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**RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE
SYRIAN WAR –
DOMESTIC DRIVERS AND
REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

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*N.B: The article only reflects
the opinion of its author.*



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past year, Russia has become an increasingly pivotal player in the Syrian war and, by extension, in the broader Middle East. Its military intervention since September 2015, its recent assistance of the Assad regime in retaking Aleppo and its subsequent forging of a Syria-wide ceasefire with Ankara have made significant impacts on the ground and marginalized the US' role in the conflict. Russia's close cooperation with Iran and rapprochement with Turkey and Egypt will continue to redraw the lines of influence, not just in Syria but the region writ large.

Amidst the noise Russia's impact in Syria has caused, the underlying drivers of its strategy – domestic, security and ideological – remain too often ignored. As a result, Russian decisions regarding Syria routinely

catch observers by surprise and have perpetuated the idea that Russian actions are unpredictable at best, and irrational at worst. Yet, while Russian foreign policy analysis is bedeviled by a real lack of transparency into the *who* and *how* of specific decision-making, arguably, Russia's fundamental interests in Syria have been remarkably consistent over the past six years. Its policies, in turn, have been logical in light of these interests. Understanding these requires analytically embedding Russia's Syria policy in a broader context, assessing it through the prisms of Russia's perspective on the post-'Arab Spring' Middle East, its own historical experience in the Chechen Wars, its fears about so-called 'color revolutions' in post-Soviet countries, and its relationship with the West.

This article examines the key underlying drivers of Russia's Syria policy, distinguishing between Russian interests and perspectives as they relate to (1) state order and (2) geopolitics, in order to explain why Russia has been steadfast in its support for the Assad regime, stepped up its involvement at various points throughout the war and sought to carefully calibrate a path between military escalation and diplomacy. Implications of its Syria strategy for Russia's position in the broader Middle East, as well as the prospects for Syria diplomacy in 2017 will also be discussed.

RUSSIA AND STATE ORDER: IDEOLOGICAL, HISTORICAL AND REGIME SURVIVAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ideology: Russia and 'Sovereign Democracy'

First, a concern with state order, or regime stability, is essential to Russia's view on the Syrian conflict. As things are seen from Moscow, none of the outside actors propagating what they call a "political transition" in Syria have a credible plan for ensuring the orderly survival of existing state structures after Assad's departure. Russia fears that the collapse of institutions and concomitant spread of chaos will nurture instability and allow radical Islamist factions to expand their influence. An apprehension of this causal chain – the removal of strong leaders leads to state collapse, which facilitates the rise of Islamists – has more broadly characterized Russia's reaction to the 'Arab Spring' since 2011. While Moscow's official response to initial events

in Egypt and Tunisia was relatively low-key, Russian experts and diplomats voiced cautious concerns early on.¹

The regional fallout from the 2003 US invasion of Iraq gradually nurtured a conviction among Russian officials, which was then dramatically solidified by the 2011 intervention in Libya and the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, that Western policies of social-political engineering in the region are both naïve and utterly irresponsible. Certainly in private, Russian diplomats now share the view that the Iraqi and Libyan people fared relatively better under the oppressive Saddam and Gaddafi regimes, respectively, than they do in their war-torn societies today. Given the Iraqi and Libyan precedents,

1 The Russian narrative stands in stark contrast to Western scholarly accounts of the Arab Spring, which view authoritarian regimes in the Middle East as the primary cause for Islamist radicalization. For examples, see the work by Francois Burgat or John Esposito.

Western intentions to support democratic aspirations in Syria are judged as either deeply misguided or, worse, seen as a cover for ulterior motives, such as to weaken Russia's own position in the Middle East by undermining its allies.

Turning to the ideological underpinnings of this Russian outlook, there is the belief that stability and the material wellbeing of a society should be acceded priority over a concern with human rights and the degree of freedom enjoyed by its citizens. In recent years, the Kremlin has promoted its own understanding of democratization, which places primacy on gradual, stability-prioritizing and state-led change at the expense of the more pluralist role played by civil society inherent in the liberal democratic model.²

2 Roland Dannreuther, "Russia and the Arab Spring: Supporting the Counter-Revolution", *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (2015), p. 79. The prioritization of stability is not only advocated

That understanding has been nurtured by the Russian leadership's deep antipathy to the idea of linking internal regime legitimacy to validation by external actors or a specific democratic process prescribed from within.³ The concept of "sovereign democracy", which was first promulgated by Putin's Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov in 2006 in response to George W. Bush's "Freedom Agenda", entails the idea that "the form of democracy appropriate to Russian society, and by extension to other modernizing societies, is one where the state has the primary role in managing the transition to democracy,

top-down by the Russian government, but sociological work shows it is also supported by the Russian population, see Andrei Kolesnikov, "Do Russians Want War?", *Carnegie Moscow Center* (October 2016).

3 Roy Allison, "Russia and the post-2014 international order: revisionism, Realpolitik and regime change", Public Lecture, Russian and Eastern European Studies, School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies, University of Oxford (January 16, 2017).

ensuring that the resulting societal transformation does not lead to disorder and conflict but preserves social stability and economic reform".⁴ The Russian approach is thus one that values "order" over "justice" and regime security over human security.

The Russian government formulates its Syria policy through the prism of sovereign democracy. It argues that there are different paths to, and incarnations of democracy, and that the Russian model is better suited for Syria and other post-Arab Spring countries, given their complex ethnic and confessional fabric that mandates stability-prioritizing policies. In a long 2012 interview discussing Russia's view on the Arab Spring generally, and events in Egypt and Syria specifically,

4 Vladislav Surkov, "Sovereignty: it is a political synonym for competitiveness", in: N. Garadzha (ed.), *Suverenitet* (2006), quoted in: Danreuther (2015), pp. 89-90.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that “any attempts to ‘transplant’ one’s own models of state structure and development, to export one’s own values onto the soil of other countries, ignoring their traditions and culture, as a general rule cannot be successful. Russia is convinced that both the pace and form of democratization should be defined from within societies themselves”.⁵

History: The Chechen Wars

Further, Moscow’s concern with state order in Syria has its roots in Russia’s own historical experience: After the Cold War, unrest among the indigenous Muslim populations in the North Caucasus raised fears in the Kremlin that Chechen separatism could spill over to other Russian regions and precipitate state disintegration. President Putin expressed

⁵ “Lavrov: o transformatsiiakh v arabskom mire”, *Interview with Egyptian Newspaper Al-Ahram* (November 9, 2012), Russian version available at: <http://inosmi.ru/world/20121109/201973659.html>.

these concerns most plainly in an interview in 2000, warning that “the essence of the situation in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya ... is the continuation of the collapse of the USSR. If we did not quickly do something to stop it, Russia as a state in its current form would cease to exist.... we would be facing... the Yugoslavization of Russia.”⁶ He believed that it was the false promise of Western-style democracy, which was promoted in the 1990s – including in Russia – and which encouraged less control for a strong center, that led to chaos and civil war in the North Caucasus given an emerging power vacuum in Moscow. The extent to which these personal perceptions in ascending to power during the tumultuous late 1990s would determine President Putin’s outlook on the situation in Syria a decade later can hardly be overstated.

