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# Putin's Syrian Gambit: Sharper Elbows, Bigger Footprint, Stickier Wicket

by John W. Parker



Center for Strategic Research  
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**Cover:** Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier, August, 2012  
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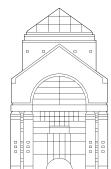


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By John W. Parker

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## **Executive Summary**

Thanks in large part to Russia's military intervention, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's fortunes have made a remarkable recovery since May/June 2015. Russia, together with the Lebanese Hizballah, Iran, and Iranian-organized Shia militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and elsewhere, has succeeded in averting Asad's military defeat. What Russian president Vladimir Putin has accomplished in Syria is important for American national security interests and policy in the region because it frames some of the hard choices Washington must now make.

Russia has profited from a hard core of Alawite and Christian support for Asad inside Syria. At the same time, U.S. reluctance to become militarily involved in Syria facilitated the move of Russian forces into the country. Russia also benefited from the disunity among the diverse opposition to Asad and their external patrons. While Saudi Arabia and Turkey were both early proponents of ousting Asad, Saudi Arabia is now more focused on defeating Houthi rebels in Yemen, and Turkey on fighting Kurdish separatist forces in northern Syria. In return for help from Putin in resolving its Kurdish problem, Turkey in 2016 helped Putin resolve Russia's Aleppo problem.

As President Donald Trump considers and implements a way forward on working with Russia in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and toward peace in Syria, events of the past several years underscore several fundamental constraints under which Putin will be operating and some challenges that have been overstated.

First, Russia will find it hard to deliver Asad's agreement to any political arrangement that requires him to step aside to bring the conflict to an end. Asad plays Russia off against Iran and the Lebanese Hizballah, placing them all on the same level and extending no preference to Putin for Russia's contribution to his survival.

Second, Tehran will not be keen to see its leverage in Damascus diminish and that of Moscow grow. Tehran will support Asad in his resistance to any Russian pressure that would impact what Tehran sees as its existential interests in Syria as a vital link in Iran's land bridge to the Lebanese Hizballah.

Third, while working with Iran militarily in Syria, Russia has successfully pursued engagement with most major Sunni powers in the Middle East, most interestingly Saudi Arabia, as well as with Israel. However unpopular on "the street," Putin and Gulf Sunni royals appear to have no complexes about dealing with each other.

Fourth, Putin does not want Syria to be a "negative" issue going into the next Russian presidential elections, scheduled for March 2018. This may be the major reason he has wanted

to “solve” Aleppo so quickly in 2016 and pivot again to peacemaking efforts more prominence. Cooperation with the Trump administration and renewed American treatment of Russia as a “respected equal” would make Syria a more manageable electoral issue for Putin.

As Washington continues to formulate and fine-tune a new approach to fighting ISIS and terrorism under the Trump administration, this study makes the following policy recommendations. First, the United States must cast aside sentiment and strictly prioritize its objectives and preferred or acceptable outcomes.

Second, the United States should work toward a Syria that remains unified even as the American fight against ISIS benefits from Syrian Kurdish military prowess. The Kurds should be part of the mix in political negotiations going forward but only in the context of a unified Syria at the end of the process.

Third, the United States should explore the military pros and cons of more robust cooperation with Russia in Syria, without conceding anything in advance on Asad’s future or Iran’s place in the region. As it did on April 7, 2017, in response to Damascus’s sarin gas attack on Khan Shaykhun, the United States needs to be prepared selectively and judiciously to strike at Syrian regime forces from time to time to inhibit their attacks on nonterrorist opposition fighters and civilian populations.

Fourth, Washington should work quietly with Moscow toward diminishing Iranian leverage in Syria and the region. That said, while Moscow probably hopes that its weight in Syria will increase over time at Iran’s expense, Russia has little interest in sharing its influence gains in Syria with the United States.

Finally, with or without Russia, the United States should engage militarily in Syria more robustly. Besides being necessary to fight ISIS more effectively, this will also help reverse the view that began to take hold in the region during the Barack Obama administration that the United States is a declining power, and encourage regional capitals to rebalance their relations with Moscow.

This paper is based on information that was current as of June 6, 2017.

## Introduction

This is not an exhaustive narrative of Russia's military intervention in Syria. It is instead a fresh look at the motivations and timing of the major inflection points in Russian decisionmaking from spring 2015 to early 2017 that have resulted in a fundamental reorientation of Russia's posture in Syria and the Middle East. These in turn have impacted U.S. national security interests and policy choices going forward in the region.

In mid-2012, Russia appeared to be on the brink of losing its last toehold in Syria. Because Russia's subsequent efforts to reverse this trend turned out better than even Moscow expected, President Vladimir Putin started to think bigger in Syria. With its military intervention in Syria, Russia began to be viewed as the rising power and the United States as the waning influence in the region.

In dealing with the fallout of the Arab Spring for Russian interests, Putin did not pursue a long-term strategy beginning in 2011–2012, but rather took one tactical step after another that together eventually led Russia to where it is now in the Middle East. The north star of Putin's policy in Syria has been the pursuit of at least the appearance of equality with the United States, and American acknowledgment of Russian interests and parity on the world stage.

In the several years before the events examined in the present work, Putin had already benefited domestically, regionally, and internationally from the West's accumulated intervention fatigue and mistakes in dealing with the evolution of the Arab Spring. Putin thus owed as much to American reluctance to do more militarily against Asad as to skilled Russian regional diplomacy. What was widely regarded as American passivity surprised, angered, and disappointed many capitals in the Arab world, and Putin's stature in the region steadily grew.

## Rising Threat

Russian perceptions and attitudes toward the Arab Spring have changed dramatically over the last 6 years. In visits to Moscow in February and July 2011, this author found the Russian reaction to the upheavals in the Middle East to be passive and bordering on desultory.<sup>1</sup> This attitude changed dramatically by February 2012, when I next visited Moscow.

Putin had bitterly and publicly criticized the murder of Libyan president Muammar Qaddafi in October 2011. As he ran to return to the presidency after serving a term as prime minister, Putin defiantly vowed that there would be no repeat of the "Libyan scenario." Russia would resist international pressure to oust Syrian president Bashar al-Assad from power. Syria had become the venue of the hour for Russia to demonstrate that it was still a great power and

for Putin to present himself as a strong leader defending not only Russia's but also other states' sovereignty and independence against foreign interference.

As the conflict in Syria grew in intensity, Russian students of the region had a deep appreciation of the core support for President Asad and of his potential staying power.<sup>2</sup> They also viewed the opposition as fractious, bound to radicalize, bent on ousting Asad, but having no clear—much less unified—agenda for Syria after that. They would be proved right on all counts.<sup>3</sup>

The Russian perspective was one of amazement that the United States and the West were allowing Saudi Arabia and Qatar to drag them into the conflict, essentially doing their dirty work for them. Russians saw this as a clear case of the tail wagging the dog and a reprise of earlier Saudi tactics against Moscow in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Bosnia. Experts in Moscow forecast chaos not only for Syria but also for the entire region should the opposition succeed in ousting Asad.

Still, my contacts in Moscow were largely resigned in 2012 to Russia's exit from its last foothold in the Middle East—Syria—and to what then seemed would be Asad's inevitable downfall. Russia's only hope was that these processes would happen as slowly as possible so as to postpone and perhaps soften the inevitable chaos that would follow.<sup>4</sup>

### **Chechen Specter**

The early involvement of Chechen fighters in the opposition to Asad in mid-2012 weighed heavily on the Russian perspective. Rustam Gelayev, the son of well-known Chechen commander Ruslan Gelayev, was killed in action in Aleppo in August 2012. His death was widely publicized and greeted in Russia, but in the North Caucasus it served to spur Chechen enlistments in the anti-Asad cause.<sup>5</sup>

Some Russian generals who would fight in Syria had earlier fought in the second Chechen war and remained haunted by that experience. It resembled Syria in the destabilizing effects of foreign sponsors and the difficulties and costs of controlling the conflict. This earlier Chechen experience vividly colored and contributed to the Russian authorities' reaction to Syria.<sup>6</sup>

Many Russians viewed the Middle East as a source of extremist Muslim security threats to Russia and its former Soviet neighbors in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and Putin would come to regard the Asad regime's longevity as critical to keeping those threats bottled up as long as possible far south of Russia's borders. It was not for nothing that Russia's official Foreign Policy Concept underscored the need to keep Syria whole.<sup>7</sup>

For Russia, Syria would become not just a great power game, although that was clearly part of it. Overshadowing that aspect was the visceral perception in Moscow that there would

be only bad repercussions for Russia if Syria collapsed.<sup>8</sup> As the Russian air campaign got off the ground in September 2015, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov would comment that “nobody’s really heard about the moderate opposition.”<sup>9</sup>

In an interview on the decision to intervene in Syria, Putin would stress that he had no intention of committing Russia to taking sides in Sunni-Shia sectarian feuds in Syria or the region.<sup>10</sup> No wonder; all but 3 million of Russia’s 15 to 20 million Muslims are Sunni. Committing exclusively to a pro-Shia coalition led by Iran against the interests of assorted Sunni powers in the Middle East would risk provoking Sunni sectarian discontent at home. It would also stimulate sympathy among Russia’s Muslims for Sunni opposition forces in Syria, even the extremist ISIS.<sup>11</sup>

In announcing the decision to intervene, Putin would assert that the only way to fight international terrorists creating chaos in Syria and the region was to “take the initiative and fight and destroy the terrorists in the territory they have already captured rather than waiting for them to arrive on our soil.” ISIS terrorists had declared Russia their enemy, and were they to succeed in Syria, they would “inevitably return to their own countries, and this includes Russia.”<sup>12</sup> By mid-2015, according to the Russian Security Service, some 7,000 of the 30,000 foreign fighters in ISIS were natives of Russia and other former Soviet states.<sup>13</sup>

Some experts would draw analogies between Russia’s armed intervention against Islamic terrorism in Syria and Soviet intervention in late 1936 against fascist forces in the Spanish civil war. In both cases, argued several analysts with military backgrounds, it was better to carry the battle against the rising menace to “distant shores” than wait for it to threaten closer to home or even in the heartland. Even if “big Syria” failed, Russia could always fall back to the “proto-state of Alawistan” and put it under its “umbrella.”<sup>14</sup>

Looking back, another expert in Moscow would argue that it was important for Russia to protect Asad because thousands of militants from the former Soviet Union were fighting in Syria. Radical Islamist groups already dominated the moderate opposition in 2012, so even early on it was already too late for a peaceful transition. Now, the air campaign in Syria that began in September 2015 was a golden opportunity to kill off extremists from the former Soviet Union efficiently and prevent them from returning home.

Syria was an opportune killing field, this analyst explained bluntly. It was efficient. It saved money and resources. Moreover, Asad’s defeat would lead to a surge in Sunni radicalism in Syria and around the world. The massacre of Shias and Christians would turn Syria into a mono-Sunni state allied to Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Russia had to stop the chain of revolutions created by Saudi Arabia and supported by the West.<sup>15</sup>

## Early Engagement

Russia began providing diplomatic protection to the Asad regime in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2011 and military supplies via the naval so-called Syrian Express in 2012. Iranian and Lebanese Hizballah forces, meanwhile, began to fight on the ground in Syria by fall 2012 and around the same time began to train pro-Asad militias to do the same.

Besides vetoing draft resolutions on Syria in the UNSC in October 2011 and February and July 2012,<sup>16</sup> Russia in 2012 began to send a steady flow of basic military supplies, including ammunition and infantry weapons, to the Syrian armed forces. The Russian Black Sea fleet had around seven large *Tapir*-class landing ships each making around 10 trips to Syria each year. The ships, rather old and displacing only around 4,000 tons, were loaded in Novorossiysk and then sailed from Crimea through the Bosphorus to the port of Latakia in Syria. The shipments were mostly from military reserve stocks and thus put little strain on Russia's weapons industry. Russian pundits and analysts began to refer to this constant ship traffic as the "Syrian Express."<sup>17</sup>

Active Hizballah and Iranian involvement on the ground in support of the Syrian government began by early fall 2012. Rumors of the arrival of Iranian and Lebanese Hizballah forces started in September 2011. A year later, on September 16, 2012, the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), General Mohammed Ali Jafari, conceded publicly that IRGC Quds Force specialists were in Syria. The next month, the first Hizballah casualty in Syria was confirmed, and 13 Hizballah fighters were taken prisoner by the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA).<sup>18</sup>

Beginning in mid-2012, IRGC and Quds Force officers trained pro-Asad regime protection militias centralized in a National Defense Force (NDF).<sup>19</sup> In June 2013, after the Asad regime had faced an "existential threat" over the winter of 2012/2013, Hizballah and the Iranian-trained NDF played key roles in recapturing strategically placed al-Qusayr.<sup>20</sup>

In winter 2014/2015, newly recruited Shia militias backed by Iran, with some linked to movements in Iraq, arrived by the planeload in Syria from "Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Yemen, Lebanon, and elsewhere."<sup>21</sup> In January–February 2015, Iran and Hizballah forces commanded and, together with foreign Shia militias, fought key battles, with Syrian regime forces relegated—to their discomfort—to support roles.<sup>22</sup>

IRGC Quds Force commander General Qassem Soleimani, coordinator of Iranian military activities in Iraq and Syria, reportedly—though disputably—visited Moscow July 24–26, 2015, for consultations over the situation in Syria.<sup>23</sup> Some have posited that the Iranians lobbied and convinced Russia at this time to intervene in Syria.<sup>24</sup> By the time Soleimani purportedly visited

Moscow, however, the Syrian Express had already accelerated, Putin had begun laying the diplomatic cover for military intervention, and Asad within days justified it—as well as Iranian and Hizballah military assistance—with a belated public admission of Syrian army personnel and desertion problems.<sup>25</sup>

Whatever coordination took place between Soleimani and Russian military-political authorities in summer 2015, it more likely than not focused on how best to use the Russian air assets that would soon be based at Hmeimim airbase in Syria. As we shall see, this was a secret development that would not be announced for several months but that would affect the sequencing of a rumored forthcoming surge of Iranian-sponsored forces into Syria.<sup>26</sup>

### **Fractured Opposition**

From the beginning, the Russians benefited from a strong core of supporters for Asad, including Alawites and Christians. For the latter, Moscow expressed not only affinity but also a protective interest.<sup>27</sup>

The opposition to the Asad regime, meanwhile, expanded over the years and increasingly acquired arms. By late 2015, according to one estimate, it numbered some 150,000 insurgents in 1,500 operationally distinct organizations.<sup>28</sup>

However, the failure of the Syrian opposition to act cohesively, and the multiple and overlapping local conflicts that comprised the Syrian civil war and on which the anti-ISIS campaign was superimposed, aided Russia in supporting Asad. Opposition groups fought each other even as they fought the Asad regime.<sup>29</sup>

The insurgency could be roughly divided into nearly a half-dozen camps.<sup>30</sup> The first two were international jihadist groupings. One centered on Jabhat al-Nusra, an offshoot of al Qaeda's operations in Iraq officially established in Syria in January 2012.<sup>31</sup> Since the last half of 2012, most of Syria's opposition groups coordinated their efforts with Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>32</sup> In an effort to distance itself from its al Qaeda origins, Jabhat al-Nusra changed its name in 2016 to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.

The second camp revolved around ISIS. Originally the Islamic State in Iraq, ISIS also evolved from al Qaeda and expanded into Syria in April 2013. Although ISIS sought to subsume Jabhat al-Nusra under its command, the latter refused to submit.<sup>33</sup> By July 2013, ISIS relations with the broad array of other opposition organizations in Syria were not just tense but hostile,<sup>34</sup> and by February 2014, the rupture between ISIS and al Qaeda and its other offshoots in Syria was total.<sup>35</sup> On June 24, 2014, ISIS proclaimed the establishment of a caliphate spanning territories across Iraq and Syria.<sup>36</sup>

Syrian Salafists comprised a third camp. Most fought and coordinated operations with the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra. Unlike ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra embedded itself with many Syrian Salafist organizations as well as Syrian independent fighting groups, a fourth broad category of the insurgency.<sup>37</sup>

The Free Syrian Army was the best known in this fourth category. Although the FSA included officers who had defected from the Syrian army and police and was supported by Turkey, it failed to consolidate and effectively organize the various independent oppositions to the Asad regime.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, some 7.5 to 9 percent of the FSA reportedly was actually comprised of the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>39</sup> By March 2013, Syria's Salafists and the international jihadist organizations started to overshadow the FSA in fighting effectiveness.<sup>40</sup>

Cooperation with Jabhat al-Nusra tainted the reputations of more moderate Syrian insurgent groups, putting off Western governments—including the United States—who did not want to indirectly support groups working with foreign jihadist elements no matter how effectively they fought the Asad regime.<sup>41</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra's success in reaching out to Syrian Salafist and independent factions, due in part to the modest support coming from the West, would greatly complicate attempts at ceasefires in 2016 and 2017. They would exclude Jabhat al-Nusra, from which Syrian insurgents were reluctant to distance themselves, while also providing an excuse for Syrian forces to target non-Nusra opponents using their ties to Jabhat al-Nusra as a cover for breaking ceasefires.

Kurdish and Turkoman insurgent groups operating largely independently of other Syrian groups along Syria's northern borders could be considered a fifth category of the opposition. The Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the Kurdish People's Protection Forces (YPG), comprised arguably the most effective fighters in the insurgency, but they fought for Kurdish interests and not necessarily against the Asad regime or with other opposition groups.

By late 2012, the PYD-YPG was well on its way to consolidating its presence in Kurdish areas in northern Syria along the Turkish border,<sup>42</sup> and in July 2013 it announced a constitution for an autonomous "Rojava" (West Kurdistan). This was anathema not only to Turkey, which considered the PYD-YPG a terrorist organization along with its Turkish "parent," the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), but also to nearly all Syrian insurgency groups.<sup>43</sup>

Turkey opened its borders to the FSA and gave its fighters sanctuary and support on Turkish soil. By July 2012, the Turkish border was de facto open to all opposition groups fighting in Syria with the exception of the Kurds, though they with determination could also traverse it.<sup>44</sup> Turkey's interests in Syria were both to deter Kurdish autonomy and to topple Asad.

On the goal of deposing Asad, Turkey had much company in the Middle East, to include most prominently Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan. These Sunni-led states shared an aversion to Shia Iran that now extended to the Iranian-supported Asad regime. While providing extensive official and unofficial financial and military support to the Syrian opposition, however, these countries did not put their own boots on the ground in Syria until Turkey launched Operation *Euphrates Shield* on August 24, 2016, but did so then not to fight against the Asad regime but rather to push ISIS forces back from its borders and to constrain Kurdish regional autonomy.

In general, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, and Turkey over the years “continued to act independently of each other, and often in different directions and with different partners.”<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia in March–April 2015 began to focus most of its direct engagement efforts in its armed intervention in Yemen against what it saw as Iranian-supported Houthi rebels.<sup>46</sup>

### **U.S. Aversion to Escalation**

Russia in Syria also enjoyed greater freedom of action because of the Barack Obama administration’s aversion to escalation. In fact, Putin over his years in power has been able to take advantage of the regional turbulence first set in motion by President George W. Bush’s overwhelming use of military force against Saddam Hussein in Iraq and then by President Obama’s underwhelming use of force against Bashar al-Asad in Syria. Obama’s August 2013 decision in particular not to back up his chemical weapons “red line” with military action against the Asad regime for killing over 1,000 people with sarin gas in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta motivated and gave Putin the opening for his most recent round of regional activism.<sup>47</sup>

One Russian observer later speculated that Putin, after the “red line” incident, recalculated that he had to strike militarily in Syria while Obama was still in office. The United States could make any Russian armed intervention on Asad’s behalf difficult, but Putin gained confidence that Obama would not want to fight but to negotiate.<sup>48</sup> Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu would marvel that the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had 624 cruise missiles aimed at Asad regime targets in 2013 but did not use them thanks to Washington taking up Putin’s suggestion to free Syria of chemical weapons.<sup>49</sup>

The aversion to escalation in the Middle East during the Obama administration amounted to a sea change in the U.S. posture toward the region and Moscow. In October 1973, most famously, during the Yom Kippur War, the Richard Nixon administration placed all American forces around the world on DEFCON III, the highest state of peacetime readiness, after the Soviet Union suggested it might unilaterally deploy military forces to enforce a ceasefire between Egypt and Israel.<sup>50</sup>

Several days after the Russian air campaign in Syria launched on September 30, 2015, the President made clear he was persuaded that Putin's military campaign would not succeed. It would be "self-defeating" and lead only to a "quagmire." Putin, in Obama's view, would be forced to come back to a political settlement. In any case, Obama said, Syria was "not some superpower chessboard contest," and he was not going to make it "into a proxy war between the United States and Russia."<sup>51</sup>

Even after the Russian campaign began to show some signs of military success in late winter, Jeffrey Goldberg noted in the *Atlantic* that "the president's ambivalence about more-extensive engagement remained" and that for Obama, "new and direct action in Syria . . . would be a nightmare."<sup>52</sup> Ben Rhodes, assistant to President Obama and Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications and Speechwriting throughout all these events, would later state that "I profoundly do not believe that the United States could make things better in Syria by being there."<sup>53</sup>

As the Russian buildup in Syria peaked, Philip Gordon, White House coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa, and the Gulf Region from March 2013 to April 2015, wrote of the "relentless counter-escalation" that President Obama and his aides had come to expect from Russia, Iran, and Hizballah. The Russian deployment to Syria underscored for Gordon that "Russia, let alone Iran, is not going to allow the regime to fall unless and until they believe that whatever replaces it will not threaten their core interests."<sup>54</sup> It was a case of escalation dominance, Gordon would tell a think tank audience in spring 2016. Russia knew the United States would not counterescalate. And the United States could count on Russia, Iran, and Hizballah counterescalating to undermine any U.S. escalation.<sup>55</sup>

### **Palmyra Wake-Up Call**

After the earlier challenges to the Syrian regime, the victory at al-Qusayr by forces supporting Asad on June 5, 2013, produced a substantial confidence bump in Moscow. Hizballah and the Iranian-trained NDF played key roles in recapturing the strategically placed city. The success was seen as confirmation of the staying power of the Damascus regime, supported critically by Lebanese Hizballah fighters, Iranian advisors and financial support, and Russian military supplies and diplomatic blocking. As such, it was also seen as a token of success for Putin's independent, anti-Western policy on Syria, and thus also of the importance of Russia in the region.<sup>56</sup>

The subsequent spectacular wave of ISIS victories across Iraq and Syria, culminating with the capture of Palmyra in May 2015, took both Washington and Moscow by surprise.<sup>57</sup> In Iraq,

these victories included Fallujah in January 2014, Mosul and Tikrit in June 2014, and Ramadi in May 2015.<sup>58</sup>

In Syria, ISIS started displacing members of an insurgent coalition from Raqqa in August 2013. The coalition, which included the jihadists Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham, a local Salafist group, and an FSA faction, had captured the city in March 2013, but by January 2014 ISIS fully controlled Raqqa and began making it the capital of the caliphate that it proclaimed at the end of June 2014.<sup>59</sup> While losing Raqqa to ISIS, elsewhere in Syria an even grander coalition of non-ISIS insurgent groups—including core jihadists, Syrian Salafists, a group aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, and a more moderate FSA faction—captured the northern governorate capital of Idlib at the end of March 2015.<sup>60</sup>

Putin's subsequent direct military thrust into the Syrian civil war and Middle East politics would be unprecedented in the post-Soviet era, catching even some close Russian observers of the region off guard. After all, in his televised annual phone-in session just a month before the fall of Palmyra, Putin had reassured viewers across Russia that "Of course, for us there is no direct threat from ISIS."<sup>61</sup>

In Moscow, the initial impulse among some observers was to discount the impact of ISIS advances on the staying power of the Asad regime ground forces. This author was in the Russian capital May 15–21, 2015. Despite the spectacular ISIS advances that very same week, the common reaction among the Moscow experts and observers with whom this author met was confidence that whatever Asad's travails, he had survived previous low points and could be expected to outlast President Obama's stay in the White House. Russia would never put its own boots on the ground in the Middle East. But Russia had no choice but to plod on and render all necessary diplomatic and military matériel support to the Syrian regime.<sup>62</sup>

However, there were some early alarm bells. Reporting on the fall of Palmyra to ISIS, the journalists Sergey Strokan and Maksim Yusin on May 22 warned that "the threat that the regime in Damascus may fall and the country may break up is becoming increasingly more real." In taking Palmyra, they reported, ISIS had battled not other opposition forces but Syrian government forces directly. Strokan and Yusin concluded that "Asad's army, which successfully fought against moderate opposition forces in the first stage of the war, is unable to find an antidote against a far more powerful force—IS radicals—and has to retreat."<sup>63</sup>

The complacency among some Russian observers about the staying power of the Asad regime soon evidently gave way to the judgment, not publicized at the time, that it might not survive until the end of the year. Indeed, in Syria, the ISIS Palmyra campaign had "sparked panic within pro-regime circles."<sup>64</sup> Looking back on the mood a half-year later, Vladimir Yevseyev,

an expert on the region at the Moscow-based Center for Social and Political Studies, would recall that in July 2015, “the feeling was that Assad was finished, that it would be only a couple of months.”<sup>65</sup>

Anton Lavrov, another expert on Russia’s intervention in Syria, would write that by the end of summer 2015, although government troops still controlled the majority of Syria’s heavily populated areas, they were steadily giving ground on all fronts. By this time, concluded Lavrov, “The final defeat of Asad still appeared a distant, but now already unavoidable, prospect.”<sup>66</sup> Indeed, this was the sentiment among most analysts, even outside of Moscow.

In a televised address to the nation on July 27, 2015, Asad made the unusual concession that Syria’s armed forces were experiencing personnel shortages and battlefield losses. It marked a switch from earlier claims that Damascus was doing well on the battlefield to conceding problems.<sup>67</sup>

### **Saving President Asad**

The ISIS capture of Palmyra would prove a watershed for Russian policy toward Syria, but it would be months before the turning point became apparent. In Moscow, by the time of Asad’s public concession of battlefield problems, Putin had already begun to put in place the elements for a major diplomatic and military initiative in the Middle East that would eventually take many unaware. Building on Russia’s stealthy occupation and annexation of Crimea in February–March 2014, Putin was acquiring a taste for surprise.<sup>68</sup>

The immediate trigger to activate a military response was Moscow’s acute concern over Asad’s near-term security. According to President Obama, when Putin telephoned him on June 25, 2015, he left the impression that Asad was facing a dire situation and his staying power was uncertain.<sup>69</sup>

It was their first direct conversation in 4 months since Obama called Putin on February 10 to discuss Ukraine.<sup>70</sup> It was Putin who broke the ice in placing the call. As such, the contact was especially noteworthy. Not long before this, the perception in Moscow was that Putin was resigned to waiting until Obama’s successor was in the White House before trying to reengage personally with his American counterpart.<sup>71</sup>

Several weeks later, Obama reflected on the phone call and his assessment that the Russians saw the Asad regime as shaky. He told Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*:

*I was encouraged by the fact that Mr. Putin called me a couple of weeks ago and initiated the call to talk about Syria. I think they get a sense that the Assad*

*regime is losing a grip over greater and greater swaths of territory inside of Syria [to Sunni jihadist militias] and that the prospects for a [Sunni jihadist] takeover or rout of the Syrian regime is not imminent but becomes a greater and greater threat by the day. That offers us an opportunity to have a serious conversation with them.<sup>72</sup>*

In his public statements, however, in accordance with the needs of the occasion, Putin shifted and flip-flopped on the primary purpose of the air campaign whose preparations would soon be under way. He initially painted Russia's military intervention as a response to the growing threat to Russian security interests from the south: it was better to defeat ISIS and other brands of extremists and terrorists in Syria than to wait and fight them in the Russian homeland.<sup>73</sup> In an October 2015 upbeat interview, however, perhaps with an eye on Asad's secret upcoming visit to Moscow, Putin asserted that "Our only goal is to support the lawful government and create conditions for a political settlement."<sup>74</sup> Only after Asad's security had improved in spring 2016 did Putin finally more openly concede a more limited aim: "Our mission was above all to bolster Syria's statehood and support the legitimate government."<sup>75</sup>

After the direct Russian military intervention into Syria became a reality, some observers would assert that the primary motivation for Putin's forceful move into the Middle East was to divert attention from Ukraine and to force the West to negotiate with him.<sup>76</sup> It was true that Putin used the advances of ISIS as an opportunity to engage Obama and the West on both crises. But the real breakthrough on Ukraine had come earlier—just before the fall of Ramadi and Palmyra in May, and not after the start of Russia's air campaign in September—with the U.S. decision to send Secretary of State John Kerry and Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland to Sochi for talks with Lavrov and Putin on May 12, 2015.<sup>77</sup>

The Sochi meeting was an important link in what was already developing as a revived push toward a third phase of the stalled Geneva process of encouraging talks between the Syrian regime and opposition groups to resolve the civil war.<sup>78</sup> Secretary Kerry had not set foot in Russia since May 2013. Sochi was therefore an icebreaker of sorts after U.S. and European Union attempts to isolate Russia diplomatically over its military actions in Ukraine had met with mixed success.<sup>79</sup>

Financial sanctions had not proved a "silver bullet" in Western efforts under Obama to restrain Russian behavior in Ukraine, but they had had an important impact on Russia's economy. When those over Ukraine had been imposed, Moscow had thought for a brief period that it could pivot to China and the East for help. But Russian leaders soon realized they had little

alternative but to come to terms with the West over Ukraine to relieve the pressures of reduced access to Western banks.

There had indeed been a slow Russian pivot to the East, and political relations with China continued on an upswing.<sup>80</sup> But it would be many years before China could compete with Europe and the West as a credit and finance capital.<sup>81</sup> Even as Putin gave pride of place to President Xi Jinping at the May 9, 2015, World War II victory celebrations in Moscow,<sup>82</sup> he was preparing to meet with Secretary Kerry on May 12 in Sochi, and on June 25 he would resume his phone calls to President Obama. More than a year before the U.S. elections in November 2016, Moscow again appeared eager to explore what sort of accommodation might be possible with Washington, whoever the winner.

