

Syria Is Not A Strategic Priority For Washington

WASHINGTON – It is clear that Russia, as the key ally of president Assad of Syria, has taken a lead role in trying to set the stage for a final peace settlement regarding this tragically battered country. The recent Sochi meeting in which president Putin hosted president Rouhani of Iran and president Erdogan of Turkey seems to illustrate a resurgent Russia once again playing a key role in the Middle East.

America in retreat?

In Washington, the defenders of the (frankly defunct) myth of Pax Americana sounded alarm bells. *“America is in full retreat –they admonish us– and the bad guys are filling the void. We are losing ground, while they are gaining”.*

Indeed. But here is the question. Is the American national interest really profoundly impacted by who is in control in Syria? What’s so important about Syria from Washington’s standpoint? Well, very little. Sure enough, if we look at a map of the Middle East, we can see that a firm Russian foothold into Syria, plus continuing Iranian influence there, changes the geopolitical picture.

Russia and Iran in the lead

True. Still, this being the case, in what way does this geopolitical realignment affect America’s vital interests? Syria is now a semi-destroyed and completely impoverished country. Whoever will exercise influence on Damascus does not gain that much. In fact, to the extent that the Russians need to prove that they are real friends of Assad, they would have to support Damascus financially, for many years. And this may prove to be quite a burden for a Russian state not exactly swimming in wealth.

Iran's influence in Syria is a concern. However, there are several counterweights within the region to Tehran's hegemonic ambitions. From this perspective, it would be prudent for Washington to continue supporting its traditional Sunni Arab allies who are actively opposing Tehran's expansionism.

Middle East no longer of critical importance

That said, even taking all this into account, the idea that Washington "*must*" regain its historic role as a key powerful player in the Middle East has no longer any strong rational justification.

Of course, until a few years ago, one could have argued that the Middle East indeed had extraordinary strategic value for Washington, because it sits on most of the oil the rest of the world desperately needs.

Well, this argument is far less compelling today, in this new era of abundant oil supplies in large measure caused by America's newly discovered technologies (fracking and horizontal drilling) that allowed US energy companies to exploit massive domestic shale oil reserves. Indeed, thanks to fracking, in just a few years America doubled its oil production. This is a real game changer.

Besides, if you add to this dramatic domestic oil production boom increased oil supplies from Canada, plus imports from Mexico, Colombia, and Venezuela, the U.S. has, or will soon have, "*hemispheric energy independence*". This means that most of the oil America will need will come from domestic sources or from imports from reliable neighboring countries, and not from the Persian Gulf.

Middle Eastern oil not so important

Now, this is a major and completely benign geopolitical change! In simple language, as the U.S. no longer relies on Middle Eastern oil for its very economic viability,

controlling events in the region is no longer such a key priority.

Besides, going forward, the slow but steady emergence of electric vehicles as commercially plausible alternatives to gasoline powered cars makes the strategic importance of oil, and therefore of Middle Eastern oil and whoever owns it or controls it, progressively far less significant.

Down the line, if you take oil out of the equation, or at least if you downgrade its strategic value as the (no longer so) essential fuel for all modern industrial countries, the Middle East becomes far less important. Absent oil and the power and wealth that it brings, Taiwan is a far more significant player in the global economy than Saudi Arabia.

Let Syria go

Bottom line, let's not fret about who will be in charge in Damascus. After years of civil war that caused destruction and millions of refugees, Syria is a disaster, a true basket case. Even assuming wildly optimistic scenarios, it will take years and astronomic investments to bring it back to semi normality. Let Russia worry about all this.

US Enacted Sanctions Against Russia

WASHINGTON – It should not come as a surprise that Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to retaliate in kind, after the US Congress passed a bill (subsequently signed into law by President Trump) that includes tough economic sanctions against Russia, as retribution for Russia's alleged

interference in the US 2016 elections, and for unrelated issues pertaining to its meddling in Ukraine and more.

Punish Russia

Back in 2016, then US President Barack Obama ordered punitive measures against Russian diplomats stationed in the USA based on US intelligence findings that Russia had actively attempted to interfere in the U.S. elections via hacking and other cyber attacks. The sanctions included the expulsion of a number of Russian diplomats. These sanctions were included in a presidential directive issued by Obama. As such they could have been rescinded by the new president. But now the tougher sanctions have been enacted by the Congress and therefore President Trump will not be able to eliminate them or modify them unilaterally.

Putin's reaction

After the US Congress passed this law containing sanctions, by a huge margin in both houses, Putin decided to get even, as he realized that these are "veto proof" majorities. In other words, even if he wanted to, a more conciliatory President Trump could not have blocked this legislation.

Putin's objective seems to get even. In order to bring the number of US diplomatic personnel in Russia down to the same level of what Russia is allowed to have in the United States, (455), 755 American diplomats will have to leave Russia. This is a major cut.

Impact

Will this move affect Washington Moscow based diplomats' ability to engage Russia in a meaningful way? Probably yes, even though it is not clear at this time which sectors of the bilateral relationship will be mostly affected by these significant cuts.

Most of all, this sequence of tough actions and counter actions indicates that US – Russia relations are in very bad shape, without any signs of improvements.

No Ambassador

To make things worse, keep in mind that the U.S. currently has no Ambassador in Moscow. Former Utah Governor and now Chairman of the Atlantic Council Jon Huntsman has been nominated by President Trump to fill that post, but he has not yet been confirmed by the Senate.

Once confirmed, will Huntsman, an astute businessman who also served as U.S. Ambassador to China, be able to help turn things around? There are at least some areas in which Washington and Moscow can find common ground. At some point, there will have to be some kind of agreement on the future of Syria. There is also an opportunity to convince Russia that it is not to its ultimate advantage to be on the same side of Iran in the Middle East.

Common front on North Korea?

And finally there is the looming threat of North Korea's long-range ballistic missiles, soon to be armed with nuclear warheads. North Korea's threat is clearly aimed at the USA and its allies, South Korea and Japan. But Russia cannot be too happy with the idea of an unstable regime capable of launching nuclear armed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles, (ICBMs) at its door step.