⁶ Quoted in: Natalya Gevorkyan, Natalya Timakova and Andrei Kolesnikov, *Ot pervogo litsa* (2000), pp.133-135.

Just like the sovereign democracy prism, the Chechnya prism has shaped Russia's Syria policy. Moscow's insistence that transnational Islamist terrorism threatens the very integrity of the Syrian state echoes similar claims the Kremlin made regarding Chechnya in the early 2000s.⁷ Further, the Second Chechen War was exclusively framed as a conflict fuelled by outside forces. Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the October 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, the Kremlin held weekly press conferences to support claims that Chechens had links to the Taliban and provided the largest contingent of Al-Qaeda's foreign legion in Afghanistan. Equally, in Syria, Russia has

7 For a comparison of Russia's perspective on the Second Chechen War and the Syrian civil war, see: Fiona Hill, "The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad," *Foreign Affairs* (March 25, 2013); Hanna Notte, "Russia in Chechnya and Syria: Pursuit of Strategic Goals", *Middle East Policy Council*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring 2016).

labelled the armed opposition as foreign mercenaries supported by external players, who try to use the conflict in Syria to further their own nefarious goals.⁸ Its discourse has portrayed the Syrian conflict as a binary struggle between the Assad regime and "terrorists". As was the case with Chechnya, Russia has rejected any distinction between good and bad armed opponents of the Syrian state and has criticized the US throughout last year, when Moscow and Washington were trying to install a stable cease-fire, for failing to provide satisfying intelligence on the whereabouts of "moderate" rebels. Finally, both in Chechnya and Syria, Russia has also claimed it is fighting a terrorist threat of not just regional, but transnational

8 For one exemplary Russian account which, in line with the official view, argues that the Syrian crisis has been predominantly fuelled by external actors, see: Boris Dolgov, "The Syrian Conflict: Russian and GCC Perspectives", *Russian International Affairs Council* (November 19, 2015).

proportions, leaving Moscow at the forefront of defying what is no less than a civilizational challenge.⁹

Regime Survival: Fearing 'Color Revolutions'

Finally, Russia's concern with state order in Syria betrays fears about Western-supported 'color revolutions', not only in the Middle East but also in Russia's own neighborhood. In providing steadfast support to the Assad regime since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Moscow has argued it is thwarting yet another Western attempt to impose standards of political legitimacy on a sovereign state. Russian official rhetoric on Syria has made constant references to past Western-backed interventions in the

broader Middle East as having violated international law, while stressing that Russia's own military involvement in the Syrian conflict was requested by the legitimate government of the country and thus constituted another "intervention by invitation".¹⁰ Grievances over Western democracy promotion efforts have been a consistent theme in Moscow's outlook since 9/11 and the beginning of the US military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, but they have notably intensified over time.

Viewing the Taliban as a threat to its own national security, Russia supported the October 2001 US-led campaign in Afghanistan, but as Washington progressively adopted a narrative of state-building in the country, Russia became more critical.¹¹ It

⁹ Some authors have also drawn a parallel between Russian military tactics used in the bombing of Grozny in 2000 and those in Aleppo in recent months, see: Mark Galeotti, "Putin is playing by Grozny rules in Aleppo", *Foreign Policy* (September 2016).

¹⁰ Allison, Lecture at University of Oxford (January 16, 2017).

¹¹ For a detailed analysis of Russian objections to perceived Western-orchestrated regime change and democracy promotion objectives, in

was then staunchly opposed to military action against Iraq. When claims about the presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) inside Iraq proved unfounded and the language of regime change started to figure more prominently in the US' discourse on the war, Russia's apprehensions became yet more acute. Further, having abstained from the UN Security Council vote on Resolution 1973 on Libya, in what was partially a gesture of goodwill to the US, the Kremlin observed with complete incredulity how the 2011 intervention eventually resulted in regime change. President Putin called the elimination of Gaddafi not just a "medieval", but outright "primitive apotheosis" of the West's meddling in regional affairs, warning that Russia would not allow the Libya scenario to be reproduced in Syria.¹² Worries about possible

Afghanistan, Iraq and beyond, see: Roy Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention* (2013).

12 Vladimir Putin, "Russia in a

US regime change intentions against Damascus had been expressed already long before the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011. Whether it was the Bush administration grouping Syria with the infamous "axis of evil" in May 2002,¹³ or the US stepping up its threats against the Assad regime following the assassination of Rafik Hariri in Beirut in February 2005 – Russia always made clear that it would not tolerate externally orchestrated regime change in Syria.

While Moscow's current support for Damascus needs to be understood in this historical perspective,

changing world" (text in Russian), *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* (February 27, 2012), available at: <https://rg.ru/2012/02/27/putin-politika.html>.

13 In his original State of the Union Address in 2002, US president George W. Bush designated only Iran, Iraq and North Korea as belonging to the "axis of evil". However, Undersecretary of State John R. Bolton a few months later added Syria to this axis in his "Beyond the Axis of Evil" speech.

it is a fear of contagion of democracy promotion efforts beyond the Middle East that really lies at the core of its misgivings. Already during the Libya crisis, Sergey Lavrov argued that sowing a belief among people that “foreigners [helping] us” overthrow the regime may be “contagious”, and could “spread to protesters in other countries of the region” hoping for assistance from the international community, and that this would be “an invitation to a whole array of civil wars”.¹⁴ Fears about a Western-backed regime change dynamic spreading like a virus ultimately betrays the Russian regime’s paranoia about so-called “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space, which Russia sees as its legitimate sphere of influence. Moscow’s reaction

¹⁴ “Sergey Lavrov at a press conference in Tskhinvali (April 26, 2011)”, *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts: Former Soviet Union*; quoted in: Roy Allison, “Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment With A Regime In Crisis”, *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4 (2013).

to the popular uprisings in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, which the Kremlin staunchly alleged had been staged by the West, were an early case in point. By February 2011, then President Dmitri Medvedev warned that the scenario unfolding in the Arab world had been prepared for Russia by certain script-writers, too, while Army General Nikolai Makarov argued following Gaddafi’s fall that the technique of “color revolutions”, used by “leaders of some countries” to “remove undesirable political regimes”, might later be applied to Russia and its allies.¹⁵ After Libya, Syria became the Russian litmus test for how the West would be allowed to respond to internal conflicts in the future. Until today, Syria remains Russia’s red line, Russia’s “never again” to US-backed regime change.

It is important to note that the 2011 events in Libya coincided not only with the start of the Syrian crisis, but also with

¹⁵ Allison (2013), p. 817.

internal turmoil surrounding parliamentary and presidential elections in Russia itself. The Kremlin's announcement in 2011 that Vladimir Putin would assume the Presidency for a third term sparked unprecedented protests on Moscow's streets. The tense internal political situation forced Putin to further consolidate his power against the opposition. He also blamed the protests on nefarious foreign influences, demonizing the US and attacking Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and US Ambassador Michael McFaul personally for their alleged involvement.¹⁶ Adopting an uncompromising stance on the unfolding Syrian crisis became part and parcel of this anti-Western policy of power consolidation, which became increasingly driven by Russia's *idée fixe* of thwarting further color revolutions, and whose ideological building blocks had been installed with Surkov's "sovereign democracy" five years earlier.

