THE WAR IN SYRIA: LESSONS FOR THE WEST

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FOREWORD

Six years ago, when Syrian crisis started nobody believed it would leave such an imprint on EU internal affairs as well as international politics. Hundred thousands of migrants and refugees which crossed Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece to look for safety and better life conditions was one of many wake up calls for European societies. In 2015, it was a record number of 1.3 million migrants which reached European soil from battered regions of Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Africa and elsewhere.

European countries and EU institutions were not ready to receive these people, administer their arrival, screen them for security reasons and provide with decent living conditions upon arrival. In late summer of 2015 Greece, Balkan countries, Hungary and later Austria experienced unprecedented and uncontrolled migration flow across their borders. German Chancellor Angel Merkel decided to open German borders to migrants and along with welcoming them announced her famous phrase "Wir Schaffen Das"[1]. Since than more than a year has passed and the question remains — can Germans or indeed European Union manage this challenge without seriously undermining its unity and security.

It is timely to analyse all aspects and impact of so called "Migration Crisis" on the European Union and Europe in general. Without proper self-criticism it will be very difficult to tailor new political strategies and counter rising populism and advance of authoritarianism. One of the major assumptions reader can observe in following articles is that ultimately passivity in international and security policy sometimes is more costly than activity. Moreover, it is not correct to call it Migration crisis, since huge migration wave to Europe started as a consequence of lengthy and bloody military conflicts and civil wars. Therefore, in broader terms it is crisis of contemporary international order, international and security policies where the EU and the United States as strongest players were unable to deliver meaningful, efficient, and timely answers. Since the beginning of the conflict the West clearly declared that dictator Assad "should go". At the same time it failed to propose any realistic way how to remove Assad, create an interim government or to assist opposition to remove Assad. No fly zones were introduced despite of Turkish suggestion at a time. When Assad crossed the red line drawn by USA President Obama not to use chemical weapons against civilians and opposition, consequences did not follow. It further encouraged Assad to use any force to crush his opposition. The result is weakening international stability, increasing fragmentation of democratic Western world and unprecedented rise of populism.

[1] From German — "We make it"

Who are "losers" and who are "winners" in escalation of Syrian civil war? War in Syria created a huge grey zone of insecurity giving chance to different terrorist organizations to establish themselves. It also gave an opportunity for countries like Russia to misuse Western absence to create its own military and political presence in Syria. Politics is like water, if there is an empty space it will be filled with it. Where Western policies are absent, someone else takes the place. Among losers first of all one should mention Syrian people, more than 350,000 lost lives. However, politically among losers are also Europeans, their relationship with Turkey was damaged greatly. Also the United States prestige suffered during these wars. Whereas authoritarian regimes like Russia, Iran, and number of radical organizations are major beneficiaries of Western political confusion and delay to act on international stage. For understandable reasons the West was tired of former interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan which did not bring expected result — stability, peace and democracy to these countries. Citizenry of democratic Western societies increasingly abandoned military component as a solution to any crisis. Simultaneously we became more concerned with decreasing social security and economic prosperity at home after the financial crisis.

In turn, Assad and his ally Russia understood that apart of political declarations not much will be done against him from the EU or US side. While we in the West are increasingly losing our compass and ability to act on the international stage, Russian authoritarian leadership under Putin is grasping the momentum. Their goal can be characterized by slogan from Trump's campaign in US presidential elections — Make Russia (US) Great Again!

A legitimate question is — What comprises Great Russia in the minds and souls of current Russian leadership? Assumption would be that Great Russia means some revival of lost empire, either Tsarist or Communist. Perhaps some mixture of both. Moreover, it would mean to enforce on the West situation where the West would be incapable to make external or even internal political decisions without Russian influence. To reach this goal Russian leadership shall not only control its internal affairs with iron fist, but reestablish relative control over territories of former Tsarist or Russian Empire, weaken or possibly assist the dissolution/fragmentation of economic, political, and military competitors like the EU and NATO. The assumption is that Russia can be stronger if others are divided and weaker. To reach this goal current Russian leadership are using geopolitical, financial, economic, military means. It has developed cyber and strategic communication capacity with assistance of its military and state controlled media. It attempts to use weakness of open and democratic societies to challenge them from inside by assisting various fake or/naive NGO's and movements to shed a doubt on value of their free societies. Russia has been openly endorsing Brexit and Trump knowing that both would weaken the West and thus make Russia relatively stronger. In other words, as weaker and more divided the West is, as stronger and more influential is Russia.

At the same time Syria just like Ukraine is a showcase of these ambitions. Russians had a clear goal and motivation to keep Assad in power. It would grant

to Russia possibility to continue its military presence in Syria and eventually reestablish its leverage in the Middle East. Additional success would be to enforce its position on the West by fragmenting our political unity and disabling decision making. Western inability to revert the occupation and annexation of Crimea just like occupation of South Ossetia in 2008 war against Georgia gave to Kremlin a reason to believe that it can go further. And Russia acted, this time by deploying its Air Force, special operation forces and other combat units in Syria to bolster battered regime of Assad. Unfortunately, many leaders in Western Europe were taken by surprise. At home in Russia, Kremlin leadership presented themselves as major fighters of growing terrorism ready to combat ISIS in the region.

It must be noted that skillfully using strategic communication Russia established its perception as World power at home as well as requested its place at decision table in the West. Number of Western leaders publicly acknowledged that Syrian conflict cannot be solved without taking Russia on board. It also increased support in number of European countries to lift imposed sanctions on Russia despite the fact that no changes of Russian aggressive behavior in international politics can be observed. Minsk agreement is not implemented, Crimea remains annexed, Donbas is under control of Russian sponsored guerrillas, Russian military presence is there, Normandy format talks are abandoned, military sable rattling continues in Russian western, southern and northern districts. While elections in France and Germany are coming, among increased number of political circles appeasement is taking over political realism, ostrich policy is favored instead of bold initiatives. Russia continues to take our sleepy, indecisive, frequently slow minded and increasingly divided West by surprise adding to our political fragmentation even more by skillful propaganda and state controlled media. At the end of August, 2016, Russia once more surprised by using military basis in Iran in order to bomb targets in Syria.

Today, because of 5 years of warfare, hundreds of thousand lost lives, there are millions of refugees and Syrian conflict is far from being solved. Its spillovers we can see in Turkey, Europe and elsewhere. Syrian and other Arab conflicts served as a cradle to ISIS, another violent and deadly organization challenging peace and security, claiming innocent lives of civilians far from its ideological Heartland in Middle East. Thousands of European youngsters mainly with immigrant background are joining this terrorist organization for various reasons starting from boredom and ending with identity crisis and instability to integrate in host societies.

As far as Russian assertiveness, in August 2016 Ukraine was once again just inches from a new Russian military adventure. Kremlin denied Normandy format of negotiations and never implemented Minsk agreement. Additionally, its military presence and activity near the Baltic and Nordic countries as well as Poland remains high. In this situation, NATO reassurances for deterrence and commitments made in Warsaw Summit in July 2016 must be noted as historic and positive decisions. Also, the US vice-President Joe Biden visit to Riga on 23rd of August 2016, and later to Stockholm, and Ankara is an important and

symbolic step to provide additional security and solidarity. As far as Turkey is concerned, this is one of the first high ranking Western politician visits to Turkey after unsuccessful coup. EU and Most of European leaders failed to act timely and wisely towards Turkey in those crucial days.

One can argue that global terrorism and increasing Russian revanchism are among major threats to European security and stability. Russian willingness to redraw the post WW2 borders and prove its global ego is a serious challenge just like rising tide of global terrorism. However, both these challenges would not been able to reach its zenith if not the Ostrich policy of European political leadership. Denial and unwillingness to see these problems timely and act properly created an opening for Russian authoritarian leadership to challenge post war security architecture and borders of its neighbours.

Number of former European political leaders and thinkers with great political experience like Mr. Hannibalson, Mr. Uffe Ellemann Jensen or Mr. Carl Bildt have been expressing similar concerns. Within our societies frequent impotence of current Western leaders to provide timely and active policies is giving an opportunity for the rise of unprecedented populism and fragmentation. Populist and extremist leaders like Le Pen are using the impotence of conventional European political establishment to undermine European Union and the whole project of European post war cooperation. Trump in the US does the same as far as undermining of transatlantic unity. Populists are claiming that current establishment and institutions are unfit to face contemporary political challenges and therefore should be abandoned. This spirit of nihilism is echoed by Russian state sponsored means of strategic communication like Sputnik or RT and various undercover operations.

Russian authoritarian leadership rightly understands that its economic, political and military means has limits. Therefore, the relative share of global power can be increased by diminishing the share of Western power. European anti-establishment, extremist, anti-EU, and anti-globalist political circles and civic movements has become natural partners of current Kremlin revisionist leadership.

If European Union and West at large should survive, political courage and leadership is needed to face internal and external challenges now. Pro-European, liberal democratic forces and political leaders cannot afford dig their heads in the mud of ignorance and hope that things will turn right by itself. We, Europeans, have to admit that our biggest problem is ourselves and our fear to take responsibility and make right and timely decisions. If we solve our internal challenges, external challenges and threats cannot seriously harm us. In turn, if we as Europeans do not face these internal challenges and weaknesses of our continent now, we will not be capable to stand against outside challenges coming from, Russia, international terrorism or anywhere else.

The first step towards solution is admittance that we committed mistakes as far as our policy towards Syrian civil war, Turkey, migration, Russia, defence and security. Second, we have to formulate clear steps to be taken in the short time

period to ensure EU defence capabilities, border security, economic and trade policies. European and Western lifestyle was and will be determined by liberal democratic values which we can and must defend against authoritarian and intolerant challenges from inside or outside. European greatness is open trade policy, entrepreneurship and possibility to make a difference globally by soft as well as hard means.

This book is the second volume on lessons to be learned by Europe and the West at large from Syrian conflict to make our political, economic, and military standards of our liberal democratic continent an example for many to follow.

Artis Pabriks
Riga & Brussels, September 2016

INTRODUCTION

I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy.
/John Adams, 2nd President of US/

This quote of John Adams stresses the rather hopeful view of the second US President — the freedom fighting would be eventually crowned by peace. The international politics scholars of the *Realpolitik* theory would reject the hopes that have no root in a long-term vision while according to them, the reason for all wars is the failing human nature — concern about the personal safety and thirst for power. Where fear persists there is the aggression. As another US president Abraham Lincoln has pointed out: "Human action can be modified to some extent, but human nature cannot be changed." If Lincoln is correct, we have trouble and the only way forward is to contain the evil with a just war as expressed in the principles of the international law — *jus ad bellum*. Nevertheless, disregarding the pessimism of the realism's school it is worth to seek the ways how to keep peace and when the war is on, to forge a peace deal. Leaving the study of the war incentives to the philosophers it is still worth trying to draw consequences out of Syrian war and the Western involvement there.

The aim of this volume's articles is to learn lessons from the involvement of the Western world in the Syrian crisis. Is the European Union and US involvement compatible to the challenges that Syria, the wider Middle East and Europe face? What shall the likely EU strategy be in order to resolve the Syrian conflict and to diminish the refugee crisis? What kind of motivation does Russia have when engaging in Syria and what would be the consequences? How can the West effectively neutralise the Daesh propaganda and win the battle for the hearts and souls? These are the questions and answers dealt by the authors — an international team, rallying after European parliamentarian Artis Pabriks' and the Centre of Eastern European Studies initiative, comprising the experts from Latvia, Germany, UK, Poland, USA and Turkey.

The story begins with a chapter by Malte Gaier and Katharina Senge analysing the influence of the Syrian war onto refugee crisis in the Middle East and Europe. The core of their article is the role of Germany in the situation. Chancellor Angela Merkel knows very well from her own experience that the one who has the means and responsibility is always vulnerable to the demands and criticism by other players. Gaier and Senge are not just investigating the influence of the Syrian war on the region but also the implications to Germany and the European Union

as a whole. Their article examines the policies of the EU and Germany to solve the refugee crisis as well.

Julian Lindley-French reflects the options of Europe vis-á-vis the war in Syria on a strategic level. The question is put as follows: does the EU have a real strategy for the present tragedy of the war and refugee crisis? How Europe can deal with its vulnerability in front of challenges? What is the nature of the Syrian conflict? What can Europe hope to achieve? What would a European grand strategy look like? — These are the questions J. Lindley-French is searching the answers to. The Euro-integration is a significant project bearing fruit initially in the foreign policy, but the success is still limited.

Henri J. Barkey's article analyses the US policy in Syria. He regards the US actions in the conflict solution as rather ad-hoc than proactive measures. The readers will reveal the results of this involvement. US has long-term interests in the region, comprising Syria, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Lebanon and Israel. Besides those actors there is Russia's engagement with a greater ambition in the region.

In this book Michael Kofman reviews the cooperation between US and Russia in solving the Syrian crisis starting from the year 2011. He analyses how the two countries have overcome the initial confrontation and achieved a degree of coordination of the operations. Similarly to the Cold War era between US and USSR, Syria is the place where the interstate diplomatic relations of Washington and Moscow are tested with confrontation on a political level and cooperation on the field. The need to coordinate the military actions arises against the background of the failure of the *reset* policy and illegal annexation of the Crimea. This context is by no means helpful to the negotiations for cooperation with Russia which has challenged the international community with its aggression against Ukraine.

Every warfare nowadays is backed by an information war. Spread of information or disinformation is not just a state-owned instrument; the combating groups and terrorists manage to use the strategic communication rather effectively as well. Daesh is not an exclusion; this war-time feature is examined by Rafal Zgryziewicz. He analyses the Daesh use of images, symbols and information, that sums up to a kind of strategic communication within the Middle East region. R. Zgryziewicz is not just examining the channels, methods and target groups of Daesh but dwells upon the very structure and the roots of the terrorist organization.

Māris Cepurītis is examining the motives of Russia to involve itself into the Syrian war. The launch of active military operations in Syria by Russia came to many as surprise, but not for those who had access to the information of military nature. M. Cepurītis is observing Russia's goals in Syria itself and in wider Middle East as well as in a broader context pointing to Russian elite's desire for the status a global superpower.

Liz Wahl writes about Russia's propaganda during the Syrian war. Irrespective to what Putin and his propagandists have to say about Russia's plans in Syria, it became quite obvious right after Russia's first engagement that it cares more about protections of Assad's regime than fighting the terrorists. Lies and disinformation

has become routine practice of Russia's foreign policy superseding even the scale of the Cold War era. The success of the messaging by the Russian propagandists and diplomats is partly attributed to inability of the Western societies to conceive that there can be lies to a such extent. Not everyone is probing the information by official Russia and comparing with other information sources therefore the article by Liz Wahl is quite a reminder about the necessity to address critically the messaging by RT and other Russian media.

Osman Bahadir Dincer and Mehmet Hecan analyse the importance of Turkey's involvement in the solution of the Syrian crisis. The Turkish policy towards Syrian before 2011 signalled both successes and problems. The Kurdish demands, terrorism and Syrian refugees did not allow Turkey to stand aside as a neutral observer. O. B. Dincer and M. Hecan reviews the development of Turkey's involvement from *proactivism* to *reactivism*. In a step-by-step analysis of the period since 2011 it becomes evident that Turkey will largely continue to influence the events in Syria as an important regional player.

This book aims to reach out to a wide audience — all those who are interested in the developments in Syria and in the Middle East region as a whole as well as in the lessons learned by EU and US from this war. I would like to express my gratitude to the authors for their contributions and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and European People's Party for their financial support in the edition of this volume.

Andis Kudors
Riga, September 2016

Part I
Lessons Learned: European Union

THE SYRIAN CONFLICT AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION — A GERMAN PERSPECTIVE

Malte Gaier, Katharina Senge

The ongoing Syria crisis continues to pose a constant threat and long-term challenge to the region as a whole and the international community with Germany gradually playing a more visible role as a mediator in crisis diplomacy, as a main destination for displaced refugees, and as a target for Islamist terrorism. The prolonged Syrian conflict has accelerated the decline of security and stability in the MENA region through warfare, enforced migration and displacement, as well as destruction of infrastructure on a large scale. Further, the Syrian revolution — in its core a non-violent popular uprising by the Syrian people against its ruling regime — became subject to increased radicalization among its main actors, thus empowering radical Islamist elements among the armed opposition. In addition, neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq who have absorbed no less than 4.5 million Syrian refugees since 2011 are facing an enormous burden posed on their economy and society. This article intends to describe the Syrian conflict as a prolonged international conflict seemingly immune to diplomatic intervention, and with long-term side effects on the security environment not only of the region but also on Europe and Germany. Furthermore, this article focuses on the specific policies with which the European Union and the German government tried to deal with the massive influx of refugees, especially between August 2015 and spring 2016, as a direct result of the prolonged Syrian conflict. It therefore outlines the legal and instrumental framework of European refugee and migration policy.

The Diplomatic Crisis: Prospects and Limitations

Analyzing the diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Syria war and a settlement of the conflict in which eventually more than 350,000 people were killed[1], the tragedy of Syria appears even more tragic. Despite numerous proposals having been presented by various parties to the conflict and the mediating parties, as of now any initiative seemed to have failed. Reasons for the failure included the lack

[1] There are only estimates of deaths with the total numbers varying. In April, UN Special Envoy to Syria De Mistura put out the estimate of 400,000 killed — so far the highest toll figured by a UN official, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/staffan-de-mistura-400000-killed-syria-civil-war-160423055735629.html.

of understanding and diverging interests on central aspects between the regional (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey) and international (US, Russia) powers, and the lack of trust and coordination between rebels and regime forces on the ground with all parties having violated local ceasefire agreements at some point.

While intense diplomacy at the end of 2015 raised hopes for progress for the Syria peace process after four years of war, developments on the battlefield in the first half of 2016 lead to disenchantment on all sides. In February, the UN Security Council had unanimously adopted Resolution 2268 demanding all parties to comply with the terms of a US-Russian agreement on a cessation of hostilities. The ceasefire officially started on 27 February, 2016, but exempted attacks on UN--designated terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat an-Nusra which was used as an excuse by Russia and the Syrian regime to attack positions of rebel factions with no links to ISIL and an-Nusra and civilian areas.[2] While the truce was initially reported to hold despite individual local fighting, it finally collapsed by the end of March with Syrian regime forces, with support from Russia and Iran, successfully recapturing the city of Palmyra from ISIL.

Within the framework proposed by the International Syria Support Group (ISSG)[3] in its Vienna Communiqué[4] and UN Security Council resolution 2254 — in fact the 13th resolution on Syria since early 2012 — the international community had once again proposed a road map calling for the establishment of a transitional body until August 1, followed by the implementation of a new Syrian constitution and free elections under UN auspices to be held within 18 months by mid-2017. However, similarly to the temporary suspension of the third round of the Geneva peace talks between the opposition groups and regime representatives due to intensified fighting in early February, the ultimatum of 1 August imposed on the Syrian regime elapsed. Prior steps announced by the Syrian regime such as the reshuffling of its cabinet did not reflect serious commitment to the road map towards devolution of power. Trust in the seriousness of the regime to abide by the agreement deteriorated even further with reports about new military advances in Aleppo Governorate.[5]

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2 Both organizations were designated as terrorist groups on 30 May, 2013, on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 1267 (1999) which sanctioned entities linked to or stemming from Usama bin Ladin's Al-Qa'ida group.

3 The ISSG was formed in 2015 as a standing multilateral task force to establish a formula for a political solution to the Syrian conflict. Co-chaired by the US and Russia it includes the EU, Germany, France, UK as well as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Its plan for a political transition based on the first Geneva talks of 2012 starting on 1 January 2016 has been endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

4 Statement of the ISSG in Vienna, 14.11.2015. See http://www.un.org/undpa/en/Speeches-statements/14112015/syria.

5 According to Presidential Decree No. 203 of 3 July, 2016, a new government was formed but the implementation of 26 new ministers and five ministers of state was widely seen as not more than a cosmetic change to the nucleus of power consisting of the core resorts of defense and inner affairs and the inner circle of presidential advisers, http://sana.sy/en/?p=80720.

Compared to the early transformative phase of the Syrian conflict from the formation of the armed opposition from 2011 until 2012 with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) as its centrist military force among the fighting opposition groups, and the escalation of violence on the various battlefields, the Syria conflict of today has become more internationalized with its proxy war elements gaining more momentum. In diplomatic terms, the intervention by regional powers such as Russia and Iran on the one side, and the US, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar on the other, has made it considerably more difficult to achieve a political resolution of the conflict or to even reach limited local truce agreements. Growing frustration over the conduct of several rounds of inter-Syrian negotiations between rebels and regime with subsequent violations of local ceasefire agreements became obvious in mid-June: In a leaked internal US State Department memo which had been circulated on the ministry's internal so-called dissent channel, more than 50 diplomats criticized the Obama administration's Syria policy, demanding an increase of diplomatic pressure by the US to be put on the regime in Damascus and — if necessary to keep negotiations alive — "a more militarily assertive US role in Syria".[6]

The Circle of Violence: Military Escalation and Human Suffering

On 7 July 2016 regimes forces were reported to have recaptured the last standing supply route between rebel-held eastern Aleppo and the surrounding areas in the North towards the Turkish border and Idlib, the next major city under rebel control. After four years of intense fighting, Syria's second largest city, industrial hub, and symbol of the Syrian Revolution whose Western part, inhabiting more than a million people, was under regime control and its eastern rebel-held part with up to 300,000 civilians laid under a complete siege by the regime. Previously, the regime had declared a 72-hour ceasefire, which it instantaneously violated in an attempt to gain ground.[7]

On 31 July, the day prior to the ultimatum imposed by UN resolution 2254 on the Syrian regime to present a transitional political body, rebel forces under the leadership of the former Nusra Front and its nationalist-Islamist ally Ahrar as-Sham together with various other rebel factions announced the "Grand epic for Aleppo", a full-scale offensive from both the outside and the inside of eastern rebel-held Aleppo, targeting the south western regime-held suburbs in an attempt to break the siege. After a week of intense combats with more than 700 fighters on both sides being killed, the rebel advance succeeded in securing a narrow corridor

[6] Max Fisher, "The State Department's Dissent Memo on Syria: An Explanation," *The New York Times*, June 22, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/17/world/middleeast/syria-assad-obama-airstrikes-diplomats-memo.html?_r=0.

[7] Asharq al-Awsat, "Violence Persists as Syrian Regime Cuts Only Road into Rebel-held Aleppo," *The Syrian Observer*, July 8, 2016, http://www.syrianobserver.com/EN/Features/31308/Violence_Persists_Syrian_Regime_Cuts_.

which provided direct access to the eastern city of Aleppo. While this "victory of the Mujahidin" might have the potential of locally shifting the military balance at Syria's Northern front in favor of the rebels forces, recent gains might also have a positive impact on the High Negotiations Committee of the Syrian Opposition (HNC) during the future negotiations between the opposition and the regime.[8] However, footage of Islamist rebel forces together with civilian population celebrating the end of the siege on the streets of eastern Aleppo[9] provides cause for concern, indicating that the Aleppo victory helped radical-Islamist factions in gaining more public acceptance and sympathies than ever before. Coinciding with a new US-Russian agreement over conducting air strikes against ISIL and an-Nusra in late July, 2016, Abu Muhamad al-Golani, leader of the Nusra front had announced that the organization would split from al-Qaeda and reorganize itself under the new name Jabhat Fatah as-Sham,[10] after al-Qaeda's leader Ayman az-Zawahiri had approved this step.[11] The fact that residents of the eastern city had begun to burn tires on the streets in a despaired attempt to impose a no-fly zone on their own by preventing Russian and regime warplanes from identifying targets, added to the public feeling of delusion about both, failed international diplomacy and general indifference by Western powers on the one side, and Islamist rebel factions reshuffling facts on the ground in favor of the Syrian people on the other.

Wake-up Calls for Europe and Germany

As far as Europe and Germany are concerned, the need to support a political solution to the Syrian crisis has been imperative to German politicians from the very beginning of the revolt in 2011. The insistence on the implementation of the Geneva Communiqué[12] of 30 June, 2012, and subsequent formulas as endorsed in various UN resolutions has since become incrementally important given the developments in 2015 with the expansion of ISIL in Syria and Iraq, the peak of the refugee crisis having been reached during the summer months, and

[8] Reactions towards the breaking of the Aleppo siege by the Western-backed main opposition group Syrian National Council (SNC) which forms a major block within the HNC were overwhelmingly supportive. See e.g. http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-opposition-inter-idUKKCN10N1X9.

[9] See for instance a video published and distributed on social media by various rebel-linked media channels including Jabhat al-Fatah as-Sham: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmKqDd_oHzg.

[10] Arab. "Front for the Conquest of Greater Syria".

[11] Liz Sly, Karen DeYoung, "Syria's Jabhat al-Nusra splits from al-Qaeda and changes its name," *The Washington Post*, July 28, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrias-jabhat-al-nusra-splits-from-al-qaeda-and-changes-its-name/2016/07/28/5b89ad22-54e6-11e6-b652-315ae5d4d4dd_story.html.

[12] See Action Group for Syria Final ("Geneva") Communiqué, 30.06.2012.

the beginning of the Russian-Iranian intervention on September 30. As a result, the humanitarian crisis in Syria regained ground in the German public debate culminating with the perception of the Aleppo siege during July/August 2016.

The encirclement of Aleppo by regime forces and their international Shiite militia allies added another estimated population of 300,000 to those civilians already living in besieged cities across Syria. According to the UN and international NGOs, the number of civilians living under siege at that point accounted for over one million.[13] According to the UN figures released for June, at least 592,000 people in Syria[14] were living under siege — the majority of these areas being encircled by the regime — with the denial of access to water and food and as starvation is being used as a weapon of war. According to these figures, another four million live in so called "hard-to-reach areas". Effective humanitarian support and access to deliver humanitarian aid, combined with a long-term strategy for sustainable support, has not yet materialized on the ground.: Prioritizing cooperation with the Syrian government at all costs, in order to ensure indirect access to war-torn areas in Syria, the UN since 2011 has enabled the distribution of approximately three billions of dollars USD of international aid. Since the money is since 2011 to be directed by the Syrian government, it flows from Damascus almost exclusively into its own the regime's territories.[15] Attempts to have truck convoys deliver food into rebel-held besieged areas — such as the cities of Foua, Daraya and Kefraya, which holds a population of 20,000 — failed after regime troops stopped the convoys and confiscated the supplies including food and even baby milk. In May, the ISSG members in a joint statement reaffirmed sieges of civilian areas to constitute a violation of international humanitarian law and called for the immediate lifting of all sieges until 1 June.[16] However, when the ultimatum ended with no visible progress on the ground, the ISSG's attempts to call on the World Food Program (WFP) to carry out a program for air bridges and air drops for all Syrian areas in need failed to materialize.

Recent attempts towards more direct intervention in Syria such as Foreign Minister Steinmeier's call for a humanitarian air bridge into Aleppo's encircled western and eastern areas illustrate Germany's desire to shape any political solution

[13] See Siege Watch Second Quarterly Report, May 2016, published on 10.06.2016, URL: http://syriainstitute.org/2016/06/10/2046/.

[14] Numbers presented by UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Stephen O'Brien on 27 May, 2016, URL: http://www.unmultimedia.org/radio/english/2016/05/syria-nearly-600000-living-under-siege/#.V7OsPzVGhsw.

[15] See the recent report "'Taking Sides: The United Nations' Loss Of Impartiality, Independence And Neutrality In Syria" published by the NGO Syria Campaign. URL: http://takingsides.thesyriacampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/taking-sides.pdf.

[16] "Note to Correspondents: Statement of the International Syria Support Group," May 17, 2016, https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/note-correspondents/2016-05-17/note-correspondents-statement-international-syria-support.

to the conflict by political and humanitarian means.[17] While former proposals presented by Russia and the Syrian regime, such as the opening of humanitarian corridors to enable civilians to flee the rebel-held eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo together with an amnesty offer for rebel fighters, have gone largely unheeded by civilians and opposition fighters alike for a lack of trust in the regime.[18]

With regard to humanitarian aid and development cooperation, Germany has remained a significant donor in the MENA region since the outbreak of the Arab Spring. Germany has also intensified its support for Syria according to the strategic approach of strengthening local reforms and actors of change in order to politically stabilize Europe's Southern neighborhood. In total, Germany has been one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid for refugees in the MENA, with a total volume of more than 1.4 billion USD[19] between 2012 and the first half of 2016, hence ranking third after the US and the UK. Germany's approach of "Tackling the root causes of displacement, stabilizing host regions, supporting refugees!"[20] focuses on Syria's neighboring countries Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq, where most of the Syrian war refugees found sanctuary. Germany hosted the first conference on the Syrian refugee situation in Berlin in October, 2014, and is also one of the main donors to the UN World Food Program. Within the ISSG, Germany has gradually worked towards a more pro-active political role. As an ISSG founding member it took the chair of one of the four ISSG Working Groups that are subordinated to UN Special Envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura.[21] Yet there is increasing consensus among German decision makers that improving economic conditions in partner countries in the MENA region as part of humanitarian and economic cooperation proves insufficient when countering the threat scenario of an increasingly insecure and destabilized neighborhood.

The declaration of the caliphate, and the rapid advance of ISIL into formerly state-controlled areas in Syria and Iraq during the summer of 2014 has impacted Germany's foreign policy view on the region. The refugee crisis of 2015 and subsequent attacks committed by terrorists affiliated with ISIL in European cities have exposed the West's vulnerability and strengthened the arguments in favor of

17 "Die Menschen in Aleppo mit Hilfe versorgen," August 12, 2016, http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Aussenpolitik/Laender/Aktuelle_Artikel/Syrien/160812_Aleppo.html.

18 When the proposal of opening humanitarian passages was announced on 28 July, rebel-held areas, according to ground reports, were still shelled by Russian airstrikes and artillery fire by the Syrian Arab Army. See https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/7/29/no-real-exit-world-criticises-regimes-aleppo-humanitarian-corridors.

19 For an overview see https://www.supportingsyria2016.com/about/germany/. Most of the funds are administered by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Federal Foreign Office (AA).

20 See BMZ website: https://www.bmz.de/en/what_we_do/issues/Sonderinitiative-Fluchtursachen-bekaempfen-Fluechtlinge-reintegrieren/deutsche_politik/index.html.

21 Since September 2015, Volker Perthes, director of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), acts as the chairman of the Working Groups on the Military, Security and Counter-Terrorism.

a more direct intervention towards the war-torn Levant region. Since September, 2014, Germany contributes militarily to the US-led global coalition in the fight against ISIL and its supply of equipment and weapons to the Northern Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces, and thus to a direct conflict party, has significantly supported local forces in their fight against ISIL. Further steps towards more engagement included a permanent training mission for Peshmerga fighters, established and run in Erbil by the German Armed Forces (Bundeswehr), and aircraft reconnaissance missions over Syria by German Tornado jets, approved by the parliament (Bundestag) in December 2015.[22]

However, under the current political and military framework it remains unlikely that developments on the ground will change European and German calculus towards more direct intervention — neither humanitarian nor military — in the Syrian conflict. From a European and German perspective, any further gradual destabilization of Syria and its neighboring countries in the Levant would have catastrophic consequences that would have a direct impact on their security interests. Further, like most of the other ISSG members, Germany sees the end of the Syrian war to be a precondition for an effective fight against ISIL and its radical-Islamist affiliates in the Near and Middle East. In other words, the expansion of ISIL and the security threat to Germany imposed by the group is seen as a side effect of the prolonged Syrian conflict. Radical non-state actors gained ground because of the disintegration of the Syrian state and the lack of a long-term strategy that stabilizes and develops liberated areas in order to then counter ISIL by creating ideological and socioeconomic pull factors that would help with winning hearts and minds, especially in Sunni populated areas.[23] This commitment goes hand in hand with the assessment of ISIL as a root cause for radicalization and forced migration, which ultimately has a negative impact on Europe and Germany. However, while ISIL in Syria is held responsible for war crimes and serious violations of international law, it is not seen as the central cause for civilian casualties and mass displacement in Syria.[24] Rather, systematic air campaigns by the Syrian and Russian Air Forces, artillery bombardments on civilian residential areas, hospitals and schools, intended to depopulate rebel-held parts of Syria, indicate that despite the necessity to militarily engage ISIL, in the long run only a political solution for Syria can effectively address Germany's security interests both internationally and on the domestic level.

[22] In addition, the parliamentary mandate allows for up to 1,200 troops being deployed abroad as part of the Tornado reconnaissance mission. See also https://www.rt.com/news/324721-germany-syria-mission-bundestag/.

[23] For this approach see http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/point-of-view/a-german-strategy-for-syria.html.

[24] See for instance Amnesty International's Annual Report 2015/16 on Syria: https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/report-syria/.

The Refugee Crisis from the European Perspective

The war in Syria constitutes a complex and prolonged humanitarian crisis. Experts estimate about 350,000 civilian casualties since 2011, 6.6 million internally displaced people (IDPs), and 4.8 million refugees outside the country. Four years after its beginning, the humanitarian emergency in Syria spilled over and caused what is generally called the "European refugee crisis 2015/16". Since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 a rising number of sea arrivals in Italy and fatal incidents in the Mediterranean had caused political debates flaring up now and then. Nonetheless, Europe had been rather preoccupied with itself in these years. The sovereign debt crisis, economic weakness and high unemployment in some Member States had incited restless intergovernmental negotiations, political tensions, and growing anti-European movements. The refugee crisis hit Europe in a moment of exhaustion. It is challenging the continent in its very identity as a complex governance structure, based on common values and solidarity. In fact, the multi-level structure of the European Union leads to two main discussion threads: the internal and the external one. In other words: the question of "access to protection" for refugees and the question of "allocation of responsibilities" between the Member States. Especially on the latter, there was so heated debate that the future of the European project appeared to be at a tipping point.[25]

But, in another light, the refugee crisis put European institutions and Member States under such high pressure, that European migration and asylum policies changed in a way that seemed to be out of reach a couple of years ago. In fact, the pace of reforms, proposals and programs in this policy field was so rapid in 2015 and 2016, that researchers found themselves nearly incapable to prepare in-depth analyses of these developments that would not be outdated in the moment of publication. For the pressure it put on institutions and Member States, the refugee crisis opened a window of opportunity for substantial changes in the European migration policy framework. This chapter argues that, while the EU-Turkey-Agreement and the Hotspot approach indeed introduced new instruments and rationales into the policy field, however, they remain limited to exceptional mechanisms.

[25] Especially around the Justice and Home Affairs Council decision of 22 September 2015 to relocate 120,000 refugees from Greece and Italy to other MSs and around the agreement with Turkey on 18 March, 2016 and the closure of the Balkan route ten days earlier, the tensions were extremely high. The decision in September, 2015 was unusually taken with qualified majority with dissenting votes from the Ministers of the Interior of Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania. On the latter see: European Parliament Research Service: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/569018/EPRS_BRI%282015%29569018_EN.pdf.

Basic Principles of Refugee Protection in the European Union

Before describing these developments, it is necessary to explain the basic principles of refugee protection in Europe — the starting point for policy makers in the moment the refugee crisis began. The European Union has a political multi-level structure. The 28 Member States (MSs) are sovereign nation states. Over decades, they handed certain political competencies over to the European level. Since policies on migration affect constitutive elements of a nation state, namely people and territory, they had "long been regarded as one of the last bastions of national sovereignty. Nevertheless we observe even migration policies continuously being communitarized since the 1990s."[26] The protection of external borders for example falls under the competence of each Member State. In fact, the "European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union" (Frontex) had, so far, a mainly coordinating and supporting mandate, which hindered rapid and robust operations.[27] As a result of the refugee crisis the mandate will be strengthened under the new name "European Border and Coast Guard", while Member States keep responsibility for border control.[28] Asylum and refugee protection, on the other hand, is supposed to be harmonized, i.e. organized in more or less the same way all over Europe under the framework of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), of which the Dublin procedure is a part. While regular migration (skilled professionals, seasonal workers, trainees and students) benefits the national economy if managed well, proceeding asylum applications and taking care of refugees' reception requires public budget and political effort. The purpose of committing all states to common standards for the reception of refugees and asylum procedures, was to guarantee humane protection conditions for people in need everywhere in the EU to guarantee for human rights standards and convergence of asylum decisions, to minimize the incentives for MSs to organize their asylum systems in the most unattractive way for refugees or just wave people through without registration, and to minimize incentives for refugees to pose multiple applications in different countries and

[26] Bendel, Petra: Wohin bewegt sich die Europäische Einwanderungspolitik? Perspektiven nach dem Lissabon-Vertrag und Stockholm-Programm, in: Hentges, Gudrun / Platzer, Hans-Wolfgang (Hg): Europa — Quo vadis? VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften 2011, (translation: KS).

[27] On the European security architecture in the context of migration, border control and human smuggling see in detail: Ehler, Christian / Martius, Lea von: Long March for Europe. Migrant smuggling in the Mediterranean as a Challenge for Internal and External Security Strategies of the EU, Dr. Köster Berlin 2016.