The Russia probe cloud

That said, for the bilateral relations climate to improve, the whole "Russia probe" now led by former FBI Director Robert Mueller must be concluded in Washington. Indeed, whatever the outcome of Mueller's investigations, only after he is done it will be possible to go back to a "normal" dialogue between Moscow and Washington.

That said, in the end, both sides must know that there is nothing to be gained when the two most important nuclear powers on earth do not engage with each other. Nuclear war between Russia and America is a very, very remote possibility. But such a possibility may be increased by misunderstandings and misperceptions.

Notwithstanding the sharp differences between the two countries, open lines of communication are an essential tool that will help prevent fatal errors. And both sides should know that they need competent diplomats in each other's capitals to keep those lines open.

America Cut Funds to Syrian Rebels

WASHINGTON – After the fall of Aleppo, I concluded that the Syrian opposition to Assad had been essentially defeated. Sure, some resistance still exists. But the chances of overthrowing Assad via military actions is a dream. Americans (half-hearted, in my view) efforts to force regime change in Damascus by supporting the domestic Syrian opposition through military assistance have failed.

No more US aid to the opposition

Now we learn that the Trump administration about a month ago decided to stop helping the Syrian rebels via a CIA operation code-named “Timber Sycamore”. I call this cutting one's losses and moving on.

Of course, some analysts immediately argued that cutting off

the rebels is a big Trump favor to Russian President Putin. A big favor without getting anything in return. They argue that arming the Syrian rebels was smart policy, because it created a pressure point against the Assad regime that could have been used at a later date as a bargaining chip during negotiations about a future settlement of the conflict in Syria.

It did not work

May be so. But, while the details about how much money was spent and how cost-effective this operation has been are not publicly available, the truth is that the Syrian opposition aided by the US and several Arab countries was never very effective; and now it has been essentially beaten. Not completely destroyed. Still, after the fall of Aleppo, it lost any chance of overthrowing the Damascus regime, or even inflicting serious damages to it.

Accept defeat

The Trump administration seems to have accepted this; while it is keen on focusing on the ongoing fight against the Islamic State, or ISIL. Therefore: *"Let's cut our losses, concentrate our efforts on beating ISIL, and stop throwing good money after bad"*.

New consensus

There seems to be a new consensus within the US Government that removing Assad from power is no longer a priority. (Obama instead repeatedly declared that Assad "had to go", because of his violations of human rights and other crimes against the Syrian people). Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and others actually said publicly that the removal of President Assad is no longer a precondition for any serious talks about the future of Syria.

Waste of money

Given all this, continuing a CIA funded operation aimed at arming a few Syrian rebels who do not have any realistic chances to achieve much against regular pro-Assad forces backed by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, seems like a waste of time and money.

Betrayed

Of course, if you were part of a Syrian rebels group that had been included in this CIA funded program and you were counting on continuing American military and financial support, you have every right of feeling betrayed. But this would not be the first time in which allies of America have been dropped by Washington, on account of larger strategic considerations.

The Obama Foreign Policy Record

WASHINGTON – The almost universally accepted narrative dished out daily by the serious, high brow U.S. media is that come January 20, 2017, with Donald Trump as President, we shall have 4 years of *“Amateur Hour”* in U.S. foreign policy. This dismal prospect is of course a far cry from the thoughtful, insightful and properly balanced foreign policy agenda expertly crafted and implemented by President Barack Obama and his top-notch foreign and national security policy team.

The incompetents are taking over

We are told by savvy analysts that, all of sudden, from reliable, steady competence that –as we all should know–

raised American prestige worldwide, we shall plunge into an abyss of policy mayhem stirred by dangerous ignorance mixed with laughable (or dangerous) braggadocio, with a stupendously unqualified Commander in Chief at the helm.

Condescension

This narrative is another expression of the Olympian condescension of the perennially entitled leaders of the Washington foreign affairs establishment. They simply cannot get used to the reality of a complete outsider, with no real hands-on experience in this field until now reserved to few insiders, now in charge.

Trump is inexperienced

True, Trump is inexperienced. He may indeed fail in foreign policy, and we should not take this prospect lightly, as there are bound to be consequences. On the other hand, he may not fail, after all. Trump will have a team working for him. Most of the people he picked thus far have considerable international and national security experience.

Right mix?

That said, has he chosen the right mix of people? Even more important, when confronted with difficult decisions, in murky situations when there is no obvious right policy choice, will Trump have the right instincts? Will he manage to safeguard—better yet, advance—the American National Interest? Quite frankly, we do not know yet. Time will tell.

Obama's record

However, while we can only speculate about the future, we do know a great deal about the Obama Team foreign policy record. And, no, it is not stellar. Contrary to the official narrative, the supposedly expert hands that have been in charge until now are not shining stars. And Obama is no great

leader when it comes to directing U.S. foreign affairs. Hesitation, mixed messages and retreat have defined American foreign policy under his stewardship.

Now, after George W. Bush's profoundly ill-advised pro-democracy enthusiasm which led America into two horrendously costly and mostly unsuccessful wars –Afghanistan and then Iraq– a new foreign policy guided by restraint was indeed a welcome change after the 2008 elections. But there is a huge distinction between careful, calculated withdrawal behind defensible lines, while spelling out U.S. continuing strategic priorities, and policy confusion leading to retreat.

Allowing chaos in Iraq

In Iraq, President Barack Obama used Baghdad's intransigence regarding the legal status of U.S. troops which would stay on after December 2011 as a good excuse for ending the negotiation with then Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. With no deal with Baghdad in place, the U.S. pulled completely out of Iraq at the end of 2011.

At that time Iraq was a relatively stable but still fragile and politically split country (Sunni in the North, Shia in the South) in which America had invested an enormous amount of resources. Pulling out completely while the wounds had not healed was an ill-advised and in the end horribly wrong decision.