Given the challenging developments in the Middle East, it is easy to image that Putin in his June 25 phone call tried to interest Obama in expanding Russian and U.S. cooperation beyond the Iranian nuclear issue to diplomatic and military cooperation and coordination in Syria and Iraq against the common enemy ISIS, putting aside for the time being the issue of Asad's political future. This would certainly be Putin's call to the world when he addressed the United Nations (UN) General Assembly a few months later on September 28:

*What we actually propose is to be guided by common values and common interests rather than by ambitions. Relying on international law, we must join efforts to address the problems that all of us are facing, and 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.<sup>83</sup>*

After the Russian air campaign began, Vladimir Frolov, a pundit who follows Russian policy in Syria closely, argued that as far back as Putin's meeting with Kerry in Sochi, his phone calls in June and July with Obama, and his contacts with the new Saudi leadership and others in the region, Putin had been engaged in a "double game."

Secretly, elaborated Frolov, Moscow was coordinating with Tehran and Damascus on Russia's increasingly certain military intervention to save the Asad regime from defeat by Syrian opposition forces supported by the United States and Saudi Arabia and their allies. Publicly, Putin was trying to sell Washington and Riyadh on the advantages of participating with Russia and Asad in a united front against ISIS. In this, there were probably vague references—which evidently did not provoke any pushback—to the need for direct Russian efforts to increase security

in Latakia. In Frolov's opinion, however, to the very end, Russia's intervention was the main line, and all the rest was a "cover story."<sup>84</sup>

## Stealthy Response

After the ISIS capture of Palmyra, Russian decisionmakers quickly but discretely turned to devising an emergency plan to save the Asad regime. Moscow would reconfigure and reinvigorate its traditional two-track approach to the Syrian crisis. First, Moscow would push to accelerate its already evolving and much publicized new push with the United States toward a domestic political and international diplomatic solution of the Syrian conflict. Second, there would be a much more discreet ramping up of long-standing Russian military support to Damascus forces and a likely dusting off of contingency plans for direct military intervention in Syria.

The reinvigorated political track was meant to divert attention—provide *maskirovka* or deception, in Russian military parlance—from the quietly but quickly developing new military track and then, once the air campaign was launched, to gain time for it to succeed. The immediate goal of Putin's new Syrian initiative, therefore, was to slow down and if possible reverse the Asad regime's battlefield losses and thus prolong the Syrian president's political shelf life in Damascus.

For Russia, Syria now meant something vastly different than it had in 2011. Russia then had few material interests to defend in Syria and appeared to be on the verge of losing its remaining foothold in the Middle East. Russia by 2015 was developing some material interests in Syria, unlike in June 2011, when Putin scoffed at the notion. "We have no special interest there," Putin had insisted in 2011, "neither military bases nor major projects, nor billions in investment we would need to defend. Nothing."<sup>85</sup>

That was still largely the case. Russia's naval facility at Tartus remained modest, and Russian access to the airbase at Latakia would only come later. War-torn Syria was still not an attractive or practical option for Russian investment. SoyuzNefteGaz was prospecting for oil in the Mediterranean off the coast of Latakia, but the Russian company's investment was unimpressive.<sup>86</sup>

Rather, after 4 years of defending the Asad regime in the UN Security Council and 2 years of supplying its army with some of the basic necessities of warfare, Putin had accumulated enormous personal reputational interests in Syria. Internationally, it was a venue in which Putin had repeatedly asserted Russia's right to an independent foreign policy and role as a great power. Domestically, Syria helped keep Putin's approval ratings high.<sup>87</sup>

Turning first to the military requirements of Putin's initiative to defend Russia's interests in Syria, this meant an immediate acceleration of shipments of Russian military supplies to

Damascus forces via the Bosphorus on Russian navy large landing ships—that is, the so-called Syrian Express.

The chronology of military supply logistics and diplomatic initiatives placed the timing of the decision to intervene in Syria clearly in the context of the shock in Moscow in May 2015 over the serious Asad regime reversals on the battlefield. Beginning in June 2015, there was arguably a sustained increase in the frequency of Syrian Express naval shuttle deliveries through the Bosphorus.<sup>88</sup>

In addition, shielded by the publicity given its diplomatic efforts and supported by its Syrian Express supply chain, Moscow began quietly to think through and put in place a military initiative unprecedented in the post-Soviet period. This would avoid putting boots on the ground while projecting power abroad to address what Damascus most needed: an expeditionary air contingent based in Syria to mount an air campaign in support of Asad regime ground forces.

Syrian forces were capable and battle hardened but were now worn out and depleted by 4 years of constant fighting. For Moscow, a direct military intervention in the Middle East with Russia's own equipment and forces to reverse the tide on the battlefield meant going well beyond the military advisors and supplies that Moscow had sent to various regimes in the region during Soviet times.<sup>89</sup>

With much at stake, Moscow reacted decisively and promptly to the major ISIS victories in May and launched its air operation in Syria within months, on September 30. A week after the air campaign began, an anonymous official asserted that planning for an expanded military presence in Latakia and Tartus to support an air campaign had started more than 4 to 6 months earlier, some time in the April–June period.<sup>90</sup>

### **Kramnik's Brainstorm**

Within weeks of the spectacular ISIS victories in Syria and Iraq, the outline for a precedent-breaking new Russian military approach to the conflict raging in both countries surfaced on the Russian Internet daily Lenta.ru but went largely unnoticed abroad. This was a tightly argued and detailed, forward-looking analysis by military affairs reporter Ilya Kramnik.<sup>91</sup>

Reading Kramnik's piece, it was easy to jump to the conclusion that Russia's military advisors were reporting a dire situation in both countries (as had the journalists Strokan and Yusin after the fall of Palmyra). Planners in Moscow were already evidently thinking outside the box, it seemed, and preparing a new toolkit to address what they clearly saw as a rising threat to Russia's own security.

Kramnik, however, would tell this author 2 years later that his Lenta.ru article was not inspired by leaks from the Defense Ministry over what was afoot. It was instead the result of brainstorming sessions with friends in Moscow in May–June 2015 that were focused on what more Russia could do—beyond sending supplies to Damascus via the Syrian Express naval shuttle—to help the struggling Asad regime.<sup>92</sup>

Nevertheless, earlier low points for the Asad regime would have certainly prompted the Defense Ministry and General Staff in Moscow to develop contingency planning for an escalating Syrian crisis. Kramnik would report a year later that Moscow in fact began to prepare for its military intervention in Syria in spring 2015. During its planning stages, the codename for the operation was Caucasus-3.<sup>93</sup>

According to Kramnik in his June 2015 article, Tehran early that month had already announced plans to deploy an armed IRGC contingent of up to 15,000 troops to Syria. These fighters, though in much reduced numbers, would not materialize until early September, but this was a logical Iranian response and IRGC soldiers were highly motivated, in Kramnik's view.<sup>94</sup> The actual IRGC “surge” into Syria would coincide with Russia's maturing preparations for the air campaign it launched on September 30. The augmented Iranian force and Iranian-sponsored multinational militias consisted of some 2,300 to 2,500 advisors and fighters for a total in-country presence of around 3,000.<sup>95</sup>

However, Iran had limited air support capacity to work with Syrian, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iranian-coordinated Iraqi, Pakistani, and Afghani militias and its own troops on the ground. This would not solve the problem of the Asad regime's stunning reverses, as well as those in Baghdad, or of the growing threat to Russia by ISIS in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and even inside Russia itself. Russia had to do something more than simply continuing to supply Damascus and Baghdad with ammunition and other military supplies.

Kramnik, in June 2015 in Lenta.ru, thus outlined several options whose specifics in retrospect seemed a developing blueprint for much of what the Russian Aerospace Forces (so named since August 1, 2015) would eventually do in Syria: a Russian air campaign in support of Syrian and Iranian ground forces against mainly ISIS but also “moderate” opposition forces. Modernized Su-24M2 and new Su-34 frontal aviation bombers supported by Il-78M tankers, as well as long-range aviation bombers, could launch sorties from airfields in southern Russia but also possibly from Iran, Egypt, and Cyprus. Ships and submarines in the Caspian and eastern Mediterranean, as well as bombers, could also unleash advanced Kalibr land attack cruise missile volleys against ISIS forces in Syria and Iraq.

In fact, within months, Russian and foreign experts included the 26 Kalibr cruise missiles launched from ships in the Caspian on October 7, 2015—Putin’s birthday—as a measure of the advances in Russian warfighting capabilities since the war against Georgia in 2008. And little over a year later, on August 16, 2016, Russian L-24 and Su-34 bombers struck targets in Syria from Hamadan airbase in Iran.<sup>96</sup>

Supported by Il-78M mid-air refueling tankers and A-50 and Tu-214ON and Tu-214R airborne reconnaissance aircraft, Kramnik’s game plan did not yet point to direct aircraft basing in Syria. The contingency plans evidently developed earlier called for a more limited standoff air campaign. Even a small search-and-rescue helicopter force to retrieve fallen Russian pilots would face great security problems if based in Syria, Kramnik pointed out. However, the notion of acquiring direct and secure access to an airbase in Syria evidently soon became the centerpiece of Putin’s response to the dire situation the Asad regime was facing.

Aside from this unusual piece by Kramnik, Russian news reports and commentary at first focused on the political track and did not draw attention to the military track. When they later did, as the Western press began reporting unusual Russian military-related moves toward Syria, Russian media stressed the unviability of Russian boots on the ground and the lack of necessity for a Syrian-based Russian air operation. As with the surprise Russian move into Crimea in February 2014, Moscow preferred to divert attention and delay any announcement of its military moves until they were nearly or already a fait accompli.<sup>97</sup>

### **Stealth Start to Hmeimim Airbase**

On August 1, 2015, Putin decreed the reorganization and establishment of the Aerospace Forces of the Russian Federation, incorporating what had previously been the separate Air Force and Aerospace Defense Forces. The commander-in-chief of the new Aerospace Forces was Colonel-General Viktor Bondarev, commander of the Air Force since May 2012.<sup>98</sup>

Six and a half months later, greeting elements of the Russian Air Group returning from Hmeimim airbase in Syria to an airfield in Voronezh, Russia, Bondarev told the Russian press that the air group had been established and begun to prepare for the air operation in Syria on August 1, 2015.<sup>99</sup> It was another indication of how early the option of intervening in Syria began seriously to be developed.

The establishment of the air group would have been preceded by substantial time to discuss, develop, and decide the issue at the executive level. The timing further suggests that the announcement and implementation of the overall reorganization of Russia’s airpower elements

might have been intended to mask the setting up of the air group that would soon be headed for Syria.

With preparations to make Hmeimim operational moving forward, there was a qualitative uptick in Russian supply shipments to Syria. On August 20, the *Nikolay Fil'chenkov* sailed south through the Bosphorus with military cargo on its deck. It was the first time such cargo had been spotted above deck on a Syrian Express ship.<sup>100</sup> As with the *Fil'chenkov*'s ferrying of occupation troops and equipment to Crimea in February 2014, the same ship now led the way with this more ostentatious ferrying of military cargo to Syria.<sup>101</sup>

Around the same time, Moscow also began tweaking its ground combat options. In early 2014, Putin's armed intervention in Crimea and then eastern Ukraine had flowed in part out of the momentum of Russia's earlier successes in Syria in 2013.<sup>102</sup> Now, Russia's new chapter of involvement in Syria fed off the energy of Putin's earlier successes in Ukraine. It also used some of the same methods: forces whose equipment was ferried to Syria in part by the Syrian Express.

In August 2015, Moscow reportedly began to develop a training facility for ground combat mercenaries hired by the Wagner private military contractor firm. Visible on Google Earth maps, the closed camp was next to an official Main Intelligence Directorate training camp for special forces in the village of Molkino in the southern Russian territory of Krasnodar.

Wagner fighters had earlier fought in the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of eastern Ukraine. In September 2015, they would begin to relocate to Syria, where Wagner reportedly eventually deployed as many as 2,500 fighters. The Wagner mercenaries would enable Putin officially to adhere to the "no boots on the ground" pledge made when he announced the beginning of Russia's air operation at the end of September, and to keep the official tally of Russian casualties low and the real tally a secret.<sup>103</sup>

On the air front, according to later accounts, U.S. officials by mid-August 2015 began hearing from allies that Russia was asking for permission to cross other countries' airspace on the way to Syria. This was not just for cargo planes but also for fighters and bombers that Syrians had not been trained to fly.<sup>104</sup>

This development was consistent with the publication 5 months after the fact that Russia on August 26 had signed an agreement with Syria for basing an air group at Hmeimim airbase in Asad's home province of Latakia on a "free-of-charge basis." The agreement was for "a period without term," although it could be terminated by either side one year after giving written notice to the other side.<sup>105</sup>

All the same, when a reporter asked Putin on September 4 whether Russia was deploying its military aviation to Syria, Putin claimed it was "too early to say that we are ready to do it."<sup>106</sup>

In the press, at least one expert—Viktor Murakhovskiy, chief editor of the *Arsenal Otechestva* journal—argued that Russia did not need to deploy a military force in Syria since it could hit Syrian targets from bases inside Russia using Tu-22M3 and Tu-160M long-range bombers.<sup>107</sup>

By this time, however, American intelligence agencies had already reportedly tracked the deployment to Syria of a Russian military advance team, portable air traffic station, and prefabricated housing for as many as 1,000 military personnel to an airfield near Latakia. More could well be on the way, and Secretary Kerry phoned his counterpart Lavrov to convey U.S. concerns over a potential confrontation with the U.S.-led coalition already active in regional skies.<sup>108</sup>

From September 14 to 20, Russia's armed forces conducted the large-scale Center-2015 military exercise. Just a week after the launch of Russia's air operation over Syria, Defense Minister Shoigu would recount that Center-2015 actually contained elements of ground operations designed with the landscape in Syria in mind.<sup>109</sup> An expert on the Russian military would later recall that Center-2015, as had the massive exercise that coincided with the move into Crimea in February 2014, was likewise designed to provide background noise—*maskirovka*—to confuse perceptions of what was going on in Syria.<sup>110</sup>

Russian journalists, drawing on social media, were reporting a buildup to 1,700 construction and security specialists at the port of Tartus.<sup>111</sup> By September 24, Ilya Kramnik was citing photographs available over the Internet of Russian front-line equipment—Su-30 fighters, Su-24 bombers, and Su-25 attack aircraft, plus helicopters and air defense systems—in country around Latakia. It was no longer a question of whether Russia would engage militarily in Syria “but about the time scale, objective, and price of the upcoming operation.”<sup>112</sup>

## Fighting for Asad

Russia focused the bulk of its airstrikes not against ISIS but against more moderate FSA forces that were posing the greater threat to the Asad regime closer to Damascus and to Alawite lands around Latakia.<sup>113</sup> When Putin, on March 14, 2016, declared the mission of the Russian air campaign for the most part accomplished, ISIS remained entrenched across much of the eastern part of Syria and relatively untouched by Russian airstrikes.

Three weeks after the start of the air campaign, Vladimir Frolov wrote that Moscow was “in a hurry to convert the impression of the success of Russia's military operation in Syria into a formula for a political settlement.” It could only be called an “impression of success” because the ground offensive by the Syrian army and the Iranian expeditionary force backed by Russian air support was “slow and the advances into the rebels' defense lines are insignificant.”

Assertions that the Syrian opposition was losing its combat capability were “hollow,” and 3 more months of Russian airstrikes would not change the situation, Frolov predicted. He concluded that “Moscow will be faced with a choice: either to boost its military presence or to leave, having failed to reach its goals. Putin is not going to fight in Syria forever.”<sup>114</sup>

Several months into the start of the air campaign, expert assessments of its success remained tepid at best. In mid-December 2015, Ruslan Pukhov, director of the CAST think tank in Moscow, could still write that:

*It remains unclear, however, whether the Russian intervention in Syria will bring the results Moscow is hoping for—such as stabilizing the Assad regime, weakening the Islamic State group and achieving at least a partial restoration of partnership with the West from a position of strength. So far, the Russian military campaign has failed to yield any significant military results—but it has further complicated Moscow’s relations with the United States and several regional players, especially Turkey.*<sup>115</sup>

By that time, though, addressing “lessons learned” from the air campaign to date, Russia had already begun to boost its military footprint in Syria and the tempo of operations. It deployed additional fixed wing aircraft and helicopters to Hmeimim and accelerated the rate of daily sorties. Strategic bombers based in southern Russia made more bombing runs over Syria. Together with ships in the Caspian and the Mediterranean, they launched more Kalibr land attack cruise missiles against targets in Syria.<sup>116</sup>

Besides responding militarily to the unimpressive battlefield results in Syria, the surge iterations also reacted to other events that seemed to demand not only a military but also a political response to public opinion swings in Russia, the Middle East, and Europe. On October 31, a bomb had brought down a Russian airliner over Egyptian Sinai with great loss of life: 243 passengers and crew. On November 12, there were bombings of Shia-Hizballah neighborhoods in Beirut. On November 13, ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks killed more than 120 in Paris. On November 24, Turkish F-16 fighter jets downed a Russian Su-24M bomber over the Turkish-Syrian border. Its two crew members ejected, but one was killed by ground fire. A rescue helicopter was also shot down, killing another Russian servicemember.<sup>117</sup>

The Su-24M shootdown and the two associated fatalities brought relations between Russia and Turkey—and therefore potentially with NATO—to the brink of military confrontation and led to a rupture in diplomatic and economic relations between Ankara and Moscow. Putin

used the crisis not only to continue the surge of new airpower to Hmeimim but also to deploy the advanced S-400 air defense system to the area, greatly complicating any offensive air options over most of Syria that might be considered by Turkey and the other powers supporting the opposition.<sup>118</sup> By summer 2016, although Putin and Erdogan had already begun repairing the frayed relationship, Russia did not withdraw its S-400s from Syria.<sup>119</sup>

Taking advantage of the opportunity to show solidarity with the anti-ISIS feelings that surged, particularly after the terrorist attack in Paris, Russia in December 2015 increased its airstrikes against ISIS. However, Russian fighter planes still concentrated on the broad range of opposition forces threatening the Alawite stronghold of the Asad clan and the Russian facilities at Tartus and the Hmeimim airfield in Latakia province. All this reiterated the fact that the Russian air campaign was motivated foremost by the urgent need to save and stabilize the Asad regime, which Russian analysts increasingly took as a given.<sup>120</sup>

In any event, over the winter of 2015/2016, the various elements of the Russian surge—together with the lack of any significant U.S. move to counter them—finally stabilized and revived the military fortunes of the Asad regime. However, while there were incremental battlefield returns on Russia's investment in airpower to support Syrian regime forces, the gains were often only marginal and sometimes unsustainable and easily reversible in terms of cities and territories reclaimed from the forces battling Damascus.<sup>121</sup> With time, nevertheless, the performance of the Russian air group operating out of Hmeimim increasingly underscored the improvements in Russia's warfighting capabilities since their embarrassing performance in the 2008 war with Georgia.<sup>122</sup>

## **Arm Wrestling with Asad**

Even as Putin announced the start of the air campaign on September 30, 2015, he also hinted at the need for a quick exit from the conflict. The air operation, he asserted, would have a “limited timeframe and will continue only while the Syrian army conducts its anti-terrorist offensive.” Putin underscored that the campaign would be “limited to airstrikes and will not involve ground operations.” Russia had “no intention of getting deeply entangled in this conflict.”<sup>123</sup>

A week after Russian warplanes began delivering strikes against targets in Syria, some Russian analysts were already beginning to sketch out the military and political imperatives for an early exit strategy and for staging a “mission accomplished” moment. Moscow think-tanker Mikhail Barabanov, for example, warned that the intervention in Syria “was a very risky step in military, foreign policy, and domestic policy terms.”<sup>124</sup>

Indeed, just 3 weeks after the launch of the air campaign, Putin summoned Asad to the Kremlin for their first meeting since January 2005. They met on October 20 without prior announcement, publicizing the visit only after Asad's return to Damascus. Although most details of their talk remain secret, Putin in welcoming Asad stated that "our position is that positive results in military operations will lay the base for then working out a long-term settlement based on a political process that involves all political forces, ethnic, and religious groups."<sup>125</sup> This line was consistent with Putin's assertion in his celebratory television interview 10 days earlier that, "Our only goal is to support the lawful government and create conditions for a political settlement."<sup>126</sup>

In addition, on September 30, 2015, explaining the goals of the Syrian air campaign that was getting under way, Putin had asserted that Asad agreed with the Russian view that "a final and long-term solution to the situation in Syria is possible only on the basis of political reform and dialogue between all healthy forces in the country." According to the Russian president, Asad "knows this and is ready for this process." Putin said Russia was "counting on [Asad's] active and flexible position and his readiness to make compromises for the sake of his country and people."<sup>127</sup>

That proposition, however, had already been put to the test during the run-up to the air campaign and would again be pressed in the effort to relaunch peace talks between Damascus and opposition forces. From the beginning, Asad pursued a security rather than a political solution to the mounting crisis in Syria.<sup>128</sup> The Asad regime had repeatedly come across as a difficult and nervous client of Moscow, perhaps even a deliberate spoiler of Moscow's designs for framing foreign perceptions of the Damascus regime in a more sympathetic light.

In 2012, Syrian security forces most likely arrested a dissident who was to participate in talks endorsed by Russia, and the same thing happened again in 2014. More recently, according to some accounts, at the January and April 2015 intra-Syrian talks in Moscow brokered by the Russian Foreign Ministry and Institute of Oriental Studies, Asad envoy Bashar al-Jaafari had essentially stonewalled the discussions with elements of the opposition in Moscow and refused to agree to confidence-building measures that might have encouraged opposition representatives to explore a political solution.<sup>129</sup>

On June 29, 2015, another demonstration of Syrian rigidness occurred when Putin received Syrian foreign minister Walid Moallem in Moscow and proposed an anti-ISIS coalition uniting Syria and all the countries in the region opposed to ISIS. Putin specifically included Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, soon adding Jordan to this majority Sunni country mix.<sup>130</sup> Moallem reacted to Putin's initiative with what approached ridicule. He complained that these

countries were all supporters of the “terrorists” fighting Syrian government troops. In Moallem’s view, “An alliance with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and the United States would require a very big miracle.”<sup>131</sup>

On July 27, Asad nevertheless affirmed Syria’s support for the political track Putin was launching. However, Asad immediately undercut that support by clarifying that “it is one thing to support the political track, and another to be fooled by it.” Intra-Syrian dialogue, Asad declared, would be scuttled by the presence among opposition interlocutors of “agents of the west, and opportunists who seek to make personal gains at the expense of the homeland.” Exactly this, he claimed, had prevented greater consensus during the two rounds of intra-Syrian talks in Moscow earlier in the year.<sup>132</sup>

There would be several even more strenuous rounds of “arm wrestling,” as several longtime Russian experts on the Middle East put it, over the next 2 years between Putin and Asad.<sup>133</sup> Putin would think he could pressure Asad, but Asad acted with the confidence that Putin would never go all the way. It was a game of chicken that Asad won, succeeding in twisting Putin’s original aims in intervening in Syria.<sup>134</sup>

After the October 20 meeting with Asad, Putin informed the leaders of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt of its results. All this came on the eve of a get-together in Vienna of the foreign ministers of Russia, the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia to discuss Syria.<sup>135</sup> It naturally gave rise to speculation by Russian journalists such as Strokan, who had been among the first to sound the alarm after the fall of Palmyra, about the contours of the diplomatic “blitz” that Putin was so evidently launching by bringing Asad to Moscow.<sup>136</sup>

The October 30 discussions in Vienna produced a nine-point statement that soon became known as the Vienna Document. It built on the Geneva Communiqué of June 30, 2012, and UNSC Resolution 2118.<sup>137</sup> The 17 countries that signed the document, in addition to the UN and the European Union, for the first time included Iran. The document called for accelerating diplomacy but replaced mention of a political “transition” with the vague term “governance,” and did not include a transition timetable. This “governance” was to be established by UN-supervised elections in which the Syrian diaspora would be able to participate. The document endorsed ensuring a Syrian-led political process and implementing nationwide ceasefires.<sup>138</sup>

Three weeks later, recalling his meeting with Putin, Asad tried to dismiss the entire Vienna process and the international pressure that it might bring to bear on Damascus. Ignoring all that his representatives had done to undermine two intra-Syrian sessions in Moscow in January and April, Asad claimed to have declared to Putin that “we are ready for Moscow 3 because we need to have dialogue, whatever Vienna said or any other conference. . . . So, that’s what we’re

working on with the Russians; is to hold new dialogue meeting between the Syrians, maybe in Moscow, and if so, it's going to be called Moscow 3." Furthermore, any "concrete [political] steps should follow at least a major defeat of the terrorists and the government takes control of a major area that has been captured by the terrorists.<sup>139</sup>

In any event, Moscow has had to deal with Asad's obstinacy from the beginning. After the October 20 meeting in the Kremlin, senior Israeli officials reportedly claimed that Putin had insisted to Asad that he "either leave office and make room for a transitional government or be forced out."<sup>140</sup> Asad, however, had no evident inclination to leave power: "I never thought about leaving Syria under any circumstances, in any situation, something I never put in my mind, like the Americans say 'plan B' or 'plan C.'"<sup>141</sup>

Debate and speculation continue on Moscow's ultimate preference for how to deal with Asad. However, since the passing of the low point of Asad's fortunes in fall 2012, the Syrian president's immediate political survival has always appeared to have been Plan A for Putin, with no Plan B in the wings, whatever the claims of flexibility on the point by Moscow.<sup>142</sup> Putin arguably has never pressed Asad to resign, but rather to show some flexibility that could help make the Damascus regime a more credible interlocutor, preferable to the ostentatiously brutal ISIS, and thereby prolong Asad's political life.

By February 2016, Damascus forces backed by their Russian and other allies began seriously to threaten opposition control of substantial portions of Aleppo, Syria's commercial capital and second largest city. Many Western experts judged Putin's air war a success by this time.<sup>143</sup>

In Moscow, however, the view was probably more nuanced, and Aleppo in fact would not be subdued entirely until the end of the year. Putin seemed to calculate that Moscow had reached the limits of what was possible given Syria's depleted army. By January–February 2016, it could be argued, it was time for Moscow to cut bait rather than continue to fish. Russia could not sustain further progress in Syria, so it was time to negotiate a political deal and force Asad to accept it. Besides, observers in Moscow had gained confidence that Asad was not about to be ousted. Vladimir Yevseyev, a Middle East military expert with repeated visits to Damascus under his belt, judged that it was now "impossible to change Bashar al-Assad by force."<sup>144</sup>

There had been a softening of the U.S. demand for an understanding on the need for agreement on Asad's early departure from power as a precondition for resumption of the Geneva negotiations on Syria. Washington, together with Saudi Arabia, also agreed to let Iran join the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), while Moscow dropped objections to wider participation by Syrian opposition groups in the peace talks. After a visit in mid-December by Secretary Kerry

to Moscow for talks with Putin, one commentator asserted that “a military alliance between the United States and Russia in the Middle East now looks natural, even.”<sup>145</sup>

In Munich on February 12, 2016, after a meeting of the now-17-nation ISSG, Kerry and Lavrov announced an understanding on a Syria-wide “cessation of hostilities” to take place the next week as a first step toward a ceasefire and immediate provision of humanitarian supplies to trapped civilians.<sup>146</sup> The next day, Obama called Putin about implementing the agreement. Putin and Lavrov stressed the need for coordination between the U.S. and Russian militaries in Syria, in effect what Putin had been pushing for since his June 25, 2015, phone call to Obama.<sup>147</sup>

Not without cause, Russia’s leading propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov the next day called the Syria accord “definitely a victory for Russia.” Kiselyov declared that “America has finally swung in our direction.” The agreement on the closer coordination of the two countries’ militaries in Syria was something that Russia has been proposing for some time. In Kiselyov’s view, “Now they have agreed—in other words, our relations with the Americans are being restored.”<sup>148</sup>

Within 24 hours, however, Asad tried to spike the developing Russia-U.S. deal and undermine the Lavrov-Kerry negotiations on a “cessation of hostilities.” In comments to Syria’s central bar association, Asad asserted that “no one” was capable of putting in place all the conditions necessary for a truce the following week.<sup>149</sup> A few days earlier, Asad had asserted to an interviewer that his goal was to regain control over all Syrian territory.<sup>150</sup> It was the start of another round of “arm wrestling” between Damascus and Moscow.

Russian officials and pundits immediately jumped on Asad’s skepticism toward the Russo-American ceasefire efforts. The leading “designated hitter” was Vitaly Churkin, Russia’s permanent representative at the United Nations. “Whatever capabilities the Syrian army has,” Churkin told an interviewer, “it was the efficient campaign carried out by the Russian Aerospace Forces that helped it push its enemies farther back from Damascus. Aleppo, the largest city in the north of the country, may soon be liberated. However, if they [Syrian leaders] operate under the assumption that what they need is not a ceasefire but a victory, this conflict will go on for a very long time.”<sup>151</sup>

In the press, Sergey Strokan charged that Asad was “foisting on Russia the role of guaranteeing the preservation of the Damascus regime without a political solution within the framework of the Geneva process.” It was a case of “the tail starting to wag the dog,” regional expert Aleksey Malashenko told Strokan.<sup>152</sup> Elsewhere, another pundit charged that Asad was “turning from Russia’s ally into an ungovernable sponger.”<sup>153</sup>

But Asad did not desist. In December, he had insisted that there could be no negotiations with terrorists, and that for him, anyone with a machine gun was a terrorist.<sup>154</sup> Now, on February

20, he asserted that he was ready for a ceasefire. But he undermined that premise by again insisting that “everyone who can hold machine guns against the people and against the government is a terrorist. . . You cannot say they are legitimate.”<sup>155</sup>

All the same, Obama and Putin, as co-chairs of the ISSG, announced on February 22 that a partial ceasefire would tentatively start at midnight February 27. It would exclude ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other terrorist organizations designated by the UN Security Council. But Damascus and opposition groups would need to indicate by February 26 whether they would accept.<sup>156</sup> In his statement, Putin focused exclusively on Syria and played up cooperation between Washington and Moscow on the prospective ceasefire. Obama, in contrast, while underscoring Syria, devoted equal space in his statement to the unfinished business of Ukraine.