[28] See: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-2292_en.htm. The Agency is reinforced with personell and own technical equipment and receives the right to intervene without a MS's consent, if a MS is not willing or able to protect its external borders "to an extent that risks putting in jeopardy the functioning of the Schengen area" (European Commission: Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and the of the Council on the European Border and Coast Guard, 25.12.2015, COM(2015)671 final).

by doing so minimize so-called secondary movements. In 2013 — after years of struggle — the Common European Asylum System CEAS has been adopted. Its legal framework consists of the Asylum Procedures Directive, the Reception Conditions Directive, the Qualifications Directive, as well as the revised Dublin Regulation and Eurodac Regulation. CEAS was supposed to bring greater harmonization to the 28 disparate (or not yet existing) national asylum systems. Unfortunately, it hadn't been implemented properly by the MSs before the current crisis started — in addition it still granted MSs considerable discretion for the application. Registration standards, asylum procedures, reception conditions, but also the recognition rates[29] continue to vary widely between the Member States. An important element in the framework of European refugee policy is the Dublin System. The Dublin regulation defines criteria for the attribution of responsibility for an application to exactly one Member State. Although family reunion and humanitarian reasons play a role in this, the most relevant criterion in practice is the "first country of entry".[30] The Dublin procedure is an intergovernmental process to allocate responsibility for every single application. The asylum seeker might be relocated to the responsible state and go through the very asylum procedure there. The Dublin system has been criticized for unequally burdening some countries in an unfavorable geographical position, but also for being bureaocratic and prolonging asylum procedures, which constitutes a challenge especially in times of mass influx.[31]

However, together with common standards Dublin aimed at preventing two problematic issues: regarding the protection seeking persons it was supposed to avoid so called "refugees in orbit", i.e. refugees who were sent from one country to another, every country rejecting responsibility for their case; but also "asylum shopping", i.e. multiple applications by one person in different MSs, or simultaneously or successively. Regarding the protection providing institutions a "race to the bottom" between the Member States should be avoided, i.e. a competition for the most uncomfortable and inhumane asylum system in order to attract as few refugees as possible. From the very beginning, the underlying logic was to proceed asylum applications as close to the border and as soon as possible after border crossing. Countries without external borders such as Germany benefit from the system and therefore objected to reforms for a long time. Northern countries criticized Italy and Greece about not registering arriving refugees and

[29] "In 2015, EU+ countries had quite similar approaches when deciding on Syrian, Albanian and Kosovar cases, most likely due to the relative clarity on the situation in the country of origin. In contrast, wide variation could be seen for" Iraqi (from 21% to 98%), Afghan, Pakistani and Serbian applicants. (EASO Annual Report 2015 pp 24f). The report also points out that "the scattering does not necessarily point towards a lack of harmonization across EU+ countries in terms of decision-making practice, but may indicate different profiles of applicants who have the same citizenship".

[30] European Parliament: The Reform of the Dublin III Regulation. Study for the Libe Committee, Brussels 2016.

[31] *Iibid.*

therefore encouraging secondary movements at the expense of Northern states. From their perspective, the refugees should have been registered according to European standards in order to proof and quantify overburdening first. For years, self-interest, mutual mistrust, and therefore a political stalemate blocked both the proper appliance of the existing rules on the side of the Southern as well as their adjustment on the part of the Northern countries. Also, this well established conflict line between highly affected countries (in absolute or in relative refugee numbers) had turned a blind eye on the real upcoming challenge: finding a mutual understanding of a fair and solidary refugee policy between the European transit and target countries on one hand, and those who were affected much less in either way on the other hand.[32] Pushed by the refugee crisis and acknowledging "the present system (...) was not designed to deal with situations of this kind"[33], the European Commission published a reform proposal for the Dublin system, so-called "Dublin IV" in May 2016.[34] While it foresees an automatic relief mechanism for overburdened states, the basic rationale of Dublin remains in force.[35] A further-reaching concept including quotas on a regular basis, proposed as one of two options on 6 April, 2016, was not realistic against the background of strong opposition, even against the limited relocation schemes from autumn 2015.[36] While it foresees an automatic relief mechanism for overburdened states, the basic rationale of Dublin remains in force.

The Geneva Convention and the border-free Schengen area complete the legal basics of the European framework for asylum and refugee protection. The Geneva Convention relating to the protection of refugees is an important reference point of the Common European Asylum System. The Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (Art. 78) and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (Art. 18) both refer explicitly to the Geneva Convention. Its central "non-refoulement" rule

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[32] As observed by the author in the beginning of 2015: "The line of conflict therefore does not, as is commonly thought, run between south and north but rather between west and east." See: Senge, Katharina: Who bears responsibility? Models and Perspectives of European Refugee Policy, in: International Reports of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, issue 2-3/2015.

[33] So First Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-1620_en.htm.

[34] European Commission: Proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States by a third country national or a stateless person (recast), Brussels 4.5.2016, COM(2016)270 final.

[35] European Parliament: The Reform of the Dublin III Regulation. Study for the Libe Committee, Brussels 2016.

[36] "(...) responsibility would be primarily allocated on the basis of a distribution key reflecting the relative size, wealth and absorption capacities of the Member States. As such, this would entail a fundamental change to the current system." European Commission: Communication to the European Parliament and the Council — Toward a reform of the Common European Asylum System and enhancing legal avenues to Europe, Brussels, 6.4.2016, COM(2016)197 final.

prohibits to return people, also irregular migrants, to a country where they are threatened by torture or other severe violations of human rights. Before returning irregular migrants to third countries, European MSs are obliged to examine this risk. This legal and instrumental framework (Geneva Convention, CEAS, Dublin, Schengen) has been put under extreme pressure by the growing number of refugees since 2013/14 and especially by the dramatic events between August, 2015 and March, 2016, when the agreement with Turkey came into force.

Merkel invited them! Did she?

In Germany and beyond, Chancellor Angela Merkel was and still is at the center of controversy. Her quote "We can make it", said on 31 August, 2015 and since repeated on various occasions, became firstly the motto of the new civic movement and welcoming culture in Germany, soon object of criticism and political controversy. While she was praised for being generous and foresighted in handling the refugee crisis by some statesmen[37], others affirmed that it was Merkel's "emotion driven" policy that invited and motivated migrants to come to Europe, caused the extreme increase in sea arrivals beginning in late summer 2015 and the chaos along the Balkan route.[38] The members of the Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia) at different occasions opposed the distribution of refugees in Europe by quotas and more robust resettlement schemes.[39] While they expressed concern about sovereignty and the control of national and European borders, also security concerns (fear of Islamist terrorists among the refugees) and cultural identity (unwillingness to receive people from different cultural background, especially Muslims) played a central role in their argumentation.[40] While on the one hand the protection of people in need, regardless of their culture and religion, is part of the Community acquis as described above, and therefore

[37] "Barack Obama hails Angela Merkel over handling of refugees," https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/24/migration-crisis-obama-and-eu-leaders-to-discuss-naval-patrols-in-libya;
Jean-Claude Juncker: "History will prove Angela Merkel right," http://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/jean-claude-juncker/im-bild-interview-44588872.bild.html.

[38] Viktor Orban: The refugee crisis "is not a European Problem, the problem is a German problem," (http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/refugee-crisis-is-a-problem-for-germany-not-europe-hungarian-prime-minister-claims-10484284.html);
Horst Seehofer: "(...) if Germany makes it clear that there are limits to the number of people it can accept, then migration will fall. At the moment, many still feel they have been invited," http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/bavarian-governor-horst-seehofer-talks-about-refugees-a-1080132.html).

[39] "Visegrad Group opposes Germany's refugee policy," *DW*, February 15, 2016, http://www.dw.com/en/visegrad-group-opposes-germanys-refugee-policy/a-19048816.

[40] See the reports on migration policy and public opinion in these countries from Konrad Adenauer Stiftung e.V.: http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_42726-544-1-30.pdf?151012155117, October 2015.

cannot be deselected ad libitum, on the other hand the dispute raised important questions Europe needs to discuss, like: What would be the consequences for Europe politically, culturally and socially, if some countries became more and more diverse through immigration, while others remained culturally homogenous? How can negative impacts of immigration, experienced in the past, as well as security problems be avoided in the future in order to let national societies and Europe as a whole — but also refugees and migrants — benefit from the positive impacts of migration?

While these questions still require profound reflection and dialogue, exactly one year after refugee trains were welcomed with applause by the population at Munich Central Station, Germany is trying to come to terms with the past.[41] It is a central thesis of this chapter, that the causes of the refugee crisis are complex and cannot be assigned to Angela Merkel alone, as critics do. In summer 2015 the war in Syria has reached its fourth year. At that time neighboring countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt were hosting more than four million Syrian refugees, while only 350 000 had applied for asylum in Europe.[42] At the same time, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had only received 40 percent of the funds promised by international donors for the Syrian Regional Refugee and Resilience Program.[43] In early 2015 UNHCR and WFP had been forced to cut their support for Syrians in the region by 30 percent already. While originally these refugees had received 28 USD per person per month, the sum then was reduced to 21 USD. After further reductions in April and May, 2015 in July people were finally informed, that only seven USD per month would be available for them to survive — 14 USD for the most vulnerable.[44] Without any savings left after four years of war and without the permission to work and build a present and future life on their own in the receiving countries, this information was the last straw that broke the camel‘s back. “Decreasing humanitarian aid was mentioned by refugees from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt as the reason for their despair and the reason for their decision to go to Europe.”[45] The number of sea arrivals in Greece started to increase considerably from July to August 2015 and again from September to October.

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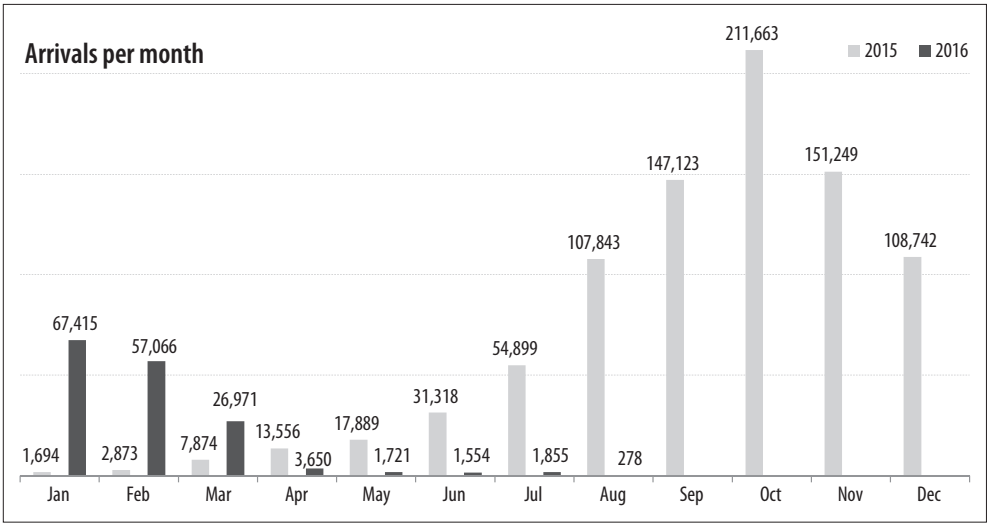
[41] Weekly paper “Die Zeit” f.ex. headlined: “My 5 September. What really happened,” (http://www.zeit.de/2016/35/grenzoeffnung-fluechtlinge-september-2015-wochenende-angela-merkel-ungarn-oesterreich.)

[42] Syria Regional Refugee Response, September, 2015, http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php.

[43] “Warum Flüchtlinge nach Europa kommen,“ *UNHCR*, http://www.unhcr.de/home/artikel/35c60af31fa36e0cce8d3943fa8ded44/warum-fluechtlinge-nach-europa-kommen.html, translation KS.

[44] Thomas Gutschker, “Wie der Hunger die Syrer in die Flucht trieb,” November 08, 2015, http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/fluechtlingskrise/wie-der-fluechtlingsandrang-aus-syrien-ausgeloest-wurde-13900101.html.

[45] See FN 42.



Source: UNHCR, Greece Data Snapshot 03 August 2016

People then moved forward, passed the Balkans and entered the EU again in Hungary. The leak of the decision by the German Federal Agency for Migration and Refugees to skip Dublin procedure for Syrians and accept responsibility for their cases[46] on 24 August, 2015 was the first of a series of incidents that intensified Germany's pull effect. Thousands of refugees were stuck at the Budapest train station and refused to be brought to detention camps. Left without sanitation and supplies they tried any possibility to go on to Austria and Germany. On 28 August, a refrigerator truck coming from Hungary was found in Austria with 71 suffocated Syrians — 59 men, 8 women and 4 children, one girl of only one year: the pressure on politicians to act grew. On 4 September, when about 1,000 refugees started to walk in the direction of Austria on the highway, finally, the German, Austrian and Hungarian governments decided together to let the people pass and offer save transport to Austria and Germany.[47] Governments made clear that this was neither a general suspension of the Dublin principles nor a precedent. The decision was characterized as unique, temporary and owed to the humanitarian emergency in Hungary.[48]

[46] This decision was covered by the Dublin regulation. The regulation foresees the possibility for MSs to voluntarily assume responsibility for asylum applications, f.ex. for humanitarian reasons. In this case the wish to shorten bureaucratic procedures might have played a role as well as practical reasons: In 2011 the EJC had identified systemic failures in the Greek asylum system and therefor relocations from other MSs to Greece had been suspended since then.

[47] Engler, Marcus, "Auf Einladung der Kanzlerin?," *Netzwerk Flüchtlingsforschung*, August 15, 2016, http://fluechtlingsforschung.net/auf-einladung-der-kanzlerin/., 17.08.17.

[48] Einreise von Flüchtlingen aus Ungarn, "Wir haben eine akute Notlage bereinigt," September 06, 2015.

To analyze the causes of the refugee flow in detail, even more aspects could be taken into account like the smugglers' strategies, the inability of the Greek Government to protect the country's borders or the growing threat for young men to be drafted into the Syrian army at the time. But even on the basis of the described aspects (cut back in humanitarian aid, no long-term perspectives for Syrians in the hosting countries in the MENA region, plus the political disagreement in Europe and symbolic incidents) it is clear that the causes of the refugee crisis are complex. The power ascribed to German Chancellor Angela Merkel in some cases shows some kind of magical thinking. It is the push factors in the countries of origin that make people leave their homes. The decision where they want to go to, however, depends on pull effects of different target countries. Both incidents of 24 August and 4 September were based on decisions that were pragmatic in their context and showed compassion with the human tragedy of Syrian refugees. Yet, an unintended effect was the message that Germany was willing to receive a large and undefined number of refugees.[49] Based on the perception that the desperate situation in countries of origin and transit, in the first place, would push men, women and children so far to risk their lives, humanitarian aid and stabilization of the Syrian neighbors became a political priority of the German political response — together with reinforced return policies for irregular migrants without protection status.

The European Response to the Refugee Crisis: No Big Coup but Better than its Reputation

Public dispute for months focused on the adequate strategy of reaction on the situation, more precisely a "national solution" versus the "European solution". The former prioritizes national interests and receiving capacities. Sovereignty plays a key role. Between January and March, 2016 it came to a showdown between the two models, when the Balkan countries closed their borders one after another. Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia and Serbia from 9 March on only let travelers with valid visa pass through and by doing so de facto closed the Balkan route. Angela Merkel, in line with Jean-Claude Juncker, warned that stopping the trek would force refugees to stay in Greece being the first entry point to the EU yet incapable of taking care of such big numbers of refugees. The report of an unannounced on-site visit of EU officials had revealed "serious deficiencies"

[49] The observation of an Austrian border official shows the not intended but undoubtedly produced pull effect: "In the beginning old people, women and children arrived, syrian families, who were very grateful." Later there were more young men, not coming from Arabic countries, but from Afghanistan or Pakistan. (…) "They didn't need our help," (http://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2016-08/grenze-oesterreich-ungarn-fluechtlinge-polizei-fluechtlingspolitik/komplettansicht, translation KS).

in Greece's border control and asylum capacities.[50] Indeed during March 2016 the number of refugees in Greece rose significantly, the camp in Idomeni — central border crossing point between Greece and Macedonia — within a couple of weeks ran up to 14,000 people waiting for passage. While the refugees refused to move to Greek reception centers and volunteer supporters encouraged them to do so, the conditions in the camp aggravated disastrously. Although the national approach brought noticeable relief to the transit and destination countries in Europe, it was not the reason for decreasing sea arrivals, which dropped since October, 2015 (see figure above), whereas it would have condemned Greece to a humanitarian crisis, if the EU-Turkey-Agreement had not been pursued simultaneously. However, since the political debate limits to the two strategic options (national vs. European solution), an overall view on the activities, programs and proposals from 2015/16 reveals that the response of the EU to the refugee crisis is as complex as its route causes. It extends from substantial humanitarian aid,[51] cooperation with third countries, search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean,[52] to enhanced border security,[53] fight against smugglers, support for Greece and Italy, readmission agreements and strengthened return policies. The European Agenda on Migration from May, 2015 had outlined the long-term priorities: Reducing the incentives for irregular migration, border management (saving lives and securing external borders), a strong common asylum policy, and a new policy on legal migration. Considerable action and funds have been activated to enforce policies in these fields.

Six so-called Hotspots were opened in Italy and five in Greece: centers for the organization of registration and identification of migrants, relocation to other MSs and return with support of European officials from Frontex, EASO and

[50] European Commission, "Assessment of Greece's Action Plan to remedy the serious deficiencies identified in the 2015 evaluation on the application of the Schengen acquis in the field of management of the external border," Strasbourg, 12.4.2016 COM(2016) 220 final, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160412/communication_assessment_greece_action_plan_en.pdf.

[51] The London Conference on 4 February 2016, co-hosted by UK, Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the United Nations raised US$ 12,1 billion in pledges in addition to existing aid funds for Syria, of that 2,4 billion from the European Commission plus the pledges by single MSs (Germany: 2,5 billion), https://www.supportingsyria2016.com/news/co-hosts-statemtent-annex-fundraising/. The conference contemporarily gave the impulse to open the labour markets in receiving countries in the region for refugees and enhancing investments opportunities.

[52] "The Role of Frontex in Search and Rescue, July 07, 2016, http://frontex.europa.eu/pressroom/hot-topics/the-role-of-frontex-in-search-and-rescue-EQYKeH. Evaluation of the mandate and extent of the operations would go beyond the scope of this chapter.

[53] See in detail: Ehler, Christian / Martius, Lea von: Long March for Europe. Migrant smuggling in the Mediterranean as a Challenge for Internal and External Security Strategies of the EU, Dr. Köster Berlin 2016.

Europol[54]. In September, 2015 the Council decided to relocate 160 000 refugees from the Hotspots to other MSs.

Migration experts and NGOs had advocated for years for a comprehensive, proactive European migration policy, and a stronger consideration of migration issues in development cooperation, foreign affairs and trade policy. The 'Global Approach to Migration' (GAM, 2005), replaced by the 'Global Approach to Migration and Mobility' (GAMM) in 2011, aimed at coordinating this crosscutting area and establishing a more consistent approach to migration.[55] Agreements with countries of origin and transit as well as return policies gained importance. The central instruments are Mobility Partnerships with third countries and readmission agreements that are usually related to visa liberalisation processes. Strengthening the mandate of the European Border Protection Agency FRONTEX and establishing a European Border and Coast Guard with an extended mandate compared to FRONTEX was also of particular importance for the Commission.[56]

Against this backdrop, the Turkey agreement from 18 March, 2016 and the instruments it combines are not a completely new approach for Europe. New is, in fact, the concrete rationale of the resettlement scheme that is part of the agreement.[57] Turkey agreed to take back refugees who entered the EU across the Turkish-European border, while the EU agreed to receive the same number of refugees from Turkey via resettlement. The idea behind that is to bring more order and safety into the refugee flow. Incentives are set for refugees to stay in Turkey, register orderly or apply for regular access to Europe via resettlement, while irregular border crossing would bring a higher risk to lose the right to stay in the EU.

The resettlement scheme, that is part of the agreement with Turkey, can be interpreted as a step towards a new framework, where resettlement plays generally a major role in European migration policies compared to former times. German politicians proposed similar agreements with other countries soon after the one with Turkey had been signed. In fact, resettlement (the reception of refugees from third countries organized officially and in cooperation with UNHCR) can be seen as a safe and fair answer to the question of "access to protection". It deprives smugglers of their basis of existence. Via resettlement the most vulnerable can reach shelter and protection in a safe way, while the current framework offers the biggest chances to benefit from protection in Europe to those who are strong enough to survive the journey and have enough money to pay the smugglers. For Europe with

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[54] European Parliament: On the frontline: The hotspot approach to managing migration, Study, Brussels 2016.

[55] See Bendel, Petra: Asylum and Migration Policy, in: Heinelt, Hubert, Knodt, Michèle (Eds.): Policies within the EU Multi-Level System. Instruments and Strategies of European Governance, Baden-Baden, 371-384.

[56] *Ibid*.

[57] European Commission — Fact Sheet. Implementing the EU-Turkey Statement — Questions and Answers, Brussels, June 15, 2016, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-1664_de.htm.

its complex external borders and vicinity to conflict regions, a robust resettlement scheme has to be combined with sound border control and vice versa. This way, in combination with humanitarian aid in the conflict region, Europe can attend to its humanitarian obligations and organize migration in a more transparent and orderly way. This is what many European and German citizens missed in 2015. However, considering the more principal rejection of any scheme based on quotas by some MSs, major steps in this direction are not to be expected.

Conclusion

The Syrian Crisis will not constitute the last migration challenge for Europe — on the contrary: migration pressure from densely populated but instable regions will continue if not increase in the future. Migration from Sub-Saharan African countries is a case that in point of fact might pose a future challenge to any European debate on migration. Long-term strategies have to include substantial funds and instruments to tackle the root causes of migration. There is no single instrument or one simple answer to such a complex phenomenon like the refugee crisis. A whole package of instruments and strategies has to be applied. The main priority should be to support people's safety and protection. National security (controlled and managed border traffic, fight against terrorism) and human security (protection and safety for people in need) should not be played off against each other. Appropriate action for protected and controlled external borders must therefore be accompanied by new and generous instruments in order to improve the living conditions and perspectives in the European neighborhood and the access to protection in a safe and worthy way. Access to protection and border control are two sides of one coin: impermeable borders without access to protection are not in line with international law or European values. Robust resettlement schemes (or other access instruments like humanitarian visa) without well-controlled borders on the other hand, would not be able to prevent chaotic situations like the ones of 2015/16.

The crisis revealed not only shortcomings of the European migration and asylum framework, but also Europe's vulnerability in the light of war and radicalization in its very neighborhood. Every day the war in Syria and in territories controlled by ISIL and other radical Islamist groups goes on, and its dramatic long term consequences increase: destroyed infrastructure and culture, generations of people without hope, security and education, but with the experience of starvation, fear and brutality. As a result, the region will continue to be a source of instability and insecurity for a very long time. Finding a political solution to the Syrian conflict and safeguard the stability of the country and the region as soon as possible is the major priority — for humanitarian reasons as well as in Europe's self-interest.

CAN EUROPE APPLY GRAND STRATEGY TO GRAND TRAGEDY?

Julian Lindley-French

> "*Grand speeches are not enough; anyone can produce a wish-list. Effective visions mist accurately diagnose the world situation, balancing idealism with risks, and ideals with capabilities*".
> /Joseph S. Nye[1]/

That the war in Syria is a grand tragedy cannot be doubted. The attacks on Aleppo by Russian and Syrian forces during the summer of 2016 bore a striking resemblance to the brutal tactics employed by President Putin in the two Chechen wars of the 1990s. The latest estimates suggest that over 250,000 people have been killed since the war in Syria began.[2] The essential question of this article is what can Europe do about it? Or, to be more precise, what means and ways can Europeans bring to bear to end the war, or at least create the conditions for a resolution of the conflict? However, that overarching question contains six other vital implicit questions. What is the nature of the Syrian conflict? What is grand strategy? What is the Scope and Extent of Europe's Grand Strategic Challenge? What Are the Barriers to European Grand Strategy? What can Europe hope to achieve? What would a European grand strategy look like?

Europe, or rather the European Union (EU), has become very good at talking about big action in pursuit of big ends, but rarely if at all very good at turning big talk into big action. Consequently, not only have Europeans retreated as strategic actors, Europe has increasingly become a victim of geopolitics rather than a shaper of it. This retreat has made Europe and its neighbourhood not only a more dangerous place, it has helped compound tragedy in places like Syria. One reason for the creation of the EU and the pooling of national sovereignty was to aggregate the influence and effect of joint European security action. Unfortunately, for many years such an ambition has been observed more as an aspiration than a fact, at least at the harder end of the security spectrum.

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[1] Nye, Joseph S. "Transformational Leadership and U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2006 edition. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2006-07-01/transformational-leadership-and-us-grand-strategy.

[2] According to "World Population Review" in 2012 Syria had a population of 22,530,746. In 2016 the population of Syria is estimated at 18,215,868. See "Syria Population 2016," http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/syria-population/.

On 28 June, shortly before the NATO Warsaw Summit (and a week after the tumultuous Brexit vote) the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, unveiled what to all intents and purposes looks like a European grand strategy. The *Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy* states that, "… [EU] security and defence is where a step change is most urgent", and that, "…in turbulent times, we need a compass to navigate the waters of a faster-changing world".[3] The Strategy goes on, "The EU can step up its contribution to Europe's security and defence", and that, "Our external action must become more joined-up across policy areas, institutions and member-states. Greater unity of purpose is needed across the policy areas making up our external action". In a sense the Global Strategy defined European grand strategy; the generation and organisation of all Europe's many forms of power, both soft and hard, in pursuit of a values-based set of agreed grand interests. Could such strategy be applied to Syria?

What is the Nature of the Syrian Conflict?

The first question concerns the nature of the conflict in Syria and what precisely Europe should seek to achieve. Indeed, for grand strategy to work such an understanding is vital. The Syrian war is in effect a vacuum within which anarchy abounds and geopolitics is afoot. In the absence of a true strategic commitment by Europeans, and the willingness to take the necessary risks needed in such a place, the best that Europe can aspire to is to mitigate the effects of such a conflict on Europe itself. Any action to degrade ISIS is, of course, to be welcomed and the American-led *Global Coalition against ISIL* has indeed made some progress in forcing ISIS out of Iraq and weakening its operations base in Raqqa. However, any such action must be grounded in grand strategic reality; stopping the war in Syria will not end the threat posed by Islamism but it will help reduce it. Therefore, the fight against ISIS whilst critically important is not the central factor in the Syrian war. This confusion is clearly apparent amongst Europe's leaders. In a December speech to the British Parliament David Cameron claimed the existence of some 70,000 'moderate' non-Islamist, non-regime 'ground troops' that the air campaign should support in the fight against ISIS. This is a very optimistic definition of both 'moderate' and 'ground troops'.

Syria is a 'mosaic society' divided into three distinct elements; town, village and tribe, with the power of President Assad established over many years on a careful system of patronage through the Ba'ath Party and the security services. For all the barbarism of the regime Assad can still count on the support of some 300,000 troops, and much of the population in and around Damascus who have done relatively well under the regime. Moreover, the opposition, such as it is,

[3] See "A Global Strategy on Foreign and Security Policy," http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/a-global-strategy-for-the-european-unions-foreign-and-security-policy/.

is comprised of many different and differing groups that find it hard to coalesce around a single leader. They may be able to coalesce into loose coalitions on certain occasions, such as the August 2016 assault on regime troops attacking Aleppo. However, there is little or no chance of a unified opposition which Europe could invest political and other support. Even the Islamists are divided between ISIS, and up until July 2016 the Al Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front.

The war is further complicated by regional geopolitics. Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Jordan, Turkey, and a host of other regional powers, all either active in one capacity or another, active on several sides, or affected in some or many ways. Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a struggle for regional-strategic supremacy which to a significant extent is also being played out in Syria, whilst Tehran seeks to enhance its influence over Syria to strengthen Iranian influence over the Levant, not least to further its struggle with Israel. The Syrian struggle has also further destabilised several neighbouring states, most notably Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and now Turkey in the wake of the July 2016 attempted military coup.

The irony is that Syria is itself a European creation. Syria emerged from the May 1916 Anglo-French Sykes-Picot agreement that carved much of the Middle East into British and French spheres of influence to replace the defeated Ottoman Empire at the end of World War One. Syria was at the epicentre of a new Anglo-French system of mandates and protectorates in the 1920s and 1930s, and at the forefront of the surge of Arab socialist-nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s as the post-colonial Arab state emerged. However, defeated by Israel in 1948, 1967 and 1973 Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and a host of Arab states across the Middle East and North Africa, steadily lost credibility as effective actors and indeed just forms of government and governance.

Today, with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continuing to act as a source of grievance, Arab nationalism is now seen by many Arabs as having failed together with distant elites representatives of factional interests, or puppets of powerful external states. Instead, a new form of pan-Arabism may be emerging within which significant elements identify with a virulently anti-state, primarily but not exclusively anti-Western, Sunni extremism. With the direct involvement of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard on the side of Assad there are also reflect deep confessional tensions between at play Sunni and Shia.

In both Iraq and Syria tensions between Sunni and Shia tribes are further reinforced by divisions between Arab, Kurdish and Turkish peoples. Turkey seems unlikely to permit the appearance of a fully-autonomous Kurdish 'state' with profound implications for Ankara's own eastern provinces. There is also the very real chance that nuclear-tipped Israel could be dragged into a conflict on its borders, especially if Jordan is threatened by some form of new Intifada that further exacerbates tensions between Israelis and Palestinians.

The Syrian war also has profound implications for Europe. Through the mass migration of millions of Syrians, Iraqis, Iranians and others, Europe is being

dragged into the Middle Eastern conflict. The 13 November, 2015 terrorist attack on Paris was in part an extension of the sectarian divisions that have riven Syria and much of the Middle East. Radicalisation of members of the many North African, Sub-Saharan African, and South Asian diasporas that now live in Europe means that a small minority of fanatics now pose a very real threat to Europeans of all ethnicities and beliefs and in so doing the security and stability of European societies, even threatening to derail the European Union. Moreover, the conflict challenges now traditional international institutions which were designed to contain extreme state behaviour but have proved spectacularly ineffective when actors operate within and between states. Indeed, given the large Muslim diaspora within many European and North American societies the threat that a fanatical few pose to those communities raises profound questions as to the willingness/ability of states to use traditional power to shape, influence, and if needs be attack groups and states deemed to be threats to national security.

What is Grand Strategy?

Grand strategy is the application of immense means in support of high political ends. This pre-supposes another question; what can Europe hope to achieve in Syria? What makes the Syrian war so intractable is that it is not merely a civil war, albeit a particularly brutal one. In 1900 Rudyard Kipling's wrote his famous novel *Kim* set against the background of the Great Game, the fight for supremacy over Central Asia between the British and Russian Empires. There is a simple, chilling phrase in the book which also encapsulates the nature of the war in Syria: "The Great Game is not over until everyone is dead. Not before".[4]

The Great Game is about power and influence and for this most base of strategic reasons the Syrian people are unlikely to receive any redemption from the world's great powers, precisely because Syria has become a battlefield in which the geopolitics of the twenty-first century are being indirectly (not-so-indirectly) fought out. With Damascus now emboldened by Russian support, the West's weakness, and having rejected several UN-backed and Arab League peace plans, the struggle to oust President Assad will thus be long and bloody.

The question of Assad's future poses the first big challenge to any European grand strategy. Should Assad's departure be a pre-condition of European strategy? Effective grand strategy relies upon a cogent and coherent set of relationships between ends, ways and means. In July 2016 Dutch Foreign Minister Bert Koenders wrote an interesting piece in the British digital newspaper *The Independent.* Entitled *Aleppo must not become synonymous with global inaction* the title was carefully

[4] See Review of Hitz, Frederick P., "The Great Game: The Myth and Reality of Espionage" (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004) by Hayden B. Peake, April 14, 2007. https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol48no3/article08.html.

worded, and captured the tragic paradox of 'European' strategy in Syria.[5] Key to the piece was the use of the phrase, 'global inaction'. Of course, Koenders should really have said 'Western inaction' or to be more precise 'European inaction'. Why? Because as a foreign minister Koenders knows all too well that without UN Security Council agreement 'global' action will not happen. This begs a further question central to the crafting of grand strategy; is Syria important enough to Europe for Europeans to act grand strategically? It is clearly important enough for President Putin to act and take significant risk in so doing. Moscow's post-September 2015 action in Syria is clearly part of a Russian grand strategy designed to extend Moscow's influence in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, demonstrate to the world Europe's strategic fecklessness, and keep European leaders politically and strategically off-balance.

The Koenders piece also demonstrates the extent to which European leaders have retreated from sound principles of grand strategy, especially when it concerns the traditional *sine qua non* of effective grand strategy, the effective and credible use of military force. The piece is correct to liken the tragedy of Aleppo to Srebrenica when the UN peacekeeping force *Dutchbat* permitted the Bosnian Serbs to murder thousands of Bosnian Muslims. Koenders also makes the valid point that most Syrians want to live neither under the murderous Caliphate nor under the equally murderous Assad regime, and their cynical Russian and Iranian backers. After all, Moscow and Tehran see the Syrian people as no more than very small pawns in a great geopolitical game.

The problem for European grand strategy in Syria is that it pre-supposes a very different set of 'rules' to that of Moscow and Tehran. For the latter grand strategy is simply the means to a very Realpolitik end, and for them the suffering of Syrian people only matters if it interferes with the achievement of very classical foreign and security policy interests. For Europeans alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people is a grand strategic interest in and of itself. This dissonance between the concept of grand strategy beloved of most European leaders and that of the illiberal powers also highlights a dangerous dissonance in the thinking of European leaders; the confusion of values with interests. In such a world, such a confusion implies the right of all to the pursuit of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Such an end sounds on paper to be an ideal European ideal, but in a realist reality such an end makes grand strategy so impossibly grand as to be impossible to realise and thus paralyzes policy.

It is precisely that contradiction that is apparent in the Koenders piece. Whilst Koenders calls for a stepped up campaign against ISIS and a much greater humanitarian effort, he also calls for the ouster of Assad. The essential grand strategic point that Koenders misses about contemporary Syria is that humanitarian action

[5] See Koenders, Bert, "Aleppo must not become synonymous with global inaction," 31 July, 2016, *The Independent*, http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/aleppo-must-not-become-synonymous-with-global-inaction-a7165081.html.

therein cannot be effective without strategic action. In other words, any alleviation of suffering and/or defeat of ISIS is not possible without either confronting Russia and removing Assad, or accommodating Russia and talking to Assad. Here is the essential 'rub' for European grand strategy. It is precisely this stark choice that Europeans must make if the necessary grand strategy is to be established, but precisely because it is a stark choice, requiring touch decisions that many Europeans would find baffling and not a little disgusting, European leaders have pretended it is a choice they need not make.

Furthermore, by avoiding the issue of grand strategy Koenders inadvertently identifies what such a grand strategy would need to look like. The first pre-requisite is an acceptance that ending the humanitarian suffering and the migration flows it is generating is not the end of a credible European grand strategy in Syria. Rather, it is one 'line of operation' towards a European grand strategy that would necessarily aim at a stable Syria in a more stable Middle East. Indeed, it is the interaction between the war in Syria, and the instability of the Middle East, that is enabling Europe's twin adversaries, global reach Islamist terrorists and illiberal powers, such as Russia and Iran, to exploit the situation to their gain and Europe's loss. In other words, for a European grand strategy to be effective it must have the grand aim of blunting the zero sum game implicit in the grand strategy of others. In that sense Koenders and his ilk both miss the grand strategic point and/or use humanitarian suffering as a form of displacement strategy precisely to avoid the very hard choices Europe now faces over Syria.

The fundamental grand strategic choice 'Europe' must make over Syria is one of confrontation or co-operation with Putin and his client/puppet Assad. Given the extent to which Europeans (and Americans) have permitted the crisis in Syria to drift confronting Russia and Assad at this stage would require Europe to apply all of its means in a sustained and intelligent way if there is to be any chance of realising Europe's true grand strategic end. Such a confrontational strategy would require Europe to threaten a major military land, sea, and air intervention, involving European, American and partner Arab forces.

The chance of such a confrontational grand strategy are clearly slim. Not only has Turkey been reduced to little more than a failed state, it is no longer a sound base from which to launch such an assault. President Obama is a lame duck president who can at best order a few air strikes against ISIS in Libya and Syria, but little more. The evolution of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) has been so slow that any relationship between what the EU would be required to do to generate grand strategy given the strategic context in which it would need to act, and what it can do, is pitifully wide. Europe today seems to be able to do little more than simply await danger to come to Europe, mitigate the effects, and/or pretend no danger exists.

If the EU cannot craft grand strategy could the major European powers undertake such an effort? After all, in Britain, France and Germany Europe has three of the world's top seven economies and military powers. Key to effective

grand strategy is strategic unity of effort and purpose. Whilst the three powers can always agree at the level of lofty values, such as alleviating humanitarian suffering, they often disagree over how strategy should be crafted and the balance between ends, ways and means to be adopted. Worse, Germany is still mired in trying to resolve the Eurozone crisis, its own mishandling of the refugee crisis, and lacks a strategic culture, particularly when it concerns the use of hard force in non-permissive environments. France is mired in a debt crisis and faces threats from home-grown terrorists that in spite of its part-successful foray into Mali is blunting France's ability and willingness to engage fully in the Middle East. Britain is now focused on detaching itself from the EU following the Brexit referendum, and recovering from over decade of following bad American strategy in both Afghanistan and Iraq during which the British over-reached themselves. The British armed forces came close to failure in Afghanistan and Iraq caused by the profound tensions between the political ends, strategic ways, and a lack of military means. Whilst on the road to recovery it will be a decade or more before the British have again a fighting force that properly reflects Britain's continuing weight in the world. London also suffers from profound strategic uncertainty. For many years the British Establishment viewed 'grand strategy' as seeking the common ground between the US, France and Germany. With the end of traditional American internationalism now apparent, France's loss of leadership in Europe, and Germany's very uncertain strategic grip, the British will again have to learn to think strategically for themselves. So, could the 'Big Three' lead Europe towards a grand strategy for Syria — possible, but unlikely.

Given those pressing realities it would appear that any European grand strategy for Syria would thus require the making of another very uncomfortable choice, unless America suddenly steps up with a meaningful and workable grand strategy of its own. If the suffering of the Syrian people really is important to European leaders, and the need to stop another three to four million Syrians making their desperate way to Europe seen as a vital policy goal, then 'Europe' must be prepared to talk to Assad and Putin.

