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## **ISIS Can Be Defeated - Putin Said How**

**At the UN General Assembly Session Putin set out a clear plan to defeat ISIS. It is workable but is the West interested?**

By Alexander MERCOURIS, RT, 16.11.2015

Ever since the Islamic State emerged on the global stage in 2014 following its capture of Mosul, the Russians have been hammering away warnings about the threat it represents.

Here is what President Putin said at the UN General Assembly: (1)

“The so-called Islamic State has tens of thousands of militants fighting for it, including former Iraqi soldiers who were left on the street after the 2003 invasion. ...

And now radical groups are joined by members of the so-called “moderate” Syrian opposition backed by the West. They get weapons and training, and then they defect and join the so-called Islamic State.

In fact, the Islamic State itself did not come out of nowhere.

It was initially developed as a weapon against undesirable secular regimes.

Having established control over parts of Syria and Iraq, Islamic State now aggressively expands into other regions.

It seeks dominance in the Muslim world and beyond. Their plans go further.

The situation is extremely dangerous.

In these circumstances, it is hypocritical and irresponsible to make declarations about the threat of terrorism and at the same time turn a blind eye to the channels used to finance and support terrorists.....

It is equally 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.

I'd like to tell those who engage in this: Gentlemen, the people you are dealing with are cruel but they are not dumb. They are as smart as you are.

So, it's a big question: who's playing who here? The recent incident where the most “moderate” opposition group handed over their weapons to terrorists is a vivid example of that.

We consider that any attempts to flirt with terrorists, let alone arm them, are short-sighted and extremely dangerous. This may make the global terrorist threat much worse, spreading it to new regions around the globe, especially since there are fighters from many different countries, including European ones,

gaining combat experience with Islamic State. Unfortunately, Russia is no exception.

Now that those thugs have tasted blood, we can't allow them to return home and continue with their criminal activities.....

Russia has consistently opposed terrorism in all its forms. Today, we provide military-technical assistance to Iraq, Syria and other regional countries fighting terrorist groups. We think it's a big mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian authorities and government forces who valiantly fight terrorists on the ground.

We should finally admit that President Assad's government forces and the Kurdish militia are the only forces really fighting terrorists in Syria. Yes, we are aware of all the problems and conflicts in the region, but we definitely have to consider the actual situation on the ground.

What we propose is to join efforts to address the problems that all of us are facing, and create a genuinely broad international coalition against terrorism.

Dear colleagues, I must note that such an honest and frank approach on Russia's part has been recently used as a pretext for accusing it of its growing ambitions — as if those who say that have no ambitions at all.

However, it is not about Russia's ambitions, dear colleagues, but about the recognition of the fact that we can no longer tolerate the current state of affairs in the world

What we actually propose is to be guided by common values and common interests rather than by ambitions.

Relying on international law, we must join efforts to address the problems that all of us are facing, and create a genuinely broad international coalition against terrorism.

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 prefaced these words with his now famous rhetorical question - which by the way he also answered in the next sentence:

***“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 and the Russians are right.

The Islamic State - and the various violent jihadi groups it both cooperates with and competes with - are a threat to humanity.

First and foremost the Islamic State is a threat to the people of Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Egypt, Afghanistan and Syria - in all of which places it has now become established.

It is a threat to the people of Turkey, where it recently carried out a horrible atrocity against people demonstrating for peace in Ankara.

It is engaged in a violent insurgency in Sinai and has claimed responsibility for the crash of a Russian airliner flying from Egypt to Russia, which left hundreds of innocent people dead.

It is a threat to the people of Lebanon, where it recently carried out another horrible atrocity, killing scores of people in Beirut.

Now it has committed the latest in this string of atrocities with its horrifying attack on Paris.

Who doubts that it is a threat to the people of every country including the people of the US?

It is therefore imperative that the leaders and people of the West - first and foremost the opinion formers there - finally heed Putin's words.

The only way to confront the Islamic State is to eradicate it utterly, together with its vile ideology.

That is not as difficult a task as some people make it out to be.

Firstly, for all its bluster, the Islamic State is militarily weak.

The regions it controls are poor and devastated by war. There is no consensus about the size of its military forces, but however big they are they are essentially a lightly armed militia force lacking advanced technology or sophisticated weapons.

