



Atlantic Council

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THE KREMLIN'S ACTIONS IN SYRIA

ORIGINS,
TIMING,
AND PROSPECTS

Frederic C. Hof, Vladislav Inozemtsev,
Adam Garfinkle, and Dennis Ross
with a foreword by John E. Herbst



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Cover photo credit: Khalil Ashawi/Reuters. A boy inspects damage inside his school, due to what activists said was an air strike carried out by the Russian air force in Injara town, Aleppo countryside, Syria, January 12, 2016.

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I FOREWORD

JOHN E. HERBST

More than one analyst of recent Middle Eastern wars has argued that they seem to go on forever because their antagonists are both too weak and too strong: too weak to win, too strong to lose.¹

“Too weak, too strong” could also be a fair summation of Russia’s position as it seeks to change the course of the Syrian civil war.

Isolated, recession-racked, and bogged down in Ukraine, Russia has plenty on its plate. But those same ills lie behind, at least in part, the country’s intervention in Syria, which for all its expense could boost the economy and win it relief from Western sanctions or freer rein in its neighborhood—not to mention restore to Russia the influence that the Soviet Union once enjoyed in the Middle East. That last objective starts with shoring up the Assad regime, whose weakening position through the summer of 2015 prompted the Kremlin’s decision to intervene.

This volume aims to illuminate the motives behind and likely next steps of the Russian government’s campaign in Syria. An outgrowth of a symposium held at the Atlantic Council on December 18, 2015 titled, “The Kremlin’s Actions in Syria: Origins, Timing, and Prospects,” the major part of this report is made up of essays by four respected scholars, analysts, and diplomats: Adam Garfinkle, Founding Editor of the *American Interest* magazine; Frederic C. Hof, Resident Senior Fellow at the Council’s Rafik Hariri Center, former adviser on Syria to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and special adviser for transition in Syria under President Barack Obama; Vladimir Inozemtsev, Professor of Economics at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow and Founder and Director of the Center of Post-Industrial Studies; and Dennis Ross, Counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, former special assistant to President Obama, National Security Council Senior Director, and special adviser to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

As Inozemtsev and Garfinkle point out, one of the original motivations for the war in Syria could be an injection for Russia’s moribund economy, allowing its arms industry to create the jobs and desperately needed export revenues that the energy industry no longer provides. Garfinkle ventures that Russian operations in Syria may be “a kind of commercial air show, with a ground addendum.” Inozemtsev sees them as a way to shift the Russian public’s focus away from former promises of prosperity, so manifestly out of reach now, to the prospect of their country’s renewed greatness, even in the face of supposed encirclement.

“If Russia’s involvement in Syria helps Moscow resume cooperation with the West, Putin will deliver the country’s great-power status to his people,” Inozemtsev writes.

Which takes us to another point of weakness that was likely instrumental in pushing Russia to act in Syria. Intervening in the war on behalf of Bashar al-Assad, a tool of Iran, has given a shunned and sanctioned Kremlin the chance to reinforce ties with Tehran, one of its few reliable allies, as the Iranians head toward a rapprochement with the West. It also allows Moscow to demonstrate its leverage over the Assad regime, whose depredations have produced a gusher of refugees overwhelming Europe.

There is near-unanimity among experts here and elsewhere that Vladimir Putin aims to use that leverage to twist arms in Brussels into abandoning the Ukraine-related sanctions imposed against Russia in 2014. Failing that, he could double down on the war’s already horrific carnage and cause a wave of new refugees powerful enough to break open the fissures among European Union (EU) countries on this issue, ultimately threatening the continued existence of the bloc. Either outcome would surely be seen as a win in Moscow.

As would Assad’s staying in power, years after US President Barack Obama called on the Syrian President to step aside. “Russia sees Assad’s continued incumbency as the key to proclaiming Moscow’s return to great-power

1 Patrick Cockburn, “Too Weak, Too Strong,” *London Review of Books*, November 5, 2015, pp. 3-6.

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status and as a stick for administering a potentially humiliating diplomatic beating to the United States,” Hof writes.

More broadly, Ross argues, the Russian President is carving out a “more central role of influence” in the region. “Putin would like Middle East leaders to see that all roads run through Moscow if they want their needs and concerns to be addressed,” he writes.

Much to the exasperation of Westerners who have been dangling carrots and brandishing sticks at Moscow for at least the past several years, it is in its very weaknesses that the Kremlin seems to find its strength. But then that is true of most who have little to lose and much to gain. Moscow has the measure of its cautious interlocutors and is willing to make risky, even reckless, choices—invading Crimea and eastern Ukraine, relying largely on unguided bombs and targeting civilian sites in Syria—as the West remains weary of conflict and wary of entanglements.

The authors of this volume argue that the White House’s decisions not to arm Syrian rebels, respond militarily to Damascus’ use of chemical weapons, or, as Hof puts it, “obstruct, complicate, or otherwise frustrate Assad-regime mass casualty assaults on Syrian civilians” inevitably helped Assad remain in power, and that US attempts to keep the Syrian conflict at arm’s length helped create a vacuum, into which Russia stepped.

Moscow’s intervention right away stopped the retreat of Assad’s forces. Starting in January, when it began a massive bombing campaign against the moderate opposition backed by the West and the civilians among whom they live, the Kremlin has enabled Assad’s forces to move toward Aleppo, the opposition’s stronghold. Moscow’s air campaign also has exacerbated the refugee problem, providing impetus for a ceasefire that does not, however, include the Islamic State of al-Sham (ISIS) or other extremist jihadi groups. Moscow again surprised the world when it announced mid-March that its intervention in Syria had achieved its objectives and that it would withdraw most of its forces. This has happened as the extremist groups, who represent the chief danger to Assad, remain in the field and largely untouched by Kremlin military operations. If Moscow implements this decision—and the Geneva talks between Assad’s government and the moderate opposition do not yield quick progress—Assad will likely find himself once again losing ground on the battlefield.

Time for some prescriptions, then. What does the West do now, short of combat, when faced with this most calculating adversary that finds war in its own interest? That question necessarily shifts our focus from dealing with Russia to ending the war, though those are overlapping goals.

Is establishment of a safe haven or no-fly zone in Syria desirable, or, if Moscow continues its bombing campaign despite the announcement, even possible? Is a Sunni-dominated coalition necessary to defeat ISIS and the Assad regime? If so, who should be its first target—Assad, whose atrocities fuel ISIS’ recruiting drive, or ISIS itself? And how far, militarily, will the United States ultimately have to go to protect civilians and pave the way for a transitional government in Syria?

And, finally, where would Russia be in all this? If it continues to attack the non-ISIS opposition to Assad, which presumably would make up a key part of this coalition, we would be in dangerous territory—not for the first time in this new era of Russian adventurism. Coaxing Russia into an anti-ISIS coalition, Inozemtsev suggests, may require the West offering things Russia wants: “A free hand in the post-Soviet space,” a guarantee of neutrality for Ukraine, readmission to the G8, and Assad’s remaining in power, at least temporarily. But these are concessions the West is unlikely to—and should not—make.

It would also be foolish to rule out the judgment of the White House that Putin has taken on a task that he cannot possibly complete. The brutal Russian bombing campaign has proven effective against the relatively weak moderate opposition, but even combined with Iranian and Hezbollah forces, may not have proved sufficient to maintain the Assad regime against jihadi forces. Perhaps this recognition, plus mounting economic woes, explains Moscow’s announced withdrawal.

SUMMARY OF CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

On December 18, 2015, the Atlantic Council hosted a conference titled, “The Kremlin’s Actions in Syria: Origins, Timing, and Prospects.” Participants included experts on Russia and the Middle East, former government officials, and journalists.

The first of two panels focused on the evolution of Russia’s policy on Syria and included commentary from Ambassador Frederic C. Hof, Resident Senior Fellow at the Council’s Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East; Vladislav Inozemtsev, Professor of Economics at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow; Angela Stent, Professor and Director at Georgetown University’s Center for Eurasian, Russian, and Eastern European Studies; Mark Katz, Professor of Government and Politics at George Mason University; and Ambassador Nabil Fahmy, former Egyptian Foreign Minister and Founding Dean of the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at the American University in Cairo. Moderating was Ambassador Francis Ricciardone, Vice President and Director of the Rafik Hariri Center.

Panel two shifted the discussion to the impact of and prospects for Moscow’s new policy, and how the West should respond. It included Ambassador Dennis Ross, Counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; Adam Garfinkle, Founding Editor of the *American Interest* magazine; Mowaffak al-Rubaie, former National Security Adviser of Iraq and former Member of Parliament, Council of Representatives of Iraq; Pavel Felgenhauer, independent Moscow-based Military Analyst and Journalist, *Novaya Gazeta*; and Ambassador Richard Burt, Managing Director of McLarty Associates and Board Director and Executive Committee Member of the Atlantic Council. The second panel was moderated by Ambassador John E. Herbst, Director of the Atlantic Council’s Dinu Patriciu Eurasia Center.

The following is an analytical summary of the conference proceedings.

PANEL ONE

Why did Russia intervene in Syria? According to Vladimir Putin, the aim was to fight terrorism and to defend Syria’s sovereignty. But there are other regimes whose grip on power—the Kremlin’s idea of sovereignty—is tenuous and whose countries are

plagued by terrorists, as Vladimir Inozemtsev points out in an essay in this volume.

So why Syria? This is not an academic question, for its answer will tell us key things about the chances for a new, democratic Syria to be born—if it survives at all—and about the chances for forming a truly broad coalition that includes Sunni Arab states, the United States and European powers, and Russia to fight ISIS.

Russia’s intervention and its commitment to Syria’s President, Bashar al-Assad, serve multiple purposes, according to most panelists.

Primarily, Russia’s actions in Syria allow Putin “to confound the United States’ policies of intervention, which he opposed for many years,” going back to Yugoslavia, Inozemtsev argued. Second, the Syria operation is part of Russia’s drive to become a global power, which has been frustrated by its conflict with the West over Ukraine and other parts of Eastern and Central Europe, according to Inozemtsev.

That argument was echoed by most panelists.

Putin has “really forced the United States to deal with him, really since this began, after the United States and its allies for twenty-eight months have tried to isolate Russia because of what’s happened in Ukraine,” Stent told the panel. “And I think he’s been quite successful in that, because right now he’s the sort of go-to man if you want to get something done on Syria, as we saw with Secretary Kerry’s visit to Moscow a few days ago.”

Pointing to recent trips to Moscow by several Middle Eastern leaders—and a proposed \$10 billion Saudi investment in Russia—Stent said the Syria operation is part of “a broader strategy of Russia to recoup its influence in the Middle East.”

Beyond intervening in the war, specifically supporting Assad gives the Kremlin a shot at a major diplomatic coup, according to Hof: “For Russia, Assad’s continued incumbency proclaims Moscow’s return to great-power status,” he said. “Putin claims that Washington has been on a democratization and regime-change jihad since 2003 in Iraq. He wants to stop it cold in Syria.”

The Russian President aims to do that, Hof said, by eliminating the non-ISIS opposition to Assad in order

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to present the United States with a choice between the embattled Syrian President—the barrel bomber, Hof calls him—or ISIS.

“He wants President Obama to eat his 2011 words on Assad stepping aside,” Hof said.

Stent agreed, but added that the Kremlin’s support of Assad grows out of Moscow’s “very neuralgic issue of regime change. So Vladimir Putin is putting Russia forward as the champion of established . . . sovereign governments all around the world.” Fahmy attributed a more pragmatic motive to Putin.

Recounting a February 2014 conversation with the Russian leader, Fahmy said Putin is concerned foremost in Syria with fighting extremism, less so with countering what he perceives as “Western arrogance.” On this point, Inozemtsev and Stent acknowledged that Putin does want (or professes to want) to assemble an anti-terror coalition despite his anti-Western bellicosity.

As for domestic considerations, a “small war outside the Russian border” signals to Russians that their country is a player on the global stage and serves as a distraction from their dire economic situation (and a remedy, to the extent that it creates jobs in the arms industry) and from Russia’s dwindling fortunes in Ukraine, Inozemtsev said.

“Mr. Putin really doesn’t have any strategy to go out from eastern Ukraine. So therefore, it needs another hot point in the world to present himself as a hero there,” Inozemtsev said.

Likewise, Stent said, “Ukraine has disappeared from Russian TV. It’s all international terrorism now. And Putin has to keep showing himself as a very strong leader who can deal with these threats to Russia.”

A final domestic driver for Moscow’s intervention in Syria, often overlooked by foreign observers, is a chance to restore prestige and a sense of purpose to Russia’s military, demoralized after a tumultuous period under the reformist former Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov and denied glory for its exploits in Ukraine by an official policy of subterfuge on that score.

Most panelists agreed that the starkly different objectives of the United States and Russia, along with

their recent history of antagonism and Moscow’s aim to blunt US influence in the Middle East and beyond, offer little hope of a genuine coalition effort to defeat ISIS, let alone usher in a transitional government in Damascus.

Far from coalition-building, some in the West will argue that if Syria is to be a quagmire, let it be Russia’s quagmire, Katz said.

Responding to Inozemtsev’s outline of Russian thinking on Syria, Katz cited a fundamental, have-cake-and-eat-it-too type of problem.

“While it is directed against the West, it is also intended to gain Western support for Russia as not just a member but the leader of the coalition against ISIL and terrorists in general,” he said. “But even if the US does not actually oppose a Russian ground offensive

in Syria, it’s hardly likely to support it, much less treat Moscow as the leader of the coalition against ISIL. There’s another alternative, and that is to simply let Russia suffer from all the ill effects of intervention in the Middle East that Washington is all too familiar with, and Moscow should be as well.”

Another fundamental complication is, with apologies to Raymond Carver, what Putin talks about when he talks about extremism. In Syria, it would apparently include the non-ISIS opposition fighters, supported by Washington, who took the brunt of early Russian bombing.

“Of course, we should try and work with the Russians—but to have a successful coalition like this we’d have to agree on who the enemy is. And I think the panel has shown that we don’t agree on who the enemy is, except by saying, you know, in general it’s Islamic State,” Stent said.

Further, the recent history of mistrust between Moscow and the West, especially on the issue of Russia’s actions in Ukraine but also on NATO expansion and the US missile-defense system in Eastern Europe, will make cooperation difficult, most panelists agreed.

It’s a sharp contrast to the atmosphere of cooperation after the September 11, 2001 attacks, but “Mr. Putin is now on a completely different course than he was fifteen years ago. So I can’t see any productive coalition under such circumstances as today,” Inozemtsev said.

“Mr. Putin really doesn’t have any strategy to go out from eastern Ukraine. So therefore, it needs another hot point in the world to present himself as a hero there.”

Vladislav Inozemtsev



Even if a coalition could be forced, and it managed to neutralize ISIS, what then, Katz wondered. “Differences about who should govern Syria among the coalition partners fighting ISIL will reemerge as strongly as ever,” he predicted. And with Russian troops on the ground, “Putin may calculate that their presence there may be the deciding factor about who will rule Syria, just as the presence of the Soviet army in Eastern Europe at the end of World War II was the deciding factor about who came to power there,” Katz said.

Still, there must be a coalition, Fahmy said.

“This is not about whether you’re going to engage Russia or whether you’re going to compete with Russia or whether you’re going to cooperate with Russia. You’re going to do all three of them at the same time. It’s simply a reality that neither the US, the West, Russia, nor the Arab world, nor for that matter Iran, has a conclusive tool in its hand to either solve the Syrian issue or to deal with ISIS alone,” he said.

Rather, the question is what the coalition’s job will be, according to Fahmy: crisis management, where cooperation is possible, or conflict resolution, which would require “a grand bargain, not only between the US and Russia, but also among regional players, because they will all have to make serious compromises that are strategic rather than tactical.”

Defeating ISIS will take ground troops, Fahmy pointed out, and no player in the Syrian crisis will be willing to provide them on its own. “And so we’re going to have to find a way to work together. The issue is how much we do this and how much not.”

“I frankly believe that engaging Russia is a good thing. And I also believe that they understand that there’s only so much you can do without engaging other parties. But I’m not ready to say yet that this step [Russia’s intervention], per se, is the beginning of the solution. That depends on the politics after that.”

Fahmy suggested the West shift its emphasis away from ousting Assad to envisioning a post-Assad Syria.

“If you develop the formula or the guarantees on what will be the day after, you actually factor in what are the interests of the regional states, what are the interests of the states outside of the leadership,” he said.

Inozemtsev, who advocates partition, concluded his remarks by saying he did not believe there will be a post-Assad Syria.

“So I think that Syria is gone. The military victory is unachievable. And the strong coalition with Russia is also out of the question,” he said.

PANEL TWO

In Panel two, the participants focused on the repercussions of Russia's intervention and possible responses, including the question of whether a sustainable ceasefire agreement was possible. But there is no reason for optimism: The war in Syria has become more intractable than it was in 2013, when the United States declined to take action against Bashar al-Assad's forces for their use of chemical weapons. Recently, the rebels and their backers in the West seem to have lost significant leverage, especially with the entry of Russia into the fray in fall 2015.

That leaves Western strategists hemmed in, and the Atlantic Council's discussion on the impact of Russia's intervention and the West's possible responses was as much about limitations as about possibilities.

In the short term, the United States has essentially two options, which ideally would be complementary: to create a no-fly zone in Syria and to form a broad, Sunni-backed coalition to fight Assad and ISIS.

But there was no agreement among panelists on whether either option is feasible.

If initial diplomacy stalls, the United States must use "the logic of leverage" against Assad's Russian backers, according to Ross.

Primarily, that would entail creating a safe haven, which could help stanch the refugee flow to Europe, make regional Sunni leaders more likely to join a coalition, once they see "that something is done to stop the onslaught against Sunnis within Syria," and "create an area within Syria where you could have leverage actually on the opposition to cohere," Ross said.

All of which would be bad news for Putin, as refugee-swamped European countries would have less need of his help in ending the conflict, and therefore less incentive to ease Ukraine-related sanctions imposed on Russia in 2014.

"He will understand it reduces his leverage on the Europeans," Ross said. "It will raise—it has the promise of actually creating an opposition that could become more effective against the Assad regime, which will raise the cost of supporting the Assad regime."