The need to talk is now pressing. In October (at the latest) President Erdogan of Turkey will likely abrogate the March 2016 deal with the EU because the gap between the two sides over human rights and visa-free travel for Turks in the EU is widening, not narrowing. Ankara could well open the floodgates to hundreds of thousands of refugees seeking to escape to Europe, not least to cement Turkey's dangerous and growing rapprochement with Putin. Unfortunately, Putin and Assad know that. Indeed, manipulating Europeans is one grand strategic line of operation that has informed Moscow's actions in Syria. Given the circumstances what price would Putin demand for co-operation? The whole point of grand strategy is that it is grand, i.e. it has many moving parts over large and interconnected space and time. For example, will Putin demand tacit European acceptance of a Russian sphere of influence in Georgia and the Balkans? Would some Western Europeans even countenance increased Russian influence in the Baltic States in

a desperate attempt to stem the flow of refugees to their countries with the very real possibility that their perceived failure would see them toppled from power? Those are the stakes.

What is the Scope and Extent of Europe's Grand Strategic Challenge?

The first task of the statesman is to recognise the Syrian war for what it is; the epicentre of conflicts across the Middle East that are now breaking out of one region and beginning to de-stabilise others. That is why a European comprehensive strategy is needed that works to effect equally at the ethnic, sectarian, regional, inter-regional and geopolitical levels. Europe's weakness is that it cannot bring to bear all the components traditionally associated with grand strategy, most notably overwhelming military power. However, if Europe acts as Europe and uses the EU has a co-ordinating hub that fact that 'Europe' is not simply another Great Power in pursuit of narrow interests could in principle offset certain weaknesses via enhanced political legitimacy. Traditionally, grand strategy can only be crafted by big power. However, the EU, by acting as a grand strategic co-ordinator, could leverage big power through the crafting of partnerships both across the Middle East and beyond. However, for that to happen Europeans would need a proper sense of the scope and extent of the grand strategic challenge they face and be willing to collectively rise to such a challenge.

A European grand strategy worthy of both the name and the challenge would thus also need to reflect agreement about how best to stabilise Syria. For the moment the main problem in crafting grand strategy is the absence of real American strategic and political leadership, allied to a Europe is that sees itself as strategically and politically incapable. Moreover, with the US distracted until a new president takes office in January 2017 US leadership will not be forthcoming. In any case, Europe's additional challenge would be to craft a strategy and then go to the US and seek Washington's willingness to be a partner, rather than a leader, in a region that because of Israel is as much domestic as foreign affairs for the Americans.

Central to a European grand strategy would be grand partnership. Such a partnership would be hard to realise. The United States, Russia, the major European powers, together with Egypt, Jordan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Israel, would need to agree at the very least to contain a war in which they all have contending interests, and in which they all support contending actors.

For all that by Europeans acting through the EU it might be possible to begin to politically 'institutionalise' the crisis thus helping to bring together the UN and the Arab League, and possibly, if it saves Russia's face, the Eurasian Union. The first step would be for the EU to act as the host of such a gathering to explore options — both formally and informally. The EU's aim would be to re-energise a community approach to the war, and by extension to de-legitimise state actions in the war. There would certainly need to be incentives for Moscow and Damascus

to attend, and the presence of the Assad regime at the table of such a gathering might be sufficient, although it would be hard to see how opposition groups could be assuaged, as they would need to be.

Critically, clarity of strategic thought would also suggest the need to separate the West's anti-ISIS strategy from the political future of Syria and the wider region, as well as 'de-conflict' the divers interests of the partners in what for the moment is a very loose and clearly conditional *de facto* anti-ISIS coalition. Indeed, it is a coalition that could very quickly fall apart triggering a wider Middle East war. The December 2015 announcement by Saudi Arabia that it seeks to lead a 34 state military coalition comprised mainly of Sunni Arab states may on the face of it provide the ground troops to defeat ISIS on the ground. Equally, such a group could also be interpreted by Iran as an anti-Tehran coalition and accelerate the division of the Middle East into competing blocs, much like Europe on the eve of World War One.

Therefore, any European grand strategy in a sense would need to be purposively narrow; grounded in and focussed almost exclusively on the political and strategic reality of Syria and seek agreement amongst all the main parties to the conflict about short, medium and longer-term measures to stabilise Syria. Above all, Europe would need to demonstrate the resolve and commitment to realise such aims at whatever cost.

What Are the Barriers to European Grand Strategy?

Albert Einstein once suggested that the only way to counter the unimaginable gravitational pull of a black hole is with countervailing superior power. If Europe is to begin to generate grand strategy it must play to its strengths; economic influence and diplomatic action. If the Syrian black hole is to be closed such power will mean far more than superior kinetic force, although through partnership such action might at some point be required, or at least threatened. At the very least, a serious European strategy would recognise that such is the danger posed by the Syrian war conflict resolution will take a lot of time, the investment of immense resources and the commitment of political capital.

In the strategic context of the Syrian war getting the balance between Europe's values and interests will be absolutely essential for the crafting of a workable grand strategy. Equally, the very hybridity of the value-interest makes it an uncomfortable partner for strategy given that it occupies an indeterminate and ill-determined space between contemporary European liberalism and Realpolitik. At one end of the spectrum the value-interest leads some to call for European intervention in all the world's conflicts under the UN's tattered and sovereignty-flouting Responsibility to Protect. This might be said to have been Tony Blair's view, which was so roundly condemned in the July 2016 *Inquiry into the Iraq War*.[6] Given the European

[6] Sir John Chilcot's "The Report of the Iraq Inquiry" (London: Crown Copyright, 2016.).

experience of both Afghanistan and Iraq, and subsequent austerity-driven cuts to European armed forces, the very real danger exists that the value-interest makes the link between ends, ways and means barely tenable.

The value-interest has also opened a fault-line between Americans and Europeans which masks a chasm over the ends, ways and means of geopolitics between the Allies. Americans believe in the value-interest because it is part of American 'moral exceptionalism' whereas Britain and France still retain just a smidgeon of global reflex, albeit one that it is fast-eroding. However, for many other Europeans national sovereignty is simply an empty shell in which the remains of the national interest occasionally twitches but is by and large dead. For them the dystopian uplands of legalism offer a false refuge against the Realpolitik imperatives of this age. The result is a UN Security Council stymied into utter inaction, and too many Europeans unwilling to recognise that legalism without power is a covenant without the sword, and of little grand strategic utility beyond the merely declaratory.

To be effective the application of grand strategic statecraft in Syria would thus demand a balanced package of co-option and coercion in pursuit of ends that are both desirable and achievable. It would require pan-European strategic judgement, sound intelligence, and above all a political strategy supported by credible, aggregated national means — political, economic, diplomatic, and to some extent military-applied consistently over time and distance by a properly functioning co-ordinating hub — the European External Action Service (EEAS).

The reason that such a mechanism has not been thus far crafted by Europeans is apparent from the 'C' in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Since at least the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon there has been a profound tension and indeed competition between the European Council, the European Commission, and the leading EU member-states over the principle and the practice of European foreign and security policy. Even though the European External Action Service remains essentially intergovernmental the fear exists in some capitals that any co-ordination of effort will establish a precedent for 'commonality' of practice. With the looming departure of Europe's most capable foreign and security policy actor from the EU that debate might now be moot. Indeed, Brexit might actually do European external action a favour. In future the only way for 'Europe' to aggregate power and thus generate grand strategy and statecraft worthy of the name will be to include Britain, and such action will only be possible if it is collective rather than common action. For all the often expressed opposing rhetoric it is clear France has a similar view on such matters to the British. Germany for its part does not wish to see its external action subsumed under common EU structures unless they are firmly under Berlin's control.

The EU would also need to confront its own failings. At the very least for grand strategy to be crafted the EU would need to overcome its own input-driven culture. Indeed, for too long the input method of measuring strategic effect has prevented the proper measuring of outputs and outcomes for fear of measuring failure. This

wilful short-termism and tactical rather than strategic political considerations have contributed markedly to Europe's strategic retreat. Too often Europe's political leaders have preferred to focus on inputs so that they can claim credit for money spent, rather than await outcomes which would benefit some other political leader.

The effect of this form of input tyranny has been devastating because it has helped to destroy Europe as a strategic actor. If Europe is to realise grand strategy; the considered application of huge means in pursuit of considered, relevant, and ambitious ends, such a culture must be ended. Indeed, it is the tyranny of the input culture that too often renders European politics the enemy of European strategy.

Such 'tyranny' was all too apparent in Afghanistan and not limited to the EU. Both the EU and the European states engaged therein routinely focused on how much money they were investing, how many projects they had undertaken, how many more children were being educated, etc. etc. There was little real regard to the actual needs of Afghanistan as a country or the outcomes that were vitally-needed if the country was ever to be stabilised. The result was strategic failure, an egregious waste of taxpayer's money, and years of political cover-up and obfuscation. If the same happened in Syria the EU would make matters even worse, not better.

Unfortunately, the tyranny of Europe's input culture also warps the activities of civil society, most notably non-governmental organisations (NGOs), who would be vital partners in any European grand strategy. When the EU or the member-states suddenly become desperate to spend money in order to generate a political illusion non-governmental organisations (NGOs) embark on a feeding frenzy. This encourages small, non-viable charities to offer a myriad of even smaller, non-viable projects simply so leaders can generate the impression of progress, when in fact it is heat rather than light that is generated.

Nor is the tyranny of Europe's input culture confined to aid and development. The input culture also drives 'summititis', a particularly painful and useless infection that takes place shortly before gatherings of EU and NATO heads of state and government. Desperate for something to announce officials cast around for new projects upon which to heap money so that political leaders can again give the impression of progress where none exists. The result is a culture in which 'success' is too often measured by the smooth running of a summit and/or the agreed 'language' that emerges, rather than outcomes on the ground that actually change things for the better. Syria is too dangerous for such political chicanery to continue.

Britain is a case in point. So fixated has London become with the need to see short-term politics and inputs as long-term strategy and outcomes that London is seemingly incapable of conducting a proper audit into the outcomes it desires or the true strategic effect of its 'investments'. Brussels also suffers from the same affliction.[7] Indeed, perhaps the greatest victims of Europe's tyranny of the input culture are Europeans themselves. So corrosive has this culture become in the European body politic that long-term strategic planning has been effectively

[7] This problem has been confirmed to this author by two leaders of major EU projects.

killed off. European leaders talk a good talk about strategy and planning because the appearance thereof is part of the tyranny. However, because the relationship between the often massive means invested and outcomes generated has become so tenuous, and the influence of Europeans on world events so small, Europe's security effect is often far less than the sum of its many parts.

What Can Europe Hope to Achieve?

What Europe can hope to achieve in Syria pretty much comes down to how much political risk European leaders are prepared to take. In Syria the absence of European statecraft has done as much damage to Europe's influence as Europe's perennial confusion of values with interests. However, whilst the various and variegated Geneva plans may in time lay the foundation for a resolution by Syrians for Syrians it is extremely unlikely any 'big deal' can now be reached between the regime and the opposition. 'Transition' will thus demand the direct involvement of the international community.

Experience of political transition in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya would suggest that all parties to the conflict would need to begin efforts at political reconciliation before any enduring settlement can be hoped for. Here Europeans might be able to play a significant role, but only as part of conflict resolution and stabilisation and reconstruction paradigm if the basic conditions for a cessation of hostilities are to be established. At the very least reprisal killings would need to be prevented and humanitarian suffering alleviated even-handedly, with a new seat of government in Damascus rapidly established and protected. A clear political timetable for transition would also need to be crafted, allied to early disarmament and rehabilitation of combatants. To that end, the armed forces would need to be re-oriented and essential services and the judicial system preserved to provide stability in transition. Critically, a new constitution would also be needed with extreme elements in both the regime and the opposition disarmed and forced to face a choice; reconciliation or exclusion. The EU could play in important leadership/brokerage role in all such efforts but it would be risky.

Any European grand strategy would also need to work to effect equally at the ethnic and sectarian levels of Syrian society because the main driver of the war are tensions within Syria itself. However, the Syrian war is not simply about the transfer of power from a minority to a majority. For Syria to find true peace a new political coherence would need to be forged that reflects a Syria very different to that of 1966 when Assad's father seized power. That will not be easy. Syria is 90% Arab, with some two million Kurds plus other smaller groups making up the balance of a 22 million population that has exploded by over 300% since 1966. Syria is also 87% Muslim with Shias making up 13% of the population, as against 74% Sunnis with the rest comprised of small Christian, Druze and other communities. In the past the Baathist constitution protected minorities and until those self-same minorities

feel secure peace is unlikely to endure. Again, the EU might be able to play a role in such efforts, but it would again be risky. In the circumstances, and in the absence of true strategic commitment, the best Europe could hope to achieve might best be described as sustained strategic pragmatism.

For all the vital localism of a European grand strategy for Syria such strategy would also need to properly recognise the strategic context. Einstein suggested that the only way to counter the unimaginable gravitational pull of a black hole is with countervailing superior power. If the Syrian black hole is to be closed such power will also mean at least the threat of superior kinetic force, and here Europe falls far short of what would be required. Critically, any such strategy would also require European leaders to face some hard realities, most notably in dealing with Russia.

First, Russia has succeeded in humiliating Europe and the wider West the political leaders of which have too often been reduced to impotent political hand-wringing over Syria — see the Koenders article. Not only has President Putin seized the agenda by revealing Europe's political and strategic weakness, he has in his mind at least helped renovate Russia's wider strategic credibility.

Second, Europe cannot detach Russia's involvement in Syria from Moscow's illegal occupation of Ukraine, and the pressure it is exerting on EU and NATO members. If Moscow is needed as a *de facto* partner in Syria it must not be at the cost of alleviating pressure on Russia for its actions elsewhere. In other words, Moscow will need to want to partner Europe and the wider West in Syria because right now Moscow thinks it is winning and can dictate terms. This will not be easy.

Third, President Putin has markedly enhanced Russia's influence across the Middle East. As King Abdullah of Jordan recently implied President Putin has also succeeded in getting most regional leaders to look to Moscow as well as Washington, whilst Brussels has been revealed as a paper tiger. For example, King Salman of Saudi Arabia is also understood to be keen to visit Moscow, but only when the bombing campaign is over. Russia has established a *de facto* alliance with Iran. Russia has also helped to de-stabilise Turkey, a cornerstone NATO power.

So, what pressure could Europe bring to bear on Russia in Syria? Russia will at some point want to withdraw its force from Syria before the limitations of Russia's forces are revealed. Even deploying a limited force over medium time and distance has proved challenging for Russian military commanders and planners. If the extent of those challenges were revealed it would undermine the entire cold hybrid warfare strategy Russia is engaged with in Central and Eastern Europe. The deployment is also proving expensive at a time when Russian public finances are stretched and European sanctions biting. Europeans could help offer Russia a face-saving way out of Syria, but only if the Assad regime agrees to a negotiated peace. For Europeans such a strategy would imply another tough choice; most rightly want a speedy end to the war to alleviate the humanitarian suffering but the cost of what might appear a Russian victory in Syria could be profound for Europe.

Thankfully for Europe the Kremlin is acutely sensitive to the concerns of the Russian public about Russian forces once again getting trapped in a military

quagmire. Afghanistan in the 1980s, and the two Chechen wars of the 1990s, one of which was the personal responsibility of a then newly-minted President Putin, remain painfully strong in the Russian popular-political consciousness. There are signs Russia may seek a way out. President Putin wants President Assad to hold presidential elections in Syria. President Assad has resisted the proposal because he knows that Moscow has a candidate in mind to replace him who is controlled by Russian military intelligence, the GRU, which is extremely active in Syria and environs.

Critically, for a European grand strategy to work Europe would need to exploit Russia's weaknesses, both in Syria and beyond. President Putin is playing a relatively weak but coherent strategic hand to maximise Russian influence, against a far stronger but far less cohesive group of European powers. Part of Putin's strategy involves seizing every opportunity to appear to be the equal of the United States, and the superior of Europeans. The strategy is also designed to keep European powers permanently off-balance, eternally unsure as to what an unpredictable Russia might do next…and where. The very fact of a European grand strategy for Syria would demonstrate to the Kremlin that Russia will fail precisely because such a strategy would communicate European strength and resolve. In the face of either Russian strategy would collapse. The message to Russia should this be clear; you cannot break the EU, if you co-operate over Syria, ease pressure on Ukraine by implementing the Minsk II agreement, and stop intimidating the Baltic States by ending snap exercises the possibility of a normalisation of relations might in time be possible.

What Would a European Grand Strategy Look Like?

The whole purpose of grand strategy is the generation of influence and effect over circumstance. EU talks about a strategy for Iraq and Syria and the struggle against ISIS have been hopelessly inadequate, and national efforts at best partial and marginal due to a lack of resolve and resources. No European states has as yet committed to a grand strategy for Syria, partly because such a strategy would only be feasible if all Europeans were committed. Therefore, if Europe is to craft a grand strategy for Syria, for that is what is needed, Europeans must play to their many strengths. A European grand strategy for Syria would necessarily include the following tenets and lines of operation if it is to achieve its grand aim — an end to the Syrian war:

Offensive and defensive: A European grand strategy for Syria would be both offensive and defensive in that it would engage the crisis in Syria and link that to efforts to manage refugee flows into Europe and to mitigate the ISIS threat to Europe. Such an overarching strategy that links the war in Syria to the threats faced by European citizens would have a disciplining effect on European states.

A collective approach, for example, to asylum and refugee policy might then be possible.

Force and Resource: A European grand strategy would be more resource than force. Much of the effort would be focussed on political transition, stabilisation and reconstruction, rule of law and post-conflict resolution and development. However, to prove Europeans are willing and able to take the necessary risk Europeans would also need to be willing to insert UN-mandated forces into Syria as part of a post-conflict mission to ensure the separation of parties to the conflict.

Harmonise national strategies: Even today European national strategies in the region still compete. For example, the UK's *Gulf Strategy* and its French equivalent imply the search for competitive national advantage over each other. That must end. Germany's 'strategy' for the region is almost exclusively mercantilist. All national European strategies in Syria and the wider Middle East must be harmonised. That might be achieved by replicating the EU+E3 approach that helped broker the deal over the Iranian nuclear programme.

Make Europe a Partnership Hub: The Syrian war could be the chance for Europe to play a leading role in the region. Indeed, only through partnership will a European grand strategy be credible and that should be the focus of a diplomatic grand strategy. It may well be that the new Administration in Washington may now be willing to give Europeans at least the role of 'strategic broker' in Syria. Such a role might also encourage Russia, Iran and others to co-operate. However, such a brokerage role could only be undertaken by the EU as history remains powerfully eloquent in the Middle East and to many Arabs and others Britain and France remain firmly on the wrong side of history.

Reinforce the EEAS: A European grand strategy for Syria would need to be based on joint rather than common action. To that end the implicit struggle between the Council and the Commission must be ended, as must the implicit struggle between the Commission and the leading member-states. For such strategy to work the intergovernmental EEAS would need to act and equipped to act as a hub/brokerage reinforced and buttressed by the foreign, security, aid and developmental resources of the member-states.

Commit to time and space: The Taliban used to taunt the coalition in Afghanistan with the phrase, "you have the money, but we have the time". They were right. The Western-led Afghanistan strategy failed because of a clear lack of unity of effort and purpose, fractured and ill-co-ordinated efforts to stabilise and reconstruct, and a security plan that had too many actors doing too many disparate things in pursuit of too many disparate objectives. However, ultimately it was a lack of strategic imagination and patience that condemned the coalition to failure. If Europeans were to consider a grand strategy for Syria they would need to properly be committed to stay there and invest in a Syrian peace.

Craft a plan: If Europeans were to be serious about a grand strategy for Syria they must collectively craft a plan…and soon!

Can Europe Apply Grand Strategy to Grand Tragedy?

This chapter set out to answer an overarching question; can Europe apply grand strategy to end Syria's grand tragedy? That question implies perhaps the biggest question of all; is Europe up for and to the challenge? T.E. Lawrence once wrote, "In fifty words: granted mobility, security (in the form of denying targets to the enemy, time and doctrine (the idea to convert every subject to friendliness), victory will rest with the insurgents, for the algebraic factors in the end are decisive, and against then perfection of means and spirit struggle quite in vain".[8]

European leaders should heed Lawrence's words but not in the way they may think. Seared by failure in Afghanistan and Iraq, paralysed by the situation in both Syria and Ukraine, Europeans have retreated into politics at the expense of considered grand strategy. Indeed, having understood that the threats they face from the Syrian war require a big, long-term strategy it is as though they have collectively resiled from the challenge.

Instead, European leaders have retreated into a series of humanitarian sound-bites, ignored catastrophes, and focussed on 'lesser' disasters on the grounds that they can at least do something. And yet what is happening today in Syria is forced change being imposed by adversaries with potentially catastrophic consequences for Europe over the medium-to-long term. Indeed, far from being the exception to the twenty-first century rule the war in Syria is fast becoming one of its defining features. In such circumstances not to act is far more dangerous than acting.

What is happening in the Middle East is acutely important for Europeans. Faced with such circumstances 'strategy' should mean a collective determination to see the very big picture of a very big picture conflict. However, European political leaders seem unable or unwilling to do that. Perhaps for that reason the very crafting of a European grand strategy for Syria might if nothing else remind European leaders how to act big, and how to act big and together.

Unless Europeans seek to generate a big, better future for Syria there is the very real chance no-one else will, and given the ensuing vacuum the spill-over to Europe and beyond could be catastrophic for Europeans. In that light calls for 'something to be done' hand-wringing by impotent European leaders far from being the first step on the path to the creation of a European grand strategy for Syria is in fact mask a determined retreat from it.

Could Europe apply grand strategy to Syria? Yes. Would a European grand strategy for Syria would help end the war? Yes. Is such a grand strategy likely? No.

[8] Lawrence T. E. (1926) "Seven Pillars of Wisdom," Adelaide University e-book Edition (Adelaide: Adelaide University Press).

Part II
Lessons Learned: USA

THE US AND THE SYRIAN EXPERIENCE: SOME LESSONS

Henri J. Barkey[1]

The Syrian conflict has not been a linear crisis. The main narrative of a rebellion against a central power in Damascus is still largely correct and important, the twists and turns in the fighting, the proliferation of actors on the ground and the changing dynamics of regional and international powers were not envisaged by the US and the West. The US in particular was often surprised by the evolution of the conflict, the emergence of the Islamic State for Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the powerful intervention by Russia that appears to have shifted the course of battle. As a result, the US policy consisted of an ad-hoc incremental approach. At times this was quite successful and achieved desired result while at other times it served to confuse interested parties about Washington's main goals and intentions.

For the US, Syria's importance was a derivative of its nuisance value; its mutually hostile relations with Israel, its reliance on Iran and the extent of Iranian influence and ultimately its welcoming attitude to a variety of terrorist organizations, ranging most importantly from Hezbollah to all types extremist Palestinian factions.

The only time when Syria acquired an important positive impression was when President Bill Clinton tried hard to bring Hafez al-Assad, the current president's father, Bashar al-Assad, into the peace process with Israel. Clinton's efforts notwithstanding a deal could not be brokered. In the aftermath of Iraq's occupation by the US, Washington was suspicious that many of the jihadists who decided to take the American (and also Iraqi) troops on were coming through Syrian frontier with support from the regime. Assad was also suspected of behind the assassination of Rafik Harriri the Lebanese prime minister and power wielder. With Harriri's death, Bashar al-Assad consolidated his complete dominance of Lebanese politics. Despite the five-year long civil war, Syria continues, in partnership with Iran continues to dominate Lebanon. Therefore, the Arab Spring's arrival to Damascus was not surprisingly welcomed in Washington.

Desired and Realistic Objectives

What started off as a peaceful protest in Syria against the regime was quickly transformed into a civil war as strongman Bashar al-Assad could not tolerate any

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kind of dissent especially in the aftermath of events in Tunisia and Egypt. In view of how these two regimes disintegrated, he opted for the immediate use of violence in the hope that it would help squash the protest movement before it gained critical momentum. In retrospect, this clearly was mistake as the conflict quickly spiraled out of control resulting in half of the population becoming displaced inside and outside Syria, countless deaths and the destruction of towns, cities and infrastructure.

From the outset the Obama Administration wanted to see the Assad regime go. A dictatorial sectarian regime, the Syria had been a constant irritation for US policy makers. Its reliance on Iran, support for the Lebanese Shi'a Hezbollah and the ruthless family rule since 1970 were among the reasons Washington was quite happy to see the Arab Spring spread to Syria and at the beginning expected the regime to not survive more than 6 months. In effect, this expectation betrayed Washington's fundamental assumption that Syria would go through a transition not unlike that of Tunisia and Egypt: the leader would depart, a new government would take over and it would somehow rule. In Libya Muammer Gadhafi had hollowed out the state. Hence when rebels decapitated the regime, the country descended into complete chaos. By contrast, Syria it was assumed had a functioning state.

What the US administration and its allies, including the Turks, failed to comprehend was how the conflict would quickly assume a zero-sum character as yet minority but politically dominant Alawite community in particular interpreted the revolt as being directed at its very existence. The community and the Assad regime had become one; even if there were dissenting Alawite voices, that community had benefited from the largesse of the regime and more importantly controlled most, if not all, the levers of political power in the country and certainly in its security services. As late as October 2015 at the Manama Dialogue in Bahrain, US Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken would articulate the US goals as "preserving Syria as a unified, sovereign state, with a secular, inclusive and non-sectarian government, its institutions intact."[2]

If the overall goal or strategy as expressed by Blinken seems to have remained constant, this cannot be said of conditions on the ground. Large swathes of territory has fallen into the hands of a variety of opposition and jihadist groups; the Syrian government once on the ropes and ill prepared has gotten a second wind with the intervention of the Iranian Quds force, Russian air assets containing and then pushing back opposition military formations. Even the arrival of ISIS on the scene initially helped the Russians as it distracted the US. From the beginning, however, the conflict was not contained to Syria; in many different ways Iraq and Syria found themselves part of a larger struggle.

For the Obama administration, the Iraq experience, not to mention Afghanistan as well, colored the way the administration would respond to Syria. On the one

[2] Remarks by Antony J. Blinken, Deputy Secretary of State, Manama, Bahrain, October 31, 2015. http://m.state.gov/md249031.htm.

hand, it came under tremendous pressure from civil society groups, responsibility-to-protect type of organizations and international expectations to intervene or take a much more direct approach to the carnage in Syria. If generals always refight the last war, politicians always run away from the last war; President Obama was determined not to get involved on the ground militarily for fear of a repeat of an Iraqi-style quagmire that consumed many American lives and contributed if not created the chaotic conditions Iraq has had to endure.

So the two axes of American policy in Syria were evident from the beginning: Assad should be replaced with the understanding that the Syrian state would fundamentally be preserved. This would be achieved without American military involvement on the ground. Within a year of the beginning of the civil war, it became obvious that these two axes worked in opposition to each other. As Syria disintegrated the Syrian state ceased to exist after a certain juncture. The state functioned in some parts of the country where the security services and the army could hold fort but in many other parts rebels created alternative governance structures and tried to attend to some of the basic needs of the remaining populations.

For Washington then its self-imposed constraint on military intervention allowed others to enter the fray. Support for the opposition forces mutated as Turkey and the Gulf countries frustrated by the inability of the pro-Western moderate rebels of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to make significant headway against the regime — in other words their failure to overthrow Assad — sought other and better-equipped protagonists to carry on with the war. Invariably, this meant jihadists who began to pour into Syria from all corners of the world. The arrival of the jihadists and especially of the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front alarmed the White House. It even lead to a major disagreement between Turkey and the US when Obama confronted then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan over Turkey's support for and facilitation of these jihadist elements which posed a threat to the rest of the region and ultimately to US allies in Europe.

Al-Nusra and other jihadists were clearly much more effective at fighting the regime then and it may also be true today. Despite its disagreements with Turkey over al-Nusra, the US helped facilitate the delivery of arms and other resources to the moderate anti-Assad rebellion. It vetted groups before providing them with the necessary help and worked closely with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar to funnel the aid. Until the decisive involvement by the Russians starting in September 2015, the rebels though deadlocked in places had been holding their own having captured important Syrian towns. For instance, they managed to resist in and hold on to the city of Homs until May 2014 by then large numbers of Iranian-equipped Lebanese Hezbollah fighters had arrived to make a decisive difference on the battlefield and the remaining opposition fighters withdrew.

In addition to the Iraqi experience, part of the American reticence to get involved was that the war in Syria did not constitute a primary threat to the US mainland or its citizens. It affected Syria's neighboring countries, Turkey, a NATO ally, Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the autonomous Kurdish

region in northern Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. In addition to the possibility of violence spreading, these countries suffered from an influx of refugees that grew with time and, more importantly, stated to settle in as it became quickly apparent to them that there would be no easy solution to the conflict. US ally, Israel though bordering Syria was not significantly affected by these events.

Washington's reaction to the crisis in September 2013 following the use by the Assad regime of chemical weapons against its civilian population validated the view that the US would flinch from the use of force even when the president had publicly put down a marker in the form of "a red line." Despite preparations to bomb Syria's chemical facilities, President Obama looked for an alternative approach which was conveniently provided by the Russians: US would forgo the bombing in exchange for Syria admitting the existence of the program and removing its chemical weapons.[3] The US decision not to bomb and deal with Damascus was received with dismay especially because many observers had hoped that had the bombing campaign gone ahead the Assad regime would have been severely damaged and could even have collapsed.

Such considerations also dominated the discussions over the creation of safe zones. Many in the US advocated safe zones as locations where the refugees could seek shelter protected by the US air force. Safe zones had been used elsewhere, most notably in Iraq following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and subsequent war. Again the US did not entertain such ideas precisely because, unlike northern Iraq where there were Kurdish fighters on the ground to help in the case of an Iraqi intervention. No such forces were available in Syria: it is impossible to defend any territory from the air alone against infiltrators on foot or occasional vehicles. The White House, therefore, perceived the No-Fly-Zone recommendation as something that would develop into a backdoor fashion to commit ground troops.

The US engagement in Syria changed fundamentally with the advent of ISIS. Not only did Washington's focus change but also the form. ISIS would become the number one concern and the US armed forces would, for the fist time, get involved directly. The fall of Mosul to ISIS in June 2014 changed everything. The ease with which ISIS captured Iraq's second city shocked everyone. ISIS it seemed had come out of nowhere; it established a Caliphate through not just the dramatic military conquests but also through the use media-savvy techniques and especially use of appalling violence. In fact, ISIS, mostly an Iraqi organization had been a major force in the jihadist opposition all along. As Charles Lister has pointed out, in April 2013, the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi demanded that al-Nusra submit to his authority and when al-Nusra's leadership refused, "a majority of the group's foreign fighters had left to join ISIS and its principal source of income had been cut."[4]

[3] Derek Chollet, "Obama's Red line, Revisited," *Politico* July 19, 2016, http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/07/obama-syria-foreign-policy-red-line-revisited-214059.

[4] Charles Lister, *Profiling Jabhat al-Nusra*, Brookings paper, July 24, 2016, p. 13.

Almost immediately after ISIS's emergence, American special forces were sent to Syria to find abducted Westerners. The July 4, 2014 operation would come to naught. Unable to find the hostages, American forces were withdrawn. It was clear that ISIS now had the US's attention; at first it was the sweep through northern Iraq, the ease with which it had defeated the Iraqi army defending Mosul, capturing large amounts of American supplied equipment, and then scoring successes against the KRG and its *peshmerga* forces. In the process, ISIS also massacred large numbers of non-Sunni Iraqis, Yazidis, in particular.

The ISIS challenge has completely reconfigured US priorities. Although the departure of Assad remains a goal, after 2014 it was the defeat of ISIS that assumed preeminence. With time the US would also turn its attention to al-Nusra. Whereas earlier, the strategy against al-Nusra consisted of marginalizing it, once Washington engaged ISIS militarily, it would eventually turn its air force against al-Nusra as well.

It was the Islamic Caliphate's broad and global ambitions that Washington saw as a challenge; it correctly understood that ISIS would not be satisfied with conquering a swathe of territory in Syria and Iraq but that it had much larger goals. ISIS's campaign in the West, its bombings and use of lone wolfs to attack the soft underbelly of these societies proved that the US was right in focusing on that organization.

The first test of the new US policy on ISIS came about in October 2014. The Kurdish town of Kobani on the Turkish border defended by the PYD, People's Protective Units, the military arm of the Syrian Kurds and their Party, the PYD, or the Democratic Union Party, became the target of a major ISIS onslaught. With most of the town's population having fled, the city did not appear to be that important except for the fact that ISIS had decided to marshal a great deal of its Mosul war booty in the form of American-made Humvees, trucks and tanks captured from the Iraqi army to capture Kobani. In turn, this provided the Americans with an opportunity to destroy a great deal of this equipment and thus deal ISIS a significant blow just when it was in a stage of euphoria coming out of Mosul and other victories.

As the White House contemplated what to do, it had to deal with a different problem, the Turkish government and its president Erdogan who made it clear that it was his preference that the town and its defenders fall to ISIS. Erdogan, who was conducting indirect peace talks with the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, in Turkey feared that a PYD/YPG success in Kobani would strengthen the hand of the PKK at home. The PYD/YPG were in effect creatures of the PKK which had created and trained them over the years before they too swept through much of northern Syria. In some ways, Erdogan was right about the impact of a PYD success on Turkish Kurds in general. For Turkish Kurds the well being of their Syrian brethren had become of central importance. In fact, massive demonstrations following the Kobani crisis in Turkey's Kurdish regions then resulted in as many as 60 deaths.

Obama broke with the Turks and ordered massive air strikes against ISIS forces besieging Kobani; the combination of American airstrikes and PYD counterattacks succeeded in handed ISIS perhaps its first and most important defeat. Much to the consternation of the Turks, Washington went on to align itself with the PYD as they had proven to be the only force capable of taking on ISIS and defeating it. The pragmatism displayed by Obama, who appears to have ordered the strikes in Kobani in opposition to most of his advisers, and his willingness to alienate US's NATO ally Turkey, perhaps the only time in recent memory that Ankara's strong preferences were overlooked, demonstrated the extent to which ISIS had become a focal point of US strategy in the Middle East. One can even argue that it came to eclipse all other considerations.

One can argue that Obama's bet has paid off as the YPG led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberated Manbij, one of the most important ISIS staging grounds on August 12. Ankara had gotten assurances from the US that the YPG would not cross west of the Euphrates River, yet Manbij does lie to the west and Obama had to convince Erdogan of the necessity of this operation. Yet, the logical next step for operations in Syria is being put on a slow burner: the Americans have made it clear that the city of Raqqa, the putative capital of the Caliphate, will be of secondary importance to the retaking of Mosul. Here again, the two conflict arenas are being conflated; it was not clear if the YPG was truly interested in also liberating Raqqa given how long and bloody the Manbij operation had been and the fact that few Kurds reside in the Raqqa environs, meaning that the locals are unlikely to be as accommodating of a majority Kurdish force. The Manbij operation also revealed another twist in American policy; by the time the SDF liberated the town, there were approximately 300 US Special Forces members participating in managing, advising and directing operations.

This focus on ISIS and the jihadists in general would ultimately lead to a search for an accommodation with the Russians whose decisive intervention in September 2015 to support the Assad government turned the tables upside down in Syria. The Russian decision to the aid of the Syrian regime came about because of the dire circumstances the regime had found itself. Russian air strikes helped Assad's forces, together with Iranian-recruited Iraqi paramilitaries, Iranian Revolutionary Guard units and Hezbollah, to change the course of the war and give the regime the upper hand in places like Aleppo. At first, there was an attempt to come up with "a nation-wide cessation of hostilities." This fell apart quite quickly when Syrian forces broke the cease fire to score gains.

The Russians, while claiming to be going after jihadist organizations, have used their air force to bomb mostly regular or "moderate" opponents of the regime allied with the US. Occasionally they have made forays against both ISIS and al-Nusra but this has not been their focus. The Russians are free riders; had the US not engaged ISIS as forcefully as it did, the problem for Damascus and its allies could have been much graver.

Washington faced with a quagmire having to confront al-Nusra and ISIS on the one hand and helping its rebels overthrow Assad on the other, has decided to opt for a political solution that can only come about if the Russians pressure their client.[5] CIA Director John Brennan seemed to represent the White House vision when he argued that Russia is "trying to crush" anti-Assad forces and that Moscow has not lived up to its commitments regarding the cease-fire or the political process in Syria. .. Nevertheless, there's going to be no way forward on the political front without active Russian cooperation and genuine Russian interest in moving forward."[6]

If the current US plan announced in July 2016 to coordinate with the Russians were to go through Assad's hand would be strengthened; soon after the announcement as Fabrice Balanche has argued, "Hezbollah's elite Radwan battalion and two thousand fighters belonging to the Iraqi militia Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba arrived in Aleppo" and together with a fierce Russian strikes made the rebels' supply routes unusable.[7] In turn, the rebels responded with a massive counterattack that was aided by considerable Saudi and Qatari supplies trucked over from Turkey. Critical to the success of the counteroffensive has been the participation of Jabath Fatah al-Sham, the rebranded al-Nusra Front, with the knowledge of not just the regional countries helping them but also the United States.[8]

Herein lies the crux of the problem for Washington: in many places the rebels it supports are enmeshed with the likes of al-Nusra; efforts at creating a building a wall of separation between the jihadists and the others have not been completely successful. The jihadist fighters can in critical times make the difference because they have both the numbers when it comes to fighters and the zeal to fight. Al-Nusra may have "repudiated" its allegiance to al-Qaeda and renamed itself to make itself more acceptable to the regional powers, but no one takes its battlefield conversion seriously.

Complicating matters further is the involvement of regional powers, which ostensibly are on the American side, primarily Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. These countries have their own interests and ambitions in Syria. Turkey from the beginning saw itself, with a long border and as the region's most successful industrial and commercial power, as the country that would benefit the most from a friendly regime in need of its services. In effect, all of Syria would become another KRG where Turkey dominates economically and wields considerable

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5 Josh Rogin, "Obama proposes new military partnership with Russia in Syria," *Washington Post*, June 30, 2016.