The partial ceasefire subsequently went forward and for a while substantially reduced the violence in Syria. At the same time, however, it in effect consolidated the Damascus regime’s battlefield gains brought about by the armed intervention of Russia and Iran and cemented Asad’s revived hold on power.<sup>157</sup>

Journalist Vladimir Frolov captured the sense of accomplishment in Moscow as well as putting his finger on some of the issues that would increasingly frustrate Putin’s efforts to cash in diplomatically on what Russia’s air campaign had accomplished militarily in Syria. The Asad regime had been stabilized and had regained control of most of “useful Syria” in the west. But in the north, around Idlib and Aleppo, opposition forces were intermingled with al-Nusra Front fighters—in essence, al Qaeda in Syria—who were on the UN Security Council’s list of terrorist organizations and thus excluded from the impending ceasefire. In addition, Syria’s borders with Turkey in the north and with Jordan in the south had not been sealed. As a result, Syrian government forces and their Shia militia allies imported by Iran were in no shape to extend the territory now under the control of Damascus. They would probably “not be able to fully take control of Aleppo” without massive new airstrikes by Russia.

Asad had no qualms about using “scorched earth tactics,” wrote Frolov. But it was not in Russia’s interests “to share responsibility for the Syrian regime’s war crimes” and risk the imposition of additional “Syrian sanctions” from the West on Russia. Moscow therefore now expected Damascus to follow Russian advice for reaching a political settlement. It was important to “freeze” the battlefield and to “kickstart” the resumption of the intra-Syrian negotiations in Geneva.

But the overriding impetus for Russian “peacemaking” lay outside Syria, wrote Frolov:

*There is a clear prospect of Moscow achieving the main political aim of the “Syrian gambit”—establishing a new kind of relationship with the United States and restoring “geopolitical parity” with Washington in the global hierarchy. The emerging format of the Syrian settlement . . . would successfully get Moscow out of the ghetto of “regional power,” which it found itself in after getting bogged down in east Ukraine.<sup>158</sup>*

Subsequent events would quickly underscore that Russia and the United States were both making commitments on which they could not or would not deliver. The United States was not able to peel the moderate opposition away from Nusra, and at the same time remained reluctant to give opposition forces the weapons they needed to more effectively fight the forces of the Damascus regime and its allies on their own. Russia meanwhile was not able to prevail on Asad to ground Syrian airplanes and helicopters, to restrain his ground forces on the battlefield, and to enter into productive political negotiations with the opposition.

As the ceasefire took shaky control after February 27, as the Geneva intra-Syrian negotiations resumed on March 14, and as Russia and its allies closed in on retaking Palmyra from ISIS—whose capture in May 2015 had set in motion the developments analyzed here—Putin seized the opportunity to grab his “mission accomplished” moment.

On March 14, the long-suspended intra-Syrian talks in Geneva finally resumed despite Damascus’s clear intention to scuttle them. As they had done at previous rounds in Geneva, Damascus’s representative would again stonewall and undermine the negotiations and push ahead on the battlefield in Syria.<sup>159</sup> Nevertheless, on the same day the talks reopened, Putin ordered the withdrawal of the “main part” of Russia’s military contingent from Syria. It was to begin the next day.<sup>160</sup>

Putin’s announcement was misperceived by many early on as foreshadowing a full withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria. Several days later, however, at an award ceremony for soldiers and defense industry personnel in the Kremlin, Putin clarified that Russian forces would be staying on at Tartus and Hmeimim, and Russia would not be withdrawing its short-range Pantsir-F and long-range S-400 air defense systems. Russia would continue to supply its full array of financial, matériel, and training support to Syrian government forces, as well as air support.

Putin told the assembly that Russia had notified Asad in advance of its withdrawal decision, and the Syrian president had “supported” it. He underscored Asad’s “reserve, his sincere striving for peace, his readiness for compromise and dialogue.” Russia’s military drawdown was

"an important positive signal" that Putin was "certain" all parties to the Geneva negotiations would "duly appreciate."<sup>161</sup>

Ten days later, on March 27, Syrian regime forces, strongly supported by Russian airpower, recaptured Palmyra. The journalist Sergey Strokan, who 10 months earlier had sounded the alarm in the Russian press over the fall of Palmyra to ISIS, again covered the story. After Palmyra's fall, Strokan had titled his piece "Neither Peace, Nor Palmyra. Islamists Turn the Syrian State into Ruins." On its recapture, he exulted "Palmyra of Victory."<sup>162</sup> Strokan's new headline seemed an appropriate bookend to what could have been the beginning of the end of Russia's experience of armed intervention in the Syrian civil war.

However, Putin needed Asad to survive to bring the conflict, or at least Russia's deep involvement in it, to a close. Asad was Putin's ticket to ride in world perceptions of Russian power. Putin needed to keep him in place, and preferably compliant, to retain for Russia a place at the table for discussions as an equal with the United States on the future of Syria. Around this time, Putin reportedly reassured Asad that "we will not let you lose." At least that is what Asad claimed to visiting British member of Parliament David Davis several weeks later.<sup>163</sup>

Indeed, if Moscow's intention was to encourage Asad to put on a more politically presentable front, Asad's resistance presented Moscow with a knotty public relations quandary. Veteran Russian diplomat Aleksandr Aksenenok captured the predicament in November 2015: "For Russia it is important that its position not be associated with the inflexibility of official Damascus, which, judging by the pronouncements of President Asad and Foreign Minister Muallem, prefers to divert real political process into absolutely noncommittal dialogue. Faced with such behavior by our Syrian ally, it will be hard for Russia to interact with its foreign partners."<sup>164</sup>

In Moscow and elsewhere, many observers were confident that Putin would be able to keep Asad on the same page and push forward with Obama on a ceasefire and resumption of negotiations. In the Middle East, however, sophisticated long-time students of the Asad family predicted that Bashar was far from through and still had many tricks up his sleeve. Indeed, rather than clarity, Putin's withdrawal announcement set the stage for one of the murkier yet ultimately illuminating "arm wrestling" chapters in recent relations between Moscow and Damascus.

From Beirut, reporter Anne Barnard cautioned that Asad was a "survivor adept at juggling allies." Her sources suggested that Asad's confidence and ambition were rising on the support of Russia's air campaign. Iran remained his "insurance card," but Hezbollah and other Iran-backed militias on their own could not help Syrian government forces advance without Russian air-power.

Therefore, suggested Barnard, Asad would likely engage in the Geneva diplomatic process but would complicate and drag it out by showing up but refusing to negotiate. Asad probably calculated that Putin needed him more than he needed Putin. Recalling Moscow's relations with Damascus during the Soviet era, a Russian diplomat recounted that "they take everything from us, except advice."<sup>165</sup>

The week of Putin's withdrawal announcement, nevertheless, Vladimir Solovyov exulted on Russia's main television channel that "in no way are we a truncheon in al-Assad's hand to be used to solve his political tasks." Russia, he suggested, had regained its status of a power without which solving world crises was impossible.<sup>166</sup>

Just 10 days later, however, on the same channel, Dmitry Kiselyov took an entirely different tack. With Palmyra liberated 2 days before, Kiselyov interviewed Asad in Damascus, introducing him to the audience as "in great shape . . . a lean and elegant man . . . a courageous man." Asad's intellect, according to Kiselyov, was "profound and considered." On Syria's future, "The president of Syria is confident of victory over the occupiers and terrorists."

Asad asserted that the U.S. coalition was not serious about fighting ISIS or terrorism and had done nothing to oust ISIS from Palmyra. Instead, it had been Russia that had helped recapture the historic city. And that would not be the end of the campaign: "The Syrian army with support from its friends will liberate every part of the country. The Russian army is helping us the most, and also our friends in Iran and Hezbollah, and other groups fighting in our country alongside the Syrian army."

In this regard, Asad said, it was essential that Russia keep its military bases in Syria. Russia's help was "decisive," and Moscow would be able to maintain a military contingent in Syria "proportionate to the fight against terrorism." The main lesson for Asad was that the West was dishonest, unreliable, and insincere.<sup>167</sup>

It was unclear whether Kiselyov's flattering portrayal of Asad was meant to make the bitter pill of Geneva talks sweeter for the Syrian president to swallow by seemingly putting behind Moscow's earlier harsh words about his obstreperousness, or whether the Kiselyov program already foreshadowed Moscow's capitulation to Asad's hard line.

On April 13, the Geneva talks resumed. The day after, in his annual television talk-a-thon, Putin took a question as to how long it would take to liberate Aleppo. Rather than urging full speed ahead, Putin recommended a respite. "The Syrian army does not have to try to bolster its position, because it achieved what it wanted before the ceasefire was announced, with our help, and does not have to make such attempts now, but the opposition is trying to take back what it lost." Russia and the United States, Putin assured viewers, were "working together fairly

intensively through the military, secret services and foreign ministries to find the way to settle the Syria conflict. I hope that these team efforts will bring us a positive result.”<sup>168</sup>

By this time, however, Iranian regular troops were in Syria fighting alongside IRGC troops.<sup>169</sup> As Putin spoke, a day after the resumption of talks in Geneva, a surge of fighting across Syria put not only the ceasefire but also the diplomatic negotiations at risk. Contrary to Putin’s advice, Damascus regime forces and their allies targeted Castello Road on the north side of Aleppo, the opposition’s sole road in and out of the city. There were also heavy airstrikes against rebel forces elsewhere, including in northwestern Latakia and central Homs provinces.<sup>170</sup> On April 18, the opposition broke off from the Geneva talks.<sup>171</sup>

On April 21, Putin convened the Russian security council to discuss the worsening Geneva talks.<sup>172</sup> From what followed, this appears to be the point when Putin threw in the towel and decided to stop pressing Asad on Aleppo. The Russian president appeared determined instead to double down on Russia’s military support of Asad’s campaign against the city, whatever the damage to his longstanding post-Crimea efforts to improve Russia’s relations with the West.

Heavy fighting started April 22 in Aleppo with Russian heavy artillery support outside the city, and the talks in Geneva predictably foundered.<sup>173</sup> By April 30, Moscow’s conversion to the Syrian position could not have been clearer. Responding to an interview question, Russian deputy foreign minister Gennadiy Gatilov stated that Moscow would not be pressing Damascus over Aleppo. This, after all, was a “fight against a terrorist threat” and as such was by no means precluded by the Geneva intra-Syrian negotiating process.<sup>174</sup>

Russia’s aerospace forces were now joining Syria and its allies in the campaign to close off the opposition’s single remaining road into areas it still controlled in Aleppo. Resolution of the Syrian conflict was proceeding on the military rather than the political track. In his Victory Day greetings to Putin in early May, Asad compared Aleppo to Stalingrad and promised that the Syrian army would fight until it had achieved complete victory over the “terrorists.”<sup>175</sup> Damascus thus successfully torpedoed Russian diplomacy.<sup>176</sup>

By early summer, one expert attuned to the changing moods among Russian policymakers observed that nobody in Moscow believed that improved Russian-American relations meant becoming partners, much less allies. What Russia wanted was pragmatic relations: “cooperate where [we] can; compete where [we] must.” For the Kremlin, it was important to be treated as an equal, “even if equal as an enemy.”<sup>177</sup>

In April, in the souring spirit of the time, state-sponsored Russian hackers penetrated the U.S. Democratic National Committee’s email servers. On July 22, they released a trove of confidential exchanges through WikiLeaks that proved embarrassing to the Hillary Clinton

campaign.<sup>178</sup> On August 4, CIA Director John Brennan phoned Federal Security Service (FSB) Director Alexander Bortnikov to warn against Russian meddling in the election campaign.<sup>179</sup> On October 7, the Obama administration officially charged Russia with sponsoring the cyber attacks.<sup>180</sup>

## **Transformed Interests**

When this author visited Moscow in June 2016, many of his interlocutors made reference to the tensions in April between the Kremlin and Damascus. The Asad regime was very rigid, said one longtime Russian expert on the Middle East. Russia tries to pressure. Sometimes it works, but often it does not. Some analysts called it a “tail wags dog” syndrome. Other observers said it was more like “arm wrestling.” Yet others still clung to the belief that Putin could impact Asad’s behavior by calibrating Russia’s military support. That, after all, had been the logic of Putin’s “partial withdrawal” in March.

In these conversations, this author argued in return that there had been a fundamental contradiction in Putin’s ascribed approach to Asad from the beginning. Putin could pressure Asad to change, but all the evidence suggested that Asad was firmly convinced that Russia would never push so hard as to dump him. Thus, Asad held on tight and resisted Russian pressure to do anything he did not want to do. None of the author’s interlocutors disagreed.<sup>181</sup>

Putin never had a plan B. His plan A was always a compliant Asad. But Asad refused to change his spots. He calculated that the West and the Syrian opposition would have to accommodate themselves to his remaining in power, and he had Iran’s support for this strategy. He was thus able to force Russia to support his military track, giving short shrift to the political track. And in what amounted to a game of chicken, Moscow repeatedly blinked. By October 2016, regional expert Leonid Isayev would forcefully argue in print that “Russia, to all appearances, has conclusively lost its levers of influence on the Syrian regime.”<sup>182</sup>

Some might call it a quagmire, but it was one that Putin apparently did not find totally uncomfortable or unproductive. After all, his strong position in Syria kept attracting regional leaders to his doorstep. The Russian president apparently calculated that he could keep gaining ground on the battlefield until the Obama administration decided to negotiate or until a new U.S. administration came into office. Moscow could then reassess the situation. Along the way, it was not excluded that the moderate opposition would simply give up, at least in Aleppo.

An important transformation in Russia’s perceptions of its interests helped Putin down this path. In 2011–2012, Putin had insisted that Russia had no interests in Syria.<sup>183</sup> Well into 2014, analysts in Moscow stressed that Syria was primarily of instrumental value to Putin. It

was above all a venue in which Putin could demonstrate that Russia was an independent power that the United States and other Western powers had to deal with as an equal. As such, Syria played an important role, along with the annexation of Crimea, in pumping up and keeping his domestic popularity high.<sup>184</sup>

By 2016, however, Putin no longer asserted that Russia had no interests in Syria, and the country's value to him had become much more than instrumental, undergoing a fundamental change. Under Putin's direction, Russian diplomats had spent years defending the Asad regime in the UN Security Council. Russia's military-industrial complex had supplied Asad's army with basic necessities of warfare. And now, for the past half year, Russia's aerospace forces had conducted high-tempo, high-profile bombing runs in support of the ground forces of Syria and its other allies.

Syria clearly was no longer simply a venue in which to underscore Russia's important role in the world. Russia now had increasingly impressive military real estate interests in the country, as well as prospects for substantial economic interests. Even with a tainted Asad hanging around its neck, these would give Russia increasing leverage in the region. This would force Western and regional powers to deal with Moscow not just on Syria but on other regional issues.

Some longtime Russian experts on the region argued that these accomplishments were by no means the result of Putin pursuing a grand strategic design. He was just lucky they had fallen in his lap because of Washington's mistakes. In this sense, Syria was just like Crimea.

Earlier, Putin had taken advantage of circumstances to strike in Ukraine. Now, in Syria, he understood that Obama would do nothing to oppose him. Syria had only become truly important to Putin when Obama had decided not to bomb Asad after the latter's employment of chemical weapons in 2013. American inaction had created a vacuum that Putin had opportunistically moved to fill. In 2013, Russia could not have done anything to oppose an American strike. But now that Russia was more deeply involved, it could not leave so easily.<sup>185</sup>

Putin on April 14 had advised Asad to desist from the assault on Aleppo. But Asad had ignored Putin not only in Aleppo but also in Geneva. Why did Putin grin and bear Asad's cheek? A plausible clue lay in Asad's talking up Russia's possession of Hmeimim airbase in his interview with Dmitry Kiselyov in March. This may have actually been a warning to Putin that Russia could lose the base if it attempted to obstruct the military moves of the Syrian military and its Iran-orchestrated allies against the opposition.

In a sense, the Hmeimim arrangement was payment in advance from Asad to Putin for the assistance the coming Russian air campaign would render Syrian government forces. Putin may have used Asad's dire situation as a selling point to gain access to Hmeimim, though the

journalist Kramnik recalls Syrian interest in hosting a Russian airbase as far back as his visit to Damascus in 2013.<sup>186</sup> With time, however, not wanting to lose the prestige of this new and singular airbase outside Russia likely became a constraint on Putin against pressing Asad or resisting his demands. Unless disinvited by the Damascus regime, Russia could hang on to the base even after it began the withdrawal of the “main part” of its air contingent on March 15, 2016.

At the same time, reminding Putin that he could issue Russia written notice at any time to terminate its access to Hmeimim within a year became an implied card that Asad could play to fend off Russian pressure. It would give him room to maneuver and to continue pursuing his own almost entirely kinetic approach to the opposition rather than engaging in Geneva negotiations on what ultimately could be his departure from the scene.

Perhaps Putin, with an eye to history, did not want to repeat the Soviet Union’s experience of being kicked out of the Soviet naval base in Alexandria in April 1976 by Egyptian president Anwar Sadat. This was, after all, still a sore point in historical memory. Lavrov had dealt with the issue gingerly in November 2013 when asked whether Russia would try again to have a naval base at Alexandria.<sup>187</sup>

Three years later, a Russian expert captured Putin’s dilemma over Hmeimim and Tartus in Syria. Russia could not give up the bases; it wanted to stay there forever, but to keep the bases, Russia had to have a stable Syria.<sup>188</sup> In any event, Putin increasingly would give the impression that he had settled his dispute over war tactics and goals with Asad—Moscow’s personification of stability in Syria—and that Putin would not be doing anything to tempt Asad to expel Russia from Hmeimim airbase.

In August 2016, Putin submitted the agreement to the Duma for ratification.<sup>189</sup> Although ratification did not change the agreement’s stipulation that either side could give one-year notice to end the arrangement, the move suggested Russian confidence in its long-term presence at the airbase, as well as at Tartus port.<sup>190</sup> The latter was now of substantially greater value than it had been just a few short years before, when Russian experts dismissed it as a minor resupply and repair facility. Now, with the need to support Hmeimim, much work had been done to deepen the approaches to Tartus to accommodate the steady arrivals and departures of Syrian Express shuttle vessels and to service larger warships.<sup>191</sup>

In addition, Moscow was starting to consider the possibilities of acquiring perhaps significant material interests in Syria. The Russian company SoyuzNefteGaz had begun prospecting for oil in the Mediterranean off the coast of Latakia a year earlier, before the air campaign began.<sup>192</sup> More recently, the Damascus regime had been dangling the opportunities for oil and gas concessions to Russian energy ministry officials and representatives of major Russian energy

firms, including Gazprom head Alexei Miller. But most of these, it appeared, could only be realized after the war concluded and Syria's reconstruction began.<sup>193</sup> Nevertheless, by summer 2016, Ilya Kramnik would envision that Russia, in the future, would have a monopoly on all major economic projects in Syria, including construction of any pipelines from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>194</sup>

More substantial revenue from arms and parts sales to Syria were also a future possibility. At the time, a portion of these were being transferred on a commercial basis, noted Aleksandr Kinshchak, Russia's ambassador in Damascus. But because of Syria's war-degraded economy and Western sanctions, Russia was supplying the balance to Syria free or on privileged terms.<sup>195</sup> It seemed clear that Russia was now beyond previous insistent claims that all military matériel was being supplied to Syria for cash on the basis of old contracts.<sup>196</sup> Moscow had now returned to the Soviet-era practice of allowing clients to pay for arms with "funny" money.

The air campaign had directly cost the Russian defense ministry \$480 million up to Putin's March declaration of a partial withdrawal. But this "investment" could produce an additional \$6 billion to \$7 billion in arms export contracts in coming years. The war in Syria was not only a testing ground for advanced Russian weapons, but a showroom for prospective regional and world clients.<sup>197</sup> The cost of the campaign was in effect a "loss leader" for reeling in greater sales at real prices from other countries.

Ilya Kramnik, who in June 2015 had foreshadowed much of what was to follow, now offered his assessment of the air campaign to date, assessing its pluses and minuses. He also sketched out how Russia might define its future interests in Syria and the region. At a minimum, they lay in retaining a secular multinational and multiconfessional government in central and western Syria. It would be Russia's ally, and all major economic projects on its territory would be carried out for the most part by Russia. As already mentioned, this would include building any pipelines from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea.

More critically, however, Kramnik also hinted at Russian unhappiness with Damascus. Moscow had not succeeded in engineering a balance in internal Syrian politics compatible with Russian interests. As a result, Russia was left responsible for the results without being able sufficiently to influence decisionmaking in Damascus, including on the objectives of military actions. This was leading to a decrease in the effectiveness of Russia's military presence in Syria.

Moscow and Damascus needed to review the "format" of their interactions with the goal of achieving "real working coordination," Kramnik urged. This would not happen "without changes in Syrian internal politics," including a certain rebalancing within the Syrian elite. What was at stake was Russia's influence not just in Damascus but across the region as a whole.

At the time, Kramnik detected a downshifting in the activity of Russia's air group in Syria. This was plausible, Kramnik speculated, if Moscow was indeed reviewing the "format" of its participation in the Syrian conflict. The only satisfying outcome of such a review would be a "scenario," he argued, that offered a path toward the withdrawal of Russia's fighters. After all, ended Kramnik, "An eternal war in the Middle East is clearly not part of Moscow's plans."<sup>198</sup>

## **The Aleppo Challenge**

In the short term, however, Moscow was already preparing to shift the air campaign into higher rather than lower gear. Having been dragged by Asad in April into what could well prove to be an Aleppo—and wider Syrian—quagmire, Putin was determined to avoid the trap and move on. The goal was again to set the stage to make another try at enough of a political solution to allow him with greater finality to declare "mission accomplished" and reap the international rewards.

The solution to Putin's Aleppo challenge would involve transactional reconciliation with Ankara and closer (though bumpy) cooperation with Tehran. The Geneva talks increasingly became an irrelevant but still useful tool for Moscow, at least in part to distract world opinion from the brutal killing going on in Aleppo.

## **Iran and Khan Tuman**

The impetus for closer cooperation with Iran was the battle for Khan Tuman southwest of Aleppo on May 6, 2016. It came two days after the declaration by Russia and the United States of a ceasefire to cover Aleppo Province. The intention of this new agreement, which established a coordination center in Geneva, was to try to salvage the late February Syria-wide ceasefire after Asad regime forces bombed a main hospital in opposition-occupied Aleppo on April 27.<sup>199</sup>

At Khan Tuman, the dozens of casualties suffered by Iranian fighters and Iranian-supported militias at the hands of Islamist Nusra fighters and other opposition forces on May 6 were among the highest ever in one day. The losses provoked bitter hints in Tehran that Moscow should provide air cover to Iran's pro-Damascus militias rather than wasting time on ceasefire agreements with Washington. In noting Tehran's "accusations" against Moscow, Russian analyst Vladimir Yevseyev would put Iranian deaths at over 80, including two brigadier generals.<sup>200</sup>

Tehran's reproaches were not without result. The widespread view in Moscow was that Iran and Russia were tactical allies but strategic competitors. Russia and Iran competed for influence in Syria and pursued separate agendas. Iran wanted to preserve Syria as a conduit for supporting Lebanese Hizballah. Russia saw Syria as a platform from which to resist Western-inspired

“regime change” and force the West in general and the United States in particular to deal with Russia as an equal. However, Russia and Iran have been united in wanting to preserve Syria as a unitary state and in opposing outside efforts to topple Asad.

Some experts argued that Russia hoped to displace Iran in Syria without drawing much attention to the fact. All the same, Iran welcomed and indeed needed Russian military help to preserve its interests in Syria. But to the maximum extent possible, Iran used Russia to get this done, just as it used Lebanese Hizballah and Afghan, Pakistani, and Iraqi militias to minimize the spilling of Iranian blood.<sup>2001</sup>

Indeed, Moscow’s competition with Tehran for influence in Damascus meant that Russia had to pay heed to Iran’s military and political requirements to cultivate the Asad regime. It was a synergy that Asad clearly encouraged. It was now especially useful to the Syrian leader in spurring Russia to backtrack on its ceasefire pledges.

In assenting to this pressure, Moscow did not want to be outbid by Tehran for influence in Damascus. What many saw as Moscow’s “tactical alliance” with Tehran was paradoxically born of this competition and did not reflect any strategic unity. Asad made the most of this rivalry to bend Putin to his will rather than vice versa. And Tehran, in playing on Putin’s ambitions for a Russian return to the region, was able to get Moscow to do a great deal of Iran’s dirty work in Syria.

A longtime Russian expert of the region observed that the big powers—not only the United States and the West but also Russia—no longer had allies in the Middle East. Instead, all the regional players sought to manipulate the big powers. They were all tails that wanted to wag their big-power dogs. The big powers should not be charmed by local leaders, cautioned this analyst. They were capable of dropping a big power like a hot potato when interests diverged. As to Iran and Syria in particular, their interests had nothing to do with the agendas of the United States and Russia.<sup>202</sup>

Not long after, a Russian pundit asserted that the main concern of senior Russian officials was that the United States did not appreciate Russia’s efforts in Syria and refused to cooperate openly with Russia. This was a source of great disappointment among them. Relations with America continued to be a major issue for Russia, he emphasized. Russia had two goals in Syria: first, to prove that Russia was still a great power, and second, to prove that Russia was a valuable partner for the West. All the rest was secondary or propaganda.<sup>203</sup>

For the time being, however, the pressure from Asad prevailed, and Russian airstrikes on Aleppo resumed on May 22. They were the first confirmed Russian strikes since the partial cessation of hostilities had been declared at the end of February.<sup>204</sup> By early June, Russia’s air

campaign had returned to pre-cessation tempos.<sup>205</sup> Newly emboldened, Asad on June 7 pledged to his newly elected parliament that “we will liberate every inch of Syria.”<sup>206</sup>

Although not clear at the time where it was leading, planning on the military front continued among Damascus’s main supporters. On June 9, Russian defense minister Shoigu and Syrian defense minister Fahd Jassem al-Freij conferred in Tehran at the invitation of Iranian defense minister Hossein Dehqan. The talks were secret, but Iranian “leaks” and informed Russian journalists suggested the meeting had been made necessary by a worrying uptick in offensive operations—presumably including the Iranian debacle at Khan Tuman—by al-Nusra and the often intermingled so-called moderate opposition forces.<sup>207</sup> Then, on June 18, after a stop at Hmeimim airbase, Shoigu paid a surprise visit to Asad in Damascus.<sup>208</sup> A Syrian source later claimed that Shoigu had informed Asad that Russia would be sending more forces the next week.<sup>209</sup>

By July 17, Syrian regime forces and their allies captured Castello Road, finally imposing a total siege on Aleppo neighborhoods still controlled by opposition forces. Fighting from the south, however, the opposition managed on August 7 to break the siege by capturing the Ramouseh corridor on the city’s southwest side.<sup>210</sup>

On August 16, in a move that had not been telegraphed but must have been discussed by Shoigu, Dehqan, and Syrian defense minister al-Freij when they met in Tehran in June, Russian long-range Tu-22M3 and frontal aviation Su-34 bombers began delivering heavy strikes against what were described as ISIS and Djabat al-Nusra targets in Aleppo, Idlib, and Deir ez Zour provinces from Hamadan airbase in western Iran.<sup>211</sup>

Journalists close to Russia’s military establishment stressed that the situation on the ground in Syria was not improving, especially around Aleppo, and had already necessitated long-range aviation bombing runs from Russian bases in July. Hamadan base in Iran was much closer to targets in Syria, permitting substantially more efficient and greater bomb payloads.<sup>212</sup>

The context suggested that Russia had used Iran’s Khan Tuman debacle in June to gain access to Hamadan. Reacting to criticism from Tehran, Moscow may have promised better support for Iranian-backed militias—particularly in Aleppo Province—in return for the use of Hamadan airbase on Iranian territory.

In Moscow, some saw Hamadan and other measures of closer military cooperation between Russia and Iran as an approach to the day when the two nations would be able to agree on a “strategic partnership.”<sup>213</sup> As soon as the Russian flights from Hamadan became public, however, they sparked considerable controversy in Tehran.<sup>214</sup> In part, having brushed a “third rail” in Iranian politics—Article 146 of the constitution forbids foreign bases in the Islamic

Republic—they probably fed grist into the mill of bitter conservative-moderate skirmishing between factions in Iran's political class.

In any event, in less than a week, Iranian defense minister Dehqan announced that Russian use of Hamadan had been suspended. Dehqan's televised statement on August 22 betrayed not only extreme annoyance with Russian publicity over Hamadan but also distrust of Russia's ultimate aims in Syria: "The Russians are interested in showing that they are a superpower and guaranteeing their role in deciding the political future of Syria. And, of course, there has been a certain showing-off and ungentlemanly conduct on their part." Sergei Strokan, who had just days before touted Russia's "forward base" (аэродрома подскока) at Hamadan, now used word play to rebrand it a "boomerang base" (аэродрома отскока).<sup>215</sup>

### Turkey and the Kurds

The interrupted Russian bomber strikes from Iran's Hamadan airbase nevertheless contributed to advancing the efforts of Syrian government forces and their allies to reimpose the siege on eastern Aleppo. On September 4, they succeeded in taking back the Ramouseh corridor.<sup>216</sup> All the same, expert observers judged that the battle for Aleppo would prove a prolonged stalemate.<sup>217</sup>

The path to short-circuiting the impasse, however, was already developing. In Moscow, Putin was still left with an Aleppo problem to which Turkey's open borders had long contributed. In Ankara, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan faced another iteration of Turkey's long-standing Kurdish problem, now aggravated—from Ankara's perspective—by the chaos of war in Syria. The two capitals had a great incentive to find complementary interests in Syria to solve their respective priority challenges.