But as the lessons of Srebrenica tell us, a safe haven must be protected, which Ross suggested could be a joint effort among Turkey, the Gulf states, and European countries.

Burt, however, was skeptical that they would sign on, and Garfinkle even argued that having to police a no-fly zone could increase the chances of conflict between Russian and US forces.

Are the chances better, then, of forming a coalition against either Assad or ISIS? Garfinkle argued that an anti-Assad coalition is more feasible and more urgent, because defeating ISIS is not a priority for the region's governments, while atrocities committed by regime forces serve as recruiting fodder for the terrorist group.

"So this puts us right at loggerheads with what the Russians are trying to do in Syria, which is to sustain Bashar al-Assad, where our interests and the interests of the Sunni coalition should be to displace him, whether physically or by dint of re-torquing the battlefield so that diplomacy can produce the kind of outcome that we desire," Garfinkle said.

And if it's not obvious who would supply the troops to police a safe haven, it is no more so when it comes to putting together a battlefield coalition, some panelists said.

There is little appetite in the United States for sending troops, Herbst noted, although polls have shown

that opposition softening since the San Bernardino massacre.

"It would have to involve Turkish troops for sure, probably French troops, and, very important, a clear understanding with the Sunni powers that they're going to stop their support for the extremists and maybe they're going to put their own troops on the ground," Herbst said, estimating the process would take another two to three years.

Burt was less optimistic.

"We can talk about, well, we'll get the Turks in there. Well, we've already recognized this morning that the Turks' major interest is not ISIS. It is protecting their Turkmen and dealing with the Kurdish issue," he said. "So if it's not the Turks, we're not going to get—the Kurds are great when they're defending their

If initial diplomacy stalls, the United States must use "the logic of leverage" against Assad's Russian backers.

Dennis Ross

community and their regions. You can't expect the Kurds to go into the Arab zones and fight ISIS there.

"But to try to talk about a grand coalition to fight ISIS in a situation of civil and internal internecine conflict in both Syria, in Iraq, in Yemen, in Libya, and to think that we . . . could create such a grand coalition to get to fight in these internal conflicts, I think is a huge mistake," Burt said.

In any event, al-Rubaie said, some in the region have welcomed Russia's involvement for giving the Syrian conflict new urgency in the West but also because their bombers' "less sensitive" rules of engagement could be more effective at hitting ISIS targets than US planes, which take greater pains to avoid civilian casualties.

In the long term, the tasks the West has set for itself in Syria are no easier. They include helping to establish free elections and a transitional government with wide regional support and ultimately trying to dampen the contest for dominance between Saudi Arabia and Iran—Burt called it a thirty-year war—and choking off support for violent religious extremists (for it was in this tinderbox that Assad was able to turn a protest against the regime into a sectarian conflagration, Ross noted).

Seen in that context, the question is not only how to respond to Russia's actions in Syria, but also how to create a situation acceptable to regional powers, including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, as well as various groups on the ground in Syria, Burt said.

"I think the big mistake we could make here is to think that somehow the United States and Russia—even if they were to reach agreement—could drive an overall settlement here," he said.

As for Russia's goals, in the short term they seem more in reach than they did a few months ago: keeping Assad in power, for now, and possibly even getting EU sanctions relaxed, provided "Putin demonstrates that he's trying to seek somehow through just purely public diplomacy [to] play a constructive role in the Syrian exercise," Burt said.

Long term, however, the Kremlin could have as steep a hill to climb as the West, for it seeks, according to Felgenhauer, "a new world order" with a free hand for "established tyrants," great powers making the world's big decisions, and Eurasia carved up into zones of influence.

SYRIA CRISIS: FROM CHAOS TO SOLUTION

FREDERIC C. HOF

That arrangement, Moscow calculates, “would build the new world order that would give Europe peace for generations,” Felgenhauer said.

When Syrian security forces opened fire on peaceful demonstrators in the southern city of Deraa on March 18, 2011, few observers (if any) were able to predict the start of a process that would lead to armed rebellion and make Syria a proxy battleground for competing regional (Iranian, Arab Gulf, Turkish) and international (American and Russian) powers. Notwithstanding “Arab Spring” popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, and notwithstanding deepening economic problems in Syria caused by natural (drought) and man-made (corrupt, incompetent governance) factors, Syria did not seem in the first quarter of 2011 to be a candidate for eventual state failure. Indeed, the United States was deeply involved in a promising diplomatic effort to bring about a Syrian-Israeli treaty of peace. But as 2011 drew to a close, what had begun as a peaceful and non-sectarian uprising against a regime inclined to abuse the dignity of its constituents was becoming rapidly militarized; and four years later Syria itself would be in ruins.

This paper seeks to illuminate a potential pathway to a political settlement embracing all of Syria within its current boundaries. Unlike other initiatives, official and “track two” unofficial, aimed at bringing an honorable and sustainable end to a humanitarian abomination and a political catastrophe, this prescriptive essay does not assume the existence of shared interests among key parties, commonalities to be coaxed out by dialogue and discussion. Instead it assumes sharply conflicting interests among key parties, conflicts that cannot be papered-over by processes and palaver.

As 2011 drew to a close, what had begun as a peaceful and non-sectarian uprising against a regime inclined to abuse the dignity of its constituents was becoming rapidly militarized; and four years later Syria itself would be in ruins.

For example: it will *not* be assumed here that the United States, Russia, and Iran share a near-term interest in defeating the Islamic State of al-Sham (ISIS, also known as Islamic State, ISIL, or Daesh) in Syria. Neither is it assumed that there is some level of interests-based reassurances that can induce Tehran and Moscow to compel their joint client—Syrian President Bashar al-Assad—to yield power to a transitional governing body established in conformity with the terms of the June 30, 2012 Final Communiqué of the Action Group on Syria.²

On the contrary: a key operating assumption of this paper is that Russia and Iran—for separate but compatible reasons—wish to keep their client (Assad) in power at least in some part of Syria for the foreseeable future; that the nature of the military campaign being waged by Russian aircraft and Iranian-assembled militias against armed groups—not ISIS—actively combating the Assad regime defines Russian and Iranian priorities in Syria; and that the Vienna diplomatic process launched by Washington and Moscow in October 2015 is seen by the latter as a time-buying expedient for military operations aimed at securing Assad’s position.

For Iran, preservation of the Syrian regime headed by Assad is a national security requirement of the highest order. During his fifteen-year incumbency Assad has placed Syria at the disposal of Iran by making his country a secure, supportive hinterland for Iran’s Lebanese militia, Hezbollah. Assad’s Syria has been essential to Hezbollah’s ability to dominate

² “Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué 30.06.12,” *The United Nations*, June 30, 2012, <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf>.

Lebanon politically and keep an impressive arsenal of rockets and missiles pointed at Israel. Whereas Assad's father, Hafiz, was the senior partner in the Syria-Iran relationship and a stern overseer of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, Assad the younger has subordinated himself to Iran on matters involving Hezbollah and made himself a peer—at best—of Hezbollah's leader. Indeed, Hezbollah's military intervention in Syria—undertaken at the behest of Iran—saved Iran's client from military defeat in 2013 and continues to sustain him.

For Russia, Assad has much less salience as a national security tool than he has for Iran. Yes, there is a naval refueling station on the Mediterranean Sea at Tartus that Moscow would like to retain. Were this the principal object of Russian policy, Moscow might well see Assad in the way Washington wishes Moscow would see Assad: as a liability.

Instead, however, Russia sees Assad's continued incumbency as the key to proclaiming Moscow's return to great-power status and as a stick for administering a potentially humiliating diplomatic beating to the United States. Russian President Vladimir Putin has made clear his belief that, since Iraq in 2003, Washington has been on a regime-change, democratizing jihad around the world—but particularly in the Arab Muslim world. For Putin, forcing upon President Barack Obama (or his successor) the straightforward, binary choice of Assad or ISIS would be the platinum standard of diplomatic achievement. To eliminate all Syrian alternatives to Assad and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (the self-proclaimed "caliph" of the "Islamic State") would be the prelude to forcing a no-win choice on an American President who, in August 2011, called on Assad to step aside. Russian military operations in Syria to date are fully consistent with setting this necessary precondition for a diplomatic coup.

These assumptions may ultimately prove incorrect. Indeed, knowledgeable Iranians and Russians have told the author repeatedly that Assad is neither liked nor respected in either Tehran or Moscow. It is possible that Iran has already found (or will soon find) Assad and his family too heavy a burden to carry and has already identified a replacement. It is conceivable that Russia really does see Assad and his murderous regime as expendable, provided the bulk of Syria's remaining state structure—cabinet of ministers, security services, departments, agencies, intelligence community—is preserved. The author has seen no evidence supporting any of this. The entire world sees military operations against Assad's real enemies—not ISIS—belying these possibilities. And yet it is possible that Moscow truly believes that the Turkmen anti-Assad rebel enclaves in

northwestern Syria it is bombing really are ISIS military concentrations. And perhaps Tehran really thinks that Syria's appetite for subordination to it extends beyond the Assad family. If either of these things is true, the Vienna peace process will bear fruit quickly.

Obviously the author is not sanguine on these matters. Still, the possibility that assumptions underlying this paper could be wrong, in whole or in part, or that events (Assad's sudden, unexpected death, for example) could change conditions drastically dictates that the course of action recommended herein take into account the possibility that Iranian and Russian intentions in Syria are or will become much more benign than those assumed by the author. Every effort will be made, therefore, to recommend substantive steps aimed at setting the stage for diplomatic progress that do not undermine whatever good intentions Moscow and Tehran may really have, no matter how well-concealed. Moscow and Tehran may well find the steps suggested here to be objectionable in the extreme. But they will do so only if the author's assumptions about their motives in Syria prove correct.

OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGY: PRE-ISIS

What is it the United States seeks to achieve with respect to Syria? What is the national security objective? And how does it plan to go about achieving that objective? Put differently, what is the strategy?

Prior to June 2014, when ISIS forces operating from secure bases in central and eastern Syria swept through much of Iraq, the American objective for Syria centered on Assad's yielding power and on achieving the objective set forth in the June 30, 2012 Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué: "an end to the violence and human rights abuses and the launch of a Syrian-led political process leading to a transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people and enables them independently and democratically to determine their own future."³ The first substantive step in this political transition away from violent, dictatorial family rule would be, to quote the communiqué, "a transitional governing body which can establish a neutral environment in which the transition can take place. That means that the transitional governing body would exercise full executive powers. It could include members of the present government and the

3 Kofi Annan, "Concluding remarks by Joint Special Envoy Kofi Annan at the Meeting of Action Group on Syria - Geneva," speech delivered at the Meeting of Action Group on Syria, June 30, 2012, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/Syria/press.asp?NewsID=1236&slID=41>.

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Meeting of the International Syria Support Group in Munich on February 11, 2016. Photo credit: US Department of State/Flickr.

opposition and other groups and shall be formed on the basis of mutual consent.”⁴

Although the name “Assad” was mentioned nowhere in the 2012 document drawn up in Geneva, Washington’s position was that he could not, by definition, partake in a Syrian political transition aimed at fulfilling Syrian desires for a state “genuinely democratic and pluralistic . . . [complying] with international standards on human rights . . . [and offering] equal opportunities and chances for all.”⁵ This interpretation of the political transition mandate embedded in the Geneva Final Communiqué was fully consistent with the view expressed by Obama months earlier, on August 18, 2011: that Assad should, for the good of the Syrian people, step aside. The two key paragraphs of the Obama statement are as follows:

The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. His calls for dialogue and reform have rung hollow while he is imprisoning, torturing, and slaughtering his own people. We have consistently said that President Assad must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people,

⁴ “Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué 30.06.12,” p. 3.

⁵ Ibid.

the time has come for President Assad to step aside.

The United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria. It is up to the Syrian people to choose their own leaders, and we have heard their strong desire that there not be foreign intervention in their movement. What the United States will support is an effort to bring about a Syria that is democratic, just, and inclusive for all Syrians. We will support this outcome by pressuring President Assad to get out of the way of this transition, and standing up for the universal rights of the Syrian people along with others in the international community.”⁶

More than four years after the presidential statement it is clear that Obama’s pledge not to “impose” a transition on Syrians has been fully honored. Whatever pressures have been applied to Assad, they have fallen well short of producing the desired “step aside” outcome. Three key decisions account, in the main, for this policy shortfall: a decision in the summer of 2012 not to organize and arm Syrian nationalist rebels

⁶ Barack Obama, “The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way,” August 18, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad>.

to resist both the regime and a gathering al-Qaeda presence in Syria; a decision in the summer of 2013 *not* to respond militarily to regime chemical attacks crossing a presidentially proclaimed American red line; and a seemingly permanent administration decision *not* to obstruct, complicate, or otherwise frustrate Assad-regime mass casualty assaults on Syrian civilians. All three have all contributed greatly to Assad's political longevity in Damascus.

Indeed, to the extent there actually was a strategy aimed at implementing the Geneva blueprint for an Assad-free political transition in Syria, it was (and continues to be) very much focused on trying to secure the cooperation of Moscow in establishing a negotiating process that would produce the requisite transitional governing body and, through the magic of mutual consent, consign Assad and his retinue of enablers to the dustbin of history. Beginning in mid-2013 Secretary of State John Kerry was importuning his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, to help him convene a Geneva conference that would execute bloodless regime change in Syria. For Kerry, the Assad regime's 2013 military consolidation in western Syria courtesy of Iranian-summoned Hezbollah fighters meant nothing. As he explained in Paris on October 21, 2013:

But the situation on the ground is irrelevant to the question of the implementation of Geneva 1. And maybe President Assad needs to go back and read Geneva 1 again, or for the first time, but Geneva 1 says you will have a transition government by mutual consent. So it doesn't matter whether you're up or whether you're down on the battlefield; the objective of Geneva 2 remains the same, which is the implementation of Geneva 1, which means a transition government arrived at by mutual consent of the parties.⁷

Kerry, himself a war veteran, should have known better: it does matter diplomatically whether one is up or down on the battlefield. When Assad-regime and Syrian opposition delegations assembled for talks in Switzerland in December 2013 and January 2014, the regime made two things painfully clear: it understood fully the contents of the Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué, and it rejected them categorically. Indeed, in the wake of the September 2013 chemical weapons agreement the regime had doubled-down on its civilian mass homicide tactics, using everything except chemicals to murder, maim, and

stampede civilians living in rebel-controlled residential neighborhoods. Secured militarily in western Syria mainly through the organizational efforts of Iran, the Assad regime saw nothing but absurdity and naïveté in the proposition that it should negotiate itself out of existence. Russia proved unable or unwilling to oblige its client to negotiate in good faith. Talks in Montreux and Geneva produced a diplomatic fiasco, notwithstanding good faith efforts to negotiate by the Syrian opposition delegation.

The reluctance of the Obama administration to tilt the battlefield situation in a way that might either enable genuine negotiations or oblige Assad on his own to step aside was as understandable as it was operationally disastrous. As relentless regime assaults on predominantly peaceful protests proceeded through the end of 2011, it was becoming clear that the uprising would inevitably become fully militarized. And an American administration brought to power in part by widespread American popular disillusionment about intervening in Middle Eastern conflicts was content to leave the arming and ideological orientation of Syrian nationalist rebels to regional powers, most notably Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, each with its own interests. With private Gulf money financing harshly sectarian responses to Assad-regime repression (imposed largely by pro-regime sectarian elements), Washington remained in large measure in the background, choosing not to impose itself as the ultimate arbiter of who would get what in the ranks of the armed opposition to Assad. By ceding leadership on the arming and equipping issue to others, Washington sacrificed a large measure of its ability to influence events on the battlefield for the sake of shaping diplomatic processes and outcomes.

It seems clear, therefore, that the pre-ISIS Obama administration objective for Syria—negotiations resulting in a political transition sidelining Assad and his principal enablers—was not accompanied by a realistic implementation strategy. Either the administration assumed that simply convening the parties would produce the political results it deemed implicit in the Geneva Final Communiqué or it used the prospect of negotiations as a time-buying stratagem (concealing the absence of strategy and disguising a determination to hold Syria and its problems at arm's length) with the hope that something good in Syria might fortuitously turn up.

⁷ John Kerry, "Remarks With Qatari Foreign Minister Khalid al-Atiyah before Their Meeting," speech delivered at US Chief of Mission Residence, Paris, France, October 21, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/10/215713.htm>.

OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGY: THE AGE OF ISIS

Syria became much more complicated for the Obama administration in June 2014, when ISIS forces, occupying a political-military vacuum in eastern Syria that poorly armed and equipped nationalist rebels could not fill, burst into Iraq, taking Mosul and other population centers. Recognizing that the Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgency partially extinguished years earlier by the American military “surge” had been reignited by the sectarian policies of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the administration refrained from intervening militarily until Maliki was replaced in June. And it would not be until September of 2014—in the wake of some well-publicized ISIS beheadings of captured American journalists—that Obama would articulate an objective and a strategy for countering ISIS.

Speaking on the evening of September 10, the President said, “Our objective is clear: we will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.”⁸ The strategy would entail four components:

1. Conducting a systematic campaign of air strikes, mainly in Iraq, though not excluding Syria.
2. Supporting Iraqi and Kurdish forces “with training, intelligence, and equipment,” and ramping up military assistance to Syrian rebels, calling on Congress “to give us additional authorities and resources to train and equip these fighters.” Moreover, according to the President, “In the fight against ISIL, we cannot rely on an Assad regime that terrorizes its own people—a regime that will never regain the legitimacy it has lost.”⁹
3. Redoubling efforts to cut off funding, improve intelligence, improve defense, counter ISIS ideology, and stem the flow of foreign fighters.
4. Continuing to provide humanitarian assistance.

The President warned that the struggle would take time and involve risks. But, he added, “It will not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil.”¹⁰ This predisposition against employing American “boots on the ground” perhaps explained why the President described his strategy as “counterterrorism” in nature.