6 *Ibid*.

7 Fabrice Balanche, "Aleppo: Is the Turnaround Sustainable for the Rebels?" The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 9, 2016. http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/is-aleppo-turnaround-sustainable-for-rebels.

8 Erika Solomon, "Outside help behind rebel advances in Aleppo," *Financial Times*, August 9, 2016. https://www.ft.com/content/da076830-5d77-11e6-a72a-bd4bf1198c63.

political influence. Despite years of close relations with Assad, Erdogan never achieved what he wanted in Syria, in part because Assad was always careful to heed first and foremost it primary ally, Iran's preferences. For the Saudi Arabia, Syria is a quasi battlefront where it can confront Iran and "hurt" it. For Qatar it is all about extending its regional influence.[9]

That these may have their own priorities and calculations ought not to come as a surprise. In a country ravaged by civil war with hundreds of rebel groups, big and small, operating more or less autonomously events are difficult to anticipate much less plan. Hence, even the best-laid plans would have met defeat. Having other powers participate helps in burden sharing, provides a degree of agility and finally for the US, bedeviled by the Iraqi experience, bestows some amount of legitimacy. Still the element of unpredictability remains as a potent force: consider, for instance, the most recent rapprochement between Russia and Turkey. This is driven in large measure by Turkey's pique at the US over support for the PYD and most recently the failed July 15 coup attempt that Ankara blames on the US-based exiled Turkish cleric Fethullah Gülen. Ankara's anger at Washington non-compliance with an immediate extradition of Gülen has the potential to derail US-Turkish cooperation along many dimensions. Already, there are hints that Russian-Turkish reconciliation[10] may lead to some accommodation in Syria. The Russians are said to have decided to allow Turkish planes to attack ISIS targets in Syria. Until then, Turks were deterred by the powerful S400 anti-aircraft missile system the Russians had installed in northern Syria.

The Turks, who have been most adamant in seeing Assad go, could shift their policy in discussions with the Russians. Prime Minister Binali Yildirim told an audience just as "we have reestablished ties with Russia, we will normalize our relations with Syria."[11] This would put them at odds with Saudis and perhaps the Qataris although the US may find this shift to be helpful since it, at least at this stage, seems less fixated on Assad than ISIS and has been open to considering alternative transition scenarios.

The realities on the ground, that is, the consolidation of the Syrian regime along the Damascus to Aleppo axis and to the lands east with Russian and Iranian intervention have forced Washington to revise its goals and suggest that it would accept a negotiated transition. Clearly, Assad would very much be part of this transition process. What is not clear is who would be on the other side;

[9] Giorgio Caferio and Daniel Wagner, "Turkey and Qatar: Close Allies, Sharing a Doomed Syria Policy," *The National Interest*, November 9, 2015. http://nationalinterest.org/feature/turkey-qatar-close-allies-sharing-doomed-syria-policy-14283?page=3.

[10] On November 24, 2015, Turks downed a Russian SU-24 bomber that crossed into Turkish airspace for all of 17 seconds; Putin's reaction was swift and categorical. He banned Russian tourists from Turkey and stopped the importation of Turkish agricultural exports. Both of these measures turned out to be costly prompting eight months later an about face by Erdogan who apologized to Putin and then went to visit him in St. Petersburg.

[11] "Başbakan Yıldırım'dan Suriye mesajı," *Hürriyet*, August 13, 2016.

the opposition like the country is fractured. If recent history is an indication, the Assad regime and its supporters will seek to use this to further consolidate power and manipulate the transition process to their benefit. This endpoint, however, is the current final resting point of the incrementalist US policy in Syria.

Lessons Learned

It is clear that the US was confronted with a unique no-win situation for which it did not, and perhaps could not have had, any past experience to derive lessons from. Iraq and Afghanistan are the closest examples of having to operate in mayhem with outsiders intervening to make things difficult, to say the least. However, in both instances, American troops were already on the ground and had an element of control.

Iranian and Russian involvement was driven by determined and well-internalized objectives. As Gerald Hyman writes, Putin was intent on reasserting Russia's claim as a world power; prevent another color revolution in a country nominally allied with Moscow; and demonstrate that he is a reliable ally by coming even to the defense of an weak ruler.[12] The Iranians were equally determined not to let Assad fall. For them, just as it was for Syria's Alawite community, the conflict was a zero-sum one. Hence they were willing to expend great resources including the blood of their own forces.

The Iranian intervention was immediate; that is, it came as soon as Assad appeared to be in need while the Russian one came in later and was instrumental in preventing a collapse. Either way, the US faced two single-minded and unwavering opponents. Another irony that clouded issues, perhaps more so on the American side than on the Iranian, was the negotiations over the Iranian nuclear agreement. The Obama administration may have been reluctant to confront the Iranians more forcefully for fear engendering a backlash from the hardliners in Iran who appeared not to be enthusiastic about the deal. A ratcheting up of the pressure on the Iranians would have entailed perhaps the bombing of Assad's forces with the understanding that non-Syrian formations, be they Hezbollah's or Iranian, would have been on the receiving end of American bombs. On the other hand, the administration must have been cognizant that the Iran deal benefited the regime in Tehran, which in turn, had an indirect bearing as Aaron Lund argues, on Assad.[13]

It is too early to know whether the Iran nuclear deal played any role in the White House resistance to taking a more direct role against Assad, certainly later on in the conflict when such action could have made a difference either in undermining the regime or preventing further civilian casualties. Was the Iran deal

[12] Gerald Hyman, "A New U.S. Strategy for Syria," *The National Interest*, December 28, 2015.

[13] Aaron Lund, "What Does the Iran Deal Mean for Syria?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 14, 2015. http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=60707.

more important to the White House than the Assad regime's survival? Meanwhile, Iran's task was easier. Nothing Tehran did or could do would have a direct bearing on the US. Even if it did, given the importance of Assad's survival or at least that regime's to Iran, the leadership in Tehran would certainly have gone the extra mile no matter what. In other words, the cost calculations were different.

Therefore, considering the asymmetric nature of threat perceptions and levels of importance ascribed to the conflict, the US was from the beginning at a disadvantage. At the core of its lack of success was the fact that Syria was not a priority. Its almost total commitment would come later and, as we have seen, it would be against ISIS and not Assad. Here the contrast between its resoluteness vis a vis ISIS and Damascus is telling.

The US's incrementalist approach to policy was not reflected in the definition of objectives. These remained relatively stable until the very end when it reconsidered its anti-Assad stand. Between 2011 and today, the US stuck to the overthrow of Assad narrative. It did not develop an alternative vision for Syria; what would, for instance, the reconstruction of the country look like? One of the most critical communities in Syria is the Alawite one. It is their fear of the day after that has married them to the regime. The US never publicly signaled the different Syrian communities and constituencies of what kind of Syria it wanted to see going forward. The US, even if minimally involved in the civil war, remains the most important power watched by everyone. Its unwillingness to suggest alternative solutions for Syria remained a major failure. One of the realities of the Middle East is that even when the US does not express its preferences, people in the region automatically ascribe what they think those are. Ambiguity, in other words, is not a strategy.

Hence putting forward, as Hyman argues, "some organizing principles, some clearer set of objectives, around which to rally the fissiparous stakeholders," has always been necessary. "That would clearly include a regime change which, properly understood, means not just a change in personnel (in this case Assad and his entourage) but a fundamental transformation of structure and process, in this case from a narrow, sectarian, brutal authoritarian dictatorship to a regime that represents the aspirations of the majority of the various Syrians, a modus vivendi among its constituent communities, and institutions and procedures that encode some kind of consensus."[14]

This has been the most important missing element of the American strategy. In addition, coming up with a plan on how to resettle that half of the Syrian population which was displaced by the conflict, reconstructing the infrastructure, especially water, road and electricity networks would have provided, however distant, a positive storyline for the Syrians to look for. Moreover, no other country among the US allies would have envisaged starting such a project, yet Washington

[14] Aaron Lund, "What Does the Iran Deal Mean for Syria?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 14, 2015. http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=60707.

could also have used it bring together the disparate elements of the coalition together and prevent them from free lancing when frustrated with the slow pace developments.

Instead, the US stayed put and watched from a distance. This would have been justified had the US not engaged. Instead, the US at times has also alienated its allies, such as when, Obama accused the Saudis of "freeloading on US power."[15] The recent successes against ISIS, especially the fall of Manbij, should provide an opportunity to the US to develop a strategic plan for Syria. Of course, in view of the fact that this is an election year, the Obama will let the new administration worry and deal with Syria.

[15] Anthony Cordesman, "U.S. Strategy and the War in Iraq and Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 13, 2016. https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-strategy-and-war-iraq-and-syria.

US AND RUSSIA IN SYRIA'S WAR: COOPERATION AND COMPETITION

Michael Kofman

When the Arab Spring reached Syria in March of 2011 the resulting protests, along with Syria's brutal military response to put down the uprising, would eventually pit Russia and the US against each other in what has since become the most destructive civil war in the Middle East. The subsequent five years bear witness to diplomatic coups, political maneuvers on the international state at the UN, covert operations, and arms deals in support of an escalating proxy war and military brinksmanship between two coalitions trying to intervene in the same country. At times reminiscent of US-Soviet negotiations during the Cold War, Syria has proven a difficult and largely unsuccessful test for both countries' to reconcile their interests, values and visions for the international system.

The context of bilateral relations between Russia and the US, within which the Syrian conflict was situated, would also change profoundly between 2011-2016. During the war relations soured as the US 'reset' policy finally towards Russia collapsed in 2013, and a tense confrontation took hold following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the spring of 2014. Indeed the context of Syria in US-Russia relations, its implications, and the willingness of the two parties to cooperate changed as quickly and significantly as the nature of the Syrian civil war itself. This chapter explores the history US-Russian cooperation and at times competition in Syria.

2011 — Early Days in a Decisive Year

Large protests in the Syrian city of Daraa erupted on March 18, 2011, in the vein of other Arab Spring protests that shook established political orders in the Middle East. The Syrian Army besieged Daraa in April of that year. A brutal crackdown by Bashar al-Assad proved to be the spark in the spring of 2011 that would ultimately ignite the Syrian civil war. Yet ironically, Syrian-American and Syrian-Russian relations were not only in good state prior to the events of the Arab Spring, but improving. While Russia had long standing ties with the Syrian regime as a legacy of the Cold War, the US was too revising a previously antagonistic relationship.

Russia had inherited Syria as a client state at the collapse of the Soviet Union. The USSR began to support Syria after the Suez Crisis of 1956, but its client state status was sealed in 1971 when Hafez al-Assad came to power, offering Moscow

a further opportunity to strengthen ties with Damascus. At the time Moscow gained an important naval base in Tartus, Syria for its fleet in the Mediterranean, but this facility had been left moribund after the Cold War ended. Syria continued to purchase Russian arms, and a legacy influence there offered Moscow the semblance of being a player in the Middle East. After the collapse of the USSR the client relationship became mostly transactional. Russia lacked the resources to maintain client states through largess, expecting payment for arms. With the Soviet Union's fleets gone, Tartus lacked significance, becoming a minor resupply point, ill equipped for Russia's ships to even dock there.

Meanwhile just months before the outbreak of the protests in 2011 the US had posted an Ambassador to Damascus for the first time in six years. This was an effort to change course from the policy of isolation, dating back to 2005, when the Syrian regime was found complicit in the assassination of Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri. When protests broke out in March, senior US officials believed that Assad had changed and may be willing to pursue reforms. At the time Hillary Clinton had said that "there's a different leader in Syria now. Many of the members of Congress of both parties who have gone to Syria in recent months have said they believe he's a reformer."[1] Such sentiments early on suggest an optimistic outlook within the US political establishment on how Syria would respond to its own iteration of the Arab Spring.

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov similarly voiced the Russian expectation for reforms in Syria, "On the other hand, the time is ripe and even overripe for reform in most of these countries. We are talking about socio-economic and political reforms. People want democratic change, of course, given the specificity of each country."[2] It is unclear whether Russia truly believed in the necessity of internal reforms in Syria, but its initial response was not dissimilar to the US, even though the unraveling situation in Libya weighed heavily upon Russia's policy position towards the protests reshaping the region.

The two country's priorities differed at the outset of the conflict. The US sought to prevent large scale humanitarian violations from taking place, and even though initially positive on Assad, quickly understood that the Syrian regime had not fundamentally changed in nature. Russia on the other hand was preoccupied with preventing a Libya-like intervention in Syria, seeing Libya as an important model to avoid. Lavrov had drawn this line early on in May of 2011, stating Russia's concern that the Syrian uprising would be used as the reason for another Western intervention in the vein of Libya, "The calculation is that foreign players will get

[1] Glen Kessler, "Hillary Clinton's uncredible statement on Syria," *The Washington Post*. April 4, 2011. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/hillary-clintons-uncredible-statement-on-syria/2011/04/01/AFWPEYaC_blog.html.

[2] Transcript of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview to Russian Media Following Attendance at Arctic Council Meeting, Nuuk. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. May 12, 2011. http://archive.mid.ru//brp_4.nsf/0/497D137BD37D5300C32578930027DE88.

imbued with this problem and will not only condemn the violence there, but subsequently repeat the Libyan scenario, including the use of force."[3]

Following the Syrian siege of Daraa, the US imposed sanctions on Assad and six senior officials, but the official American position was that the Syrian leader could still "negotiate a way to stay in power" but Secretary of State Clinton had stated that the "country could not go back to the way it was before."[4] Assad's calculus was likely rooted in the perception that the uprising could be put down in a matter of weeks, but as the violence spread the US was steadily leaning towards calling for regime change.[5] Concerned that a US led coalition might replicate the Libyan intervention in Syria, Russia began to move into blocking position. Sergey Lavrov stated in November that "we are extremely concerned that some leaders of the coalition forces, and later the NATO Secretary-General called the Libyan operation a "model" for the future. As for Russia, we will not allow anything like this to happen again in the future."[6]

Russia was drawing a line in the sand on Syria when it came to US led interventions, and not just in the Middle East. From Russia's perspective, Syria was different not only because of its long running ties with Moscow, but also its geographical proximity and the conflict had more important international dimensions. In Syria Russia sought to face down what it perceived was a US policy of regime change, the employment of sanctions as a coercive tool of foreign policy, and political coalitions to isolate countries in the international community.[7] Ironically, Moscow would find itself very much the target of the sort of US sanctions and Western opprobrium in 2014 from which it sought to defend Syria in 2011.

Russia's concerns about US policy predilections were in some respects vindicated later that month, when after considerable internal pressure President Obama said that "For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."[8] These were the so-called 'magic words' that would come to

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[3] Transcript of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview to Russian Media Following Attendance at Arctic Council Meeting, Nuuk. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. May 12, 2011. http://archive.mid.ru//brp_4.nsf/0/497D137BD37D5300C32578930027DE88..

[4] Steven Lee Myers and Anthony Shadid, "U.S. Imposes Sanctions on Syrian Leader and 6 Aides," The New York Times, May 18, 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/world/middleeast/19syria.html.

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at Joint Press Conference with UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah Al Nahyan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. November 1, 2011. http://archive.mid.ru//brp_4.nsf/0/632FA95D978207EB4425793D0027E134.

[7] *Ibid*.

[8] Macon Phillips, "President Obama: The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way." White House Press Office. https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad.

both define and haunt the US policy on Syria. It was in November of 2011 that the US and Russia chose contradictory policy approaches in the conflict, which would shape their interactions until Moscow's launch of combat operation in September of 2015.

With the Arab League voting to impose sanctions on Syria, Russia increasingly worried about a coalition similar to that participating in Libya, choosing to intervene. "A scenario involving military intervention in Syrian affairs is absolutely unacceptable for us," Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said in late November.[9] In reality, the US approach was much more cautious. Recalling internal debates at the time, US diplomat Frederic C. Hof had said that there doubts about how quickly Assad would fall, "Even though Assad was not as impressive as the other four who were swept aside, he still had a lot of resources and the ability to turn this into a largely sectarian conflict since his military forces were predominantly of the same sect as he was."[10] Hence the US administration called for him to step aside, but made sure it was not alone, coordinating with leaders of France, Germany and Britain to issue similar calls.

Moscow strove to push cooperation on resolving the Syrian crisis towards multinational forums such as the UN Security Council, where its veto power could shield the Assad regime from sanctions. In this cause it found China a worthy ally. The two powers vetoed a resolution on Syria in October 2011, even after the text was revised thrice and did not even include the word 'sanctions.'[11] Libya lent credence to their cause, since other countries such as Brazil, India and South Africa also felt that NATO had misused a previous UN resolution in the conduct of air strikes against Qaddafi's regime in Libya. Moscow's vocal concerns that a Security Council resolution on Syria would be similarly misused found traction beyond countries with immediate interests in the survival of Bashar al-Assad.[12]

2012 — Inexorable March Towards Proxy War

As the conflict intensified, Russia began to increase its arms shipments in response to the growing needs of the Syrian army. Already the prime arms supplies to Damascus, Russian arms shipments in 2011 totaled nearly $1 billion, not

[9] James Brooke, "Syria: Russia Clings to Legacy of Soviet Ties in Arab World," Voice of America, November 29, 2011. http://blogs.voanews.com/russia-watch/2011/11/29/syria-russia-clings-to-legacy-of-soviet-ties-in-arab-world/

[10] Steven Mufson, 'Assad must go': These 3 little words are huge obstacle for Obama on Syria, The Washington Post, October 19, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/assad-must-go-these-three-little-words-present-a-huge-obstacle-for-obama-on-syria/2015/10/19/6a76baba-71ec-11e5-9cbb-790369643cf9_story.html.

[11] Associated Press. Russia and China veto UN resolution against Syrian regime. October, 2011. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/05/russia-china-veto-syria-resolution.

[12] *Ibid.*

including difficult to track small arms and light weapons.[13] A steady supply stream of ships carrying arms and supplies from Russia's Black Sea port of Oktyabrsk to Tartus in Syria would become dubbed the 'Syrian Express.' According to estimates by well regarded Russian centers of analysis, such as CAST, in 2012 Russia still had some $4 billion dollars in outstanding contracts for the Syrian military and those figures only included publicly disclosed agreements.[14]

Initial progress between Russia and US could be seen at the UN in the approval of a six-point plan for Syria on March 21, 2012 and appointment of Kofi Annan as a joint special envoy from the UN and Arab League.[15] Moscow preferred keeping international approaches confined to the auspices of the UN, where it was an equal, and well placed to shape any multinational response. Following the approval of a proposal for 300 unarmed military monitors in Syria the Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, exclaimed "We're on the right track now."[16] These initiatives offered a visage of addressing an incipient civil war without injuring Russian or Syrian interests. The approach was codified in the Geneva Communique on June 30th, which provided a framework for the international community, and the various sides in Syria to resolving the conflict based on a six-point plan.

At this stage the bilateral relationship between Russia and US was cooling, with Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency signaling the end of a more cooperative atmosphere during the height of the 'reset' policy. Russia sought to maintain the image of cooperation at the President's meeting in Los Cabos, Mexico that June, with Vladimir Putin announcing that "We also discussed international affairs, including the Syrian affair. From my perspective, we've been able to find many commonalities pertaining to all of those issues. And we'll now further develop our contacts both on a personal level and on the level of our experts involved."[17] President Obama's speech was far less optimistic, "we discussed Syria, where we agreed that we need to see a cessation of the violence, that a political process has to be created to prevent civil war, and the kind of horrific events that we've seen over the last several weeks..."[18]

Western efforts to increase pressure on the Syrian regime at the UN went nowhere. In July of 2012, Russia and China cast their third veto against a UK

[13] Thomas Grove and Erika Solomon, Russia boosts arms sales to Syria despite world pressure, Reuters. February 21, 2012. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-russia-arms-idUSTRE81K13420120221.

[14] *Ibid*.

[15] In Presidential Statement, Security Council Gives Full Support to Efforts of Joint Special Envoy of United Nations, Arab League to End Violence in Syria. UN Security Council. March 21, 2012. http://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10583.doc.htm.

[16] CNN Wire Staff, "U.N. authorizes 300 unarmed Syria monitors," CNN, April 21, 2012. http://edition.cnn.com/2012/04/21/world/meast/syria-unrest/.

[17] Remarks by President Obama and President Putin of Russia After Bilateral Meeting. The White House Office of the Press Secretary. June 18, 2012. https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/06/18/remarks-president-obama-and-president-putin-russia-after-bilateral-meeti.

[18] *Ibid*.

sponsored resolution that would have imposed sanctions against Syria, resulting in "bitterness and acrimony" at the council.[19] Efforts to establish a ceasefire were fruitless. War broke out between the Free Syrian Army, committed to bringing down Assad, and the Syrian regime that summer, which vowed to annihilate the uprising.

US allies in the Middle East, most notably Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Jordan, ramped up their support for the Syrian opposition. In an effort to maintain a role in the conflict, and retain visibility on who was supplying whom, the US began to covertly sponsor the Syrian opposition. In late June it became known that the CIA had officers in Turkey "helping allies decide which Syrian opposition fighters across the border will receive arms to fight the Syrian government."[20] Thus, the US approach expanded from diplomacy and humanitarian aid to directly backing one side in the conflict against another.[21] With Russia already increasing its military support for the Syrian army, in the summer of 2012 the conflict began to take on the dimensions of a proxy war between Moscow and Washington, D.C. Events at the UN would become a sideshow to regional actors and major powers shaping the course of this conflict by supporting proxies on the battlefield.

2013 — An Unexpected Deal

By the spring of 2013 covert US support for the Syrian opposition expanded to include more than 160 military cargo flights arriving in Turkish and Jordanian airports.[22] The large airlift operation "correlated with shifts in the war within Syria," and while the Obama administration publicly stuck to the line that the US was only providing non-lethal aid, in reality the operation was facilitating weapons transfers from American allies in the region.[23] US intelligence officials supported efforts by Arab and Turkish allies to arm the Syrian opposition that year, not just with airlift but also by making deals with less known arms suppliers like Croatia. Eventually the operation expanded to the tune of perhaps 3,500 tons of military equipment that year.[24]

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[19] Rick Gladstone, "Friction at the U.N. as Russia and China Veto Another Resolution on Syria Sanctions," The New York Times, July 19, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/20/world/middleeast/russia-and-china-veto-un-sanctions-against-syria.html.

[20] Eric Schmitt, "CIA Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition," The New York Times. June 21, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html.

[21] *Ibid*.

[22] C. J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid from CIA. The New York Times. March 24, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html.

[23] *Ibid*.

[24] *Ibid*.

US entanglement in the war tracked in parallel with a decline of good will in bilateral relations with Russia. Following Vladimir Putin's presidential campaign in 2012, during which he instrumentally criticized the US, a series of incidents took the relationship to consistently new lows.[25] Moscow booted USAID from Russia, and the US levied sanctions against Russian officials as part of the Magnitsky Act. Then there was the Snowden affair, when NSA contractor Edward Snowden fled to Moscow and was granted asylum by Russian authorities in the summer of 2013. Syria aside, the relationship was unraveling.

Although Russia and the US had embarked on a course towards resolving their irreconcilable positions by supporting proxies on the Syrian battlefield, events in the war imposed a dramatic reversal later that month. On August 21st the Syrian regime used chemical weapons on the outskirts of Damascus, primarily sarin gas, which killed over 1,400 civilians.[26] Having previously declared in 2012 that use of chemical weapons would constitute a red line for the US, the Obama administration began to ready a series of air strikes. A political consensus in Washington, D.C. coalesced around the need for direct US military intervention in the form of an air campaign.

Moscow's guiding fear, that the US would intervene militarily appeared to be rapidly approaching on the horizon as American officials began to plan for a military response. There had already been several minor chemical weapons attacks in 2013, with France's foreign minister levying accusations against Assad's regime in June and US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel doing the same as early as April. Moscow sought to cast doubt on the veracity of Western claims, coming up with its own findings which placed the blame on the Syrian rebels rather than the government. At every point the Russian government sought to shield the Syrian regime from the potential consequences of a more robust US response.[27] However, the August 21st episode appeared beyond the pale relative to prior violations. It placed the matter "front-and-center on the world stage."[28]

Yet the political momentum behind a US strike on Syria came to a grinding halt when Obama chose not to pursue military action immediately and instead ask Congress for legislative approval. The sudden turn surprised US officials and Russian counterparts alike. With Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya as the background,

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[25] Anne Gearan and Philip Rucker, "Obama cancels summit meeting with Putin," The Washington Post, August 7, 2013. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-cancels-upcoming-meeting-with-putin/2013/08/07/0e04f686-ff64-11e2-9711-3708310f6f4d_story.html.

[26] Syria chemical weapons agreement reached between United States, Russia. CBS News. September 14, 2013. http://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-chemical-weapons-agreement-reached-between-united-states-russia/.

[27] These counter allegations may not have been entirely untrue, but in 2013 Russia consistently sought to undermine the narrative that the Syrian regime was responsible for using chemical weapons against its own population.

[28] Greg Botelho, "War of words between Russia, U.S. on Syrian crisis heats up," CNN, September 6, 2013. http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/05/world/russia-us-relations/.

Obama was not entirely certain that a Congressional authorization would go his way.[29] More importantly, while speaking in London, Secretary of State John Kerry intentionally or unintentionally suggested that the only way for Syria to avoid US retaliation was a to hand over all of its chemical weapons within a week.[30] Initially the US State Department painted these as rhetorical comments, not indicative of an actual policy, but Moscow interpreted this as an opportunity and set about attempting a diplomatic gambit.[31] Privately the US president was uneasy about an attack, the American people were "unenthusiastic about a Syria intervention," and Germany's Chancellor Angel Merkel told him they would sit out any Syria campaign.[32]

Sensing a lack of conviction behind the plan to conduct air strikes, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs attempted to head off the US intervention. Sergey Lavrov replied to Kerry's comments by stating that "If the establishment of international control over chemical weapons in that country would allow avoiding strikes, we will immediately start working with Damascus."[33] Remarkably, the Russian side came through. On September 9th Russia presented exactly the sort of proposal Kerry had offhandedly cited during statements in London. It offered for Syria to place its entire known chemical weapons stockpile under international control and immediately accede to the protocols of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. The move would end Syria's status as one of the seven countries not part of the 1997 convention banning stockpiling of chemical weapons.[34] By September 12th, the UN had received a signed document from Syria as stated requesting to join the convention.[35]

The deal to remove Syria's chemical weapons appeared to be a successful Russian maneuver to resolve both of the countries' problems. The Obama administration found itself backed into a corner by a previously announced red line, but little political desire to intervene in Syria and questionable prospects in Congress approving strikes. Meanwhile Russia was likely desperate to avoid strikes against the Syrian regime, and what would no doubt become a US led coalition of Western countries directly intervening in Syria. The Russian price was clear, "We proceed from the fact that the solution of this problem will make unnecessary any

[29] Dan Roberts and Julian Borger, Syria crisis: Obama welcomes Russia's chemical weapons proposal. The Guardian. September 10, 2013. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/us-russian-proposal-syria-chemical-weapons

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," The Atlantic. April 2016 Issue. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/.

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] Warren Strobel and Louis Charbonneau, High-stakes U.S.-Russian talks open, Syria to join chemical arms ban. Reuters. September 12, 2013. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE98A15720130912.

[35] *Ibid.*

strike on the Syrian Arab Republic," while Kerry replied that "President Obama has made clear that should diplomacy fail, force might be necessary to deter and degrade Assad's capacity to deliver these weapons."[36]

Subsequently the administration had attempted to paint this as a mutual success of US conventional compellence and coercion, with Kerry declaring that "Only the credible threat of force — and the intervention of President Putin and Russia based on that — has brought the Assad regime to acknowledge for the first time that it even has chemical weapons and an arsenal, and that (it) is now prepared to relinquish it."[37] While there was some truth to the political characterization, the US administration was caught between conflicting instincts and imperatives, and Russia had provided a way out. Moscow too was interested in seeing Syria's chemical weapons disposed of, as they were a dangerous wild card in the war. Their use made shielding Assad's regime increasingly onerous and unpalatable on the international stage.

In the week following Russia's proposal and Syria's application to the Chemical Weapons Convention the teams led by Kerry and Lavrov agreed on the scope and size of Syria's chemical weapons inventory, the timetable, and technical measures for disposal.[38] Throughout the negotiations Damascus remained silent and let Moscow take the lead. This initiative was not simply a bilateral but also an international success. Russian forces provided support to disposal teams on the ground in Syria and helped ensure the regimes' cooperation, Norwegian and Dutch ships ferried the poisonous chemicals out to sea where specialized US vessels reprocessed the compounds.[39] It was in effect an international disassembly line, ultimately removing 1,290 metric tons of chemicals between the fall of 2013 and June 30, 2014.[40] Although the Syrian forces still had access to chlorine bombs, which they would continue to use through 2016, the much more lethal weapons-grade toxins were successfully removed.[41]

After the chemical weapons attack in August, exchanges at the UN Security Council grew more hostile with US Ambassador Samantha Power refraining that, "the system has protected the prerogatives of Russia."[42] In August of 2012

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[36] Warren Strobel and Louis Charbonneau, High-stakes U.S.-Russian talks open, Syria to join chemical arms ban. Reuters. September 12, 2013. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-idUSBRE98A15720130912.

[37] *Ibid*.

[38] Syria chemical weapons agreement reached between United States, Russia. CBS News. September 14, 2013. http://www.cbsnews.com/news/syria-chemical-weapons-agreement-reached-between-united-states-russia/.

[39] *Ibid*.

[40] *Ibid*.

[41] There is some evidence in 2016 that Syria may not have declared its entire program, and could have small amounts of chemicals still hidden somewhere, though nothing conclusive had emerged at the time this chapter was written.

[42] Greg Botelho, War of words between Russia, U.S. on Syrian crisis heats up, CNN, September 6, 2013. http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/05/world/russia-us-relations/.

Kofi Annan had already resigned, with the ceasefire having gone nowhere, and been replaced by Lakhdar Brahimi, who too proved unsuccessful. Secretary General Ban Ki Moon had opined that "two and half years of conflict in Syria have produced only embarrassing paralysis in the security council."[43]

However, the new found rapport between Kerry and Lavrov began to revive broader international efforts towards organizing another peace conference, which would be called Geneva II, set for the winter of 2014. Despite the grim atmospherics in bilateral relations, the chemical weapons deal created a degree of momentum and established some faith that bilateral cooperation could result in positive outcomes in Syria. While the personal channel between John Kerry and Sergey Lavrov would remain, the belief that a way forward on Syria could be found quickly faded in 2014.

2014 — The End of Geneva and the Beginning of ISIS

In the spring of 2013 Lavrov and Kerry had discussed bringing both sides to the table in direct negotiations. Following their successful work to avert US airstrikes and begin dismantling the Syrian chemical weapons arsenal, the two diplomats sought to reignite the diplomatic process to achieve a ceasefire in 2014. Russia and the US sponsored the Geneva II conference on Syria, with the backing of the UN, and much of the work being done by UN's special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi. The goal was to bring delegations from warring sides together in January of 2014 and discuss directly how to implement the peace plan as outlined in the Geneva Communique of 2012. This approach proved a high profile diplomatic failure.

The Geneva II conference represented a good faith effort by the US and Russia, but neither country truly pressured their respective proxies towards concessions, and their respective positions on Syria starting from 2011 proved impossible to overcome in January-February 2014. The primary sticking point was Bashar al-Assad's fate, which the Syrian representatives refused to even discuss. For the US and Syrian opposition a transitional government without Assad stepping down was a non-starter. Moscow was disappointed that it could not include Iran in the talks, perhaps Syria's only true ally. Tehran was excluded because it had failed to endorse the original Geneva Communique, and of course the US was disinclined to see it involved.

The talks achieved little outside of a minor respite for the city of Homs, allowing the Red Cross to evacuate some of the civilians, but did not provide wider

[43] Dan Roberts and Julian Borger, "Syria crisis: Obama welcomes Russia's chemical weapons proposal," The Guardian, September 10, 2013. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/us-russian-proposal-syria-chemical-weapons.

access to other besieged zones in the conflict.[44] As the conference collapsed amidst recriminations it was clear to some Western diplomats that the Geneva process was a "dead end" and the two sides were engaging in "talks for show."[45] As the fighting raged on Brahimi would resign, in the footsteps of Kofi Annan, to be replaced by Staffan de Mistura in July of 2014.

Events in Europe would take an unexpected turn, yet again changing the bilateral context of US-Russian interactions in Syria. In late February of 2014, Russia seized Crimea from Ukraine, annexing it in March, and then began an incursion in the eastern regions of the country. Subsequent fighting would spiral out over the course of the spring and summer, resulting in Western sanctions, and suspension of cooperation across military and official channels. The relationship between Russia and the US became toxic, with distrust at senior levels and a growing degree of confrontation. Syria's prominence as a foreign policy dispute fell by the way side in light of Russia's war with Ukraine.

In the spring of 2014 the US began to provide more training and arms to the Syrian rebels. Not only did American officials seek to advance a military solution, but they were concerned with the growing presence of al-Qaeda fighters and jihadist groups among the opposition.[46] As a consequence the US began a program to supply TOW anti-tank guided missiles to select group, a program that produced results against Assad's forces on the battlefield. The chief motivation, however, was not pursuit of a proxy war as some in Moscow may have suspected. President Obama later explained his thinking, "the notion that we could have—in a clean way that didn't commit US military forces—changed the equation on the ground there was never true."[47] Instead the US sought to facilitate weapons from less scrupulous Arab allies and filter who they were given to in an effort, as some put it, to keep them "from trying to give too many sophisticated weapons to crazy people in Syria."[48]

American concerns about the role of extremists were well placed. In June Islamic militants attacked across Syria into Northern Iraq, quickly capturing Mosul with perhaps no more than 6,000 soldiers. Subsequently Baiji and Tikrit fell as the Iraqi army was seemingly melting away. Then Ramadi and Fallujah, which

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[44] Staff, "Syria peace talks break up as UN envoy fails to end deadlock," The Guardian. February 15, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/15/syria-peace-talks-break-up-geneva.

[45] *Ibid*.

[46] Tom Bowman and Alice Fordham, CIA Is Quietly Ramping Up Aid To Syrian Rebels, Sources Say, NPR Conflict Zones. April 23, 2014. http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2014/04/23/306233248/cia-is-quietly-ramping-up-aid-to-syrian-rebels-sources-say.

[47] Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," The Atlantic. April 2016 Issue. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/.

[48] Op. Cit. Tom Bowman and Alice Fordham, CIA Is Quietly Ramping Up Aid To Syrian Rebels, Sources Say.

spelled military disaster for the government of Iraq.[49] By the end of the month ISIS had declared the creation of the Islamic Caliphate across Syria and Northern Iraq. The US responded by first launching an air campaign, and then assembling a coalition of European and Arab states to strike ISIS.

Rather than unwittingly being drawn into Syria, the US would become preoccupied with first saving Iraq and subsequently leading a campaign against ISIS. In its own way, Russia ended up making contributions to the fight against ISIS in Iraq. In 2012 Moscow signed a lucrative deal to supply Mi-28N attack helicopters worth $4.2 billion with Baghdad, which Iraqi forces employed once they began arriving in 2014.[50] As ISIS overran the north, Moscow rushed Su-25 ground attack aircraft to Iraq in June along with military advisers.[51] Russia may have been trying to show the US up amidst growing tensions over the situation in Ukraine. Still, while uncoordinated in nature, Russian and American arms were bolstering Iraqi capability to hold ground against ISIS.

2015 — Russia Enters the Fray

As the US embarked on a slow paced effort to rebuild Iraq's army into six capable brigades and retake cities lost to ISIS, the tide of battle in Syria began to turn against Assad and his Shia allies. Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate group, occasionally supported by ISIS on the battlefield, steadily grew in power. That spring several groups assembled into the Army of Conquest, a loose alliance coalition of fighters many of whom were radicalized. They began a concerted campaign against regime territory in northwest Syria while ISIS seize Palmyra and steadily approached Assad's forces from the east.

The looming defeat of Syrian and Hezbollah forces led to Russia's direct entry into the war. During the summer of 2015 Moscow was visited by several Syrian Baathist officials, and head of Iran's Quds force, Qassem Soleimani.[52] It's unclear whether the Russian intervention was planned over the summer, or if the decision was made months earlier in the spring, but by the end of August there were signs of a Russian military buildup in Syria. The Russian decision has been characterized

[49] Martin Chulov, "ISIS insurgents seize control of Iraqi city of Mosul," The Guardian. June 10, 2014. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/10/iraq-sunni-insurgents-islamic-militants-seize-control-mosul.

[50] "Russia Delivers More Attack Helicopters to Iraq for Fight against ISIS" The Moscow Times. February 2, 2015. https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/russia-delivers-more-attack-helicopters-to-iraq-for-fight-against-is-43451.

[51] Fred Weir, "Russia to the rescue in Iraq? Moscow delivers jet fighters to Baghdad," The Christian Science Monitor. June 30, 2014. http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0630/Russia-to-the-rescue-in-Iraq-Moscow-delivers-jet-fighters-to-Baghdad. As many as 21 Su-25s are now being operated by the Iraqi air force in 2016.

[52] Iran Quds chief visited Russia despite U.N. travel ban: Iran official. Reuters. August 7, 2015. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-iran-soleimani-idUSKCN0QC1KM20150807.

by some as a bold political maneuver, but the history of the conflict suggests that just as the US sought to avoid direct entanglement in the Syrian civil war, so did Moscow, until Syrian defeats made that policy unsustainable.