To this day, President Obama claims he had no choice, given the uncooperative stance of the Baghdad government. But this is nonsense. If the Obama administration really wanted a deal with Prime Minister al-Maliki that would have allowed a substantial U.S. military presence after 2011 it would have found a way to get one.

Get out

The fact is that Obama wanted out of Iraq, entirely for

domestic political reasons. He wanted out of Iraq in order to show to the American people that he had made good on a major campaign promise: he had brought all the troops home. And, in fact, later on he repeatedly bragged about this “accomplishment” represented by the closing of the Iraq War chapter. Which is to say that concerns about Obama’s popularity at home caused America to essentially abandon a country in which it had invested years, hundreds of billions, and so many lives of killed U.S. soldiers.

Could sizable American troops stationed in Iraq have prevented the steady descent into chaos that followed their departure? We do not know for sure. But it is not far-fetched to believe that they could have helped keep things together.

Belated U-turn in 2014

That said, Obama was forced to make a complete U-Turn on Iraq when this deeply divided country was confronted with an invasion masterminded in 2014 by the Islamic State, or ISIL from its bases in Eastern Syria. A massive invasion, by the way, that the sophisticated Obama intelligence leaders never saw coming.

With no U.S. troops on the ground, (thanks to Obama’s complete troops withdrawal decided back in December 2011), ISIL breezed, mostly unopposed, into Northern Iraq. In a matter of days it took over Mosul –the second largest city in the country– and the entire North West of Iraq. An eyewitness quoted by *The Guardian* said that:

“The city [Mosul] fell like a plane without an engine. They [ISIL] were firing their weapons into the air, but no one was shooting at them.”

Beyond taking over Mosul, ISIL captured vast amounts of cash and a huge arsenal of U.S. supplied weapons and material, simply because the Iraqi troops had run away.

So, here is the upshot regarding Obama's record on Iraq: U.S. troops out; ISIL in. The Caliphate takes over 1/3 of the country within days. America forced to move back in. But slowly and with hesitation. Meanwhile, militias funded by Iran spread through the country. This is complete policy failure.

Surge in Afghanistan?

In Afghanistan, President Obama started with an almost comical public debate in the Fall of 2009 (first year of his mandate) about what U.S. policy should be regarding the continuing Taliban insurgency. Obama finally ended the deliberations in November 2009 with a commitment to a "Iraq-like" surge in Afghanistan. But it was a surge accompanied by a publicly announced withdrawal timetable.

Yes it was just like that. Washington would send additional troops aimed at stabilizing this perennially chaotic country; but only for a short while. How ill-advised. You go to war not to shoot around a little bit, and then go home. You go to war to win. Or you do not go at all. Result? 2016 is over and the war in Afghanistan is still going on. This is another failure due to Washington's indecisiveness and half measures.

Get rid of Ghaddafi

Then there was Libya, and the ill-conceived idea of toppling dictator Ghaddafi, without even a thought of a game plan about what to do afterwards. Result? Ghaddafi was toppled and he is certainly dead. But so is Libya, now a failed state torn apart by various warring militias. This is failure number three.

Hesitation about Syria

And what about Syria? in 2011, at the beginning of the Arab Spring, President Obama declared that President Assad heavy-handed repression of initially peaceful pro-democracy demonstrations was intolerable. Assad, Obama declared, "*had to go*".

Strong words. However, this clear statement of a U.S. policy objective –nothing but regime change would do for Syria–lacked even the semblance of a policy aimed at obtaining the outcome: make Assad go.

This incoherence between grandiose objectives and no policy to implement them was only the beginning of a half-hearted U.S. policy in support of some factions within the Syrian opposition.

Military planners should know that a little bit of support is not enough. In war, either you are in or you are out. Even if your method is to support the opposition, as opposed to sending your own troops, you have to be with them all the way. Support to your side in the conflict has to be decisive. The objective must be victory.

Media criticism

Well, even the serious usually pro-Obama media, after years of U.S. half measures, recognized that Syria is a huge policy failure for Obama. this is a BBC analysis dated October 2015:

“[Regarding Syria] the philosophical discussion at the White House was heated and fierce, leading to stalemate, not resolution.

For years Obama and his deputies refused to say categorically: we’re not doing this. Instead a decision was postponed.

Four years later, the result is a splintered Syrian opposition, the growth of the Islamic State group and a humanitarian disaster stretching across Europe.

Last year, in a move that was more symbolic than serious, Obama asked Congress for money to fund a programme allowing US personnel to teach rebels marksmanship, navigation and other skills.

The goal was to train about 15,000 rebels in Jordan and other

countries so they could return to Syria and fight. However, US defence officials admitted last month [September 2015] that only four or five of the recruits in the programme had actually returned to the battle."

It ended badly

And this was the BBC, a fairly sympathetic voice. A year later, things got only worse. The result of years of U.S. policy confusion and half measures is a semi-destroyed Syria, Russian massive intervention in support of Assad, the Iranians and Hezbollah firmly planted there, a defeated opposition just driven out of Aleppo, not to mention untold numbers of dead people and millions of refugees. And now, a new ceasefire was arranged by Russia in partnership with Turkey and Iran. The U.S. is not even at the table. Talk about American retreat. This is a colossal policy failure.

ISIL in Iraq

And then there is ISIL in Iraq, the worst consequence of the U.S. total military withdrawal from the country it had invaded back in March of 2003. In a speech to the Nation, on September 10, 2014, President Obama sounded really tough about ISIL and the threat that it represented for the region and indeed the world.

He declared that: *"Our objective is clear: we will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy"*.

It sounded that America really meant business. To begin with, Obama told the world that Washington had assembled a powerful coalition of 66 countries. Impressive? Not so much. If you care to dig just a little bit, you discover that this unbeatable anti-ISIL Armada includes heavyweights like Luxembourg, Somalia, Iceland, Bosnia, Bahrain, Romania, Cyprus, Estonia, Panama, Montenegro, Latvia and Albania. Are you still impressed?