In November 2014, after the appointment of retired Marine General John Allen as Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL (a coalition that would grow to sixty-five members, a handful of which would participate in military operations), the White House issued a fact sheet titled (in part) “The Administration’s Strategy to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL),” which listed nine “lines of effort” to counter ISIS, most of which entailed non-military measures.¹¹

Interestingly, “supporting effective governance in Iraq” was at the top of the list. There was no parallel reference to supporting effective governance in Syria, reflecting the continued arm’s-length approach to the Assad problem. Second on the list was “denying ISIL safe-haven,” which referred to air strikes in Iraq and Syria “and supporting Iraqi forces on the ground.” Point three—“building partner capacity”—cited advisory and training activities focused on Iraqi forces, including Kurds and a [Sunni Arab] National Guard to be established. With regard to Syria, “Our train and equip program will strengthen the Syrian moderate opposition and help them defend territory from ISIL.”¹²

These descriptions of strategy, supplemented by periodic statements by administration spokespeople, made it clear that Iraq was the strategic center of gravity meriting the preponderance of effort; that Syria—notwithstanding the location of ISIS’ headquarters in Raqqa—was only a safe-haven and logistical center to be harassed. It was only when ISIS attempted, in September 2014, to take the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani that a sustained air-ground campaign was mounted against the organization inside Syria. Whereas the weakness of an anti-ISIS ground combat component in Iraq could be addressed in part by strengthening two existing entities, the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga, in Syria the ground component, beyond an existing Kurdish militia, would be created from whole cloth.

Yet the very terms of reference for the Syrian Arab force to be trained and equipped to fight ISIS doomed the enterprise from the start. The “Syrian moderate opposition” to be organized was, in fact, opposed to the continued existence of the Assad regime, which it had been resisting for years. Questions of how such a force could be organized and deployed on the basis

8 Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on ISIL,” speech given from the State Floor, September 10, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “FACT SHEET: The Administration’s Strategy to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Updated FY 2015 Overseas Contingency Operations Request,” November 7, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/07/fact-sheet-administration-s-strategy-counter-islamic-state-iraq-and-leva>.

12 Ibid.

of a combat mission focused exclusively on ISIS were never systematically addressed or answered. The effort was a fiasco, one eventually dismissed by the White House spokesman as having been forced upon the administration by its critics. The whole misguided, wasted undertaking was influenced by the desire of the Obama administration to divide the problem of Syria into two parts: ISIS, which required a harassing kinetic response; and the Assad regime, where American military engagement should be avoided.

Notwithstanding the miserable failure of the train-and-equip program, nationalist rebel forces often working cooperatively with the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front managed, for much of 2015, to gain ground on the Assad regime in northwestern Syria, while Jordanian-supported nationalist rebels repulsed a regime offensive in the southwest. ISIS and the regime mainly observed a live-and-let-live arrangement, violated by ISIS whenever it saw something (an oil field, a military base containing an arsenal, or a town containing priceless antiquities) it wanted that was held by regime forces. More often than not regime forces and ISIS focused their respective military efforts on trying to eliminate alternatives to both.

Rebel gains would inspire Russia to intervene in Syria at the end of September 2015. Although it would claim to be intervening to help the Syrian government counter the ISIS threat, combat operations actually undertaken by Russian air force assets would, over the next ten weeks, overwhelmingly target nationalist rebel units—mainly in northwestern Syria.

The Russian military objective seemed to be stabilizing the Assad regime militarily, working in concert with an exhausted Syrian army and with Shia militiamen provided by Iran. The political-diplomatic objective seemed to be creating—for the West in general and Washington in particular—a choice between Assad and the ISIS “caliph,” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Confident that Washington would swallow deeply and opt to support Assad against the “caliph” once all alternatives were eliminated, Russia saw in Syria an opportunity to defeat what it considered a US-led regime change and democratization campaign launched in Iraq in 2003 and renewed in Libya in 2011. Thwarting the American President, who had called on Assad to step

aside would be, for Moscow, a diplomatic triumph par excellence.

Washington’s strategic response to Russia’s military intervention was to try to play diplomatic judo with it, once again seeking Moscow’s help in establishing a negotiating track for political transition in non-ISIS Syria. Russia, seeing a drawn-out diplomatic process as a potentially useful tool to buy time for the achievement of military objectives, readily agreed to facilitate matters.

On October 30, 2015, twenty parties, including Iran, met in Vienna and agreed on a statement that, among other things, called on the United Nations to convene the Syrian government and opposition for “a political process leading to credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance, followed by a new constitution and elections.”¹³ A subsequent meeting in Vienna on November 14 called for talks to begin on or about January 1, 2016, a ceasefire to take hold at the same time, a transitional governing body to assume power within six months of the start of negotiations, and national elections to take place in mid-2017. There was no agreement on the role or future of Assad in any of these proceedings.¹⁴

A modified administration strategy for Syria, linking political transition in the west to defeating ISIS in the east, emerged. The “theory of the case” advanced by Obama and his Secretary of State was that the chronically undermanned ground combat component needed to defeat ISIS militarily in Syria could be provided by a united front of the Syrian army and nationalist Syrian rebels, provided a way could be found to arrive at an inclusive government—a transitional governing body or something like it—minus Assad. It was clear to the administration that Assad was pure poison for anything smacking of inclusivity and anything inspiring a united front against ISIS.

Russia saw in Syria an opportunity to defeat what it considered an US-led regime change and democratization campaign launched in Iraq in 2003 and renewed in Libya in 2011.

13 John Kerry, “Joint Press Availability with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura,” speech given at the Grand Hotel Vienna, Austria, October 30, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/10/249019.htm>.
 14 John Kerry, “Press Availability with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura,” speech given in Vienna, Austria, November 14, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/11/249515.htm>.

THE KREMLIN'S ACTIONS IN SYRIA

In Paris on December 1, Obama expressed the hope that the Vienna process—the one Kerry and his Russian counterpart have “so meticulously stitched together”—would eventually result in a halt to Assad-regime and Russian bombing of “certain opposition groups,” thereby producing “a conversation about politics.” “And slowly,” said the President, “we then are able to get everybody’s attention diverted to where it needs to be, and that is going after ISIL in a systematic way.”¹⁵ Speaking in Washington, DC, on December 5, Kerry added the following:

Last month in Vienna, the International Syria Support Group, which we did summon together and who came together in a great cooperative effort, called for negotiations between the government and the moderate opposition with a target date to begin of January 1st. And even just now driving over here I was in touch with folks in Doha talking to them about what is happening with the Saudis, who we are—who are convening a conference of the opposition in order to have the opposition choose their negotiating team, their platform, and be ready to go to the table. And Russia and Iran are at the table for the first time joining with us in this communiqué, which was consensus unanimous in which they agree that there has to be a transition.

Now, what shape it takes we’re going to have to fight about, but the governments involved are going to meet later in this month in New York in order to continue to move this process forward. Our goal is to facilitate a transition that all parties have stated that they support: a unified Syria; a non-sectarian Syria; a Syria which will choose its own leadership in the future by an election that they have all agreed will be supervised by the United Nations under the highest standards of international law and of elections, with fair, full, transparency and accountability, in order for even the diaspora to be able to vote for future leadership.

The purpose of this transition will be to establish a credible, inclusive governance within six months. The process would include the drafting of a new constitution and arrangements for internationally supervised elections within 18 months. And I can’t promise you everybody is going to make it happen, but I can promise you that the legitimacy of this effort will exhaust diplomacy and call on all

of us then to make the choices we need to make in order to end this war.

Meanwhile, a nationwide ceasefire will go into effect between the government and the responsible opposition, assuming they come to the table and they begin this initial process. Imagine what that will do to take the pressure off of refugees, off of day-to-day turmoil. This step would also further isolate the terrorists and enable the coalition and its partners to then go after Daesh and other violent extremists with greater unity and power.¹⁶

Three developments—Russian military intervention in Syria, a massive migration of Syrians walking to Western Europe, and massacres planned by ISIS in Syria and executed in Paris on November 13, 2015—had given the Obama administration an enhanced sense of urgency in seeking a diplomatic solution to the problem of political transition in western Syria, a solution that could be applied militarily to the ISIS presence in eastern Syria.

Addressing the American people from the Oval Office on the evening of December 6, 2015, in the wake of an ISIS-inspired massacre in San Bernardino, California, Obama said, “The strategy that we are using now—air strikes, special forces, and working with local forces who are fighting to regain control of their own country—that is how we’ll achieve a more sustainable victory. And it won’t require us sending a new generation of Americans overseas to fight and die for another decade on foreign soil.” Instead of American military forces providing the ground combat component against ISIS in Syria, it would be “local forces,” ideally supplemented sometime in the future by the Syrian army and Syrian rebels united by a common, anti-ISIS cause in Syria’s post-Assad future.¹⁷

Two years after pursuing Russia to participate in a transformational diplomatic forum—a quest that resulted in fiasco, Washington’s pursuit is afoot again. Will it end the Assad regime’s survival strategy of collective punishment and mass homicide? Will it shuffle Assad and his murderous regime to the exits? Will it produce—in the form of a united Syrian front—the ground combat component so sorely needed to defeat ISIS militarily in Syria? None of these outcomes

15 Barack Obama, “Press Conference by President Obama,” speech given at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Centre Issy-les-Moulineaux, France, December 1, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/01/press-conference-president-obama>.

16 John Kerry, “Brookings Institution’s 2015 Saban Forum Keynote Address,” speech given at the Willard Hotel Washington, DC, December 5, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/12/250388.htm>.

17 Barack Obama, “Address to the Nation by the President,” speech given from the Oval Office Washington, DC, December 6, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/12/06/address-nation-president>.



Syrian refugee camp on the Turkish-Syrian border, where some of the 2.5 million registered Syrian refugees in Turkey have been forced to find shelter. *Photo credit: European Parliament/Flickr.*

is likely. But suppose it all comes true. How long will it take? In the wake of Paris, November 13, 2015, how much time do we have? Is there a strategic alternative?

A PROPOSED STRATEGIC ALTERNATIVE

If Washington could describe the Syria it hopes to see in January 2017, when Barack Obama yields the office of the presidency to his successor, what would it look like? Most American observers—supporters and critics of administration policy alike—might agree on the following:

- ISIS would be gone.
- Assad and his entourage would be gone.
- Syria's territorial integrity would be intact, with empowered local governance taking hold for the first time in the country's modern political history.
- An inclusive national unity government would preside in Damascus, successfully consolidating calm and stability, protecting vulnerable groups, preserving governmental institutions (including military) and qualified staff, pursuing accountability and national reconciliation, facilitating international humanitarian assistance, and beginning the long process of economic reconstruction, administrative reform, and constitutional overhaul.

- Refugee return and reintegration would be under way.

Drawing upon these characteristics of the Syria that Obama would no doubt wish to bequeath to his successor and to his own presidential legacy, one could compose a national security objective. And without for a moment assuming that the end-states listed above can or should be achieved by solitary, unilateral American action, one can devise a strategy that would maximize the ability of the United States to bring them about.

The strategic alternative proposed here accepts the Obama administration's assumption that Assad and his entourage are fatal to the prospect of an inclusive national unity government. Assad and his enablers have built a portfolio of war crimes and crimes against humanity that will impress historians for generations. Yes, the United States allied itself with the Soviet Union of Josef Stalin in World War II. But under conditions of real desperation in the West, Stalin brought the Red Army with him to the fight. Assad—should he ever elect someday to fight ISIS—brings an exhausted army and an appetite for privilege, the sense that Syria is his personal patrimony. He also brings an absolute inability to inspire unity under his command, given what he and his enablers have done to the Syrian people. But the administration's hypothesis that Assad must be sidelined before the

creation of a ground combat component sufficient to defeat ISIS militarily in eastern Syria is true only if one restricts the requisite ground combat component to indigenous Syrian forces. Remove that restriction and one may conceive of defeating ISIS militarily in the east even while Assad clings to power in the west. Given what happened in Paris on November 13, 2015 and the certainty that ISIS in Syria will try it again in Western Europe—and perhaps attempt something similar in North America—time is not available to wait for Assad's departure, unless it is somehow impending.

This is not to say, however, that the Assad side of Syria lacks relevance to the military defeat of ISIS in the east. Assad-regime aerial and indirect (artillery, rocket, missile) fire assaults on Syrian civilian residential areas constitute recruiting bonanzas for ISIS, both within Syria and among disturbed, disaffected Sunni Muslims around the world. They have also caused a humanitarian abomination that has victimized more than half of Syria's population, left the other half to the prospect of retribution, swamped Syria's neighbors with refugees, and sent hundreds of thousands of Syrians on long hikes through Europe. Assad's departure may not be necessary for ISIS' military defeat in Syria, but neutralizing his assistance to the ersatz caliph would be an important dividend to protecting Syrian civilians from the genocidal effects of his depredations. And the advent of an inclusive national unity government in Damascus would, of course, require that the regime—the ruling family and its inner circle of enablers and enforcers—yield power entirely.

The strategic alternative proposed here would, therefore, have three principal elements aimed at bringing about the kind of Syria that Obama would presumably want to hand off to his successor:

- Defeating ISIS militarily in central and eastern Syria, ideally before it is able to plan and execute more Paris-like atrocities. ISIS' military defeat will require, in addition to air strikes, a ground force combat component powerful enough to close with the enemy and kill it. Designing and deploying this ground combat component is an urgent operational priority.
- Protecting Syrian civilians in western Syria from the mass casualty atrocities of the Assad regime.

Doing so would not only deprive ISIS of a recruiting tool and mitigate a humanitarian abomination, but would also constitute a practical precondition for transition negotiations and political compromise. How, after all, can one expect a broadly representative swath of the Syrian opposition to engage in sustained peace talks and make sensible accommodations with governmental counterparts if its constituency is being terrorized, vaporized, and stamped on a daily basis?

- Giving the Syrian opposition an opportunity, with substantial financial and technical support, to establish decent and effective governance in those parts of Syria liberated from ISIS, while continuing to press for the passing of the Assad regime via negotiations consistent with the Geneva blueprint.

With respect to the ground combat component needed to defeat ISIS militarily in Syria, this writer has been urging the Obama administration for months to launch a diplomatic initiative roughly analogous to that led by Secretary of State James Baker in 1990 and 1991 in response to Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait. The objective of the initiative would be to bind regional and Western European states to contributing ground combat, combat support, and combat service support units to a military campaign—led by the United States—aimed at liquidating the ISIS presence in Syria. This

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recommended course of action has not been acted upon. In the event, therefore, that ISIS headquarters in Syria is able to commission a Paris-like outrage in the United States, Obama may feel politically obliged to respond in the manner he would most like to avoid: by introducing a large, all-American military force into eastern Syria to fight and kill ISIS.

Given what happened in Paris, its possible replication in the United States, and the absence to date of any effort to build a credible ground force coalition, the Department of Defense has no choice now but to plan for such a unilateral American intervention. Provided there is a real sense of urgency, however, the Obama administration would be well-advised to begin the coalition-building diplomatic heavy lifting immediately. It will not be easy. There is no appetite among potential contributors for putting ground forces inside Syria. That appetite would have to be stimulated by an American administration whose

reputation on Syria-related matters is, to put it mildly, not in good odor among American allies and partners. Those allies and partners would have to be convinced that Washington will see the matter through. They will have to be convinced that there will be real American skin in the game—something far beyond fifty special operations personnel.

They will also have to be convinced that a ground campaign in Syria against ISIS, one supported by coalition air assets, will be accompanied by a realistic and implementable civil-military stabilization plan. ISIS will not be killed so that central and eastern Syria can be turned over to the Assad regime. Regional partners in particular will want to see the Syrian opposition—particularly the Syrian National Coalition (recognized in December 2012 as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by the “Friends of the Syrian People” group)—establish an administrative authority or even an alternate Syrian government in land liberated from ISIS, one that can link up with local coordinating committees now operating underground. This authority/government can take the lead in standing up local security forces and, with external assistance, begin the process of building a Syrian National Stabilization Force.

The obstacles to building such a coalition would be significant. The Jordanian armed forces, for example, are quite proficient but lack an expeditionary capability; lift and sustain assistance would be vital. Were the Turkish army involved, clearly arrangements would have to be made for it to pass through Kurdish lines in Syria without incident. Potential Arab Gulf contributors might well feel as though their hands are full with the conflict in Yemen, although the Saudis have recently hinted at a possible ground role inside Syria. In the wake of Paris—and the promise of more to come—there might be some appetite in France for a combat role and parallel appetites elsewhere for providing combat support (signal, engineering) and combat service support (logistics, medical). Clearly this would be a heavy lift diplomatically for Washington. The alternative, however, is to hope and pray that ISIS does nothing mandating ground force military intervention; and if those hopes and prayers fall short, do the job unilaterally with American soldiers and marines.

Civilian protection in western Syria is likewise easier to discuss than to bring about. Although limited military countermeasures may be required to put an end to the Assad regime’s mass civilian casualty campaign, they must be the last resort, employed only once all diplomatic efforts are deemed by Washington to have failed.

What is mandated in the first instance, therefore, is relentless diplomatic pressure on Russia and Iran—by Washington bilaterally, through the United Nations, and via whatever other channels might be deemed appropriate and useful—to get their client out of the business of collective punishment and mass homicide. Civilian protection must not, under any circumstances, be conflated with the general ceasefire referred to by the “International Syria Support Group” (ISSG) consisting of the twenty parties attending the Vienna conference of November 14, 2015. The ISSG statement noted that “The group agreed to support and work to implement a nationwide ceasefire in Syria to come into effect as soon as the representatives of the Syrian government and the opposition have begun initial steps towards the transition under UN auspices on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué.”¹⁸ This is fully appropriate. Yet deliberate attacks on civilians are specifically forbidden by international law; they are inadmissible under all circumstances and not subject to the terms of a ceasefire between combatants that may or may not come about any time soon.

Whether or not Moscow and Tehran are able and/or willing to stop their client’s mass homicide campaign will help determine whether or not the Vienna/ISSG process has promise. If they cannot or will not bar their client from committing wholesale murder, can or will they bind him to a negotiating process consistent with the Geneva blueprint for political transition? If the civilian constituencies of the Syrian opposition—which recently demonstrated an unexpected degree of unity in a Riyadh conference sponsored by Saudi Arabia—continue to be subjected to bombing, shelling, siege, starvation, and disease, can that opposition negotiate in good faith and entertain compromise arrangements, while retaining its ability to represent Syrians?