The Russian intervention in Syria was a play on several levels: a gambit to save Assad, an attempt to break out of Western political isolation, forcing the US to treat Russia as an equal in the conflict, and a demonstration to domestic audiences at home that the country was still a great power, capable of bold moves on the international stage. The initial deployments quickly engendered American hostility and apprehension, in no small part given the simmering conflict in Ukraine. Russian transport aircraft were met by almost puerile US efforts to prevent their forces from arriving. US State Department officials pressured Bulgaria to close its airspace to Russia, asking Greece to do the same.[53] Despite efforts to block Russian access via Europe, Moscow secured transit over Iran and Iraq, allowing equipment to pour into Latakia and Tartus in Syria.

While coy about his intentions, Russia's leader Vladimir Putin intended to speak at the opening UN General Assembly session in September 2015 and also pursued a presidential meeting with Obama on the sidelines of his visit to the US Russia's impending combat operation led to a public change of face in US policy on Syria. Secretary Kerry's statements that month began to show flexibility on Assad's fate in light of the Russian intervention. "It doesn't have to be on day one or month one. There is a process by which all the parties have to come together and reach an understanding of how this can best be achieved," Kerry said.[54] The demand that Assad must step down at the outset of a transitional government, which was a principal divide not just with Syria's representatives but Moscow's as well, appeared to be fungible.

Speaking at the UN, Vladimir Putin laid out Russia's intent to cast the intervention as part of a broader fight against terrorism, in part using ISIS as a veil behind what was a mission to save the Syrian regime. "We think it is an enormous mistake to refuse to cooperate with the Syrian government and its armed forces, who are valiantly fighting terrorism face to face. We should finally acknowledge that no one but President Assad's armed forces and Kurdish militias are truly fighting the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations in Syria," and "we must join efforts to address the problems that all of us are facing and create a genuinely broad international coalition against terrorism."[55]

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[53] Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, U.S. Moves to Block Russian Military Buildup in Syria, The New York Times. September 8, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/09/world/europe/us-moves-to-block-russian-military-buildup-in-syria.html.

[54] Kerry says Syria's Assad must go but timing negotiable. Al Jazeera. September 20, 2015. http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/kerry-syria-assad-timing-negotiable-150919124946684.html.

[55] Washington Post Staff, "Read Putin's U.N. General Assembly speech," The Washington Post. September 28, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/28/read-putins-u-n-general-assembly-speech/.

No Cooperation, Deconflicting Only

Despite US suspicions, the arrival of Russian Su-30SM multirole fighters on the runway at Hemeimeem Air Base, followed by additional squadrons of fixed wing and rotary aviation, forced the gave Washington, D.C. little choice but to begin discussions with Russia on operations in Syria. The technical realities of having Russian air power operating within the same combat space as US and other coalition aircraft demanded a set of understandings to prevent an incident or miscalculation on the part of either side. Indeed, this is what Moscow was counting on when broaching the topic of a presidential level meeting in late September of 2014.

In a 90-minute meeting between Obama and Putin the two countries agreed to develop a mechanism to deconflict and "prevent unintended military engagement in Syria."[56] The word 'defconflict' would subsequently become a political characterization, as the Obama administration was not keen on suggesting it was strong-armed into restoring military ties, but this was precisely what happened. Following the meeting there was no indication that the US and Russia were aligned in views on how to achieve a political solution in Syria, as one official put it, "we have a difference about what the outcome of that process would be."[57]

It's unknown whether Russia promised some sort of cooperation in the fight against ISIS to the Obama administration on September 28th, but from the first wave of its strikes the targets were clearly moderate Syrian opposition fighters backed by the US and regional allies. Moscow's political framing for its campaign was one that placed all Syrian opposition under the rubric of a counter terrorism fight, which from a Russian perspective made sense, as Putin implied at the UN, that he only considered Assad's and Kurdish forces to be legitimate. Nicholas Gvosdev aptly described Russia's perspective as "there is no such thing as a "moderate opposition"—only groups that have varying degrees of support for and affinity to the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS)," suggesting "the promulgation of a narrative that the conflict in Syria is now binary and one is either with Assad or "with the terrorists" and groups that continue to fight against Assad are de facto allied to ISIS."[58]

Despite the Russian campaign's targeting of the US backed opposition, the two sides signed a memorandum in October intended to prevent mid-air incidents in the skies over Syria. A basic set of protocols was setup for air crews, as the Pentagon's press secretary explained, "These protocols include maintaining professional

[56] Teresa Welsh, "Obama, Putin Meet in New York," U.S. News. September 28, 2015. http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/09/28/obama-putin-meet-in-new-york.

[57] *Ibid*.

[58] Nikolas K. Gvosdev, "Moscow's War in the Air: Russia Sends a Message in Syria," The National Interest, October 1, 2015. http://nationalinterest.org/feature/moscows-war-the-air-russia-sends-message-syria-13983.

airmanship at all times, the use of specific communication frequencies and the establishment of a communication line on the ground."[59] The administration was keen to avoid the perception that there was any "broader accord" or US endorsement of the Russian operation, both for political reasons, and to avoid the perception that it was abandoning the Syrian opposition on the ground. "The discussions through which this MOU has developed do not constitute US cooperation or support for Russia's policy or actions in Syria," Mr. Cook said. "In fact, far from it, we continue to believe that Russia's strategy in Syria is counterproductive and their support for the Assad regime will only make Syria's civil war worse."[60]

Moscow setup an intelligence sharing and coordination cell in Baghdad, including Syria, Iran, Iraq and Israel. Perhaps most surprising was how quickly Russia and Israel had found common ground after Israel's delegation flew to Moscow in the first week of its deployment. Russia had created the sense that it was leading its own coalition in Syria, backed by rhetoric that this was a campaign against ISIS, though most observers were quickly disabused of such notions. Moscow's ambition was not simply to break out of Western isolation, which it arguably accomplished with great aplomb in late September, but to make the US work with its coalition.

Military coordination and a delineation of sectors in Syria would result in political and operational gains for Russia. First, it would mean an official ceding of the battle space to Moscow (although arguably the US unofficially did just that), and second it would legitimate the intervention as an equal to US efforts against ISIS. Perhaps most importantly, direct military cooperation in Syria would prove a repudiation of sanctions levied over the war in Ukraine, and might pull apart the Western countries essential to sustaining pressure on Russia.

Russia's intervention also effectively closed off any avenues for US military action against the Syrian government, given the risk of direct confrontation with a peer nuclear power. Yet rather than constrain the US, this arguably helped the US President, who despite Russian fears of 'another Libya' never sought to intervene and impose regime change. Ironically Obama had always seen US action in Syria as a foolhardy proposition. The Washington, D.C. military and political establishment may have been incensed at Russia's intervention, essentially challenging a monopoly on American use of force abroad, but Obama was not. Confident in the belief that if US use of military power could not bring about a political outcome, Russia's would certainly result in a quagmire, the Obama administration chose not to challenge this turn of events and instead intensified efforts against ISIS. Russia's intervention led the US to largely cede the airspace over western Syria, while pushing it into a more deliberate and expansive effort to defeat ISIS.

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[59] Gordon Lubold, U.S., Russia Reach Agreement on Syrian Flights, The Wall Street Journal. October 20, 2015. http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-russia-reach-agreement-on-syrian-flights-1445371698.

[60] *Ibid.*

An Unexpected Success in Vienna

Moscow's campaign was tied together with Iranian ground forces, Hezbollah, and a train and equip mission to restore the fighting power of the Syrian regime. However, even if successful, there was little chance the Assad government could hold any captured territory with a political process to lock in their battlefield gains. Hence Russia launched a diplomatic approach in parallel with combat operations in October. Given lackluster results in the first month of strikes, the US had presumed that diplomatic entreaties were evidence Russia was disheartened and sought a quick way out, but this proved to be a misperception. Moscow intended to stay in Syria for the long term, and was once again presenting the US with a mutually beneficial diplomatic offer, but one that first and foremost provided for Russian interests in the Syrian conflict.

Sergey Lavrov approached John Kerry with a proposal for a series of meetings in Vienna on October 23rd, including the foreign ministers of Turkey and Saudi Arabia. If successful a follow on meeting would be held on the 30th with a much broader group of countries represented, but without Syria. The divisive issue of Assad's future would be initially tabled while Russia and the US sought a basis for a national ceasefire. "If we can get in a political process, sometimes these things have a way of resolving themselves," said Kerry, while Lavrov stuck to the official position that Assad's fate was ultimately for the Syrian people to decide and not the object of negotiations.[61] The meetings proved unexpectedly productive, leading to another discussion on November 14th, which created the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) at the level of foreign ministers.

As in 2013, unanticipated events provided momentum for US-Russian cooperation on Syria, when terrorists struck Paris in November 2015. The international community was galvanized by the tragedy, and the November meeting in Vienna produced a deal to convene Syrian government representatives and their opposition by early 2016. More importantly it delineated a ceasefire between the Syrian regime and 'recognized opposition groups' i.e. not jihadists, within six months.[62] This agreement setup an 18 month plan to negotiate and establish a new Syrian government, a process led by UN envoy Staffan de Mistura.[63]

The deal in Vienna was reinforced by a brief personal meeting between Putin and Obama on the sidelines of a G20 summit in Turkey the following day. The US President's subsequent statement was indicated glimmers of optimism, "What is different this time and what gives us some degree of hope is that, as I said, for

[61] Matthew Rosenberg and Neil MacFarquhar, "U.S. and Russia Find Common Goals on Syria, if Not on Assad," The New York Times. October 23, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/24/world/middleeast/us-and-russia-find-common-goals-on-syria-if-not-on-assad.html.

[62] Jonathan Tirone, "Syrian Tranisition Plan Reached by U.S., Russia in Vienna," Bloomberg. November 14, 2015. http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-11-14/syrian-transition-plan-achieved-by-u-s-allies-kerry-says.

[63] *Ibid.*

the first time all the major countries on all sides of the Syrian conflict agree on a process that is needed to end this war."[64] Putin sounded more conciliatory, asking the US and Russia to "stand together" while Obama called him a "constructive partner."[65] A few days after progress in Vienna, and the bilateral huddle in Turkey, the Obama administration began signaling to Russia that the reward for a successful peace process could be "more opportunities for coordination with respect to ISIL," a deliberate reference to the joint military operation Russia sought.[66] If Lavrov's and Kerry's efforts yielded a ceasefire, the US was willing to talk about joining forces, despite apprehension in the Department of Defense and protests within diplomatic circles.

On December 18, 2015 the UN Security Council passed resolution 2254 setup the ISSG as the 'central platform to facilitate the United Nations' efforts' and directed the UN special envoy to pursue talks in January 2016.[67] Despite slippages in the timeline, numerous ceasefire violations, the ISSG and the agreement initially reached in Vienna remains the only viable peace process for Syria that has US, Russian and UN endorsement. At this point in the war more than 250,000 Syrians had died and millions rendered refugees in neighboring countries. Although Russia and China vetoed four UNSC resolutions on Syria between 2011 and 2016, it was the initiative spearheaded by Kerry and Lavrov in Vienna that resulted in the current framework for settling the war in Syria.

2016 — A Russian Victory, or Peace?

By the winter of 2016 Russian intervention, together with Iranian forces and Shia militias had turned the tide of battle in Syria. The opposition was in retreat while government troops began recapturing isolated bases and long lost areas. With Russian air power, special forces and commanders embedded in their operations, the Syrian forces made steady progress. Russian leaders continued to make positive statements on their newfound cooperation with the West, but in truth, the facts on the ground were changing in Moscow's favor. The US narrative of a Russian quagmire in Syria had not come to fruition, and instead the two countries were running parallel and independent campaigns. As Joshua Landis and Steven Simon

[64] Karen DeYoung, David Nakamura and Juliet Eilperin. Obama and Putin huddle for talks in aftermath of Paris attacks. The Washington Post. November 16, 2015. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-and-putin-meet-for-talks-in-aftermath-of-paris-attacks/2015/11/16/c38a137a-8c51-11e5-acff-673ae92ddd2b_story.html.

[65] Vladimir Isachenkov, Josh Lederman, U.S. and Russia entertain cooperation in Syria, Military Times. November 18, 2015. http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/2015/11/18/us-and-russia-entertain-cooperation-syria-putin-obama-philippines/75984312/.

[66] *Ibid*.

[67] Resolution 2254. UN Security Council, December 18, 2015. http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf.

described, "Obama has not ceded Syria to Russia entirely; rather, he established a tacit division of labor, by which the United States combats ISIS in the east of the country while Russia combats Assad's foes in the west. Moreover, Obama believes Russia will fail in its endeavor to restore Assad's control over the country as surely as it failed in Afghanistan in 1979. The fight will become a "quagmire," he predicted, which will force the Russians to come back to the United States for a negotiated solution."[68]

Rather than fight for territory, Russia had embarked on a campaign to destroy the Syrian opposition and transform the Syrian conflict into one where the US would have few options between Assad and the likes of al-Qaeda affiliates or the Islamic State. Hence Russian and Syrian forces dragged their feet on the ceasefire, since every day on the battlefield strengthened their hand at the negotiating table. The political process was necessary to secure military gains, but it was also on a faster timetable than the Russian-led coalition preferred. Moscow too had its hands full with Syrian intransigence. Assad pursued territorial gains, seeking to retake Aleppo and deal a crushing blow to the Syrian opposition. Russia lacked absolute control and was negotiating its way through this 'alliance.'

The planned peace conference in Geneva took place on February 1st, but Syrian forces pressed an offensive on the outskirts of Aleppo and the UN envoy chose instead to suspend talks for the month. Russia also sought the addition of Syrian Kurds to the meeting but was blocked by Turkish opposition. Following the Turkish shootdown of a Russian Su-24 in November 2014, Moscow's rancor led it to openly support Syrian Kurds. Thus the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) became a shared ally of the US and Russia in Syria, and Moscow began providing aid to Kurdish militias.[69] More than likely it was always Russia's plan to integrate the Kurds as the only other acceptable entity in Syria into a national unity government, together with the Syrian regime, and thus water down the opposition's role.

After meeting in Munich, Russia and the US agreed to a cessation of hostilities by February 27th. This official ceasefire held intermittently. Assad had done US-Russian cooperation few favors, stating earlier that month that he intended to retake all of Syria. His comments underlined the differences between Russia's objective to reach a settlement with US support and the Syrian leader's territorial ambitions.[70] Since then Syrian forces have conducted several offensives, matched by rebel counter offensives and attacks led by Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State.

[68] Joshua Landis and Steven Simon, "Assad Has it His Way," Foreign Affairs. January 19, 2016. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2016-01-19/assad-has-it-his-way.

[69] Mark N. Katz, "Russia and the Syrian Kurds: A complex interaction," The Arab Weekly. June 19, 2016.

[70] Ian Black and Kareem Shaheen, "Syrian president Bashar al-Assad vows to retake whole country," The Guardian. February 12, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/12/syrian-president-bashar-al-assad-vows-to-retake-whole-country.

The momentum of US-Russian cooperation began to grind to a halt in February and March. Syrian forces attempted to cut off supplies from the Turkish border to the opposition holding large areas of Aleppo. The Islamic State joined the fray with attacks on the Syrian army, forcing Russia's air campaign to switch targeting for the first time to genuinely deal with the jihadist threat. Two campaigns were in progress, one in pursuit of Syrian and Iranian ambitions, focused on encircling Aleppo, and another edging into Islamic State territory to satisfy Russian desires. Watching Iraqi and Kurdish forces, backed by US airpower and special forces roll back ISIS, Moscow wished to make its own timely contribution. Whether it was publicity on the international stage, the necessity of countering ISIS attacks, or another play to interject itself into the US led campaign, Russian operations began to shift closer in support of American objectives.

Forced Cooperation

Failure to abide by the established ceasefire reached a boiling point in June, with Syrian forces preparing for another operation against Aleppo. John Kerry declared that "the cessation of hostilities is frayed and at risk" adding "Russia needs to understand that our patience is not infinite. In fact, it is very limited now with respect to whether or not Assad is going to be held accountable."[71] Sergey Lavrov responded that the US needs to be "less impatient" while Russia's Chief of General Staff fired back that "If anyone's patience on Syria is waning, it is ours, not the United States."[72] Both sides grew frustrated, as reflected by military interactions between Russian and American forces in and outside Syria.

Rather than showing signs of newfound cooperation, Russian ships harassed the US Navy in the Mediterranean, maneuvering close to carriers and their escorts.[73] The game of maneuvers was in part spurred by a fairly large US show of force that month, choosing to conduct carrier strikes into Syria from the Mediterranean with two carrier strike groups.[74] Whether in response to US carrier operations, or John Kerry's pointed remarks in Oslo, Russia decided to force the matter on June 16th. Russian Su-34 bombers flew two sorties against a training base on the Syrian-Jordanian border, where British special forces had been located just

[71] John Kerry, Remarks at the Oslo Forum, US Department of State. June 15, 2016. http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/06/258506.htm.

[72] Max Suchkov, Are major players shifting strategies in Syria? Al Monitor. June 23, 2016.

[73] Christopher P. Cavas, "Latest warship encounter brings Russian protest," Defense News. June 28, 2016. http://www.navytimes.com/story/military/2016/06/28/russia-us-destroyer-got-too-close-its-ships-europe/86468512/.

[74] Aerospace and Defense, "U.S. strikes Islamic State from Mediterranean carrier for first time," Reuters. June 3, 2016. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-strikes-usa-idUSKCN0YP1WU.

a day before.[75] After US forces informed Russian counterparts that the facility was part of the counter-ISIS campaign, scrambling jets to warn off incoming Russian aircraft, the Su-34s attacked the site a second time. US officials proved quite vocal, claiming there was the "potential for US and Russian jets to engage each other."[76]

The June strike seemed to have found its mark, impressing upon political officials the need for cooperation, sidelining hawkish views within the two countries' militaries. In early July US officials began to signal a willingness to work jointly with Russia in combat operations over Syria, which would require select members of the opposition to distance themselves for jihadist groups proscribed by the peace plan.[77] The initial proposal was announced as enhanced information sharing and coordination in exchange for Moscow convincing the Syrian air force to largely ground itself.[78]

Further reporting revealed that the US had indeed offered Russia the sort of deal it initially tried to pressure out of the Obama administration in September and October of 2015. According to a leaked copy of the proposal, the US and Russia would create a Joint Implementation Group in Amman, Jordan, staffing it with intelligence and operations personnel.[79] The countries would develop missions against Jabhat al-Nusra together, decide who would fly them, and perhaps later develop integrated operations that include assisting each other.[80] In exchange, Russia would have to restrict itself to strikes against agreed targets and enforce that the Syrian air force does the same. Thus there would be designated areas where the Syrian air force could not bomb, but the deal did not prevent operations in self defense. The deal was predicated on the assumption that Russia and the US could agree in their 'designations' of areas and groups, along with Moscow's ability to ground the Syrian air force as part of this bargain; terms that had eluded them thus far.

On July 14th, John Kerry arrived in Moscow, supposedly with this proposal in hand, titled "Approach for Practical Russian-American Cooperation." The reception in Moscow was cordial but non-committal, while offensive operations continued in Syria. Official patience was "running thin" in the US, vocalized in numerous statements, and those distrustful of any cooperation with Russia were being

[75] Russia Bombed Base Used By U.S. in Syria — Reports. The Moscow Times. July 22, 2016. https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-bombed-base-used-by-us-in-syria-reports-54696.

[76] *Ibid*.

[77] Ian Black, "US ready to work with Russia to fight Syria's Islamic extremists," The Guardian. July 1, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/01/syria-us-russia-cooperate-fight-islamic-extremists-united-nations.

[78] *Ibid*.

[79] Josh Rogin, "Obama's Syria plan teams up American and Russian forces," The Washington Post, July 13, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/obamas-syria-plan-teams-up-american-and-russian-forces/2016/07/13/8d7777cc-4935-11e6-acbc-4d4870a079da_story.html?utm_term=.21ebf154a418.

[80] *Ibid*.

vindicated by the lack of progress on ceasefire or peace talks.[81] The difficulty in realizing cooperation was not simply born of competing agendas or politics, but the complexity of the conflict, making it impractical to clearly separate so-called moderates from extremists. The Russian view of Syria, perhaps cynical at the outset, began to approach reality in July of 2016 as extremist groups dominated the battlefield and moderates were woven into their lines. Syrian ambitions aside, the US perception of the conflict was increasingly misaligned with the reality that Russia's intervention had shaped over the preceding ten months.

As of August 15th, Geneva peace talks remained suspended without a ceasefire in place. A new offensive to encircle Aleppo was launched in July. Yet, decisive victory would continue to elude Assad, as Russia had long come to realize. The Syrian military and its allies lack the density and resilience to hold captured ground, even with Russian support, and thus cannot hope to inflict a decisive victory to settle the war. The July-September fighting around Aleppo has placed extremists in the leading role, sidelining and radicalizing what is left of the moderate opposition. As a consequence, Russia's plan remain on track, shaping the conflict in such a way so that in time the US will lack alternatives to the Syrian regime. Russia's binary vision of the battlefield, one shared by Syria and Iran, may become the reality, transforming the opposition into extremists while leaving the Syrian regime as the only alternative actor in the country.

Conclusion

US-Russian interaction in Syria has proven a winding path, marred by conflicting interests, and punctuated by remarkable successes in cooperation. The two have engaged in a proxy war, while concurrently pursuing diplomacy towards a political settlement. In the diplomatic realm the US applied pressure on Syria, while Russia blocked and stalled. Both maneuvered to secure national interests as the war drew in regional actors. It was at points when cooperation was seemingly impossible, with the two sides diametrically opposed in their policy positions, unexpected events intervened and proved to be the impetus for diplomatic breakthroughs.

In August 2013, after Syrian use of chemical weapons, a US military campaign seemed inevitable. Instead those months proved the most successful case of US-Russian bilateral cooperation in Syria, overseeing a multinational effort to disarm one of the largest known chemical weapons stockpiles. When Russia intervened in 2015, sharply elbowing the US on the international arena, and bombing

[81] Carol Morello and Karen DeYoung, "Kerry arrives in Moscow with a proposal for Syrian in hand," The Washington Post. July 14, 2016. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/kerry-says-iran-deal-has-made-world-a-safer-place-one-year-later/2016/07/14/a954071c-484f-11e6-8dac-0c6e4accc5b1_story.html.

American supported forces on the battlefield, rapprochement seemed impossible. Yet the Russian campaign spurred a more robust US effort to tackle ISIS, eventually resulting in the first negotiated nationwide cessation of hostilities in Syria. Initial Russian proposals for military cooperation were met with derision in the US, but by the summer of 2016 Washington approached Moscow with a similar offer in hand.

From the outset of this war, both national establishments were driven by fears, and a strong sense of losses they strove to avoid, but absent a vision for settling the conflict. The US political establishment lurched between contradictory imperatives, but avoiding intervention, but pursuing a proxy effort halfheartedly. The US backed the opposition as a means of retaining influence over fellow allies and applying pressure on the Syrian regime, not a concerted effort to effect regime change. Moscow was consumed by the dread that the US would find pretexts to reproduce its intervention in Libya, overthrow Assad, and destabilize another country in the Middle East. As the bilateral relationship unraveled between the two countries over Ukraine the Russian policy in Syria took on more important geopolitical and international dimensions, in part to alleviate it owns political isolation and force the US to acknowledge its interests.

Russia proved capable in its use of diplomatic and military, but the US remained a steadfast actor, indispensible to allies. Peace remains elusive in Syria at the time of this writing. Despite years of arming opposing sides, and sparring in the UN, Russia and the US have paradoxically worked together, bringing the conflict closer to settlement than it has ever been.

Part III
Lessons Learned: The Propaganda War

DAESH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Rafal Zgryziewicz

Today, information and news of events from around the world circulate, uncensored, at the speed of the Internet. This information revolution has allowed individuals or groups to mobilize in a manner never seen before. Current technology enables individuals and groups the ability to create, store, manage, control, manipulate and transmit information quickly and easily. In turn, this has created an increased dependency on information and IT by nation states, non-state actors and individuals. This has led to the concept of the information environment.[1] In such time, it is necessary to have a very comprehensive approach in order to shape the information environment properly. The process which should be used to achieve coherence between communication and information activities, closing the gap between words, visuals and actions is known as strategic communications.

For organisations, strategic communications that clearly communicate and implement the mission of the organisation, its vision, and its values is becoming increasingly important. Different actors use information and influence activities in order to achieve its own short and long term objectives.[2] However, quite often there is still an existing misinterpretation of such process. Some organizations perceive strategic communications as being reserved for top strategists only. But to simplify the concept as being merely an information campaign that communicates messages to a desired audience is also misleading. Clear communication is critical to success, whether it takes place through information or influence activities. In addition to that, actions not solely designed for information strategy can amplify messages and be complementary to overall strategic communications. One has to be noted, that without proper engagement of various communication capabilities, different supportive functions and direct actions, strategic communication would not be effective.[3] Therefore, an understanding of the surrounding environment (psychological, virtual and physical domain) and a clearly defined audience are critical to strategic success. The information environment is used by state actors, as well those seeking to undermine states. Such organizations may indulge in

[1] AJP-3.10, Allied Joint Doctrine For Information Operations, NATO Edition A Version 1, December 2015, 1-1.

[2] Information activities are actions designed to affect information or information systems (AJP-3.10).

[3] Staff functions are not communication capabilities, but can be used to analyze, plan, asses and integrate information activities in support of accomplishing desired objectives.

military activities evoking terror, but today the battle has moved to the information space as well. One of the best trained and successful in its strategy is the terrorist organization 'so-called Islamic State', also known as IS/ISIS/ISIL/Daesh. In order to gain support for its expansion in the Middle East, Daesh launched an extremely sophisticated campaign targeting many audiences around the world. Statements and claims were immediately followed by actions intended to demonstrate Daesh commitment to its declared strategy.

Having in mind an importance of words, visuals and actions, in this article we would like to depict how Daesh uses strategic communications in order to achieve desired objectives for expansion over the Middle East. Therefore, we want to start with brief explanation about roots of the organization and structure which has an incredible importance for the overall strategy. Then we take a look at short-term objectives already achieved, and long-term objectives which Daesh is currently working on. As far as narratives are the most important part of the strategic communications, based on released products, we want to present themes and the main lines of efforts Daesh puts into its strategy. Finally, in the last chapter, we would like to focus on specific channels Daesh uses for dissemination its own products, as well as on global and regional audiences the organization is targeting.

Roots of Effectiveness

Daesh rebranded itself as an independent terrorist organization after cutting connections with Al-Qaeda. A new name used as a core message in the strategy, successes on the battlefield, and the proclamation of 'the Caliphate' had given the organization an excellent springboard to launch its cause. In his first speech the self-claimed Caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced his plans to build a Muslim state and his expectations for re-establishing the Caliphate. The organization came up with a unique value proposition — the unification of the Muslim world in a newly declared state to experience the sacred benefits of as a part of the Ummah.[4] By articulating these future benefits, Daesh was able to capture the attention and interest of specific target audiences. By June 2014 already 12,000 foreign fighters from 81 countries had joined in the fighting in Syria's civil war[5]. Eighteen months later, through making use of strategic communications and effectively shaping the information domain the number of foreign fighters travelled to Syria more than doubled.[6] Having of foreign fighters was not only important for their engagement at the region as militants but even more important was their knowledge about indigenous population of the countries where they came from.

[4] Ummah is the historical name of the Muslim community with common history.

[5] Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*, The Soufan Group, 9.

[6] Richard Barrett et al., *Foreign Fighters, An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, The Soufan Group, 4.

From a strategic communications viewpoint, understanding the motivation and psychographics of a population is high-value information that can be leveraged to achieve strategic goals using minimal resources.[7] Daesh carefully refines its messages to address the specific range of concerns each of its target audiences holds. Those responsible for strategic communications are well aware that their products must be tailored to take advantage of vulnerabilities and delivered using the proper platforms in terms of access and popularity to achieve a positive result.

The Daesh communications strategy depends on the structure of the organization. Daesh operates globally through its councils, each playing its own role. The Media Council spreads the organization political and Salafi ideology, giving considerable attention to the Internet and other forms of mass communication. Because of a specific logotypes, its products can be easily recognized. One of the oldest branches of the Media Council is the *Al-Furqan Institute,* established in 2006. The institute is responsible for both print and web-related propaganda products. It was the *Al-Furqan Institute* that published the video of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi delivering a sermon declaring his 'Caliphate' in the Mosul mosque. Another branch of the Media Council that plays an important role in shaping Western perception is the *Alhayat Media Center*. This branch is relatively new. It targets global audiences by disseminating highly professional video clips and other products, including online magazines like *Dabiq* (English), *Islamic State News* (English), *Islamic State Report* (English), *Dar al-Islam* (French), *Konstantiniyye* (Turkish), and ИСТОК (Russian). The *Anjad Media Foundation* specializes in producing and broadcasting jihadist songs. The foundation is well known for its *Nasheeds*.[8] Each country has its own anthem, therefore Daesh pretending to be perceived as a state, released a nasheed called *'Dawlat al-Islam Qamat'* which became an unofficial Daesh anthem.[9] The English name for this song is *'My Ummah, Dawn Has Appeared'* and continues to be used in many products.

Another media branch with global reach is the *Al Bayan Radio*. Although the radio station is located in Iraq, Daesh has advertised numerous frequencies on which its stations can be heard in parts of Iraq, Syria, and Libya. What makes radio strategically efficient is English translations that are broadcast over the Internet. Listeners can choose from interviews with Mujahidin and officials concerning current affairs, religious issues, poetry recitations, and news provided by regional correspondents. Without reliable information about local audiences, none of these media outlets would be successful. Therefore, the Intelligence Council is responsible for gathering information about possible supporters and adversaries,

[7] Psychographics are audience psychological characteristics such as attitudes, values, lifestyles, and opinions. They are used to understand characteristics such as fears, loves, hates, cultural norms, and values.

[8] Type of vocal music (lyrics), usually makes reference to Islamic beliefs, history, and religion, as well as current events.

[9] Alex Marshall, *How Isis got its anthem*, The Guardian, accessed April 13, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/09/nasheed-how-isis-got-its-anthem.

provides necessary information about vulnerabilities, current susceptibility and the most convenient channels for communications. An integrated cooperation and cross-functional engagement show that every Daesh member and part of the global structure have its own task and goals to achieve in strategic communications.

Effectiveness on a battlefield, income from the sale of oil, extortion, and ransom as well as wide publicity, gave Daesh advantage in spreading the organization strategy. One year after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's speech, many organizations have pledged allegiance or offered their support to Daesh. This support is instrumental, not only for conducting terrorist attacks, but also for amplifying the Daesh Information Strategy globally.[10]

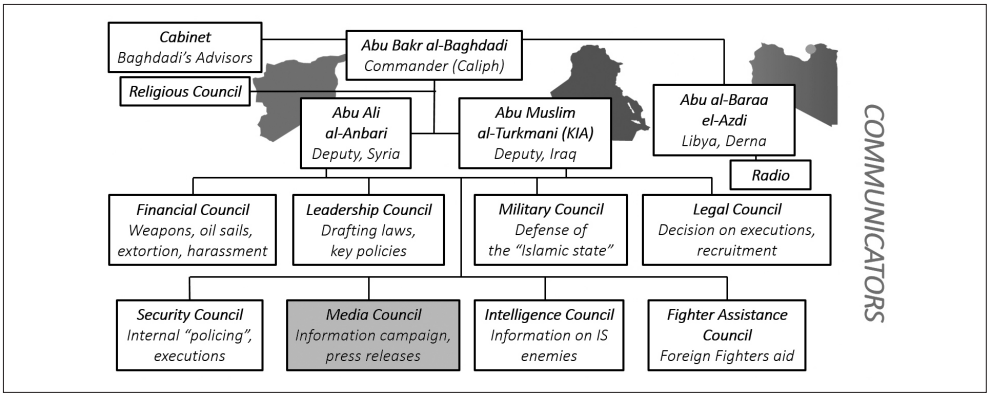

Fig. 1 **Daesh global structure.**

Daesh has also established regional structures in seized territories. At the regional level the organization communicates through a series of departments, each with its own tasks to accomplish.[11] By leading local society in the style of a state Daesh increases its credibility.

An analysis of public statements and media products shows that Daesh has regional departments responsible for security, development, education, legal issues, and healthcare. Having in mind importance of spreading good news and keeping people updated, the organization established media departments at the regional level as well. For example, Raqqa province is divided into four sectors and thirteen departments. Three departments are devoted to security. The Public Security Department was established to ensure regional security and to detect Alawites spies or intelligence service operatives from enemy countries.[12] Daesh also claims

[10] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, *Daesh information campaign and its influence* (Riga: NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 2016), 6.

[11] Raqqa Province Media, *A Tour Through the Offices of the State*, propaganda video released on 03 April 2016.

[12] Raqqa Province Media, *They Are the Enemy, So Beware of Them #4*, propaganda video released on 10 February 2016.

to have the Army Department, which allegedly consists of several battalions of soldiers from different military disciplines who are ready to protect the province and its people in case of attack.[13] An important part of communication strategy is emphasizing the engagement of the 'soldiers'; videos of them in their camouflage uniforms demonstrating their commitment and will of fight encourage the people to believe in the cause. The presence, posture, and profile of the 'soldiers' has also been taken as the model for the local Police Department which, according to Daesh claims, has been established to provide security across the province.[14]

By exhibiting a police presence on the streets, and maintaining organized checkpoints and patrols, the organisation hopes to be seen as a credible state able to protect its people's rights. Three departments are dedicated to justice. The Tribes and Public Relations Department was established in order to soothe enmities and restore connections between tribes within the province. By giving people the chance to solve their disputes at the provincial level it gives them the sense that they belong to a 'newly established country'.[15] The Judiciary Court and Public Complaint Departments are responsible for the Sharia courts.

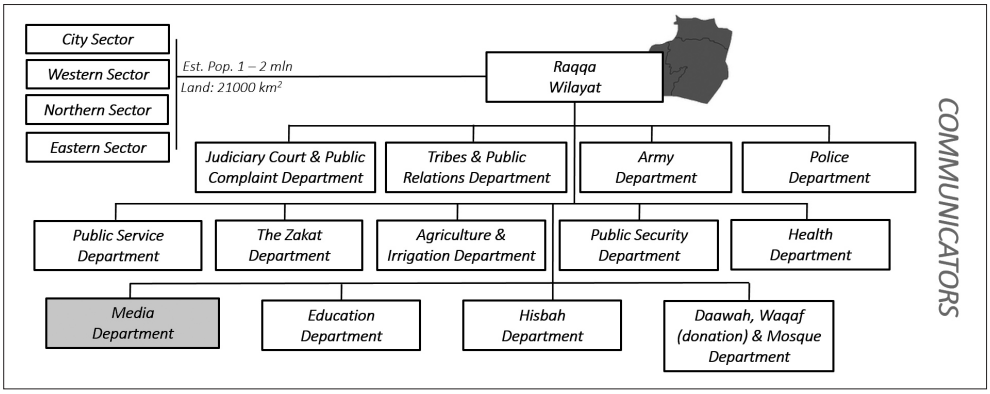

Fig. 2 **Daesh regional structure (Raqqa example).**

The Public Service Department is the department responsible for realising Daesh claims about providing clean water, electricity, building reconstruction, etc.[16] By making sure that the regional structure is closely connected to the larger administration gives local inhabitants the sense of living in a real province that is part of a bigger state.

[13] Furat Province Media, *Clanking of the Swords*, propaganda video released on 14 February 2016.

[14] Ninawa Province Media, *Traffic Enforcement in Wilayat Ninawa*, propaganda video released on 30 August 2015.

[15] Ninawa Province Media, *Glad Tidings in the Support of the Tribes*, propaganda video released on 07 April 2016.

[16] Ninawa Province Media, *The Constructors of the Land*, propaganda video released on 08 September 2015.

Religious issues are intertwined with many aspects of everyday life. Therefore, Daesh has established several structures for providing guidance in religious matters. One of the pillars of Islam is paying Zakat, a form of tithe or tax collected by the Zakat Department.[17] Zakat includes agricultural crops, livestock, goods from shops, as well as money. In accordance with their religious beliefs, the collected Zakat is redistributed among poor Muslims, the Islamic clergy, and others in need. All transactions are recorded and afterwards depicted in various products for communications purposes. The Hisbah Department also plays an important role, informing the local population about what is and is not allowed according to Sharia Law.[18] Anyone, who does not follow the strict rules laid down by the Hisbah Department comes under investigation of the religious police.[19]

Another part of the structure is the Dawah Donation and Mosque Department, responsible for providing religious teachings.[20] The department encourages all Muslims to preach their religion, takes care of the mosques, and participate in mosque reconstruction missions.[21] The The Agriculture and Irrigation Department, according to the Daesh claims, is responsible for everything related to farming, including trade between the provincial government and local farmers, the distribution of goods such, as flour for baking, and the supervision of work on dams and irrigation streams.[22] The department must also uphold its image at the provincial level by making positive public announcements concerning agriculture. To provide full spectrum of social care for local population, the Education Department according to Daesh communications, was established for education of society, and The Health Department provides medical services and manages hospitals.[23]

The aforementioned structure is the Daesh powerful tool for strategic communications. Showing region with self-sufficient province it creates message of being effective despite many problems in the region. The mastery of strategic communications can be only seen when words are follow by deeds. For that reason Daesh uses all kind of products prepared by regional media departments as

[17] Homs Province Media, *al-Zakat: Right of the Money and Duty of al-Imam*, propaganda video released on 01 March 2016.

[18] Hisbah is an Islamic doctrine that says that the duty of the ruler is to keep everything in order according to Sharia law; to let the people enjoy what is good and to forbid and punish for what is wrong, e.g. drinking alcohol, smoking, using drugs, etc. Daesh suggests that Hisbah is the sacred duty of all of its members.

[19] Tarabulus Province Media, *To Establish the Religion*, propaganda video released on 30 March 2016.

[20] Dawah means the way of proselytizing or preaching of Islam. The term literally means 'making an invitation'.