Painfully slow progress

And the American military effort has also been modest. Two years later, while there have been significant successes against ISIL, we are still not done. Coalition supported Iraqi forces, (by the way this would also include support from Iran) are getting closer to Mosul; but they are still far from retaking it and eventually driving ISIL out of Iraq, let alone “destroying” it, as Obama pledged.

This is almost inconceivable. ISIL is a bunch of nasty thugs who use barbaric methods. But ISIL is not the German Wehrmacht smashing France, or the Japanese Imperial Army conquering Manchuria or the Philippines. It is a rag-tag, third-rate military force. It is unbelievable that America, with the largest and most technologically advanced military force in the world, could not destroy the self-proclaimed Islamic Caliphate in a matter of weeks.

To the contrary, a recent *Washington Post* story indicated that this battle against ISIL is going to be long slug:

“.[...]But a full offensive to retake the city [of Raqqa, de facto capital of ISIL] could still be months or more away, despite hopes in Washington that an operation to take the Islamic State’s most symbolically significant stronghold would be well underway before President Obama left office.”

This slow and uneven progress is the military outcome of policy confusion and partial military engagement. Despite Obama’s clear commitment a couple of year ago, the mighty U.S. still has not managed to “*degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL*”.

Pivot to Asia?

And there are many more examples of grand plans that yielded little. Consider the pivot to Asia. Nice idea; but little to show in terms of results. Suffice to say that China, just as

America publicly committed to shift its policy focus on Asia, has managed to increase its sphere of influence throughout most of the South China Sea –essentially unchallenged.

True, the Obama administration made all the right noises when confronted with the evidence that China is busy building up and militarizing small islands scattered across the South China Sea that it occupied with the bogus justification that these rocks (some of which do not even qualify as “land” according to international law) have always been under Chinese sovereignty.

The Obama administration has not been able to challenge this creeping Chinese expansion, nor has it been capable or willing to persuade the Chinese to retreat and get out.

Iran

I am purposely leaving out of this analysis the Iran nuclear deal, because it is a lot more complicated than these other issues, and because in Iran’s case the Obama administration acted with purpose towards a fairly clear policy objective: freeze the Iranian nuclear program. And this objective has been reached. While there are many vocal critics of the deal, none of them seem to have a better plan. Just getting out of a “bad deal” without having anything to replace it will not yield better outcomes.

Obama’s retreat

Anyway, you get the picture. Clearly, it is always easy to point out foreign policy failures with the benefit of hindsight. Of course, it would be completely unfair to blame Obama for an Arab World in chaos, and other major troubles.

Still, the net result of Obama’s 8 years in office is not stellar.

All in all, U.S. policies regarding Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya,

Syria and ISIL reveal a pattern of hesitation, in fact genuine confusion, and the inability to define, articulate and pursue what in Obama's mind is the U.S. national interest.

What U.S. retreat signals to the world

It would be disingenuous to conclude that all these failures, mixed messages and retreats from the world stage do not matter, because America after all is still the most powerful country on earth.

It is obvious that other political leaders around the world look at both American military capabilities and American political will. If they conclude that America lost its will, its powerful military forces will not deter as much as they used to.

Will Trump be better?

In the end, it is perfectly alright to express doubts about President-elect Trump ability to articulate a mature U.S. foreign policy. Still, the idea that come January 20 2017 the rowdy, clueless children are taking over, while the thoughtful grown ups have been driven out of the room is nonsense.

Quite frankly, if the poor Obama foreign policy record is the best the mature and experienced adults are capable of, then we may as well give the untested Trump and his team a chance.

Who knows, they may surprise us.

Italy Overwhelmed by Poor African Immigrants

WASHINGTON – Italy has two major demographic problems. Both of them carry bad outcomes. Italy is the destination of too many immigrants from poor countries in Africa and the Middle East; while its native population is shrinking due to extremely low fertility rates. In plain language: not enough new babies.

Gloomy picture

Here is the gloomy end game. Italy's population is progressively becoming more African/Middle Eastern. And this trend brings no economic gains, because most of the new residents are either illiterate or low skilled, while at the same time they are entitled to receiving costly social services.

Crisis point

Add to this social and political tensions caused by the new immigrants. Indeed, according to public officials, Italy has reached a crisis point when it comes to its ability to welcome and integrate immigrants arriving mostly from Africa and the Middle East. Piero Fassino, former Mayor of Turin, a major city in Italy's North West, recently stated that: *"In terms of numbers [of new immigrants] we are at the point of surpassing what can be managed by the public authorities. Unless we deal with it, this immigration problem may overwhelm us"*.

Political tensions

Among other issues, Fassino pointed out that immigrants come up on top of the waiting list for low-cost housing, because they usually have large families (unlike the Italians), and large families have a priority among those waiting for these units.

This way immigrants end up getting the housing originally planned for low income Italians. And this unforeseen development clearly breeds strong anti-immigrant resentment.

Lowest fertility rates

And it gets worse. If we look at the never-ending immigration tidal wave in conjunction with low fertility rates among Italian women, then we have the elements of a demographic/political crisis. Italy now has the lowest number of new births per unit of population in the entire European Union. Simple math: fewer native Italians and more Africans permanently settled in Italy will transform the country's ethnic composition—rather rapidly.

Indeed, Italy is now at the point in which deaths have surpassed new births. This means a progressively shrinking native population. If we consider that in Italy, (like in most other developed countries), social services and pensions going to current recipients are paid for through contributions by active workers, it is obvious that the entire fabric of the Italian welfare state will soon become unsustainable. There will not be enough revenue to finance benefits. Simply stated: too many retirees, and not enough active workers paying into the system.

Immigrants do not add to the quality labor pool

From this perspective, the arrival of large numbers of new immigrants should be viewed as good news, no? More young people with jobs paying into the welfare system, should help re-balance it. Right?

Well, not really. Because these new immigrants are unskilled and mostly illiterate. These new arrivals have hard time get real jobs. They often become part of an informal, underground economy. To put it mildly, they do not add to the quality of Italian human capital. They are a net cost to the country.