If diplomacy fails to stop Assad-regime war crimes and crimes against humanity—activities that enhance the recruiting appeal of ISIS—limited military countermeasures by the United States may be required to offer a modicum of civilian protection. Any such measure involving the word “zone” should be approached with caution and skepticism. A no-fly zone, a safe zone, a protected zone, and the like would all require robust ground force protection lest they become, like Srebrenica in 1995, a killing zone for civilians supposedly being protected. The best possible “protected zone” would be the totality of Syrian territory liberated militarily from ISIS. Anything short of that would require protection not only from air attacks, but from ground assaults as well.

18 John Kerry, “Press Availability with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura,” op. cit.

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An alternate kinetic approach to civilian protection could involve the use of primarily stand-off systems—cruise missiles and the like—to engage targets (airbases, artillery formations, missile storage facilities) associated with ongoing atrocities. Even here the Syrian regime should be given advance warning that civilian mass casualty operations must cease forthwith lest lethal retaliatory steps be taken. One presumed advantage of this approach would be that it would minimize the possibility of confrontation between coalition and Russian combat aircraft.

Yet the precise military methodology employed to make it somewhere between difficult and impossible for the Assad regime to commit mass murder would emerge from the combination of a clear statement of intent by the American Commander-in-Chief and options then placed at his disposal by the Department of Defense. A combination of methods might emerge. Whatever the methodology, diplomacy first and fair warning of consequences are essential.

Kinetic steps cannot, however, rescue the approximately 600,000 Syrians now besieged by their so-called government in defiance of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2139.¹⁹ Iran, in particular, should be pressed to require its Syrian clients to lift those sieges and to permit United Nations relief convoys to go where they wish and when they wish in accordance with the Security Council mandate. Whether or not Tehran can or will take this step will be an indicator of the Vienna process' potential efficacy.

Nothing in this recommended strategic approach—defeating ISIS militarily in eastern Syria while bringing a modicum of civilian protection to the west—would be the least bit inconsistent with the discovery that Moscow and Tehran actually harbor benign and positive intentions with respect to political transition away from brutal, corrupt, and incompetent family rule toward inclusivity, rule of law, citizenship as the

supreme political value, and even democracy. Nothing in the recommended approach calls for abandoning the Vienna diplomatic process or launching a regime-change military assault on Assad and his clique. Indeed, permitting the nationalist opposition to provide governance in areas liberated from ISIS would provide a natural negotiating counterpart for the Assad-regime-controlled Syrian Arab Republic rump government in Damascus. Although this scenario might not produce the Assad-free Syria Obama would ideally like to hand off to his successor, it could prove to be a giant step in the desired direction.

The more likely possibility, sad to say, is that neither Russia nor Iran harbors such good intentions. Instead, they will probably use the Vienna process as a time-buying exercise to secure their client militarily in the hope that the binary choice between the Barrel Bomber and Baghdadi can be brought about and imposed on the West. Ideally, the Obama administration will be proved correct: Moscow will discover its military intervention is fruitless, Tehran will find Assad too expensive to carry, and both will bind themselves to inclusive Syrian governance, which, by definition, must exclude the authors of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Yet if the objective of the Obama administration is to hand to its successor the kind of Syria described in these pages, it will not rely on the good intentions of Russia's President and Iran's Supreme Leader. It will not leave Syrian civilians defenseless. And it will certainly not wait for ISIS-planned mass slaughter in the United States to put an end to this vile organization in Syria, where it and its headquarters sit atop a restive and captive population. At the very least the administration should bequeath to its successor a Syria in which ISIS is gone, Syrian civilians are protected from regime atrocities, and a decent alternative to the regime itself is taking root in areas liberated from ISIS and expanding into rebel-controlled areas of northwest and southwest Syria, building an all-Syrian stabilization force that could, if need be, eventually oust the regime that made ISIS possible in the first place.

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¹⁹ Valerie Szybala, *Slow Death: Life and Death in Syrian Communities under Siege* (Syrian American Medical Society, 2015), p. 5, https://www.sams-usa.net/foundation/images/PDFs/Slow%20Death_Syria%20Under%20Siege.pdf.

THE RATIONALE AND GOALS OF RUSSIA'S SYRIA POLICY

VLADISLAV INOZEMTSEV

The Russian military operation in Syria that launched on September 30, 2015, took some Western policymakers by surprise, leading them to believe that Vladimir Putin is even more unpredictable than they had thought. But a closer look reveals that this move fits neatly into the evolution of Russia's foreign and domestic policies—which are driven by a quest for respect and the survival instinct of one man—and, moreover, that there had been clear hints about Moscow's next steps in Syria.²⁰

REASONS BEHIND THE INVOLVEMENT

What prompted Russia's incursion into Syria, which seems impractical and irrational given its worsening economic crisis and the ongoing conflict with Ukraine? Officially, there were two explanations. One was the imperative to defeat international terrorism associated with ISIS. (During his visit to Dushanbe on September 15, 2015, Putin said, "We support the Syrian government . . . in countering terrorist aggression. We provide and will continue to provide the necessary military technology assistance and urge other nations to join in."²¹) Another was to restore Syria's sovereignty (in his interview with the Interfax and Anadolu news agencies on November 13, 2015, Putin underlined Russia's goals: "to defeat ISIS and restore Syria as a unified, sovereign, and secular state; create safe living conditions for everyone regardless of their ethnicity or faith; and open prospects for social and economic revival of the country [based on the assumption that] Syria is a sovereign country and Bashar al-Assad is its President elected by the people."²²) But given that terrorists, whether al-Qaeda or other radical groups,

have been operating in Syria and Iraq for years, and that there are plenty of countries requiring outside help to restore their sovereignty, these arguments do not quite explain why the Russian air force was sent to Syria immediately after the Kremlin received Assad's request for help.²³ Instead, there were several other reasons for Russia's actions, which are linked less to Syria's plight than to geopolitical or domestic developments.

GEOPOLITICAL DRIVERS OF INTERVENTION

Soon after the end of the Cold War, Russians developed a deep discontent with the new global order, as they realized the depth of their country's decline and saw that the West intended to subsume Russia into established European and Atlantic economic and military alliances. The popular feeling was that Russia had been marginalized or even excluded from global politics. For more than forty years, Soviet policymakers acted as leaders of a superpower confronting the United States on an equal footing: Moscow had its say on major global issues, the Soviet military felt itself on par with the Americans, and the economic difficulties experienced by the people were justified by this prolonged confrontation. After 1991, the Russian elite never shed this mindset, and those who advocated the restoration of Russia's greatness became increasingly influential in domestic policy. During President Boris Yeltsin's tenure, Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov attempted to prevent NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia and then famously turned his plane back to Moscow

20 Celleste Wallander, "Tactically, Russia Acts Brilliantly" (interview with Celleste Wallander, Senior Director for Russia and Eurasia on the US National Security Council), Meduza.io, November 10, 2015, <http://www.meduza.io/feature/2015/11/10/takticheski-rossiya-deystvuet-blestyasche> (in Russian).

21 Kremlin, "CSTO summit: Vladimir Putin took part in a meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization Collective Security Council in Dushanbe," September 15, 2015, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50291>.

22 Kremlin, "Interview to Interfax and Anadolu News Agencies: In the run-up to the G20 summit, Vladimir Putin gave an interview to Russia's Interfax news agency and Turkish Anadolu Agency," November 13, 2015, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50682>.

23 The meaning of "sovereignty" is flexible in contemporary Russia, and the word is used by officials in whatever way that justifies their actions. The current Russian leadership distinguishes between the sovereignty of the great powers, which they used to call "real sovereignty" (see Andrei Kokoshin, *Real Sovereignty in the Current World-Political System*, 3rd ed., (Moscow: Evropa Publishing House, 2006), pp. 63–69, in Russian), and all other types of sovereignty. "Real sovereignty" presupposes the state may establish whatever rules it wishes—hence Putin's authoritarianism is called in Russia "sovereign democracy" (see Vladislav Surkov, "Nationalization of the Future," *Expert*, November 20, 2006 (in Russian)). Russian leadership pretends it stands against any limitation of sovereignty from outside except when it comes to the post-Soviet space, where it treats the countries as independent, but not sovereign. (This formula circulates widely in the Kremlin's inner circles but is never pronounced officially.)

when heading to an official meeting in the United States after the bombardment of Serbia began in 1999. The group of former KGB officers that rose to power along with Putin in the early 2000s felt particularly humiliated with what they perceived as the United States' unilateral actions and tried to oppose them several times—from the 2003 war in Iraq to the NATO enlargement in 2007 and the rise of pro-American sentiment in Georgia in 2008. Moscow claimed that “nation-building” in Iraq, the revolutions in North Africa, and the overthrow of the Ukrainian government were US-inspired actions destroying “government institutions and the local way of life [bringing] instead of democracy and progress . . . violence, poverty, social disasters, and total disregard for human rights, including even the right to life.”²⁴ Russian leaders are seeking to at least diminish American influence by preventing the United States from toppling the Assad regime. Putin effectively saved Assad back in 2013 from the consequences of his army's likely use of chemical weapons.²⁵ A new US-inspired attack on the Syrian leader, he might believe, needed a response. Therefore, the most general motivation for Russia's action was its opposition to a “unipolar world” and its determination to project its military might into the region while American power there was at a low point.²⁶

The second reason is closely connected with the first. After the Cold War, Russia ceased to be a global power but remained a dominant regional player—until recent years, when even this status was effectively challenged by Western actions: NATO and

the EU moved closer to Russia's western borders, Ukraine drifted westward, and Russia's attempts to orchestrate post-Soviet integration or even win support from allies for its actions in Georgia in 2008 and in Crimea in 2014 went nowhere. Since 2012, state propaganda has clearly been fueled by the political elite's desperate need to shore up Russia's flagging global clout; and in Syria, Putin saw his chance. It was no coincidence that Russia launched its Syria incursion soon after the détente in the US-Iran relationship: Politicians in Moscow likely realized that Russia could lose its last potential ally located close to the former Soviet borders, further isolating Moscow. In this light, support for Syria could be an attempt to find a new rationale for a Russian-Iranian alliance and to restore regional status by unconventional means: Unable to expand the use of its hard power in the post-Soviet near-abroad beyond eastern Ukraine, Russia decided to demonstrate it in more remote regions as proof of its seriousness and military reach.

State propaganda has clearly been fueled by the political elite's desperate need to shore up Russia's flagging global clout.

The third driver for intervention has to do with Russia's Ukrainian conundrum of 2014-15, and in particular, the consequences that led to Russia's near total political and economic isolation. Moscow has done its best in recent months to prove that it can survive without its Western connections, trying to establish closer economic and political ties with China and counting on rising oil prices. However, it seems clear now that Beijing will not offer even

a fraction of the loans and investments that Europe once supplied, and oil prices may not recover for another couple of years. Furthermore, China has no intention of replacing Europe as the main market for Russian oil and gas. Beijing appears to be a tough partner, pressing for healthy discounts when buying Russian commodities and uninterested in promoting a “new industrialization” of Russia's Far East. Under such conditions it becomes crucial for Putin to overcome his country's isolation from the West by “forcing” the Americans and the Europeans at least to cooperate on some issues. Putin was farsighted enough to see that the West was effectively losing its fight with the rising Islamic State and reckoned that ultimately support for what remains of Assad's Syria may dovetail with efforts to bring stability to the region. Moreover, he realized that the so-called anti-ISIS coalition is a loose group, which lacks strategic goals and internal coordination, and saw a means for Russia to become a core player

24 Kremlin, “70th session of the UN General Assembly: Vladimir Putin took part in the plenary meeting of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in New York,” September 28, 2015, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.

25 A deal was proposed by Putin at the G20 summit in St. Petersburg on September 6, 2013 and negotiated from September 12 to September 14, 2013 in Geneva. As the result, Syria's chemical weapons were taken out of the country and destroyed by June 23, 2014. The agreement saved the Syrian regime from intense international pressure after a chemical attack in Ghouta, near Damascus, on August 21, 2013.

26 Petr Akopov, “The War in Syria is a Preventive War for Russia,” *Vzglyad*, October 1, 2015, <http://www.vz.ru/politics/2015/10/1/769776.html> (in Russian). *Vzglyad* is a conservative website with connections to the Russian presidential administration. Akopov writes, “Russia goes to war for those who try to save their country from American aggression,” arising as “the leader in the struggle for a world free from anti-human and anti-national projects imposed by dictatorships, whatever they are—either Anglo-Saxon or Islamic.”



Aircraft at Khmeimim Airbase, Russia's hub for military operations against the Islamic State. Photo credit: Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.

again in the Middle East.²⁷ Putin informed Obama about the imminent Russian involvement and presumably proposed to cooperate in the “antiterrorist” campaign in Syria at their meeting in New York during the UN General Assembly session. After that approach failed, he decided to act unilaterally.²⁸ Putin’s quest for respect and the will to resume dialogue with the West on whatever subject was another “geopolitical” reason behind Russia’s actions.

DOMESTIC DRIVERS OF INTERVENTION

Several other causes for the Syrian operation had predominantly domestic roots, since almost every foreign policy decision in Russia today aims to buoy the power elite’s popular support. Particularly since 2008, even the most controversial moves, such as the war with Georgia, the annexation of Crimea, and the introduction of sanctions against Turkey, have boosted Putin’s approval ratings. Today it seems of even more importance as external “victories” must compensate

for increasingly obvious internal economic failures: in 2015, the ruble fell to historic lows, real disposable income declined by more than eleven percent (with dollar-adjusted wages back to 2005 levels), and the financial authorities were forced to acknowledge that the recession would continue into 2016.

In this context, the Kremlin needed to deliver proof of Russia’s “rise from its knees.” During 2000-07, both the power elite and the people concentrated on economic issues (the “doubling of GDP” was the dominant slogan of the time) while Putin successfully pushed the so-called “Putin consensus,” a trade-off between growing well-being and shrinking political liberties.²⁹ That changed starting in 2008, as the country entered a financial crisis from which, according to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, it has not recovered.³⁰ After a relatively short period of extremely high oil prices, Russia faced a new downturn following Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012: Growth rates fell from a

27 Guy Taylor, “Obama anti-ISIS coalition crumbles as Arab allies focus elsewhere,” *Washington Times*, November 30, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/nov/30/obama-anti-isis-coalition-crumbles-as-arab-allies-/?page=all>.

28 Juliet Eilperin and Karen DeYoung, “Obama and Putin outline competing visions on Syria,” *Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-and-putin-outline-competing-visions-on-syria/2015/09/28/619fa6a2-6604-11e5-9ef3-fde182507eac_story.html.

29 Vladimir Putin, annual address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, May 16, 2003, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21998>, and Vyacheslav Glazychev, “The ‘Putin Consensus’ Explained,” in Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard, and Andrew Wilson, eds., *What Does Russia Think?* (London: European Council on Foreign Relations, 2009), pp. 9-13.

30 “Medvedev: We Still Have Not Recovered from 2008 Crisis,” *Vesti*, December 10, 2014, <http://www.vestifinance.ru/articles/50589> (in Russian).

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promising 4.7 percent in the first quarter of 2012 to a dismal 0.4 percent in the fourth quarter of 2014—and then shrunk throughout 2015.³¹

At the same time, Putin's approval rating fell to its lowest level since he took power, approaching 63 percent.³² Officials started to shift the public's focus away from the economy, where they clearly held a losing hand.

The Sochi Winter Olympics of 2014 produced short-lived enthusiasm, but the games were not enough to restore popular confidence. So, Kyiv's Maidan of early 2014 was a nice gift to Putin, allowing him to change the focus of his policies. From the point of view of public opinion, it was a master stroke to invade Crimea and to launch a war in eastern Ukraine. The popular mood since has favored war as a possible solution to political problems, and today the polls indicate that up to 54 percent of Russians believe war is possible with NATO countries, while 28 percent say their country might engage in military operations against NATO troops outside Russia's territory.³³ Therefore, the expansion of Russia's military presence became for many (if not the majority) a kind of substitute for economic success. Finding the country encircled by enemies and forced to fight on different fronts, citizens naturally refrain from criticizing their leader for poor economic performance at home.

Even more significant was the need to calibrate the state propaganda that remains a key source of the Kremlin's power. By mid-2015, it became clear to the Russian leadership that the operation in Ukraine would not be a success and that Crimea's annexation would not be recognized any time soon. The eastern parts of the country, the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, where Russia supposedly defended "ethnic Russians" and Russian-speakers, are an economic dead zone plagued by increasing criminality in everyday life. Meanwhile, from the beginning of 2015 with the economic crisis becoming more acute, the Russian public started losing interest in the Ukrainian issue, and something new (or rather old, like the terrorist threat) was needed to make them

rally around the government and to forget once again about their economic hardships.

For the regime, it must have seemed a good option to switch the attention from "the Ukrainian fascists," supposedly in control of Kyiv, to the ISIS terrorist threat, infecting increasingly larger territories in the Middle East. Thus, in the fall of 2015, Putin evoked the specter of terrorism more often, even at the United Nations, where he proposed "relying on international law [to] create a genuinely broad international coalition against terrorism: Similar to the anti-Hitler coalition, it could unite a broad range of parties willing to stand firm against those who, just like the Nazis, sow evil and hatred of humankind."³⁴ Terrorism, as one may recall, was a crucial issue for Putin for many years. His meteoric rise to power began in 1999 after Chechen terrorists allegedly blew up two apartment buildings in Moscow. This attack became the basis for a new war in the North Caucasus, and Putin's regime used the terrorist threat to justify curbing political liberties. The autocracy was effectively established after the abolition of regional elections in 2004, which was tied to the "ineffectualness" of the elected governors supposedly demonstrated during the siege of a school in Beslan, where nearly two hundred children were massacred. Terrorism has not been eliminated in Russia, and antiterrorist rhetoric is still widely used, so replacing the Ukraine issue with antiterrorism seemed another bright tactical idea for the regime. Undoubtedly, Russians prefer the fight against terror far from Russia's borders to any war with terrorists conducted on their soil.³⁵

The third domestic reason for the intervention is to boost Russian military production and, even more importantly, to restore the prestige of the Russian armed forces. In the past several years, the Russian army has undergone a serious transformation that seems to have boosted its capabilities. The reform was implemented by former Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov with open disregard for top military officials, many of whom felt humiliated by the civilian personnel of the Defense Ministry, where bean-counters played the dominant role.³⁶ However, Serdyukov was fired in late 2012 over a corruption

31 Federal State Statistical Service, Short-term economic indicators-2015, November 2015, http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b15_02/Main.htm

32 Levada Center, www.levada.ru/old/26-08-2015/avgustovskie-reitingi-odobreniya-i-doveriya.

33 "Sociologists Find That More Than Half of Russians Believe the Threat of War With NATO Countries is Real," *Newsru.com*, April 3, 2015, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/03apr2015/nato.html> (in Russian), and "Most Russians Expect Major Military Clash With ISIS, Almost One-Third With NATO," *Newsru.com*, November 21, 2015, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/21nov2015/igconflict.html> (in Russian).