[21] Raqqa Province Media, *Da'wah Forum in the City of al-Raqqa*, propaganda video released on 12 July 2015.

[22] Raqqa Province Media, *Water Is the Source of Life*, propaganda video released on 18 May 2015.

[23] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, *Daesh information campaign*, 26.

an amplification of actions taken during its expansion.[24] Selectively chosen pictures, news and statements are turned into products prepared for global and regional consumption. As Raqqa example shows, there is no particular office where products are designed and prepared for distribution but many small information points where everyone can download products on his own smartphone, memory stick or take it as a printed version. What is even more important those places are also used for possibility of sharing information and people who want to have an active part in 'the state' might deliver information for next products and be a part of 'state news system'. In this way Daesh involves the indigenous population actively as a part of its communication strategy. The media competition for 'hearts and minds' of local population force Daesh to look for even those who are not able to get daily news. To show its commitment in Iraq, Daesh established mobile platforms and media activation points for those regions where broadcasts are unavailable.[25]

In addition to physical structures on the ground, there is an attempt to create a 'virtual caliphate', not only on Social Media and the Internet. It is about creating the feeling of belonging to the organization without Daesh having a physical presence in a specific region. Even if the organization is unable to hold terrain, supporters could continue to communicate and organise through the community of interest.

Daesh Objectives

The organization has clearly defined what it wants to achieve through direct military action, communication capabilities, and the tasks it assigns to regional leaders. Despite many disagreements with Al-Qaeda and its franchises, Daesh is still using the plans created by Osama Bin Laden that predict twenty years of Islamic expansion. Originally the plan was divided into six stages, each with a specific objective.

The first stage, called 'Awareness', was planned for 2000-03 as a campaign against the US and other Western states to publicise the story of the Crusades and the continuing war against Islam. The second stage, named 'Shocking', was planned for 2004-06 to bring the US and its allies into battle with the Mujahidin in Iraq. The third stage, or 'Standing Up and Becoming Strong', was planned for 2007-10 with the goal of involving countries bordering Iraq in the campaign and engaging Syria. The fourth stage, 'Recovery', was planned for 2010-13. This stage was to focus on taming the Arab countries with positive connections to the West, encouraging pious Muslims to rise up and rebel against their current governments. The reestablishment of the Caliphate based on the 'Prophet's Instructions and

[24] Ninawa Province Media, *But Allah Will Perfect His Light*, propaganda video released on 21 March 2016.

[25] Daesh Newsletter, *al-Naba #21*, released March 8, 2016, accessed Apr 14, 2016.

the Way Showed by Him' was to take place during the fifth stage, 'Establishing the Islamic State'. The sixth and final stage was called 'Open War' and was planned for 2017-20.

According to the plan, a holy war would begin between the believers (Muslims) and non-believers (the infidels), in which Allah would ensure the ultimate triumph of the believers. In a mosque in Mosul in 2014, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi made his bid to claim a place of importance in the execution of the Al-Qaeda plan. Al-Baghdadi holds a doctorate in Islamic studies.[26] His knowledge of religious issues affords him respect among the members of the indigenous populations and gives him an advantage. No one imagined that anyone would be so bold as to call for the return of the Caliphate to the region historically known as the Sham in the world as it is today. Al-Baghdadi's statement helped achieve the first objective, turning the eyes of the world to the events taking place in Iraq and Syria, and it launched Daesh's strategic communications campaign. The speech was a tremendous coup that has been exploited many times in the organisation's propaganda materials. People who were susceptible to radicalization and ripe for recruitment saw this as evidence of the group's seriousness and capacity, and were given a vision of what might be expected from the newly declared 'state' in the future. Although not every foreign fighter who travelled to Syria and Iraq joined Daesh, the heavy involvement of the organization and its communication strategy caught the attention of the world media.

The second objective, currently underway, is to deter potential adversaries. Daesh widely distributes news about their brutality in order to raise public awareness, intensify feelings about their conscious cruelty, and convince their enemies of the impossibility of defeating them. This objective is supported by messages and actions aiming to weaken their opponents' will to engage Daesh directly.[27] Actions for achieving this goal focus mainly on the regional population. However, a small percentage of the messages are aimed at Westerners as well. Images of successful attacks perpetrated in European countries are used repeatedly. After the Brussels attack on 22 March 2016, 18% of Daesh video products emphasised this successful attack on the enemy, far from 'the Caliphate'.[28] Foreign fighters speaking their native languages were engaged to show global commitment and spread the message as widely as possible.

Daesh simultaneously continues to fight its internal adversaries, both physically and psychologically, expelling religious minorities and secular populations from the territories they control. Daesh targets its internal enemies and publicises footage showing beheadings and killings, as well as the destruction of ancient heritage sites

[26] *A Biography of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi*. Insite Blog on Terrorism & Extremism. SITE Intelligence Group. 12 August 2014. Retrieved 31 May 2016.

[27] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, *Daesh information campaign,* 29.

[28] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence: *Daesh Strategic Narrative*, March 2016.

in order to instil fear in anyone who considers opposing them. These activities are evidence of the group's regional aspirations to be an important player and change-maker in the Middle East.[29]

The long-term objective for Daesh involves an ancient prophecy about the small town of Dabiq, located in northern Syria, where 'the Final Battle' between believers and non-believers is to take place. When the rule of the Caliphate has been established globally, peace will come to mankind. Anyone who fights it is an enemy of peace. In this story, the deployment of any Western or non-Sunni forces provides further evidence of their depravity. Dabiq is also the name given to the organization's online magazine for the global Internet audience. The prophecy plays a tremendously important role in the communications strategy and in that case the religion is a driver.

Communication Strategy

Every organization has a core message, usually a compact statement declaring why the brand is important and what it stands for. A core message communicates the values and key differentiators that define the brand. Daesh also has a core message. It is short, bold, and does double duty as the name of the organisation. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's speech proclaiming of 'the Caliphate' set the course for the organization and was the trigger for global engagement. By using the name 'Islamic State', the group is claiming to represent all Muslims as a legitimate state.[30] This name is used by the mainstream media and has become an unconscious extension of the organization's strategy. Using the name preferred by the organization gives it credibility as a legitimate state and place for every 'true Muslim'. Communications experts suggest using the less flattering name 'Daesh', which is also used by the global coalition, as well as many Arab countries.[31] Daesh is well aware of the power of names. In the Middle East it is much more common to use 'the Caliphate' or 'the State of the Caliphate'. This name has a stronger meaning that refers to the history of the region and the roots of Islam.[32] By using a name that also expresses its core message the organization has created a powerful strategic communications tool.

Successful strategic communication is built on clear and memorable stories. The use of metaphor and storytelling helps create a shared understanding of the significance of the cause that sticks in people's minds.[33] Therefore, unforgotten

[29] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, *Daesh information campaign,* 29.

[30] *Ibid*., 31.

[31] The global coalition consists over sixty countries committed to work together under a common, multifaceted, and long-term strategy to degrade and defeat Daesh.

[32] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, *Daesh information campaign...*, 12.

[33] Boal, K.B. and Schulz, P.L, *Storytelling, Time and Evolution: The Role of Strategic Leadership in Complex Adaptive Systems*, The Leadership Quarterly, 19, 2007, 411-428.

stories should be prepared the way that everybody remembers it and the sticker a story is the more likelihood that it will stay with people. Narratives are inseparable part of stories and are used to explain the reason why organization exists and what are the expectations. Daesh knows about importance of narrative themes, therefore has carefully prepared its own. Based on an analysis of their communicative output, the themes can be grouped into three categories—political, religious, and social.

The first narrative theme represents Daesh's aspirations to be perceived as a well-organised state and a global player. The organization claims that its leader, the self-proclaimed Caliph Ibrahim, is the founder of 'the Islamic State', Muhammad's successor, and only he holds the true vision for the Caliphate. This narrative is used to emphasize that everything happening in Iraq and Syria is the fault of the Westerners and the Arab countries that cooperate with them. The narrative says that only 'Islamic State' can rebuild what the West has destroyed and bring peace to Muslim people. According to the Daesh communication strategy, Muslim territories were divided by an artificial agreement made by Westerners, so 'the Islamic State' has arisen to re-establish the Caliphate and erase the false borders that keep members of the Ummah from living together in peace.

To amplify this narrative, Daesh uses various symbols in everyday communications. Almost every product created for global dissemination (videos, magazines, etc.) carries the signature black banner with a description. The nasheed *My Ummah, Dawn Has Appeared* is positioned as the 'state anthem' and is extensively used. Use of the political narrative in propaganda products is consistent and comprises 50-60% of Daesh's monthly narrative output.[34] The history of Islam, the constant fight against apostates and crusaders, and the suffering of the Middle East population are emphasized. The military engagement of the 'brave soldiers of the Caliphate' is also highlighted in statistics and infographics published in newsletters and videos. It is common to depict fallen 'brothers' who lost their lives during operations against enemies of the 'Islamic State'. The global coalition against Daesh is portrayed as the enemy that tries to disturb Muslim's life. Prominent politicians most involved in the fight against Daesh are depicted and selectively quoted. The political narrative also includes stories about good management (i.e. *zakat* collection, social administration, and the effective engagement of various Departments).

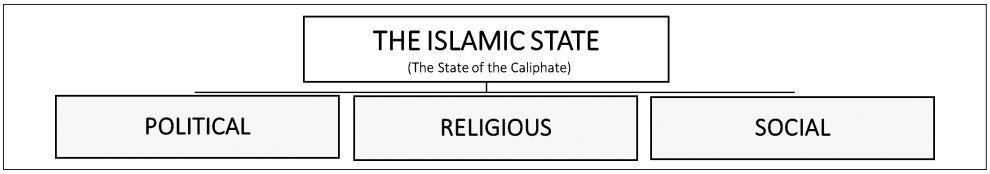

Fig. 3 **Daesh narrative themes.**

[34] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence: *Daesh Strategic Narrative*, January, February and March 2016.

Analysed publications containing political narratives show the organization's ambition to expand into North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula. During the Umayyad Caliphate, the second of the four major Arab caliphates established after the death of Muhammad, these regions were included in the caliphate territories. Therefore, Daesh perceives this region as its own which should belong to 'the Islamic State'. Since the time when religion drives behaviour, religious themes are often included in Daesh's territorial claims to strengthen the message. Daesh often uses political and religious narratives that are complementary and interweaving, therefore some products contain multiple types of messaging. For example, by adding the word 'Allah', which Muslims perceive as sacred, to their flag, a state symbol of power, the organization merges two powerful narratives themes. The solid black colour of the flag is also important, since that was the Prophet Mohammed's war banner. This flag compresses time and space — it refers to the origins of Islam and points to the future for believers by also representing the day of the final battle in Dabiq and of resurrection. The 'Dabiq prophecy' is end-of-days story that pits the forces of Islam against the Christian West.[35] As the apocalyptic history plays a vital role in the strategy, Daesh is using 'Dabiq prophecy' as an important part of the communication strategy. The end-of-days prophecy, similar to the Christian concept of the Judgement Day, is described in the Quran and detailed in several of the Hadith, or collections of reports quoting Muhammad. Different traditions of Muslim scholars disagree about this story, but for Daesh the final battle will take place in Dabiq, a city in northern Syria.

The hadith accepted by some Sunni Muslims tells that this area will play a historic role in the battles leading up to the conquests of Constantinople and Rome, where the final battle between the Caliphate and the Crusaders will take place. According to the Daesh worldview, Westerners have been engaged in a global war against Islam, essentially from its beginnings, and the Western powers are the provocateurs of the current tensions between Muslims. When the words Constantinople, Rome, and Crusaders are used, they all refer to the Christian West in one way or another. Daesh narratives repeat that it is only matter of time until the soldiers of the Caliphate will bring the light of the Caliphate to the land of apostates. The city of Dabiq figures prominently in Islamic prophecies about the time when the Mahdi or the 'guided one' brings victory over the false prophets and all those who oppose Sharia. Daesh chose to call one of its magazine as 'Dabiq' so that it would be a repeated reminder to English-speaking Muslims that the prophecy is being fulfilled, inviting them to participate in the most important moments in the world history.

Apart from the fact that selectively chosen quotations from the Quran and the Hadith are used in almost every product, purely religious narratives are mostly found in the *Daawah Literature*, booklets with religious themes and *Nasheeds* where

[35] Ilene Prusher, *What the ISIS Flag Says About the Militant Group*, Time, accessed Apr 14, 2016, http://time.com/3311665/isis-flag-iraq-syria/

various *Surah* are recited.[36] They are prepared exclusively for religious purposes and comprise 15-30% of Daesh's monthly narrative output.[37] As a one of the many examples, a booklet recently released explains in why good Muslims must destroy their satellite dishes.[38] According to the religious narrative, satellite TV is forbidden for Muslims and satellite dishes are bad for their health. In reference to another product, newsletter *'al-Naba'* released at the end of 2015, we can conclude that Daesh wants to completely control the information environment and influence its audience through such religious narratives.[39] That booklet emphasized that satellite TV programmes lie about the mujahidin, defame them, spread false news, and interfere with true Jihad. Moreover, such TV programmes propagate sorcery, charlatanism, and rationalist philosophies that poison people's minds with atheism. The religion of democracy and secularism is worshipped instead, spreading immorality, corruption, and obscenity by showing women, music, and videos that instigate urges and make sins less abhorrent to the Muslim psyche, softening their hearts toward immoral people.

The third narrative theme has social message and convey a utopian vision of the Caliphate, describe training camps and 'famous battles of the Islamic State soldiers'. Daesh tries to attract young people by showing them the advantages of being recruited and receiving good military training (including weapons, tactical, and physical). Pictures from training camps, preparation for military operations, and involvement on the battlefield are shown extensively.[40] Brotherhood amongst 'the Islamic State soldiers' is also a driving factor in such narrative. Depicting Jihad as a sense of life and being 'brothers in arms' are amplified by FPS (First Person Shooter) type's products, where camera is mounted on the weapon or head of fighter who is actually engaged in a battle. Those who are fascinated to the idea of glory through battle are also attracted to joining Daesh. Some of the products glorifies people who had sacrificed their lives in the fight with 'the Islamic State' opponents.[41] Such kind of stories are built to worship people who are ready to take action against 'Islamic State' adversaries. It amplifies the social messaging and match to the line that life without Jihad in literal meaning is useless and true happiness can be achieved only in the afterlife.[42] Descriptions of martyrs in connection with fragility of life give Daesh a powerful narrative toward those who are already

[36] Surah is a chapter of Quran.

[37] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence: *Daesh Strategic Narrative*, January, February and March 2016.

[38] Daesh booklet, *Why Should I Destroy the Satellite?,* released March 28, 2016, accessed April 27, 2016.

[39] Daesh Newsletter, *al-Naba #11*, released December 29, 2015, accessed April 27, 2016.

[40] Fallujah Province Media, *al-Shaykh Abu Hamza al-Muhajir Military Training Camp #2*, propaganda video released on 24 February, 2016.

[41] Hallab Province Media, *My Son Preceded Me*, propaganda video released on 19 February, 2016.

[42] Salahuddine Province Media, *Battle of Abu Basir al-Qurashi*, propaganda video released on 17 February, 2016.

radicalized and deeply devoted to religion. Additionally, this narrative theme is used to tell stories about social support provided by 'the state' for indigenous population.[43] Social messages comprise 20-30% of Daesh communications.[44]

The stories which are build based on different narrative themes are good basis for creating suitable conditions for achieving desired behaviour of the target audiences.[45] Therefore, Daesh in its strategy clearly articulates objectives for the information environment, and split its effort into four main lines in order to link multiple tasks and missions. Amongst those it can be found that Daesh is looking for support, wants to unite in the fight against its foes, frighten internal and external adversaries and inform wide audience how effective 'the Islamic State' is. Since the time when western countries have been trying to counter narratives which may be perceived as attractive for youngsters, the problem with line which is designed for achieving support is much broader.

The phenomenon of foreign fighters had been noticed by different countries when the number of terrorists in the Daesh ranks increased dramatically and finally reached 31,000 of foreigners at the end of 2015.[46] In that time approximately 5,000 people from different European Union countries were between those who had been directly supporting Daesh.[47] However, one has to be noted that according to Muslim radicals there are plenty of different ways how to have its own role in the expansion of 'the Caliphate'. Daesh is stressing in its campaign that being fighter is the one of many ways 'the state' can be supported. Giving money to the fighters or their families after they have died, encouraging others to be a part of jihad, conducting weapons training and raise children in the proper way is also the way how to support expansion of 'the Islamic State'. Having in mind an importance of information sharing, a knowledge how to spread the call for Jihad through Internet media plays an important role. Therefore, Daesh strategy is embraced in various social media platforms and there is also place for those who are willing to contribute and amplify the main narratives. In that case the presence on the ground is not necessary, because 'the Caliphate' can be supported virtually by establishing discussion forums and email lists to facilitate the sharing of Jihad literature and news. Furthermore, western mainstream media are existent threat for 'the Caliphate' because according to Daesh, those media are used to demonize Mujahedeen, spread lies about them and blow out of proportion their mistakes. Additionally, through such media 'western rotten world' tries to sow the seeds of disunity amongst 'Islamic State' Ummah, attempts to ruin the reputations of their

[43] Ninava Province Media, *Orphan Care in Patronage of the Islamic State*, propaganda video released on 03 March, 2016.

[44] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence: *Daesh Strategic Narrative*, January, February and March 2016.

[45] Target audience are individuals or groups selected for influence or attack by means of psychological operations or actions taken.

[46] Richard Barrett et al., *Foreign Fighters, An Updated Assessment…*, The Soufan Group, 4.

[47] *Ibid*., 12.

leaders, and ignores or demonizes the scholars of truth. On the other hand, it glorifies and promotes the scholars of falsehood. Consequently, all those who wants to support can fight with lies spread by Westerners such way. Praying for those who are in fight, following and spreading the news of successful battles of 'the Islamic State soldiers' are also the way how people may support 'the Caliphate'.

Teaching or learning skills valuable from battlefield perspective is also the way how 'the state' can be reinforced. Hence, physical fitness, arm and first aid training is adequate for those who are preparing to join the ranks. Many products in the Daesh strategic communications is in Arabic, thus learning Arabic is the additional way how to support 'the Islamic State'. As the organization is claiming, it is important for Mujahedeen to be able to communicate through a common language and Arabic is the proper one. Likewise, translation of the Jihad literature into other languages it helps the organization. Most of the Daesh publications are in Arabic, therefore those who speak a foreign language in addition to Arabic, should translate the most important works into their languages to be noticed not only regionally but among Muslims of every tongue. Loyalty as well as a moral support are also desired from possible supporters and followers. Based on the monthly assessment of the first quarter 2016, it had been noted that 24-26% of the strategy was designed for this particular line.[48]

The next line of effort is focusing on audience unification with main emphasis on regional Sunni population, and it ranged between 23% and 30% of whole communications.[49] Daesh as a terrorist organization is working on bringing together all Sunnis and convincing them that there is a need to re-establish the historical Caliphate in the contemporary world. The strategy of this particular line is based on the products and advertisement the 'Islamic State' as the only place for every 'true Muslim'. Disbelievers and apostates will not be tolerated. The efficacy of Daesh in this line of effort partially depends on undermining Islamic countries and other organizations, and portraying them as weak. It is very convenient to show the global coalition against Daesh as a common enemy of the Muslim people. In that case, alleged crimes are shown with main emphasis on wounded children, destroyed buildings and disturbance of the normal life under 'the Caliphate'. Religion is used as a driver factor for unification and quotations from the Quran play a key role.

Pictures of beheading, sex slavery and cruelty are widely used to put fear into people's hearts. This part of strategy comprised 11-17% of Daesh communications. Having in mind small percentage of such messaging as well as incredibly strong meaning of it, one has to be noted that there is a very powerful line used to diminish will of Daesh adversary's engagement. Such strategy aims both international and regional Daesh opponents and it is effectively used in direct physical actions against captured opponents and westerners who are later exposed to execution, punishment

[48] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence: *Daesh Strategic Narrative*, January, February and March 2016.

[49] *Ibid*.

etc. Daesh executions are growing increasingly sophisticated. Numerous men accused of spying against 'the Islamic State' were murdered using a multitude of gruesome methods, including the use of explosive 'necklaces'.[50] Before the executions, captives are commonly directed to describe their actions against 'the State' and to explain how they cooperated with Daesh opponents who are depicted as an apostates or crusaders. In some of the videos Daesh filmed their captives in civilian clothing re-enacting their alleged acts of treason. In some cases audience who gathers around the execution place can watch those performance in real time or shortly after when video products are released as online propaganda. However, Daesh counts on some Westerners to fund the needs of the organization, so messages are carefully calibrated to appeal to the right people at the right time. Countries that do not currently face the problem of foreign fighters and radicalization are also vulnerable to this type of messaging because, if they feel the problem does not affect them, they will be less likely to support their country and decision makers in spending money and manpower to fight Daesh.[51] Additionally, as it was recently seen in Paris and Brussels, act of terrorism committed in Europe are also part of Daesh efforts and are directed against western values. Such way of communication is done to frighten western society and convince nations who are unified in the battle against Daesh that the fight is doomed to failure.

The final line of effort, which undisputedly plays an important role in the strategy, is spreading information about the achievements of the organization. Such messages comprise 34-37% of the monthly communication strategy. Events in Iraq and Syria as well as those in Sinai Peninsula are currently most discussed.[52] The average Western consumer of world news is more interested in informative reports of Daesh activities, than in support, unification, or intimidation.[53] Therefore, Daesh has been publishing videos and infographics, allegedly showing battles won by 'the Islamic State' fighters. The organisation also wants to control the information that local populations are exposed to, to push out opposing narratives. To increase their local credibility they publish stories about 'Zakat distribution', the effectiveness of the Hisbah Department, and the success of their military operations, etc.[54]

While the global coalition against Daesh as well as other opponents work to counter the terrorist strategy, an information vacuum still exists in many places and many of the stories are contradictory. Therefore, Daesh uses any and all means at its disposal to satisfy the needs of their target audiences to be informed, showing 'the Islamic State' in a good light and hiding its failures.

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[50] Fallujah Province Media, *Where to Flee?*, propaganda video released on 17 April, 2016.

[51] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, *Daesh information campaign...*, 34.

[52] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence: *Daesh Strategic Narrative*, January, February and March 2016.

[53] Ph.D. Tomasz Grzyb, *Report On Empirical Research Into Daesh Communication In Social Media*, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Wrocław Branch, May 2015.

[54] Every Newsletter '*al-Naba*' consists different infographics to emphasize effectiveness of Daesh.

Global and Regional Commitment

The rapid evolution of social media and the public's growing demand for information provide a sobering indication of the breadth of platforms that can be used for strategic communications, not only by state actors, but also by terrorist organizations. Daesh as a one of many terrorist organizations, has recognized the value of social media in the global and regional communications. Therefore, over the time, the organization became well known for their mastery of social media, which in many ways has superseded more traditional communications platforms. Their skilful audience analysis and juggling of the messages and platforms gives the group an enormous advantage in the efficacy of their strategic communications. Such tools are extensively used to spread narratives and drag attention of various audience. To spread globally its strategy, Daesh uses Twitter as a platform for short announcement or indication where various products can be found. To illustrate further, Daesh utilizes a number of uncontrolled, unsupervised sites, such as *justpaste.it* or the *archive.org,* to post videos, photos, messages, and its releases all of which reaches global audiences.[55] State agencies and the global coalition work within the law to counter the dissemination of terrorist propaganda, but Daesh has developed methods to sustain and renew blocked and suspended user accounts. To amplify main narration, and help to introduce new social media accounts after suspension of previous, Daesh uses efficiently its followers to advertise new accounts for product dissemination. Such activities let the terrorists to sustain on social media platforms and keep their strategy undisturbed.[56] Moreover, to spread strategy globally and seed fear in those who are against 'the Caliphate' or have already joined the global coalition, Daesh uses terrorists who are willing to amplify the communication strategy far away from the Middle East. Therefore, every act of terrorism such as Europeans faced in Brussels and Paris, perpetrated by the group sympathizers, were used shortly after and turned into the specific product for global dissemination. Based on ways of communications, languages used for it and place where products were disseminated, one third of the overall strategy is prepared for global audience.[57] However, one has to be noted that nowadays almost everyone has possibility of reaching information through Internet, and even if a product is for specific regional populations, there is still an option for unintended target audience who may be accidently exposed on Daesh narration. The assessment of first quarter of 2016 showed that 6-16% of Daesh propaganda products were published in multiple languages including online magazines such as *Dabiq*, *Dar al-Islam*, *И*СТОК, and

[55] Joseph Shaheen, *Network Of Terror: How Daesh Uses Adaptive Social Networks To Spread Its Message*, NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, Riga, 2016, 5.

[56] *Ibid*., 21.

[57] Based on assessment of Daesh Communication Strategy, NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence.

Konstantiniyye, jihadist nasheeds, and selected videos showing specific actions taken away from Iraq and Syria.[58]

Since the time of the global coalition engagement, current situation has forced Daesh to take defensive posture. Many countries put a lot of efforts to fight against Daesh, therefore terrorist freedom of manoeuvre and actions have been disrupted. Consequently, this situation cause that the regional issues are currently the main concern for Daesh. Most of Daesh's information strategy aims the indigenous population of the Middle East and is connected with regional issues. The main focus is being shifted depend on the current global coalition activities, and mostly is focused on Iraq and Syria.

In its strategy Daesh predominantly targets the regional population. About 90% of products and actions is reserved for regional Sunnis. The next intended audiences are those who could possibly be engaged as supporters. Being a supporter, according to Daesh, means not merely to take actions only as a foreign fighter, but also there are other ways how 'the Caliphate' can be backed. On the Internet an online lecture delivered by Anwar al-Awlaki on January 5, 2009 can be found. He expressed that there are *'44 ways of supporting al-Jihad'*. His lecture refers to the Arabic article written by Muhammad al-Salim titled *'39 ways of supporting al-Jihad'*, and is still circulated amongst 'the Caliphate' sympathisers. Therefore, Daesh stress in its campaign that there is also place for others who can join the ranks, but still are not ready to commit as a fighter or martyr. Such messaging is aiming also those who have been already supportive to the organization in order to emphasize effectiveness of 'the state' and keep high morale of those people. Other main targeted groups are western societies and main opponents in the region who are perceived as apostates, crusaders or disbelievers.

The NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence research on Daesh as well as *Monthly Strategic Narrative* assessments have shown, that the motivation for finding personal identity could be a driver for at least one quarter of released products. Many young people have a strong desire for adventure and want to change their lives; Daesh leverages these psychological factors in the products they use to encourage Muslim youth to join their ranks. The organization also plays on the emotions of possible supporters by publicizing images and information about casualties—mostly children—allegedly caused by global coalition airstrikes. Images of the violence Daesh itself perpetrates are also an important part of its communication strategy. They go hand in hand with reports of successful terror operations and are meant to frighten their adversaries, dampen their motivation, and make them think twice about taking action against a 'strong and ruthless enemy'. Publicising an image of an organisation that is so dedicated to its cause that there are no gaps between its words and its deeds can serve as a positive motivator for supporters and a negative motivator for adversaries. Having in mind variety of

[58] Maj Rafał Zgryziewicz, NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence: *Daesh Strategic Narrative*, January, February and March 2016.

targeted audiences, Daesh is trying to reach all ages and segments of the society. Children and their commitment to 'the Caliphate campaign' are commonly used to influence youngsters. However, Daesh uses also older people to underline that not only youths can play an important role in 'the Caliphate'. That is why in some products old fighters can be seen as the main actors, to show that for some there is time even at twilight years of life to take action against apostates and crusaders.

Conclusion

The aforementioned model of communications strategy incorporated into an effective campaign gives Daesh a strategic advantage. Visuals, words, and actions have been effectively used for shaping information environment. Daesh has adopted the strategy of creating its own version of the symbols that internationally recognised countries use, i.e. the flag, anthem, emblems, and organizational structure. These are intrinsic to Daesh's communication strategy. The group advertises its good management practices, declarations of support from other organisations recognised within its community of support, as well as their operational successes. By highlighting its achievements and emphasizing its future plans Daesh strives to inspire hope, excitement, and confidence in those people who are inclined to believe in them. To counter these 'legitimising narratives' it is important to observe how the group communicates, both internally and externally. Each culture differs in perception, values, and beliefs. What organisations, actions, symbols are called is, in a very real sense, a claim on the right to exist.[59]

Once an act of terrorism has been executed in Europe, world media spreads news of the event; this gives Daesh an advantage. Visuals recorded by Western media are often incorporated into Daesh propaganda and republished to support its regional and global strategic communication goals. Daesh successfully exploits the need of Western mainstream media for sensational, attention-getting news. As shown by the recent study published by the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, of the four lines of effort Daesh employs to achieve its goals — support, inform, frighten, and unite — European audiences respond best to having and sharing information about Daesh activities. Having and sharing information is a vital part of participating in civil society, but for the terrorists, 'All publicity is good publicity.' When news of Daesh cruelty also serves to frighten susceptible segments of the global media audience, it is an additional success for the terrorists. Daesh also exploits social media, mainly Twitter, through a technique known as 'hashtag hijacking', e.g. in the aftermath of the 22 March 2016 Brussels attacks Daesh co-opted hashtags being used by the general public to express outrage and

[59] Public Broadcasting of Latvia, *Stop calling terrorists 'Islamic State'*, the public presentation of the NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence research on Daesh, 04 December, 2015.

concern in the Twitter as vehicles for their own propaganda.[60] However, these events can be reframed once again and can be portrayed as an indicator of Daesh weakness. Global coalition efforts have put the 'architects of the Caliphate' on the defensive. By drawing attention to an act of terror in Brussels, attention shifts away from the erosion of power in the Middle East; this can be perceived as part of a strategy to hide Daesh failures.[61]

The will of the international community and the cooperation of different entities will eventually lead to the destruction of the creature which wants to be called 'the Islamic State'. In addition to the physical structure of territory and leadership, Daesh is attempting to build a 'virtual caliphate'. Daesh global ambition does not stop with Social Media and the Internet space; the organization wants to nurture a global sense of belonging for its supporters without having to have a physical presence everywhere is has supporters. Even when the group is unable to hold terrain, its supporters should be able operate and spread messages through the support community.

[60] Hashtag like *#Bruxelles* and *#Belgique* were used for dissemination of Daesh's recent products.

[61] Public Broadcasting of Latvia, *Terrorists want to shift attention from the Middle East*, the interview with author of the research at NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence, 29 March, 2016.

RUSSIA'S PROPAGANDA ON THE WAR IN SYRIA

Liz Wahl

Introduction

When Russian war planes reigned bombs down on Syria in September 2015, it seemed to take the international community by surprise.

It was barely twenty-four hours since Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama had a meeting at the United Nations. The atmosphere was tense and the exchange was awkward, as the relationship between the leaders grew sour over two years of disagreement over Russia's annexation of Crimea and meddling in the war in Ukraine. The president had hoped to have an open and honest discussion about the Ukraine crisis but had to address the new elephant in the room: Russian military activity was detected to be moving into Syria. Exactly what the Russians were up to was unclear. Putin assured the president that Russia's military involvement in Syria would be of shared interest, with ISIS being the target. But the two had different visions for the country's leadership — Putin said he would support Assad's government, weakened by years of civil war. Obama reiterated his position that the path to peace in Syria meant Assad had to go.[1]

It did not take long for Russia's true intentions to become obvious. Within days, the crosshairs of Russian warplanes were revealed to be rebel strongholds, not terrorist hotbeds. In the months that followed, it would become clear that Russia's primary focus in Syria's civil war was not to fight ISIS or Islamist extremists, but to prop up ally Bashar al-Assad.

But a different story was playing out on Russian media. It is a narrative for which the audience had been primed to believe for years. Although Syria was a new battleground, the lines had already been drawn between good and evil. The enemy, to the eyes of Russian media observers, was not just the obvious terrorists — beheading journalists and civil servants and conducting mass executions while brazenly capturing the horror in high definition video — but a subtle, sly, and sinister network of geopolitical players that had been conspiring together for world domination longer than the existence of the so-called Islamic State. This behemoth of an enemy had been consistently exposed on Russian media: The US and the West.

Russia Today (RT), an English-language international cable news channel funded by the Russian government, aims to shape the worldview of its news

[1] "Tension Clouds Meeting Between Barack Obama, Vladimir Putin," CNN, September 29, 2015, http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/28/politics /obama-putin-meeting-syria-ukraine/.

consumers to be skeptical of the US, EU, NATO, and other Western institutions and media. From the newsroom to television and computer screens, reality is molded through persistent use of denial, deflection, and distortion of headlines and stories. Through these mechanisms, grains of truth are exaggerated, critical facts omitted, and greater context conveniently ignored to manufacture a story that furthers the Kremlin's foreign policy interests. The resulting presentation of information when it comes to Russia or its allies often bears little resemblance to reality.

This piece will explore the tactics used in a Russian-sponsored newsroom to shape the narrative of the war in Syria and impact public perception and discourse of the conflict. It will examine Russian news coverage of the long running crisis from the war's beginnings through the escalation and subsequent Russian military intervention into Syria. What storyline about Syria was Russian media trying to convey to the world? What were the recurring themes, methods, and goals in the skewed stories? What is the role of modern day Russian propaganda and how does Russian media aim to exploit the rapidly changing new media landscape?

Shaping the Story: Coverage of the War's Early Days

A flashback to RT's coverage of the early days of the Syrian civil war demonstrates how the seeds of the Russian narrative of the conflict were planted. It's a storyline that echoes the paranoia typical of stories aired on Russian television in which Western governments are implicated for executing regime change and toppling legitimate governments — all in pursuit of absolute geopolitical control and isolation of Russia. In order for this mission to be carried out, according to Russian media, the hapless Western-controlled monopoly on information is complicit and obedient to its warmongering, hegemonic governments. In fact, calling out the mainstream media for being part of the conspiracy was a regular news beat at RT. Deflecting away from the atrocities being carried out by the Syrian government, RT aimed to create a haze of confusion by blaming Western media for actively taking sides in and skewing coverage of the bloody conflict.

Anastasia Churkina was a New York-based RT correspondent. The daughter of Vitaly Churkin, Russia's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, a look at Churkina's reporting reveals she had no qualms about pushing the Russian narrative. A transcript of her story dated April 11, 2012 titled in the newscast rundown "Syrians Disenchanted Over Mainstream Media," pins the blame on Western media for misrepresenting the Syrian conflict. The language of such packaged news stories subtly (and not so subtly) implicates mass media outlets as part of a larger conspiracy.

"Desperate new pleas come out of the country and growing calls for the world to stop the killing," says a short clip from Fox News edited into the piece. Churkina, in her usual cheeky tone when covering the "anti-mainstream media" beat follows with her voice over, "The American public treated to a simply scripted blockbuster

in a far-away land. Nazir Hussain — a Syrian living and working in Los Angeles says Western media have blindly adopted the official line of their governments."[2]

She then turns to a sound bite to an interview with Hussain, identified as a founding member of the Syrian American Forum. Hussain says, "they are not checking it, they are not checking the sources of their stories, and there is a lot of exaggeration."

Churkina later continues on with her narration, "The West — and Qatar — in favor of regime change — will not acknowledge the presence of armed forces — including Al Qaeda — on the ground. Some Syrians counter that media outlets in fact increased fatalities on the ground through misinformation."

"For example, they are telling people in Syria, the regime is about to collapse. So the people are rising up. And on the other hand — the regime still strong, and is not falling. So when they are giving deceptive information like this, it's killing people in the streets," says Hussain.

Noteworthy here is how the blame is placed on the media reporting on civilians protesting, rather than the regime that is killing those civilians. The report portrays the views of Hussain as that of an ordinary Syrian, and fails to mention his organization is staunchly pro-Assad. The pro-regime Syrian American Forum, with chapters in eight states, hosts events and pushes for Congress and the White House to hear its point of view. While it condemns ISIS crimes, it makes little distinction between rebel groups in Syria, broadly portraying the opposition as comprised of extremist groups and blames the US for providing "direct and indirect support" to terrorists.[3] It is a charge, as we'll continue to explore, that is shared and amplified consistently throughout the years of the Syrian conflict on Russian media.

Churkina concludes her report with a statement that reads more as advice to Western journalists rather than hard news reporting, "While the world works to hash out a plan of action for Syria, the media need to provide facts and context, say Syrians wary of a potentially risky future for their country. Distorted views will simply deepen and prolong the crisis."

The irony in such news reports is the recurring theme of blaming Western media for distorting reality and failing to provide context. As seen in this report, the aim is not to inform on the events of what is happening on the ground in Syria, but to place suspicion on Western journalism and to heighten pro-regime voices, regardless of fact and context. These two journalism musts — verifying facts and providing context — are systematically absent from the newsroom. Nowhere in the news segment is there a mention of atrocities the Assad regime is accused of committing, nor does it touch on the core grievances, root causes, or humanitarian

[2] "Syrians in U.S. speak up about MSM crisis coverage," April 12, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch ?v=K2TV1FGTcIk.

[3] "SAF Condemns Recent ISIS Crimes," The Syrian American Forum, February 25, 2015, http://www.syrianamericanforum.org/index.php/media-1/pressreleases/95-saf-condemns-recent-isis-crimes.

crisis resulting from the war. The piece is one of deflection, casting suspicion on the foreign media's reporting, and diverting any blame on the regime by creating a narrative in which no facts can be verified and any mainstream assertions are questioned. As a result, the story is distorted through creating a false equivalence — one where anyone and everyone involved in the conflict is at least equally guilty. The deflection works to overlook violence being carried out inside Syria's borders and to raise doubt on mass media portrayal of the conflict.

