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“The Threat of Islamist Extremism in Russia”

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Who Is Putin Really Protecting Assad From?

Unlike in Ukraine where Moscow has openly declared that its motive for intervention and support for separatist forces as being undertaken to counter the West, Russian officials have characterized their support for the Assad regime in Syria as actually being in Western interests—even if Western governments do not quite seem to understand this—since it serves the common goal of combatting the Islamic State (also known as IS, ISIS and ISIL).

Russian President Vladimir Putin recently described the Assad regime as an important ally in the fight against IS. "It is evident," he stated recently, "that without an active participation of the Syrian authorities and military, without participation of the Syrian army inside the territory, as the military say, in [the] fight against Islamic State, terrorists cannot be expelled from that country and from the region on the whole." <http://tass.ru/en/politics/821110>

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described the Assad regime as a crucial ally against IS. He declared that, "the Syrian president is the commander-in-chief of probably the most capable ground force fighting terrorism, to give up such an opportunity, ignore the capabilities of the Syrian army as a partner and ally in the fight against the Islamic State means to sacrifice the entire region's security to some geopolitical moods and calculations." <http://tass.ru/en/politics/821910>

While the West may not like Assad, Russian officials and commentators are saying, his authoritarian regime is preferable to an even worse one that IS would establish that would pose a real threat to Western, as well as Russian, interests. Furthermore, Assad regime forces are needed in order to stop IS from taking over more—or even the rest—of Syria. Western insistence that Assad must step down, then, is foolish since this would gravely weaken the forces fighting against IS. The West, then, should work with Moscow and the Assad regime against the common IS threat, and not against them.

This argument is based on the premise that the Assad regime is actively fighting against IS. There have been numerous reports, though, that the Assad regime and IS have actually not been fighting with each other, or not doing so very much. A widely quoted study by IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center at the end of last year noted that the Assad regime's "counterterrorism operations...skew heavily towards groups whose names aren't ISIS. Of 982 counterterrorism operations for the year up through Nov. 21 [2014], just 6 percent directly targeted ISIS." <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/syria-isis-have-been-ignoring-each-other-battlefield-data-suggests-n264551>

In February of this year, *TIME* reported on a Sunni businessman with close ties to the Assad regime describing various forms of actual cooperation between the Assad regime and IS, including how the Assad regime buys oil from IS-controlled oil facilities, how Syria's two main mobile phone operators provide service and send repair teams to IS-controlled areas, and how Damascus allows food shipments to the IS capital, Raqqa. <http://time.com/3719129/assad-isis-asset/>

At the beginning of June 2015, US Embassy Damascus "accused the Syrian government of providing air support to an advance by Islamic State militants against opposition groups north of Aleppo." <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/02/syria-isis-advance-on-aleppo-aided-by-assad-regime-air-strikes-us-says>

In July, Turkish intelligence sources claimed that "an agreement was made between the Assad regime and ISIS to destroy the Free Syrian Army in the country's north." <http://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2015/07/02/isis-and-assad-cooperate-locally-on-mutual-interests-to-destroy-fsa>

Why would the Assad regime not fight against IS and even cooperate with it? Both of them have an interest in weakening their common foes: other Syrian opposition groups being supported by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other countries.

Moscow and Damascus, of course, vehemently deny that the Assad regime and IS are not fighting each other and are even cooperating against their common foes. The numerous reports that this is what is happening, as well as the compelling nature of the "enemy of my enemy is my friend" logic at work here, point to their credibility.

And if these reports are true, then certain implications follow:

--If Assad and IS are not really fighting each other, but the Assad regime is losing ground, then its weakening is due primarily to the non-IS forces backed by Turkey and the Gulf Arabs.

--Russian military support to the Assad regime is likely to be used primarily against those forces that are most threatening to Damascus (i.e., the Free Syrian Army, the Al Nusra Front, etc.), and not against IS which is less threatening to it.

--Russian calls for the West to work with Moscow and Damascus in the fight against IS, then, are really intended to elicit Western acquiescence to increased Russian support for Assad regime efforts to combat its more threatening non-IS opponents, as well as to divide Western governments that fear IS more than the Assad regime on the one hand from Turkey and Gulf Arab states which are more focused on supporting the downfall of the Assad regime through supporting its non-IS opponents on the other.

What all this suggests is that the recent increase in Russian military involvement in Syria is motivated much less by a desire to combat IS than by the desire to protect the Assad regime against its more active non-IS opponents as well as to blunt the actions of Western and Middle Eastern actors aimed at supporting them.