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The Collision Course in Syria

By Daniel Lazare

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Exclusive: President Obama's continued insistence on "regime change" in Syria and his support for Sunni jihadists not called ISIS have escalated tensions with Moscow, especially after Turkey shot down a Russian warplane along the Syrian border. This division may help only the extremists, writes Daniel Lazare.

With Turkey downing a Russian Su-24 warplane along the Turkish-Syrian border this week, dire predictions about the dangers of escalation in the Syrian conflict are coming true. Events are spinning out of control as Syria turns into a happy hunting ground for military forces locked on a mutual collision course.

Up to 50 U.S. Special Operations troops are due to enter Syria shortly in support of a hastily assembled Arab-Kurdish coalition that could easily come under Russian or Turkish attack. The U.S. is stepping up its bombing raids, destroying another 238 ISIS fuel trucks in eastern Syria last weekend. Russia is targeting tankers plus an ISIS training camp in Idlib in Syria's far north, while France has also upped its bombing campaign since Nov. 13 in response to ISIS claiming credit for the terror attacks in Paris.

If Turkey seemed to be holding back from joining the fight against ISIS, the fact that ethnically-related Syrian Turkmen villagers have come into Russia's line of fire – as part of Moscow's

broad attack on Islamic militants seeking to overthrow the Syrian government – may have been a significant factor in persuading Turkey to enter the fray by shooting down the Russian plane.

So, Turkey is fighting the Russians and Kurds, who are fighting ISIS, which is fighting the Syrian government plus Hezbollah and Iranian forces. ISIS has also blown up a Russian tourist flight over the Sinai, set off suicide bombs in Beirut and shot up civilians in Paris. It's a three- or four-way brawl that grows more chaotic by the week.

The day before the Paris attacks, President Barack Obama told ABC *This Week's* George Stephanopoulos that ISIS has been "contained" in its caliphate in northern Syria and Iraq. But now it is clear that ISIS has not been contained at all. Along with Al Qaeda, which claimed credit for a bloody assault on an upscale hotel in Bamako, Mali, ISIS is metastasizing across half the globe while many of the world's leading powers throw themselves into the maelstrom.

A lot of people have had a hand in creating this perfect storm, but there is no question who has played the leading role, i.e. the United States. From the moment Obama declared in August 2011 that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside," the "indispensable nation" has played an indispensable part in helping Turkey and the Arab Gulf states turn Syria into a bleeding wound.

Obama claimed to be seeking a democratic solution to Syria's growing civil war, and initially the claim did not seem implausible. After all, he had a lot of important forces on his side. One was Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, hailed by not only the White House but the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* as living proof that Islamism and democracy could be successfully combined.

Another was Saudi Arabia, a country synonymous with "moderation" as far as official Washington is concerned, plus the other Gulf states as well. Economically flush after oil had stabilized at \$100 a barrel, the petro-sheiks promised to help with "regime change" in Syria, so how could Obama go wrong?

One Wrench?

From this viewpoint, there was one wrench in the works – Iran. A key backer of the Assad government, it was a regional threat that many Western experts agreed had to be put in its place. Never mind that these same experts had almost unanimously backed George W. Bush's disastrous invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq — their arguments carried the day regardless.

Thus, Obama's Syria policy all but wrote itself. Overthrowing Assad in order to curtail Iranian influence would be the chief goal, while funding would come from the Gulf states. Working with Syrian exiles in southern Turkey, the C.I.A. would see to it that the arms and money reached the right rebel groups.

It all seemed so simple. Tinkers to Evers to Chance: with so many "moderates" playing ball, "moderation" would surely emerge triumphant.

But the effort soon encountered bumps in the road. With mobs chanting “Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the coffin,” Syrian opponents of Assad soon turned out to be less democratic than previously believed. With Syrian minorities – not just Alawites, but Christians, Druze, Yazidis, and others – huddling in fear over the prospect of a militant Sunni victory, growing numbers threw their support behind Assad. So did Sunnis appalled at the prospect of returning to a mullah dictatorship that the Baathist government had successfully overthrown.