The use of denial, deflection and distortion is used by the embattled Syrian President Bashar Al Assad himself. It is evident in an exclusive interview with RT, which aired November 2011. It happened at a time when he was facing international condemnation for a war that had claimed 35,000 lives in his country. With Russia being one of the only countries standing by Assad, RT landed the rare interview with the leader at the newly renovated presidential palace in Damascus. Here, he was given a platform to deny the existence of a civil war and blame the violence on the West.[4]

"The problem is not between me and the people. I don't have a problem with the people. The United States is against me. The West is against me. Many Arab countries including Turkey, which is not far, of course, are against me," Assad said. "It's not about reconciling with the people. It's not about reconciliation between the Syrian and the Syrian. We don't have a civil war. It's about terrorism and support coming from abroad to support terrorists to destabilize Syria."

Asked about alleged war crimes perpetrated by his government against civilians, he was unable to admit there was any legitimate political opposition. He blamed violence in Syria on foreign fighters and foreign armaments. Making clear he had no intention to flee, he said "I am not a puppet. I was not made by the West to go to the West or to any other country… I am Syrian, I was made in Syria, I have to live in Syria and die in Syria."

When the interviewer asked about protests that escalated on March 15, 2011, Assad said he would not change his government's response. The demonstrations that erupted at that time are widely recognized as the start of the civil war, when the opening shots were fired as the Syrian government aimed to suppress the mostly peaceful protests.

Of course, Assad did not see it that way. Expressing no regret, he said the government response was "to stand against terrorists. Because that's how it started. It didn't start as marches. The cover, the umbrella was marches, but within those marches you had militants who started shooting the civilians and the army at the same time." The mentality expressed by Assad is dichotomous — you're either with the government or you're with the terrorists. This is a narrative echoed in Russian media. It will later set the tone for Russia's heroic military intervention into the country.

[4] RT, "Assad to RT: 'I'm not Western puppet — I live and die in Syria'," *YouTube* video, 25:02, November 8, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdH4JKjVRyA.

Who has Chemical Weapons?

In August 2013, Assad's regime was accused of using sarin gas on the opposition, killing hundreds of people in the rebel-held areas near Damascus. The use of chemical weapons was a previously established "red line" for Washington. As a result, the White House was readying an action plan to make good on its promise to swiftly retaliate if chemical weapons were used. Ultimately, US airstrikes were called off after Russian President Putin stepped in, and brokered an agreement in which Assad agreed to disarm his chemical weapons arsenal. It was a political predicament for Western powers. On the one hand, a "red line" had been crossed and the administration would appear to be making empty threats if it failed to act. On the other, there was a strong lack of domestic will from the public. Less than a week after the Obama Administration announced it was confident Assad's government has used chemical weapons, the Pew Research Center for the People & Press reported 70 percent of those polled wanted the US to stay out of the Syrian conflict. The poll also found that most Americans had little interest in Syria, with just 15 percent saying they were following news about charges that Syria has used chemical weapons against rebel groups very closely.[5]

Amid the political frenzy and negotiations, Russian television had been working to debunk the Western storyline that would have justified retaliatory airstrikes. Ignoring all evidence that a heinous war crime had been committed, the wheels were set in motion to create a cloud of confusion as to who had possession of chemical weapons and who was responsible for using them.

In December 2013, freelance writer Seymour Hersh, was looking for a prominent outlet to publish his story about Syria. A Pulitzer Prize winner, Hersh had a long history of writing about military scandals. This time, his piece entitled "Whose Sarin?" was turned down by major print outlets, but was ultimately published in the London Review of Books. In it, Hersh asserted that the Obama administration had "cherry-picked" intelligence surrounding a chemical weapons attack so that it could pin the blame on the Syrian government regime. "Barack Obama did not tell the whole story this autumn when he tried to make the case that Bashar al-Assad was responsible for the chemical weapons attack near Damascus on 21 August," wrote Hersh. "In some instances, he omitted important intelligence, and in others he presented assumptions as facts. Most significant, he failed to acknowledge something known to the US intelligence community: that the Syrian army is not the only party in the country's civil war with access to sarin."[6]

The accusation was explosive — that the White House had lied about the chemical attacks as a pretext to launch airstrikes in Syria. Hersh suggested

[5] "Public Remains Opposed to Arming Syrian Rebels," Pew Research Center, July 17 2013, http://www.people-press.org/2013/06/17/public-remains-opposed-to-arming-syrian-rebels/.

[6] Seymour M. Hersh, "Whose sarin?" *London Review of Books*, December 19, 2013, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n24/seymour-m-hersh/whose-sarin.

there was ample evidence that a government opposition group had the capability to carry out a sarin gas attack, yet the administration was intentionally suppressing it. Hersh's story was slated to appear in the Washington Post, but the paper ultimately declined to run it because it didn't meet standards. The New Yorker, an outlet Hersh had previously written for, also decided against publishing it.[7]

RT found out about this, and would highlight the alternative possibility that an opposition group used chemical weapons. The story would also fit the channel's long running narrative that the mainstream media seeks to hide information harmful to Western governments.

"Hersh's report didn't originally appear in the United States. He had to go overseas to the London Review of Books to have it published, where it was extensively fact-checked," said RT reporter and political commentator Sam Sacks. After revealing Hersh's piece was turned down from the New Yorker and Washington Post, he compares the situation to Iraq. "Yup, that's the same Washington Post that right after Colin Powell made his case before the UN on WMDs in Iraq back in 2003, ran an editorial titled 'Irrefutable.'"[8]

Raising the issue of the Iraq war was a common tactic of deflection. It was typically raised, at the request of the Russian news director, when a Western country was thinking about intervening militarily in another country, or when criticizing the military motivations of Russia or a Russian ally. It's designed to be used when the conversation becomes uncomfortable or unfavorable for Russia. Ask "What about Iraq?" and all of sudden the discussion pivots to the US not having the capacity to assert moral superiority over any other country or entity.

"You see, Hersh's story isn't just about intelligence cherry-picking and manufacturing consent for war. It's about how the White House can get away with this stuff because of the sad state of journalism in America," said Sacks. He continues on with the critique of American journalism and how Hersh's story is not just "a story of war, but how the media lets the president get away with war, just like they did in Iraq by silencing those who are speaking truth to power."

Hersh's story was rife with the ingredients for exploitation by Russian media. It served to continue the trend of finding methods and sources to blame chemical attacks on the opposition, no matter the evidence to the contrary. Additionally, it's the ideal example of the all-powerful mainstream media conspiring with governments to suppress information from the public to justify war. However, the facts, by all credible accounts, would not support the assertions made in Hersh's reporting.

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7 "New Yorker, Washington Post Passed On Seymour Hersh Syria Report," Huffington Post, December 8, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/12/08/seymour-hersh-syria-report_n_4409674.html.

8 RT America, "US Mainstream Media silences dissent on Syria WMD claims," *YouTube* video, 3:52, December 10, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27llKwTrmRo.

Another controversial figure pinning the blame on the opposition for using chemical weapons would prove to be a godsend for Russian media. Mother Agnes Mariam de la Croix — the mother superior at St James the Mutilated monastery, a Catholic enclave near Damascus, was a blessing for Assad propaganda. Veiled as a mediator between warring parties and champion for truth, the 63-year-old Lebanese nun set out on a mission to spread the word that the September Sarin gas attack in Ghouta was a false flag operation. Videos showing the lifeless bodies of civilians, many of them children, had been staged, she claimed. Mother Agnes made these farfetched, bombshell claims in her 50-page report based strictly on her own interpretations of the veracity of YouTube videos posed online.[9] This despite not actually witnessing the attacks, nor having any military, forensic or videography expertise. She would later go on a speaking tour in the US, spreading her alternative theory on chemical weapons attacks in Syria. While in the US, she made a pit stop in RT's Washington, DC bureau where she was given a television platform. The planner distributed to employees for that day's news coverage provided some links to background information on Mother Agnes. The links underneath segment topics were meant to help staff glean background information on the issue to be reported. Bundled together under "Mother Agnes" were links to stories published about the nun, as well as links about Hersh's story and the apparent mainstream media suppression of his story. The background information on Hersh served to corroborate the controversial nun's story.

"I wanted to call the attention of the international community," she told RT. She suggested the children that appeared in the video had come from another region of Syria. "After tracking them, I observed many things in those videos, and I finished to conclude that some videos, those videos that I have been viewing — were staged."[10]

Mother Agnes' assertions, though contradictory to any reliable intelligence source or data, were also used as a propaganda tool by Kremlin leaders. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov used the nun's findings to bolster his theory that the deadly chemical attack that occurred a month prior was staged by Syrian rebels.[11]

An interview with the New York Times shows Mother Agnes had long been conspiracy-minded. She identified the Arab Spring as a "false flag" concocted by

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[9] Mother Agnes Miriam, "The Chemical Attacks on East Ghouta to Justify Military Right to Protect Intervention in Syria," International Support Team for Mussalaha in Syria, September 11, 2013, http://www.globalresearch.ca/STUDY_THE_VIDEOS_THAT_SPEAKS_ABOUT CHEMICALS_BETA_VERSION.pdf.

[10] RT America, "Syrian nun blames rebels for August sarin gas attack" Sy*YouTube* video, 6:18, December 9, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7kV9tNoGNA.

[11] "Russia's Foreign Minister Cites Questions Raised by Nun in Syria on Chemical Attacks Robert Mackey," New York Times Blogs, September 17, 2013, http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/09/17/russias-foreign-minister-cites-questions-raised-by-nun-in-syria-on-chemical-attacks/?_r=0.

foreign meddlers and saw the Syrian opposition as no different. "What happened is the interference of half the globe in Syrian affairs, infiltrating Syria with foreign fighters, recycling Al Qaeda and putting under threat the civilian population," she told the Times, echoing the worldviews expressed by Assad and Putin.[12]

The controversial nun had been stamped by her critics as "Assad's nun" for her propaganda value to the regime. But beyond promoting disinformation, Mother Agnes has been accused of having close links to the Assad government. She had secured visas for foreign journalists, indicating she had some clout with government officials.[13] She was reported to be the point person in organizing the evacuation of the besieged town of Moadamiyeh in Ocotober 2013. Many of the men that left the town during the evacuation she was overseeing are reported to have been captured and beaten by regime officials.[14] Nevertheless, she has denied being an advocate of Assad and accusations of being an agent of his government.

One of the first times RT mentioned the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian conflict was on May 6, 2013. The anchor introduced the story, "In the fog of war, there is always a lot of confusion about right and wrong and who is responsible for what atrocities. The line between good and bad, heroes and villains is often blurred. The civil war in Syria is no exception." The anchor then introduced the reporter covering this story, Churkina, the daughter of Russia's Ambassador to the United Nations.[15] Churkina would provide ongoing coverage on UN reports and developments on the Syrian conflict.

"We are hearing from the commission that they have gathered enough testimony from casualties and local doctors on the ground treating the injured in Syria. Basically showing enough proof, enough suspicion, as they say, to claim that the rebel groups, the opposition groups, are using Sarin gas, a chemical weapon considered a weapon of mass destruction, on the ground," said Churkina.

Prompted by the anchor, Churkina later pivots to comparing the doubt surrounding the use of chemical weapons in Syria to faulty intelligence about weapons of mass destruction in the lead up to the Iraq war. "The existence of weapons of mass destruction that were never to be found… and in this particular case again we're hearing the WMD cheers as a pretense to kind of rally up the public opinion when it comes to the Syrian crisis," said Churkina.

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[12] Ben Hubbard, "A Nun Lends a Voice of Skepticism on the Use of Poison Gas by Syria," *New York Times*, September 21, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/22/world/middleeast/seeking-credible-denial-on-poison-gas-russia-and-syria-turn-to-nun.html?_r=0.

[13] Raya Jalabi, "Critics Question Catholic Nun's 'Alternative Story' on Syria Civil War, *New York Times*, December 5, 2013 http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/05/catholic-nun-mother-agnes-syria-civil-war.

[14] Michael Weiss, "Assad Walls Off the Besieged Damascus Suburb He Gassed in 2013," *The Daily Beast*, August 12 2015, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/12/assad-walls-off-the-besieged-damascus-suburb-he-gassed-in-2013.html.

[15] RT America, "Syrian Rebels Used Chemical Weapons — UN Report," *YouTube* video, 5:57, May 6, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeJwh2fF_H4.

The claim that the rebels had used the nerve agent was made on Swiss television by Carla Del Ponte, a member of the UN commission of inquiry investigating alleged war crimes in Syria. While Churkina conveyed Del Ponte's claims as "enough proof" to blame the rebels, the UN quickly released a statement clarifying it "had not reached conclusive findings."[16]

On July 9th, Russian Ambassador Churkin submitted a Russian intelligence report to the UN that claimed to document proof that rebels had carried out sarin gas attacks. "It was established that on March 19 the rebels launched an unguided "Basha'ir-3" projectile towards Khan al-Assal controlled by the Government forces," said Churkin in a press release. "There is every reason to believe that it was the armed opposition fighters who used chemical weapons in Khan al-Assal." Churkin underscored that his report, unlike other reports provided to the UN, was based on samples taken at the projectile impact point by Russian experts in person, rather than third parties.[17]

This press release was essentially regurgitated on-air by Gayane Chichakyan, a DC-based RT reporter from Moscow. "The fact of the matter is that the US had already decided to arm the Syrian rebels under the pretext that Syrian government has used chemical weapons — although the evidence the US supposedly has was not verified by the UN," said Chichakyan, after summing up the press release. "So you have a huge gap of trust with the US on the one hand insisting the Syrian government has used chemical weapons and Russia on the other hand saying that you have to look at all evidence before take such a dramatic action."[18]

These claims were diametrically opposed to the findings of the US, UK, France, human rights organizations, and independent analysts. While Western government intelligence said it had evidence that strongly pointed to the Syrian government conducting chemical attacks on civilians, report after report from the UN would back that up with more proof.

In a September 2013 Report of the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syria, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon concluded chemical weapons were used on a relatively large scale in Ghouta. The report stated the sarin gas attacks resulted in numerous casualties among civilians, including many children. The conclusion was based on exploded surface-to-surface rockets which were found to contain Sarin, environmental contamination of Sarin, as well as interviews, blood and urine samples from patients. While the aim of the report was to establish whether or not chemical

[16] "UN's Del Ponte says evidence Syria rebels 'used sarin'," BBC, May 6, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22424188.

[17] "Press statement by H.E. Ambassador Vitaly Churkin, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, on the use of chemical weapons in Syria," Embassy of the Russian Federation to the United Kingdom, July 10, 2013, http://www.rusemb.org.uk/foreignpolicy/1039.

[18] RT America, "Syrian rebels, not government used chemical weapons Russia claims," *YouTube* video, 3:02, July 9, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oq4OUQMK7Ag.

weapons were in fact used, it did not primarily seek to identify who was responsible for using the deadly weapons. However, it did identify the types of weapons used to carry out the attacks, including unguided rockets only known to be in possession of the Syrian government.[19]

A report on the attacks on Ghouta by Human Rights Watch further details the types of weapons used in the attacks. "One of the types of rockets used in the attack, the 330mm rocket system — likely Syrian produced, which appear to be have been used in a number of alleged chemical weapon attacks, has been filmed in at least two instances in the hands of government forces," the report stated. "The second type of rocket, the Soviet-produced 140 mm rocket, which can carry Sarin, is listed as a weapon known to be in Syrian government weapon stocks." Neither rockets have ever been reported to be in possession of the opposition, nor is there any evidence rebel groups have the equipment needed to launch these rockets.[20]

As far as Churkin's report claiming the opposite and blaming the opposition for using chemical weapons, the UN looked into that, too. The final report from the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic concludes that chemical weapons were used throughout the Syrian conflict, including in Khan Al Asal on March 19th, 2013 and on August 21, 2013 in Ghouta. In examining the assertions by the Russian Federation presented to the UN, "The United Nations Mission studied the report but could not independently verify the chain of custody for the sampling and the transport of the samples."[21]

Another UN report released in March 2014 provided more concrete evidence that pointed to the Syrian government as responsible for using the deadly chemical weapons. The report further discredited Churkin's claims. Comprised by a team of two dozen independent experts and investigators, the Commission of Inquiry on Syria found "The evidence available concerning the nature, quality and quantity of the agents used on 21 August indicated that the perpetrators likely had access to the chemical weapons stockpile of the Syrian military." The commission said the chemical agents used in al-Assal on March 19 "bore the same unique hallmarks as those used in al-Ghouta."[22]

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[19] "Report of the United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic on the alleged use of chemical weapons in the Ghouta area of Damascus on 21 August 2013,"United Nations, September 16, 2013, https://disarmamentlibrary.un.org/UNODA/Library.nsf/780cfafd472b047785257b1000501037/5f61477d793185d285257be8006b135a/$FILE/A%2067%20997-S%202013%20553.pdf.

[20] "Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria," Human Rights Watch, September 10, 2013, https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/10/attacks-ghouta/analysis-alleged-use-chemical-weapons-syria.

[21] "United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic," United Nations, accessed May 31, 2016, https://unoda-web.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/report.pdf.

[22] "Chemical weapons used in Syria appear to come from army stockpile: U.N.," Reuters, March 5, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-chemical-idUSBREA240SF20140305.

These facts and finding were largely irrelevant to Russian media. Often overlooked or ignored, producers (with the vetting of the Russian news director and superiors) would instruct reporters and anchors to highlight any voice, however questionable, that furthers the Russian narrative. Russian media has consistently deflected from Syrian wrongdoing in the conflict, however heinous. The bias is further evident in a simple search of the RT YouTube channel. A search input of "Syria chemical weapons" yields among the top headline results: "Unverified videos allegedly show Syria rebels using chemical weapons," "Rebels had motive to carry out chemical weapon attack in Syria," "Syria chemical attack is 'rebels' provocation in hope of intervention' — Putin," "Syrian rebels trained to use chemical weapons in Afghanistan — Lavrov," and after Syria agreed to destructing its chemical weapons arsenal after international condemnation and threats of foreign military intervention, "Syria chemical arms destruction begins, rebels unhappy?"

At a minimum, Russian media viewers are unable to assign blame to any party in the Syrian conflict, as facts never seem concrete enough to warrant anger or action. On a wider scale, the greater narrative casts Western parties as lying about matters as significant as war crimes, all in order to justify meddling in affairs abroad, even if that means sponsoring terrorism. The greater message is that Western powers, namely the White House and the US intelligence community, are hungry to overturn regimes it doesn't like and is willing to say and do anything to make it happen. Portraying this storyline often means using disinformation that blames the victims while exonerating the perpetrators.

Russia Intervenes in Syria

Through the years covering of the civil war in Syria, Russian media had vigorously pushed the narrative that foreign intervention or foreign meddling of any form was inappropriate and would only serve to deepen and and prolong the conflict. There would be one exception to this rule: Russia. On September 30, 2015, with the government regime appearing to be in imminent danger of being overthrown, Russia came to Assad's rescue. Russia claimed to be primarily targeting ISIS and terrorist groups, and Russian media served to highlight this claim. After news broke of the firsts airstrikes, an explainer on RT's website "Russia goes to war with ISIS: Why and how?" aimed to provide simple, straightforward answers. The "Why?" was summed up in two sentences over a picture of a tank bearing an ISIS flag and a jihadist with a raised fist, "Thousands of foreigners fighting with terrorists in Syria came from Russia and neighboring ex-Soviet countries. Dealing with them in Syria is better than allowing them to return." It justified Russia's military action through explaining that the Syrian government asked for help, giving Russia legal permission to send in the troops and fighter jets. The last question posed in the explainer was "Are there limits?" The article stated, "Yes. There is a deadline.

It's classified. Ask NATO or armchair generals on Twitter for answers," somehow using the occasion to make a joke and demean Western military leaders.[23]

Among the other headlines emblazoned on the RT homepage that day: "8 ISIS targets hit during 20 combat flights in Syria — Russian Military," "ISIS militants in Iraq, Syria have WMD components, Lavrov warns UN security council," and "Russian anti-terror op in Syria — LIVE UPDATES." The headlines made the Kremlin's storyline clear — Russia was embarking on a military intervention to take out ISIS.

A few weeks into the military intervention, RT broadcast an "exclusive" report which revealed "What's in Russian pilots' anti-ISIS survival kit in Syria," as the segment was later titled when uploaded to YouTube. Reporting from the new Russian military base in Latakia, the correspondent pointed out that a few weeks beforehand, it was just "ground, earth and weeds" and described what he called Russia's "anti-terror operation." The lower thirds on the report reads, "Defense Ministry: Terrorists fleeing in droves due to strikes." Not long thereafter, RT would post online slow motion footage of Russian jets taking off from that base "on anti-ISIS sorties." The caption below the video cites Russia's Defense Ministry's claim that its fighter jets hit over 270 terrorist targets across Syria in the last two days.[24]

Reality proved different. The bulk of the airstrikes in the first month of Russia's bombing campaign hit anti-government groups other than ISIS.[25] Some ISIS targets were hit, but nominal by comparison. By the year's end, human rights groups reported thousands of civilian casualties as a result of the air bombardment, with hospitals and ambulances among the targets. The intense bombing campaign would send hundreds of thousands of people displaced and fleeing for their lives, significantly exacerbating a refugee crisis unseen since World War II.

Throughout the horror, Russian media's approach remained largely consistent, denying accusations of civilian deaths and deflecting away from the fact that most of Russia's airstrikes had targeted non-ISIS rebels. The storyline that Russia was making significant gains in defeating ISIS continued to play out. When it wasn't ISIS, the casualties were almost always touted to be of terrorists. After a while, it didn't matter — the definition of a terrorist had become distorted. Just like Assad stated in that exclusive RT interview in the presidential palace when the war was relatively new (and before ISIS was known to exist), the opposition in general was comprised of terrorist groups.

For those that buy into this narrative, Russia fighting alongside the Syrian military meant helping a legitimate government fight a harrowing battle against

[23] "Russia goes to war with ISIS: Why and how?," RT, September 30, 2015, https://www.rt.com/news/317021-russia-syria-engagement-how/.

[24] RT, "What's in Russian pilots' anti-ISIS survival kit in Syria," *YouTube* video, October 20, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdkK69ScZ3Q.

[25] "Russian Airstrikes in Syria: September 30 — October 28, 2015," Institute for the Study of War, accessed May 31, 2016, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Airstrikes%2028%20OCT-01_5.jpg.

terrorism in its many forms. Therefore, when Western and NATO powers talk about aiding and arming the opposition, it logically follows that the West is a supporter and sponsor of terrorism.

This binary definition can lead to troubling conclusions and justifications. The ruthless bombing campaign would not spare hospitals in opposition territory. According to Doctors Without Borders (MSF), hospitals had been deliberately targeted in rebel-held areas on many occasions. About a month into Russia's intervention into the war, international observers reported that four hospitals were hit by airstrikes. The hospitals were located in the regime-held Idlib province of northwestern Syria. Humanitarian workers believed the buildings were deliberately targeted, keeping up with the practice of the Assad regime to strike hospitals that cared for his opponents. Russia denied any attacks against civilians and claimed its airstrikes only targeted ISIS.

"These attacks are inexcusable. Claiming that the fight is against terrorists does not give any government the right to tear up the laws of war, which specifically protect health workers and facilities. With these actions, Russia is damaging hospitals, putting patients and medical staff at risk, and depriving civilians of life-saving access to healthcare," the director of programmes at Physicians for Human Rights, Widney Brown told The Guardian.[26]

RT TV had a conspiratorial explanation to divert the blame away from Russia. On a newscast on November 3rd, 2015, the anchor reported, "Russian jets hit over 200 terror targets in eastern and northern Syria just over the weekend…it was recently alleged that Russian jets destroyed a hospital in the city of Sarmin. The Russian Defense Ministry called on journalists to double-check the stories they publish." After showing a brief clip of a Russian military official advising the mass media to protect their reputations and refrain from publishing "fake" stories, the anchor continued, "But it's not just the media, the accusations were actually picked up by the US State Department. And to prove the hospital is totally intact, the Russian Defense Ministry provided up-to-date satellite photographs." The anchor then hands it over to Chichakyan reporting in Washington, DC for more details.[27]

Chichakyan highlighted that no media outlet had been able to verify the claims that the hospitals were really bombed. She went on to present satellite images provided by Russia's Defense Ministry that claim to show the Sarmin hospital intact and unbruised by any bomb. Chichakyan then showed a clip of her at the State Department as part of the press pool, questioning the spokesperson about the precise location of the hospital it says was bombed. Another reporter followed

[26] Martin Chulov and Shiv Malik, "Four Syrian hospitals bombed since Russian airstrikes began, doctors say," *The Guardian*, October 22, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/22/three-syrian-hospitals-bombed-since-russian-airstrikes-began-doctors-say.

[27] RT, "Syria hospitals Russia accused of bombing don't exist — Defense Min," *YouTube* video, 4:25, November 3, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iPGwac2h18.

up to press for details. The State Department official appeared flustered as she was unable to provide an immediate answer.

"Some very serious accusations against Russia still stand unverified," Chichakyan concludes in the studio. No aerial footage was shown of the current state of the other hospitals reported to be targeted. But the implication was clear: The US was lying about Russia hitting hospitals and targeting civilians, and so was the Western media.

Coverage of the hospital strikes in Syria on RT was scarce. However, a search on the outlet's YouTube channel for "MSF hospital bombing" will bring up plenty of reports of the US airstrike on a MSF hospital in Kunduz, Afghanistan which happened on October 3, 2015. The US Defense Department would admit to what it called a terrible mistake, eventually prompting a public apology from President Obama. Russian media would focus its efforts on the US airstrike, conveniently deflecting coverage away from the numerous hospital strikes inside Syria.

MSF eventually decided to stop disclosing the GPS coordinates of its hospitals, believing it would put them in increased danger of being in the crosshairs of Syrian and Russian airstrikes. The decision was made after another one of its hospitals was hit in February 2016.

"Since 2011 during the demonstration time, medical activities that are not under their control are considered by the government of Syria as illegal and consequently as legitimate targets," one MSF official told The Guardian, after one of its hospitals was hit by airstrikes believed to originate from Russian planes. The strike on the MSF hospital in the opposition-held area of northern Syria on February 15, 2016 was reported to have killed eleven people. "This decision explains the repeated threat, arrest, torture and killing of doctors … and their direct families in addition to the systematic targeting of networks in charge of supplying underground medical activities in besieged zones." Turkey said another hospital in a rebel-held town was destroyed by a Russian airstrike earlier that week.[28]

Again, Russian media would go on a farfetched campaign to deny Russia bombed a hospital in Syria. The headlines following the attack on Sputnik News, RT's online-based international media counterpart read as follows: "Syrian Ambassador to Russia Accuses US of Airstrike on MSF-Backed Hospital," "Kremlin Slams Unacceptable Claims of Russia Behind Strike on Syria Hospital," "Data Shows Airstrikes on Syrian Hospital Launched by US-Led Coalition Jet," and later in the day after implicating the US had bombed the hospital, a softer headline emerged, "Pentagon Unsure Who Launched Attack on Syrian Hospital."

The first article quotes Syrian Ambassador to Russia Riad Haddad, "Actually, US Air Force have destroyed it, and Russia Aerospace Forces have no connection

[28] Kareem Shaheen, "MSF stops sharing Syria hospital locations after 'deliberate' attacks," *The Guardian*, February 18, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/18/msf-will-not-share-syria-gps-locations-after-deliberate-attacks.

to it. Intelligence information proves it." Haddad added that the accusations against Russia were part of "information warfare."[29]

The second Sputnik article quotes Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov. "Once again, we categorically dismiss these statements and consider them to be unacceptable. Especially because those making these statements are unable to prove their allegations in any way," said Peskov. He went on to blame the media for distorted reporting and urged news consumers to "not become a victim of perverse information."[30]

Russian media served to deflect responsibility from the Kremlin and mirror the baseless and bizarre statements coming from government officials. A statement from Russia's Ministry of Defence implied the hospital attack was a fabrication. Distorting the time and locations of media coverage on the hospital, the ministry suggested the bombing was reported on before the attack even occurred.[31] Eliot Higgins, the founder of the investigative blog Bellingcat, which has credibly used online, open-source forensic evidence to debunk several of Russia's claims in the wars in Ukraine and Syria, put it this way: "It's unclear whether or not the Russian Defence Ministry actually believes this absolute nonsense, or have reached the point of being so desperate to deflect criticism that they make up any rubbish to defend themselves, even if it's laughable conspiracy theories about MSF and Turkey plotting against them."[32]

From Ukraine to Syria

Russia's military adventure in Syria followed its disastrous intervention and ongoing involvement in the war in Ukraine. Pivoting to Syria served as a powerful tool to deflect away from the aftermath of Russia's backing of pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine. Gone were the headlines about Ukraine, even the ones that denigrated the Ukrainian government. The headlines had all but disappeared from US mainstream media as well. Replacing them were headlines of Russia's role in the war in Syria and the fight against ISIS.

[29] "Syrian Ambassador to Russia Accuses US of Airstrike on MSF-Backed Hospital," Sputnik News, February 15, 2016, http://sputniknews.com/middleeast/20160215/1034810903/msf-hospital-airstrike-syria.html.

[30] "Kremlin Slams Unacceptable Claims of Russia Behind Strike on Syria Hospital," Sputnik News, February 16, 2016, http://sputniknews.com/politics/20160216/1034829557/kremlin-syria-hospital.html.

[31] Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, accessed May 31, 2016, http://eng.syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12078613 @egNews.

[32] "Russia's Bizarre Barely Coherent Defence it Didn't Bomb Hospitals in Syria," Bellingcat, February 17, 2016, https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2016/02/17/russias-barely-coherent-defence-it-didnt-bomb-hospitals-in-syria/.

Though vastly different conflicts in different regions of the globe, the language used in reporting on both wars in Russian media have been strikingly similar. Both accused the West of fomenting an uprising, denied the existence of a legitimate civil war, while aiming to overlook humanitarian crimes and justify the rule of a corrupt and brutal dictator. In both cases, Russian media demonized government opposition through faulty and distorted generalizations. In Ukraine, the opposition was made up of fascists, neo-Nazis and neocons. In Syria, the opposition was made up of terrorists, jihadists and extremists. Both contain a grain of truth, but reality as a whole does not match the narrative crafted by the Kremlin and amplified in the media it funds. In the last few years, Russia has invested in expanding its international reach while increasing government control of free speech within its own borders. Yes, neo-Nazis existed within the Maidan protests that led to the ouster of Ukraine's pro-Russian president, but their impact and composition in the protests was relatively small. Yes, terrorists and extremists existed among the rebel groups in Syria, but the protests that prompted the civil war were largely peaceful and comprised of civilians.

Conclusion: Truth and Consequences

The consequences of the war have been utterly devastating for Syria. The ripple effects of the conflict have reached far beyond Syria's borders, of a magnitude fathomable perhaps only in the history books.

The war would reach new levels of horror, but the storyline would persist. Russian news outlets have consistently echoed the Kremlin's paranoia of a conspiratorial West out to isolate Russia and keep a tight grip on the world order. But if it was in fact Putin's attempt to alter the geopolitical landscape through his own military adventure, he has to a certain extent, succeeded. Millions of refugees have fled Syria, many of them to European countries struggling to cope with the surge. Without precedent or an action plan to deal with the influx, the refugee crisis has created division between and within EU countries. Far right political leaders and parties, channeling the frustration of citizens angry at their political leaders, have gained prominence.

RT touts itself as being a daring alternative to the status quo in which Western media controls the information of the world. The divisive political climate in the US and EU has grown favorable to Russia and easily exploited for its propaganda value. With anger towards powerful elites and mainstream institutions boiling over on both sides of the Atlantic, Russia doesn't need to invest hundreds of millions of dollars into a propaganda machine to tell people abroad to seek an alternative — they already want one.

Healthy skepticism and critical thinking should be practiced in any functioning democracy. Russian media portrays itself to be a champion of both, but encourages the opposite — a deranged paranoia and a perpetual state of doubt. Without

established facts, there remains doubt. As long as there's doubt, decisive choices can't be made. The effect is a state of paralysis that prevents action. Sometimes doing nothing is the wise route. Other times, doing nothing is deadly and dangerous. This is true for the individual. For a government, the decision to act — or not — can be consequential for millions. Facts must first be established in order to make a healthy assessment of reality and choose the best course of action.

Russian media aims be a vehicle for instilling a constant state of doubt. It plants the seeds of doubt on established facts and casts suspicion on the integrity and motivations of Western countries and media. Throughout the war in Syria, Russia has used its information apparatus to shape the narrative of the conflict through denial, deflection and distortion. By redirecting the camera to Western shortcomings — real or fabricated — and exploiting and exaggerating existing grievances in Western societies, it aims to deepen divisions and thwart public consensus in the US and EU. Lost in all the noise and confusion is the real suffering, death, and devastation of the reality of the war in Syria.

The challenge for the West is to convince its own people to see through the messaging of a rogue government. The Kremlin doesn't play by traditional rules, and neither does the media that it sponsors. The road to restoring trust in democratic governments and the mainstream institutions entails the public recognizing that a world in which facts don't matter and reality is manufactured is not a desirable alternative.

Part IV
Lessons Learned: The Region and Beyond

RUSSIA'S STRATEGY IN SYRIA: MULTIPLE AIMS

Māris Cepurītis

On 30 September 2015 Russia's aviation conducted first strikes against Daesh positions in Syria, thus beginning active phase of Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict. This Russian move came as a surprise to almost everyone except those with access to military grade information. With the same suddenness on 14 March 2016 Russia's President Vladimir Putin announced withdrawal of the main part of Russian forces in Syria. Despite the partial withdrawal, Russia has continued its military operations in Syria. In addition to military activities Russia has been actively involved in political dealings that revolve around the Syrian conflict. In political realm, Russia has played an active part since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, not only acting in the UN Security Council, but also in other formats that focused on the resolution of the conflict. This article examines Russia's strategy in Syria, focusing on Russian interests and approach in the Middle East and wider foreign policy goals.

Historical Dimension of Russian-Syrian "Axis"

The history of cooperation between Syria and Russia (previously — the USSR) began in the last years of the Second World War, when in 1944 the USSR and Syria established official diplomatic relations. The USSR granted Syria diplomatic recognition even before the full independence of the Syrian state on 17 April 1946.[1] Although the USSR was one of the strongest supporters of the Syrian state, the first years of relations remained strained because of the regular Soviet critique of Syrian leaders. Despite this, the USSR continued to sustain relations. The importance of Syria to the USSR can be described by several reasons. Firstly, the geopolitics of the Southern territories of the USSR in Caucasus and Central Asia where inseparable from the Middle East, but Syria's geopolitical location provided opportunities for the USSR to outflank Turkey and Iraq — strong Western allies at the time. For the USSR Syria was much needed partner that could help to secure the "soft underbelly" of the Soviet Union. Secondly, the Syrian Communist Party and its allies have gained some influence in the Syrian politics,[2] so ideological links could be used to further spread communist ideas in the Middle East.

[1] Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend of Foe?,* (Westport, London: Praeger Security International, 2007), 13.

[2] *Ibid*.

Importance of Syria probably caused the renewal of mutual cooperation after the death of Stalin in 1953. The first example of renewed relations was the Soviet-Syrian trade agreement of 1955 that helped to improve trade relations. The Soviet presence was seen in large infrastructure projects like construction of Tabqa dam that was to help irrigation of the regions and could be further adapted as hydroelectric plant. Also military cooperation flourished during overall improvement of Soviet-Syrian ties.

1960-s came as an uncertain period for Syria and for its relations with the USSR. It started with the creation of the United Arab Republic — the political union between Syria and Egypt that lasted from 1958 until 1961, when Syria seceded. It was continued by coup that brought Ba'ath Party to power in Syria and ended only after November 1970 when Syria's Minister of Defence Hafez al-Assad seized the power and became the President of Syria.

After the seizure of power in 1970 Hafez al-Assad needed strong allies so he could secure his position domestically and position Syria regionally. The USSR on the other hand was interested in a regional partner that could be used to balance the Western countries and especially the USA. After seizure of power Hafez al-Assad tried to secure greater political autonomy for Syria but so it wouldn't impact relations with Syria's strongest partner — the Soviet Union. This approach paid off as since 1970 the relations of Syria and the USSR intensified.

In 1971 Syria and the USSR signed agreements that would shape relations in the next decades and also is one of the reasons why today Russia remains one of the most visible supporters of Syria and especially Assad's regime. This is the agreement that permitted Moscow to use the port of Tartus in exchange for advanced weapons.[3] With this agreement Tartus became one of the most important support points of the Soviet/Russian Black Sea Fleet. For Syria Assad gained imports of the Soviet weapons. According to the estimates by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, from 1971 until 1991 Syria received from the USSR armaments of a total value of 29.1 billion USD averaging exports of 1.38 billion USD each year.[4] During the Cold War the Soviet Union remained the largest supplier of weapons to Assad's Syria dwarfing other suppliers. In 1986 Syria became the largest non-communist buyer of Soviet arms.[5]

Nevertheless there were also some policy initiatives that ran contrary to Moscow's wishes, for example, Syria's worsening relations with Iraq or military action taken against the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1983.[6] These steps can be seen as a part of Assad's realpolitical thinking — choosing the action that

[3] Jiri Valenta, Leni Friedman Valenta, "Why Putin Wants Syria," *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2016), Vol. 23, Issue 2.

[4] Stocholm international Peace Research Institute, Accessed June 28, 2016, http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/html/export_values.php

[5] Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend of Foe?,* (Westport, London: Praeger Security International, 2007), 16.

[6] *Ibid.*

best suites Syria, but not always the USSR. Syrian intervention in the Lebanese civil war against PLO and Lebanese Communists, who were also financed from KGB sources, created a rift between both regimes. The support for opposite sides in the conflict led to expulsion of half of the Soviet military advisers from Syria.[7] Despite these cases, since 1971 Syria had become more dependent on the Soviet support and Syria had to pay its dues. For example Syria didn't protest the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan at the time when most of other countries in the Middle East did.