Putin was already seriously looking to Erdogan to help Russia solve its Aleppo problem, and Erdogan was increasingly seeing Russia as the key to helping him solve his Kurdish problem. In short, Turkish help was beginning to appear more important to Russia than American cooperation in avoiding a quagmire in Syria. But first Putin and Erdogan needed to smooth over the profound rupture in their relations that had developed over the past year.

In July 2015, some observers judged that the discussions between Ankara and its allies over an ISIS-free buffer zone in northern Syria had been the immediate catalyst for Moscow's decision to intervene militarily in Syria. However, Moscow's Syrian Express naval shuttles had already begun to accelerate in June 2015, before the buffer zone debate gained prominence in Turkey. Nevertheless, the Turkish buffer zone notion no doubt acted, if not as the detonator, then as an accelerant, as one specialist later put it, to Moscow's planning, already long in

progress, for military intervention.<sup>218</sup> The Turkish discussion would have simply given Moscow another reason to go ahead with it without further delays.<sup>219</sup>

In November 2015, given the dependence of Syrian opposition groups on supply routes moving across the Turkish border, it could be argued that the crisis in Russian-Turkish relations occasioned by the Turkish shoot-down of a Russian Su-24 warplane was unavoidable sooner or later as Russia sought to save and then reinforce the Asad regime. Putin called the shoot-down a “stab in the back.” According to some experts, Putin began to regard Erdogan as odious and “untouchable”: in the same category as Mikheil Saakashvili, the Georgian leader when Russia fought a brief war with Tbilisi in August 2008.<sup>220</sup>

By February 2016, despite some accomplishments, Moscow had not managed to seal Syria’s borders with Turkey in the north and with Jordan in the south. As a result, observers such as Frolov judged that Syrian government forces and their supporters were in no shape to extend the territory they now controlled and would probably not be able to completely retake Aleppo without massive new airstrikes by Russia.<sup>221</sup>

Underscoring the rift with Turkey and presumably to encourage Ankara to tighten up the border, Russia permitted PYD officials to open a Syrian Kurdistan, or Rojava, “representative office” in Moscow on February 10, 2016. Russia, however, was clearly not ready to burn all its bridges to resuming more fruitful relations with Ankara. The Kurdish office had the status only of a nongovernmental organization, and no official Russian representatives attended the opening, although PYD representatives were present at the ceremony and spoke to the press.<sup>222</sup>

PYD sources viewed Moscow’s warming relations with them as “temporary and tactical.” Vadim Kozyulin, a senior researcher at the Russian Center of Political Studies, explained the “rules of the game” to a Russian correspondent:

*I think that in this case these are well-thought-out steps taken with a cool head. There are rules of the game the Kremlin does not want to break. Turkey might respond to open support of Kurdistan with support for Ichkeria [Chechnya]. And by showing restraint you can count on reciprocal restraint. . . . We are thus witnessing an exchange of signals. I can assume that answers are coming in as well. Turkey has now received a signal from Russia: The path to the negotiating table is not yet closed. It is not yet too late to apologize for the downed Su-24. Everything can still be rectified.<sup>223</sup>*

In March, concern rose in Ankara after a 2-day meeting of the PYD in the northeastern Syrian town of Rmeilan. Ankara regarded the PYD, along with its military wing, the YPG, as part of the PKK, with whom the PYD was affiliated. Turkey, along with the United States, had long considered the PKK a terrorist organization. But now the PYD unilaterally declared creation of a semi-autonomous Rojava-Northern Syria federal region linking the three “cantons” of Jazeera, Kobane, and Afrin.

This region in northern Syria, however, contained some Arab areas hotly contested by Syrian government, rebel, Kurdish, and ISIS forces. Turkey had warned that the border area of Azaz near Aleppo, in particular, would be a “red line.” As a general proposition, Turkey would not accept any Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria across the border from Turkey’s own restless Kurdish region.

Stoking tensions between Ankara and Washington, the PYD/YPG was the main U.S. local partner on the ground in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria. American supplies and air support had helped the YPG deprive ISIS of territory into which the PYD-YPG expanded control. Nevertheless, the United States as well as Turkey and Syria—both government and opposition—had warned that the PYD’s Rmeilan declaration could aggravate the conflict in Syria and accelerate the disintegration of the country.<sup>224</sup>

In April, Obama called Putin to urge him to press Damascus to halt its attacks against the opposition and to work toward a political transition in Syria.<sup>225</sup> Putin affirmed his commitment to strengthening the ceasefire Moscow and Washington had laboriously negotiated. But the Russian leader also “stressed the need for the moderate opposition to distance themselves swiftly from ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, and to close Syria’s border with Turkey, from where fighters and arms supplies for the extremists make their way in.”<sup>226</sup>

In June, Moscow expert Vladimir Yevseyev argued at length that “restoration of Russian-Turkish relations is more important than the U.S. presidential election” for Russia to make a breakthrough in Syria. The main problem in Aleppo was not so much al-Nusra as Turkey’s constant supplies to the militants in the city and region. It was necessary to lessen this support. Erdogan had recently congratulated Putin on Russia Day, and the Russian media had eased ad hominem attacks on Erdogan’s family. But it was hard to say whether this would “be followed by a lessening of Turkish support for the radicals.”<sup>227</sup>

In fact, a turn-around soon followed. Putin and Erdogan spoke by phone on June 29 and agreed to meet in person. Putin also instructed the Russian government to normalize trade and economic relations with Turkey.<sup>228</sup> Putin called Erdogan again after the failed July 15–16 coup attempt against the Turkish leader, who going forward would increasingly encourage conspiracy

theories blaming the United States and the Central Intelligence Agency for the coup and other travails.<sup>229</sup>

That same day as the Putin-Erdogan phone call, July 17, 2016, Syrian government troops and Hezbollah militia fighters finally captured Castillo Road, the lifeline to opposition forces in eastern Aleppo, an Asad regime goal ever since the U.S.-Russian agreement on a partial cease-fire was reached in March–April. On August 7, however, opposition forces opened a road into Aleppo from the southwest, the Ramouseh corridor, thus breaking the siege.

Putin and Erdogan finally met in St. Petersburg on August 9 amid much speculation about Turkey’s pivot to Russia. The agreements announced were mostly of the political and economic “memorandum of understanding” type. On Syria, however, a Turkish foreign ministry delegation met with counterparts the next day.<sup>230</sup> And Putin would later underscore the importance of the understandings that he and Erdogan had reached behind the scenes in the confidential portion of their discussions in St. Petersburg.

On August 24, Ankara launched Operation *Euphrates Shield* without provoking any Russian resistance. Backed by U.S. warplanes, Turkish troops and tanks for the first time crossed the border into Syria to help Free Syrian Army forces capture Jarablus from ISIS, the last Syrian-Turkish border crossing held by ISIS. In Ankara, U.S. Vice President Joseph Biden—with an eye on Kurdish forces that earlier had captured Manbij—warned that the United States would cut off aid to Kurdish forces that did not retreat across the Euphrates into Iraq. He stated categorically that there would not be an independent Kurdish entity stretching across northern Syria and Iraq.<sup>231</sup>

Five days later, Sergey Strokan, who had regularly chronicled earlier major inflection points in Syria, outlined the deal that appeared to be emerging. Russia and Iran’s “guarded” reactions to Kurdish protests against Operation *Euphrates Shield* had been “highly eloquent.” They pointed to “tacit understandings” reached by Putin and Erdogan. The expert Vladimir Sotnikov told Strokan that “their essence in general outline is as follows: Moscow and Tehran close their eyes to the Turkish campaign against the Kurds and do not impede it. Ankara, in response, softens its approach to Bashar al-Assad, whose ouster the Turkish authorities have sought throughout the five years of conflict.”

The Obama administration was not ready to take decisive steps to help resolve the Syrian conflict, elaborated Strokan. Turkey could thus now take over the Western lead from the United States. Turkey could do so by focusing on its own problems in the region—that is, preventing a viable Kurdish autonomy in Syria that could intensify separatist sentiments among Kurds

across the border in Turkey, rather than continuing to focus on ousting Asad from power in Damascus.<sup>232</sup>

Other experts in the region were reaching similar conclusions. Hassan Hassan noted the “uncharacteristically soft and generic statements” by Russia and Iran and Turkey’s incursion into northern Syria. “Given Russia’s increasingly assertive role in Aleppo,” Hassan speculated, “the Turkish intervention in the same area could push the two countries to seek a workable formula in the north, as the United States has shown little appetite to act more actively to resolve the conflict in that region.”<sup>233</sup>

Turkey’s threat perceptions heightened as the PKK/PYD expanded its area of operations in northern Iraq and Syria as it participated in the U.S.-sponsored anti-ISIS campaign. Turkey’s primary objective was to remove PKK safe havens in Iraq and Syria and control the borders. Ankara is determined to prevent any autonomous Kurdish entity south of Turkey’s borders in Syria that could feed Kurdish aspirations for greater autonomy within Turkey itself.<sup>234</sup>

Turkey’s strategic obsession was on defeating the PKK together with the PYD and the YPG, and to control the 800-kilometer border with Syria, now under PKK/PYD domination. For Ankara, the PKK has always been more important than whether Asad stays or goes. Anti-Asad statements since 2011 had been just an impermanent phase, unlike the permanence of opposition to the PKK. By 2016, much of Erdogan’s earlier insistence that Asad had to be removed had changed due to the overwhelming concern over a rising PKK.

This shift worked in Russia’s favor. With Turkey’s perception of the PKK/PYD threat increasing, it was not all that surprising that Erdogan suppressed his shorter lived infatuation with toppling Asad and decided to trade help from Putin to resolve Turkey’s Kurdish problem in northern Syria for Turkish help to Russia in resolving its Aleppo problem.

Iran, of course, was also part of the mix. Over the years, it had repeatedly dealt with Kurdish challenges within its own borders, and episodically cooperated with the PKK to protect and advance Iranian interests in Syria and Iraq and vis-à-vis Turkey.<sup>235</sup> Now Russia, Turkey, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, successors to empires that had competed with each other in the region for centuries, were beginning to find common geopolitical ground in keeping Syria united by opposing Kurdish aspirations for expanded autonomy in northern Syria. Even within Syria, argued the Russian expert Yevseyev, a majority of the population, including a good number of Kurds, opposed federalization because it could easily lead to the disintegration of the country.<sup>236</sup>

Kurdish ambitions did not present a direct threat to Russia, but Moscow viewed the potential breakup of Syria as fraught with regional chaos and negative consequences for Russian security. It was easy to find Russian analysts who believed that Kurdish independence was inevitable

and that the fracturing of Syria could not be prevented. But this was their personal opinion and official Moscow did not support it, underscored other colleagues.

These colleagues pointed out the obvious: that Kurdish independence would mean a complete redrawing of the map of the Middle East. Powers external to the region might think this was not a bad idea. A Kurdish state might be a useful buffer between Sunnis and Shias and Israel. But for Russian policymakers, the agenda was already overloaded. Not just Russia, but Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Iraq were all opposed.<sup>237</sup> And Russia's updated foreign policy concept, as we have seen, would soon also underscore the need to keep Syria whole.

Secretary of State Kerry and foreign minister Lavrov subsequently concluded a tortuously negotiated ceasefire agreement on September 9 that quickly collapsed, with no signs of regret from Moscow.<sup>238</sup> The United States and its allies hit Syrian forces at Deir ez Zour on September 17, reportedly killing 62.<sup>239</sup> Russia charged that it could not have been a mistake, and then used the accident as a pretext for installing S-300 air defense missiles at Tartus.<sup>240</sup> On top of Russian and Iranian-sponsored forces already in Syria, the sophisticated S-400s already at Hmeimim and the S-300s now at Tartus made Western consideration of any military options against the Asad regime all the more challenging.

As Damascus declared that the ceasefire was over, the Syrian and Russian air forces bombed a humanitarian aid convoy on Aleppo's outskirts on September 19.<sup>241</sup> Many around the world considered the strike a "war crime."<sup>242</sup> Undeterred, the two air forces launched a concerted air assault on rebel-held eastern Aleppo on September 23, 2016. It was the most intensive in 5 years and claimed more than 80 victims just on its first day, with Damascus announcing that a ground operation would follow.<sup>243</sup>

With the collapse of the ceasefire, Putin effectively ditched the political track with the Obama administration. Putin was now working with Erdogan in Syria, so he could afford to do so. With elections for a new U.S. president looming on November 8, Putin moved on to create more favorable facts on the ground in Syria with which to face the next U.S. administration. Should U.S. policy on Syria not change with the new president, Putin evidently decided that Russia would at least be respected as a feared equal.

In the meantime, Putin would solve Aleppo with Turkish military forbearance and political assistance. Ankara would no longer try to impede the Russian-Syrian-Iranian assault on opposition holdouts in the city, and would no longer seek to sustain their opposition to Damascus and the forces backing it. Ankara would instead work with Moscow on a ceasefire and extrication of opposition fighters from Aleppo.

Turkish journalist Fikret Bila explained the military trade-off: “The reconciliation allowed Turkish forces to enter Syria and to operate in the region from Jarablus to Azaz in the west, and south toward al-Bab, without any objections from Moscow. Turkey in return agreed not to help rebel forces in Aleppo.” Turkey’s priorities had changed: “What is important for Ankara now is to secure the region along its borders, and move south toward al-Bab. This is why it is relatively silent on Assad and on what is taking place in Aleppo.”<sup>244</sup>

Reviving economic ties interrupted by the November 2015 Su-24M shoot-down crisis, Putin traveled to Istanbul on October 10, 2016, to speak at the World Energy Congress. While there, Putin met with Erdogan and revived the Turkish pipeline agreement with a special low gas price for Turkey.<sup>245</sup> On December 6, Turkish prime minister Binali Yildirim met in Moscow with his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev and Putin for talks on Syrian territorial integrity and economic relations. Putin expressed gratitude for Turkish ratification of the TurkStream pipeline agreement.

Meanwhile, as the assault on Aleppo gathered steam in October, Moscow prepared for a major blitz by showcasing the *Admiral Kuznetsov* aircraft carrier, which ostentatiously steamed toward Syria’s shores.<sup>245</sup> On November 15, Russia struck targets in Homs and Idlib provinces from the air and sea. The *Admiral Kuznetsov* saw combat for the first time in its troubled history. At same time, after a 28-day pause in airstrikes against Aleppo, Syrian bombing of opposition-held eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo resumed.<sup>246</sup>

On December 16, Putin told a press conference in Japan that in Aleppo “everything is going according to the agreements, including the agreements with the President of Turkey during his [August 9] visit to St Petersburg. We agreed that Turkey would provide any possible assistance with removing those militants who are willing to surrender in Aleppo—primarily to save civilian lives.” More recently, Putin and Erdogan agreed that there should be a nationwide ceasefire after which Russia and Turkey would sponsor new intra-Syrian talks between the Syrian government and the armed opposition. They would be held in Astana, Kazakhstan, and would supplement the Geneva negotiations.<sup>247</sup>

## Astana, Geneva, and Rojava

In fact, the battle for Aleppo ended on December 15, 2016, the day before Putin’s press conference in Japan. Opposition fighters and battered residents began to be evacuated out of eastern Aleppo toward Idlib Province.<sup>248</sup> Sidelining the United States and the United Nations, the foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey, and Iran met on December 20 and issued what became

known as the Moscow Declaration, which called for expanding the ceasefire in Syria.<sup>249</sup> On December 28, Russia and Turkey reached agreement on a nationwide ceasefire.<sup>250</sup>

The next day, Putin met with Lavrov and Shoigu in the Kremlin and approved going forward with the ceasefire beginning that midnight. Shoigu reported to Putin that the Syrian government and the “main opposition forces”—leaders of seven “moderate” opposition groups with more than 60,000 fighters, including Ahrar al-Sham—had signed on to the ceasefire that morning. Turkey would be a joint guarantor of the ceasefire. ISIS and al-Nusra were not part of the agreement and would continue to be regarded as terrorist organizations, as would other forces that did not heed the ceasefire.

At the same meeting, Lavrov reported on plans to invite Egypt to join the ceasefire effort, and later possibly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq, Jordan, and the Trump administration once in office as well. It echoed Putin’s proposal of June 29, 2015, that Syrian Foreign Minister Moallem had ridiculed at the time as a “miracle.” With reason, Putin now underscored that the arrangements were “very fragile.” Nevertheless, while referencing the upgrades to the Tartus and Hmeimim bases that had already begun, he gave Shoigu the go-ahead “to scale back our military presence in Syria.”<sup>251</sup>

Little more than 3 weeks later, Russia and Turkey together with Iran convened talks in Astana on January 23–24, 2017, which were joined by the UN Secretary General’s special envoy, Staffan de Mistura. While preparations for the talks went forward, Russia carried out separate and then for the first time joint airstrikes in support of the Turkish offensive against ISIS near al-Bab in northern Syria.<sup>252</sup>

In Astana, the Syrian government and opposition fighter delegations met in the same hotel ballroom for the opening of the talks. Otherwise, they interacted only indirectly and hostilely through the three hosts and the press. Neither the Syrian government nor the opposition delegations signed up to their hosts’ joint statement. Nevertheless, with Putin having set a fairly low bar with his “very fragile” comments, Russia and its co-sponsors declared the meeting a success simply for having reinforced their commitment to a ceasefire and pointing the Syrian participants toward a resumption of the Geneva talks.<sup>253</sup> That resumption finally took place on February 23.<sup>254</sup>

The prospects were not auspicious for either track.<sup>255</sup> On February 7, Asad repeated that “we need to liberate every single inch on the Syrian territory from those terrorists.”<sup>256</sup> The next day, meeting with a Russian State Duma delegation, Asad declared the Astana format far preferable to Geneva for facilitating the finding of shared points of view and moving the “Syrian

question” off dead center.<sup>257</sup> On February 16, Asad again reiterated his goal of retaking “every inch” of Syrian territory.<sup>258</sup>

Given that the Syrian government and opposition delegations did not even talk to each other in Astana, Asad’s comments paralleled his earlier disparagement of the Geneva format and disingenuous praise for the Moscow talks in spring 2015. Syrian delegation head al-Jaafari had done much to undermine Russian objectives in Moscow in 2015 and now seemed primed to do the same in Astana. Not surprisingly, even before they opened on February 23, progress at the resumed talks in Geneva was already being discounted.<sup>259</sup>

In terms of Turkey’s equities, not least of the challenges for Moscow has been how to approach the concept of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. Turkey has blackballed any Kurdish attendance at Astana, but Russia’s position is that the Kurds must eventually be involved in the Geneva negotiations. In fact, when Lavrov on January 27 briefed some Syrian opposition groups on the Astana meeting, they included representatives of the Syrian PYD.<sup>260</sup>

A draft constitution put into circulation in January by Russia for discussion by Syrians included a reference in Article 4 to “Kurdish cultural autonomy.” Otherwise, the draft repeatedly embraced the concept of a Syria whole and indivisible, beginning with Article 1, Paragraph 2.<sup>261</sup> Nevertheless, some concluded—in all likelihood erroneously—that Russia was ready to cede much more than cultural autonomy to Syria’s Kurds.<sup>262</sup>

However, while Russia continues to see a place for Kurds in postconflict Syria, it does not support in principle any independent territorial entities in Syria, presumably including an independent Kurdish entity. Addressing the danger that the “de-escalation zones” agreed on in May at Astana—discussed in the next section—will harden territorially and morph into the de facto fragmentation of Syria, Putin has emphasized that:

*I really hope (and what I am about to say is very important) that these zones do not become a prototype for the future territorial division in Syria. On the contrary, I expect that these de-escalation zones, if peace is established, and the people who will be controlling them, will cooperate with the official Syrian authorities.<sup>263</sup>*

As analysts in Moscow see it, only Russia can guarantee Turkey’s main objective of preventing the formation of a Kurdish autonomy. This is the strongest motivation for Turkey to cooperate with Russia in Syria, including as a co-sponsor of the Astana process. Russia is therefore comfortable with facilitating Turkish efforts to prevent a Kurdish statelet in northern Syria. But

Russia opposes Erdogan pushing beyond this to establish what would be in effect an exclusive Turkish zone or sphere of influence in northern Syria.<sup>264</sup>

Ankara is not just worried about an YPG-PKK statelet in northern Syria contiguous to Turkey's own Kurdish-heavy territories, but about an autonomy linked both to the United States and to Iran that would open up a new corridor for Iranian influence from Iran across northern Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean.<sup>265</sup> However, Turkey's efforts to crush PYD-YPG fighting forces have been frustrated by the United States, especially east of the Euphrates and by Russia west of the Euphrates.<sup>266</sup>

However, Russia needs Turkish buy-in to address its own military and political objectives in Syria. For Russia, according to one observer in Moscow, getting Turkish help in freeing Idlib, part of Latakia, part of Hamma, and western Aleppo Province is most important. Without Turkey, Russia cannot do this. The opposition goes through these territories to help the Free Syrian Army. As with the battle for Aleppo, logistics is key and Russia needs Turkey's help in preventing the opposition from getting supplies and reinforcements. Turkey still controls a strong opposition force of 65,000, according to this observer, compare to Syrian army strength of 100,000 to 110,000.<sup>267</sup>

In addition, another Moscow observer points out, Russia's Muslims are all Sunnis, and they are unhappy that Russia is supporting the Alawite Asad regime in its war against the Sunni Syrian opposition. The same could be said for Russia's Central Asian neighbors. They are all oriented on Sunni Turkey's policy toward Syria, and this has been a factor that Putin needs to take into consideration in dealing with Turkey's Erdogan.<sup>268</sup>

Despite Turkey's strong views on the subject, Russia and the United States both value the YPG as a fighting force against ISIS, but take different approaches toward taking advantage of what the YPG has to offer. To speed the liberation of the ISIS capital of Raqqa, President Trump on May 8 decided to go forward with limited and "metered" arming of YPG components of the Syrian Democratic Forces that would not pose "additional security risks" to Turkey.<sup>269</sup> Deliveries of these weapons began on May 30.<sup>270</sup>

While Russia has good contacts with the Kurds, it wants to lessen their zone of control.<sup>271</sup> Russia's stated policy is to maintain contacts with the YPG, but not to arm it. As Putin put it in May 2017, after the U.S. decision to begin supplying arms directly to the YPG:

*Unlike other countries, we have not declared any intention of supplying arms to Kurdish fighters. They do not have any great need for our supplies in any case, as*

*they have other supply channels. We do not see any need to get involved in arms supplies.*

*But the Kurds are a real factor in the situation in Syria and their fighters are taking part in operations against the so-called Islamic State and are among the most combat-ready groups; therefore, we think it perfectly justified to maintain working contacts with them, if only to avoid possible confrontation and situations that could pose a threat to our service personnel.<sup>272</sup>*

Putin made clear that Russia seeks an advantage for itself with Turkey vis-à-vis the United States by not arming the Kurds: “I am aware of the Turkish President’s concerns—and we discussed this yesterday—over the [U.S.] announcement that it will supply arms to the Kurds. We do not do this.”<sup>273</sup>

At the same time, Russia carefully maintains ties with the PYD-YPG as a lever with which to pressure Turkey. In spring 2017, Ankara continued to jockey for position in northern Syria against YPG forces while negotiating with Moscow over rolling back Russia’s Su-24M shoot-down sanctions.<sup>274</sup> Moscow, however, has throughout this transactional back-and-forth ignored Turkish pressure to close down the PYD’s Syrian Kurdistan office in the Russian capital. The Russian position is that the office has no diplomatic functions and enjoys the status only of an NGO.<sup>275</sup>

## **Tomahawk Response**

On April 4, 2017, Syrian government warplanes based at Shayrat airfield in Homs Province attacked Khan Shaykhun in Idlib Province with sarin gas. The strike killed more than 80 civilians, including children.<sup>276</sup> In response, the United States on April 7 launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles from the destroyers USS Porter and USS Ross in the Mediterranean against the Shayrat airbase.<sup>277</sup>

Sarin and other chemical weapons had been proscribed by the September 2013 agreement on ridding Syrian government stocks of all chemical weapons. The agreement followed the sarin strike of August 21, 2013, on the Damascus suburb of Ghouta that killed over 1,000 people, including many noncombatants.<sup>278</sup> However, Syrian forces had delivered at least four similar nerve agent strikes since December 2016 and multiple chlorine attacks since April 2014, according to one study.<sup>279</sup>

Official Russian reaction was predictably negative. President Putin released a statement calling the April 7 cruise missile strike “an act of aggression.” He asserted that Syria “has no

chemical weapons,” and charged that Washington’s move “dealt a serious blow to Russian-U.S. relations.”<sup>280</sup>

The Ministry of Defense echoed that all charges that Syrian government forces had used chemical weapons against Khan Sheikhun were “groundless.” It therefore “suspended” cooperation with the Pentagon on the memorandum signed in 2015 on preventing incidents in the air space above Syria.<sup>281</sup>

Russian government-controlled media quickly put out alternative scenarios and explanations for the casualties, all absolving the Asad regime of responsibility and obfuscating what had happened on April 4. At the same time, taking their cue from the Russian Defense Ministry’s disparaging assessment that only 23 of the 59 American Tomahawks had reached their targets on April 7, they suggested that the U.S. strike on Shayrat airfield had been ineffective and unimpressive.<sup>282</sup>

Within days, however, at least one team of Russian journalists had mapped the trajectory of the Tomahawks. They discovered that the twisting flight path had been cleverly designed to avoid air space controlled by Syrian and Russian air defense systems, including S-300s and S-400s, and illustrated their reporting article with a map.<sup>283</sup>

This author, by coincidence, visited Moscow for interviews from April 7 to 14. The first day of my meetings in the Russian capital coincided with the American attack on Shayrat airbase. The fresh reactions I encountered among regional experts ranged from complete denial by some that the Asad regime could have or would have attacked Khan Shaykhun with chemical weapons, to complete acceptance and lack of surprise by others that it had.<sup>284</sup>

Several analysts observed that the American response had punctured the balloon of Russian military prowess in Syria. Borrowing terminology from the world of soccer, one quipped that in Syria, “Russia strikes as much as it can, while America strikes as much as it wants.”

Initially, several of my interviewees argued that the American strike on the Shayrat airbase—unleashed as President Trump hosted Chinese President Xi at Mar-a-Lago in Florida—was most of all a message to China that it should take North Korea in hand lest the United States do the same to that country. Another interviewee, however, observed that the U.S. strike had sent a signal to multiple addressees—Russia, Asad, Iran, China, North Korea—at little cost.

Despite Putin’s charge of “aggression,” Moscow did not cancel or postpone the visit by U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson scheduled for April 12. In fact, once in Moscow, Tillerson met with not only Foreign Minister Lavrov but also President Putin. The day after Tillerson’s visit, and reportedly at his request, the Russian Foreign Ministry revived cooperation on the air safety memorandum.<sup>285</sup> In the weeks that followed, both the rate and level of bilateral Russian-

American contacts over air operations in Syria actually increased compared to before the April 7 Tomahawk strike on Shayrat airbase.<sup>286</sup>

In addition, at the highest level, Trump and Putin agreed in a phone call on May 2 to seek a ceasefire in Syria at the round of Astana talks set to begin the next day, to which Trump committed to send a U.S. representative. There was mention of the need to establish “safe zones” in Syria.<sup>287</sup> During the same phone call, Putin reportedly asked Trump to receive Foreign Minister Lavrov at the White House, which he did on May 10.<sup>288</sup> Stuart E. Jones, the Acting Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, attended the Astana talks on May 3–4. He thus became the highest ranked American official to be present during the Syria talks under the Trump administration.<sup>289</sup>

Russian, Turkish, and Iranian negotiators in Astana reached agreement in principle on a 6-month ceasefire and establishment of four “de-escalation areas and security zones”: in Idlib Province, the Damascus suburbs of East Ghouta, a pocket north of the central city of Homs, and parts of Deraa and al-Quneitra provinces along Syria’s southern border with Jordan. The negotiators mandated a joint working group to work out the details.<sup>290</sup>

The ceasefire went into effect on May 6. In a telephone call on the same day, Russian and American joint staff chiefs General Valery Gerasimov and General Joseph Dunford recommitted to full implementation of Syrian air safety agreement and discussed the memorandum on de-escalation zones agreed in Astana.<sup>291</sup>

In subsequent comments, Lavrov underscored that Russia’s de-escalation zones initiative was designed to echo American proposals for safe zones raised by Tillerson in Moscow on April 12 and Trump in his phone coversation with Putin on May 2.<sup>292</sup>

Among the regional experts I interviewed in Moscow in April, all but the persistent deniers of Asad complicity in the sarin attack viewed the strike on Khan Shaykhun as an effort by Damascus, backed by Tehran, to impede Putin’s pivot to the Syrian peace track in the run up to Russia’s March 2018 presidential elections. They also saw it as designed to frustrate Putin’s efforts to establish relations with the new Trump administration.

One long-time analyst of Russian politics and relations with the United States, however, was skeptical that the Syria issue could or would impact on Russia’s next elections. He observed that pro-Putin “propagandists” were already prepared to handle all possible alternative scenarios for developments in Syria. Other experts maintained that Russian voters were more focused on salary cuts, inflation, and official corruption than on Syria.

Indeed, fresh polling by the Levada Center while this author was in Moscow indicated that Putin continued to score high on security and international issues. However, the polling trends

also suggested that domestic factors were starting to offset Russian voters' support for Putin's "Crimea consensus."<sup>293</sup>

It could be argued that Syrian government chemical strikes on civilian populations had a tactical warfighting rationale under prevailing battlefield circumstances.<sup>294</sup> Moreover, given the American track record since 2013, Damascus probably calculated that it risked little chance of a response from the United States.

The main aim of the strike on Khan Shaykhun was probably not to upset Russian sponsored peace talks. However, the Syrian regime probably saw that possibility as an added plus rather than a reason not to go ahead and again use proscribed chemical weapons. Whether reckless, heedless, or deliberate, the bottom line was that the sarin strike on Khan Shaykhun was clearly a potentially provocative move in what was yet another round in the long-running Asad-Putin "arm wrestling" match.