The Kremlin's increasingly anti-Western outlook, which has been crystallizing since 2011, underpinning Russia's illiberal conception of sovereign democracy, and assisting Putin's efforts to remain in control after returning to the Presidency, has shaped Russia's rhetoric on the Syrian war. First, the Russian narrative has promulgated a broader clash of values between Western corruption and moral decay on the one hand, and Russian protection of tradition and conservative values on the other. This rhetoric has been fed and fuelled by the Russian Orthodox Church, an increasingly powerful lobby supporting the Kremlin's foreign policy. In his most recent press conference held on January 17, Sergey Lavrov devoted some time to elaborate on and criticize the West's "post-Christian" values, which he argued were not the values "the Europeans' grandfathers and great-grandfathers adhered to", but rather "something

¹⁶ Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership* (2014), p. 246.

new, something that has been subject to 'modernization', something all-permissive".¹⁷ In the Syrian theater, Russia has consequently portrayed itself as a bulwark of stability and guarantor of national identities and state order, as well as the only major power truly serious about fighting the threat posed by ISIL. In his September 2015 remarks to the UN General Assembly, President Putin proposed an "anti-Hitler"-type coalition to fight ISIL.¹⁸ Russian officials keep referencing this speech to this day, in order to express their disappointment that Western states have not yet

joined such a coalition.

Secondly, the Russian discourse has securitized the Syrian crisis as a fight of existential importance. As argued in the preceding section, the conflict in Syria has been essentially reduced to a struggle between Assad and the terrorists, the civilized and the barbarians of ISIL, Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (formerly Jabhat Al-Nusra) and affiliated groups. In perpetually producing narratives of external existential threats that Russia needs to stand up against – the fascists in Ukraine, international terrorism in Syria – the Kremlin has diverted the public's attention from pressing economic problems.¹⁹

Looking at Syria through the prism of much-dreaded "color revolutions", Russia has offered an anti-Western, moralizing and existential threat securitizing account

17 "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference on the results of Russian diplomacy in 2016, Moscow", (January 17, 2017), translation from Russian by the author, available at: http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2599609.

18 Vladimir Putin, "Address to the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly" (September 28, 2015), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.

19 Andrey Kolesnikov, "A Background War", *Vedomosti* (October 22, 2015).

of the conflict, one that is designed to fuel patriotism, while simultaneously carry a clear message to the Russian people: popular uprisings do not pay off. In this context, since the Ukrainian threat narrative had to some extent run its course by mid-2015 and the war there was seen as protracting without significant results, some analysts argued that the start of Russian airstrikes in Syria also conveniently served to ensure continued popular mobilization.²⁰

Russia's media campaign on the Syrian operation has indeed been savvy and provided a highly skewed picture of Russian motivations and actions – recently featuring extensive coverage of the Russian-supported “liberation” of Eastern Aleppo's civilians held hostage by “terrorists”, of surgical missile

20 For instance, Jeffrey Mankoff, “A Syrian Sleight of Hand – To Deescalate in Donbass, Putin Moves to the Mediterranean”, *Foreign Affairs* (October 13, 2015).

strikes launched from the Kuznetsov aircraft carrier, or of Syrian civilians baking bread with Russian flour after months of starvation imposed by the armed opposition.²¹ By imbuing Russia's Syria campaign with the importance of a higher moral order, the official media narrative has given the domestic populace a sense of pride and urgency, intended to fuel patriotism. The appeal of Russia's war abroad, as it is presented by the media, is partially driven by the absence of significant losses on the Russian side, but also by the fact that it is framed as just, defensive, triumphant and preventive, offering symbolic compensation for economic stagnation at

21 For examples of such official Russian media coverage, see: “Po IGLIL b'itut rossiiskie korabli”, *Vesti* (November 15, 2016), available at: <http://www.vesti.ru/videos/show/vid/697907/cid/9/>; “Zhiteli Aleppo vypekut hleb iz rossiiskoi muki”, *Vesti* (November 26, 2016), available at: <http://www.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=2826053>.

home.²² Importantly, that media narrative has been pushed in the context of a growing vacuum of alternative sources of information on the one hand, and broader public apathy regarding Russian actions abroad on the other.²³

22 Kolesnikov (2016).

23 The most recent high profile case in a government crackdown on small news outlets in past years has involved top editors at RBC, a widely-read independent publication, leaving their positions in May. 2016. The independent Levada pollster, the human rights group Memorial, as well as the non-governmental SOVA Center think-tank were declared foreign agents over the past year. In 2016, the Russian government allocated almost 1 billion USD to supporting the media, making the state the largest donor in the country's media market. And according to Freedom House's "Freedom of the Net" scores, Russia moved from "partially free" (until 2014) to "not free" (from 2015). "Freedom of the Net", *Freedom House*, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/russia>; "The Russian government is spending almost a billion dollars on the media this year", *Meduza* (August 3, 2016), available at: [However, despite its skilled state-led media offensive, it appears that Russia's Syria campaign has been less crucial to regime consolidation purposes than the annexation of Crimea or the conflict in Eastern Ukraine were previously. In early October 2015, when Russians were polled regarding their support for Russia's military campaign in Syria, only 47% voiced clear approval, while 33% expressed reservations.²⁴ At the end of the day, Syria is not part of Putin's *Russkiy Mir*.²⁵ And the involvement in a Middle Eastern country evoked fears of a "second Afghanistan" among almost half of the respondents polled just after](https://meduza.io/en/news/2016/08/03/the-russian-government-is-spending-almost-a-</p>
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[billion-dollars-on-the-media-this-year](#).

24 "Levada Center survey" (October 2-5, 2015) ("Do you support the Federation Council's decision to allow the use of Russian troops abroad?"), available at: <http://www.levada.ru/eng/russian-participation-syrian-conflict>.

25 "Russkiy mir" is Russian for "Russian world".

airstrikes began.²⁶

Today, according to official numbers, Russian casualties in Syria remain limited, especially if compared to Iranian, Turkish or Hezbollah losses.²⁷ But the deaths of two Russian nurses serving in Aleppo province in early December, which caused somewhat greater public resonance, were followed by the dramatic crash of a Defense Ministry plane transporting Russian musicians and journalists to Hmeymim airbase on Christmas Day. In addition, a Russian MiG-29 jet fighter crashed into the

26 “Levada Center survey” (October 23-25, 2015) (“In your opinion, is it possible that Russian military involvement in the Syrian conflict could escalate into a “New Afghanistan” for Russia?”), available at: <http://www.levada.ru/en/2015/11/06/russian-participation-in-the-syrian-military-conflict/>.