No way out

Is there a way of this? Probably not. Italians do not have more children because of a changed culture in which family is no longer thought of as important, and in part because children are deemed to be too expensive for millions of struggling lower income Italians who can barely make ends meet.

Immigrants driven by poverty

At the same time, abject poverty will continue to drive hundreds of thousands of poor Africans out of their Continent. Same thing for Middle Eastern people trying to escape from civil wars, and political chaos in their native lands. Many of them end up in Italy because Italy is close to Africa, Syria, and Iraq. Once the new immigrants get there, hard to move them elsewhere.

So, here are the facts. Soon enough, Italy and others parts of Europe, especially Southern Europe, will look more like Africa and the Middle East.

Can U.S. Fight Insurgencies?

WASHINGTON – Under pressure, the Obama administration released the estimated number of civilians killed (unintentionally) in the course of U.S. drone strikes that have taken place in

various theaters. Along with the figures came new guidance aimed at further reducing “collateral damage”, i.e. the killing of civilians in the course of U.S. air attacks via drones. (These attacks are always aimed at military targets).

Indeed, sometimes, civilians get killed accidentally due to their proximity to military targets. (There have also been a few cases in which civilians have been mistakenly targeted, because it was wrongly assumed, based on the information available at the time, that they were in fact enemy fighters).

Civilians killed by drone attacks

US Intelligence sources stated that 116 civilians were killed in the course of drone strikes aimed at hitting legitimate military targets in different theaters. This usually happens because enemy positions are located in the midst of populated areas.

President Obama stated that America, from now on, will do its very best to further reduce these numbers. Of course, several critics immediately argued that the real number of civilians killed is a lot higher. Besides, this total just announced excludes the death toll from operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan.

This U.S. announcement could be just public relations; or it could be an oblique way to tell the world that from now on the U.S., while fighting elusive enemies on different fronts, will be more restrained. It will bomb less, with drones or conventional aircraft. Indeed, if this new guidance will take effect as stated, hard to bomb more enemy positions most often located in populated urban areas, when your goal is to further reduce the chance of killing civilians.

Restrictive Rules of Engagement

Still, whatever the real numbers of civilians accidentally killed, the truth is that America’s current “Rules of

Engagement” are already extremely restrictive on when and where U.S. bombs can be legitimately used.

Drones strikes are usually planned on the basis of carefully sifted intelligence. “Dynamic” strikes that occur in the context of ongoing military operations however are also subject to complex procedures. Tactical Operations Centers need to authorize them, often only after having received the input of military lawyers who are standing by 24/7 and who are called upon to assess the legality of strikes, on the basis of the available intelligence regarding the situation on the ground.

Is the way to fight a war?

This way of fighting a war looks crazy. But these are the standard rules. Given all these restrictions on what targets can be bombed aimed at avoiding or at least reducing possible civilian casualties, quite often requested strikes are simply not authorized by the U.S. military authorities.

Well, then why do we have non combatants killed by U.S. bombs? Very simple. Al Qaeda, the Taliban and now ISIL do not follow the established laws of warfare. They routinely place their own assets (troops, ammunition, logistics) in the middle of densely populated areas. They deliberately use civilians as human shields. And the purpose of all this is obvious: to deter American attacks.

Civilian deaths become propaganda tools

And when some ISIL positions are indeed attacked and civilians are killed, then there is a huge publicity gain for the insurgents. *“The blood thirsty Americans bomb indiscriminately, deliberately targeting women and children”.*

Needless to say, ISIL and others have a vested interest in inflating the numbers of civilians killed through drone or other U.S. air strikes. This is their own way of fighting the

propaganda war, using the argument of American barbarity in order to recruit more people willing to fight and die for the cause.

Impossible to avoid civilian casualties

The fact is that, even with heroic efforts, it is impossible to avoid civilian casualties while fighting irregular forces that hide within populated areas. It is just impossible. Even with highly sophisticated satellites and other sensors that gather detailed images and provide real time data to those who operate drones, or to pilots of manned aircraft, it is just impossible for the U.S. military to neatly separate combatants who usually wear no uniforms from innocent civilians in populated areas.

No way to win

So, here is the bottom line. If Obama is serious about cutting the number of casualties going forward, then this means that America cannot realistically fight aggressively and win against insurgents who routinely hide in urban areas. Even today, without new restrictions in place on the use of air power, the effort to minimize collateral damage means relatively few air strikes, because many targets are deemed to be unlawful by the military lawyers, and therefore excluded.

More targets will be declared off-limits

If America wants to further diminish the likelihood of future civilian casualties while fighting insurgents, this means that an even larger number of possible military targets will be declared off-limits by the military lawyers, due to their close proximity to civilian areas.

And here is the absurdity. This is no way to fight any war. As troubling as this is to our civilized conscience, it is just impossible to fight an insurgency that operates in cities and towns without causing some unwanted suffering.

If America wants to win against ISIL and other insurgents, it has to accept this fact: if you want to destroy enemy forces that hide in populated areas, you have to accept that civilians will also be killed.

Long, inconclusive conflicts

Otherwise, if avoiding civilian casualties is more important than destroying at least some enemy targets, let's prepare for an endless and inconclusive conflict with adversaries who do not play by the accepted rules of war.

With all the restrictions outlined above, and possibly more to come, the U.S. cannot fight properly; because Washington feels the pressure of a world public opinion that requires America to behave according to an impossible standard.

Dealing With The Terror Threat in America

WASHINGTON – As we are entering the heated phase of the US presidential campaign, the Orlando massacre perpetrated by Omar Mateen, a self-radicalized second generation US born Muslim, has immediately become a major political issue.

Terror and politics

Both Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump felt the pressure to articulate a (supposedly) credible anti-terror strategy aimed at preventing more terror attacks in the US. But the expectation that either of them can come up with a winning strategy that will destroy terrorism while providing total protection to all Americans is patently absurd.