As we have seen, there was an extensive track record of skirmishing between Moscow and Damascus over Russia's political-military tactics and objectives in Syria since even before the start of Russia's direct military intervention in 2015. The most recent round of political differences between Moscow and Damascus had started with the final ouster of all opposition forces from east Aleppo on December 22, 2016. Moscow succeeded in restarting the Geneva talks and developing a parallel negotiating format in Astana, but was frustrated by several largely unproductive rounds of talks in both venues.<sup>295</sup>

As the Astana and Geneva negotiations gained little traction, at least one long time scholar of the Middle East and critic of Putin's military intervention in Syria, Aleksander Shumilin, got more than his usual minimal access to the mass media to lay out his views.<sup>296</sup> The wider exposure of Shumilin's critical views of the Asad regime and of the Russian and Iranian approaches to Syria started in connection with Iranian President Rouhani's visit to Moscow on March 27–28 and continued after the events of April 4 and 7.<sup>297</sup>

In trying to explain Shumilin's increased prominence, one observer suggested that there was a split in the establishment. Those who did not totally agree with current Russian policy wanted views such as Shumilin's aired more widely in public. They were searching for new ideas—Plan B or C or D—to help Russia avoid getting stuck in the swamp of Syria. Even for Putin, suggested this expert, a Syrian peace settlement was important for reestablishing relations with Washington and easing economic sanctions. While Russia publicly continued to support Asad, Moscow was reportedly privately exploring alternatives.

As the bloom wore off Russia's military intervention in Syria, several regional observers in Moscow seemed once again to emphasize the priority of relations with the United States for

Russia, and to deemphasize the importance of Syria. Putin's highest task, argued one, should be to return to global politics and good relations with the United States. Russia's CIS neighbors, the United States, China, and Europe are all higher priorities for Russia than was Syria, they argued.

In exasperation, one analyst even called for Russia to forget its newly acquired bases in Syria. There would be other opportunities in the Middle East for a Russian presence in the region: Cyprus, Egypt, or Libya, for example. While that may be true, the record so far does not suggest that Putin will take that advice.

So far, the jury is still out on what the Astana and Geneva tracks will in the end produce, and the evolving situation continues to present serious challenges to American objectives and interests in Syria.<sup>298</sup> Nevertheless, Putin's de-escalation zones initiative may eventually develop into an escape hatch that will provide Russia political cover to avoid long-term involvement in an endless war in Syria. Already, Jordanian, Russian, and American representatives have reportedly been meeting behind the scenes to explore arrangements for a southern de-escalation zone in which Israeli equities would also loom large.<sup>299</sup>

There has, however, been increasing anxiety in Moscow over the impact of U.S. domestic politics on Russia's ability to do business with the Trump administration. According to one report, "officials in Moscow are fretting that the tycoon-turned-politician will be so engulfed by political crises at home that he'll have no chance to form a normal working relationship with . . . Putin."<sup>300</sup>

Putin himself, however, recommended patience in late May 2017. Those who had lost the elections in November 2016 refused to accept defeat and were using the "anti-Russia card" in political infighting, he asserted. "This is why we are in no hurry, we are ready to wait, yet we strongly hope that Russian-U.S. relations will become normal again sometime in the future."<sup>301</sup>

As for the Tomahawks, they seem to have proved effective in the mission. There have at least to date been no further chemical weapons attacks by Asad regime forces on the Syrian opposition since the American cruise missile strike of April 7.

## Lessons Learned

In their phone call on January 28, Putin endorsed "establishing real coordination of actions between Russia and the USA aimed at defeating ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria."<sup>302</sup> As President Trump continues to consider and implement a best way to move forward on working with Russia in the fight against ISIS and toward peace in Syria, events of the past

several years underscore several fundamental constraints Putin will be operating under, and some challenges that have been overstated.

### **Putin Cannot Deliver Asad**

Putin has succeeded beyond all expectations in preserving Asad in power. At the same time, Putin can no longer be under any illusions that Russia can easily manage Asad's war and political aspirations by the careful calibration of the amount of military and diplomatic support Russia extends to him.

Putin cannot automatically deliver Asad's resignation or slow departure from the Syrian political scene. Asad will have to be a willing party to any international deal. The Syrian president will continue to be his own man, however much pressure Putin puts on him, and will be on guard more than ever for his political and physical security.<sup>303</sup>

In an interview on December 7, 2016, Asad said he planned to "liberate" all of Syria and disparaged the June 2012 Geneva Communique, which Russia still supports.<sup>304</sup> Even after the total defeat of the opposition in Aleppo, Asad has continued to brand all the opposition as "terrorists" and to call for the "full elimination of terrorism all over the Syria territory."<sup>305</sup> Syrian head of delegation UN Ambassador Bashar al-Jaafari, who contributed to undermining the intra-Syrian talks that Russia sponsored in Moscow in January and April 2015 by calling the opposition representatives "terrorists," did much the same again in Astana, greeting them as "armed terrorist groups" in the opening session.<sup>306</sup>

In contrast, Putin has consistently stressed the need to extend and reinforce a nationwide ceasefire and reengagement in peace talks.<sup>307</sup> And Shoigu and Lavrov have suddenly pivoted toward recognizing at least some elements of the opposition as "moderates."<sup>308</sup>

Asad rules out discussing his political future with the opposition or any outside powers, including Russia. Any change to Syria's constitution will have to be approved in a referendum by "the Syrian people." Asad has commented, "It's not something we discuss either with the opposition or with any other country.<sup>309</sup> If I have the feeling that I want to be president, I will nominate myself, but that depends on . . . [whether] I feel that the Syrian people . . . want me."<sup>310</sup>

Particularly if pressed to cede power, Asad's resistance to any deal he thinks might harm his interests could even extend to suggesting that Russia's presence at Hmeimim airbase and Tartus port facility is no longer required. Russia needs to keep earning its keep in Asad's Syria and cannot rest on its laurels. Losing the bases would be a humiliation that Putin would likely do everything to avoid. Rather than pulling up stakes, Moscow is now focused on expanding the capacities of both Hmeimim and the port facility at Tartus.<sup>311</sup>

If Asad is put out of political commission by a serious health problem, this could be a lucky break for Putin.<sup>312</sup> However, this would depend on who might then replace Asad. Moreover, Russia will not be able unilaterally to name a replacement since Iran will also have a favorite. Besides, Moscow and Tehran will both have to contend with and defer to Damascus regime insiders, who will ultimately decide the issue.

### **Iran Constrains Putin's Freedom of Action**

The persistent view among many regional experts in Moscow is that Russia and Iran are tactical allies but strategic competitors.<sup>313</sup> As one stated, it would not be a bad thing for Russia if Iranian influence were decreased in Syria, though Moscow could not say this openly.<sup>314</sup>

Russian-Iranian cooperation is sustainable, including in Syria, so Russia will resist U.S. pressure to break with Iran. However, while pragmatism dictates this marriage of convenience, mutual mistrust prevents it from evolving into an alliance. Besides, neither side wants the obligations that would come with an alliance. Iran sees itself as the leader in the region, while an alliance would undermine Russia's other goals in the region and beyond, since the Middle East is just one dimension of Russia's foreign relationships.<sup>315</sup>

Mutual irritations discreetly persist despite the "situational alliance" in Syria. According to one "informed" Moscow insider, "Mutual complaints are accumulating, although they are rarely voiced."<sup>316</sup> In February 2017, Russian deputy premier Dmitry Rogozin recently postponed a trip to Tehran during which he reportedly was to complain of Iranian purchases of Boeing and Airbus instead of Russian passenger jets.<sup>317</sup>

Strategically, Tehran will not be keen to see its leverage in Damascus diminish and that of Moscow grow. Some experts on the region already report that Iranian officials are less certain and proud that Iran is calling the shots in Syria, and more concerned that the situation has flipped and that Russia is now in the driver's seat. Should the joint efforts of Russia and Iran nevertheless succeed in stabilizing Damascus, we should then expect a difficult conversation between Moscow and Tehran over relations with Syria.<sup>318</sup>

Tehran will support Asad in his resistance to any Russian pressure that would impact what Tehran sees as its existential interests in Syria as a vital link in its land bridge to the Lebanese Hizballah.<sup>319</sup> Indeed, Asad had long been able to count on Tehran being a far more fervent supporter than Russia, one ready to throw everything into the battle to preserve him.<sup>320</sup>

In December 2016, Iran, Syria, and their militias blocked and delayed implementation of the Russian-Turkish ceasefire-evacuation deal on Aleppo with last-minute demands, including for assistance to a couple of Shiite areas near Aleppo.<sup>321</sup> In January 2017, already irritated

at Russia treating it as a lesser partner in coordinating the upcoming Astana talks with Turkey, Iran was further discomfited by their invitation for the United States to attend despite Iran's opposition.<sup>322</sup>

Russian reporters subsequently wrote that Iran in essence blackballed participation by an American delegation at the talks in Astana. Some Russian analysts also speculated that Iran "needs new trump cards in future haggling with the United States," where the new Trump administration was "demonstrating determination to harden the policy on Iran," including toward the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiated by the Obama administration.<sup>323</sup>

Asad is mindful that Iran has his back more fundamentally than does Russia. Much like Asad, Tehran from the beginning has preferred a military-security solution that would batter any and all opposition,<sup>324</sup> secure Asad and his Alawite regime in Damascus, and safeguard Tehran's interest in maintaining Syria whole and as a conduit to Lebanon from which to pressure Israel. At present, while Putin looks for a viable military "exit-light strategy" of sorts, Iran wants to burrow even further into Syria.<sup>325</sup>

In his interview to Portugal's RTP TV on November 16, 2016, Asad did not give Russia pride of place. Instead, he played Russia off against Iran and the Lebanese Hizballah, placing them all on the same level and extending no preferential thanks to Putin for Russia's contribution to his political survival. "All of them are important," he argued, "so it's difficult to say who is more important than the other."<sup>326</sup>

Indeed, given the growing presence of Russia and Iran in his country, the Syrian president will have all the more reason to keep up his guard and continue balancing the longtime strategic rivals against each other. Russia's popularity may be rising among Syrians, who reportedly resent Iran's interventionist attitude. Still, according to one recent report, "Asad is balancing Iran with Russians and vice versa. If Iran presses too hard, he cites Russian reservations. If Russia presses too hard, Assad then refers to Iranian objections."<sup>327</sup>

Russia may sympathize with the United States about Iranian meddling throughout the Middle East, but Russia cannot attack the problem directly. Ironically, where Russia is nevertheless successful, it likely means that it has displaced not only Iran but also the United States.

Russia and Iran both shy away from zero-sum approaches to their ancient, tangled, and contradictory relationship. Russia wants to maintain ties with all countries in the Middle East, even Iranian nemeses Israel and Saudi Arabia. Russia would not do anything with Iran in Syria that might upset Israel in a major way.<sup>328</sup> This irritates Iran, but Iran lives with it, as does Russia with Iran's nuclear ambitions and rocky relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia.

While Russia's ability to put pressure on Iran is exaggerated, the West nevertheless can affect the dynamics of the Russian-Iranian relationship.<sup>329</sup> When discussing Iran, veteran Tehran watchers in Moscow argued that the Putin-Rouhani summit in Moscow on March 28, 2017, had not accomplished all that it could.<sup>330</sup> They suggested that Putin put his foot on the brake of developing Russian-Iranian relations so as not to impede his efforts to repair relations with Washington. Putin was wary about the U.S. reaction to progress in his dealings with Tehran, some explained. The Iranians especially seemed to have been disappointed by the results, they claimed, and overall Russian-Iranian relations are still characterized by a profound lack of trust.<sup>331</sup>

One expert who supports closer Russian-Iranian relations elaborated on the many limitations to what the two countries might achieve in pursuing the goal of a “strategic” relationship, as called for by Putin and Rouhani at their March summit.<sup>332</sup> In Syria, Russia is trying to cooperate with Iran, but it is not easy and Russia and Iran have different views on the future of Syria. Iran also does not like it that Russia does nothing to prevent Israeli attacks on Iranian interests in Syria, but Russia is not interested in helping Hezbollah on the Golan Heights. In Iraq, Russia is willing to send weapons, but not to engage militarily or to choose sides in the Sunni-Syria confrontation. In Yemen, Russia does not want to engage militarily, but Iran is doing some of that.<sup>333</sup>

Nevertheless, alongside irritations on both sides, Russia and Iran have episodically found common ground for cooperation in the past in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, much as they have found more recently in Syria.<sup>334</sup> The bottom line, however, is that there can be no U.S. expectation that Russia will join with the United States in an across-the-board campaign against Iranian actions in the Middle East or to scuttle the nuclear JCPOA.

### **Putin Can Work with Israel and Arab Sunni Leaders**

While indeed working with Iran militarily in Syria, Russia has successfully pursued engagement with most major Sunni powers in the Middle East, most interestingly Saudi Arabia, as well as with Israel. At the same time, Russia has cooperated in the P5+1 to clinch the July 14, 2015, JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran despite opposition to such an agreement from Saudi Arabia and Israel.<sup>335</sup>

Especially after Obama's August 2013 decision not to back up his chemical weapons “red line” with military action against Bashar al-Assad in Syria, distressed Middle East leaders began to look to Putin as a steadier hand playing a weightier role in the region. They also reached out to him as a signal to Washington not to take them for granted. As former National Security

Council official Dennis Ross notes, “Perceptions matter more than mere power: The Russians are seen as willing to use power to affect the balance of power in the region, and we are not.”<sup>336</sup>

Moreover, given Russia’s dealings with Iran, however uneven, the Sunni monarchies evidently thought it prudent to try to loosen the grip of the Moscow-Tehran relationship so as to slow down the growth of Iranian power in the region.<sup>337</sup> Putin reportedly has argued with Americans, Saudis, and Israelis that Russia’s active efforts in Syria could serve in time to constrain Iran’s and Hizballah’s role there.<sup>338</sup>

The launch of Russia’s air campaign reinforced assertions that Moscow was now firmly part of an Iranian-led “Shia axis” of resistance fighting the various Sunni oppositions in Syria and their regional Sunni backers. The air operation is likely to have inflamed preexisting negative opinion toward Russia on the Arab street, particularly in the Gulf.<sup>339</sup> In Saudi Arabia and most other Sunni Middle East countries, the United States and Russia are equally unpopular on the street.<sup>340</sup>

Nevertheless, Moscow has displayed agile cross-sectarian diplomatic footwork before and since the start of its air campaign.<sup>341</sup> However jaundiced toward Saudi Arabia are Russia’s own experts, and however inflamed against Russia is the “Arab street,” at the very top Putin and Gulf Sunni royals appear to have no complexes about dealing with each other. During the Obama administration, they began to court Russia as an ascending power in the region and to regard the United States as a declining power.

For the Saudis, the perceived Iranian threat in Yemen is clearly much more important than in Syria.<sup>342</sup> The Saudis are willing to work with Russia as long as Russia does not give them grief over Yemen. King Salman reportedly “praised” Russia’s abstention on April 14, 2015, in the UNSC vote to adopt Resolution 2216 addressing the Yemen crisis.<sup>343</sup> While fully engaged in Yemen, the Saudis have not engaged with their own forces in Syria. Nevertheless, the Saudis and other Gulf powers can still up the ante in Syria by increasing their military and financial support to the opposition. This could seriously thwart Asad’s dream of taking back the rest of Syria that still remains outside Damascus’s control.<sup>344</sup>

Lavrov’s statement in his meeting with Putin and Shoigu on December 29, 2016, on plans to invite Egypt to join the ceasefire effort, and later possibly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq, Jordan, and the United States, was clear recognition that Moscow needs to get Saudi and wider regional buy-in to the Syrian peace process.<sup>345</sup> Otherwise, argues one of Moscow’s preeminent foreign affairs analysts, leaving them out “will evoke growing rejection in the region, which has traditionally taken a nervous view of the imposition of decisions from outside. So without Saudi

Arabia and other Gulf countries, ideally Egypt and Jordan, a stable settlement is, for all that, not in the cards.”<sup>346</sup>

Over the years, Moscow has become cynical toward repeated Saudi dangling of prospects for substantial arms sales, which in the end always peter out. Meanwhile, Riyadh has repeatedly concluded impressive arms contracts with the U.S., most recently put at \$110 billion during President Trump’s May 20–21 visit.<sup>347</sup>

Perhaps more important in the long run than arms sales, however, the possibilities seem to be improving for benefits to Russia from closer relations with Saudi Arabia in the energy sector. In May 2017, Russia coordinated with Saudi Arabia and other OPEC members on restraining the supply of oil to world markets, potentially lifting the price of oil and increasing revenues to the Russian state budget.<sup>348</sup>

Along with the oil agreement with Russia, Riyadh balanced Trump’s trip to Saudi Arabia with Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince Muhammed bin Salman’s call on Putin in the Kremlin.<sup>349</sup> Both sides touted the meeting, and it followed the first ever formal meeting between Rosneft boss Igor Sechin and Saudi Aramco chief Amin Nasser in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.<sup>350</sup>

### **Putin Covets the Mantle of Peacemaker**

Putin’s public approval ratings remain at their post–Crimean annexation record-high levels.<sup>351</sup> And for the third straight year, *Forbes*, in December 2016, named Putin the most influential person in the world.<sup>352</sup> Syria may not be as important to the Russian public as the Crimea. Nevertheless, Putin does not want Syria to be a negative issue going toward the next presidential elections, scheduled for March 11, 2018. This may be the major reason he has wanted to “solve” Aleppo so quickly and pivot again toward efforts to pose as a peacemaker. In this endeavor, co-operation with the Trump administration and renewed U.S. treatment of Russia as a “respected equal” will make Syria a more manageable issue for Putin to present to the Russian public and electorate.

Russia’s campaign in Syria has not burdened the Russian state budget directly. But the real costs have gone beyond the immediate expenditures on military activities there. These have added to the impact of other factors responsible for what many economists now expect will be a prolonged period of stagnation that actually began in 2012, even before the bottom fell out of the world oil market.<sup>353</sup> Russia could be facing two decades of stagnation, with its economy stuck in the doldrums as the 2018 presidential elections approach.<sup>354</sup> And one of the repercussions of Putin’s armed interventions in Ukraine and Syria has been the steady draining of Putin’s revered special funds, the Reserve Fund and the National Wealth Fund, to cover budget deficits.<sup>355</sup>

Putin on December 29 gave defense minister Shoigu the go-ahead to begin scaling back Russian forces in Syria. As with Putin's earlier "partial withdrawal" announcement in March, it was more a rebalancing of the asset mix rather than a meaningful drawdown. Besides, most of Russia's assets in the Syrian theater were airborne, and these could be quickly returned to Syria or used in stand-off mode.

In any event, pursuant to Putin's order, chief of the general staff Valery Gerasimov, on January 6, 2017, announced the beginning of the withdrawal of the Russian carrier group from Syria. Northern Fleet ships would lead the way, to include the carrier *Admiral Kuznetsov*.<sup>356</sup> Military experts, however, would point out that the *Kuznetsov*'s deployment all along had been meant to be short so that the design-plagued ship could once more undergo repairs.<sup>357</sup>

The war in Syria clearly is far from over, and peace and reconstruction lie far in the future.<sup>358</sup> Some of the same factors that helped Russia save Asad—in particular the multiplicity of opposition forces and the contradictions among them and their foreign supporters—will also act to prolong the war and any negotiations to end it. Besides, the Syrian regime appears intent on abiding by the post-Aleppo ceasefire only when it suits its own objectives. The regime's month-long siege of the Wadi Barada valley outside Damascus, replete with rocket and barrel bomb assaults, was a reminder of the extreme brutality that sparked the civil war 5 years earlier.<sup>359</sup>

There will be no quick fix. Even as Damascus and its allies were finally about to force opposition fighters holed up in eastern Aleppo into submission, ISIS recaptured Palmyra from fleeing Syrian government troops on December 11.<sup>360</sup> The debacle sparked a torrent of critical commentary in the Russian press. One remarkable editorial endorsed finding a stronger replacement for the weak Asad regime through political compromise after having taken Aleppo. Otherwise, there could be no guarantee for the security of Russia's bases in Syria, and Russia would have to repeatedly come to the rescue of the Asad regime as it lost yet more Syrian cities. Besides, it argued, polls suggested that Asad's fate was of little interest to Russian citizens.<sup>361</sup>

Future similar setbacks probably will again raise questions over how many times Russia will have to save Asad's bacon and whether Asad is really worth it. To date, Putin clearly thinks he has no choice, especially given what he regards as the unpalatable, most likely alternatives.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

Russia's military and political moves into Syria and acquired respect across the Middle East are important for U.S. national security interests and policy in the region going forward. Russia's greater presence alters the context in which the U.S. priority of fighting ISIS must operate.

What Putin has accomplished in Syria shapes some of the hard choices that the United States must now make.

As the Trump administration formulates and fine-tunes a new approach, Washington must strictly prioritize its primary, secondary, and tertiary objectives and preferred or acceptable outcomes. With fighting ISIS the highest priority, other goals will need to be put off to the longer term, if not downgraded, for the sake of advancing the more immediate priority of fighting terrorism.

Especially given opposition in Syria, Russia, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran to breaking up Syria, the United States should work toward a Syria that remains unified even as the U.S. fight against ISIS benefits from Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG military prowess. As with the Russian approach, the Kurds should be part of the mix in political negotiations going forward but only in the context of a unified Syria at the end of the process.

The United States should explore the military pros and cons of a more robust cooperation with Russia in Syria, without conceding anything in advance on Asad's future or Iran's place in the region. The United States can join with Russia in insisting that Asad must talk and negotiate with the opposition. Russia's agenda on this is much closer to the United States than is Iran's.

Nevertheless, Washington needs to downgrade any expectations that Russia can or will betray Asad any time soon. In fact, Russia will continue to attack opposition forces that it judges threaten the Asad regime. By the same token, the United States needs to be prepared selectively and judiciously to strike at Syrian regime forces from time to time to inhibit their attacks on non-terrorist opposition fighters. Moscow will publicly complain but privately understand. It may even appreciate whatever military pressure the United States might put on Asad to engage in a real political negotiation with the non-jihadist opposition.

Washington should work quietly with Moscow toward diminishing Iranian leverage in Syria and the region. The United States should abandon heavy-handed attempts to peel Russia away from Iran, since Russia will only go so far. In reality, Moscow and Tehran are not so close anyway. Moreover, some estrangement will happen on its own accord. However, frictions are always balanced by patience in Russian-Iranian relations. As a result, they are elastic and capable of stretching without snapping. That said, while Moscow probably hopes that its weight in Syria will increase over time at Iran's expense, Russia has little interest in sharing its gains with the United States.

With or without Russia, the United States should engage more robustly militarily in Syria. Besides being necessary to fight ISIS more effectively, this will also help reverse the view that took hold during the Obama years that the United States is a declining power in the region, and

encourage Middle Eastern capitals to rebalance their relations with Moscow. However, while local Sunni powers in the region want the United States to act more decisively against Iranian interests, they do not want the United States to go to war with Iran. They will also continue to nurture expanded ties with Moscow given Russia's enhanced position in Syria.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The author has visited Moscow 13 times from May 2010 to April 2017 to conduct research and consult with various Russian experts. These visits are cited throughout this paper as “Author’s conversations in Moscow.” The present essay is a sequel to the author’s previous work on the subject, which left off in May 2015, and can be read in conjunction with that earlier work. See John W. Parker, *Understanding Putin Through a Middle Eastern Looking Glass*, Strategic Perspectives no. 19 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, July 2015), available at <<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-19.pdf>>. See also John W. Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program: Replay or Breakthrough?* Strategic Perspectives no. 9 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, March 2012), available at <<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-9.pdf>>.

<sup>2</sup>For a recent report on the enduring support for Asad by a Turkish observer, who estimates that Asad today could win over 70 percent in a presidential election, see Fehim Taştekin, “What Will Be the Cost of Aleppo Victory for Damascus?” *al-Monitor*, January 16, 2017, available at <[www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/turkey-syria-was-aleppo-a-pyrrhic-victory.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/turkey-syria-was-aleppo-a-pyrrhic-victory.html)>.

<sup>3</sup>Noted Western analyst Charles Lister would reach much the same conclusion at the end of his celebrated granular analysis of the evolution of the Syrian revolution and civil war. See Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 390–391.

<sup>4</sup>Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 7–9.

<sup>5</sup>Lister, 63, 74–75, 80–81, 86.

<sup>6</sup>Expert comments, “Defeating Daesh and the Day After,” conference, National Defense University, Washington, DC, June 28, 2016.

<sup>7</sup>Paragraph 93 states that “Russia supports the unity, independence and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic as a secular, democratic, pluralistic state, representatives of all ethnic and religious groups which will live in peace and security and to enjoy equal rights and opportunities.” See “Foreign Policy Concept,” Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Web site, December 1, 2016, available at <[www.mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2542248)>.

<sup>8</sup>On all of these themes, see Parker, *Understanding Putin*, and author’s conversations in Moscow, June 2016.

<sup>9</sup>Andrew E. Kramer and Anne Barnard, “Russian Soldiers Join Syria Fight,” *New York Times*, October 6, 2015, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/world/middleeast/russian-soldiers-join-syria-fight.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/world/middleeast/russian-soldiers-join-syria-fight.html)>.

<sup>10</sup>Vladimir Solovyov, interview with Vladimir Putin, Sochi, October 10, 2015, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50482>>.

<sup>11</sup>The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, and by the Arabic Daesh.

<sup>12</sup>President of Russia Web site, “Meeting with Government Members, September 30, 2015, Novo-Ogaryovo, Moscow Region,” September 30, 2015, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50401>>.

<sup>13</sup> Russian Security Service Deputy Director Yevgeny Sysoyev, Sochi, November 10, 2015.

Sysoyev put the total number of ISIS fighters in Syria at 50,000 and in Iraq at 30,000. See “V FSB zayavili o snizhenii terroristicheskoy aktivnosti v Rossii za minuvshij god v 2,5 raza” [The FSB Announced a 2.5 Times Reduction in Terrorist Activity in Russia over the Past Year], *News.ru*, November 10, 2015, available at <[www.newsru.com/russia/10nov2015/fsb.html](http://www.newsru.com/russia/10nov2015/fsb.html)>. On sympathy toward ISIS in the Caucasus, see Neil MacFarquhar, “Islamic State’s Recruiting in Caucasus Prompts Growing Concern in Russia,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2015, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2015/11/21/world/europe/for-russia-links-between-caucasus-and-isis-provoke-anxiety.html?emc=eta1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/21/world/europe/for-russia-links-between-caucasus-and-isis-provoke-anxiety.html?emc=eta1)>; and Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 67–68.

<sup>14</sup> Author’s conversations in Moscow, June 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 10–11.

<sup>17</sup> For background on the development of the Syrian Express, see Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 16–18, 69; Aleksey Nikolsky, “Russian Naval Presence in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Problem of Projected Naval Basing,” *Moscow Defense Brief* 40, no. 2 (2014), 5–8; Ilya Kramnik, “Sirijskij ehkspres. Kto podstavil plecho Basharu Asadu” [Syrian Express: Who Lent a Shoulder to Bashar Asad], *Lenta.ru*, October 6, 2015, available at <<http://lenta.ru/articles/2015/10/06/express/>>; and Sergey Ishchenko, “Doroga zhizni’ dlja aviabazy ‘Hmejmim’” [“The Road of Life” for the “Hmeimim” Airbase], *Svobodnaya Pressa*, October 16, 2015, available at <<http://svpressa.ru/war21/article/133967/>>.

<sup>18</sup> Lister, 88–90.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 83–84, 88–91, 128.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 119–120, 136.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 330.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 332–333, 351–352.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer Griffin and Lucas Tomlinson, “Exclusive: Quds Force Commander Soleimani Visited Moscow, Met Russian Leaders in Defiance of Sanctions,” Fox News, August 6, 2015, available at <[www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/08/06/exclusive-quds-force-commander-soleimani-visited-moscow-met-russian-leaders-in/#](http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/08/06/exclusive-quds-force-commander-soleimani-visited-moscow-met-russian-leaders-in/#)>. On this supposed visit, see also Laila Bassam and Tom Perry, “How Iranian General Plotted Out Syrian Assault in Moscow,” Reuters, October 6, 2015, available at <[www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/06/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006](http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/10/06/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006)>. Another unconfirmed Soleimani visit to Moscow was reported in mid-September: “Senior Iranian General Said to Make Second Moscow Trip,” *The Times of Israel*, September 15, 2015, available at <[www.timesofisrael.com/senior-iranian-general-said-to-make-second-moscow-trip/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/senior-iranian-general-said-to-make-second-moscow-trip/)>.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, “Iran’s Military Intervention in Syria: Long-Term Implications,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policywatch* 2505, October 15, 2015, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-military-intervention-in-syria-long-term-implications](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-military-intervention-in-syria-long-term-implications)>; and Ali Alfoneh and Michael Eisenstadt, “Iranian Casualties in Syria and the Strategic Logic of Intervention,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policywatch* 2585, March 11, 2016, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-casualties-in-syria-and-the-strategic-logic-of-intervention](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-casualties-in-syria-and-the-strategic-logic-of-intervention)>.

<sup>25</sup> “President al-Assad’s Address to the Nation: July, 2015,” SANA, July 27, 2015, available at <<https://syria360.wordpress.com/2015/07/27/president-al-assads-full-speech-july-2015/>>.

<sup>26</sup> Ilya Kramnik, “Burja v Levante. Kakoj mozhet byt’ vojna Rossii protiv ‘Islamskogo

gosudarstva” [Storm in the Levant: What Kind of War Might Russia Wage against the “Islamic State”], *Lenta.ru*, June 11, 2015, available at <[lenta.ru/articles/2015/06/10/dimashq/](http://lenta.ru/articles/2015/06/10/dimashq/)>.