27 “Spisok pogibshih rossiian s nachala kampanii VKS v Sirii”, *RBC* (December 5, 2016), available at: <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/05/12/2016/58457c589a-79473fa152c4a2?from=newsfeed>.

Mediterranean on November 14, as did one of its SU-33 jets attempting to land on the Kuznetsov aircraft carrier on December 5. In light of such mounting calamities, the reported recent deployment of Chechen fighters to Syria has been interpreted in some circles as partially driven by the Kremlin’s calculation that potential Chechen deaths in Syria would cause less alarm among Russia’s overall population.²⁸ Polls on domestic attitudes towards the military operation in Syria have not changed much over the past year, with support still hovering at around 50

28 In early December, Russian TV station “Dozhd” published a video purportedly showing Chechen troops preparing for deployment to Syria. “Chechenskih kontraktnikov otpravili v Siriiu”, *Dozhd* (December 7, 2016), available at: https://tvrain.ru/news/chechnya-422827/?utm_campaign=breaking&utm_source=push&utm_medium=422827&utm_term=2016-12-07. See also Pavel Felgenhauer, “Chechen Special Battalions Sent to Syria as Reinforcements”, *The Jamestown Foundation* (December 8, 2016).

percent.²⁹ While approval ratings for President Putin spiked after Russia's military moves on Crimea and have remained stable since,³⁰ it thus seems questionable whether these are supported specifically by the Syria campaign. Going forward, popular mobilization over Russia's war in Syria will most likely remain limited and the Kremlin is well aware of these constraints.

Preempting Spillover from Collapsing State Order: Is Russia's Campaign 'Counterterrorist'?

Since September 2015, Russian media and officials have claimed that a key aim of Moscow's military campaign in Syria has been to destroy

29 "Siriiskii Konflikt", *Levada Center Poll* (October 31, 2016), available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2016/10/31/sirijskij-konflikt/>.

30 "Dve treti rossiian zahoteli ostavit' Putina prezidentom", *Kommersant* (November 16, 2016), available at: https://lenta.ru/news/2016/11/16/ostavaysya_s_nami/; Kolesnikov (2016).

foreign fighters. A driving concern, so the argument, is that the collapse of Syrian state order could facilitate a terrorist "spillover" beyond the country's borders. Such a scenario would pose a real security threat to the Russian Federation itself if extremists move to the North Caucasus, other Russian regions or Central Asia. Sergey Lavrov warned as early as March 2011 that "the more the Middle East gets unstable, the higher the risk of people with malicious purposes causing us trouble."³¹ And two weeks before the Russian military commenced airstrikes in Syria in September 2015, President Putin argued at the CSTO meeting in Dushanbe that "militants undergoing ideological indoctrination and military training by ISIS come from many nations around the world, including, ... the Russian Federation, and many former Soviet

31 "Sergey Lavrov in an interview to Ekho Moskvyy" (March 2011), available at: <https://www.rt.com/politics/russia-arab-unrest-caucasus/>.

republics. And, of course, we are concerned by their possible return to our territories.”³²

According to the latest official numbers, 3200 Russian citizens have joined a terrorist formation in Syria or Iraq.³³ An additional 2000 to 3000 people from Central Asia have been estimated amongst the ranks of various groups in the Syrian jihad.³⁴ The possibility of foreign fighters returning and conducting terrorist attacks on

32 Vladimir Putin, “Speech at CSTO Collective Security Council session in Dushanbe” (September 15, 2015), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50291>.

33 “Bolee 3,2 tysiachi rossiian v’ehali v Siriiu i Irak, chtoby voevat’ za boevikov”, *Ria Novosti* (November 21, 2016), available at: <https://ria.ru/incidents/20161121/1481772465.html>.

34 See, for instance: The Soufan Group, “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq” (December 2015); Noah Tucker, “Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses”, Report prepared for USAID (May 2015).

Russian soil, or forming and supporting regional extremist organizations, is routinely brought up by Russian officials and the media. Moscow has indeed been worried about the security situation, especially in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria, where people pledging allegiance to ISIL have claimed responsibility for a number of strikes, more recently also in Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod.³⁵ The Federal Security Service (FSB) has reportedly thwarted a number of ISIL-inspired attacks over the past months, both in Moscow and St. Petersburg, but also outside large urban centers.³⁶ In

35 “Islamskoe gosudarstvo vzialo na sebja otvetstvennost’ za napadenie v Nizhnem Novgorode”, *Kommersant* (October 26, 2016), available at: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3126516>.

36 “V FSB zaiavili o predotvrashhenii teraktov v Ingushetii i Moskve”, *Kavkaz Uzel* (November 15, 2016), available at: http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/292654/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter; “Rossiiskie spetssluzhby v 2016 godu predotvratili 42 terakta”, *Ria Novosti* (December 13, 2016),

light of the perceived threat, military and counterterrorism exercises remain a frequent occurrence in the North Caucasus, especially Dagestan.

The Kremlin's worries about the nexus between the Syrian war and domestic-oriented radical Islamism extend beyond the North Caucasus. It has also long been concerned about an ISIL infiltration across the Afghan-Tajik border.³⁷ A recent trilateral meeting between Russia, Pakistan and China was partially intended to address these apprehensions.³⁸ In past

available at: <https://ria.ru/incidents/20161213/1483445190.html>.

37 For a recent statement, see Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special representative for Afghanistan: 'Zamir Kabulov: Situaciia v Afganistane nakaliaet obstanovku v Tadzhikestane', *news.tj* (September 13, 2016), available at: <http://news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20160913/230788>.

38 "Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow" (December 27, 2016), available at: http://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/spokesman/briefings/-/asset_publisher/D2wHaWMCU6Od/content/

years, Russia has continuously pledged help to Tajikistan's military to counter terrorism, for instance, by reinforcing Dushanbe's military base with armored personnel carriers and battle tanks.³⁹ Only in early January, Moscow's Ambassador to Dushanbe suggested that Russia was seeking to further expand its military presence in Tajikistan by renting the Ayni

[id/2581141?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_D2wHaWMCU6Od&_101_INSTANCE_D2wHaWMCU6Od_languageld=en_GB#11](https://ria.ru/instance/D2wHaWMCU6Od&_101_INSTANCE_D2wHaWMCU6Od_languageld=en_GB#11)

39 Some Western experts on Central Asia have criticized Moscow for using the ISIL threat narrative in Central Asia to increase its leverage over the republics and justify why they need to militarily and politically work closely with Russia, for instance: Noah Tucker, "Islamic State messaging to Central Asians Migrant Workers in Russia", *CERIA Brief*, No. 6 (March 2015). More recently, US military figures have criticized Russia for using its allegedly acute concern over ISIL's Khorasan Province as a pretext for lending legitimacy to the Taliban and undermine NATO policy towards Afghanistan, see: Ahmed Rashid, "Moscow moves into the Afghanistan vacuum", *The Exchange* (January 13, 2017).

airbase.⁴⁰ Warnings about ISIL's intention to build and consolidate its "Khorasan Province", which includes Central Asia, have been voiced not only by the Russian leadership, but also other regional heads, for instance Kyrgyzstan's Almazbek Atambaev.⁴¹

Then, there is the daunting challenge of managing a big Central Asian migrant population at home, in Russia's industrial cities, such as Moscow, Vladivostok or Tyumen. Most Central Asians are radicalized and lured into the Syrian jihad while working in Russia, rather than in their home countries.⁴² Recruitment processes amongst these

40 "Russia Announces Intent to Establish Air Base in Tajikistan", *Eurasianet* (January 2, 2017), available at: http://www.eurasianet.org/node/81826?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter.