The terror threat

The "Terror Threat" is not a monolith led by an organized command. It is composed of multiple, mostly independent factions spread around at least a dozen countries, with support from a myriad of diverse foot soldiers. They can be citizens of Arab countries. But they can also be European or US national citizens of Arab or other Muslim descent. They can be from Bosnia, Chechnya or Kosovo. Some of them may have received training in Syria. Others may have been convinced to join the global jihad through Islamic propaganda delivered via the internet.

ISIL in Syria and Iraq

Sure enough, America and the West have a tangible target in the self-declared Caliphate, chunks of Syria and Iraq now occupied by ISIL. It can be plausibly argued that the existence of a somewhat functioning "Islamic State" provides encouragement to assorted young dreamers around the world who now are convinced that this new religious-political entity, supposedly founded on total adherence to the True Faith, is the clear sign of an unfolding global revolution of which they are the vanguard.

People believe in crazy things

Yes, this is absolutely crazy. But, as history amply demonstrates, some people at times believe in crazy things. Therefore, redoubling our efforts to destroy the Islamic State is probably a good thing.

But let's not harbor any illusions. The genie of Islamic Fundamentalism is out of the bottle. Even assuming ISIL's quick defeat, (not a sure thing), this millenarian ideology now embraced by ISIL will find another vehicle. It will probably find a new home and new followers in other parts of the world.

Is there are a plan?

Given all of the above, what should a new US President do to protect all Americans? Nothing new, really. America is not confronted with a frontal assault orchestrated by Islamic radicals. ISIL and its associates did not land here as an organized army attacking us. We have a few (certainly not tens of thousands) ISIL followers, spread around, here and there, within America.

Some of them harbor jihadist beliefs and intentions. A small number of them are willing to plot and execute terror attacks –just like Omar Mateen did in Orlando. And the sad reality is that small numbers can do great damage.

Asymmetric warfare

Omar Mateen, the young man of Afghan descent who plotted and executed the Orlando massacre was all by himself. He was not acting (as far as we know) under direct orders of some kind of ISIL supreme leader in the U.S. or the Middle East.

In other words, this horrible Orlando massacre did not require any master plan, structure or chain of command. Again, Mateen did it by all by himself. And look at what he did. Just one man –acting alone– killed 50 people and injured more than 50 others. A real carnage. This is what is known as “asymmetric warfare”. You do not need an army, or even a platoon to kill a large number of unarmed civilians gathered in one place.

Better police work

Is this is so, what is to be done? Realistically, the only thing that a responsible new US President can promise to America is to do his/her best to have and possibly beef up a robust intelligence and police apparatus that hopefully will catch the bad guys before they can act.

But nobody in his right mind can promise 100% success. The

home-grown terrorists are likely to be just like the young man responsible for the Orlando massacre. Most likely they are psychopaths acting on their own who have adopted this ideological veneer –Islamic fundamentalism– in order to justify their violent intentions. Indeed, no sane individual would seriously believe that firing into a crowd of unarmed people will bring about a major, constructive political transformation.

Unrealistic expectations

In a more sober political environment in which voters would avoid harboring unrealistic expectations, both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump would say precisely this. *“We shall do our best. But it is impossible to monitor millions of people 24/7. Some of the bad guys will slip through. More attacks are unfortunately possible.”*

But saying this sounds like hopelessness. The candidates for the highest office in the land “must” offer a “perfect plan”. And so they do, even though they know (and we should know) that this is mostly hot air.

Again, better intelligence and coordinated police work can do something, probably a lot, to mitigate the risk of more attacks. But we cannot expect perfection.

Living with the threat

So, are we going to live with this latent terror threat indefinitely? The answer is yes. Until at least some individuals scattered here and there in the United States (and elsewhere) will be inspired by crazy ideologies that order violence as the best tool to bring about a new order finally based on the True Faith, we should expect more terror plots.

Even if we managed to destroy the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria very quickly, this would not kill –for good– the crazy ideology that breeds terrorists and new terror threats.

A different version of this article was published in www.globalpi.org, the website of the Global Policy Institute, a Washington DC think tank.

German Voters Fear Difficult To Assimilate Immigrants

WASHINGTON – German Chancellor Angela Merkel and her political allies just took a big hit in three states elections from voters seemingly upset with her open door policy that will allow very large numbers of Syrians to be accepted into Germany as refugees.

Elections setback

The CDU (Merkel's party) suffered major losses. The political map in the three German States that just held elections has been changed, quite dramatically. The openly anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany party has done quite well, especially in poorer Saxony-Anhalt, where unemployment is higher than in the rest of Germany.

Anti immigrant revolt?

So, is this sign of a brewing Europe-wide anti immigrant wave that will crush all the established political forces that are still trying to find a balance between humanitarian aspirations and popular concerns about having too many immigrants?

Hard to say. As the German vote shows, the anti-immigrant sentiment is strong; but not yet overwhelming. The AfD political victories in Germany are noticeable but not

stunning. Despite this political setback, Angela Merkel and her coalition are still very much in control in Berlin. And as many opinion polls indicate, her immigration policies still enjoy wide approval.

Fear

That said, we are seeing that lots of voters (in Germany and elsewhere in Europe) now are truly afraid that their countries soon enough will be unrecognizable, because of the impact of too many immigrants from distant lands with completely different customs and religions. This is a bit far-fetched. Europe is not about to be “taken over” by Arab asylum seekers, or more simply by large numbers of economic immigrants from Africa and the Middle East.

Not today, that is.

Something needs to be done

Which is to say that, while the mostly unchecked immigration problem is still somewhat manageable today, unless something really serious is done –quickly– to heavily restrict immigration from Africa and the Middle East, in a few years Europe will be indeed unrecognizable.

Focus on Syria

Let’s clarify this. Right now the media focus is almost entirely on the millions of Syrian refugees driven out of their semi-destroyed country by a bloody and most destructive civil war. Given the focus on Syria, people in Germany and in the rest of Europe may be led to believe that, once peace returns to Syria, this immigration emergency will be over.

