

The Future of US-Russia Relations

By: Dr. Abdullah Robin

As President Obama prepares to leave the White House on the 20th January 2017, the future of US-Russia relations is in turmoil. President-elect Trump has called for friendly relations with Russia, while outgoing President Obama raised tensions by announcing the expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats on the 29th December, 2016. This follows reports from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that Russia conducted cyber attacks against the US, which the CIA claimed were intended to influence the election in Trump's favor. Democrat Senator Amy Klobuchar, told the BBC that the Russian hacking: "is not just about American democracy, it's about all democracies ... for the US just to roll over and to let this happen with no response would have been a huge mistake." Republican Senator John McCain said: "We have to make sure that there is a price to pay, so that we can perhaps persuade the Russians to stop these kind of attacks on our very fundamentals of democracy."

As for Trump, he sided with Russian President Putin in accusing the Democrat Party of being "bad losers"! Next day Putin said, "Although we have the right to retaliate, we will not ... but will plan our further steps to restore Russian-U.S. relations based on the policies of the Trump administration." Trump praised Putin's response: "Great move on delay (by Putin) - I always knew he was very smart!" So, is Trump's position a reflection of a new policy towards US-Russian relations?

Trump's view is aligned with the view of the "Tea Party" faction within the Republican Party that says the US should not be burdened with moral leadership in the world. This does not mean that the US would retreat from the world; it just means that the US would not be responsible for forcing other countries to adhere to the same human rights values that the US claims to adhere to. This explains Trump's statements that the US should work openly with Putin in Syria, despite the unprecedented savagery of the Russian campaign, while Obama has distanced himself from Putin publicly but coordinates with Russia indirectly through Erdogan.

Trump has made statements that seem to threaten the world order. He has suggested leaving Europe alone to face Russian expansion if European countries do not pay more money for their defense, and he is widely reported to have said that he might recognize the Russian annexation in 2014 of Crimea from Ukraine, which would be a major change in policy as the US punished Russia with economic sanctions for that aggression. However, Trump's statements are slogans for his supporters to show them that he is "putting America first," and his comment about the Russian annexation of the Crimea was not honestly reported. He was responding to a question, and he simply answered that he "would be looking into that," which would be an inadequate response from an aware politician, but no one has claimed that he possesses awareness! Hence, his statements should be treated cautiously. His answer about the Crimea was in July, and he has not said more on the subject, even after further US sanctions were applied against Russian projects in the Crimean on the 21st of December. Whatever may be Trump's intentions, improvement in US-Russian relations would be limited by Congress.

Both chambers of Congress: The Senate and The House of Representatives agreed upon the text of the "National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017," which was signed by Obama on 23rd December 2016, even though he was disappointed by parts of it, such as the continuation of funding for Guantanamo Bay despite Obama's promise to close it! This Act determines funding for the US Department of Defense. It is full of steps against Russia, which is described in the US Senate Armed Services Committee summary as "a near-peer competitor" that threatens the US "monopoly on advanced military technologies." The committee complained of "Russian nuclear provocations" and that the "United States assured access to space continues to rely on Russian rocket engines, the purchase of which provide financial benefit to aides and advisors to Vladimir Putin – including individuals sanctioned by the United States – and subsidizes the Russian military-industrial base. This is unacceptable."

After the 20th of January, US relations with Russia might improve, and both countries could work together openly on some projects, but Putin's expansionist desires in Europe will continue to be opposed by the US, at least until some greater threat emerges.

* Written for *Ar-Rayah* Newspaper - Issue 111