<sup>27</sup> Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 7–9.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 2, 390.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 331.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 58–59.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 119–120, 122.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 7, 61, 77–78, 83–85, 114–115.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 95–96.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 77–78, 154.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 384–385.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 343–344, 384–385.

<sup>47</sup> “Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012–2017,” Arms Control Association, April 7, 2017, available at <[www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity](http://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity)>.

<sup>48</sup> Vladimir Razuvayev, “Chto oznachaet operacija v Sirii dlja rossijskoj politiki. Vojna RF na Blizhnem Vostoke: svoi sredi chuzhih” [What the Operation in Syria Means for Russian Politics; Russian Federation’s War in the Middle East: Our Boys Among Strangers], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta Online*, November 3, 2015, available at <[www.ng.ru/ng\\_politics/2015-11-03/9\\_syria.html](http://www.ng.ru/ng_politics/2015-11-03/9_syria.html)>.

<sup>49</sup> Anastasiya Lyalikova, “Shoigu soobshhil o predotvraschenii udara 624 krylatymi raketami po Sirii” [Shoigu Reported on the Prevention of a Strike by 624 Cruise Missiles on Syria], RBK, August 15, 2016, available at <[www.rbc.ru/politics/15/08/2016/57b1c3ee9a794700f82d7c0d](http://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/08/2016/57b1c3ee9a794700f82d7c0d)>.

<sup>50</sup> For a short analysis of the historical documentation, see Adam Wambolt, “DefCon III,” Richard Nixon Historical Research Center, October 14, 2014, available at <[www.nixonlegacy.org/the-new-nixon/2014/10/defcon-iii](http://www.nixonlegacy.org/the-new-nixon/2014/10/defcon-iii)>. See also Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1979), 581–591; and James F. Jeffrey and Michael Eisenstadt, “U.S. Military Engagement in the Broader Middle East,” Part I, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy Focus* 143, March 2016, 9–11, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus143-Jeffrey.pdf](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus143-Jeffrey.pdf)>.

<sup>51</sup> President Barack Obama, “Press Conference by the President,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, October 2, 2015, available at <[www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/10/02/press-conference-president)>.

<sup>52</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 2016), available at <[www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/)>.

<sup>53</sup> David Samuels, “The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama’s Foreign-Policy Guru,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2016, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html?ref=todayspaper](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/magazine/the-aspiring-novelist-who-became-obamas-foreign-policy-guru.html?ref=todayspaper)>.

<sup>54</sup> Philip Gordon, “It’s Time to Rethink Syria,” *Politico*, September 25, 2015, available at <[www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/its-time-to-rethink-syria-213184?o=1](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/09/its-time-to-rethink-syria-213184?o=1)>.

<sup>55</sup> Author’s notes on the question and answer session after Gordon’s presentation at the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy, March 17, 2016. For a summary of the presentations by Gordon and Anna Borshchevskaya, see <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/putins-middle-east-policy-causes-and-consequences](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/putins-middle-east-policy-causes-and-consequences)>. See also the remarks by Prem Kumar, who served on the National Security Council (NSC) staff for 5 years, including as Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa from 2013 to 2015. Kumar, panel on “Obama’s Mideast Legacy and the Next Administration,” Middle East Institute, 69<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, November 13, 2015, available at <[www.mei.edu/events/obamas-mideast-legacy-and-next-administration](http://www.mei.edu/events/obamas-mideast-legacy-and-next-administration)>. Steven Simon, who was senior director in the NSC for Middle East and North Africa in 2011–2012, also warns about the dangers of escalation in Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, “How to Avoid a Syrian Quagmire,” *New York Times*, October 6, 2016, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2016/10/06/opinion/dont-intervene-in-syria.html?ref=todayspaper](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/06/opinion/dont-intervene-in-syria.html?ref=todayspaper)>. Elsewhere, Derek Chollet, who served at the White House as Senior Director for Strategic Planning in the NSC from 2011–2012 and as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs at the Pentagon from 2012–2015, has written that some senior White House officials would dismiss the calls by unnamed “foreign policy grandees” for more forceful action in unspecified regions of the world with the quip “too much college, not enough knowledge.” Derek Chollet, *The Long Game* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016), 226.

<sup>56</sup> Andrei Nekrasov, “Russia’s Motives in Syria Are Not All Geopolitical,” *Financial Times*, June 19, 2013, at <[www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f41794d4-d738-11e2-a26a-00144feab7de.html#ixzz2WsLAqn51](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f41794d4-d738-11e2-a26a-00144feab7de.html#ixzz2WsLAqn51)>; Lister, 119–120, 136; and Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 15.

<sup>57</sup> Anne Barnard, “Syrian Forces and Hizballah Fight Insurgents for Control of Border, and Routes,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2015; and Anne Barnard, “Syria Is Disintegrating into Fragmented Parts Under Pressure of War,” *New York Times*, July 16, 2015. For insights into the tragedy of Palmyra through the eyes of a Syrian soldier whom ISIS beheaded, see Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, “From Syrian Officer, an Insider’s Look at War,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Lister, 183, 231–232, 347–348.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 112, 162, 195, 238, 253, 257.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 338–340.

<sup>61</sup> “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin” was broadcast live on Channel One, Rossiya-1 and Rossiya-24 TV channels, and Mayak, Vesti FM, and Radio Rossii radio stations. April 16, 2015, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49261>>. The author is grateful to Leonid Isayev, “Opjat’ Udivili: Itogi Sirijskoj Kampanii Moskvy” [We Have Surprised Them Again: Results of Moscow’s Syria Campaign], *Politkom.ru*, March 21, 2016, available at <<http://test.politcom.ru/20898.html>>, for the reminder.

<sup>62</sup> Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 73. This earlier publication tracks Moscow's reaction to the Arab Spring and Syrian conflict into May 2015 and sets the stage for the current discussion of Putin's approach to Syria beginning in June 2015.

<sup>63</sup> Sergey Strokan and Maksim Yusin, "Ni mira, ni Pal'miry. Islamisty prevrashhajut sirijskoe gosudarstvo v razvaliny" [Neither Peace, Nor Palmyra: Islamists Turn the Syrian State into Ruins], *Kommersant*, May 22, 2015, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/2731056](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2731056)>.

<sup>64</sup> Lister, 356.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Birnbaum, "Putin Sees Truce as Win for Russia," *Washington Post*, February 26, 2016. This was the prevalent view that this author encountered in his conversations in Moscow in June 2016.

<sup>66</sup> Anton Lavrov, "Konflikt v Sirii v 2013–2016 gg" [The Conflict in Syria from 2013–2016], Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, *Jekspert Vooruzhenij* 123, no. 2 (March–April 2016), 60.

<sup>67</sup> "President al-Assad's Address to the Nation: July, 2015," SANA, July 27, 2015, available at <<https://syria360.wordpress.com/2015/07/27/president-al-assads-full-speech-july-2015/>>.

<sup>68</sup> On surprise and other evolving aspects of foreign political-military strategy under Putin, see Michael Kofman, "The Moscow School of Hard Knocks: Key Pillars of Russian Strategy," *War on the Rocks*.com, January 17, 2017, available at <<https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/the-moscow-school-of-hard-knocks-key-pillars-of-russian-strategy/>>.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, "Obama Makes His Case," *New York Times*, July 15, 2015.

<sup>70</sup> "Readout of the Presidents Call with President Putin of Russia," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, February 10, 2015, available at <[www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/10/readout-presidents-call-president-putin-russia](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/10/readout-presidents-call-president-putin-russia)>.

<sup>71</sup> Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 73–74.

<sup>72</sup> Friedman, "Obama Makes His Case." Both sides have kept a tight lid on what was discussed during the two presidents' phone call on June 25. The broad subjects included the ISIS threat, Syria, Ukraine, the Iranian nuclear negotiations, and bilateral issues. However, aside from indicating that the two presidents had instructed their foreign ministers to discuss combating the spread of ISIS in the Middle East, neither side at the time divulged any further details of their phone call. The official Kremlin bare-bones description is at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49768>>. The account provided by the American side is at "Readout of the President's Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia." See also Peter Baker and David M. Herszenhorn, "Calling Obama, Putin Breaks His Silence," *New York Times*, June 26, 2015.

Obama spoke with Friedman only after the Iranian nuclear deal was in the bag. With the June 30 Iran nuclear negotiations deadline looming, Obama presumably would not have wanted to let disagreement over Syria upset cooperation with Russia on finishing up what would become known as the nuclear Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). For the text of the JCPOA and associated materials, see "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," U.S. Department of State, available at <[www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa](http://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa)>. Given the tense atmosphere in Vienna, Obama probably also would have been leery that a sudden American lurch onto the Syrian battlefield might cause Iran to pull back in Vienna on the JCPOA negotiations. Leon Panetta, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency from 2009–2011 and Secretary of Defense from 2011–2013, would later picture Obama's stance toward Iran as encompassing the precepts that "if you ratchet up sanctions, it could cause a war. If you start

opposing their [Iran's] interest in Syria, well, that could start a war, too." (See Samuels, "The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama's Foreign-Policy Guru.")

<sup>73</sup> "Meeting with Government Members September 30, 2015, Novo-Ogaryovo, Moscow Region."

<sup>74</sup> "Interview to Vladimir Solovyov, October 10, 2015, Sochi," October 12, 2015, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50482>>.

<sup>75</sup> "Vladimir Putin Took Part in the Third Truth and Justice Regional and Local Media Forum," St. Petersburg, April 7, 2016, President of Russia Web site, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51685>>. Similarly, 2 years earlier, only after it was all over but the shouting, had Putin openly conceded that Russian soldiers had been involved in taking over Crimea (Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 38.)

<sup>76</sup> Sergey Korzun, "Stanislav Belkovskij ob itogah 2015 goda dlja 'ustavshego' Putina" [Stanislav Belkovskiy on the Results of 2015 for a "Tired" Putin], RFI, December 26, 2015, available at <<http://ru.rfi.fr/rossiya/20151226-stanislav-belkovskii-ob-itogakh-2015-goda-dlya-ustavshego-putina>>. Belkovskiy argued, "Well, the invasion of Syria, which marked the continuation of the Kremlin's war line. It became clear that the operation to force the West to love [Russia], launched by Vladimir Putin after the annexation of the Crimea in spring 2014, was entering a dead end and therefore needed new theaters of war, new subjects which would encourage the West to negotiate with Putin's Russia. The West as before is not ready for negotiations, so this means that Syria will not be the last front."

<sup>77</sup> Michael Birnbaum and Carol Morello, "No Breakthroughs as Kerry, Putin Meet in Sochi," *Washington Post*, May 13, 2015, available at <[www.washingtonpost.com/world/no-breakthroughs-as-kerry-putin-meet-in-sochi/2015/05/12/29b4857a-f811-11e4-a47c-e56f4db884ed\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.1454285398c6](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/no-breakthroughs-as-kerry-putin-meet-in-sochi/2015/05/12/29b4857a-f811-11e4-a47c-e56f4db884ed_story.html?utm_term=.1454285398c6)>. After the discussions in Sochi, Lavrov stated, "I hope that our American partners, after they have analyzed the results of the talks with Kerry, will take steps to resume collaboration. We are prepared for this." (Interview with Lavrov by Nikolay Dolgopolov and Yevgeniy Shestakov, "Business Breakfast: Major Note," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta Online*, May 18, 2015.) Putin no doubt hoped that the discussions in Sochi would be the beginning of a broad-based reengagement with the United States. By the end of the year, however, the United States kept it pretty much limited to Syria, as well as to closing out the P5+1 negotiations with Iran on its nuclear enrichment program. And American and European sanctions on Russia for its actions in Ukraine stayed in place.

<sup>78</sup> Geneva 1 produced the Geneva Communique of June 30, 2012 (Action Group for Syria, Final Communique, available at <[www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueAction-GroupforSyria.pdf](http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueAction-GroupforSyria.pdf)>); Geneva 2 in Montreux and Geneva in January–February 2014 deadlocked primarily over the Syrian government's inflexibility on the agenda and ended with a press conference in which United Nations mediator Lakhtar Brahimi vented his frustration and extended his apologies to the Syrian people. Anne Barnard and Nick Cumming-Bruce, "After Second Round of Syria Talks, No Agreement Even on How to Negotiate," *New York Times*, February 16, 2014, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/world/middleeast/after-second-round-of-syria-talks-no-agreement-even-on-how-to-negotiate.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/world/middleeast/after-second-round-of-syria-talks-no-agreement-even-on-how-to-negotiate.html?_r=0)>.

<sup>79</sup> Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 39–62.

<sup>80</sup> Author's conversations in Moscow, May 2015. Well-known experts saw Moscow as still interested in good relations with the United States and the West and under no illusions about China. For

Russia, in fact, the gains from the emerging relationship with China did not compensate for the losses from the broken connections with Europe. Russia and China had been working on building ties for a long time, but the Ukrainian crisis had accelerated and pushed the dynamic much further.

<sup>81</sup> Jane Perlez and Neil MacFarquhar, "Rocky Economy Tests Friendship of Xi and Putin," *New York Times*, September 4, 2015; Mikhail Korostikov, "Pochemu za proshedshej god Rossii ne vpolne udalsja 'povorot na Vostok'" [Why Russia in the Past Year Has Not Achieved Full Success in Its "Pivot to the East"], *Kommersant*, February 8, 2016, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/2906658](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2906658)>; Alexander Gabuev, "A Pivot to Nowhere: The Realities of Russia's Asia Policy," Carnegie Moscow Center, April 22, 2016, available at <[http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=63408&mkt\\_tok=eyJpIjoiWW1NME1HRXpPVEU0WkdGbSIsInQiOij3ZTQwRVRtTm9PZGo5UlZ0WTU4TzZoaExBTHZQOGhITXpBTkZ5a3BtQVwvS1h2Vm1tUUowWnVSRTg3QnZhGJsV1hiY3haK01hZ-TRcL0twXC9cL055Z2hsSWczTFpnV0NTRHlxTAyQUI2OTBoRDg9In0%3D](http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=63408&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWW1NME1HRXpPVEU0WkdGbSIsInQiOij3ZTQwRVRtTm9PZGo5UlZ0WTU4TzZoaExBTHZQOGhITXpBTkZ5a3BtQVwvS1h2Vm1tUUowWnVSRTg3QnZhGJsV1hiY3haK01hZ-TRcL0twXC9cL055Z2hsSWczTFpnV0NTRHlxTAyQUI2OTBoRDg9In0%3D)>; Alexander Gabuev, "Did Western Sanctions Affect Sino-Russian Economic Ties?" The University of Nottingham, China Policy Institute Blog, April 26, 2016, available at <<http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2016/04/26/did-western-sanctions-affect-sino-russian-economic-ties/>>; and author's conversations in Moscow, June 2016.

<sup>82</sup> For a still photograph, see "President Putin and Visiting International Leaders Attend Victory Day Celebrations in Moscow, May 9, 2015," Al Jazeera, May 9, 2015. For video, see "#Victory70: Largest May 9 Parade in Russian and Soviet History since WW2 (FULL VIDEO)—YouTube," Russia Today, available at <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPCXiyo-3L8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPCXiyo-3L8)>. The length of this video is 1:31:15; a clear pan of Putin et al. is at the 33:10 mark.

<sup>83</sup> "70<sup>th</sup> Session of the UN General Assembly," President of Russia official Web site, September 28, 2015, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>>.

<sup>84</sup> Vladimir Frolov, "Peregruzka 1.0. Kak shli peregovory mezhdju Rossiej i SShA po Sirii" [Overload 1.0: How the Negotiations Between Russia and USA on Syria Went], *Slon*, October 19, 2015, available at <<https://slon.ru/posts/58227>>.

<sup>85</sup> "Russia Has No Special Interest in Syria—Putin," Interfax, June 21, 2011. Putin would repeatedly elaborate on this theme for the next few years. See Parker, *Understanding Putin*, note 11, 79.

<sup>86</sup> Alex Wright, "Russian Company Begins Oil Prospecting off Syrian Coast," *The New Arab*, September 22, 2015, at <[www.alaraby.co.uk/english/News/2015/9/22/Russian-company-begins-oil-prospecting-off-Syrian-coast#sthash.iagKbNhk.dpuf](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/News/2015/9/22/Russian-company-begins-oil-prospecting-off-Syrian-coast#sthash.iagKbNhk.dpuf)>.

<sup>87</sup> On all of these themes, see Parker, *Understanding Putin*.

<sup>88</sup> Based on sightings reported in "Foreign Warship on Bosphorus 2015 (Part 49)," *Bosphorus Naval News*, December 4, 2015, available at <<https://turkishnavy.net/2015/12/04/foreign-warship-on-bosphorus-2015-part-49/>>. Three such ships headed south through the Bosphorus in January 2015; 7 in February; 6 in March; 2 in April; 3 in May; 8 in June; 2 in July; 7 in August; 10 in September; 12 in October; and 7 in November 2015. For ships in the Russian Navy by fleet and class, see "List of active Russian Navy Ships—2016," August 17, 2016, available at <<http://russianships.info/eng/today/>>. In addition, the Russian navy bought eight cargo bottoms from Turkey, and these began to supplement the Navy's large landing ships in October (Ishchenko, "Doroga zhizni' dlja aviabazy 'Hmejmim.'" ["The Road of Life" for the "Hmeimim" Airbase]. Analyzing Syrian Express traffic on a quarterly rather than

monthly basis, analysts at Moscow's CAST think tank date the uptick to the third quarter of 2015. See M.S. Barabanov et al., *Sirijskij Rubezh* [Syrian Frontier], ed. M. Yu. Shepovalenko, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Moscow: Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, 2016), 125–127. The first edition of the book is available at <<http://cast.ru/news/tsentr-ast-vypustil-knigu-sirijskiy-rubezh.html>>.

<sup>89</sup> Mikhail Barabanov, "Why Russia Needs an Exit Strategy in Syria," *The National Interest*, October 9, 2015, available at <[www.nationalinterest.org/feature/why-russia-needs-exit-strategy-syria-14044](http://www.nationalinterest.org/feature/why-russia-needs-exit-strategy-syria-14044)>; Dmitry Trenin, "Putin's Syria Gambit Aims at Something Bigger than Syria," Carnegie Moscow Center, October 13, 2015, available at <[http://carnegie.ru/2015/10/13/putin-s-syria-gambit-aims-at-something-bigger-than-syria/ij2j?mkt\\_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRohv6jPZKXonjHpfSx67uQsWaeg38431UFwdcjKPmjrlYQASsd0aPyQAgobGp5I5FEIQ7XYTLB2t60MWA%3D%3D](http://carnegie.ru/2015/10/13/putin-s-syria-gambit-aims-at-something-bigger-than-syria/ij2j?mkt_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRohv6jPZKXonjHpfSx67uQsWaeg38431UFwdcjKPmjrlYQASsd0aPyQAgobGp5I5FEIQ7XYTLB2t60MWA%3D%3D)>; and Nikolay Kozhanov, "Sirijskaja zapadnja: chego zhdat' ot rossijskoj operacii na Blizhnem Vostoke" [Syrian Trap: What to Expect from Russian Operations in the Middle East], RBK, December 25, 2015, available at <[www.rbc.ru/opinions/politics/25/12/2015/567c069b9a7947b52c231eb3](http://www.rbc.ru/opinions/politics/25/12/2015/567c069b9a7947b52c231eb3)>.

<sup>90</sup> Anne Barnard and Andrew E. Kramer, "Russian Missiles Help Syrians Go on the Offensive," *New York Times*, October 8, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> Kramnik, "Burja v Levante" [Storm in the Levant].

<sup>92</sup> Kramnik's expert views on military matters were informed by reporting trips to Syria in 2013 and 2014. But Kramnik claims never to have expected his scenario to play out in real life. As he saw it, Russian policy toward Syria at the time was still quite cautious. Kramnik claims never to have heard anything directly from the Ministry of Defense (MOD), though he recalls having received intimations that his article had been read and noticed there. But no one from MOD ever called him to comment on the article or ask more questions. Author's conversation with Ilya Kramnik, Moscow, April 14, 2017.

<sup>93</sup> Ilya Kramnik, "My uhodim, uhodim, uhodim. Kakim mozhet byt' zavershenie rossijskoj operacii v Sirii" [We Are Leaving, Leaving, Leaving: How the End of Russia's Operation in Syria Might Look], July 2, 2016, *Lenta.ru*, available at <<https://m.lenta.ru/articles/2016/07/02/syriaout/>>.

<sup>94</sup> In mid-July, there would be still "unconfirmed" reports of 10,000 to 20,000 Iranians arriving on Syria's Mediterranean coast. See Barnard, "Syria Is Disintegrating into Fragmented Parts Under Pressure of War."

<sup>95</sup> See the following meticulous analyses of Iranian and Lebanese Hizballah fighters and advisors in Syria, as well as of Iranian-sponsored Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani militiamen: Alfoneh and Eisenstadt, "Iranian Casualties in Syria and the Strategic Logic of Intervention"; Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Army Suffers Its First Casualties in Syria," Policy Alert, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 12, 2016, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-army-suffers-its-first-casualties-in-syria](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-army-suffers-its-first-casualties-in-syria)>; and Ali Alfoneh, "The IRGC Morphs Into an Expeditionary Force," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policywatch* 2615, May 12, 2016, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-irgc-morphs-into-an-expeditionary-force](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-irgc-morphs-into-an-expeditionary-force)>.

<sup>96</sup> "Meeting with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu," President of Russia official Web site, October 7, 2015, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/90/events/50458>>; and "Samolety VKS RF Tu-22M3 i Su-34, vzletev s ajerodroma Hamadan v Irane, nanesli aviaudar po obektam terroristov v Sirii" [RF Aerospace Forces Tu-22M3 and Su-34 Airplanes Flying from Hamadan Airbase in Iran Carried Out Airstrikes against Targets in Syria], Russian Defense Ministry official Web site, August 16,

2016, available at <[http://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/country/more.htm?id=12092929@egNews](http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12092929@egNews)>.

<sup>97</sup> Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 28–39.

<sup>98</sup> “Russia Establishes Aerospace Forces as New Armed Service—Defense Minister,” TASS, August 3, 2015, available at <<http://tass.ru/en/russia/812184>>.

<sup>99</sup> Alexander Stepanov, “Vernuvshiesja iz Sirii letchiki rasskazali o tjagotah vojny” [Returning from Syria Pilots Told about the Hardships of War], *MK*, March 15, 2016, available at <[www.mk.ru/politics/2016/03/15/vernuvshiesya-iz-sirii-letchiki-rasskazali-o-tyagotakh-voyny-v-sirii.html](http://www.mk.ru/politics/2016/03/15/vernuvshiesya-iz-sirii-letchiki-rasskazali-o-tyagotakh-voyny-v-sirii.html)>. The present author is grateful to Anton Lavrov, *The Conflict in Syria from 2013–2016*, for this “catch” on page 60 of his article.

<sup>100</sup> “UPDATE: The Cargo on Russian Landing Ship Nikolay Filchenkov,” *Bosphorus Naval News*, August 22, 2015, available at <<http://turkishnavy.net/2015/08/22/update-the-cargo-on-russian-landing-ship-nikolay-filchenkov/>>; see also “Russian Warship Korolev Passed Through Istanbul with Cargo on Her Deck,” *Bosphorus Naval News*, September 5, 2015, available at <<http://turkishnavy.net/2015/09/05/russian-warship-korolev-passed-through-istanbul-with-cargo-on-her-deck/>>; and Yuriy Lyamin, “Sirijskij Jekspress’ Zametno Aktivizirovalsja v Poslednee Vremja” [The “Syrian Express” Has Become Noticeably More Active Recently], September 8, 2015, available at <<http://imp-navigator.livejournal.com/363312.html>>.

<sup>101</sup> Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 28–29, 37.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 28–39.

<sup>103</sup> The original outstanding reporting on “Wagner” was done by St. Petersburg online reporter Denis Korotkov, in “Slavjanskij korpus’ vozvrashhaetsja v Siriju” [The “Slavonic Corps” Returns to Syria], *Fontanka.ru*, October 16, 2015, available at <[www.fontanka.ru/2015/10/16/118/](http://www.fontanka.ru/2015/10/16/118/)>, and “Oni srazhalis’ za Pal’miru” [They Fought for Palmyra], *Fontanka.ru*, March 29, 2016, available at <[www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/](http://www.fontanka.ru/2016/03/28/171/)>. See also subsequent expanded reporting in German Petelin and Vladimir Vashchenko, “Iz Mol’kino v Pal’miru: kak trenirujut rossijskih naemnikov” [From Molkino to Palmyra: How They Train Russian Mercenaries], *Gazeta.ru*, March 31, 2016, available at <[www.gazeta.ru/social/2016/03/30/8151161.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/social/2016/03/30/8151161.shtml)>; Ilya Rozhdestvenskiy, Anton Bayev, and Polina Rusyayeva, “Prizraki vojny: kak v Sirii pojavilas’ rossijskaja chastnaja armija” [War Ghosts: How a Private Russian Army Appeared in Syria], RBK, August 25, 2016, available at <[www.rbc.ru/magazine/2016/09/57bac4309a79476d978e850d](http://www.rbc.ru/magazine/2016/09/57bac4309a79476d978e850d)>; and Ilya Rozhdestvenskiy, Polina Rusyayeva, and Anton Bayev, “Na rossijskih naemnikov v Sirii potratili do 10 mlrd rub” [Up to 10 Billion Rubles Spent on Russian Mercenaries in Syria], RBK, August 25, 2016, available at <[www.rbc.ru/politics/25/08/2016/57bd8ddd9a794799c6f816ac](http://www.rbc.ru/politics/25/08/2016/57bd8ddd9a794799c6f816ac)>. An English summary of RBK’s reporting can be found in Liveblog Team, “RBC Publishes Report Sourced in FSB and Military on Wagner Private Military Contractor with 2,500 Fighters in Syria,” *The Interpreter*, August 26, 2016, available at <[www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-august-26-2016/](http://www.interpretermag.com/russia-update-august-26-2016/)>.

<sup>104</sup> Greg Miller and Karen DeYoung, “Early Signs of Russian Intent,” *Washington Post*, October 10, 2015.

<sup>105</sup> “Soglashenie mezhdu Rossijskoj Federacij i Sirijskoj Arabskoj Respublikoj o razmeshhenii aviacionnoj gruppy Vooruzhennyh Sil Rossijskoj Federacii na territorii Sirijskoj Arabskoj Respubliki” [Agreement Between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on Locating Russian

Federation Armed Forces Air Group on the Territory of the Syrian Arab Republic], *Ofitsialnyy Internet Portal Pravovoy Informatsii* [Official Internet Portal for Legal Information], January 14, 2016, available at <<http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201601140019>>. The name of the airbase can be rendered into English a variety of ways, including Hmeimim (used in this paper) but also Hmeymim, Khmeimim, Humaymim, and other variants.

<sup>106</sup> “Vladimir Putin Answered Russian Journalists’ Questions, 4 September 2015, Vladivostok,” President of Russia Official Web Site, September 5, 2015, available at <[http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/press\\_conferences/50234](http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/press_conferences/50234)>. See also Hugh Naylor, “Putin Says Syrian President Ready for Elections, Compromise,” *Washington Post*, September 5, 2015; and Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “Russian Moves in Syria Pose Concerns for U.S.,” *New York Times*, September 5, 2015.

<sup>107</sup> Aleksandr Stepanov, “Jekspert: Rossija smozhet bombit’ IGIL s pomoshh’ju dal’nej aviacii. Pri neobhodimosti budet zadejstvovan opyt vojny SSSR v Afganistane” [Expert: Russia Will Be Able to Bomb ISIS with Aid of Long-Range Aviation. If Necessary, Experience of USSR’s War in Afghanistan Will Be Mobilized], *MK Online*, September 4, 2015, available at <[www.mk.ru/politics/2015/09/04/ekspert-rossiya-smozhet-bombit-igil-s-pomoshhyu-dalney-aviacii.html](http://www.mk.ru/politics/2015/09/04/ekspert-rossiya-smozhet-bombit-igil-s-pomoshhyu-dalney-aviacii.html)>.

<sup>108</sup> Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. Objects to Russians on Activities Seen in Syria,” *New York Times*, September 6, 2015.

<sup>109</sup> Sergei Shoigu, “Shoigu rasskazal o podgotovke sirijskoj operacii” [Shoigu Told About the Preparation for the Syrian Operation], *Lenta.ru*, October 6, 2015, available at <<http://lenta.ru/news/2015/10/06/center/>>.

<sup>110</sup> Author’s conversations at Stanford workshop, January 2016.

<sup>111</sup> Ilya Barabanov, Ivan Safronov, and Yelena Chernenko, “Razgovor po prjamomu povodu” [Conversation on a Direct Line], *Kommersant*, September 21, 2015, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/2814812](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2814812)>. See also Oleg Ushakov, “Maksim Shevchenko: Why Russia Needs War in Syria” [Maksim Shevchenko: zachem Rossii nuzhna vojna v Sirii], *Sobesednik Online*, September 12, 2015, available at <<http://newsrbk.ru/news/2202432>>. Here Shevchenko, a journalist and member of the Presidential Human Rights Council, offered in effect a semi-official justification for the impending air campaign in support of the Asad government: to preserve Syria as a longtime, multi-confessional friend of Russia. For an expert Western assessment on the political-military rationale for Russian deployments around Latakia and buildup at the Tartus port facility, see Fabrice Balance, “Latakia Is Assad’s Achilles Heel,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policywatch* 2489, September 23, 2015, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/latakia-is-assads-achilles-heel](http://washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/latakia-is-assads-achilles-heel)>.

<sup>112</sup> Ilya Kramnik, “Profilaktika nevezhlivosti. O celjah vozmozhnoj rossijskoj operacii v Sirii” [Preventing Impoliteness: On the Objectives of a Possible Russian Operation in Syria], *Lenta.ru*, September 24, 2015, available at <<http://lenta.ru/articles/2015/09/24/taki/>>.

<sup>113</sup> Lister, 369.

