

# Obama should seek accord with Assad to combat common enemies in region

TONY GEORGE

Iraq is exploding as fanatic Islamic terrorists are surging through the troubled nation, crucifying and beheading civilians, and threatening the world's second largest oil supply.

There is plenty of blame for the failure of the Iraqi democratic experiment, which began with the U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein, who, in his own deadly way, had kept his violent neighborhood, including Iran, in line.

It was the Obama administration that failed to detect the re-emergence of terrorists infiltrating the ranks of Syrian rebels against President Bashar Assad.

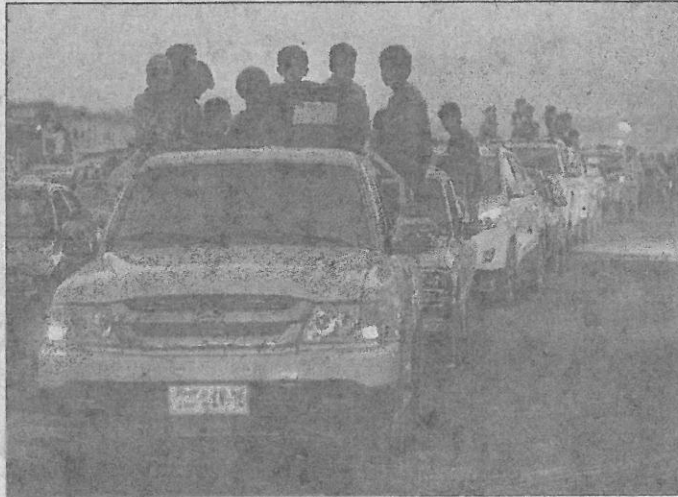
The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the most deadly terrorist gang on the planet, camouflaged itself as Syrian freedom fighters. Actually, it was plotting a bloody holy war from Damascus to Baghdad to New York.

The ISIS commander is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a former al-Qaida chief, who built a terrorist base in Syria and targeted Assad for defeat.

ISIS has been murdering Christians, Jews, moderate Muslims and Syria's army soldiers. Every day, Syrians have reported the reign of terror via social media and I have received reports from family and friends about the barbarism.

I publicized them in opinion articles in *The Plain Dealer* two years ago and drew criticism from Robert Ford, then ambassador to Syria, who was stationed in Washington, D.C.

He invited a group of Syrian-American Christians to the State Department and insisted that American intelligence had not detected terrorists in the Syrian rebel ranks. He said we were alarmists and that our recommendation that the United States reach a truce with



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Iraqi citizens fleeing from Mosul and other northern towns wait in a queue to cross to secure areas at a Kurdish security forces checkpoint on Wednesday.

Assad was nonsense.

Lately, Ford has changed his mind. In a speech at Tufts University in March, he admitted that terrorists, indeed, had infiltrated the rebels. "There are some really bad people in Syria right now, on the opposition side," he said, though he still insists Assad should go.

The State Department seems just as clueless. Secretary of State John Kerry recently called Assad a magnet for terrorists knowing full well that our own allies, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait, are financing the invasion of foreign terrorists into Syria and Iraq.

This picture is illogical. Anti-democratic Gulf States — our friends — are helping wreck the American-backed democratic government in Baghdad. And, Iran, for decades a U.S. enemy, wants to bail out our ally, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

But, Sunni-Shiite politics and religious infighting have never made sense to Americans.

Former President Bill Clinton, who often called on me for advice and insight on Syrian politics, believed that the road to Middle East peace was through Damascus.

I believe that reconnecting with Damascus might be the bold stroke President Barack Obama needs to accomplish what superpowers America and Russia have been unable to do for decades — wipe out terrorism.

Re-engagement would give Obama leverage to prod Assad into keeping his promise to extend political freedom, a move that could defuse the civil war. Obama and Assad then could train their guns on common enemies, ISIS and al-Qaida.

Syria and the United States have commonality. Syrians were allies in the first Gulf War against Saddam Hussein. Assad protects the religious freedom of Christians and Jews. Christians, who realize that Sharia law means genocide, plead daily for Obama to protect them

from terrorist death squads. Christians fear the same fate as a Sudanese mother of two babies who has been sentenced to hang — but later pardoned — for marrying a Christian.

Given our national security, it is crucial that Obama welcome any allies who are killing the extremists. An accord with Assad is just as plausible as teaming up with Iran.

An Obama overture to Assad would likely draw rebuke from Sunni royals, who, for religious and economic reasons, want to destroy Assad. As long as Assad is in power, he controls oil and gas lines that greedy rich Gulf States need to connect with Europe.

But, think about it. Can Americans be cozy with anti-democratic Saudis, Qataris and Kuwaitis, who brutally crack down on civil rights and religious freedom? They summarily execute dissidents. Women have no freedom. Gays are persecuted. Political dissidents have been executed.

A first step for Obama to begin rebuilding relations with Assad is to select Syrian-Americans who are trusted by Assad. Granted, it would be an uneasy but pragmatic alliance that could finally crush terrorism and make the world safer.

The time to act is now, before the Middle East explodes and ISIS targets America.

*George, a Cleveland businessman, is a former board member of the Arab-American Institute, former member of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and former member of the Syrian Cultural Garden Committee. He is an American-born Syrian Christian who met with Syrian President Bashar Assad in 2004 to discuss reforms.*