41 "Ne grozi iuzhnomu frontu: Kak Rossiia namerena borot'sia s IG eshhe i v Srednei Azii", *Lenta* (October 20, 2015), available at: <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/10/20/khorasan/>.

42 Tucker (2015).

communities are difficult to study empirically, but there is evidence that people are approached on work sites, in gyms and unofficial mosques, which are often attended by migrants. In Moscow, for instance, even the much celebrated opening of the Cathedral Mosque in September 2015 was unlikely to mitigate the shortage of official places for worship. Without local imams who speak their native language to turn to for guidance, many migrants participate in online devotional communities, where they often end up being targeted by extremist recruiters.

Yet, as important as it is to acknowledge these various security concerns, fears of an "Islamist spillover" have never been the primary driver of Moscow's strategy in the Syrian war. While it is conceivable that the Russian military, following the recent fall of Aleppo, might step up anti-ISIL airstrikes in Syria to some extent, its

core objective remains the preservation of the Assad regime.⁴³ For one, its military campaign has arguably heightened the terrorist threat to Russia. While a group of Saudi Wahhabi clerics called for jihad against Russia following the deployment of its troops to Syria, ISIL released a Russian-language video shortly thereafter, warning that Russian “blood will spill like an ocean”.⁴⁴ But more importantly, extremists from the North Caucasus

have been able to leave for Syria in high numbers and largely unhindered since the beginning of the 2011 uprising, especially until the 2014 Sochi Olympics, because authorities hoped to export the domestic jihad.⁴⁵ Yet, Russia did not see the need for “counterterrorism” airstrikes until September 2015. And then, it did not even primarily target ISIL on the ground. Instead, Moscow’s decision to escalate its involvement in Syria was prompted by the successes in early 2015

43 In late December, Russian jets reportedly for the first time provided air support for Turkey’s “Shield of Euphrates” operation, bombing the city of Al-Bab, one of ISIL’s remaining strongholds in Syria. With Palmyra having recently fallen back under ISIL control, some analysts also expect Russia to step up its efforts there.

44 “Saudi opposition clerics make sectarian call to jihad in Syria”, *Reuters* (October 5, 2015), available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-saudi-clerics-idUSKCNORZ1IW20151005>; “ISIS threatens Russia in new video”, *CNN* (November 12, 2015), available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/11/12/middleeast/isis-russia-threat/>.

45 “The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?”, *International Crisis Group* (March 2016). The report shows that, up until the Sochi Olympics in early 2014, Russian officials did little to prevent radicalized Islamists from leaving for Syria. Instead, the overarching concern at that time was to keep the North Caucasus secure for the Sochi Games. The FSB only became worried about the outflow (and possible return) of extremists from mid-2014, tightening border and airport controls. Elena Milashina, “Halifat? Primanka dlya durakovi!”, *Novaya Gazeta* (July 29, 2015), available at: <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/07/29/65056-171-halifat-primanka-dlya-durakov-187>.

of those armed opposition groups, which threatened Russia's core objective of Syrian regime survival. While Russian officials have certainly tended to classify any armed opposition as "terrorist", they have also argued that the foreign fighter threat directed at the Russian Federation itself emanates mostly from ISIL and Al-Qaeda affiliated groups. Unlike saving the Assad regime, fighting ISIL to preempt a "spillover" has never been Russia's main objective in Syria, but saying so has resonated well with the domestic audience.

Further, ISIL's influence on Russia's *umma* has been more limited than official rhetoric suggests, with returning foreign fighters behaving largely passively and regional extremist organizations, such as the Caucasus Emirate, remaining essentially disbanded.⁴⁶ Russia's large

46 "Eksperty sviazali zaiavlenie Shebzuhova s oslableniem 'Imarata Kavkaz'", *Caucasian Uzel* (January 6, 2016), available at: <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/275548/>.

Sunni Muslim community has been mostly loyal to the state when it comes to the Syria campaign, rather than taking any action or protesting in significant numbers.⁴⁷ That being said, Russian experts on Islam and the North Caucasus monitor the situation closely, warning that the current calm could give way to another explosion of radical activity, with Russian actions in Syria serving not as the exclusive, but as an additional igniting factor.⁴⁸ Some, for instance, have interpreted the recent attacks on security forces in Chechnya's capital Grozny, which left eleven militants dead, as a reaction of a part of Chechen society to Russian military support for Damascus.⁴⁹

[kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/275548/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/275548/).

47 Alexei Malashenko, "Voina v Sirii glazami rossiiskih musul'man", *Carnegie Moscow Center* (June 23, 2016).

48 Alexei Malashenko, "Preserving the Calm in Russia's Muslim Community", *Carnegie Moscow Center* (September 9, 2016).

49 Elena Milashina, "Napadenie

RUSSIA AND GEOPOLITICS: FROM HOPES OF COMPELLING US COOPERATION TO REGIONAL REALPOLITIK

Moscow's Syria Policy: The Message to Washington

Leaving aside Russia's state order concerns which, as argued, have been underpinned by historical experience and reflected fears of color revolutions in post-Soviet countries (and of Islamist spillover from the Middle East to a lesser extent), there are also Moscow's more sober geopolitical interests at stake in Syria. Its alliance with the Assad regime represents the core of its post-Soviet presence in the Middle East and Russia's actions in recent months have betrayed its desire to expand power-projection capabilities

na Grozny. Chto eto bylo?", *Novaya Gazeta* (December 20, 2016), available at: https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/12/20/70958-napadenie-na-groznyy-chto-eto-bylo?utm_source=push.

in the region. Russia's armed forces have launched attacks on targets in Syria from the Caspian Sea, submarines, the Iranian Hamadan base, its Black Sea Fleet and most recently its only aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov. Substantial military hardware has been deployed to Syria, including the S-400 and S-300, an oscillating number of fighter aircraft, tanks, submarines, destroyers and surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft.⁵⁰ After it was passed by the State Duma, President Putin signed a federal law confirming Russia's indefinite deployment of forces at

50 For a detailed overview of Russia's military deployment to Syria until mid-2016, see: "The Syrian Frontier" (available only in Russian), *Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies* (2016), available at: <http://cast.ru/upload/iblock/686/6864bf9d4485b9cd-83cc3614575e646a.pdf>. Following the latest Russia-Turkey negotiated ceasefire in Syria, Moscow announced in early January 2017 its intent to withdraw its aircraft carrier from Syria and scale down its military presence.