In no way is the the army of the Islamic State a match militarily for the immeasurably more powerful armies of the great world powers - first and foremost those of the US and Russia.

Secondly, it is deeply unpopular with those it rules. Hated is probably not too strong a word.

Its insane cruelty, and the puritanical laws it relentlessly imposes, are such as no human society would ever willingly accept or impose on itself. This is a totalitarianism only matched by the one the Khmer Rouge established briefly in Cambodia.

Once liberated from this sort of yoke the people the Islamic State rules will no more want it back than the people of Cambodia in the 1980s wanted the Khmer Rouge back.

This is not mere inference.

According to an opinion poll conducted recently in Iraq and Syria, only 5% of Iraqis consider the Islamic State a positive influence. (2)

In Syria - possibly because of the greater polarisation caused by the war but more probably because of fear of retribution provoked by its murderous methods - that rises to just 22%, still very much a minority.

What the people of Iraq and Syria really think of the Islamic State is perhaps shown best by another finding in the same opinion poll: more than 80% of the people of both countries believe it is a foreign/US construct - which is to say they overwhelmingly see the Islamic State as an alien force imposed on them from outside.

The Islamic State's unpopularity means that once defeated its prospects of melting away amongst the local people and waging a guerrilla war are close to nil.

As it happens the Islamic State is so unpopular it needs to recruit a large proportion of its fighters from foreign volunteers, a fact which must reinforce the impression amongst the local people that it is a foreign army of occupation. That makes it all but impossible for its fighters to hide amongst the local people to wage a guerrilla war.

This is in stark contrast to the Taliban, which was a genuine Afghan movement that was far less brutal and far more popular, and which did genuinely provide Afghanistan with a better or at least a more orderly government than what came immediately before and after it.

It was however by proclaiming the Caliphate and declaring its chief - the man who previously called himself "Ibrahim Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi" - as the Caliph, that the Islamic State guaranteed its eventual destruction.

By declaring himself Caliph, Al Baghdadi is claiming leadership of the entire Muslim world. According to him it is now a religious duty for all Muslims to obey him.

This claim gives Al Baghdadi and his movement their allure. It is also however his greatest act of folly.

Firstly, he is making a claim that the vast majority of Muslims - and all Muslim governments - are bound to contest. That alone all but guarantees his eventual failure.

Secondly, as Caliph - i.e. as Commander of the Faithful of God - he can no longer afford to appear to fail.

He cannot copy Osama bin Laden and live life on the run, or become just a guerrilla leader. As Caliph he needs people and territory to rule, otherwise his credibility as Caliph collapses.

The military weakness of his movement however means that he cannot hold territory if there is a determined effort to wrest it from him.

Above all he must constantly show his followers that he is winning, and that he will deliver them the victory ordained by God, which as Commander of the Faithful of God he has promised them. If his followers start to doubt his eventual victory their faith in him will go, at which point his authority and that of his movement will collapse.

This means that neither he nor his organisation can survive defeat in the way the Taliban and Al Qaeda could after they were defeated in Afghanistan in 2001.

That is probably why the Islamic State has embarked on the orgy of violence and destruction we have seen over the last few weeks.

For the first time since the Caliphate was proclaimed last year, Al Baghdadi and his movement feel under pressure.

In Syria Russian air strikes are hurting them as never before.

The Syrian army - backed by Russian air strikes - is gaining ground near Aleppo, and is close to liberating Palmyra.

The Kurds in the north are slowly closing in on Raqqa - the Islamic State's "capital" - despite obstruction from Turkey.

In Iraq - according to some reports - an Iraqi airstrike wounded Al-Baghdadi himself.

In face of these setbacks Al Baghdadi needs spectacular acts of violence to show his followers that he is still strong, and that they and he are still winning.

That is why there has been this recent spike of atrocities as Al Baghdadi and the Islamic State lash out in all directions.

In reality, the only reason Al Baghdadi and the Islamic State still exist despite the weakness and contradictions at the heart of their movement is because those who ought to be united against them are divided because the US and the Western powers remain fixated with their geopolitical games.