<sup>114</sup> Vladimir Frolov, “Kto ne skachet, tot IGIL’ Kak Kreml’ vidit politicheskoe uregulirovanie v Sirii” [“If They Are Not Jumping Up and Down, They Are ISIS”: Kremlin’s View of Political Settlement in Syria], *Slon*, October 25, 2015, available at <<https://slon.ru/posts/58542>>. Here Frolov speculates at length that Asad may have agreed to resign early after a short transition period and negotiations with the opposition.

<sup>115</sup> Ruslan Pukhov, "Commentary: Russia Must Walk a Fine Line with West Amid Crises in Ukraine, Syria," *Defense News*, December 13, 2015, available at <[www.defensenews.com/story/defense/commentary/2015/12/13/outlook-2016-russia-must-walk-fine-line-west-while-facing-crises-ukraine-syria-ruslan-pukhov/76919068/](http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense/commentary/2015/12/13/outlook-2016-russia-must-walk-fine-line-west-while-facing-crises-ukraine-syria-ruslan-pukhov/76919068/)>. See also Matthew Bodner, "No End in Sight for Moscow's Syria Escapade," *The Moscow Times*, December 10, 2015, available at <[www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/no-end-in-sight-for-russias-syria-escapade/552351.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/business/article/no-end-in-sight-for-russias-syria-escapade/552351.html)>.

<sup>116</sup> Ivan Safronov and Pavel Tarasenko, "Bazy na vyrost. Rossijskie letchiki zadejstvovali v sirijskoj operacii novuju infrastrukturu" [Bases with Room for Growth: Russian Airmen Bring New Infrastructure Into Play in Syrian Operation], *Kommersant*, December 7, 2015, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/2871518](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2871518)>; and Dmitriy Gorenburg, "What Russia's Military Operation in Syria Can Tell Us About Advances in Its Capabilities," PONARS Eurasia, Policy Memo 424, March 2016, available at <[www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/advances-russian-military-operations](http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/advances-russian-military-operations)>. For tracking Russian force levels in Syria, see also *Sirijskij Rubezh* [Syrian Frontier], 105–119.

<sup>117</sup> Keith Bradsher, "Jet's Downing Is Culmination of Old Friction," *New York Times*, November 26, 2015.

<sup>118</sup> "Peskov: Putin soglasilsja s predlozheniem perebrosit' na bazu 'Hmejmim' v Sirii S-400" [Peskov: Putin Agreed with the Proposal to Deploy the S-400 to Hmeimim base in Syria], *Vzglyad*, November 25, 2015, available at <<http://vz.ru/news/2015/11/25/780152.html>>. For a flavor of the overall propaganda line accompanying surge during this period, see "Hard Slog Ahead: Successes and Challenges of Russia's Air Campaign in Syria," *Sputnik*, December 1, 2015, available at <[sputniknews.com/analysis/20151201/1031052661/russian-syria-operation-2-months.html](http://sputniknews.com/analysis/20151201/1031052661/russian-syria-operation-2-months.html)>.

<sup>119</sup> Neil MacFarquhar and Tim Arango, "Erdogan and Putin Seek to Put Syria Rift in Past," *New York Times*, August 9, 2016, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2016/08/09/world/europe/russia-putin-turkey-erdogan-syria.html?emc=eta1&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/09/world/europe/russia-putin-turkey-erdogan-syria.html?emc=eta1&_r=0)>. On June 27, 2016, Erdogan had issued a statement of regret over the November 2015 shootdown (Sabrina Tavernise, "Trying to Mend One More Diplomatic Fence, Turkey Apologizes for Downing Russian Plane," *New York Times*, June 28, 2016, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2016/06/28/world/europe/russia-turkey-erdogan-putin.html?action=click&contentCollection=Europe&module=RelatedCoverage&region=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/28/world/europe/russia-turkey-erdogan-putin.html?action=click&contentCollection=Europe&module=RelatedCoverage&region=EndOfArticle&pgtype=article)>).

<sup>120</sup> Ben Hubbard, "Putin's Gambit on Syrian War," *New York Times*, December 16, 2015, argues that little had changed on the ground—and at great cost to Russia and hardship to Syrian population. On the cost issue, see John Barnett, "The Costs of Russia's Air Expeditionary Campaign," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policywatch* 2531, December 11, 2015, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-costs-of-russias-air-expeditionary-campaign](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-costs-of-russias-air-expeditionary-campaign)>. For a look at Hmeimim airbase, see Matthew Chance, "Inside Kremlin's Creeping Military Campaign in Syria," *CNN World*, December 21, 2015, available at <[www.cnn.com/2015/12/21/world/russia-syria-matthew-chance-back-story/](http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/21/world/russia-syria-matthew-chance-back-story/)>.

<sup>121</sup> Liz Sly, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria Halt Aid," *Washington Post*, December 15, 2015, is a good summary of Russian airstrikes in Syria before, immediately after, and after Russia's loss of a Su-24 to Turkish F-14s.

<sup>122</sup> Jeffrey White, "Russia's Military Strategy in Syria Becoming Clearer as its Forces Engage in Combat," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policywatch* 2503, October 9, 2015, available

at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-military-strategy-in-syria-becoming-clearer-as-its-forces-engage-in](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-military-strategy-in-syria-becoming-clearer-as-its-forces-engage-in)>; Steven Lee Myers and Eric Schmitt, “Russian Military Uses Syria as Proving Ground, and West Takes Notice,” *New York Times*, October 15, 2015; Robert Lee, “Voennye aspekty rossijskoj operacii v Siri” [Military Aspects of the Russian Operation in Syria], *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye*, January 15, 2016, available at <[http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2016-01-15/8\\_aspects.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2016-01-15/8_aspects.html)>; Gorenburg, “What Russia’s Military Operation in Syria Can Tell Us About Advances in its Capabilities,” which also includes specifics on the Kalibr land attack cruise missiles, which Russia launched on Putin’s birthday (October 7); Ruslan Pukhov, “A Proving Ground of the Future,” *Russia in Global Affairs* no. 2, March 30, 2016, available at <<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/A-Proving-Ground-of-the-Future-18075>>; and Aleksey Ramm and Anton Lavrov, “Vozmezdie bez dozapravki. Operacija v Sire pokazala slabye mesta Vozdushno-kosmicheskikh sil” [Retribution Without Refueling: Operation in Syria Reveals Weak Points in Aerospace Forces], *Voyenno-Promyshlenny Kuryer Online*, April 6, 2016, available at <<http://vpk-news.ru/articles/30078>>.

<sup>123</sup> “Meeting with Government Members September 30, 2015, Novo-Ogaryovo, Moscow Region.”

<sup>124</sup> Barabanov, “Why Russia Needs an Exit Strategy in Syria.”

<sup>125</sup> “Meeting with President of Syria Bashar Assad,” President of Russia Official Web Site, October 21, 2015, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50533>>. See also Steven Lee Myers and Anne Barnard, “Assad Finds Chilly Embrace in Moscow Trip,” *New York Times*, October 22, 2015.

<sup>126</sup> “Interview to Vladimir Solovyov, October 10, 2015, Sochi.”

<sup>127</sup> “Meeting with Government Members September 30, 2015, Novo-Ogaryovo, Moscow Region.”

<sup>128</sup> Lister, 53, 55.

<sup>129</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, “Syrian Peace Talks in Moscow End in Disarray,” Yahoo News, April 10, 2015, available at <[www.yahoo.com/news/both-sides-syria-conflict-wrap-4-days-moscow-090249031.html?ref=gs](http://www.yahoo.com/news/both-sides-syria-conflict-wrap-4-days-moscow-090249031.html?ref=gs)>; Vitaly Naumkin, “Russia Mulls Strategy to Resolve Syrian Conflict,” *al-Monitor*, June 3, 2015, available at <[www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/russia-syria-conflict-strategy-moscow-meetings.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/06/russia-syria-conflict-strategy-moscow-meetings.html)>; and Myers and Barnard, “Assad Finds Chilly Embrace in Moscow Trip.”

<sup>130</sup> “Meeting with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Mu’allim,” June 29, 2015, President of Russia Official Web Site, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49781>>.

<sup>131</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, “Russia: Officials Meet on Syrian Crisis,” *New York Times*, June 30, 2015.

<sup>132</sup> “President al-Assad’s Address to the Nation: July, 2015,” SANA, July 27, 2015, available at <<https://syria360.wordpress.com/2015/07/27/president-al-assads-full-speech-july-2015/>>.

<sup>133</sup> Author’s conversations in Moscow, June 2016.

<sup>134</sup> To rework President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s apocryphal aphorism about Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza or Dominican Republic President Rafael Trujillo, “Asad may be a son-of-a-bitch, but he’s his own son-of-a-bitch.”

<sup>135</sup> Karen DeYoung, “Ahead of Syria Talks, Setting Assad’s Future Aside,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2015.

<sup>136</sup> Sergey Strokan, Yelena Chernenko, and Pavel Tarasenko, “Blic na vysshem urovne. V bol’shoj igre s Zapadom Vladimir Putin sdelal hod figuroj sirijskogo prezidenta” [Blitz at Highest Level: Vladimir Putin Has Moved a Piece in the Grand Game with the West—the Syrian President],

*Kommersant*, October 22, 2015, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/2837426](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2837426)>.

<sup>137</sup> "Final Declaration on the Results of the Syria Talks in Vienna As Agreed by Participants," European Union External Action, October 30, 2015, available at <[https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5960/final-declaration-on-the-results-of-the-syria-talks-in-vienna-as-agreed-by-participants\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5960/final-declaration-on-the-results-of-the-syria-talks-in-vienna-as-agreed-by-participants_en)>. For press coverage, see Carol Morello, "Diplomats Call for Cease-fire in Syria, Plan Peace Process," *Washington Post*, October 31, 2015; and Peter Baker, Helene Cooper, and David E. Sanger, "U.S. Troops Sent to Syria to Aid Forces Fighting ISIS," *New York Times*, October 31, 2015.

<sup>138</sup> For a good analysis, see Andrew J. Tabler and Olivier Decottignies, "The Vienna Declaration: Precision Is Key to Avoiding a Slippery Slope," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policy-watch* 2518, November 5, 2015, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-vienna-declaration-precision-is-key-to-avoiding-a-slippery-slope](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-vienna-declaration-precision-is-key-to-avoiding-a-slippery-slope)>.

<sup>139</sup> "President al-Assad to Chinese PHOENIX TV Channel: From the Very First Day, We Were Determined to Fight Terrorism," SANA, November 22, 2015, available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=62206>>.

<sup>140</sup> Avi Issacharoff, "Putin Told Assad to Go or Be Made to Go, Israeli Officials Say," *The Times of Israel*, November 16, 2015, available at <[www.timesofisrael.com/putin-told-assad-to-go-or-be-made-to-go-israeli-officials-say/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/putin-told-assad-to-go-or-be-made-to-go-israeli-officials-say/)>.

<sup>141</sup> Asad interview with Spanish EFE news agency, "President al-Assad: Russia's Policy Towards Syria Is Based on Values and Interests, the West Is Not Serious in Fighting Terrorists," SANA, December 11, 2015, available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=63857>>.

<sup>142</sup> Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 21, 32.

<sup>143</sup> For a forceful exposition that Moscow was wholly in the driver's seat at this moment in Syria, see Michael Kofman, "The Russian Quagmire in Syria and Other Washington Fairy Tales," *Warontherocks.com*, February 16, 2016, available at <[warontherocks.com/2016/02/the-russian-quagmire-in-syria-and-other-washington-fairy-tales/](http://warontherocks.com/2016/02/the-russian-quagmire-in-syria-and-other-washington-fairy-tales/)>.

<sup>144</sup> Birnbaum, "Putin Sees Truce as Win for Russia."

<sup>145</sup> Kirill Martynov, "Jadernaja vojna otmenjaetsja. Rossijskie diplomaty gotovy k proryvu v otnoshenijah s SShA" [Nuclear War Canceled: Russian Diplomats Ready for Breakthrough in Relations with United States], *Novaya Gazeta*, December 17, 2015, available at <<http://novayagazeta.livejournal.com/4129454.html?fullversion=yes>>.

<sup>146</sup> Lavrov, available at <[www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNon-kJE02Bw/content/id/2079622](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNon-kJE02Bw/content/id/2079622)>. Agreement available at <[www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/conflicts/-/asset\\_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/2086375](http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/2086375)>.

<sup>147</sup> Putin's account: <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51312>>. Obama's version: <[www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/14/readout-presidents-call-president-vladimir-putin-russia](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/14/readout-presidents-call-president-vladimir-putin-russia)>. See also Karen DeYoung, "Obama and Putin Agree to Facilitate Syrian Aid," *Washington Post*, February 15, 2016; and Shadi Hamid, "Why Doesn't Obama Seem to Listen to Syria Experts," *Zaman al-Wasl*, February 13, 2016, available at <<https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/14041.html>>.

<sup>148</sup> Dmitry Kiselyov, "Vesti Nedeli," February 14, 2016, available at <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1YU20pZ9nU&list=PL6MnxjOjSRsRzsISAIU-JcbTi7\\_a5wB\\_v&index=27](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1YU20pZ9nU&list=PL6MnxjOjSRsRzsISAIU-JcbTi7_a5wB_v&index=27)>, with segment devoted to this topic at the 13:30 to 16:40 point of the recording. According to one poll, Kiselyov's "Vesti Nedeli" is the most watched and most highly regarded "analytical" news show on Russian TV. See "Chto smotrijat

po televizoru?” [What Do They Watch on Television?], FOM, August 26, 2016, available at <<http://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/12824>>.

<sup>149</sup> CNN, “Assad Casts Doubt on a Ceasefire (U.S. Questions Russian Willingness for a Ceasefire),” available at <[www.cnn.com/2016/02/16/middleeast/syria-assad-ceasefire-doubts/](http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/16/middleeast/syria-assad-ceasefire-doubts/)>. An incomplete report of Asad’s speech can be found available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=69527>>.

<sup>150</sup> “President Bashar al-Assad’s AFP Interview, February 12, 2016,” Assad’s official Web site, February 12, 2016, available at <[www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1510:president-bashar-al-assad-s-afp-interview-february-12-2016&Itemid=468](http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1510:president-bashar-al-assad-s-afp-interview-february-12-2016&Itemid=468)>.

<sup>151</sup> Available at <[www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/general\\_assembly/-/asset\\_publisher/lrzZMhfoy-RUj/content/id/2104524](http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/general_assembly/-/asset_publisher/lrzZMhfoy-RUj/content/id/2104524)>.

<sup>152</sup> Sergey Strokan, “Bashar Asad razvoevalsja. Sirijskij lider brosil vyzov diplomaticeskim usilijam Moskvy” [Bashar al-Assad Blusters: Syrian Leader Challenges Moscow’s Diplomatic Efforts], *Kommersant*, February 16, 2016, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/2918046](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2918046)>.

<sup>153</sup> Yevgeniy Medvedev, “Bashar Asad predpochel vojnu, a ne mir. Sirijskij lider otverg rossijskie iniciativy i reshil srazhat’sja do poslednego” [Bashar al-Assad Prefers War, Not Peace: Syrian Leader Rejects Russian Initiatives and Decides to Fight to End], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, February 18, 2016, available at <[www.ng.ru/world/2016-02-18/1\\_asad.html](http://www.ng.ru/world/2016-02-18/1_asad.html)>.

<sup>154</sup> Asad interview with Spanish EFE news agency.

<sup>155</sup> David Alandete, “80 Countries Support the Terrorists in Syria,” *El País*, February 20, 2016, available at <[http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/02/20/inenglish/1456005883\\_962894.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/02/20/inenglish/1456005883_962894.html)>.

<sup>156</sup> Vladimir Putin’s address following adoption of a joint Russia-U.S. statement on Syria, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51376>>. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, February 22, 2016, Readout of the President’s Call with President Vladimir Putin of Russia, available at <[www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/22/readout-presidents-call-president-vladimir-putin-russia](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/22/readout-presidents-call-president-vladimir-putin-russia)>; and “Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as Co-Chairs of the ISSG, on Cessation of Hostilities in Syria,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, February 22, 2016, available at <[www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNon-kJE02Bw/content/id/2105704](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNon-kJE02Bw/content/id/2105704)>.

<sup>157</sup> David E. Sanger, “Truce Comes with Price, but Not for Assad,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2016. For maps of the battlefield changes during the Russian air campaign, see the online version of this article at <[www.nytimes.com/2016/02/27/world/middleeast/syria-truce-comes-with-price-but-not-for-assad.html?emc=eta](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/27/world/middleeast/syria-truce-comes-with-price-but-not-for-assad.html?emc=eta)>. The article also provides a link to a series of map graphics, regularly updated, showing the shifting control of territory across Syria since 2011, available at <[www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/30/world/middleeast/syria-control-map-isis-rebels-airstrikes.html](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/09/30/world/middleeast/syria-control-map-isis-rebels-airstrikes.html)>.

<sup>158</sup> Vladimir Frolov, “Igra na kompleksah. Kakoj cenoj dalos’ peremirie v Siri” [Game of Complexes: At What Price Does Syrian Cease-Fire Come?], *Slon*, February 22, 2016, available at <<https://republic.ru/app.php/posts/64338>>.

<sup>159</sup> See, for example, Syrian foreign minister Moallem’s comments in Alexandra Valiente, “Walid Al-Moallem on the Coming Geneva Talks,” *Syria 360*, March 12, 2016, available at <<https://syria360.wordpress.com/2016/03/12/walid-al-moallem-on-the-coming-geneva-talks/>>. Moallem disputed UN special envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura’s interpretation of his mandate for organizing the

negotiations, said any discussion of the presidency was a “red line,” and questioned whether there was any such thing as a “moderate opposition” in Syria. At the Geneva 3 round of intra-Syrian negotiations that began on March 14, Damascus’s lead negotiator Bashar al-Jaafari called his opposition counterpart a terrorist and refused to enter into face-to-face talks (“Syria Conflict: Government Rejects Direct Peace Talks,” BBC, March 16, 2016, available at <[www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35820823](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35820823)>). Asad would set parliamentary elections for April 13 contrary to what Russia had agreed to in the International Syria Support Group.

<sup>160</sup> “Meeting with Sergei Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu,” President of Russia Official Web Site, March 14, 2016, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51511>>. For an assessment of Russian gains and balances at this moment, see also Neil MacFarquhar and Anne Barnard, “Putin Orders Syria Pullout, Citing Success,” *New York Times*, March 15, 2016, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2016/03/15/world/middleeast/putin-syria-russia-withdrawal.html?ref=todayspaper&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/15/world/middleeast/putin-syria-russia-withdrawal.html?ref=todayspaper&_r=0)>; Anne Barnard, Maher Samaan, and Derek Watkins, “Signs of Hope Five Years After Start of Syria’s War,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2016, available at <[www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/03/13/world/middleeast/syria-control-isis-maps-cease-fire-civil-war-five-years.html?ref=todayspaper&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/03/13/world/middleeast/syria-control-isis-maps-cease-fire-civil-war-five-years.html?ref=todayspaper&_r=0)>; and Liz Sly, “Tracing the Long Free-Fall of Arab Spring in Syria,” *Washington Post*, March 13, 2016.

<sup>161</sup> “Meeting with Russian Armed Forces Service Personnel,” President of Russia Official Web Site, March 17, 2016, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51526>>. On Putin’s withdrawal announcement, see also Vladimir Frolov, “Pochemu Rossija vyvodit vojska iz Sirii imenno sejchash” [Why Russia Is Withdrawing its Troops From Syria Precisely Now], *Slon*, March 15, 2016, available at <<https://slon.ru/posts/65213>>; and Dmitry Gorenburg and Michael Kofman, “There Is No Russian Withdrawal from Syria,” *Warontheroocks.com*, March 18, 2016, available at <<http://warontheroocks.com/2016/03/there-is-no-russian-withdrawal-from-syria/>>. Kofman elaborated on many of these points on April 6, 2016, at a conference at the National Defense University on “Assessing Russia’s Strategic Presence in Syria.”

<sup>162</sup> Sergei Strokan and Ivan Safronov, “Pal’mira pervenstva. Sirijskaja armija pri podderzhke RF perehvatyaet iniciativu v bor’be s islamistami” [Palmyra of Victory: With the Russian Federation’s Support, the Syrian Army Is Regaining the Initiative in the Battle Against the Islamists], *Kommersant*, March 28, 2016, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/2949331](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2949331)>.

<sup>163</sup> Charlie Cooper, “Vladimir Putin Revealed to Have Told Assad: ‘We Will Not Let You Lose,’” *Independent*, April 17, 2016, available at [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/putin-assured-assad-he-will-not-let-syria-lose-civil-war-says-mp-a6987986.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/putin-assured-assad-he-will-not-let-syria-lose-civil-war-says-mp-a6987986.html).

<sup>164</sup> Aleksandr Aksenenok, “Sirijskaja armija pri podderzhke RF perehvatyaet iniciativu v bor’be s islamistami” [Syria: With Whom to Negotiate], *Vedomosti*, November 17, 2015, available at <[www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2015/11/17/617102-siriya-dogovarivatsya](http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2015/11/17/617102-siriya-dogovarivatsya)>.

<sup>165</sup> Anne Barnard, “Stubbornly Confident, Assad Emerges as a Survivor Adept at Juggling Allies,” *New York Times*, March 26, 2016, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2016/03/23/world/middleeast/bashar-al-assad-syria-russia-west.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/23/world/middleeast/bashar-al-assad-syria-russia-west.html)>.

<sup>166</sup> “Vecher s Vladimirom Solov’evym” [Evening with Vladimir Solovyov], Rossiya One Television, March 17, 2016, available at <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHcDa3S97Fs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KHcDa3S97Fs)>.

<sup>167</sup> “Bashar Asad—o glavnom uroke konflikta: na Zapad nel’zja polagat’sja” [Bashar Asad on the

Most Important Lesson of the Conflict: You Cannot Rely on the West], Rossiya One Television, March 29, 2016, available at <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=BX0Dlcs6m7s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BX0Dlcs6m7s)>.

<sup>168</sup> “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin,” President of Russia Official Web Site, April 14, 2016, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51716>>.

<sup>169</sup> Farzin Nadimi, “Iran’s Army Suffers Its First Casualties in Syria,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 12, 2016, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-army-suffers-its-first-casualties-in-syria](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-army-suffers-its-first-casualties-in-syria)>.

<sup>170</sup> Fareed Zakaria and Hugh Naylor, “Syrian Truce in Tatters,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 2016.

<sup>171</sup> Another in Vladimir Frolov’s expert commentaries on Syria registered the tensions between Moscow and Damascus over the Aleppo offensive at this juncture. See Vladimir Frolov, “Rossija pereocenivaet stepen’ blagodarnosti Asada”. Vladimir Frolov o tom, pochemu mezhsirijskie peregovory i samo peremirie nahodjatsja na grani sryva” [“Russia Overestimates Assad’s Degree of Gratitude”]: Vladimir Frolov on Why the Intra-Syrian Talks and the Ceasefire Itself Are on the Verge of Collapse], *Gazeta.ru*, April 17, 2016, available at <[www.gazeta.ru/comments/2016/04/17\\_a\\_8182625.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/comments/2016/04/17_a_8182625.shtml)>.

<sup>172</sup> “Meeting with Permanent Members of Security Council,” President of Russia Official Web Site, April 21, 2016, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/5177>>.

<sup>173</sup> Peter S. Goodman, “Russian Military Buildup Near Aleppo Threatens Truce, Kerry Warns,” *New York Times*, April 23, 2016.

<sup>174</sup> Olga Golovanovaya, “Gennadij Gatilov: My ne namereny davit’ na Damask po povodu Aleppo” [Gennadiy Gatilov: We Do Not Intend to Press Damascus about Aleppo], *Interfax*, April 30, 2016, available at <[www.interfax.ru/world/506457](http://www.interfax.ru/world/506457)>.

<sup>175</sup> “President al-Assad Congratulates Putin on Victory Day: Syrians Will Not Be Satisfied until Defeating the Enemy,” *SANA*, May 5, 2016, available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=76435>>.

<sup>176</sup> Frolov made these points in Vladimir Frolov, “Vojna bez pobeditelej. Pochemu Rossija i SShA okazalis’ bessil’ny v Siri” [A War Without Winners: Why Russia and the U.S. Turned Out to Be Powerless in Syria], *Slon*, May 24, 2016, available at <<https://slon.ru/posts/68462>>.

<sup>177</sup> Author’s conversations in Moscow, June 2016.

<sup>178</sup> Tom Hamburger and Ellen Nakashima, “Clinton Campaign—and Some Cyber Experts—Say Russia Is Behind Email Release,” *Washington Post*, July 25, 2016, available at <[www.washingtonpost.com/politics/clinton-campaign--and-some-cyber-experts--say-russia-is-behind-email-release/2016/07/24/5b5428e6-51a8-11e6-bbf5-957ad17b4385\\_story.html?postshare=3271469455497809&tid=ss\\_mail](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/clinton-campaign--and-some-cyber-experts--say-russia-is-behind-email-release/2016/07/24/5b5428e6-51a8-11e6-bbf5-957ad17b4385_story.html?postshare=3271469455497809&tid=ss_mail)>; and Ellen Nakashima, “Russian Government Hackers Penetrated DNC, Stole Opposition Research on Trump,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 2016, available at <[www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russian-government-hackers-penetrated-dnc-stole-opposition-research-on-trump/2016/06/14/cf006cb4-316e-11e6-8ff7-7b6c1998b7a0\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/russian-government-hackers-penetrated-dnc-stole-opposition-research-on-trump/2016/06/14/cf006cb4-316e-11e6-8ff7-7b6c1998b7a0_story.html)>.

<sup>179</sup> Matt Apuzzo, “Russia-Trump Tie Was Big Concern of Ex-C.I.A. Chief,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2017, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/us/politics/john-brennan-russia-trump-campaign-cia.html?ref=todayspaper&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/23/us/politics/john-brennan-russia-trump-campaign-cia.html?ref=todayspaper&_r=0)>.

<sup>180</sup> Ellen Nakashima, “U.S. Government Officially Accuses Russia of Hacking Campaign to Interfere with Elections,” *Washington Post*, October 8, 2016, available at <[www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-government-officially-accuses-russia-of-hacking-campaign-to-influence](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-government-officially-accuses-russia-of-hacking-campaign-to-influence)-

[>.](http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2016/10/07/4e0b9654-8cbf-11e6-875e-2c1bfe943b66_story.html)

<sup>181</sup> Author's conversations in Moscow, June 2016.

<sup>182</sup> Isayev is a senior lecturer at the National Research University School of Higher Economics in Moscow. See Leonid Isayev, "Chego hochet Moskva. Vostokoved Leonid Isaev o tom, kak Rossija zaputalas' v svoih vneshnopoliticheskikh prioritetax" [What Does Moscow Want: Oriental Studies Expert Leonid Isayev on How Russia Has Become Confused About its Foreign Policy Priorities], *Vedemosti*, October 18, 2016, available at <[www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2016/10/18/661343-chege-hochet](http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2016/10/18/661343-chege-hochet)>.

<sup>183</sup> Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 11.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>185</sup> Author's conversations in Moscow, June 2016.

<sup>186</sup> Author's conversation with Ilya Kramnik, Moscow, April 14, 2017.

<sup>187</sup> Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 52.

<sup>188</sup> Author's conversations in Moscow, June 2016.

<sup>189</sup> "Putin Asks Russian Duma to Ratify Syria Air Base Deal," RT, August 9, 2016, available at <[www.rt.com/politics/355189-putin-asks-russian-duma-to/](http://www.rt.com/politics/355189-putin-asks-russian-duma-to/)>; and David Filipov and Andrew Roth, "Russia Has Its Permanent Air Base in Syria: Now It's Looking at Cuba and Vietnam," *Washington Post*, October 8, 2016, available at <[www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/07/russia-has-its-permanent-airbase-in-syria-now-its-looking-at-cuba-and-vietnam/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/10/07/russia-has-its-permanent-airbase-in-syria-now-its-looking-at-cuba-and-vietnam/)>.

<sup>190</sup> The agreement on expanding Tartus contains a similar stipulation. The agreement is for 49 years with an automatic 25-year extension unless either side gives written notice at least 1 year before expiration of either relevant term (Article 25, Paragraph 1). See "Soglashenie mezhdu Rossijskoj Federacij i Sirijskoj Arabskoj Respublikoj o rasshireniu territorii punkta material'no-tehnicheskogo obespechenija Voenno-Morskogo Flota Rossijskoj Federacii v rajone porta Tartus i zahoda voennyh korablej Rossijskoj Federacii v territorial'noe more, vnutrennie vody i porty Sirijskoj Arabskoj Respubliki ot 18 janvarja 2017 goda (vremenno primenjaetsja s 18 janvarja 2017 goda)" [Agreement Between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on the expansion of the territory of the material-technical logistics point of the Navy of the Russian Federation in the area of the port of Tartus and calls by military ships of the Russian Federation in the territorial sea, internal waters and ports of the Syrian Arab Republic from January 18, 2017 (shall be applied provisionally from 18 January 2017)], January 20, 2017, Official Internet Portal for Legal Information, available at <<http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201701200039>>.

<sup>191</sup> Matthew Bodner, "Why Russia Is Expanding Its Naval Base in Syria," *The Moscow Times*, September 21, 2015, available at <<https://themoscotimes.com/articles/why-russia-is-expanding-its-naval-base-in-syria-49697>>; and Ishchenko, "Doroga zhizni' dlja aviabazy 'Hmejmim'" ["The Road of Life" for the "Hmeimim" Airbase]. Also see the comments by Vladimir Komoyedov, retired commander of the Black Sea Fleet who became head of the Duma's Defense Committee, in "Komoedov ocenil dlitel'nost' prebyvaniya rossijskih voennyh v Sirii" [Komoyedov Assessed the Duration of the Presence of Russian Forces in Syria], Interfax, August 9, 2016, available at <[www.interfax.ru/russia/522755](http://www.interfax.ru/russia/522755)>, and those of Viktor Ozerov, head of the Federation Council's Defense and Security Committee, in "V Sovfede anonsirovali shagi RF po razvitiyu aviabazy 'Hmejmim,'" Interfax, August 9, 2016, available at <[www.interfax.ru/russia/522788](http://www.interfax.ru/russia/522788)>.