34 Vladimir Putin, speech at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly, September 28, 2015, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.

35 Kremlin, "Meeting with Government members: Vladimir Putin met with Government members to discuss measures to overcome economic recession in 2016, ..." September 30, 2015, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50401>.

36 Irek Myrtazin, "What's Going On in Syria May Last Forever" (interview with Vladimir Denisov), *Novaya Gazeta*, October 30, 2015, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/70536.html> (in Russian).

scandal. During the Ukrainian operation, which might have served to boost armed forces' prestige, the military units were forced to act covertly, denying any involvement on the battlefield in eastern Ukraine. The soldiers killed in action were brought back to Russia secretly and buried without acknowledgement of their service. Some political activists who discovered the facts of Russian military serving in Ukraine were harassed by the authorities.³⁷ The operation in Syria, on the contrary, appeared to be the first since the war in Georgia where the Russian military was able to deploy openly, use its most sophisticated weaponry, fulfill a need for its country, and test its capabilities in action. Now, Russian military factories run at full capacity, providing employment for around three million workers and a decent living for their families.³⁸ So the Syrian operation (at least to a point) broadens Putin's support at home and helps reconcile disaffected military brass and national leaders.

Although Russia has long supplied the Syrian regime with arms and munitions and has consistently backed the Syrian President, there was no prerequisite for Russia's direct involvement in Syria.³⁹ The start of the operation came only once the active phase of the conflict in eastern Ukraine seemed to be over, thus giving Russia a chance to concentrate on new tasks. Also, the nuclear deal with Iran that was achieved last summer rang alarm bells for Russia, and sent Moscow seeking new points of cooperation with Tehran that might prevent unpredictable political or economic moves by Iran. As an additional factor, the Russian political elite, cognizant of the economy's deterioration, desperately sought a chance to restore contacts with both the United States and Europe and perhaps even to prove that it is capable of playing a crucial role in an antiterrorist coalition.

Putin disguises the true objective of the operation, which is not to defeat terrorists but to preserve the Assad regime.

Although Russian leaders claim that the domestic terror threat from ISIS is the main impetus for the operation and continue to portray ISIS as the principal enemy, they do not target ISIS strongholds but rather armed Syrian opposition groups (according to Russian sources, approximately 90 percent of attacks were directed at moderate anti-Assad opposition during October strikes).⁴⁰ To some extent, Putin disguises the true objective of the operation, which is not to defeat terrorists but to preserve the Assad regime and a sovereign Syrian state in its prewar borders.⁴¹ The situation changed with the crash of the Russian jetliner in Sinai on October 31, 2015, and the Islamist attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015. Both events prompted Putin to coordinate Russian efforts with other prospective coalition members, first of all the French. He even promised President François Hollande to refrain from strikes against moderate opposition forces and to focus exclusively on ISIS groups.⁴² No one can be sure that this change signals an overall

change in Russia's strategy, but it might be a sign that Russia can play a more positive role in the struggle with ISIS, independently of Assad's future. Assuming, of course, that the West relents in its insistence that the Syrian President must exit before negotiations begin over the country's future.

FUTURE GOALS

But let us turn to the main goals of the Russian operation in Syria. Like the factors that led Russia

into the fray, most of its goals are unrelated to Syria itself and are linked to other international or domestic considerations.

First, Russia hopes to sell its new export—Putin's famous "stability" packaged under the internationally recognized brand of the war on terror. In Russia,

37 Lev Shlossberg, "The Dead and the Living," *Pskovskaya Gubernya*, August 26-September 2, 2014, http://www.gubernia.pskovregion.org/number_705/01.php (in Russian). After this text was published, Shlossberg, a regional deputy, was beaten by unknown people, and later his deputy status was revoked by regional lawmakers.

38 "Russian defense industry production up 2.5% in 1Q09," RIA Novosti, June 2, 2009, <http://sputniknews.com/russia/20090602/155148607.html>. The number mentioned accounts for roughly one-third of Russia's manufacturing jobs.

39 Russia supplied Assad's regime with weapons and ammunition for years; after the start of the civil war in Syria back in 2011 Russia even vetoed (on October 4, 2011) a proposed UN Security Council resolution to impose an arms embargo on Syria, in order to continue arms deliveries to Damascus.

40 Alexandra Kopacheva, "We Cannot Exit this Conflict Easily," *Novaya Gazeta*, October 17, 2015, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/comments/70383.html> (in Russian) and Nathan Patin, "Geolocation Once Again Disproves Russia's Targeting Claims in Syria," Bellingcat, November 11, 2015, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2015/11/11/geolocation-once-again-disproves-russias-targeting-claims-in-syria/>.

41 Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Putin's aim is clear: to restore the principle of sovereignty to international affairs," *Independent*, October 19, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/putin-s-aim-is-clear-to-restore-the-principle-of-sovereignty-to-international-affairs-a6698221.html>.

42 Elizabeth Pineau and Denis Pinchuk, "Hollande, Putin agree to work more closely to combat Islamic State in Syria," Reuters, November 26, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-france-idUSKBN0TF1ZX20151126#oCQkxvQkssBwfZWG.97>.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad meet in Moscow on October 20, 2015.
Photo credit: Kremlin.ru.

stability now equals pure conservatism, stasis, and even nondevelopment, but outside the country—especially in the Middle East, where change often means disorder or degradation—this product may appear extremely attractive. Russia, therefore, directly challenges the United States, which has supported democratic uprisings in the Middle East and Ukraine. Putin’s promises to keep existing governments in power, to fight both extremism (i.e., moderate opposition) and terrorism (i.e., outspoken radicals), and to respect the sovereignty of states and keep their borders intact are very appealing and could become the new foundation for Russia’s soft power. Of course, Putin has his own goal in mind—as long as stability is successfully sold to foreign customers it can still be served as the main course to his own citizens.

Second, Putin wants to build a coalition of conservative states in the Middle East. In an interview with Iran’s al-Khabar TV on October 4, 2015, Assad said, “The cause for optimism is President Putin’s initiative to form a coalition of Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Syria that, he hopes, will prevail, or the whole region will be destroyed.”⁴³ Russia desperately wishes to regain

⁴³ “President al-Assad: New Antiterrorism Coalition Must Succeed, Otherwise the Whole Region Will Be Destroyed,” interview with Iran’s Khabar TV, October 5, 2015, <http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=56697>.

its former clout in the region, which was considered a zone of Soviet special interests for decades when Moscow had great sway over many countries from Libya to Syria, from Egypt to Iran. Not long ago we witnessed a reestablishment of Russia-Egypt ties, which survived the downing of the Russian jetliner soon after it departed from Sharm el-Sheikh airport.⁴⁴ One of Russia’s legitimate aims in the Syrian conflict is to regain its status in the region through meddling in the “great regional game” on par with the United States and European powers, and finally to return to the Middle East that it left after the Soviet era. Russia clearly seeks to curb US and other European countries’ influence and limit their presence in the region.

Third, Moscow has yet another goal in mind that might look incompatible with the others: It is trying simultaneously to limit US influence in the Middle East and to establish a large coalition with the Americans and Europeans to fight terrorism worldwide and to defeat the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. By refocusing the air attacks on ISIS’ positions, instead of

⁴⁴ Although the government of Egypt might be considered directly responsible for the crash of the Russian passenger jet over Sinai, Russia did not impose any sanctions on Egypt, and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu recently visited the country. By contrast, Moscow imposed heavy sanctions against Turkey after its military jet was downed after trespassing in Turkish airspace.

on US-backed opponents of Assad, Moscow hopes to keep alive the coalition option; another way to court recognition for its role would be to get involved in the fighting on the ground. That might be unavoidable, first because Assad doesn't have enough forces even to retake crucial cities from the opposition, let alone to fight ISIS in remote areas, and second because it would make Russia the only nonregional power ready to engage in a full-scale war on terror, and therefore poised to emerge as the coalition's natural leader. By securing a place in the new international antiterrorist grouping, Russia expects to be treated as a privileged partner by the Americans and Europeans.

Fourth, by joining or even leading an antiterrorist coalition, Russia hopes to manipulate its Western counterparts into lifting sanctions imposed in 2014, in the midst of the Donbas hostilities. No one in the Kremlin seriously expects Western recognition of the Crimea annexation, but a considerable part of the Russian conservative political elite (often referred to as *siloviki*) believes it might be possible to redraw the "red lines" that hold Russia's near-abroad within its zone of influence. Russia would like to restore a Cold-War-like world with clearly marked frontiers both sides must not cross. Moscow seems to consider the Syrian operation the last chance to achieve this.

Russia is not likely to achieve all of these goals. Putin's "stability" may be welcomed in the Middle East, but plenty of autocrats in the region (in Syria, Iran, Egypt, and elsewhere) adopted this strategy long ago, and secured it by much crueler methods than those Putin himself may apply. A local coalition also seems none too viable, as different regional players have conflicting interests in Syria, and few really want the Syrian state to be recreated from its rubble. Putin's major goal, a kind of a new global antiterrorist alliance, is even less likely given that there is no consensus either on Assad's fate or even on who "the terrorists" are. And, of course, no one in the West wishes to trade Putin's willingness to act together in the Middle East for his new adventures in Ukraine—both the EU and the United States prolonged or even expanded the anti-Russian sanctions after the start of Russian involvement in Syria.⁴⁵ There was no serious

reaction to Putin's calls for a new world order that he heralded in a new provocative documentary of that name.⁴⁶

All other objectives deal exclusively with Russian domestic issues. Putin is looking for a political consensus in Russian society to replace the previous one, which was based on providing growth and rising incomes fueled by spiraling oil prices and reduced capital investment while restricting political freedoms; a new one might focus on restoring the country's "greatness" at a time when fear has become the dominant uniting principle. The popular leader in this case acts less as an agent for development, modernization, and increasing well-being than as a savior who secures the nation's survival in an age of terror and hostility. If Russia's involvement in Syria helps Moscow resume cooperation with the West, Putin will deliver the country's great-power status to his people. At the same time, by invoking an everlasting terrorist threat, he holds all the controls over society

and can determine the right and wrong time for democracy, a liberal market economy, social programs, etc. That is a realistic scenario, considering that Russians take the terrorist threat seriously and do not blame the current economic slump on Putin's policies: Around 75 percent of the population believes that the major economic and political challenges that Russia faces originate from abroad.⁴⁷

Russia would like to restore a Cold-War-like world with clearly marked frontiers both sides must not cross.

As we consider Russia's involvement in Syria, it's important to keep in mind that this policy is not rooted in Russia's interests, but rather in Putin's interests and worldview. It is prompted not by Russia's geostrategic position in the region, but by Putin's domestic interests and foreign policy phobias. We are seeing nothing more than a great power's policy being hijacked by one person's agenda. In the Syrian adventure, Russia's leadership has drafted a strategy it believes is free of miscalculation or constraint, but there are several wild cards that could complicate Putin's calculations.

45 Michael Birnbaum, "E.U. extends sanctions against Russia amid a growing split over their future," *Washington Post*, December 21, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/eu-extends-sanctions-against-russia-amid-growing-splits-over-their-future/2015/12/21/16157de6-a381-11e5-8318-bd8caed8c588_story.html.

46 "The World Order," Vladimir Soloviev, director, released December 20, 2015, on Rossiya TV, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNhYzYUo42g>.

47 "Russian Society: One Year of Crisis and Sanctions," (Moscow: Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, 2015), p. 6 (in Russian).

THE KNOWN UNKNOWN

The first, and the most crucial, question is whether the Russians will launch a ground operation in Syria. Even a superficial look at the country suggests it is in complete chaos. Assad's army is struggling to hold even the tenth of the Syrian prewar territory it now holds, and even with support from Russian contract soldiers and government troops, the army seems unable to advance against both ISIS and the opposition forces. At the same time, recent Western involvement in the region proves that it is as difficult to weaken the Islamists by airstrikes alone as it is foolhardy to rely on rising popular protest in the regions under their control. The chances are slim that the Russians will either coax the moderate Syrian opposition to join them in the fight against ISIS (as we saw in the case of the Russian bomber pilot who was shot dead after surviving Turkey's shoot-down of his plane, the anti-Assad insurgents are extremely hostile to the "invaders" because of heavy losses caused by the Russian attacks) or that they will destroy this opposition with Assad's help (since this requires the consent of the United States, European nations, and Turkey, which at this point hardly looks forthcoming).⁴⁸

Therefore, if Russia really aims to defeat ISIS, it will need to mount a large ground operation. We can probably expect that to happen soon, for several reasons. First of all, Russian state propaganda has become more aggressive, advocating a larger presence in Syria and castigating the Westerners for their tentativeness. Moreover, Russian leaders have begun to praise the Kurds as the most active fighters against the terrorists, arguing that they should be supported. The Russian military is also ready to intervene on the ground, as senior generals reiterate. The deployment of a second airbase to receive transport aircraft also suggests that the ground operation should be expected soon.⁴⁹ If so, the Russians would hope to emerge as the leading force in any prospective antiterrorist coalition.

But a second question emerges: what are the trade-offs that Russia can offer for establishing a broad antiterrorist coalition on Syria?

Russia's ultimate goal goes far beyond keeping Assad in control of the tenth of the former Syrian territory he controls now, but consists in restoring the prewar Syria, rebuilding its political institutions, and securing

its territorial integrity (many Russian political analysts simply admit that Putin's quest for reconsidering the sovereignty issue is one the biggest driving forces behind his actions).⁵⁰ Russian involvement in Syria's problems may be viewed as an indirect challenge to American geopolitical constructs of recent decades, such as the Greater Middle East, nation-building in Iraq, democratization of Afghanistan, etc. Moscow proposes not to "democratize" the nations plagued by civil wars and terrorist groups, but rather to bring them "back to normalcy"—not to destabilize them, but to restore public order. If it succeeds, it may claim that a new paradigm has been forged to save failing nations.

At the same time, Russia's involvement in Syria has predominantly geopolitical grounds and is aimed at forcing the United States and Europe into cooperation with Moscow that will allow the Kremlin to return to global politics. Therefore, the Russians might be cooperative with both the United States and European nations on many issues if Moscow sees readiness for compromises. Moscow may accept Assad's resignation once the fight with ISIS is over or most of Syrian territory is recovered. If Western powers are really interested in a prompt and decisive victory over ISIS, then Russia, if incorporated into a huge coalition, might be quite helpful. Russia may go as far as agreeing to renegotiate the Minsk agreements on terms much more favorable for the Ukrainians and Europeans if it gets support in Syria and leads a "global front against terror" that could be very instrumental for Putin's domestic policy. Moreover, more concessions may follow from Russia if Moscow were readmitted to the club of great powers.

And last but not least, there is another pending question: Are Western powers ready to cooperate with Russia in the region and beyond, and on what terms? More questions than answers here.

Western countries seem uninclined to ease their relations with Russia. Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister David Cameron, and many world leaders have already declared that no joint efforts with Russia in Syria will change their countries' stance on sanctions, which were imposed as punishment for Russia's actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Indeed, the EU countries agreed to extend these sanctions for another six-month period, until June 2016. Whether enhanced cooperation with Russia is possible depends on three things. First, is the

48 "Russia urges Turkey to arrest rebels over pilot's death," Al Jazeera, December 30, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/russia-urges-turkey-arrest-rebels-pilot-death-151230163927991.html>.

49 Tom Parfitt and Bel Trew, "Russia builds new base for more jets in Syria," *Times*, December 1, 2015, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/world/middleeast/article4628231.ece>.

50 Leonid Bershidsky, "Nature of sovereignty a key issue in Russia-US divide," *Japan Times*, September 21, 2015, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2015/09/21/commentary/world-commentary/nature-sovereignty-key-issue-russia-u-s-divide/#.Vl8cU3arQdV>.

West ready to form an anti-ISIS coalition with Russia in exchange for giving Moscow a free hand in the post-Soviet space? Is it ready to freeze the discussions on Crimea's status, renegotiate the Donbas issue, guarantee Ukraine's neutrality, and accept a unique role for Russia in Central Asia? Second, will it accept Assad's temporary stay in power for the sake of a joint ground operation against ISIS, which, if successful, may be depicted as Russia's big triumph? Third, can it secure a place for Russia in the international arena by restoring its participation in the G8, along with other symbolic steps?

Western powers have good reason to look for such a compromise.⁵¹ After all, Putin is right when insisting that it was not Russia who sapped the post-Cold War global order, but the United States and its insane adventures in Afghanistan in the 1980s and Iraq in 2000s that sowed the current Middle East disarray. Indeed, Russia violated international law by annexing Crimea, but Putin considered it a preventive step against the so-called color revolutions that spread through North Africa and former Soviet republics. Russia is, of course, a complicated partner to deal with, but, after all, politicians should find ways to resolve problems, not merely let them mushroom.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the choice Russia made in Syria should be taken seriously from a strategic perspective and not dismissed as part of a "propaganda war" meant to explain to Russians "why they must tighten their belts since there is no economic growth in sight."⁵²

51 Alexander Lebedev and Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Terror: A new solution to an old problem," *Independent*, December 3, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/terror-new-solutions-to-an-old-problem-a6759141.html>.

52 Elizaveta Antonova, "Guriev calls the operation in Syria a propaganda war," RBC News Agency, November 21, 2015, <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/21/11/2015/565051779a79474d636ac927>.