A recent article by Patrick Cockburn we republished recently shows how the US military campaign against the Islamic State in Syria is a fiction, as the US's priority remains the overthrow of President Assad. (3)

It is this obsession with overthrowing the Syrian government - the one thing standing in the way of Al Baghdadi and his movement taking over the whole of Syria- which explains why Al Baghdadi and his Islamic State are still there.

What makes it worse is that some governments still appear to believe they can manipulate jihadi movements like Al Baghdadi's to achieve their goal of overthrowing the Syrian government.

Here is what Putin said about that:

"It is equally 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.

I'd like to tell those who engage in this: Gentlemen, the people you are dealing with are cruel but they are not dumb. They are as smart as you are. So, it's a big question: who's playing who here? The recent incident where the most "moderate" opposition group handed over their weapons to terrorists is a vivid example of that."

Putin again is obviously right. It is incredible that the obvious truths he says have to be spelled out in this way, and it is still more incredible that there are still so many people in positions of power and influence in the West who deny them.

If the latest atrocity in Paris is used as pretext to step up the West's undeclared war against President Assad and Syria - as is desired by some and feared by others (4) - then that would be an exercise in utter perversity.

It would be exactly what Al Baghdadi and his movement want, and would be a total betrayal of the people who have been killed in Paris - and before that in Syria, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt.

If there is one thing however that has become abundantly clear in recent years it is that there are some people in the West who - whether out of vanity or ideology - are prepared to embrace this folly.

The time has come - indeed it is long overdue - for people like that to be shunted aside and for the leaders of the West to put aside their geopolitical games and focus instead on doing what they were elected to do, which is safeguard the interests of their people.

That means working to achieve a peaceful settlement in Syria through honest negotiations held without pre-conditions, whilst uniting to eliminate murderous fanatics like Al Baghdadi, his Islamic State and the other jihadi groups that have proliferated as the war has dragged on.

It means working with Russia and Iran to achieve these objectives.

It means working with the Syrian army and government to defeat the jihadis and the Islamic State. As Putin rightly says, they and the Kurds are the ones who are actually fighting the jihadis in Syria, and it is sheer perversity not to help them do so.

It means accepting the possibility that President Assad may stay if in genuinely free elections a majority of the Syrian people decide to vote for him - as every opinion poll and survey of opinion conducted in Syria since the start of the conflict that I have seen says they will.

It means embracing Putin's proposal for a global alliance against the sort of jihadi terrorism that Al Baghdadi and people like him represent.

Lastly, it should be obvious that Europe cannot go on admitting without proper checks unlimited floods of refugees from the Middle East.

Here is what Sergei Ivanov - Russia's Number 2 and Putin's Chief of Staff - said about that just a few weeks ago in the interview he gave to TASS at the end of October, which we recently published: (5)

“How can one be sure that among the migrants there are no “sleepers” - sleeping agents or undercover terrorists who are on the way to the Old World for the purpose of settling down inconspicuously somehow and waiting for the D-day to come?

And on that D-day they will emerge in the forefront again to play the very well familiar role.

For instance, of a suicide bomber who is prepared to give up one's life for faith and take as many other human lives as possible? I wouldn't like to utter gloom

prophecies, but I personally have no doubts it will happen this way. I am dead certain!”

In the light of what has just happened in Paris these words sound terrifyingly prescient.

Since Ivanov sees the reports of Russia's intelligence agencies it is possible he was repeating what they were warning him. However, given the sort of organisation the Islamic State is, the possibility it might do what Ivanov warned about ought to be obvious.

If the Western powers refuse to do all these things then the war against the Islamic State will drag on. There will in that case be many more atrocities like the one in Paris. It will be innocent people who will pay the price.

### **Notes**

(1) <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>

(2) <http://www.opinion.co.uk/article.php?s=orbiiacss-poll-in-iraq-and-syria-gives-rare-insight-into-public-opinion>

(3) <http://russia-insider.com/en/military/russia-hits-isil-hard-us-just-goes-through-motions/ri11027>

(4) <http://russia-insider.com/en/politics/western-elites-already-spinning-paris-narrative-their-advantage/ri11169>

(5) <http://russia-insider.com/en/politics/sergey-ivanov-talks-tass/ri11080>