Hmeymim airbase and authorized investments in its modernization, as well as that of the Tartus port.

Russia's desire to project hard power in Syria must be understood in the context of its evolving relationship with the United States. While its initial military escalation was undoubtedly prompted by the perceived need to prop up an Assad regime losing significant territory by mid-2015, an additional motivation was likely to change facts on the ground in Syria in a way that would force the US to re-engage Russia more actively in diplomacy. The Russian government, it appears, believed the Syrian crisis could be instrumentalized to create conditions for a "thaw" in relations between Russia and the West, following the severe fallout over Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine. Moscow defined this in itself as a desirable objective – despite its often anti-Western rhetoric discussed above – because a sustained crisis with the West

has never been in its interest. The idea that Russia would use airstrikes in Syria towards that end might sound outlandish to Western observers, but it was frequently articulated within the Moscow expert community at the time. Whether the Kremlin hoped for more concrete benefits – a settlement of the Ukraine crisis on terms acceptable to Russia, or the lifting of sanctions – is a matter of speculation. But Moscow's relentless demands for cooperation with Washington on Syria have shown just how valuable the perception of an equal partnership remains to the Kremlin. While Russian expectations for any joint action on Syria have ebbed during the recent US presidential transition, with President Obama considered as a "lame duck" on Syria and amidst more bilateral tension following the fall of Aleppo and the US' decision to expel Russian diplomats, there is modest hope for cooperation with the incoming Trump administration.

Moscow's Growing Regional Clout: Increasingly an End in Itself?

Its growing military involvement in Syria has created opportunities for Moscow to build more robust commercial and diplomatic relationships with other Middle Eastern players, at a time when its gambit of forcing Washington into cooperation appeared to not be paying off. Since September 2015, Russia's military-industrial complex has led discussions on weapons deals with actors including Algeria, Iran, Bahrain, Turkey and Lebanon,⁵¹

51 "Algeria Increases Order of Russian-made Mi-28 Helos to 42", *DefenseNews* (April 7, 2016), available at: <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/2016/04/07/algeria-increases-order-russian-made-mi-28-helicopters-42/82747976/>; "Rossiia s "Triumfom" zahodit v Bahrein", *Kommersant* (September 9, 2016), available at: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3083667>; "Russia and Iran in talks over \$10 billion arms deal: RIA", *Reuters* (November 14, 2016), available at: <http://www.reuters.com>

while also cementing regional access by conducting joint military drills with select players. At the same time, Russia's Foreign Ministry has renewed modest attempts to re-start an Israeli-Palestinian peace process and signalled its interest in playing a mediating role in the Libyan crisis.⁵² The

[com/article/us-russia-iran-arms-idUSKBN1390UM](http://sputniknews.com/article/us-russia-iran-arms-idUSKBN1390UM); "Russia-Turkey Commission to Discuss S-400 Air Defense Systems Deliveries Soon", *Sputnik* (November 19, 2016), available at: <https://sputniknews.com/military/201611191047614849-russia-turkey-s-400/>; "Livanskii ministr rasskazal o krupnom proekte postavok vooruzhenii iz Rossii", *Ria Novosti* (January 7, 2017), available at: https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20170107/1485232040.html.

52 General Khalifa Haftar, the commander of Libya's armed forces loyal to the country's Tobruk-based government, visited Moscow several times last year for high-level consultations. At the end of December, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gatilov said in an interview with Tass that Haftar should become part of Libya's leadership and that the UN remains ineffective in diffusing the Libyan crisis. Libyan national unity government Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Maiteeq went on to state on January 4 that

cumulative effect of this string of Russian initiatives, some more serious than others, has been an emerging perception

any possible initiatives by Russia to arrange the political dialogue in the country would be welcomed. And following its withdrawal from Syria on January 5, Russia's Admiral Kuznetsov arrived in Libyan territorial waters on January 10 for joint drills with Haftar's forces, while Russia's Chief of General Staff reportedly travelled to Tobruk for a meeting with Haftar. "Gatilov: RF bez entuziazma odnositsia k idee sniatiiia oruzheinogo embargo s Lvii", *Tass* (December 27, 2016), available at: <http://tass.ru/politika/3909283>; "Libya Ready To Welcome Russia's Initiatives For Political Dialogue", *Sputnik* (January 4, 2017), available at: <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201701041049260071-libya-russia-political-dialogue/>; "Russian warships doing military drills in the Libyan water coordinated with Haftar's forces", *Libyan Express* (January 10, 2017), available at: <http://www.libyanexpress.com/russian-warships-doing-military-drills-in-the-libyan-water-coordinated-with-haftars-forces/>; "Russian Chief of General Staff arrives in Tobruk to meet Khalifa Haftar", *Libyan Express* (January 11, 2017), available at: <http://www.libyanexpress.com/russian-chief-of-general-staff-arrives-in-tobruk-to-meet-khalifa-haftar/>.

of Moscow "upping the ante" in the region. As Russian-US relations were sliding towards yet another low point, following both sides' last-ditch effort to preserve a Syrian ceasefire in September 2016, Moscow's investment in the Syrian frontier and shrewd cultivation of ties with pivotal players (especially Turkey) had by then put the Kremlin in a position from which it has been increasingly able to dictate the terms of Syria diplomacy. While its initial military escalation was partially about forcing Washington into a lukewarm friendship, that goal has for now receded into the background, due to both persistent disappointments with the US and a self-awareness of Russia's growing clout in the Middle East. Unlike protecting the Assad regime and preserving Syrian state order, gaining such clout was not initially a key driver of Russia's Syria strategy. But it has become one over time, as the Syrian war turned into a derivative of the broader US-Russian confrontation.

Russia and Iran: A Marriage of Convenience in Syria

An important element of this broader regional resurgence has been Russia's evolving relationship with Iran. Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, Russian-Iranian relations had been souring for a number of years, for instance because President Medvedev had supported UN sanctions against Iran in 2010 and signed a ban on the Russian delivery of the S-300 missile defense system to Tehran. Following the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in 2011, Russia and Iran cooperated towards saving the Assad regime, though for different reasons. While Moscow has been concerned with defending the principle of state order and regime inviolability in Syria, Iran's support for Damascus has been driven by its desire to retain its regional influence and access to its chain of defense comprising Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Making sure the ruling Assad dynasty stays in power has been

far more vital to the self-perceived Iranian "besieged fortress", than it has been to Moscow.

