

Can US Break with Jihadist Allies?

Exclusive: The Obama administration finds itself caught in the contradictions of its Syrian policy, having backed radical jihadists to achieve another “regime change” but now finding that its opportunism is spreading chaos beyond the Mideast into Europe. But can the U.S. adjust course and abandon its jihadist clients, asks Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria (Updated on Jan. 25 with new last two paragraphs)

The passage of a major U.N. Security Council resolution is like a cheap high: the euphoria wears off pretty quickly. Such was last month’s unanimous adoption of a “peace plan” to end nearly five years of Syrian bloodshed.

With Monday’s start date for a planned ceasefire and the launch of negotiations already put off, it’s looking increasingly unlikely that the talks will start any time soon. The major obstacle is deciding who will represent the opposition across the table from the government. And that hinges on the question of who is a terrorist in Syria. It doesn’t help that world governments have failed since the League of Nations to agree on a treaty legally defining terrorism.

Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met in Geneva on Wednesday and the two were unable to decide who the Syrian terrorists are that should be excluded from the negotiations.

They agree on excluding the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front (Al Qaeda’s affiliate) who have already been eliminated from participation. But what about the myriad other opposition groups, some of whom collaborate closely with Nusra and other extremists?

A hundred of them were melded together by Saudi Arabia in Riyadh last November. But they want Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down immediately. That’s a complete non-starter as the U.N. plan would allow him to stay on for six months making way for a transitional government until a new constitution is written and a general election held in 2017. Kerry has been blasted by neoconservatives for agreeing to this compromise and for allowing Assad to run again in that election.

The U.S. compromised on that point after being spurred on by the refugee crisis that is spreading disorder into Europe and by Russia’s entry into the war against the Islamic State and other jihadist groups. But there is so far little compromise on the question of terrorism.

Putin’s Challenge

Moscow's and Washington's disagreement goes back to the beginning of the Syrian civil war, as I reported more than three years ago. In September, Russian President Vladimir Putin went a step further in accusing the U.S. of supporting terrorists in Syria in his address to the U.N. General Assembly.

"The Islamic State itself did not come out of nowhere," Putin said. "It was initially developed as a weapon against undesirable secular regimes." He said it was irresponsible "to manipulate extremist groups and use them to achieve your political goals, hoping that later you'll find a way to get rid of them or somehow eliminate them."

He made it clear he was speaking of the U.S., when he added: "I'm urged to ask those who created this situation: do you at least realize now what you've done? But I'm afraid that this question will remain unanswered, because they have never abandoned their policy, which is based on arrogance, exceptionalism and impunity."

Putin did not mention clear evidence he was certainly aware of from the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency. An August 2012 DIA document declassified by a judge says that Washington, Ankara and the Gulf States were helping to establish a Salafist principality in eastern Syria to pressure Assad and that it could team up with extremists on the Iraqi side of the border to form an Islamic State, the document uses that exact phrase. Then DIA chief Gen. Mike Flynn later told Al Jazeera that this was a "willful decision in Washington," not the U.S. merely turning a blind eye to what was happening.

The U.S. has long supported unsavory groups to reach short-term U.S. interests. Washington argues it is vetting what groups it supports, but even the Daily Beast (a big supporter of neoconservative regime-change strategies) has called this into question, reporting that CIA-backed rebels fight in tandem with Al Qaeda.

In his speech Putin called for a coalition similar to the Soviet-U.S. alliance in the Second World War to fight the most fearsome terrorist force in history, Adolf Hitler's Nazis. Putin argued that Syria's military is the only effective ground force (along with the Kurds) against the Islamic State and that all nations who really want to defeat it should work with Assad's army and fight the groups trying to overthrow him.

"Similar to the anti-Hitler coalition, it could unite a broad range of parties willing to stand firm against those who, just like the Nazis, sow evil and hatred of humankind," Putin said.

Russia presented a draft resolution at the Security Council that would have

authorized such a grand coalition. But the U.S. flatly rejected it because it still plots Assad's overthrow with groups that Russia says are terrorists. It wasn't a surprise then that two days after Putin spoke that Russia launched its first airstrike was against a CIA-backed group threatening the Assad government. It was a strong message from Moscow to Washington: if you keep supporting extremists in Syria we will strike them.

The U.S. government and its corporate media accused Russia of hitting "moderate" groups instead of the Islamic State (which Russia has repeatedly also targeted). Washington leveled the tired charge that Putin is trying to reestablish the Soviet Empire and takeover the Middle East from the U.S.: a duplicitous case of projecting imperial designs onto another. Perhaps Russia really is worried about terrorism spreading from Syria and really wants to do something to stop it.

Defining Terrorism

Having an international agreement legally defining terrorism would be useful in this circumstance, but coming up with one codified in a treaty has long bedeviled governments. The League of Nations tried and failed. A month after 9/11 the U.N. General Assembly met to agree on an international convention against terrorism, but failed because it couldn't agree on defining terrorism.

Terrorism is only a tactic. But governments seem to conflate it with a cause. It's okay when their side uses it, but not when their enemy does. This has spawned the cliché, "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter."

If you can objectively isolate the tactic from the cause, an agreed definition may be possible. It would be along the lines of terrorism is an act of violence carried out by non-state actors, targeting civilians for any cause, whether just or not.

The cause of the Palestinians under occupation is just, for instance, but blowing up Israeli civilians in a bus is terrorism. The cause of the Islamic State, as an occupying force, is clearly unjust, and it commits terrorism when it targets civilians. The target is essential to the definition. A non-state actor, even the Islamic State, attacking military targets is using guerilla tactics not terrorism. Some groups, like ISIS, use both.

The lack of a definition has helped states to continue sponsoring terrorism, though they do not directly commit acts of terrorism themselves, as many people contend. States commit war crimes, which is worse. Only non-state actors employ terrorism, which is not under the jurisdiction of the war-crimes International Criminal Court and could only in some instances be considered a war crime.

Without a common understanding of what terrorism is, it is difficult to imagine

agreement between Moscow and Washington to get the Syrian talks started without some extremely deft diplomatic maneuvering. That may still happen amid [reports](#) that the U.N. will invite two sets of opposition groups to satisfy both the U.S. and Russia.

Without such a compromise to get talks started, however slim the chance they will succeed, there is no prospect in sight of an end to the Syrian war until one side wins it militarily.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist based at the U.N. since 1990. He has written for the Boston Globe, the London Daily Telegraph, the Johannesburg Star, the Montreal Gazette, the Wall Street Journal and other newspapers. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at [@unjoe](#).