The local forces working with the C.I.A. in Turkey turned out to be members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the militant fundamentalist outfit whose longtime slogan declares: “Allah is our objective; the Qur’an is the Constitution; the prophet is our leader; jihad is our way; death for the sake of Allah is our wish.” Erdoğan turned out to be an authoritarian drawn to ever more extreme forms of Sunni Islam while the Gulf states turned out to be autocratic, no surprise for anyone remotely familiar with their political structures. Instead of democrats, they therefore channeled money to Sunni extremists eager to drown Shi‘ite resistance in blood.

Although the White House did its best to avert its eyes, Al Qaeda was also a growing force among the rebels, as was ISIS (also known as Islamic State, ISIL or Daesh). Rather than “moderation,” such forces stood for sectarianism, bigotry and jihad.

Massive Miscalculation

A quarter of a million people would eventually die as a consequence of Obama’s miscalculation, 7.6 million would be displaced, and another four million would be driven abroad, all this in a country of just 22 million prior to the onset of civil war.

To put this in perspective, it is as if 3.6 million Americans had died as a result of a foreign-financed civil war, 110 million had been driven out of their homes, and another 58 million had been forced to flee abroad to Canada, Mexico or whatever other country would take them, where they would have no choice but to beg or perhaps sell ballpoint pens to passers-by in hopes of scratching out a living.

Instead of democracy, the U.S.-led push to overthrow Assad put Syria on the path to catastrophe. Obama could have hit the pause button at any point once it became clear where the effort was going.

The period following the August 2013 Ghouta poison gas attack, when it became clear that the rush to blame Assad had nearly led to an all-out NATO assault, would have been a good moment for a reappraisal. But the timing was wrong. The Saudis, Turks, and Israelis were all uneasy that Obama was seeking a rapprochement with Iran, and they would have been doubly spooked if Obama had backed off from his vow to overthrow Assad. Hence, Obama felt he had no choice but to double down. Destroying Syria was easier than disrupting key Middle Eastern alliances.

Something similar would later occur in Yemen. As U.S. and Iranian negotiators edged closer and closer to a deal on Iran’s nuclear program, the Obama administration had to be ever more sensitive to its allies’ concerns. This was especially the case with Saudi Arabia, the dominant

power in the region, which was alert for the slightest indication that Washington was tipping in favor of its archenemy.

After pouring “hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of military weapons” into the anti-Shi‘ite struggle in Syria, as Joe Biden would put it; sending troops to put an end to democratic demonstrations into Shi‘ite-majority Bahrain, and then savagely repressing Shi‘ite protests in their own Eastern Province, the Saudis decided that the time had come to suppress yet another Shi‘ite force.

This was the Shi‘ite Houthi tribesmen in Yemen who had risen in revolt against a rising tide of Saudi-funded Sunni-Wahhabist radicalism. Claiming that the Houthis were nothing more than a cat’s paw for Iran, the Saudis, backed by most of the other Gulf states, commenced nightly bomb raids that quickly reduced the already impoverished country to ruin.

This would have been another appropriate time to hit the pause button. After signing on to the anti-Shi‘ite crusade in Syria, Obama might have decided that one jihad was enough. But instead he ordered the Pentagon to provide technical backup for the Saudi war machine, selling the kingdom \$1.29 billion worth of smart bombs to replace those used to flatten Yemeni neighborhoods and sending airborne tankers to refuel Saudi fighters in mid-flight so they could reach their targets.

By Nov. 13, U.S. tankers had flown some 471 refueling sorties, delivering more than 17 million pounds of fuel. As a result, more than 2,500 civilians have died, according to UN estimates, while health, water, and sanitation services have all been brought to the brink of collapse.