Russian-Iranian cooperation on Syria has certainly been extensive, with Tehran even temporarily allowing the Russian military to fly airstrikes from its Hamadan base last summer. However, lingering mutual mistrust and diverging goals in Syria have consistently presented obstacles towards the development of a full-fledged alliance. Moscow has never wanted Tehran to develop a nuclear weapons capability and has been ready to take actions in the past to thwart any such ambitions. Differences in style between both actors played out starkly during Russia's usage of Hamadan, which ended rather abruptly with Iran's Defense Ministry criticizing Russia for publicizing the raids and displaying a "show-off" attitude.⁵³ Further, Iran

53 "Iran Says Russia's Use of Air Base Has Ended For Now", *Gandha-*

has been more comfortable deploying proxies in the Syrian war, an approach that does not gel so neatly with the Russian *modus operandi*. Since grievances over state collapse in Libya and Iraq feature prominently in the Kremlin's thinking, it wants to avoid a situation in Syria where non-state actors dominate on the ground.⁵⁴ Finally, following the latest Russia-Turkey brokered Syria-wide ceasefire, Iranian-backed offensives in the Wadi Barada region near Damascus, though not officially criticized by Moscow, have served as the

ra Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (August 22, 2016), available at: <http://gandhara.rferl.org/a/iran-russia-syria-air-base/27938420.html>.

54 Hanna Notte, "New 'Axis of Resistance'? – Why Russia Avoids Full Identification with the Syrian-Iranian Alliance", *Russian International Affairs Council* (December 15, 2016). That being said, there is some evidence that Russia has developed a pragmatic relationship with Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict, see Alexander Corbeil, "Russia Is Learning About Hezbollah", *Carnegie Endowment For International Peace* (January 11, 2017).

latest stark reminder of the two sides' diverging priorities in Syria.⁵⁵

From Moscow's perspective, beyond Syria, there are additional reasons why the Russian-Iranian relationship is best characterized as a "marriage of convenience", rather than a full-fledged alliance.⁵⁶ First, while having been greatly at odds with the Arab Gulf states in its approach to the Syrian crisis, Moscow has still been

55 Since the Russia-Turkey brokered ceasefire was announced on December 29, pro-Assad forces have continued their offensive on Wadi Barada, reportedly backed by Hezbollah and Iranian headquarters, arguing that Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham fighters (excluded from the truce) are present in the area. While Turkey has warned that the offensive will derail plans for upcoming political talks between the Assad regime and the opposition in Astana, Kazakhstan, Russia has remained relatively silent on the issue.

56 Clement Therme, "The Iran-Russia Entente: Marriage of Convenience or Strategic Partnership?", in: Paolo Magri and Annalisa Perteghella (eds.): *Iran After The Deal: The Road Ahead*, ISPI (2015).

keen to foster diplomatic and commercial relations with the GCC members and has been clearly reluctant to be perceived as sitting too firmly within an Iranian pro-Shia camp. Admittedly, following the announcement of the latest Syria ceasefire on December 29, Sergey Lavrov suggested that Saudi Arabia and Qatar would not be invited to the first round of Syria talks in Astana,⁵⁷ in what was yet another sign that Russia is forging a new coalition comprising Iran, Turkey and Egypt, one that is able to impose the terms of Syria diplomacy not only on the US, but also on the Arab Gulf states.⁵⁸ But that being said, Moscow remains interested in dialogue with

the GCC, continuing its multi-vector diplomacy of forging relations with actors across the Middle East that has been so characteristic of Russian foreign policy towards the region since the early 2000s. And Russia's pragmatism pays off: Qatar's sovereign investment fund only recently announced its intent to pay 5 billion USD in hard cash for a stake in Rosneft, heralding one of the largest deals Russia has ever struck with a GCC state.⁵⁹

Second, while pursuing its strategic goals in Syria, Russia wants to avoid the risk of seriously alienating Israel, let alone associate with the militant anti-Israel rhetoric characteristic of the Iranian leadership. Russian-Israeli relations have evolved under Putin's presidency, lingering frictions over Moscow's cooperation with Iran and Syria and engagement of

57 "Lavrov says Egypt could join Syria talks in Astana", TASS (December 29, 2016), available at: <http://tass.com/politics/923242>.

58 Emile Hokayem, "How Syria Defeated the Sunni Powers", *The New York Times* (December 30, 2016), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/opinion/how-syria-defeated-the-sunni-powers.html>.

59 "Glencore and Qatar take 19.5% stake in Rosneft", *Financial Times* (December 10, 2016), available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/d3923b08-bf09-11e6-9bca-2b93a6856354>.

Hamas notwithstanding. Since the start of Russian airstrikes in Syria, Russia and Israel have been careful to coordinate their military activities along the Syrian-Israeli border in order to prevent accidents. Differing views on the legal status of the Caspian Sea, as well as the relatively modest level of economic cooperation, remain additional impediments towards a more robust Russian-Iranian alliance.

Russia and the Quest for Great Power Status

The Russian desire to play a key role in mediating the Syrian war on equal terms with Washington has highlighted a final driver of its strategy: the importance it attaches to international “status”. While even Realists admit that all states care about status (Robert Gilpin once called prestige the “everyday currency of international politics”), post-Soviet Russia seems to do so disproportionately. Though

Russia lost its superpower status at the end of the Cold War, successive Russian elites refused to accept that their country had therefore become a lesser power.

In escalating its role in the Syrian war in a carefully calibrated way, Russia has forced the US and other players to accept it as an indispensable mediator of the conflict, and as a force to be reckoned with in the wider region. The Russian play has clearly served its quest for status recognition, especially since it has allowed the Kremlin to showcase Russia’s latest military prowess and thus win new clients. If one adds Russia’s grandstanding rhetoric about “carrying the torch in the fight against international terrorism” to the picture, it seems clear that Russia’s involvement in Syria has betrayed the desire to project a certain image, domestically and internationally. Few episodes illustrated this as vividly as the Kremlin’s staging

of a triumphal concert in Palmyra earlier this year, after Russian-backed forces had recaptured the site from ISIL. As one prominent Russian commentator put it, the Middle East has become an arena “to showcase that the period of Russia’s absence from the international scene as a first-rate state has ended.”⁶⁰

Over recent months, Western commentators and the Twitter community have often been quick to ridicule Russian calamities in Syria, belittling its “ageing rust bucket of an aircraft carrier” deployed towards the Mediterranean, or calling the crash of a Russian Su-33 jet attempting to land on the Admiral Kuznetsov “embarrassing”.⁶¹ But such

sarcasm has missed the point that even Russia’s undermodernized military has brought to bear enough airpower to break the rebellion in Aleppo, catapulting Russia into the position of chief mediator in the Syrian crisis. Even those mocking Russia have to admit it has gained international status through its involvement in Syria – status not necessarily as what the ‘West’ would characterize as a responsible actor assuming a constructive role, but as a shrewd player deploying hard power consistently, largely competently, its eyes always on the prize.

60 Fyodor Lukyanov, quoted in: Yaroslav Trofimov, ‘Russia’s Long Road To The Middle East’, *The Wall Street Journal* (May 27, 2016), available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-long-road-to-the-middle-east-1464361067>.

61 “Don’t laugh at Vladimir Putin’s rusty navy – at least the Russians have an aircraft carrier”, *The Telegraph* (October 25, 2016), available

at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/25/vladimir-putins-aggression-means-we-must-speed-up-the-rebuilding/>; “Embarrassing: Second Russian warplane crashes into Mediterranean off aircraft carrier”, *Express* (December 5, 2016), available at: <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/739906/Russia-warplane-crash-Mediterranean>.

