one obvious partner that should share its distaste for such violent religious zealotry has always steadfastly refused to engage in real counter-terrorist partnership with it. What is Russia to assume about 'gamesmanship' and 'strategy' when it gets criticized for airstrike targeting but is rebuffed by the United States when asking for specific targets to hit or locations to avoid? How should the general public react to criticism of Russian motives as new voices begin to recognize the comprehensiveness of Russian strikes and that its air campaign might be working?

So when people like Simpson criticizes the conflict in Syria as a dilemma with no military endpoint because it is and can only be a fight to the death, they are unknowingly acknowledging the Russian argument that has been in play all along. And this is exactly why Syria could end up a 'swamp' that Russians are willing to get dirty in. When framed in the language of millenarian religious struggle harkening back to the vile barbarism of the Chechen wars, Russians on the whole are willing to fight if it might mean there will be no Paris tragedies in Moscow or St. Petersburg. For Russia this is not a battle about political systems or economic markets or global positioning (which is what it always accuses American 'adventurism' of being about), but rather a war over the very lifeblood of modern society.

So caution should be urged when critics claim impending Russian doom in Syria and an inevitable political quagmire. Syria is no Afghanistan Redux: Russia is not trying to ideologically claim the territory for itself in a move of proxy-prestige. Its goals are actually far more attainable and far more easily aligned with popular attitudes at home. It is not necessarily striving for a 'perfect political solution' that the whole world can get behind in order to claim personal victory: these are the lofty and often unrealistic foreign policy goals with which America pushes itself into a corner. Russia, in the end, can claim 'victory' if there is a local regime in Damascus partial to its interests and it continues to have the opportunity to kill jihadists at will there. In the Russian diplomatic mindset this matters because it means relevance on the world stage while having to worry less about creeping Koranic quasi-insurgencies across its own major cities.

Two things are certain as the battle rages on in Syria: assumptions about American foreign policy superiority need to be taken with a grain of salt, as there is as much rational geostrategic self-interest in America's positions as there is with Russia's. And when it comes to the fight against groups like DAESH, Russia has been rather uniquely candid

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about its purposes and goals, all while hoping America and the West would be willing to join in. Even if that never happens and the West continues to refuse such a partnership, it might not want to hold its diplomatic breath waiting for the 'quagmire demise' of Russia. Reports on the inevitability of Russia's slow Syrian death may just prove to be greatly exaggerated.

In the end, the mistake the Western world has made for nearly two decades is that it has drawn up civilizational lines based on geography, political ideology, state/religious boundaries, and even economic strategies. These lines have allowed the world to divide itself into ever-smaller camps, making the civilian undersides of societies ever easier and more susceptible to extremist bloodshed and horror. In this battle Russia feels it should not be seen as the West against the Rest or white against color or the Global North against the Global South. It is about the Modern world fighting the Zealot world. Until leaders in the West embrace this reality and begin to smash their own self-imposed boundaries of nationalism, statehood, and geostrategy, they will constantly be putting themselves in a limited and exposed position against a radicalized enemy. And scenes like the ones played out in France, Lebanon, and Kenya will only continue. Hope at the moment does not seem bright: already less than two weeks after the Paris attacks and increased pressure from world leaders to consider cooperating in the fight against terrorist zealots, Turkey downed a Russian jet fighter that it claimed did not respond to 'warnings about crossing into Turkish airspace.' Worse still, initial reports are that the two pilots successfully ejected from the fighter, only to be shot at while floating to the ground via parachute. Incidents like this, in the face of a greater common enemy, means the Modern world is not taking the Zealot world as seriously as it needs to. It means that World War Z will continue to be lost.

Notes

[1] For an explanation as to what DAESH actually stands for and where it comes from linguistically (while also being provided a compelling reason why the global community needs to shift off of the terms ISIS and ISIL and IS and exclusively use the preferred Arabic acronym DAESH) please see Oakley 2015.

About the author:

Matthew Crosston is a Professor of Political Science and the Miller Endowed Chair for Industrial and International Security and Director of the International Security and Intelligence Studies (ISIS) program at Bellevue University. His research agenda addresses issues within counter-terrorism, intelligence analysis and education, failed democratization, global gender violence, and cyber war/ethics.