“The reason the Saudis are there conducting these airstrikes,” State Department spokesman Mark Toner said earlier this month, “is because of the ongoing violence stoked by Houthi rebels.” If translated into straight talk, he was saying that the Saudi Wahhabists are right because they are an essential ally of the United States while Shi‘ites are wrong because they are not. The importance of maintaining the Washington-Riyadh axis trumps all other considerations.

Worsening Violence

The upshot has been widening waves of sectarianism and violence. Although few Western observers will admit it, Assad has done the world a service simply by hanging on. If he hadn’t, a path would have been cleared for an ISIS takeover in Damascus, the consequences of which are all but incalculable.

With Islamic State’s black banners flying from the presidential palace, there would not be a million refugees pounding on European doors, but three, four or maybe five times that number. Instead of 130 dead in Paris, there would be thousands as ISIS used its control of an entire nation-state to launch more and more attacks.

The Saudis wouldn’t care since they have all but closed their doors to the refugees, few of whom want to live in bizarre and brutal theocracy in the first place. But the resultant tidal wave would all but swamp Europe, pumping up xenophobia to ever higher levels.

Since the Paris attacks, the ultra-right has been on the march from one end of the Continent to the other. In France, where Marine Le Pen is surging in the polls, the possibility of a National Front victory in the 2017 presidential elections can no longer be dismissed. In Germany, the anti-immigrant Pegida movement is drawing record crowds. In Prague, Czech President Miloš Zeman recently addressed an anti-Muslim rally.

In the Polish city of Wrocław, nationalists chanting “God, honor, and Fatherland” recently burned an orthodox Jew in effigy at an anti-immigrant demonstration in the Polish city of Wrocław. (Go to 3:30 for footage of the burning.) The twisted thinking apparently is that since international forces are seemingly flooding Poland with refugees, Jews must somehow be responsible.

In Ukraine, ultra-rightists told a crowd of 500 people in Kiev that their country was in the “grip of the world Zionist conspiracy.”

All this is without ISIS seizing state power in Syria, so imagine what would happen if it did. Obama should be careful what he wishes for since he just might get it.

Turkey’s downing of a Russian Su-24 is yet more good news for ISIS. All at once, French President François Hollande’s dreams of a united front with Russia against Al Qaeda and ISIS have been dashed. Obama’s told-you-so tone at his press conference with Hollande on Nov. 24 was revealing.

The incident, Obama told reporters, “points to an ongoing problem with the Russian operations in the sense that they are operating very close to a Turkish border, and they are going after a moderate opposition that are supported by not only Turkey but a wide range of countries. And if Russia is directing its energies towards Daesh and ISIL, some of those conflicts, or potentials for mistakes or escalation, are less likely to occur.”

In other words, if Russia doesn’t want to lose more planes, it should cooperate with the West’s strategy of avoiding attacks on Sunni jihadists not directly connected to ISIS.

“The challenge,” Obama went on, “has been Russia’s focus on propping up Assad rather than focusing on ISIL. ... It’s difficult because if their priority is attacking the moderate opposition that might be future members of an inclusive Syrian government, Russia is not going to get the support of us or a range of other members of the coalition.”

This is the “moderate” opposition that on Monday appealed to Al Nusra to sever ties with Al Qaeda and cooperate with the rest of the rebel movement. “I call on the honorable Syrian revolutionaries in this group” said Khaled Khoja, leader of the Syrian National Coalition, the main opposition body, “to return to the broad umbrella of the Syrian revolution and spare the country further destruction.”

If Khoja regards the head-choppers of Al Nusra as honorable revolutionaries, then what does it say about the rebel opposition as a whole? Isn’t it yet another example of expanding the definition of “moderate” to include Sunni sectarians who want to turn Syria into an Islamic state?

Patrick Cockburn, the London *Independent's* estimable Middle East correspondent, recently pointed out that ISIS can only be defeated “when its many enemies are more united.” But with Turkey shooting down a Russian plane and Obama refusing to cooperate with Russia as long as it cooperates with Assad, those claiming to oppose ISIS have never been more splintered.

Thanks to this continued U.S. insistence on “regime change,” extremist prospects are looking up.