May be so regarding Syria. However, the point here is that Syria is only the most noticeable and tragic component of a slow but relentless secular migration from Africa and the Middle East into Europe.

It started decades ago

This phenomenon started decades ago. Every year hundreds of thousands or more sail from North Africa to Italy, Greece or Spain. Some of them have been driven away by conflicts. But most of them are economic migrants.

They have been told that life in Europe is much better. And, in any event, in most instances these poor people are leaving behind a life of never-ending poverty, hardships and lack of opportunity. To them Europe represents hope. Then why not go there?

And they have big hopes, based on good stories. The Europeans are generous. In Europe refugees get shelter, food, medical attention, schools for their children. True or not, these dreams of material improvements available in Europe are strong enough to motivate people to begin long, dangerous and often costly journeys that will lead them to this Promised Land.

Nothing to do with Syria

My simple point is that the hundred of thousands who have been landing for years and years in Southern Italy, after having sailed from North Africa on overcrowded crafts, have absolutely nothing to do with the Syrian crisis. They have been coming into Europe for decades, driven by poverty, way before Syria had become an issue.

And they will continue to come long after the Syrian crisis will have been forgotten. This wave will not stop by itself. It may lose impetus only if at some point in the future African countries will be able to offer to all or most of their citizens attractive economic and education opportunities. At this time, despite higher rates of growth in some African countries, most of them cannot.

The migration into Europe will not stop

To put all this together, the acute immigration crisis caused by the Syrian civil war eventually will come to an end. But the secular wave of migration from Africa and the Middle East to Europe will continue. Day after day, large crafts full of Africans seeking a better life will continue to land in Sicily and other Italian smaller islands.

And these thousands upon thousands who taken together have already become many millions will keep fanning out across Europe.

Time to take action

Therefore, while today's fears of a "take over of Europe by immigrants" may be excessive, the European anti immigrant political forces have a very valid point. Unless the political leaders do something right now to stop this steady inflow, soon enough most of their countries will be unrecognizable.

And those who would conclude that this is just racism should consider the hard realities. Integrating hundreds of thousands of immigrants who keep coming and coming is difficult as a matter of course. But in the case of these immigrants mostly from very poor countries it is a lot more complicated.

Integration is difficult

These are not highly educated Indians with Ph.Ds in computer science. We are talking about integrating mostly illiterate village people, with little or no knowledge about modern societies, and no skills. Add to this the fact that they come from vastly different cultures, with different (and in some cases incompatible) customs and religions, and anybody should understand that integrating them is and will be extremely complicated, and very costly. While racism may play a role in fueling anti immigrant feelings, the truth is that many Europeans are really afraid.

Real fear

They fear that they will have to coexist indefinitely with large, non assimilated alien communities of new immigrants who settle at the margins of their societies.

And this is a very unsettling prospect.

Forget About Assad – America Should Focus on Fighting ISIL

WASHINGTON – What are Obama's options regarding an American "Syria Policy" aimed at supporting the emergence of a democratic state over there? None. Simply stated, we cannot fight and win against ISIL, (entrenched both in Syria and Iraq), while also trying to get rid of President Assad, as he is protected by Russia, Iran, and Iran-funded Hezbollah.

Focus on ISIL

As we should really focus on ISIL, the broader threat, we should let go of any plans aimed at replacing Assad.

As we remember, when the Arab Spring reformist winds reached Syria, President Bashar al-Assad responded with characteristic brutality. Street demonstrators were met with force. Many were killed.

At the very beginning of what (years later) turned out to be a human tragedy of monumental proportions, the Obama administration postured. It issued strong statements, proclamations. "*Assad has got to go*", Obama stated.

Yes, except that there was no appetite to do anything that

would actually *make him* go. At that time, may be there was still a chance to support the moderate, reasonably pro-western Syrian opposition. But that opportunity, assuming that it was viable, came and went.

ISIL firmly entrenched

What happened instead is that the group that became known later on as ISIL managed to exploit the unfolding civil strife within the country to gain control of a huge part of Eastern Syria. From there, the jihadists subsequently managed to quickly invade North Western Iraq, encountering no opposition, because they were viewed as “liberators” by the Sunni majority who live there.

After this territorial conquest, they proclaimed the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate in the territories they control. And it is clear that they believe to be engaged in a global battle whose final objective is Islam’s victory against the rest of the world.

As the situation on the ground rapidly deteriorated, the US administration looked surprised. The impression is that they did not see any of this coming. Since then, not much has happened, except for the mounting destruction within Syria caused by Assad’s forces, various insurgents, ISIL, and now Russian bombs.

America’s air war

True, after much hesitation, President Obama finally declared that America would fight ISIL in order to finally defeat it. Yes, except that the military effort (a limited air war) is so minimal that many people wonder if America means this or not.

But let’s look at where we are now. With America largely absent, Iran and its proxies, plus Russia entered the fray in Syria. (Iran is also supporting the Shia Government in Iraq in its own fight against ISIL).

Russia and Iran protecting Assad

It is clear that Russia and Iran want to save Assad, even though the Syrian President's position has deteriorated. Meanwhile, both America and Iran seem to share an interest in dislodging ISIL from its strongholds in Iraq and Syria.

Given all this, it is clear that America cannot even remotely aspire to obtain its old objective of supporting the emergence of a free, democratic Syria. Syria is now a semi-destroyed, hopeless country. Assad is protected by two major powers. And we have no influence there.

Destroy ISIL

What we can and should do is to destroy ISIL, because its very existence fans the flames of a global, if disorganized, jihadist ideology and groups that support it through violent means, (witness the acts of terrorism in France and elsewhere).

I believe that ISIL's ability to convince thousands of young Muslims to engage in "home-made" jihad is vastly overstated. Still, ISIL is a dangerous cancer now firmly planted in the heart of the Middle East. It has to be eradicated.