Russian leaders went to war in Syria for many reasons, and they are driven by long-term goals. Putin has invested a huge share of his political capital into the Syrian incursion, so there is no reason to expect a swift exit. The Russian intervention in Syria is a result of the Russian elite's worldview, with implications for the country's place in global politics and its power status. For these reasons this war will last a long time, whether it produces a coalition or not.

Russia's actions, however, may push the West to elaborate a more adequate strategy toward Syria. A prudent course would be to allow the Russians to enmesh themselves further in Syria's civil war and wait for the results. If (and as soon as) they fail, the West should propose a new approach to the crisis based on the assumption that Syria (like, maybe, Iraq and some other Middle Eastern countries) is an artificial construction and the current crisis inevitable. The best way to resolve the problems mounting in the region is to partition Syria, as the French envisioned in 1920 while governing the territory under the League of Nations mandate. In this scenario, Assad would remain ruler of a tiny Alawite state; the Kurds could establish their nation-state in the north and east, becoming the major force fighting ISIS on the ground; and the moderate opposition could retake control of the State of Damascus. At the same time the main focus of any antiterrorist coalition should be shifted toward fighting terrorism in Western countries (with Russia included). Not only Russian, but also Western involvement in the Syrian crisis will eventually lead us to the simple conclusion that a united and sovereign Syria is gone, a large coalition is impossible, and the less Western nations are directly involved in the Middle East's civil wars, the better.

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RUSSIAN MOTIVES IN SYRIA AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR US POLICY

ADAM GARFINKLE

What Russia is up to in Syria is not a particularly great puzzle, but to *really* understand it, and to see what Russian policy is likely to produce in and beyond the region, the context needs a brief review.

What we have been seeing in the international and regional politics of the Middle East in the past few years is a competition of multiple weaknesses. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS or Daesh) is a deeply fractured coalition of disparate forces, with a modest and under-trained military force, little governing ability, and limited financial wherewithal. Even in its highly under-institutionalized condition, its success so far as a partly pre-modern and partly post-modern state-building effort is thanks largely to the structural weaknesses of the Sunni Arab states—particularly Iraq and Syria. The sources of this weakness, in turn, run deep and long, all the way back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.⁵³

The fuel for ISIS comes mainly from the barbarities of the Syrian civil war, whose main antagonists fight from positions of weakness. The minoritarian Alawite regime in Damascus is sclerotic and poorly led, deeply unpopular since well before the misnamed “Arab Spring,” and for many years now an economic basketcase, thanks to a rapacious rentier elite. The so-called moderate opposition is also weak, particularly when it comes to cohering as an effective military force or political voice—at least until recently. The largely merchant elite of the Syrian Sunni community, long divided among tribes laid out on a “vertical” axis from Aleppo to Hama to Homs to Damascus, are notorious throughout the region for their egoism, venality, and endlessly creative beggar-thy-neighbor tactics.⁵⁴

The weakness of the Sunni Arab states, the Syrian regime and opposition, and Syria’s uniquely (for the

region) polyglot neighbor in Lebanon, has allowed the weak and domestically unpopular regime in Tehran to play the role of would-be kingmaker in Syria, using money and its most important Shia Arab proxy, Hezbollah, as instruments. Hezbollah seemed strong within Lebanese politics largely because of the structural weakness of the Lebanese state built into it deliberately from the beginning in 1943, and because of its seeming ability to stand up to Israel. In reality, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) crushed Hezbollah the last time the two foes fought, and it has been bled badly over the past years fighting on Iran’s behalf in Syria.

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Contributing to Iraq’s current prostration and Syria’s collapse into protracted violence have been the policies of the United States stretching over the past two administrations. The ill-designed March 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, and then the premature withdrawal of US forces in December 2011 represented a one-two punch to the former Sunni-dominated state apparatus. The former smashed the modernist façade of the Ba’athist state and sent that polity reeling back to its organic social forms

of affinity (*assabiya*), namely tribe and sect. The latter allowed ISIS—the recreation of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s al-Qaeda in Iraq—to expand into the vacuum. The passivity of the Obama administration with regard to Syria has fed the notion, in the region and in Moscow, that after two unsatisfactorily concluded wars (three if one adds Libya, as one should), the United States has abandoned the order-sustaining role in the region that it has accrued, stage by stage, since World War II. So while the United States is objectively strong in the region, it has become politically weak; President Vladimir Putin of Russia has sensed this weakness (and the weaknesses of the European Union and the transatlantic bond) and has acted accordingly.

But again, we are witnessing here a contest of relative weakness, for Russia is smaller, poorer, less healthy, and less industrialized than the Soviet Union; the state budget depends on exports of energy and other commodities to a degree unimaginable forty years ago.

53 Adam Garfinkle, “The Fall of Empires and the Formation of the Modern Middle East,” *Orbis*, Forthcoming.

54 The tale of how Syria became the second province of the United Arab Republic in 1958 vividly illustrates this truth.



Russian and US representatives meet in New York to discuss the situation in Syria on September 29, 2015.
 Photo credit: Kremlin.ru.

If the state functions at all at the central level, it does so mainly as a top-heavy, semi-feudal kleptocracy. To the extent that the regime is ideological, it maintains a brittle, reactionary attitude reminiscent of Czar Nicholas I. Its arms industry still functions, though in most respects at a technological level even further behind that of the United States at the end of the Cold War. The countries against which it has aggressed in recent years—Georgia and more recently Ukraine—are much weaker even than Russia and vastly less institutionalized in all pertinent ways, both being former constituent (fake) republics of the USSR.

These weaknesses at the regional level and those beyond it, in the United States, Europe, and Russia, are now interacting in peculiar and possibly dangerous ways, of which more anon. With Syria and Ukraine in play right now, shows of strength or weakness in one affect calculations and behavior in the other. Crisis points in an international system are never a series of one-offs, but inevitably compound one another to create what, for lack of a better term, can be called a collective psychological cascade among national leaders and elites. We may be approaching such a cascade now, with the multiple moving parts injecting uncertainty into the system as a whole. Such a situation is volatile, as we have already seen with the Turkish shoot-down of a Russian fighter jet.

We can look at the overall situation from the perspective of any of the engaged actors. The assignment here, however, is to focus on Russia. Afterward, we assess what it all means for the United States and its allies.

US INEPTITUDE, RUSSIAN OPPORTUNISM

It came as a surprise to awake here in North America one late-September morning to news that Russian pilots were flying combat missions for the Assad regime in what used to be Syria. It soon became clear that the strikes were directed not mainly against ISIS or “terrorists” as claimed, but against antiregime targets that included some Syrian rebels who had been receiving US aid via the CIA for at least two years.

It also soon became clear that the Russians were engaged in a fairly major effort in Syria, complete with forward air bases and a targeting plan that included shooting cruise missiles into Syria from across the Caspian Sea. Not since Soviet pilots flew missions for Egypt during the War of Attrition in 1969-70 have we seen anything like this. The Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan involved a country contiguous to the Soviet border, and the only truly Moscow-directed expeditionary efforts (in Angola, for example) in days of Cold War yore made use of Cuban troops, not Russian ones.

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There then commenced US proposals to deconflict the combat zone between US and Russian aircraft in order to prevent accidents aloft, but Russian officials informed the US government of their initial actions in a “drop by” at the US Embassy in Baghdad with a mere hour’s prior notice. US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter noted after the fact that he expected more professional behavior from the Russian military, but Russian body language was designed to constitute a swagger—in effect, an insinuation about who has balls and who does not.

This followed a pattern. First, the top US commander in the Middle East, General Lloyd J. Austin III, in September 16 testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, had remarked that he and his Pentagon colleagues were “completely flummoxed” by the reasons for the Russian intervention into Syria.

A few days later, when Russian officials announced an intelligence-sharing arrangement with Iran and Iraq aimed ostensibly against ISIS, the White House likewise seemed completely flummoxed, judging by its tongue-tied response when asked about the matter by reporters. The US government as a whole may not have been caught as flatfooted as the White House, but when a President arranges a politicized foreign policy decision-making apparatus so heavily overbalanced toward White House control, this sort of thing is more likely to happen.

Next came the Putin and Obama speeches at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) a few days later. Putin was direct and self-confident as he, for the most part, lied. Obama’s was perhaps the worst foreign policy speech of his presidency. A former Democratic administration official, David Rothkopf, criticized the President in an uncharacteristically mocking tone:

*Obama, for his part, is still reportedly trying to figure out what the heck his next halfway measure should be in Syria—should he dial up more tweets from the NSC or perhaps give another speech about how bad the options are in that country? Certainly, his UN address on Monday did not offer any clear answers—about anything. (For those of you who missed it, here is a summary of Obama’s UN remarks: “Good morning. Cupcakes. Unicorns. Rainbows. Putin is mean. Thank you very much.”)*⁵⁵

The result of the Putin-Obama UNGA juxtaposition was that, after all was said rather than done, even US allies,

notably France and Italy, openly wished the Russian military mission well in Syria.

This past autumn’s diplomatic dance carries with it an even deeper context, however. The Russians have been flexing their military muscle and dialing up the rhetoric, while the US effort against ISIS that commenced in September 2014, has been so feckless and unavailing that Centcom officials reportedly lied up the chain of command about the utility of it; this constituted one of the most serious violations of American civil-military professionalism in memory.⁵⁶ US efforts have also lacked a coherent strategy from the start, the main reason being that US policy failed to acknowledge the Assad regime’s brutal campaign against Syria’s Sunni population as the main proximate cause of ISIS strength. Attacking ISIS through low-tempo aerial attacks while leaving the wellspring of its political appeal untouched—whether to avoid interrupting the appeasement of Iran to achieve the July 14 nuclear deal, or for some other reason—resembles thinking that one can change the position of a shadow by trying to manipulate the shadow.

The deeper context also has an Iraqi aspect. The US training mission in that country proved a telegenic failure, no less than the later desultory one in Syria, which produced either nine or five (depending on who’s counting) US-trained moderates for \$500 million. By late September no one was still talking seriously about the Iraqis taking back Mosul, since they clearly could not retake and hold even Ramadi or Fallujah. As with Iraq, so with Afghanistan: The mission to sustain the Afghan government proved lacking, with the events of October demonstrating that the ANA could not hold or retake Kunduz without critical US help.

The wider context also featured a prior Syrian aspect. For those in the region, the infamous August 2013 “non-strike” event, in which the President sent ships armed with cruise missiles in the Mediterranean to attack Assad’s regime for using chemical weapons against its people, dispatched his National Security Adviser and Secretary of State to make speeches justifying the strike and then . . . did not strike. Unlike the credulous American mainstream press, no serious person in the Levant ever trusted the Syrian regime’s subsequent declaration concerning its chemical stocks to be truthful and complete—and events have since proved that it was neither truthful nor complete, not least because certified ISIS use of mustard gas and other agents in more recent times can only have come

⁵⁵ David Rothkopf, *Leave it to Vlad (and the Supreme Leader)*, *Foreign Policy*, September 28, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/28/leave-it-to-vlad-and-the-supreme-leader-obama-iraq-iran-middle-east/>.

⁵⁶ Shane Harris and Nancy A. Youssef, “Exclusive: 50 Spies Say ISIS Intelligence Was Cooked,” *Daily Beast*, September 9, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/09/exclusive-50-spies-say-isis-intelligence-was-cooked.html>.

from ISIS overrunning regime depots and using some of those residual stocks.

Moreover, the Obama administration's record in urging Israelis and Arabs toward peace is the least productive of any American administration since June 1967. Not that conditions for progress were propitious, but this record was largely due to the administration's poor diplomatic assessments and behavior. The conspicuous failure of US peace efforts, along with the pursuit of an Iranian nuclear deal in a manner that was effectively delinked from Iranian regional behavior, incurred a price. In past decades, the US government was able to maintain often paramount influence with Israel and several key Arab states at the same time despite their being often nearly at war with one another, and on at least one occasion, in October 1973, when they actually were at war with one another. Today, Israel and many key Sunni Arab states enjoy the best relations they have ever had, yet the Obama administration achieved poor relations with them all simultaneously.

It follows from this deeper context that the most popular interpretation of Russian behavior has based itself on a key precondition: the abdication of US leadership in the region and the sharp decline of Washington's reputation for sound judgment and judicious use of power. Spinoza was correct to observe that nature abhors a vacuum. The Obama administration enabled one, and the Russians, with the Iranians, moved to fill it.

The timing of the Russian intervention in Syria is also no great mystery. Iranian General Qassem Suleimani's planning trip to Moscow had to wait until August, after the signing of the P5+1/Iran nuclear deal on July 14 and congressional debate on it, lest the revelation of such kinetic coordination undermine the whole arrangement. Also, the increasingly dire military situation of the Assad regime, especially in the north around Idlib and Aleppo, factored in the decision on timing the onset of operations in Syria.

Clearly, the Russians understood how badly the war was going for the Assad regime, for they have had military advisers in Syria since the civil war began. Those advisers needed to be there, in the first instance,

to aid in the absorption of weapons deliveries, but their role was not limited to that function.

Nonetheless, the big Russian expeditionary effort needs a more complete explanation. There is no need to be "flummoxed," completely or otherwise, about the reasons for it; indeed, there are so many reasons that the Putin regime's behavior regarding Syria may be said to be over-determined. That doesn't mean that Russian policy is based on sound strategic thinking or that it will not cause the Kremlin much trouble. It probably isn't and it may, in due course.

THE KREMLIN'S THREE CIRCLES

As in Ukraine, Russian aims in Syria may be described as consisting of three concentric circles nested within each other like *matryoshka* dolls. Let's start with Ukraine, for it precedes Syria, is related to the Syrian action, and helps us see the nature of Putin's logic with respect to both.⁵⁷

In Ukraine, the innermost and least ambitious circle concerns the erection of another rubble heap on the Russian periphery—conventionally termed a "frozen conflict." These heaps make Ukraine (and Georgia, and Moldova) unappealing or unavailable as a partner to the European Union and NATO. By ensuring that countries on the Russian periphery cannot prosper as free economies linked to pluralist polities, the Russian regime protects itself from a liberal contagion that might one day spread to Moscow.

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The middle circle would move beyond the rubble to suborn or replace an unfriendly Ukrainian government. That would not require an actual military march to the west, but if successful it would enable Russian arms to walk instead of fight forward. The outer and most policy-ambitious circle then becomes not stopping NATO and the EU from any farther eastward expansion, but pressuring and perhaps even destroying them politically. The method is not hard to discern: Send "little green men" (read: deploy hybrid warfare) against a Baltic state NATO member, and watch as weak and hesitant US and European responses degrade the

57 This section draws from earlier analyses in "Putin, Obama, and the Middle East," *The American Interest Online*, October 3, 2015, and "Russia's Third Circles," *The American Interest Online*, September 17, 2015.

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Free Syrian Army members gathered around a tank in al-Qsair, Syria, on February 23, 2012. Photo credit: Freedom House/Flickr.

credibility of NATO and, with it, the whole US-led global alliance system. Russia need not be able to defeat NATO militarily to grievously wound it politically.

Of course, this is risky. Few Western analysts think Putin would risk a nuclear war to complete the Ukrainian third circle, despite recent loose talk about nuclear weapons in Russian strategy. The Western reaction to Russia's Ukraine operation has been less than stalwart, but it has not been entirely feckless. The stiffening of the German government's attitude toward Russia may be a key reason for Putin's disinclination to take further risks on that front, so far.

But, of course, well short of destroying NATO politically, Russian tactics put pressure on Western statesmen, and particularly on the Obama administration. They exacerbate strains within the administration, between it and the allies, and, as always, among the allies in Europe. With the United States effectively ceding its former alliance leadership role to Germany, and for the first time seeming not to think of European difficulties as a strategic concern of the United States, Russian policy also puts enormous pressure on a German government that neither wishes nor knows how to assume that kind of high political role in Europe, the still-persisting eurozone dilemma being a case in point.

But not even a successful consummation of the outer circle in Ukraine—were Putin willing to risk it—could

bring massive pressure on or even destroy the European Union. This is where Syria comes in.

The *inner*, most defensive and least ambitious of Russia's Syria circle is to prevent the destruction of the Assad regime. That imperiled regime is Russia's only real ally, and Tartus is its only military base beyond the territory of the former Soviet Union.

Beyond that, Russia opposes regime change in general, because it worries about a process that will not stop until it gets to Moscow. Russian policy today is therefore as reactionary as it was in 1848, when Czar Nicholas I considered sending the Russian army to Paris to crush revolutionaries.

The *middle* circle, if achieved, would give Russia a decisive role in the future of Syria, even if it ultimately requires a post-Assad and even a post-Alawite arrangement. That role would extend Russian influence, especially if it can coordinate Russian interests with those of Iran, over the entire Levant and beyond. Russian military efforts in Syria are therefore designed to torque the battlefield to favor its own, its client's, and its regional ally's interests in a settlement. It is not purely defensive. And despite a slow start the effort seems to be working.

That interpretation is bolstered by the fact that not long after the nuclear deal was signed, the Iranians

appeared ready, on Assad's "behalf," to give up on large swaths of Syrian territory in a deal that amounted to a partition. The Iranians care mainly about Damascus international airport, their main link to Hezbollah, but in their version of a possible partition they spoke only of Damascus, the Qusayr pivot toward the West, and Latakia province. That would upend traditional Syrian caution about provoking Israel near the occupied Golan Heights, suggesting that Syria has become a satrap of Iranian hegemonism, or presumptions thereto.

The only other possibility is that Russian arms are designed to suffocate the violence of the Syrian civil war altogether, as the Russians did in Chechnya; but that would require ground forces and a level and duration of effort the preparations for which are nowhere yet in evidence. True, in recent weeks Putin has made noises about using nuclear weapons in Syria, but one suspects he is not serious about this.

And it *is* logical, after all, to suppose that the Russian regime and Iran want a settlement to the Syrian civil war because it ultimately imperils both their interests. But they want a settlement to include the Alawites and, if possible, Assad. However useful ISIS may be in the short term for Iran as an agent undermining the Sunni Arab states, it could eventually consolidate itself to become a powerful core of Iran's sectarian enemy. It poses a problem for the longer-term integrity of the Russian Federation, too, whose hold over much of the Caucasus is none too solid—not to speak of the threat of Islamist militancy percolating in Central Asia. The Islamist radicalization of ethnic nationalist movements in those areas in and adjacent to the Russian Federation could prove calamitous for Moscow.

