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US' Main Target in Syria is Iran, ISIS Comes Second

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The common thread running through the two major 'hot spots' in the Middle East today – the conflicts in Syria and Libya – is undoubtedly the threat to international security from the extremist groups operating in these theatres. Therefore, Syria and Libya become test cases of the efficacy of the international community – Russia and the United States in particular – working together to steer these conflicts toward a denouement that results in the elimination of the terrorist threat and the stabilization of the situation in the two countries.

There is a history of Russian-American engagement over Syria during the Barack Obama administration, which was surprisingly intense at times – and productive too occasionally, such as over the removal of chemical weapons from Syria or in the creation of the International Syria Support Group as a platform for a peace process.

In the final analysis, of course, the Russian-American engagement over Syria turned out to be sub-optimal in results, which is not surprising, given the steady erosion of mutual trust in the overall relationship as a result of the Obama administration's containment strategies toward Russia through the last year or two of his presidency.

Plainly put, it will not be an exaggeration to say that Russia and the US are virtually in ground zero today in terms of their cooperation and coordination in meeting the terrorist challenges in Syria. The final months of the Barack Obama presidency witnessed even a calamitous decline in the US-Russia ties.

High hopes were raised when Donald Trump emerged victorious in the US presidential election last November and the expectation was that a brave new dawn of accelerating US-Russia cooperation in fighting the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and other extremist groups in Syria was breaking.

But so far that has not happened, and day by day the prospect seems to be altogether fading. There has been some degree of common ground between the US and Russia to ensure that a conflict situation did not arise recently over control of the strategic town of Manbij to the east of Aleppo in northern Syria, detracting attention away from the all-important offensive on Raqqa.

Presumably, this remained an understanding specific to the fluid situation around Manbij, which were limited in scope and were rather tactical in content and completely devoid of any strategic underpinning evolved through political and diplomatic exchanges.

The fact of the matter is that conflicting signals are emanating out of Washington. Although Trump administration is yet to spell out its policies in the Middle East, the statement made by the US Central Command chief General Joseph Votel at the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 9 contains the Pentagon's approach that do not augur well for an effective anti-terrorist campaign in Syria.

Gen. Votel's testimony took place nine days after the Pentagon submitted its report on a new Middle East strategy to the White House and its postulates must be deemed to be authoritative – most certainly, they cannot be out of sync with the policymaking discourses going on in Washington at present. What emerges from Gen. Votel's statement are mainly the following:

- Unless the «root causes of instability» in Syria are addressed, the defeat of the ISIS may turn out to be a Pyrrhic victory.

- Iran is responsible for propping up the Syrian government.

- In the «current resource-constrained environment», US' main preoccupation in Syria will be the operations to seize Raqqa and, secondly, the security operations «along the Jordanian border» to cut off the ISIS' supply routes. (The game plan seems to be to cut off Iran's access to Lebanon via land route so that Israel gets a free hand to take out Hezbollah.)

- Turkey, despite its transgressions in northern Syria, remains a key NATO ally and has a pivotal role to play in the fight against terrorism. (Significantly, Trump administration has deferred a final decision on Raqqa operations until the Turkish referendum on April 16 got over.)

- Russia and Iran are pursuing geopolitical objectives in Syria. (Gen. Votel totally ignored the two countries' contributions in the war against terrorist groups and made no references to it.)
- The Pentagon visualizes cooperation with Russia in Syria at the military level in terms of «enhancing our de-confliction mechanisms».

It appears that the US is not looking for an anti-terrorist coalition to fight the ISIS in Syria in a concerted manner, which Russia would have liked. Washington's preference seems to be for a limited alliance under its leadership, comprising the US' European partners, Turkey and the GCC states. (The recent conclave in Washington on Syria, which excluded Russia and Iran, falls into perspective.)

A question that arises here is whether it is the defeat of the Islamic State that is the US' number one priority in Syria or the containment of Iran.

In the US estimation, rolling back Iran's influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon has become a pressing demand by its regional allies – Israel and Saudi Arabia principally – and it is, therefore, integral to the restoration of American hegemony in the Middle East.

In the fullness of time, once Syria stabilizes, if northern and eastern Syria were to remain under US' control or as its «sphere of influence», it could create conditions for the laying of gas pipelines connecting Qatar to the European market, which indeed has been an idea on the backburner for almost a decade.

Curiously, the recent developments in Libya also point toward a similar ambivalent approach on the part of the US toward the fight against the extremist groups. If Trump were to keep his word about the war against terrorism being the urgent and top most priority, the US ought to be backing Khalifa Haftar who is the only figure in the chaotic Libyan landscape with the capability to vanquish the terrorist groups and bring some modicum of stability to the country in a conceivable future.

Indeed, Haftar also happens to be a figure well-known to the US security establishment and US intelligence. However, what we are witnessing is instead a Obama-era policy of low-intensity western intervention and covert support for the Islamist Benghazi militia to push back at Haftar.

If it is the rollback of Iran's regional influence that seems to be the US' number one priority in Syria, when it comes to Libya, it seems to be the old story of gaining control of its vast oil resources. Unsurprisingly, Libya's oil ports have become the focus of months of fighting.