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How Terror in Paris Calls for Revising US Syria Policy

By Gareth Porter
November 21, 2015

In the wake of the ISIS terrorist attack on Paris, President Barack Obama declared that his administration has the right strategy on ISIS and will “see it through”. But the administration is already shifting its policy to cooperate more closely with the Russians on Syria, and an influential former senior intelligence official has suggested that the administration needs to give more weight to the Assad government and army as the main barrier to ISIS and other jihadist forces in Syria.

Obama’s European allies as well as US national security officials have urged the United States to downgrade the official US aim of achieving the departure of Bashar al-Assad from Syria in the international negotiations begun last month and continued last weekend. Such a shift in policy, however, would make the contradictions between the US interests and those of the Saudis, who continue to support jihadist forces fighting with al-Qaeda’s Syria branch, al-Nusra Front, increasingly clear.

Russia had proposed to the United States in September that the United States and Russia share intelligence on ISIS and exchange military delegations to coordinate on joint steps against ISIS. The initial Obama administration response was to reject either intelligence sharing or joint planning with Russia on Syria out of hand. The reasoning was that the Russians were engaged primarily, if not exclusively, to shore up the Assad regime, which was unacceptable to Washington. Secretary of State John Kerry declared on 1 October: “What is important is Russia

has to not be engaged in any activities against anybody but ISIL. That's clear. We have made that very clear."

But that was before Paris. The fallout from that attack has changed the political vectors pushing and pulling Obama administration policy. The most obvious shift came two days after the attacks and just hours after Obama announced new intelligence arrangements with France. CIA director John Brennan reversed the earlier US decision to reject intelligence sharing with Russia on Islamic State. Revealing that he had had several conversations with his Russian counterpart since the beginning of Russia's air offensive in Syria, Brennan said the ISIS threat "demands" an "unprecedented level of cooperation" among international intelligence services. Brennan said he and his Russian counterpart had begun exchanging intelligence focused primarily on the flow of terrorists from Russia into Iraq and Syria but that now US-Russian cooperation needed to be "enhanced".

At the G-20 summit in Antalya, Turkey on 15-16 November, Obama acknowledged for the first time in his meeting with Putin that Russia was indeed combating ISIS, according to a White House official. In fact, the Russians had been hitting ISIS targets regularly during October, including what it said was a command center in the ISIS capital, Raqqa. The Obama administration had refused to acknowledge that fact in October and instead focused on the Russian targeting of non-ISIS groups. But the White House press leak about the Obama-Putin conversation did not repeat that complaint.

The issue of whether Assad must go as part of a settlement has been a fixture of US Syria policy ever since 2011, although it has now been modified to allow the Syrian president to stay in power for a period of six months as part of a settlement. But the Paris attacks may well be sparking new debate within the Obama administration on whether that demand makes sense. In an interview with CBS News on 15 November, the former deputy director of the CIA, Michael Morell, suggested that the exclusion of Assad may need to be revised. "I do think the question of whether President Assad needs to go or whether he is part of the solution here, we need to look at it again," Morell said. "Clearly he's part of the problem. But he may also be part of the solution."

It is not likely that Morell, was acting CIA director twice in 2011 and again from 2012 to 2013, was merely reflecting a personal view on the matter. Statements by US intelligence officials since 2012 have emphasized the importance of the Syrian administration and military as the primary buttress against both ISIS and al-Qaeda and its jihadist allies seizing power in the country – a point that the Obama and Kerry chose not to make. Since the "moderate" forces have all but disappeared in late 2014 and early 2015, and al-Qaeda and its jihadist allies have become the only rivals to Islamic State, that point became even more critical.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said this week, "I cannot agree with the logic that Assad is the cause of everything" in Syria. That contrasts with John Kerry's argument that unless Assad leaves Syria, "this war will not end."

But Kerry's position is based on the assumption that the major forces fighting against the regime would end the war and enter into peaceful competition if Assad could be induced to leave. In

reality, of course, those forces are committed to using force to achieve the destruction of the old “secular” political order in Syria and establish an extremist conservative Islamic State.

The issue of whether to continue to demand Assad’s departure arises just as the UN peace negotiations process on Syria – meaning negotiations among the outside powers intervening in the conflict – begin a new and highly political phase. British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond has revealed that the next phase will turn on bargaining among the international sponsors of anti-Assad groups about who would be allowed to join a new government. Those decisions, in turn, would depend on which of the groups are deemed by the foreign sponsors of those very groups to be “terrorists” and which are deemed acceptable.

As Hammond acknowledges, the Saudis are certainly not going to agree to call Ahrar al-Sham or other extremist jihadist groups allied with it and al-Nusra “terrorists”. They may have to give up al-Nusra Front, which has expressed support for the Islamic State terrorist assault on Paris.

Unless Obama is prepared to face a rupture in the US alliance with the Sunni Gulf Sheikdoms over the issue, the result will be that the very groups committed to overthrowing the remnants of the old order by force will be invited by the United States and its Gulf allies to take key positions in the post-Assad government. It’s the right time for Obama to rethink the administration’s policy toward both Assad and his jihadist foes.