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The rise of the Islamic State: Who is to blame?

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Behind the façade of a united front against the Islamic State the United States and its Gulf allies blame each other for the spectacular rise of the jihadist group that has overrun a swathe of Syria and Iraq. With the launching of US-led air attacks on Islamic State targets in Syria itself, Syrian president Bashar Al Assad is likely to emerge as a winner while his allies Russia and Iran lie low about their abetting of the Islamic State.

Commentary

THE US-LED coalition marshalled to confront the Islamic State, the brutal jihadist group that controls a large swathe of Syria and Iraq, has launched systematic air strikes against IS positions and targets in Syria as well as Iraq. They comprised besides the US, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Jordan as well as Qatar in a supportive role.

Before the airstrikes began, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif charged that most of the alliance's members, whom he dubbed a "coalition of repenters", had contributed to the Islamic State's rise by supporting armed opposition to the regime of Bashar Al-Assad. While not far off the mark the Iranian minister would have hit the nail squarely on the head had he included Russia, a member of the coalition, as well as his own country, though it had not been invited to the alliance's founding meeting in Paris earlier this month.

Sharing responsibility for IS

If anything, Russia and Iran may even share a greater responsibility because as Assad's main backers they were more likely to have been privy to the Syrian leader's grand strategy to defeat the popular uprising-turned armed rebellion against him. If Iran blames the United States for supporting the Syrian rebels, the US' Arab allies argue that Washington's failure to supply moderate Syrian rebels with the sophisticated weaponry and funding they needed to defeat Assad's forces or allow Gulf states to do so, had created a vacuum that the Islamic State filled.

Frustrated by the US failure, as a result, Gulf states and Turkey aided a host of rebel groups, including the Islamic State, in a bid to topple Assad with or without full-fledged US support. Their

resolve was strengthened by the fact that Assad enjoyed the support of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and its Lebanese Shiite ally Hezbollah.

In doing so, the US and its allies walked into the trap Assad had set for them. For much of the last three years of bitter fighting in Syria that has killed an estimated 160,000 people and displaced 6.5 million others, Assad's forces have confronted non-jihadist forces rather than those of the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL), the name by which the group was known before it rebranded itself as the Islamic State in June. Assad's sparing of the jihadists was designed to allow them to emerge as the dominant force rallied against him so that he could project himself as indispensable in the struggle to contain Islamist extremism.

Syrian support for jihadists dates back to aid provided by the Assad government to Al Qaeda in Iraq for targeting of US troops, according to documents captured by American forces in 2007 in Iraq's Sinjar mountains and published by the US Military Academy at West Point. The documents revealed that Syria facilitated the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq. Many of them were Saudi and North African nationals, who today are among the largest of Islamic States' foreign fighter contingents. They utilise the same support structures and logistics networks that were originally established in Iraq with Syrian aid. Moreover, several Islamic State operatives are men who were detained by Syrian authorities on charges of terrorism and later released in a series of general amnesties, according to The New York Times.

A win-win strategy

Assad's strategy has worked well. Islamic State has emerged as the Syrian leader's foremost opponent. The United States and its allies struggled with how to confront the group not only in Iraq but also in Syria without legitimising or cooperating with the one Arab leader whose ouster they sought. Irrespective of whatever strategy the allies develop, Assad benefits. Cooperation with his regime as is being demanded by Russia would bring Assad in from the cold. If the coalition opts to take on the Islamic State in Syria without coordination with Damascus, Assad can sit back as his enemies confront the most immediate threat to his regime and do the dirty work for him.

It is hard to believe that Iran and Russia with their intimate involvement in the Assad regime's battle for survival had been oblivious to the Syrian leader's nurturing of jihadist forces first in Iraq and, since the eruption of widespread opposition to his regime in 2011, in Syria itself. It was a high risk strategy for both Russia, with its soft underbelly in the Caucasus repeatedly wracked by jihadist violence, and Iran that sits at one extreme of the Middle East's increasing Sunni-Shiite divide.

Like with US and Gulf policy failures and mistakes, Russia and Iran's high-risk gamble resembles a chicken that has come home to roost, witness Russia's inclusion in the US-led alliance against Islamic State and Iran's support for the war against the group. Their opposition to Islamic State is nonetheless tempered by their efforts to legitimise Assad by insisting that he be acknowledged in military strikes against the group inside Syria. There is little reason to doubt Russia and Iran's sincerity in wanting to confront the Islamic State. That however does not erase the legitimate suspicion that they more than others were witting accomplices in IS' rise given the nature of their involvement with the Assad regime.

James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg and the author of the blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, and a forthcoming book with the same title.