The Russians must know that committing themselves to prop up the Assad regime indefinitely could be costly, futile, and self-defeating, because it could strengthen ISIS and lead to direct attacks on Russian interests, as with Russian aircraft flying out of Sharm al-Sheikh (if that event proves to have been a terrorist act). If the commitment to Assad is truly unconditional, then the Russians are putting themselves into a *zugzwang*, unable to move in one direction without risking harm from another.

If Russian decision-makers believe that ISIS cannot readily or completely be defeated as long as Assad

remains in Damascus, they and the Iranians are most likely acting to prevent a collapse of the Syrian regime, thereafter to negotiate their way to a less dangerous successor arrangement. If they think ISIS can be defeated in due course and all of Syrian territory restored to the Assad regime, then the military effort will be longstanding and may involve ground troops. If that is the case, the proposition placed before US policymakers then goes something like this: If we Russians are willing to solve your ISIS problem for you, are you willing to pay the price in the persistence of the Assad regime, the rise of Russian preeminence in the Levant and beyond, and the bolstering of Iranian regional influence as well?

The most ambitious *third* circle in Syria parallels that in Ukraine. If Putin's third-circle goal in Ukraine is the undermining of NATO or, failing that, pressure against it (and he gets another bite of that apple from Syria *viz.* NATO ally Turkey and in another way besides), in Syria it

is the undermining of the European Union or, failing that, enough pressure against it to break the EU's unanimity about continuing Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia.

How might this third-circle tactic be implemented? The brutality of the Assad regime has so far made nearly five million of Syria's 24 million people refugees and killed more than a quarter of a million. Many more—approximately 7.5 million to 8 million—are internally displaced. This barbarity took several years to accomplish with an unimpressive Syrian order of battle. The Russian military

could easily expand the number of dead Syrians and the number of refugees to double and triple those numbers in six months to a year. The Russian military understands well how to cause migratory genocide; it practiced the method in Afghanistan throughout the 1980s, and in some respects more recently in Chechnya.

But why might the Russians do such a thing in Syria? To destroy or seriously degrade the European Union is a longstanding Soviet/Russian goal, at least as Putin understands those goals as a classic exemplar of "KGB-lite" thinking. The EU is already fraying over the challenge of managing fewer than a million asylum seekers. The domestic politics of EU countries is turning quickly illiberal on that account, which is a political attitude much more to Moscow's liking and

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an attitude that would also very likely harm NATO's capacity to act in a crisis. What will happen to the EU and to the domestic politics of its members if they must deal with three million or perhaps five million refugees during just the next year?

Just as aggressing against a Baltic state in hopes of politically destroying NATO would be risky, so would weaponizing Syrian refugee flows in hopes of politically destroying the European Union. But the Russians may do it if they think benefits will outweigh risks. As in Ukraine, the Russian calculation of benefits versus risks in Syria turns on what restraints and countermeasures other actors can muster to raise Russia's costs. If EU members keep henpecking one another over the asylum crisis, the Russian leadership may conclude that trying to make Europe's dilemma worse bears relatively few costs. As for a possible US reaction, the Russians probably discount anything serious from the current administration, which seems either reluctant or unable to see what is going on in Europe as the long-term security issue it is.

Since September, Russian actions in Syria have suggested an effort not just to protect the Assad regime and to alter the facts on the battleground for a propitious diplomacy, but also to use violence to spur more refugee movement out of the country. Hard evidence of intentions is lacking, of course, and some observers initially were reluctant to credit this possibility—although that judgment gave the Russian leadership more credit for civilized behavior than it deserved.⁵⁸

An early piece of circumstantial evidence is that the Russians reportedly were flying from the outset some ninety sorties a day in Syria—compared with about ninety *a month* by the US military since September 2014. The operational tempo of US efforts was limited by intelligence capabilities; American personnel could not readily identify military targets, and they were justifiably concerned about the consequences of killing innocents. The Russians have had no better intelligence, leading to the presumption that they did not mind killing innocents and that the killing had a wider tactical purpose. Even more telling is that Russian jets have been attacking hospitals, schools, bakeries, housing complexes, water-treatment plants, and other basic infrastructure. They have also used cluster munitions. All of this would be in keeping with

an effort to worsen the violence and create more refugees headed to Europe.⁵⁹

Whether intentional or not, this is clearly what is happening. Despite the middling initial tactical success of Russian and Iranian arms, the level of internal violence has risen sharply. "The Russian bombing is worse than that by the regime," said anti-government activist Shadi al-Oweini, referring to the greater accuracy of Russian attacks. "In the past, I used to drive my car around. Nowadays, no way; we will be bombed immediately."⁶⁰ The Syrian Network for Human Rights reported on December 17 that Russian air attacks have killed five hundred and seventy civilians since early October, including 152 children and sixty women.⁶¹ The Norwegian Refugee Council said on December 2 that aid delivery routes had been newly blocked, forcing the group to suspend most of its operations in much of northern Syria. "As humanitarian actors on the ground we fear that intensified military intervention will once again undermine hopes for real peace talks," the Secretary General of the Council, Jan Egeland, said in a statement. "We are left with the impossible task of caring for ever more families forced to flee."⁶²

WEAPONS SALES, UKRAINE, AND A THUMB IN THE EYE

Three other ancillary Russian motives may also help explain its Syria policy. One is pecuniary, one is diplomatic in the broad sense, and one is familiar but defies simple labels. First things first.

Some sources value Russian weapons contracts with the Assad regime at up to \$4 billion, nearly all of it provided on credit. The contracts include Sukhoi fighters, attack helicopters, T-90 tanks, and other platforms recently and still on display on the Syrian battlefield. With the regime flailing, Russian leaders worried about not getting paid. They have had reason

59 All these tactics intensified in January and February in the effort to take Aleppo, especially the deliberate bombing of hospitals.

60 Ben Hubbard, "Putin's Gambit Over Syria Proves to Be Dual-Edged Sword," *New York Times*, December 15, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/16/world/europe/in-russia-john-kerry-pushes-forward-on-syrian-peace-process.html?_r=0.

61 Syrian Network for Human Rights, "They Came to Kill Us," December 17, 2015, http://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/They_Came_to_Kill_Us_en.pdf. This organization, based in London, while obviously an anti-regime partisan, has reported with reasonable objectivity and accuracy from Syria for more than three years.

62 David Sanger and Somini Sengupta, "To Crush ISIS, John Kerry Urges Deft Removal of Syria's Assad," *New York Times*, December 3, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/04/world/middleeast/to-crush-isis-john-kerry-urges-deft-removal-of-syrias-assad.html>. This same information, using similar "slogan" language, appeared under Liz Sky's byline on the front page of the *Washington Post* on December 15—nearly two weeks later.

58 Since December, Russian behavior has led ever more observers, particularly in Germany, to conclude that Russian policy is deliberately seeking to exacerbate Europe's migrant dilemmas.

to worry: They ate \$8 billion in debts owed them by the now-defunct Ba'athist regime in Iraq.

Recall as well that Russian authorities recently agreed to sell Iran the expensive S-300 air defense system. More important, Iranian conventional weapons are mostly old and obsolete. With more than \$100 billion in unfrozen sanctions cash in pocket, the Iranian regime will seek major arms purchases. It is likely to pursue a Russian order of battle, perhaps with embellishments here and there in Chinese and maybe French.⁶³

Remember that Iraq, too, used to possess a Russian-made order of battle. Its government may seek to renew that relationship. That would likely be the advice from Tehran, if only for the sake of interoperability. And it aids the cause of Russian arms sales that the Shia in Baghdad are fast falling out of love with all things American.

Thus, we have lately been witness to a Russian commercial military air show with a ground addendum. Arms sales might figure high in Russian motives because the price of oil has fallen sharply and looks to stay depressed for a while. Western sanctions over Ukraine also have taken a serious toll even at their current selective levels, and the ongoing failure to reform the Russian economy has resulted in significant deindustrialization and reduced productivity. Weapons are among the very few manufactured items the Russians can sell abroad these days. And as is the case with other major weapons producers, export markets make domestic purchases economically viable—and the Russian authorities plan to make many purchases for their own use.

How much money might be involved? Looking out over a decade we could be talking conservatively about \$50 billion to \$75 billion—and that is money to be made by politically connected oligarchical elements that the regime has special reason to reward. Putin has gone to the trouble of denying this, but he's not been very persuasive. On December 11 he said, "Our actions were not dictated by some incomprehensible abstract geopolitical interests, by the desire to test

new weapons systems, which in itself is also important. But that is beside the point. The main objective is to prevent a threat to the Russian Federation itself."⁶⁴ Yes, it's "important" to test them—out in the open so that potential customers can evaluate their effectiveness.

As to the diplomatic, consider Ukraine. The Russian government has achieved its first-circle aims in Ukraine, having erected another anticontagion rubble heap. The recent slowdown in the fighting in eastern Ukraine has led some to believe that a diplomatic solution may be close at hand, but that is unlikely. The Russians are probably consolidating their political gains, and watching as eyes turn toward the Levant.

This ploy has worked well so far. When French and Italian diplomats publicly wish Russia well at the UN with regard to Syria, we are witness to a segmented form of amnesia—which says a great deal about how much those governments and others in Europe actually care about what happens in Ukraine.

When French and Italian diplomats publicly wish Russia well at the UN with regard to Syria, we are witness to a segmented form of amnesia.

Without its utilitarian aspects, international diplomacy would reduce to a play without a plot. But without its psychodramatic aspects, it would be like a plot with no soul. Putin enjoys surprising and wrong-footing the Obama administration *for its own sake*. He remembers that the Soviet Union used to have a strong position in the Middle East, but shrewd US diplomacy got the Russians expelled from Egypt, the key to that position, in July 1972. He

wants to restore that position at US expense. He thus embodies the ego-shaken personality of the demised Soviet Union. Of more practical importance, superior gamesmanship is a mark of leadership that pays practical dividends amid the current Russian elite and also the Russian public. We must not underestimate the domestic political benefits of the current Russian policy, or the domestic political motivation behind most of what Putin does in foreign affairs: It is popular and will probably continue to help Putin politically unless it manifestly turns into an embarrassment.

Alas, thinking strategically is a luxury these days in Russia. An ambient panic drives any consideration of interests, financial or otherwise, toward the short term.

⁶³ Since this writing in December 2015, this prediction has been borne out by events. Prospective announced sales of Russian tanks and fighter aircraft, however, violate the terms of the Iran nuclear deal and would defy UN Security Council prohibitions. The way forward is therefore not yet clear in this regard.

⁶⁴ Kremlin, "Expanded meeting of the Defence Ministry Board: Vladimir Putin took part in the annual expanded meeting of the Russian Federation Defence Ministry Board," December 11, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50913>.

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Putin is a skilled tactician, able to play a weak hand well. Perhaps he is aware of Stephen Sestanovich's "maximalism" thesis, which holds that risk-averse folk in a naturally dicey environment cede great advantage to leaders who know what they want.

If so, Putin possesses another advantage over the American administration: He is an autocrat and Barack Obama is not. Democratic leaders can become maximalists if forced to it under extreme circumstances; but in normal times, as Robert S. Vansittart wrote in *The Mist Procession* (1958), "democracy often changes its mind because it seldom knows it." That cedes advantage to autocrats who do know their own minds, especially when the balance of interests, as dictated by geography, trumps the overall balance of power.

ASSAD, THE FIRST DOMINO

After trying hard to miss the point for months and even years on end, it seems to have finally dawned on Obama administration principals that if they want to defeat ISIS, they must do *something* to first stop the Syrian civil war—and it must be done in such a way that does not leave Assad long in power.

Anyone who has thought through the problem eventually comes to this sequence of reasoning: ISIS constitutes a threat to the United States and to key allies (like France), and current policy is not working as reliably or as quickly as we would like; air power alone cannot do the job, but the stomach for again introducing large numbers of US boots on the ground in the Middle East is lacking; hence, for military but more importantly for prospective political reasons, those boots on the ground should be Sunni—whether Arab or Turkish; but every possible candidate to supply those boots has a strategic priority that takes precedence over a doomsday showdown with ISIS (for Turkey, it's the Kurds and Assad; for the Saudis, Yemen and the Iranians; for Egypt, it's the Sinai and Libya and more; and so on). But while it is impossible for the US government to form a coalition of the willing to act against ISIS, it is not impossible for it to form a coalition, probably needing to feature Turkish power, to act against the Assad regime. (That requires *inter alia* stopping, not encouraging, the stupid Saudi intervention in Yemen, but that should be done anyway.)

Note what this means insofar as the Russians are concerned: if the Russians (and Iranians) are really tied to Assad in a blood-on-the-saddle posture, then what the US government can and may find in its interest to do flies directly in the face of what the Russians

are doing. We need for Assad to go at the hands of a Sunni coalition that can defeat first him and then ISIS, and then establish transitional arrangements, at the least, to govern the Sunni parts of the Levant. But the Russians want Assad to stay. Or do they?

When in mid-October, Assad was summoned to Moscow, it seemed that we might be about to witness an old scene from history, aptly described to me by the late foreign policy analyst Harvey Sicherman thusly: "If you want to stab someone in the back, you first have to get behind him." "Stabbed in the back" could translate nowadays as "sent shopping for a dacha in the Moscow suburbs"; we'll see. In the originally Vienna-based diplomacy now afoot, US policy needs to probe whether the Russians (and Iranians) are really wedded to Assad. If they are, no deal is in the US interest; if not, we can talk.⁶⁵ The point is that Sunni coalition-building aimed at Assad first, ISIS later, is the wise approach, and it would not be wise to allow Moscow either to effectively veto that path or to take ownership and control of it.

But it's not clear if the administration is ready to make the switch, or to act boldly on the implication. On December 14, Secretary of State John Kerry reportedly accepted the Russian demand that Assad stay, for now. What promise he got in return about Assad's slightly longer-term future we do not know—maybe none at all. The reality is that the Russians and Iranians have a lot more skin in the game than we do, and the Obama administration seems strongly disinclined in its final year to do anything bold in the Middle East. It is not clear if it retains enough credibility to succeed even if it wanted to. Besides, the Russians got on the ground first militarily; having decided not to establish a humanitarian keep-out zone four years ago, the administration would risk a fight with the Russians already there, in order to set one up now.

And anyone who thinks the situation will change dramatically in January 2017 needs to think again. Even if a Republican wins in November, it's unlikely that a new President will want to rush off to war in the Middle East against anyone, let alone against a nuclear-armed Russia, especially before he or she even has a team in place.

As to the present President, he seems unworried about it. When told of criticisms that the Russians are "winning" in Syria, he reportedly replied in March 2014:

⁶⁵ For my analysis of the so-called Vienna process as it developed after this essay was drafted, see "Follyanna?" *American Interest Online*, February 11, 2016, and "Follyanna?: A Coda," *American Interest Online*, February 12, 2016.

I am always darkly amused by this notion [that] somehow Iran has won in Syria. I mean, you hear sometimes people saying, 'They're winning in Syria,' and you say, 'This was [the Iranians'] one friend in the Arab world, a member of the Arab League, and it is now in rubble.' It is bleeding them because they're having to spend billions of dollars. . . . The Russians [too] find their one friend in the region in rubble and delegitimized.⁶⁶

Obama seems to have the old dog-chases-school-bus scenario in mind. His view has been that their intervention won't affect the war much and may well turn into a quagmire for the Russians. Secretary of Defense Ash Carter publicly made similar predictions.

Alas, the matter is complicated. Suppose that in an effort to create a Sunni coalition force to attack ISIS in Syria, the administration manages to coax Turkish arms across the border in significant numbers, presumably after reaching an understanding that the Turks will not focus militarily on the Kurds. A Turkish vivisection of ISIS might seem at first to aid the survival of the Assad regime and thus comport well with Russian interests, but things would look different if such an intervention in due course helped to consolidate the

non-jihadi Sunni opposition to Assad. What would Russia do then? Attack Turkish troops in Syria, or start a war against Turkey proper to force its soldiers out of Syrian territory? It might, and, if so, it wouldn't be the first time Russians made war against Turks.

The President's quagmire thesis may be correct. Certainly, what we learned about the technological backwardness of Russian air force operations in the aftermath of the Turkish shoot-down of a Russian fighter suggests that the Russians are having plenty of operational problems and may not be able to sustain their present operational tempo for long. But the President might be mistaken, too, at least in the sense that elites throughout the region do not share his dismissive attitude about the Russians, and that perceptions do matter.

It could be, therefore, that in addition to a competition among weaknesses of varying kinds and at various levels, we may soon witness a competition of errors, both Russian and American, and errors encompassing a variety of third parties, not least Turkey. How those errors will interact and play out, and to what effect, no one knows. The future depends, as always, on contingent judgments not yet made. The only prediction one can make with confidence is this: full employment ahead for diplomats and pundits.

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⁶⁶ Dennis Ross, "Nothing in the Middle East Happens By Accident—Except When It Does," *Mosaic*, December 7, 2015, <http://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2015/12/nothing-in-the-middle-east-happens-by-accident-except-when-it-does/>.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO COLLABORATE WITH RUSSIA ON SYRIA?

DENNIS ROSS

Samantha Power described the struggle in the Balkans in the 1990s as the problem from hell. The civil war in Syria, with more than 250,000 dead and twelve million people displaced, makes the conflict in the former Yugoslavia look tame by comparison. With the Russian military intervention, Vladimir Putin has created new facts in Syria. Even before the more overt Russian intervention in the fall of 2015, the United States had been trying to work with the Russians to defuse the war and put it on a path to a resolution.

Little on the ground has emerged from these efforts. Yet, given the impact of the conflict in the Middle East and the reality that it has created a humanitarian catastrophe, the United States should continue exploring what it can do to stop the war. Indeed, no strategy for defeating, much less discrediting, ISIS is possible without doing so—or at least without ending the war between the Syrian regime and the opposition exclusive of ISIS. Nothing has done more to foster recruitment for ISIS than the Bashar al-Assad regime's brutal war against civilian populations in the areas of the country that opposition groups control. From the use of barrel bombs to the attacks on hospitals, to the effort to choke off food supplies to rebel-controlled areas, the onslaught of the regime has served the interests of ISIS and its ability to appeal to Sunni Muslims—who have seen very little done to protect Sunnis from Assad's ongoing assault.