Forget about Syria

As for Syria, let's look at it realistically. Did Assad ever launch any messianic, anti-western movement? No, he did not. Was he behind terror attacks against the US Homeland? No, he was not. He was yet another Middle Eastern nasty autocrat. Unpleasant, yes. But no direct threat to the security of the United States. Bottom line: we can live with him.

No deal with ISIL

But we cannot "do a deal" with ISIL. ISIL needs to be eradicated. Is it possible for Washington to work with Russia and may be even Iran on this? Who knows.

Still, whatever the chances of a serious anti-ISIL coalition, Russia and Iran will continue to support Assad.

As we have no way to convince them otherwise, we better admit this reality, forget about Assad, and focus on ISIL.

The Terror Threat Will Not End

WASHINGTON – Terror attacks hatched by crazy militants underscore the deep vulnerabilities of modern, open societies. They trigger an avalanche of emotional and sometimes useless reactions. After Paris was hit hard (yet again) by another cell of Islamic radicals, French President Francois Hollande declared passionately that France is clearly under military assault, and that this is “war”.

Hit them hard?

Well, this being war, as a response to this ISIL-led “military operation” aimed at Paris, Hollande dispatched French jet fighters to hit targets in Raqqa, Syria, the de facto capital of the ISIL-led, “Caliphate”.

Does this response make any sense? Symbolically, may be. But as a military reaction, not a lot; unless Hollande intends to engage up to the end, namely until the complete annihilation of the Caliphate. Well, first of all, France does not have the

military tools to do this. Besides, even complete success would only be a partial victory.

Destroy the Caliphate

I have argued here, several times, that the destruction of the self-described Caliphate would help the “anti-Islamic radicalism” effort. Indeed, the very existence of this bizarre but quite real state, right in the heart of the Middle East, is a source of pride and inspiration for all Islamic militants, and a powerful tool to get more recruits willing to go there, and fight “for the cause”.

That said, I am under no illusion that even the complete and final destruction of the Caliphate will take care of the anti-Western terror problem. At least some of the more committed militants will melt away from the ISIL-controlled territories in Eastern Syria and Northern Iraq and will regroup somewhere else.

A difficult agenda

Well, so what is to be done? There is no simple answer. There is no clear recipe that will quickly lead the West to “victory”. Let’s be clear, even in this strange conflict, “victory” will take place only when all the known and unknown terrorists have been caught, and I mean all of them; and –most crucial– nobody else will be willing to follow their example and engage in any fresh terror plots.

In other words, as in all conflicts, large or small, all the enemy combatants and would-be combatants have to say clearly and unequivocally: “We lost. We are done. No more fighting”.

This is the strategic objective of any conflict, and the only possible definition of “victory”. This must be the goal.

But in this conflict against a variety of terror groups it is

an extremely difficult goal. And here is why.

Many foot soldiers

Whether we like it or not, there are thousands and thousands of people across the Muslim world, and within Muslim communities in Western countries, who now see the West as their mortal enemy. They are not going to change their mind on this any time soon. And there is not much we can do to about any of this.

It is easy

Besides, planning and executing acts of terrorism targeting civilians in Paris, New York, or Berlin is very easy. Right now, it only takes a few motivated people willing to die in a suicide mission to hatch a terror plot. And, sadly, there seem to be plenty of them.

The idea that the Paris terror attacks are the result of a highly sophisticated command and control structure is nonsense. Sure enough, it takes some planning and coordination to plot and execute, simultaneously, multiple attacks. But it is not that complicated. The terrorists identified a number of unprotected, soft targets, (a soccer stadium, a concert hall, and restaurants). Going there and opening fire, indiscriminately, against unarmed civilians is not that difficult.

It is cheap

And it gets even worse. These type of attacks against soft targets are cheap. Very cheap. A recent Reuters story quoted some experts who calculated the up front cost of the Paris terror attacks: about 7,000 Euro, approximately US \$ 7,500.

Well, this is next to nothing. Even if the real amount spent is higher, say 20,000 Euro, it is still a very low bar. So, here is the thing. The barrier to entry to be a terror group

is extremely low. You need a few, motivated people who know how to handle fire arms, and some cash.

How to protect ourselves

Having said all this, how do we protect ourselves? Sadly, a perfect shield does not exist. The main line of defense has to be more and better intelligence. Admittedly, this is a never-ending, thankless job.

There are millions of young, unhappy Muslims who may fit the profile of a would-be terrorist. How do you vet all of them? Impossible. Sure, we can get better at this. But we cannot become perfect.

In the meantime, we can extend police and intelligence services powers. But this creates a conflict with the need to protect our civil liberties. Therefore, here we have an issue. How far can we go? Do we want to become a police state, so that the police can better protect us? It is obvious that this can lead us down a dangerous road.

There is no strategy

Anyway, here is the thing. Bombing Raqqa a couple of times is not a serious strategy. A serious strategy would have to include the complete destruction of IS and the Caliphate. But even this would not be enough.

A serious strategy would have to include the creation of an alternative message that could be embraced by those who now choose militancy and terror plots. This would be the real "silver bullet" that would defeat terrorism. But I doubt that anybody can come up with a new, more appealing "peaceful package" that would actually "sell". The end game here is to convince young militants that there are better ways to get more opportunities in the societies they live in. Unfortunately, nobody is that smart. As yet, nobody developed a new message that can gain real traction.

Silly grandstanding, empty talk

In the meantime, though, we waste time grandstanding with unproductive talk of “war”. Here in Washington, we waste time with stupid debates about how we should vet Syrian refugees who want to come to America. The idea that several US Governors and a majority of the members of the House have really nothing better to do other than demanding more stringent vetting of poor souls from Syria, in case some of them may be terrorists in disguise, is disheartening. Yes, potentially this may be an issue. But we already have a very stringent vetting process. Refugees do not just walk in. It takes several months of checks and re-checks.

In any event, is this all we can do? How about giving more resources to the FBI, the federal agency with the people who know something about the threat? And how about getting serious about destroying the Caliphate?