ADDENDUM: WHO MAKES RUSSIA'S SYRIA POLICY?

Embedding Russia's Syria policy in a broader context, assessing it through the prisms of Russia's perspective on the post-'Arab Spring' Middle East, its historical experience in the Chechen Wars, its fears about so-called 'color revolutions' and its relationship with the West, this article has argued that it is possible to identify Russia's fundamental interests in the Syria war, which have remained largely consistent over the past six years and driven policy. That being said, getting behind the *who* and *how* of concrete Russian actions is much more challenging. Transparency into final decision-making processes on foreign policy, while constrained in any political system, is especially limited in the Russian Federation. Even though a number of domestic actors, most notably the military-industrial complex, the oil industry and the Russian

Orthodox Church have represented important lobbies influencing Russia's Middle East policy, and while the historically pro-Arab leaning Foreign Ministry arguably plays its role in executing diplomacy, it has become consensus among Russia analysts in recent years that foreign policy decisions are in the final instance taken by a small circle, including the President and his key advisors.⁶²

While the decisive deliberations occur within Putin's inner circle, the President's willingness to heed the advice of different lobbies seems to oscillate over time. For instance, following the failed September 2016 ceasefire, which Russia had

62 Nikolas Gvosdev and Christopher Marsh, *Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors, and Sectors* (2014); Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return to Great Power Politics* (2009); Fiona Hill, "Putin: The one-man show the West doesn't understand", in: *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (2016).

brokered with the US, the position of Russia's Defense Ministry appeared to have been elevated within the power circle, driven both by the perceived success of the military campaign and by the failure of diplomacy. Russia's subsequent support for the Assad regime's operation to retake Aleppo from the armed opposition was a natural result of that shift. But the Russian military's ability to impose its preferences is not cast in stone. At other times, diplomatic considerations have been prioritized over the military-industrial complex' interests, for instance when the Russian government banned the S-300 sale to Iran in the summer of 2010, in what was partially a gesture of goodwill to the United States. Instead, events in recent weeks suggest that diplomatic and military concerns remain carefully calibrated in Russia's Syria strategy and that no single lobby enjoys the President's attention. Following Aleppo's fall, Russia was eager to

quickly forge a ceasefire and jump-start renewed political talks. It might also be no coincidence that, on the same day the ceasefire was announced, Deputy Defense Minister Anatolii Antonov – who has great diplomatic experience negotiating with the US government – was re-appointed to the Foreign Ministry, where he will “coordinate military and political security issues”.⁶³ At the end of the day, Moscow needs a political solution (on its terms) towards the Syrian crisis, in order to extricate itself from the war, claim the status of successful “peacemaker” and drive its policy of preserving Syrian state order to its full conclusion.

CONCLUSION

Considering the key drivers of Russia's Syria policy, what informed guesses can be made

63 “Takoi chelovek polezen dlia MID”, *Gazeta* (December 29, 2016), available at: https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/12/29_a_10456451.shtml.

about developments in 2017 and what are the important questions analysts should be asking going forward? To this insecure Russian regime, which increasingly sees itself as a “besieged fortress” that has been denied its deserved status by the United States, the protection of Syrian state order will remain the central concern. If one reflects on the range of actions Russia has taken throughout the Syrian war – from working with the US on Syrian chemical weapons demilitarization, to launching airstrikes in Syria, to recently getting Turkey to acquiesce to Russia’s approach via exploiting its weaknesses – Moscow has been diplomatically savvy and militarily shrewd in pursuit of its goal. There is nothing to suggest that Russian ingenuity has reached its limits.

Forging a new alliance with Turkey, Iran, and to some extent Egypt, Russia has successfully marginalized the US in the Syrian conflict for

the time being. While Russia’s military has played a key role in putting Moscow into this position of relative strength, ultimately, Russia needs a political process. Increasingly at liberty to dictate its terms, Moscow will still show some measure of flexibility in order to give diplomacy a chance. The list of groups Moscow included in the latest ceasefire featured both Ahrar Al-Sham and Jaysh Al-Islam – previously labelled “terrorist”, now counted among the “moderates” – in a sign that the Kremlin saw merit in adjusting its position as a gesture to Turkey.⁶⁴ Further, Russia’s pro-regime agenda will remain calibrated to pursue limited goals. While it is vital that Assad does not succumb to external pressure, Moscow is not committed to enable him to retake all of Syria’s territory. Instead,

64 “List of armed formations, which joined the ceasefire in the Syrian Arab Republic on December 30, 2016”, *Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation*, available at: http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12107227@egNews.

it has wanted Assad to be just about flexible enough for a diplomatic process to remain alive. As long as there is a political track, Russia will be central to it and Russia will be talked about. This is indispensable to Russia reclaiming status in the Middle East and the international community more broadly.

With these considerations in mind, it is also conceivable that the Kremlin will be ready to seek closer cooperation on Syria with the incoming Trump administration. Yet, that it will not cede initiative or escalation dominance to the US government has been made clear over recent months, when Russia pushed ahead in enabling Assad to retake Aleppo, rather than sitting out the US presidential transition and waiting for Donald Trump's arrival at the White House. Instead, as laid out in its latest foreign policy strategy published at the end of last year, Moscow will continue to forge ad hoc intra- and cross-regional alliances

whenever it sees them as conducive towards its goals.⁶⁵

I have argued that we might well be entering a period in which the Middle East ceases to serve as a bargaining chip in Russia's relationship with the US, but is acquiring a qualitatively new level of strategic significance in itself for Moscow. Yet, whether Russia has an independent "vision" for a regional security order, one that has more to it than mere anti-Western revisionism, remains doubtful. In his appearance at the latest Valdai Club meeting in October, President Putin called for a "kind of Marshall Plan" for the Middle East as an "effort in which Russia is

65 "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, available at: http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248?p_p_id=101_IN-STANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_IN-STANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB.

certainly willing to join.”⁶⁶ And representatives of Moscow’s expert community harbor hopes that Russia could one day play a mediating role between the GCC and Iran. Whether such intentions are sheer hubris or actually realistic possibilities depends on a number of factors that will take some time to play out: the extent of regional players’ readiness for Russia to fill the vacuum left by recent US retrenchment, President Trump’s policies towards the Middle East, as well as the trajectory of social and economic stability in the Russian Federation itself. At this point, some Middle Eastern interlocutors will say that greater respect for Russia in the region is sustained by angst not admiration, by its readiness to deploy brute

force, rather than the appeal of its soft power. Others will instead admire Russia for appearing to resist American influence, representing conservative values and protecting Christian minorities in the region. The history of whether Russia’s image will benefit or suffer from its role in the Syrian war, and how its broader posture in the Middle East will be affected, is therefore one that still has to be written. What seems certain, for now, is that Moscow’s Syria policy will remain firmly in pursuit of protecting what is Russia’s understanding of state order in the Middle East and beyond.

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66 “Vladimir Putin Meets With Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 13th Annual Meeting” (October 27, 2016), available at: <http://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-took-part-in-the-valdai-discussion-club-s-plenary-session/>.