While Iran may have been instrumental in shoring up Assad, the Russians have come to play a critical role that may be even more meaningful to Assad's survival. That gives the Russians leverage over both Assad and the Iranians in Syria.

Are they willing to use it to end this conflict? Will they work with the Americans to do so? To answer these

questions, we need to open the aperture wider and take a broader look at Putin's motivations and how we might think about them.

Putin is intent upon restoring Russian national pride and honor. For someone who declared the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century," it should come as no surprise that he is driven by the need to reestablish Russia's status as a superpower on par with the United States.⁶⁷ He has spoken frequently about the destabilizing consequences of the "unipolar" world—a world in which the United States acted as if it were "one master, one sovereign."⁶⁸ A world in which, in Putin's eyes, Washington made the rules. Russian weakness made that possible, and he has acted to change both the reality of Russian weakness and the American ability to shape the rules or call the shots internationally.

Recall that in 1971, Andrei Gromyko, then Foreign Minister of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), declared that no problem anywhere in the world could be settled without the Soviet Union.

Putin would like Russia to be seen in comparable terms. When Gromyko made this declaration, it was not viewed favorably in Washington. Henry Kissinger might have promoted détente, but it was to regulate superpower competition and make it predictable and stable. It was not to make the Soviets an arbiter on all global and regional issues. Today, one might ask whether we should view Putin differently—should we be concerned about Putin's Russia becoming a global arbiter?

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67 John Gray, "A whiff of the bad old days," *Globe and Mail*, March 13, 2009, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/a-whiff-of-the-bad-old-days/article723515/>.

68 Vladimir Putin, "Unilateral force has nothing to do with global democracy," *Guardian*, February 12, 2007, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/feb/13/comment.russia>.



All that remains after a devastating five-year conflict in Taftanaz, Syria, in January 2013. *Photo credit: IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation/Flickr.*

Former World Bank President Robert Zoellick once spoke about having the Chinese become global stakeholders. Gaining from the international system, they should help to uphold the rules of that system and help preserve it. Some may argue that Putin wants to challenge that system more than preserve it. Certainly, his actions in the “frozen conflicts” in Moldova and the Caucasus, and in Crimea and Ukraine suggest as much.

Moreover, his sense of grievance toward the United States is deep-seated and driven by the perception that America, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, overstepped the bounds, exploited Russian weakness, fostered the color revolutions, and stoked global tensions and instability, in Putin’s words, by “unilateral and frequently illegitimate actions.”⁶⁹ It is hard to escape the conclusion that his desire for pay-back—to show that the Russians are winning and the Americans losing—should give us pause about Russia being an international arbiter. Still, we have seen Putin’s readiness to cooperate with the United States on issues such as the Iranian nuclear program,

where Moscow and Washington unmistakably shared interests.

Fighting terrorism is one such issue where collaboration is both desirable and necessary. Russia has been the victim of Islamist terror, and Putin has been outspoken about the need for a collective effort to fight it, calling for a grand alliance against terrorism in his speech to the UN General Assembly this past fall. Later, at the Valdai conference, he spoke of terrorists being “an enemy of civilization and world culture,” saying that “we should not break down terrorists into moderate and immoderate ones.”⁷⁰ Similarly, in his presidential address on December 3, 2015, he declared that “we must stop our debates and forget our differences to build a common antiterrorist front. . . . Every civilized country must contribute to the fight against terrorism, reaffirming their solidarity, not in word but in deed.”⁷¹ He added that “There must be no double standards. No contacts with terrorist organizations.”⁷²

69 Vladimir Putin, Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, President of Russia Official Website, February 10, 2007, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2007/02/10/0138_type82912type82914type82917type84779_118123.

70 Kremlin, “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club: Vladimir Putin took part in the final plenary session of the 12th annual meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,” October 22, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50548>.

71 Vladimir Putin, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” Kremlin, December 3, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50864>.

72 Ibid.

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His words on fighting terror are reassuring. Unfortunately, in his December 3 speech, they were also clearly aimed at Turkey. And his calling for no distinctions between moderate and immoderate terrorists was his way of criticizing the United States for backing certain opposition groups in Syria. Even more to the point, it is hard to take his words at face value, especially about no contact with terror organizations, when Russia is partnering with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah in Syria; both treat terror as an instrument of their policy, with Hezbollah literally being an inventor of suicide bombings in Lebanon more than thirty years ago. Today, the Russian air force is flying air cover for both of them in Syria.

So even on terror, Washington and Moscow do not agree on definitions, much less on whom to treat as partners. But does that rule out cooperation on Syria? Indeed, if the Americans are to affect the Syrian civil war, it is hard to do so without taking the Russians into account and seeing whether cooperation could alleviate the conflict. Clearly, the Obama administration is convinced that collaboration is necessary. More importantly, they believe it will be productive. Following his meeting with Putin at the Paris summit on climate, President Obama was hopeful that we would be able to cooperate diplomatically with the Russians on Syria and suggested that Putin was moving in the right direction. While acknowledging that Putin would not soon alter his posture of support for Assad or target only ISIS, the President argued that the lessons of Afghanistan and the logic of quagmire would bring Putin around to where he needed to be.

Perhaps because he has been working closely with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on the Vienna diplomatic process, US Secretary of State John Kerry has been much more positive about collaboration with the Russians, emphasizing after Vienna that they had been cooperative. On December 15, after his meetings with Putin and Lavrov in Moscow, Kerry said, "This was a productive day. Our discussions were constructive."⁷³ He said although the United States and Russia don't see eye to eye on every aspect of Syria, "we see Syria fundamentally similarly. We want the same outcomes. We see the same dangers. We understand the same challenges. And we believe that a united, nonsectarian Syria represents the future, and we also agreed that it is a future without Daesh and we're committed to try to continue to destroy Daesh."⁷⁴

If Obama and Kerry are right about being able to collaborate with the Russians on Syria, so much the better. Unfortunately, that seems doubtful unless the United States does more to raise the costs to Russia of its current posture. The Russians probably do not want the same outcome or see the challenges the same way. Putin's priorities are different. He has much more of a zero-sum approach. He wants an outcome in which Russia's influence in Syria is maintained and its military presence is preserved—and now with probably more than just a naval facility at Tartus. He wants the appearance unmistakably that Russia shaped the outcome and he wants to parlay Russia's role as the pivotal arbiter in Syria into a much more central role of influence in the region as a whole. Putin would like Middle East leaders to see that all roads run through Moscow if they want their needs and concerns to be addressed—and he is not hesitant to draw the contrast of Russia's behavior with America's. Indeed, Russia's approach to Arab leaders follows the general line that "you may not like our support for Assad but we stand by our friends, unlike the Americans."

Of course, Putin would like to minimize the costs of his intervention, and Russian complaints about the ineptitude of the Syrian forces are mounting. Having a diplomatic process that meets Russian objectives is surely something that Putin favors. Look at Russian behavior over time. In 2012, they joined the United States in adopting the Geneva principles, which called for a transition in Syria—but never agreed that this required Assad to go. When talks were held in December 2013 and January 2014, ostensibly to begin using those principles to try to create a new reality in Syria, Assad's representatives stonewalled in the meetings, and the Russians put no apparent pressure on the Syrian regime. On the contrary, Russian support for Assad remained strong, and when the regime began to suffer setbacks in the summer of 2015, Putin made a decision to militarily intervene—clearly coordinating in advance with the Iranians during General Qassem Suleimani's trip to Moscow after the completion of the nuclear deal with Iran. The Russians planned and choreographed their intervention with the Iranians, but did not let Washington know about their military plans.

Russia's military operations have been designed not just to shore up the regime, but also to work with the Iranians, Hezbollah, and other Shia militias, to change the balance of power on the ground. If there were going to be a diplomatic process, the Russians were going to alter the landscape so that the diplomacy would have to reflect this. Notwithstanding their claims to be attacking ISIS, the Russians have continued to attack primarily the non-ISIS opposition. Indeed,

⁷³ "Press Availability with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov," US Department of State, December 15, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2015/12/250680.htm>.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

even after ISIS claimed responsibility for the terrorist bombing of the Russian airliner over the Sinai—and Putin said those who were responsible would pay a terrible price—most of the Russian attacks continue to be against non-ISIS groups: Kerry publicly said on December 18, 2015 that 80 percent of the targets the Russians are hitting are non-ISIS. If anything, it appears that the Russians continue to share Assad's strategy of trying to turn the conflict into a choice between Assad or ISIS. (Ironically, ISIS shares that strategy, believing the polarization will force Muslims to choose them.)

In one other way, the Russians also seem to have embraced the Assad strategy: their bombing in northern Syria almost seems designed to depopulate areas where the rebels are in control—or at least add to the human misery there to build pressure on the opposition and drive up the refugee flow. Unfortunately, the same day that Kerry was in Moscow, there were reports that the Russians were bombing hospitals, grain silos, and water treatment plants, and the UN Humanitarian Coordinating Committee called attention to a growing humanitarian crisis because Russian bombing was hitting civilians and disrupting aid flows.

Taken together, there is a pattern of Russian behavior that suggests that, at least for now, they are not serious about collaborating with the United States on Syria for an agreed outcome. That could change. In fact, building Russia's leverage in Syria to show he could influence Assad at a time of his choosing could be what Putin has in mind for at least two reasons: first, he realizes that he cannot produce an outcome by himself in Syria, given the multiplicity of actors, but he wants to improve his negotiating position for later. Second, he wants the Europeans to see he is the key to fixing their Syria problem and wants to use this to get them to walk back the sanctions on Ukraine. Although the Europeans voted to continue the sanctions for another six months, fissures are emerging among EU members and Putin, no doubt, sees the possible benefits on Ukraine.

In other words, the administration could be right about collaboration with the Russians but they are probably not correct now, nor will they be on the matter of common goals absent pressure from Washington to alter Putin's calculus.

INDICATORS THAT THE ADMINISTRATION IS RIGHT ON PUTIN

We must hope that Obama and Kerry are right that collaboration is possible now, and that the Vienna process that Kerry has generated through his energetic efforts can work, and in a way that ameliorates the humanitarian catastrophe that the Syrian civil war has produced. Certainly, the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2254, which calls for a ceasefire and which Kerry orchestrated, is a promising sign. But the proof is in its implementation, not its adoption. Will the Russians act to implement it? This will be an early test as to whether the Russians are actually serious about collaborating with the United States on Syria in a meaningful way.

As Kerry has said, no negotiating process is possible without a ceasefire, which would quickly produce a huge change in Syria. If the Russians are prepared to impose on Assad both a ceasefire and the end of the starvation sieges on the territories controlled by opposition groups, the Turks, Saudis, and Qataris could more easily press those in the opposition to take the Vienna process seriously. In addition, among the opposition, those groups more willing to negotiate will gain greater weight, particularly as the belief that a transition is possible through peaceful means may finally take hold. As importantly, if the sieges stop and we finally see humanitarian corridors open up for provision of relief and humanitarian assistance, we are likely to see a significant reduction in the flow of refugees.

But none of this will happen if the Russians don't use their leverage now on Assad. And the fact is that Assad has no interest in a real ceasefire, opening humanitarian corridors, or changing his tactics. Given the scope of Russia's current military activity, however, Assad is in no position to reject the Russians if they insist that he stop firing and end the sieges. Thus, it should soon become clear whether collaboration can work based on the administration's strategy. In essence, the Russians have to make sure the Syrians stop the barrel bombs and permit humanitarian corridors to be opened up for the provision of food and medicine to besieged areas.

There is a pattern of Russian behavior that suggests that, at least for now, they are not serious about collaborating with the United States on Syria for an agreed outcome.

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If the Russians make this happen, while the opposition groups exclusive of ISIS and the al-Nusra Front are also observing a ceasefire, Syria will not be on the brink of political settlement—after all, neither the question of Assad going nor the forging of a political consensus will be in the offing—but at least a diplomatic process can begin and the suffering can be alleviated.

Unfortunately, the Russians are not likely to meet either of these tests—imposing on Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah a real ceasefire rather than a temporary one (which would simply give them time to retool), and permitting humanitarian corridors to be established. If they fail to meet these tests, the administration is going to face a severe challenge.

WHAT TO DO IF THE RUSSIANS FAIL THE TESTS?

Obama and Kerry have built a strategy toward ISIS that is based on ratcheting up US attacks against it in both Iraq and Syria. The Vienna process is the corollary to those military steps. It is essential not just to deal with a humanitarian catastrophe, but also to get the Sunni states and tribes to join in the fight against ISIS. There is no defeat of ISIS without Sunni forces on the ground—and there can be no discrediting of ISIS without the Sunnis delegitimizing them. But if the Russians fail the tests, the Sunnis won't join what appears to be the onslaught against the Sunnis in Syria—the natural byproduct of the United States ratcheting up attacks against ISIS as the Russians continue to hit the non-ISIS Sunni groups in Syria. In that case, the administration's strategy will have little or no prospect of success, and calling on Sunnis to do more will largely fall on deaf ears. Washington will inevitably have to do more militarily to convince the Sunni states to play the role that they must—unless Russia alters its posture.

Here it is worth making the point that a failure of the Russians to meet these tests, meaning they are not acting to implement UN Security Resolution 2254, need not mean there is no possibility of getting them to do what is necessary. It just means that it will take leverage to move them.

Putin has always been moved by the logic of leverage, not the logic of argument. The problem with the administration's approach is that there is little leverage in it. The United States is not applying any leverage either because Washington fears Putin's response or because it requires the administration to do more—and instead is hoping that the reality of Syria will impose itself on Putin. It has not so far.

The administration does have the potential for significant leverage, but it requires presenting Putin

with a choice—a choice in which he understands clearly that the United States prefers cooperation with him but if he can't or won't do his part in implementing 2254, he leaves Washington no alternative but to adopt a different posture—namely moving to create a safe haven along the Turkey-Syria border area.

Obama ought to explain his choices—and, thus, also Putin's, by conveying something like the following:

We are ready to cooperate fully with you on getting UNSC Resolution 2254 implemented and will do our part—meaning we will press the Turks, Saudis, and Qataris hard in private and in public to lean on the opposition groups they are supporting to stop firing and to make it clear to them that these groups risk their support—and ours—if they will not abide by the ceasefire. But this depends on Russia doing its part as well. We will have no success and we will make no effort to produce a ceasefire on the part of the non-ISIS opposition, if you do not prevail on Assad and the Iranians to stop firing and to permit humanitarian assistance to go through. On this path, we both gain. If you cannot do your part, you will leave me with no choice but to adopt a different posture, especially because I understand that the strategy toward ISIS cannot work unless we change the reality in Syria and demonstrate that we are now protecting Sunnis. Only in this way do we have a chance to draw the Sunni states and tribes into the fight against ISIS. Thus, if there is no real ceasefire and no opening of humanitarian corridors, I will know the Vienna process will not work at this point, and I will have to do something I have resisted until now—produce a safe haven. That has risks for both of us and it is not my preference, but it will staunch the refugee flow, it will allow us to show we will act to protect Sunnis, and it will allow us to do more to unify the opposition on Syrian soil—and, in time, that is what it will take to make the Vienna process more credible.

Why might this affect Putin? Essentially, because the last thing he wants is the establishment of a safe haven. Stopping the refugee flow takes the pressure off the Europeans and reduces their need to have Putin fix the Syria problem, with all this might mean for trade-offs on Ukraine. And promising to create greater coherence and unity among the opposition threatens to raise the cost to Putin of supporting Assad. Finally, closing off areas to Russian operations limits Russian leverage on the conflict. To be sure, it increases the risk of confrontation between US and European air forces with Russian ones—and, no doubt, Putin would threaten the West and tell it to stay out of Syrian air space. But he does not own it, and both



A glance into the life of a Syrian refugee family in Osmaniye refugee camp, Turkey, one of the many refugee camps on the Turkish-Syrian border. *Photo credit: European Parliament/Flickr.*

sides would have to work out the rules on where they would operate in order to avoid conflict.

A safe haven is not risk-free, and it is more difficult to create than before the Russian military intervention in Syria. Also, it is not something Obama could threaten unless he were actually prepared to act on it. Ironically, his readiness to do it could be used to get the Europeans, Turks, Saudis, Qataris, Emiratis, and Jordanians to share the burden and fulfill their responsibilities in implementing it: In return for helping to enforce a no-fly area, Washington would ask the Europeans, who would gain from stanching the refugee flow, to commit their air forces as well to the no-fly zone; it would ask the Turks who now have 2.2 million refugees, the Jordanians, and perhaps the French to provide ground forces to police the zone; it would ask the Saudis, Qataris, and Emiratis to finance the infrastructure for the refugees and support training for the opposition groups in the zone; and it would insist that all material support for the opposition go through one channel—support and assistance that could be conditioned on opposition groups cohering and accepting key principles for any settlement.

The fact that Turkey and others have clamored for a safe zone would make the President's readiness to adopt it—if Putin is not responsive—more believable.

Interestingly, the President's need to have a strategy that is more likely to succeed against ISIS, particularly given the American public's disquiet now, might be more convincing to Putin. In effect, the President would be saying after Paris and San Bernardino, "I have to know that we have more of a chance to involve the Sunnis in the war against ISIS. Do your part to implement the ceasefire and produce the humanitarian corridors and we are in a different place. Don't do it and I will have to take steps that I have resisted until now."

There are no guarantees with Putin or Syria at this point. But half-measures have failed to alter the reality and have left Washington with diminishing options. If the administration is going to affect Putin at this juncture, he is going to have to believe that he is going to pay a meaningful price for not responding. Obama won't be threatening as much as he will be offering a choice—indeed, an alternative that does not put Putin in a corner or deny him a face-saving way to proceed. After all, the Russians supported UNSC Resolution 2254; they simply have to be willing to enforce it.

Ambassador Dennis Ross is a Counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a former Special Assistant to President Obama, National Security Council Senior Director, and Special Adviser to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

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