<sup>192</sup> Alex Wright, “Russian Company Begins Oil Prospecting off Syrian Coast,” *The New Arab*, September 22, 2015, available at <[www.alaraby.co.uk/english/News/2015/9/22/Russian-company-begins-oil-prospecting-off-Syrian-coast#sthash.iagKbNhk.dpuf](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/News/2015/9/22/Russian-company-begins-oil-prospecting-off-Syrian-coast#sthash.iagKbNhk.dpuf)>.

<sup>193</sup> “Assad Preparing to Handover Syria’s Energy Sector to Russia,” *The New Arab*, February 15, 2016, available at <[www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/2/15/assad-preparing-to-handover-syrias-energy-sector-to-russia](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/2/15/assad-preparing-to-handover-syrias-energy-sector-to-russia)>.

<sup>194</sup> Kramnik, “My uhodim, uhodim, uhodim. Kakim mozhet byt’ zavershenie rossijskoj operacii v Sirii” [We Are Leaving, Leaving, Leaving].

<sup>195</sup> “Aleksandr Kinshhak: Govorit’ o nalichii skrytyh planov obespechit’ dolgosrochnoe voennoe prisutstvie RF v Sirii neumestno” [Aleksandr Kinshchak: It Is Inappropriate to Talk About Hidden Plans to Ensure the Long-Term Military Presence of the RF (Russian Federation) in Syria], Interfax, February 8, 2016, available at <[www.interfax.ru/interview/493796](http://www.interfax.ru/interview/493796)>.

<sup>196</sup> Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 16–18.

<sup>197</sup> Ivan Safronov, “Vozdushno-kommercheskie sily. Kakim sposom pol’zuetsja rossijskoe oruzhie posle Sirii,” *Kommersant*, March 28, 2016, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/2932551](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2932551)>. On March 17, Putin had told his military audience that some 33 billion rubles earmarked for military exercises in 2015 had simply been applied to the air campaign. Safronov was evidently using exchange rate of 68.75 rubles to the dollar.

<sup>198</sup> Kramnik, “My uhodim, uhodim, uhodim. Kakim mozhet byt’ zavershenie rossijskoj operacii v Sirii” [We Are Leaving, Leaving, Leaving]. See also Vladimir Frolov, “A Modest Deal: Vladimir Putin’s New Détente,” *The Moscow Times*, July 5, 2016, available at <[www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/a-modest-deal-vladimir-putin-s-new-d-tente-op-ed/574322.html?mc\\_cid=9c78418277&mc\\_eid=3826ac3356](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/a-modest-deal-vladimir-putin-s-new-d-tente-op-ed/574322.html?mc_cid=9c78418277&mc_eid=3826ac3356)>.

<sup>199</sup> Karen DeYoung, “Kerry: Talks with Russia Seek to Separate Rival Forces in Syria with Safe Zones,” *Washington Post*, May 3, 2016; Karen DeYoung and Erin Cunningham, “U.S., Russia Near New Agreement to Monitor Syrian Cease-Fire,” *Washington Post*, May 4, 2016; and Karen DeYoung, “State Dept.: U.S., Russia Reach Aleppo Truce Deal,” *Washington Post*, May 5, 2016.

<sup>200</sup> Arash Karami, “Iranian Officials Blame Aleppo Cease-fire Violations for Military Casualties,” *al-Monitor*, May 10, 2016, available at <[www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/iran-syria-heavy-losses-khan-tuman.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/05/iran-syria-heavy-losses-khan-tuman.html)>; Vladimir Yevseyev, “Vladimir Evseev: ‘Dlja pereloma v Sirii nuzhna prezhe vsegda normalizacija rossijsko-tureckih otnoshenij’” [Vladimir Yevseyev: “A Breakthrough in Syria Requires above All Normalization of Russo-Turkish Relations”], *Politkom.ru*, June 17, 2016, available at <<http://politcom.ru/21198.html>>.

<sup>201</sup> Author’s conversations in Moscow, June 2016.

<sup>202</sup> Discussion in Washington, DC, May 2016.

<sup>203</sup> Author’s conversations in Moscow, June 2016.

<sup>204</sup> “Aleppo: Syrian Regime, Russia Target Main Rebel Supply Route,” *The New Arab*, May 22, 2016, available at <[www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/5/22/aleppo-syrian-regime-russia-target-main-rebel-supply-route](http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/5/22/aleppo-syrian-regime-russia-target-main-rebel-supply-route)>.

<sup>205</sup> Genevieve Casagrande, “Russian Airstrikes in Syria: May 13–June 2, 2016,” Institute for the Study of War, June 3, 2016, available at <[www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-airstrikes](http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-airstrikes)

syria-may-13-june-2-2016>.

<sup>206</sup> “President al-Assad: Our War on Terrorism Continues, We Will Liberate Every Inch of Syria--VIDEO,” SANA, June 7, 2016, available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=79525>>.

<sup>207</sup> Ivan Safronov, “Respubliku zashhishhajut silami treh ministrov” [The Forces of Three Ministers Defend the Republic], *Kommersant*, June 9, 2016, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/3008279](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3008279)>; and Sergei Strokan, Kirill Krivosheyev, and Ivan Safronov, “Ministry oborony obsudili nastupleni” [Defense Ministers Discussed the Offensive], *Kommersant*, June 10, 2016, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/3008856](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3008856)>.

<sup>208</sup> AFP, “Russian Defence Chief, Assad Coordinate on ‘Anti-terrorist Fight,’” *al-Monitor*, June 18, 2016, available at <[www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2016/06/syria-conflict-russia-diplomacy.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2016/06/syria-conflict-russia-diplomacy.html)>.

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<sup>218</sup> Author’s conversations at Stanford workshop, January 2016.

<sup>219</sup> While a buffer zone seemed to be going nowhere in late July 2015, Turkey actually engaged for the first time in direct ground and air combat against ISIS fighters—firing across the border from Turkey into Syria—on July 23 after an ISIS attack on July 20 on the Turkish border city of Suruc killed 33. At the same time, Ankara finally granted Washington permission to use airbases at Incirlik and Diyarbakir to attack ISIS positions. See Ceylan Yengisu and Helene Cooper, “U.S. Jets to Use Turkish Bases in War on ISIS,” *New York Times*, July 24, 2015.

<sup>220</sup> Author’s conversations at Stanford workshop, January 2016.

<sup>221</sup> Frolov, “Igra na kompleksah” [Game of Complexes].

<sup>222</sup> Vladimir Degachev, “Kurdsko-donbasskij sojuz. Pochemu Kreml’ pozvolil Kurdistanu otkryt’ predstavitel’stvo v Rossii” [Kurdish-Donbas Alliance: Why the Kremlin Allowed Kurdistan to Open a Representation in Russia], *Gazeta.ru*, February 11, 2016, available at <[www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/02/11\\_a\\_8068331.shtml](http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2016/02/11_a_8068331.shtml)>.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Liz Sly, “Syrian Kurds Declare Their Own Region, Raising Tensions,” *Washington Post*, March 18, 2016, available at <[www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/syrian-kurds-declare-their-own-region-raising-tensions/2016/03/17/db762950-ec4c-11e5-a9ce-681055c7a05f\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.160ab3aa8c17](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrian-kurds-declare-their-own-region-raising-tensions/2016/03/17/db762950-ec4c-11e5-a9ce-681055c7a05f_story.html?utm_term=.160ab3aa8c17)>.

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<sup>226</sup> “Telephone Conversation with U.S. President Barack Obama,” President of Russia Official Web Site, April 18, 2016, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51738>>.

<sup>227</sup> Yevseyev, “A Breakthrough in Syria Requires above all Normalization of Russo-Turkish Relations.”

<sup>228</sup> MacFarquhar and Arango, “Erdogan and Putin Seek to Put Syria Rift in Past.” Erdogan had issued a statement of regret over the November 2015 shootdown on June 27, 2016 (Tavernise, “Trying to Mend One More Diplomatic Fence, Turkey Apologizes for Downing Russian Plane”).

<sup>229</sup> Tim Arango, “In Turkey, Fingers Point at Americans After Nearly Every Crisis,” *New York Times*, January 5, 2017, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2017/01/04/world/europe/istanbul-attack-nightclub.html?ref=todayspaper&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/04/world/europe/istanbul-attack-nightclub.html?ref=todayspaper&_r=0)>.

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<sup>297</sup> Nina Ilina, “Druzhba protiv Ameriki. Prezident Irana prodemonstriroval v Kremle otsutstvie protivorechij s Rossiejj. No pozicii dvuh stran po Sirii rashodjatsja, uvereny jeksperty” [Friendship Against America: The President of Iran Demonstrated in the Kremlin the Absence of Contradictions with Russia. But the Positions of the Two Countries on Syria Are Diverging, Experts are Convinced], Vedomosti.ru, March 29, 2017, available at <[www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2017/03/29/683154-iran-otsutstvie-protivorechii-rossiejj](http://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2017/03/29/683154-iran-otsutstvie-protivorechii-rossiejj)>; Azhelika Basisini, Lyudmila Podobedova, and Svetlana Burmistrova, “Nash dobryj sosed’. Kak proshla vstrecha liderov Rossii i Irana” [Our Good Neighbor: How the Meeting of the Leaders of Russia and Iran Went] RBK.ru, March 28, 2017, available at <[www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2017/03/29/58d9153a9a7947eb54bf65a1](http://www.rbc.ru/newspaper/2017/03/29/58d9153a9a7947eb54bf65a1)>; Tatiana Melikian, “Ne sojuzniki, no partnerы. Ruhani obsuzhdal v Moskve soglashenija na milliardy dollarov” [Not Allies, But Partners: Rouhani Discussed in Moscow Agreements on Billions of Dollars], Lenta.ru, March 29, 2017, available at <[https://lenta.ru/articles/2017/03/29/putin\\_iran/](https://lenta.ru/articles/2017/03/29/putin_iran/)>.

<sup>298</sup> “Sirija—‘jabloko razdora?’” [Syria—Bone of Contention], Echo of Moscow, April 11, 2017, available at <<http://echo.msk.ru/programs/sorokina/1960562-echo/>>; “Kirill Koktysh i Aleksandr Shumilin—o tom, kak vesti sebja Rossii v sirijskom voprose” [Kirill Koktysh and Aleksander Shumilin—On How Russia Should Act on the Syrian Issue], OTR (Russian Public Television), April 10, 2017, available at <<https://otr-online.ru/programmi/segodnya-v-rossii-27580/kirill-koktish-i-67514.html>>; “Kakovy perspektivy otnoshenij Moskvy i Damaska? ‘Pro et Contra’: Rossija rezko otreagirovala na aviaudar SShA v Sirii” [What Are the Prospects for Relations between Moscow and Damascus? Pro et Contra: Russia Reacted Sharply to the U.S. Airstrike in Syria], Kommersant Radio, April 7, 2017, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/3266599](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3266599)>; Aleksandr Zhelenin, “Rossija ischerpala potencial v Sirii? V Kremle poka ne ponimajut, kak otvechat’ na reshenie Donal’daja Trampa nanesti raketnyj udar po aviabaze vojsk Asada v Sirii, otmechajut jeksperty” [Russia Has Exhausted Its Potential in Syria: The Kremlin Does Not Yet Know How to Respond to Donald Trump’s Decision to Carry Out a Missile Strike Against the Airbase of al-Assad’s Troops in Syria, Experts Note], Rosbalt.ru, April 7, 2017, available at <[www.rosbalt.ru/world/2017/04/07/1605953.html](http://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2017/04/07/1605953.html)>.

<sup>299</sup> For a thoughtful review of these, see Hussein Ibish, “How America Can Influence the Syrian Conflict,” The National, May 6, 2017, available at <[www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/how-america-can-influence-the-syrian-conflict](http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/how-america-can-influence-the-syrian-conflict)>.

<sup>300</sup> Laura Rozen, “U.S., Russia Hold Secret Talks over South Syria Safe Zone,” al-Monitor, June 1, 2017, available at <[www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/us-russia-secret-talks-south-syria-safe-zone.html?utm\\_source=CGI+Daily+Russia+Brief&utm\\_campaign=c47b175e7e-EMAIL\\_CAMPAIGN\\_2017\\_06\\_02&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_814a2b3260-c47b175e7e-](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/06/us-russia-secret-talks-south-syria-safe-zone.html?utm_source=CGI+Daily+Russia+Brief&utm_campaign=c47b175e7e-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_06_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_814a2b3260-c47b175e7e-)>.

281718393&mc\_cid=c47b175e7e&mc\_eid=3826ac3356>; Putin's possible allusion to these contacts in "Vladimir Putin's Interview with *Le Figaro*."

<sup>301</sup> Ilya Arkhipov, Evgenia Pismennaya, and Henry Meyer, "Chaos Engulfing Trump Stirs Anxiety in Russia Over U.S. Ties," Bloomberg.com, May 19, 2017, available at <[www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-05-18/russia-grows-anxious-over-u-s-political-chaos-engulfing-trump](http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-05-18/russia-grows-anxious-over-u-s-political-chaos-engulfing-trump)>.

<sup>302</sup> "Vladimir Putin's Interview with *Le Figaro*."

<sup>303</sup> "Telephone Conversation with U.S. President Donald Trump," President of Russia Official Web Site, January 28, 2017, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/53787>>. For Lavrov's comments on the phone conversation, see "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at a Joint News Conference Following Talks with Eritrean Minister of Foreign Affairs Osman Saleh, Moscow, January 30, 2017," Russian Foreign Ministry Official Web Site, January 30, 2017, available at <[www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2617572](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/2617572)>.

<sup>304</sup> According to one fascinating but improbable news report, "Assad's powers would be cut under a deal between . . . [Russia, Iran, and Turkey], say several sources. Russia and Turkey would allow him to stay until the next presidential election when he would quit in favor of a less polarizing Alawite candidate." See Andrew Osborn and Orhan Coskun, "Russia, Turkey, Iran Eye Dicing Syria Into Zones of Influence," Reuters, December 28, 2016, available at <[www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-deal-idUSKBN14H12V?utm\\_source=Boomtrain&utm\\_medium=manual&utm\\_campaign=20161229](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-deal-idUSKBN14H12V?utm_source=Boomtrain&utm_medium=manual&utm_campaign=20161229)>.

<sup>305</sup> "President Assad's Al-Watan Daily Interview, December 7, 2016," Al-Watan, December 7, 2016, available at <[www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1563:president-assad-s-al-watan-daily-interview-december-7-2016&catid=322:2016&Itemid=468](http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1563:president-assad-s-al-watan-daily-interview-december-7-2016&catid=322:2016&Itemid=468)>.

<sup>306</sup> Interview for Rossiya 24 and NTV, "President al-Assad: Military Operations Will Not Stop after Liberating Aleppo, We Will Liberate Palmyra Again," SANA, December 14, 2016, available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=96184>>; statement during meeting with Iranian Assistant Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Jaber Ansari and accompanying delegation, "President al-Assad: Liberation of Aleppo Is a Relapse for Terrorism-backing Countries," SANA, December 22, 2016, available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=96852>>; and statement to French media, "President al-Assad: Everything in the World Is Changing Regarding Syria. . . . Our mission, According to the Constitution and Laws Is to Liberate Every Inch of the Syrian Land," SANA, January 9, 2017, available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=97969>>.

<sup>307</sup> Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, "First Day of Syria Peace Talks Quickly Descends Into Arguing and Accusations," *New York Times*, January 24, 2017, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/world/middleeast/syria-astana-talks-russia-turkey.html?ref=todayspaper&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/world/middleeast/syria-astana-talks-russia-turkey.html?ref=todayspaper&_r=0)>.

<sup>308</sup> "Statements for the Press and Answers to Journalists' Questions Following Russian-Japanese Talks," President of Russia Official Web Site, December 16, 2016, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/53474>>.

<sup>309</sup> "Meeting with Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov," December 29, 2016, and Anton Mardasov, "What Prompted Russia's Shift in Stance on Syria Opposition?" *al-Monitor*, January 15, 2017, available at <[www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/moscow-recognition-syria-opposition-russia-talks-astana.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/moscow-recognition-syria-opposition-russia-talks-astana.html)>.

<sup>310</sup> Interview to Japanese TV, “President al-Assad: Astana Talks Will Focus on Ceasefire and Allowing Terrorist Groups to Join Reconciliation,” SANA, January 20, 2017, available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=98592>>.

<sup>311</sup> “President al-Assad: Everything in the World Is Changing Regarding Syria.”

<sup>312</sup> “Viktor Ozerov: Rossiya prishla v Siriju vser’ez i nadolgo” [Viktor Ozerov: Russia Has Come to Syria for the Long Haul], *RIA Novosti*, November 21, 2016, available at <<https://ria.ru/interview/20161121/1481784114.html>>.

<sup>313</sup> In late January 2017, there were rumors of Asad’s incapacitation until he reappeared on January 1. See “Syrian President Assad Meets with Damascus Manufacturers,” Reuters, January 31, 2017, available at <[http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN15F1M8?utm\\_source=Boomtrain&utm\\_medium=manual&utm\\_campaign=20170201](http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN15F1M8?utm_source=Boomtrain&utm_medium=manual&utm_campaign=20170201)>.

<sup>314</sup> According to Vitaly Naumkin, one of Russia’s leading Middle East experts, “One shouldn’t link Moscow’s plans to continue providing assistance to Damascus to Tehran’s plans.” According to him, “Iran is pursuing its independent policy toward the Syrian crisis, guided by its own national interests. Russia is doing the same, while also taking into account its developing relations with the Arab Gulf states.” Vitaly Naumkin, “What Exactly Is Russia Doing in SYRIA?” *al-Monitor*, September 11, 2015, available at <[www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/will-russia-fight-islamic-state-syria.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/09/will-russia-fight-islamic-state-syria.html)>. The head of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, agreed. He said that Russia “is following its [own] interests in Syria.” Iran and Russia do share some interests, “but it is not clear that Russia is aligned with Iran with regard to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.” “IRGC Chief Hints as [sic] Moscow-Tehran Rift,” *Now*, November 3, 2015, available at <<https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566159-irgc-chief-hints-as-moscow-tehran-rift>>. On this theme, see also Nikolay Kozhanov, “The Limits of Russian-Iranian Cooperation,” Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, November 27, 2015, available at <[www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/limits-russian-iranian-cooperation?dm\\_i=1TYG,3V45V,KV061P,DXEPX,1](http://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/limits-russian-iranian-cooperation?dm_i=1TYG,3V45V,KV061P,DXEPX,1)>; Mark N. Katz, “Just How Firm Is the Russian-Iranian Alliance?” *The Arab Weekly*, Issue 33, November 27, 2015, 16, available at <[www.thearabweekly.com/?id=2929](http://www.thearabweekly.com/?id=2929)>; and Levan Dzhagaryan, Russia’s ambassador in Tehran, who cautions that while Russia has worked tirelessly to bring Iran into the international peace process on Syria and the two countries coordinate their efforts in that country, they are “not in a coalition.” “Posol RF v Tegerane: Iran dlja nas v opredelennoj stepeni konkurent, no i perspektivnyj partner” [The Russian Ambassador in Tehran: Iran for Us Is to a Certain Extent a Competitor, but also a Promising Partner], *Interfax*, October 29, 2015, available at <[www.interfax.ru/interview/476247](http://www.interfax.ru/interview/476247)>.

<sup>315</sup> Author’s conversations in Moscow, June 2016; and Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 26–27, 42–47.

<sup>316</sup> Expert comments at conference on “Rising Iran?” organized by Denise Natali and sponsored by the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, Washington DC, May 22, 2017.

<sup>317</sup> Sergey Strokan and Maxim Yusin, “Rossija i SShA okazalis’ po raznye storony Irana. Moskve nelegko soglasit’sja s novym kursom Vashingtona” [Russia and the United States Find Themselves on Opposite Sides of Iran: It Is Difficult for Moscow to Agree with Washington’s New Course], *Kommersant*, February 9, 2017, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/3213552](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3213552)>.

<sup>318</sup> Ivan Safronov, “Dmitrij Rogozin ostavil Iran bez sebja. Sorvalsja vizit vice-prem'era v Tegeran” [Dmitry Rogozin Left Iran Without His Presence: The Visit of the Deputy Prime Minister to Tehran Has Failed], *Kommersant*, February 14, 2017, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/3218427](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3218427)>.

<sup>319</sup> Expert comments at conference on “Rising Iran?”

<sup>320</sup> Hanin Ghaddar, “Iran May Be Using Iraq and Syria as a Bridge to Lebanon,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, *Policywatch* 2729, November 23, 2016, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-may-be-using-iraq-and-syria-as-a-bridge-to-lebanon](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-may-be-using-iraq-and-syria-as-a-bridge-to-lebanon)>.

<sup>321</sup> On the uncertain dynamics between Moscow and Tehran on this point, see Andrew J. Tabler, “The Not-So-Great Game in Syria, and How to End It,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 4, 2015, available at <[www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-not-so-great-game-in-syria-and-how-to-end-it](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-not-so-great-game-in-syria-and-how-to-end-it)>.

<sup>322</sup> Anne Barnard, “Amid Rain of Shells, a ‘Final Scream’ From Aleppo’s Civilians,” *New York Times*, December 15, 2016, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2016/12/14/world/middleeast/aleppo-syria-evacuation-deal.html?ref=todayspaper](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/14/world/middleeast/aleppo-syria-evacuation-deal.html?ref=todayspaper)>; Anne Barnard, Hwaida Saad, and Ben Hubbard, “Thousands of Residents Still Trapped in Aleppo as Evacuations Break Down,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2016, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/world/middleeast/aleppo-evacuation-assad-syria.html?ref=todayspaper](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/world/middleeast/aleppo-evacuation-assad-syria.html?ref=todayspaper)>; Louisa Loveluck, “Aleppo Evacuation Back on Track as U.N. Agrees to Send International Monitors,” *Washington Post*, December 20, 2016, available at <[www.washingtonpost.com/world/aleppo-evacuation-back-on-track-as-un-set-to-vote-on-international-monitors/2016/12/19/d1d9abd0-c5ca-11e6-85b5-76616a33048d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.0496f5dd9beb](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/aleppo-evacuation-back-on-track-as-un-set-to-vote-on-international-monitors/2016/12/19/d1d9abd0-c5ca-11e6-85b5-76616a33048d_story.html?utm_term=.0496f5dd9beb)>; and Ben Hubbard and Somini Sengupta, “Russia Backs U.N. Vote to Send Monitors to Aleppo, as Evacuations Resume,” *New York Times*, December 20, 2016, available at <[www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/world/middleeast/aleppo-evacuations-syria.html?ref=todayspaper](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/19/world/middleeast/aleppo-evacuations-syria.html?ref=todayspaper)>.

<sup>323</sup> “Iran Against U.S. Presence in Astana Talks: FM [Zarif],” Tasnim News Agency, January 17, 2017, available at <[www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/01/17/1299722/iran-against-us-presence-in-astana-talks-fm?utm\\_source=Boomtrain&utm\\_medium=manual&utm\\_campaign=20170118](http://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/01/17/1299722/iran-against-us-presence-in-astana-talks-fm?utm_source=Boomtrain&utm_medium=manual&utm_campaign=20170118)>; and “No Invitation for U.S. to Attend Astana Talks: Iran’s Shamkhani,” Tasnim News Agency, January 18, 2016, available at <[www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/01/18/1300319/no-invitation-for-us-to-attend-astana-talks-iran-s-shamkhani?utm\\_source=Boomtrain&utm\\_medium=manual&utm\\_campaign=20170119](http://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/01/18/1300319/no-invitation-for-us-to-attend-astana-talks-iran-s-shamkhani?utm_source=Boomtrain&utm_medium=manual&utm_campaign=20170119)>.

<sup>324</sup> Sergei Strokan and Maksim Yusin, “Iran lishaet SShA slova na peregovorah. Vypolnenie rossiskogo mirnogo plana stolknulos' s nepredvidennymi oslozhnenijami” [Iran Strips United States of Right to Speak at Talks: Fulfillment of Russian Peace Plan Encounters Unforeseen Complications], *Kommersant*, January 19, 2017, available at <[www.kommersant.ru/doc/3195666](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3195666)>.

<sup>325</sup> Lister, 384.

<sup>326</sup> Haid Haid, “Peace Talks: How Iran and Russia May Come to Blows over Syria,” Middle East Eye, January 23, 2017, available at <[www.middleeasteye.net/columns/syria-differences-between-russia-and-iran-are-open-display-1170829140](http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/syria-differences-between-russia-and-iran-are-open-display-1170829140)>; and Strokan and Yusin, “Iran Strips United States of Right to Speak at Talks.”

<sup>327</sup> “President Bashar al-Assad Interview Given to RTP TV Channel,” SANA, November 16, 2016, available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=93484>>.

<sup>328</sup> Taştekin.

<sup>329</sup> Author's conversations in Moscow, April 2017.

<sup>330</sup> Expert comments at conference on "Rising Iran?"

<sup>331</sup> For a similar assessment, see Julia Sveshnikova, "Was Rouhani's Visit to Russia Actually Successful?" al-Monitor, April 5, 2017, available at <[www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/iran-russia-rouhani-putin-visit-moscow-success.html?utm\\_source=Boomtrain&utm\\_medium=manual&utm\\_campaign=20170406&bt\\_ee=lvvrGIhRIJ0myeVco1wK4VIY1aT8cZZpiJOI9jcioX0w7X7PNI402F8GjYJ8Eni2&bt\\_ts=1491498014121](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/iran-russia-rouhani-putin-visit-moscow-success.html?utm_source=Boomtrain&utm_medium=manual&utm_campaign=20170406&bt_ee=lvvrGIhRIJ0myeVco1wK4VIY1aT8cZZpiJOI9jcioX0w7X7PNI402F8GjYJ8Eni2&bt_ts=1491498014121)>.

<sup>332</sup> Author's conversations in Moscow, April 2017.

<sup>333</sup> At the press conference following their talks, Putin used the phrase *strategic partnership* and Rouhani *strategic ties*. (For both, see "Press Statements Following Talks with President of Iran Hassan Rouhani," March 28, 2017, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54138>>.) The joint statement issued after the talks used the phrase *strategic cooperation*. See "Sovmestnoe zajavlenie Prezidenta Rossiijskoj Federacii i Prezidenta Islamskoj Respubliki Iran" [Joint Statement by the President of the Russian Federation and the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran], March 28, 2017, available at <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5176>. On the obstacles that prevent Russia and Iran from achieving strategic partnership, see Vladimir Sazhin, "Iran-Russia Strategic Partnership at the New Stage: What Could We Propose to Each Other?" in Russia-Iran Partnership: An Overview and Prospects for the Future, Report for the Russian International Affairs Council, ed. I. Ivanov (Moscow: Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies, December 13, 2016), 9–21, available at <<http://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-iran-partnership-an-overview-and-prospects-for-the-fu/>>.

<sup>334</sup> Author's conversations in Moscow, April 2017. Others attributed the lack of discussion in the Russian press of the two presidents' endorsement of the pursuit of *strategic* relations to the strong influence of pro-Israeli views in Moscow. In contrast, they stated that the pro-Iran lobby in Moscow is now small and weak.

<sup>335</sup> Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 169–206.

<sup>336</sup> For overviews from Russia's foremost expert on relations with Saudi Arabia, see G. G. Kosach, *Rossijsko-Saudovskie otnoshenija: politicheskij aspekt 1990–2015 gg* [Russo-Saudi Relations: Political Aspect 1990–2015] (Moscow: Институт Ближнего Востока, 2016); Grigory Kosach and Elena Melkumyan, Possibilities of a Strategic Relationship Between Russia and Saudi Arabia, Policy Brief, No. 6 (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, August 2016), available at <<http://russiancouncil.ru/common/upload/Russia-SaudiArabia-policy-brief-6-en.pdf>>.

<sup>337</sup> Dennis Ross, "Why Middle Eastern Leaders Are Talking to Putin, Not Obama," *Politico*, May 8, 2016, available at <[www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/putin-obama-middle-east-leaders-213867#ixzz4848koUoy](http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/putin-obama-middle-east-leaders-213867#ixzz4848koUoy)>.

<sup>338</sup> Parker, *Persian Dreams*, and Parker, *Understanding Putin*.

<sup>339</sup> Jay Solomon, "U.S. Eyes Russia-Iran Split in Bid to End Syria Conflict," *Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2015, available at <[www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-eyes-russia-iran-split-in-bid-to-end-syria-conflict-1447895357](http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-eyes-russia-iran-split-in-bid-to-end-syria-conflict-1447895357)>.

<sup>340</sup> A Zogby poll in September 2015 found majorities everywhere but Iran that already subscribed to the view that Russia's backing of Asad was a significant cause of the Syrian conflict. See

"Middle East 2015: Current and Future Challenges," Zogby Research Services, November 2015, 13, available at <<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/52750dd3e4b08c252c723404/t/5667940fbfe8731ec365efa7/1449628687692/Sir+Bani+Yas+2015+Letter+FINAL.pdf>>.

<sup>341</sup> David Pollock, "New Saudi Poll Shows Iran, Russia, United States, and Isis Are All Unpopular; Mixed Views on Others," Fikra Forum, October 22, 2015, available at <<http://fikraforum.org/?p=7907>>; David Pollock, "New Kuwaiti Survey Reveals Sectarian Divide, Concerns About Iran," Fikra Forum, October 28, 2015, available at <<http://fikraforum.org/?p=7967>>; "Middle East 2016, "Current Conditions and the Road Ahead," Zogby Research Services, November 2016, 5–9; and Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 41–42, 93, note 189.

<sup>342</sup> Vitaly Naumkin, "The Kremlin's Unexpected Decisions," *al-Monitor*, April 23, 2015, available at <[www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/kremlin-unexpected-syria-iran-yemen-israel-decisions.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/04/kremlin-unexpected-syria-iran-yemen-israel-decisions.html)>.

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