During 1980-s the USSR and Syria deepened their relations by signing the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The Treaty was signed in October 1980 in Moscow. The Treaty covers general statements on the type of cooperation between the countries. It also includes vague mutual "security guarantees" where each party agrees not to plot against one another and in case either is threatened by a third party, to coordinate actions in order to resolve the security threat.[8] The Treaty has been in force for 20 years, after it has been automatically renewed every 5 years if neither objects. The Treaty is still valid at the moment of writing of this article — the summer of 2016. Both sides still refer to the Treaty as the basis of their current cooperation. However, leaked KGB reports showed that Hafez al-Assad was quite reluctant to fully commit to the Soviet-Syrian Treaty.[9]

The last years of the Soviet Union existence saw rising tensions in the relations between both countries. The USSR continued to decline Syrian request for advanced weapons. For Syria's leaders the newest weapon systems were needed to counter threats posed by Israel. Israel, supported by the US weapon deliveries including modern weapons, was becoming a more powerful regional actor. During the last years the leaders of the Soviet Union tried to switch the foreign policy of the USSR to that based on political and diplomatic instruments providing less attention to military ones. This led to more frequent dialogue between the USSR and the USA as well as improvement in the USSR and Israel relations. For Syria the change in the USSR policy meant harder bargaining for each weapon that it received from the USSR.[10] Additionally, the end of 1980-s saw the migration of Jews from the USSR to Israel what increased the country's economic capacity and made the USSR more reluctant to support Syrian actions against Israel.[11] Thus the USSR relations with Syria were gradually eroding until the collapse of the USSR, the ties between countries remained strong.

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7 Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis," *International Affairs* 89: 4(2013), 802.

8 "Dogovor o druzhbe i sotrudnichestve mezhdu SSSR i SAR (1980)," *RIA Novosti*, September 30, 2015, http://ria.ru/spravka/20150930/1293215601.html.

9 Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis," *International Affairs* 89: 4(2013), 801.

10 Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend of Foe?,* (Westport, London: Praeger Security International, 2007), 17.

11 *Ibid*.

The collapse of the USSR created significant global geopolitical shift that also left its mark in the Middle East. Left without is strongest ally, Hafez al-Assad tried to find new directions for Syria's foreign policy. One of those was moving closer to the US and the Western countries. This was expressed by Syria's support of the US-led coalition forces in the Gulf War. Nevertheless Syria still valued its historical ally and looked at possibilities to restore relations lost in the result of the collapse of the USSR.

Thus almost immediately after the official dissolution of the USSR in December 1991 Syria recognized the Russian Federation as an official successor of the USSR. This step was followed by the exchange of official visits by Russian parliamentarians and Syrian officials to discuss further perspectives of cooperation. Despite its decline, Russia still remained important partner for Syria especially as Syrian army was armed with Soviet-made weapons and relied on continuation of supplies of ammunitions, parts and expertise in maintenance. It should be noted that the military cooperation changed after the collapse of the USSR. Firstly, arms sells were reduced to a small trickle. This was due to Russia's different views on how to shape its influence in the Middle East as well as the financial situation of the state that didn't allow massive support of other states. The financial tensions were noticeable also in Russian-Syrian relations where the new Russian government tried to pursue Syria to repay credits that amounted to approx. 7-10 billion USD given by the USSR to Syria.[12]

The relations improved around 1994 when Russia started describing Syria as its main ally in the region and saw that improved relations would help in the Middle East Peace Process, where Russia tried to become one of the facilitators and trough this acquire international recognition as a constructive player in global politics. During the period of improved relations Russia wrote off 2 billion USD of Syria's debt. This improved hopes of Syria and also other Arab states that Russia would renew its support for them. At the same time Arab countries were aware of domestic challenges of the Russian Federation. Resources and domestic constrains were factors that limited Russia's capacity to renew its presence and support in the Middle East. Furthermore Russian bet on the success of the Middle East Peace Process met with Israel's reluctance to acknowledge Russia as a full partner in peace talks. So in the end Russia was unable to fulfil its aspirations as well as hopes and needs of Syria and other Arab countries. Discrepancy between rhetoric and promises of Russian officials and actual deeds was one of the characteristics of relations between Russia and Syria for future years to come. For example Russian officials didn't accept Syrian offer to buy S 300 medium-range surface-to-air missiles despite their previous statements that Russia is prepared to supply Syria with any military technology that it desires.

[12] Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend of Foe?,* (Westport, London: Praeger Security International, 2007), 18.

Next step in relations of Russia and Syria was taken in July 1999 with Hafez al-Assad's official visit to Russia. Statements from Russian officials after the meeting of Hafez al-Assad with his Russian counterpart Boris Yeltsin indicated that the main discussion was on the Middle East Peace Process but statements before the visit indicated that the main interest of Syria was to renew the Russian arms deliveries, especially anti-tank weapon systems.[13] Even before the meeting of presidents the increase in military cooperation between Russia and Syria was visible. Regular arms deliveries to Syria began around 1998 and steadily increased. Since 1998 Russia has returned as largest supplier of arms to Syria, although the amount of trade is far less than during the Cold War. Hafez al-Assad's active diplomacy was one of factors that helped to renew the military cooperation.

Not long after the meeting of Hafez al-Assad and Boris Yeltsin both countries saw accession of new presidents. Vladimir Putin became the President of the Russian Federation in 1999, but Bashar al Assad succeeded in presidential position after his father's death in 2000. New presidents continued relations as set by their predecessors. Mostly relations were conducted by low and medium level diplomats with some exceptions of visits by the highest officials. The Minister of Defence of Syria visited Russia in 2001; in January 2003 Russia received Syrian Vice-President Abdel Halim Khaddam. During his visit Syria's Vice-President conveyed the willingness of Bashar al Assad to meet with Vladimir Putin.[14] The visit of Syria's Vice-President happened in turbulent times — just before the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Russia and Syria, the latter at the time holding a non-permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council, opposed sanctions against Iraq and a possible armed solution. The possibility of invasion was of the highest importance for Syria because in some instances Assad's regime was mentioned among other countries listed by the US President George Bush as the "axis of evil". The "Axis of evil" was originally composed of Iran, Iraq and North Korea, but in May 2002 the senior US officials mentioned also Syria as a country that tries to acquire weapons of mass destruction.[15] So it was important for Syria to secure support from Russia to deter possible actions of the US.

Next step in Russo-Syrian relations was taken in 2005 with the President Bashar al Assad's first visit to Russia. This was one of the most fruitful meetings between the two states as delegations signed six bilateral agreements on cooperation in fields of energy, transport, investment and other. During the visit the ministers of finance of both countries signed the Protocol on settlement of Syria's debt to Russia. Provisions of the Protocols meant that Russia wiped off three-quarters of

[13] "*Assad, Yeltsin begin talks,*" CNN. July 6, 1999. http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/meast/9907/06/syria.russia/.

[14] "*Opening Remarks at a Meeting with Vice-President Abdel-Galim Khaddam of Syria*", January 15, 2003, Accessed on July 20, 2016. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/21836.

[15] "Syria profile — Timeline," *BBC*. May 6, 2016. Accessed on July 20, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995.

a 13.4 billion USD debt that Syria owed mainly for arms sales during the Cold War.[16] The rest of the debt would be partially repaid or given to Russia by opening an account in the Bank of Syria for buying goods or to be used for future investment projects in Syria. Statements of the presidents indicated that the meeting was seen as a facilitator of closer ties between both countries. The only issue that hasn't been mentioned was the military cooperation and no deals related to this area have been signed. The Declaration of the meeting also touched upon the situation in the Middle East indirectly indicating the Russian and Syrian concern about actions of the US in Iraq and willingness to limit the current role of the US in the region. Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia was looking at how to reintroduce itself as a key player in the Middle East. This was needed to secure the Russian position as one of the great powers in the multipolar world that Russian officials tried to construct, as mentioned in the "Strategy of National Security of Russian Federation until 2020" approved in 2000.[17] Due to its complexity the Middle East Peace Process didn't help in this matter. Domestic factors were also of great importance — continuing military operations in Chechnya against Muslim population could alienate other Muslim countries so it was important to secure their support or at least neutrality on this issue.

As for Syria and other Arab countries — their interest in larger presence of Russia was mainly to balance the US and its ally Israel that remained one of the strongest regional players. After the invasion of Iraq and mounting tensions between the US, Iran and Syria, more active Russian presence, even a diplomatic one, could help to deter the US. Syria also benefited from Russia's position in the UN Security Council, where it could effectively block any attempt by the US or other states to introduce resolutions that were against Syria.

The improvement in the political dialogue between Russia and Syria also spilled over to other forms of cooperation. In autumn of 2008, just a few months after the war between Georgia and Russia, Kremlin announced plans to upgrade Tartus naval facilities so they could be used by larger ships. The upgrade continued in 2009 when Russian military contracts reached 19.4 billion USD.[18] The upgrade included repairs of the floating docks and other facilities as well as installation of new mobile coastal and anti-ship missile defence systems. The importance of Tartus was greatly increased in 2009 after the official announcement of the Ukrainian government that they will not extend the lease of the Russian naval base in Crimea beyond 2017. Reacting to this, Russia declared the plans to extend its base

[16] Hugh Macleod, "*From Syrian fishing port to naval power base: Russia moves into the Mediterranean*". *The Guardian*, 8 October 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/oct/08/syria.russia

[17] "Strategiia natsional'noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii do 2020 goda". Accessed on August 9, 2016, http://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/294430

[18] Jiri Valenta, Leni Friedman Valenta, "Why Putin Wants Syria," *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2016), Vol. 23, Issue 2.

in Novorossiysk that could provide partial alternative for installations in Crimea. Similar plans were made regarding Ochamphire in Russian controlled Abkhazia. The port of Ochamphire could be used for stationing ships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet.[19] Outside the Black Sea the role of Tartus as a supply point would also be greatly increased especially for vessels operating in the Mediterranean. Port of Tartus, military cooperation and support for Bashar al Assad remained the elements that described Russian and Syrian relations by the start of the Arab Spring that swept across North Africa and the Middle East in 2010.

The last years before the Syrian civil war saw changing relations between Syria, its neighbours and the Western countries. In 2008 Bashar al Assad met with the President of France Nicolas Sarkozy in Paris and the newly-elected President of Lebanon. This signalled a normalization of relations between Syria and Lebanon after decades of tensions and military collisions and occupation of Lebanese territory by the Syrian forces. Syria and Lebanon also establishes diplomatic relations thus fully recognizing Lebanon's *de iure* status. In the beginning of 2010 a huge step in the US-Syrian relations has been made as the US posted its first ambassador to Syria after a five-year break.[20] This however has been shadowed by the renewal of the US sanctions against Syria in May 2010 after arguing that Syria supported terrorist groups and was seeking weapons of mass destruction. So in the last years before the civil war Syria saw improvements in the diplomatic dialogue with western countries though actions by both sides still showed existing distrust that also shaped Western support in the Syrian civil war.

Syrian Conflict and Russia's Aims

In 2010 and 2011 the Southern and Eastern parts of the Mediterranean were swept by the Arab Spring — a protest movement that toppled regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen and led to liberal reforms in Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon and Oman. In some countries, like in Libya for example, initial protests led to a government crackdown on protesters that further escalated into civil war. Similar scenario took place in Syria, where government tried to subdue initial protests in Deraa by shooting protesters who demanded release of political prisoners. This action created nationwide protests that made al Assad to rethink his tactics. After protests continued Syria's government made the decision to release dozens of political prisoners and lift the state of emergency.[21] When this didn't give necessary

[19] "Bagapsh: Dogovorennosti o sozdanii punkta bazirovaniia Chernomorskogo flota v Omchire est," *Intefrax*. 26 January, 2009, http://www.interfax.ru/russia/59268.

[20] "Syria profile — Timeline," BBC. May 6, 2016. Accessed on July 20, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995.

[21] *Ibid*.

results Assad's government returned to proven tactics — deployed army against the protesters. Syria was pushed into a bloody civil war that still continues to rage.

Russia has been one of the actors involved in the Syrian crisis — at the beginning as a mediator and a diplomatic player, but later as one of the parties in the conflict. In this section of the article the author examines Russian policy in Syria since the beginning of the crisis, moving from wider geopolitical context of Russian foreign policy to more practical gains of Russia.

Syrian Crisis in the Context of the Great Power Politics

Since the collapse of the USSR and the establishment of the Russian Federation as its legal heir, the Russian policymakers tried to find Russia's place in the new international system. In the first years after the Cold War the global system was unipolar — dominated by the US and its Western allies. As years moved on other powers like China and India began to emerge with their economic, military and political potential. Russia as well began to defend the idea of a multipolar world with Russia as one of the Great Powers. This worldview is expressed in basic documents of Russia's foreign policy. For example in The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation that has been adopted in 2000 describes unipolarity as a destabilizing factor as it undermines the role of the United Nations Security Council and seeks usage of "power methods" that bypasses established legal mechanisms.[22] In order to counter this "Russia shall seek to achieve a multi-polar system of international relations that really reflects the diversity of the modem world with its great variety of interests."[23] The Foreign Policy Concept approved in 2008 by the new President Dmitry Medvedev and the Concept approved by the President Vladimir Putin in 2013, add new dimension of multi-polarity.

The Concept of 2008 speaks of different civilizations that shape the world order "It is for the first time in the contemporary history that global competition is acquiring a civilizational dimension which suggests competition between different value systems and development models within the framework of universal democratic and market economy principles."[24] The Foreign Policy Concept of 2008 also adds more confrontational aspect stating that as the Western world loses its dominant position, it tries to pursue policy to contain Russia.[25]

The newest Foreign Policy Concept was approved in 2013 by the returning President Vladimir Putin. This document continues to describe the world order as

[22] "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," Approved by the President of the Russian Federation V. Putin, June 28, 2000, http://archive.mid.ru//Bl.nsf/arh/1EC8DC0818 0306614325699C003B5FF0?OpenDocument.

[23] *Ibid*.

[24] "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," Approved by Dmitry A. Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, 12 July 2008, http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116.

[25] *Ibid*.

more multi-polar with global power shifting away from the West towards the East — primarily the Asia-Pacific region. New concept also more deeply establishes civilizational approach to world politics — "For the first time in modern history, global competition takes place on a civilizational level, whereby various values and models of development based on the universal principles of democracy and market economy start to clash and compete against each other. Cultural and civilizational diversity of the world becomes more and more manifest."[26] In order to not to let civilizations develop their relations in the manner described by Samuel Huntington in "Clash of civilizations and remaking of World Order", Russia tries to encourage wider "partnership of cultures, religions and civilizations".[27] Another important issue that derives from multi-polar and civilizational approach to world politics is that now a civilization or state can't impose its worldview on other civilizations. In the nutshell Russia's described approach isn't compatible with the ideas of universal values and standards.

The idea of a multi-polar world order in which centres of power are within specific civilizations is beneficial not only to Russia, as it provides ideological basis for domestic developments in Russia — its movement towards a more authoritarian and centralized state that sees neighbouring countries as its historical sphere of interest and part of the same civilization. This worldview could be attractive also to other countries that see Western values and democracy in a negative light for example Syria and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa — especially those that still have strong authoritarian leaders or elites.

Basic foreign policy documents of Russia show the main understanding of the world order of Russian policymakers. Documents analyzed have shown Russia's willingness to create a truly multi-polar world where there is a limited role of universal values or norms. Existing elements of international governance like the UN Security Council are still useful but mostly to regulate relations between great powers. Dmitri Trenin writes that "ideal world governance, in Moscow's view, is built on a great-power consensus: exactly the Rooseveltian idea of four global policemen".[28] This view is applicable also to the case of Syria where Russia defends the idea that the solution of crisis can be achieved by all interested parties, especially the great powers.

If the great-power approach is more *realpolitical* in its nature, the civilizational approach provides element of identity. Idea of existence of civilizations regulated by various religions, values, cultures and traditions, including those of governance, is used to limit the impact of universal values such as human rights. Promotion

[26] "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin, 12 February 2013. http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186.

[27] *Ibid*.

[28] Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance. Russia's Syria Policy,* (Carnegie Moscow Center, February 2013), 10. Accessed on 16 August, 2016, http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=50909.

of worldview that is based on civilizations lets Russia to construct itself as a "core state" that embodies the essence of civilization and acts as protector not only of itself but also of the whole civilization.

Russia's approach to the Syrian conflict provides foundation for the idea of the multi-polar world governed by great powers. Russia's position on Syria is characterized by its unwillingness to allow another regime change governed by Western powers, because of the uncertainty of what the new regime would look like and what would be its political preferences. Regime change also could increase the role of the US and other Western countries in MENA region as well as limit Russia's already scanty presence. So it can be argued that Russian position in Syria was partly dictated by its unwillingness to tolerate expansion of Western sphere of influence in MENA.

Secondly, Russia and its political elite have sensitive relations with revolutions especially if they have a serial character. In this aspect, the Arab Spring can be compared with the Colour Revolutions that toppled political elites of several Russian neighbours — Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in 2003-2005. Russia considered these revolutions not as the result of a societal frustration with corrupt and ineffective political elites but as externally governed regime changes. The fear of similar scenario recurring in Russia was one of the reasons why Vladimir Putin greatly limited the operation of non-governmental organizations especially those that receive funding outside Russia. Other limitations on the freedom of speech and increasing control over mass media in Russia can also be explained by this type of fear, especially when Russian regime faced massive protests after the parliamentary elections of December 2011.[29] So possibility of a "Russian Spring" was becoming more real for Kremlin. In addition, if the wave of regime changes that happened during Arab Spring would be stopped in Syria it would force the Western states to rethink their approach.

Russia's Interests in the Middle East

Speaking of Russia's interests in the Middle East it is interesting to once again look at the Foreign Policy Concepts as they give an overall policy framework for specific regions. On the Russian interests in the Middle East the Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 speaks firstly about stabilizing the situation in the region describing Russia as co-sponsor of the Middle East Peace Process. Furthermore, the Concept includes also additional aims of Russia "Russia's priority in this context will be restoring and strengthening its positions, particularly the economic ones, in this

[29] Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance. Russia's Syria Policy,* (Carnegie Moscow Center, February 2013), 12, Accessed on 16 August, 2016, http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=50909.

region of the world, so rich and important for our interests."[30] Syria isn't mentioned as a country of special interest for Russia. The only country that is highlighted is Iran which Russia seeks to develop further relations with.

The Concept approved by the President Medvedev in 2008 specifies Russia's interests in further developing relations with Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Libya and Pakistan "and other leading regional States in bilateral and multilateral formats".[31] The document also mentions the Middle East Peace Process and Russia's role as one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council in finding a long term settlement. In this Concept the Russian policy makers give more attention to regional multilateral platforms like the Organization of the Islamic Conference and the League of Arab States. The Concept of 2008 also includes Russia's interests in developing closer economic cooperation with countries of the Middle East particularly in the energy sector.[32]

The Foreign Policy Concept of 2013 continues to focus on the necessity to stabilise the situation in the Middle East and North Africa mentioning Russia's role in the UN Security Council and in the Quartet of International Mediators. Specific attention is given to Iranian nuclear program and the need for diplomatic settlement. The Concept also mentions Russia's interest in promoting the "establishment of a zone free from weapons of mass destruction and their delivery means in the Middle East." This point resembles the narrative pursued by the US and its allies, especially as weapons of mass destruction were mentioned as the mains reason for invasion in Iraq. Only in the case of Russia it is emphasized that the stabilisation in the Middle East has to be achieved with "respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity of states and non-interference in their internal affairs".[33] This statement means that Russia is against invasions even if they are against regimes that use large scale violence against their populations — like in Syria. Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states is related to Russia's mantra on the priority of international law and role of the UN Security Council. However, Russia's own actions have several times violated these principles — for example in the case of war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 or more noticeable — with the annexation of Crimea in March 2014. These actions indicate that Russia is ready to use sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference as concepts to protect itself against actions of other states that can be harmful for Russian national interest. But at the same time, Russia ignores these principles when it is beneficial

[30] "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," Approved by the President of the Russian Federation V.Putin 28 June, 2000, http://archive.mid.ru//Bl.nsf/arh/1EC8DC08180306614325699C003B5FF0?OpenDocument.

[31] "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," Approved by Dmitry A. Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, 12 July 2008, http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/4116.

[32] *Ibid*.

[33] "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin, 12 February 2013. http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186.

for it, especially in regions that according to Russia's understanding are its sphere of interests.

Overall in relation to the Middle East and Syria, the Foreign Policy Concepts give limited insight. This can be explained by the medium term nature of these documents. Despite these limitations the Concepts give overall understanding of the context of Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East, where the Middle East Peace Process and stability have remained vital elements for Russia. Though by prioritizing stability Russia also gives priority to regimes that existed in the Middle East before the Arab Spring, including that of Bashar al Assad in Syria. By giving priority to diplomatic negotiations in order to solve the crisis in the Middle East Russia also tries to raise its role as that of the country with specific ties to old regimes of the Middle East, so it becomes more valuable for other, especially Western, countries. This somewhat is a continuation of the policy that began in the first years of the Russian Federation, when the Middle East Peace Process was seen as the opportunity for Russia to show its value in the international politics.

Russia would like to play a larger role in the Middle East but currently it lacks conventional capacity in comparison to the United States. Therefore Russia tries to use opportunities to improve its standing in the region. This can be seen as Russia's involvement in the Middle East Peace Process as well as in discussions on Iran's Nuclear Program. Russia also gives a special role to Iran by keeping a friendly neutrality on the issue of Iranian Nuclear Program as well as during Syrian conflict. Iran has been one of the closest supporters of Syria and al Assad. It has financed Syria's army and other forces to defend the Syrian regime. Iran has also another role in the Syrian civil war and Russian involvement in it. In one of his interviews, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia Sergey Lavrov has stated that Syria is just a part of the "great geopolitical game" and that many outside forces "have Iran, rather than Syria on their minds".[34] Syria with its Shia regime is one of the remaining partners of Iran, so if Syria falls and the control over the country goes into the hands of the Sunni majority, Iran could possibly lose its ally and accordingly also its role in the region. Iran as a much larger and economically and military powerful state for Russia is a more important partner than Syria. So by helping the Syrian regime Russia is increasing its stock with Iranians.

Regime Survival as Russia's Priority in Syria

As examined above — Russia's foreign policy makers are strongly holding to the idea of a multi-polar world with Russia as one of the Great Powers. Since the start of the war in Syria Russia has kept strong elements of this type of worldview in its foreign policy. To support its role as one of the Great Powers

[34] "Syria's al-Assad being used in 'great geopolitical game' — Lavrov," RT, 23 October, 2012, https://www.rt.com/politics/syria-russia-human-rights-lavrov-024/.

the Russian officials have in their approach tried to limit possibilities that Western states take initiative in the conflict. This was largely based on the events in Libya where action sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council later led to the fall of the previous regime.

Libya was one of the states shaken by the Arab Spring. In this North African country the protests that began in February 2011 were driven against the longstanding President Muammar al-Gaddafi. The protests quite quickly escalated into an armed revolt. In order to limit the escalation into a full scale civil war and to protect the civilians, on 17 March 2011 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1973 that demanded "immediate establishment of a ceasefire and a complete end to violence and all attacks against, and abuses of, civilians".[35] In order to secure the protection of civilians the UN Security Council sanctioned a ban on all flights in Libya airspace. The Resolution also sanctioned the Member States that have notified the Secretary-General of the UN "to take all necessary measures … to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi, while excluding a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory".[36] Russia abstained in the voting but after the adoption of the Resolution the Russian officials expressed their critique of it.

In order to implement the Resolution, in March 2011 the NATO-led coalition enforced a no-fly zone and by the end of March took over all military operations in Libya. These included the no-fly zone, arms embargo (including transfer of mercenaries to Libya) as well as air and naval strikes against forces that carried out attacks against civilians.[37] The mission was concluded on 31 October 2011 when the activities of Libyan opposition groups and air strikes of coalition members led to the fall of al-Gaddafi, him being killed by the opposition. Nevertheless it did not lead to stability or democratic transformation of the country. Libya is still interwoven with conflict. In addition, the radical Islamists got hold of al-Gaddafi army's weapons and use them to further destabilise the situation in other regions of Africa. Therefore Libya was and still is one of the unsuccessful episodes of the Arab Spring.

Previous ties with the Syrian regime, events in Libya, unwillingness to see the continuation of Colour Revolutions and uncertainty about the foreign policy orientation of the Syrian opposition were factors that influenced Russia in giving its backing to Bashar al Assad. On Lybia and Syria the Westerns countries — mainly the United States and countries in the European Union — were opposing Russia

[35] "Security Council Approves 'No-Fly Zone' over Libya, Authorizing 'All Necessary Measures' to Protect Civilians, by Vote of 10 in Favour with 5 Abstentions," United Nations Security Council, 17 March, 2011. http://www.un.org/press/en/2011/sc10200.doc.htm#Resolution.

[36] *Ibid.*

[37] "Operations and missions: past and present," NATO. Accessed on 21 July, 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52060.htm?selectedLocale=en.

and supporting the opposition forces as drivers of democratisation. So that is no surprise that with the escalation of conflict in Syria the Western countries took steps to push Syria's regime into collaborating with the opposition. The Western powers introduced a series of sanctions for purposes of coercing al Assad to resolve the crisis by negotiations. The EU introduced travel ban for several Syrian officials. At first the list excluded al Assad and his family, but when the initial sanctions didn't give necessary results, also al Assad and his family was included in the list. Travel ban for Syrian officials was additionally strengthened by the common EU-US coordinated oil embargo in summer of 2011.[38]

The Western states have remained negative towards Bashar al Assad and his supporters. Several cases have shown that the Syrian regime can rely on Russia as their supporter although Bashar al Assad is not always easily influenced by the Russian officials. Belonging to a religious minority of Alevite Shia Muslims the Assad family and its closer allies have governed Syria and provided the USSR and later Russia with a partner in the Middle East. However, since the protests of 2011 the position of current political elite in Syria has become less stable in some instances being only few steps away from losing power. In these cases Russia has put forward initiatives that helped the current regime to remain in power.

Firstly, Russian actions for protection of the current Syrian elite were noticeable in the UN Security Council where in October 2011 and February 2012 Russia vetoed drafted resolutions that condemned the grave and systematic human rights violations in Syria.[39] On both occasions Russian *veto* was supported by China. Chinese motivation to vote against the proposed resolutions was corresponding to a wider framework of Chinese foreign policy where China opposed foreign intervention but would support a regime change if it was done by the will of the people. In addition China's Deputy United Nations Envoy Wang Min mentioned that pressuring only the Syrian regime will "cause further escalation of the turmoil and let the crisis spill over to other countries in the region".[40] Russia also tried to counter initiatives outside the United Nations. In early 2012 the Contact Group for Syria — the "Group of Friends of Syria" — was created but Russian officials compared this to a similar group that was created in case of Libya and didn't prevent the escalation of the Libyan conflict.

In the next years of the Syrian conflict Russia has several times come to Assad's aid but twice it was when al Assad's regime was hanging by a thread. Once it was in August 2013 when the information that chemical weapons have been used during attacks in Damascus appeared in the media. Almost a year earlier the US President

[38] Francesco Giumelli, *How EU sanctions work: A new narrative*, (EU Institute for Security Studies, 2013), pp. 35 Accessed on August 19, 2016, http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/Chaillot_129.pdf.

[39] Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis," *International Affairs* 89: 4(2013), 799.

[40] Mordechai Chaziza, "Soft Balancing Strategy in the Middle East: Chinese and Russian Vetoes in the United Nations Security Council in the Syria Crisis," *China Report* 50: 3 (2014), 252.

Barack Obama stated that the usage of chemical weapons is the "red line" for stronger US involvement in the Syrian civil war. After the incident in August 2013 the US officials started discussing necessary steps against the Syrian regime. One of the possible scenarios was an air strike although other types of force were not excluded. For international society, especially the Western states, it was important to send a strong signal that the usage of chemical weapons by either side would not be tolerated and would face strong consequences.

Understanding the situation, Russia took up the role as one of the key negotiators to find a solution that would remove the possibility of strikes against Assad's forces and his regime as such. After the series of discussions between the US and Russian officials involving arms control experts the agreement was reached on 14 September 2013. Syria had to remove and destroy its chemical weapons arsenal by the middle of 2014.[41]

The agreement saved Bashar al Assad and Syria's Army from the US strikes and greatly increased Russia's role in finding solutions to the Syrian crisis. Russia showed that it had special channels of communication with the Syrian regime that could be used for influencing al Assad and his closer allies. However, other cases showed that the Russian influence over al Assad is either limited or Russia lacks or isn't using the leverage at its disposal to influence the Syrian regime towards a more consensual approach.[42] Dmitri Trenin writes that "Throughout the conflict, Russia has continued to supply the Syrian armed forces with weapons and equipment under past contracts and even printed banknotes for the Syrian national bank".[43] Therefore it could have used this existing cooperation to influence al Assad in accepting deals in order to stabilise the situation.

One of the critical points for Russia and Syria came in September 2015 when in a surprise statement the President Putin announced Russian involvement in Syrian war to counter advances of Daesh. The decision was made when earlier the Syrian army lost territories to Daesh advances and in September 2015 controlled only 20-25% of its own territory. It has been said that during the clashes with Daesh the loses of the Syrian army raised serious doubts about its capacity to sustain operations.

On 30 September 2015 Russia started its military operation in Syria to counter Daesh. Russia's main approach can be called a safe one as it was mainly using air strikes. In addition to that Russia kept its operation low-cost by using munitions made during 1970-s and 1980-s. Nevertheless, Russia's initial proposal for involvement was to fight Daesh, the support for al Assad's regime wasn't lost. In

[41] Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. and Russia Reach Deal to Destroy Syria's Chemical Arms," The New York Times. 14 September, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/15/world/middleeast/syria-talks.html?_r=0.

[42] Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance. Russia's Syria Policy,* (Carnegie Moscow Center, February 2013), 19, Accessed on 16 August, 2016, http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=50909.

[43] *Ibid*.

months to follow positions of the Syrian opposition were targeted as well as those of Daesh. That helped the Syrian army to restore the control over some of the lost territories.

At the same time Russia changed its diplomatic tactics and although it continued to support the Syrian regime Russian diplomats stated readiness to discuss the possibility of a Syria without Bashar al Assad at its front thus reacting to the Western focus on removing al Assad. The Russian diplomats explored readiness of their Western colleagues to discuss regime without Bashar al Assad but with majority of current political elite. This was an additional signal to Bashar al Assad, showing that Russia has influence on the future of Syrian regime.

On 14 March 2016 Russia's President Vladimir Putin announced the withdrawal of the main part of Russian forces in Syria. The decision was justified by achievement of mission objectives — "Mr Putin said that Russia's Armed Forces have fulfilled their main mission in Syria".[44] During the meeting with Vladimir Putin, Russia's Minister of Defence Sergei Shoigu stated that during the operation "Over 2,000 criminals who have come from Russia have been eliminated in Syria's territory, including 17 field commanders. Our air force destroyed 209 facilities for producing, processing and transferring fuel, as well as 2,912 sources of petroleum product delivery. … In total, with support from our air force, the Syrian troops liberated 400 towns and over 10,000 square kilometres of territory".[45] Overall Russia's operation in Syria was described as a success, in practical terms Russian air strikes helped to counter Daesh offensive and push them back but main benefactor was Syrian army and Syrian regime. It can be argued that by improving the situation of al Assad's regime, Russia once more saved the Syrian regime from collapsing.

For Russia the operation was an opportunity to show its capabilities to quickly deploy forces and sustain coordinated military operation by using air power, naval forces and, according to some information, special operations forces and intelligence officers. But more importantly Russian operation in Syria forced other states into dialogue with Russia in order to coordinate mutual operations to avoid attacking each other.[46] Nevertheless Russian officials were interested in a much larger coordination not only technical and not only limited to Syria or the Middle East.

One purpose of Russian operation in Syria is revealed in the speech of Vladimir Putin in the United Nations General Assembly when just two days before the operation in Syria began, he urged other world leaders to create an anti-terrorist alliance: "Relying on international law, we must join efforts to address

[44] "Telephone conversation with President of Syria Bashar al-Assad," President of Russia, 14 March, 2016. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51512.

[45] "Meeting with Sergei Lavrov and Sergei Shoigu," President of Russia, 14 March, 2016, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/51511.

[46] "Russia-Israel military coordination talks on Syria to open on Tuesday," *Reuters*, 5 October, 2015. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-israel-idUSKCN0RZ24820151005

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."[47] He also mentioned the role of great powers in shaping international order "In 1945, the countries that defeated Nazism joined their efforts to lay a solid foundation for the post-war world order. Let me remind you that key decisions on the principles defining interaction between states, as well as the decision to establish the UN, were made in our country, at the Yalta Conference of the leaders of the anti-Hitler coalition."[48]

Putin's speech and Russia's operation in Syria can be seen as coordinated events that were aimed at creating new alliances of world powers to fight against terrorist threat. If this succeeded, Russia from an aggressor would become one of the problem solvers. This transition would switch attention away from Ukraine and would help Russia to get out of the political and economical isolation that it put itself in with annexation of Crimea and military operation in Eastern Ukraine. Historical examples mentioned in Putin's UN speech weren't coincidental because same approach was used by the USSR in the Second World War when before the war the USSR was one of the aggressors due to the invasion of Finland, but later became one of the Allied powers and was involved in shaping post-war international order.

Conclusion

Russia and Syria have a long history of relations that is characterized by pragmatism when states perceive each other as necessary partners. Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has been looking for possibilities to return to the Middle East as one of the Great Powers that is involved in regional affairs. In addition, Russian officials see the Middle East as the region that can help Russia to return to a Great Power status.

Russia's approach to Syrian conflict since 2011 is based on a wider framework of Russian foreign policy that tries to implement multi-polar world order with Russia as one of the powers. Russia's policy is focused on reaching objectives in Syria, wider Middle East and also in global politics. Russia's main aim in Syria was to secure the survival of Bashar al Assad's regime as one of the friendly regimes in region. In the wider region Russia is interested in sustaining the current power relations among regional powers. If the regime in Syria changes and representatives of the Sunni majority gain control over the state's future political orientation it could impact the future Shia-Sunni relations. The Syrian regime is also important

[47] "70th session of the UN General Assembly," President of Russia, 28 September, 2015. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385.

[48] *Ibid*.

in the case of Iran. Russia can gain attractiveness by staying at al Assad's side — it sends a strong signal to other authoritarian leaders who have cooperation with Russia or are in the process of choosing its allies. During the Syrian crisis Russia has shown its position as a supporter of regimes even if they have limited control over the state and the support of its population that of the foreign audiences is highly negative.

In global political framework Russian policy in Syria is focused on limiting actions of the Western states, especially those of the USA, by showing that Russia will not accept regime changes that are made without its consent. With this Russia is trying to limit the possibilities of its own regime change.

Russian military operation from September 2015 until March 2016 can be seen as an operation to fight Daesh, to support and save the Syrian regime and to create the necessity for the Western powers to start a dialogue with Russia on coordination of actions in Syria and possibly on globally coordinated fight against terrorism. This would help Russia to crawl out of the political and economical isolation created by its annexation of Crimea and its military operations in Eastern Ukraine.

Russia has a potential to become an important partner in finding solutions of the Syrian conflict. Russia can also share responsibility for fighting Daesh. But it is important for international society not to barter Russia's involvement in the fight against terrorism with grave breaches of international law that happened with the annexation of Crimea.

TURKEY'S CHANGING SYRIA POLICY: FROM DESIRED PROACTIVISM TO REACTIVISM

Osman Bahadir Dincer *and* ***Mehmet Hecan***[1]

In the context of Turkey's Middle East policy having been evolving since early 2000s, the Syrian case is perhaps the most important one as it has served as a sort of the main benchmark concerning whether Turkey's regional policy has been working or not. This is so because Turkey's Syria policy has so far demonstrated very examples of both success stories and challenges in Turkey's initiatives towards the region. While the geographical sphere including Syria was once seen as a site of opportunity, particularly in terms of its potential for economic and cultural integration with the rest of the region, following the Arab uprisings, the same site has, in time, transformed into an ongoing source of challenges. In this site, Turkey has been now facing unprecedented instability, turmoil and humanitarian crisis which demonstrate themselves in different forms like refugee crisis and spread of belligerent non-state actors.

To be sure, Turkey's Syria policy has been a function of its opening towards the Middle East which was launched in the early 2000s. In a foreign policy opening, a country's dominant desire is certainly to play a pro-active role that can help increase its influence and shape the regional policies in line with its interests, preferences and visions. However, there is always a second possibility: a country can also come to be overwhelmed by regional dynamics and challenges which conversely influence and shape the same country's own approach. Turkey's foreign policy record with the Syrian case demonstrates both types of these experiences as Turkey's Syria policy has in time started to be highly characterized by a reactive stance rather than a proactive one in line with the growing complexities and cost of managing the Syrian conflict after the Arab uprisings.

It is the aim of this chapter to illustrate and explain the shift from *proactivizm* to *reactivizm* in Turkey's Syria policy by providing changing foreign policy contexts throughout the study here. In its nutshell, the study puts forward following points and inferences: I) Before the Arab uprisings, Turkey was quite successful in institutionalizing its bilateral relations with Syria around a win-win setting aiming to reap various economic, cultural and security gains, but the outbreak of protest movements posed a challenge as it became considerably hard for Turkey to maintain the relations with a political setting significantly contested inside Syria. Up until

[1] We would like to thank Burcu Sagiroglu for her generous help in preparing a media coverage for the study here.

that time, numerous gains covered in bilateral relations were mostly led by Turkey and its *proactivizm* characterized the period. II) Even though Turkey initially adopted a cautious and constructive approach aiming to ensure a soft transition in Syria mainly by trying to convince the regime to make the demanded reforms (March-August 2011), it was relatively a bit urgent to make a decision between the opposition and the regime (September 2011), as Turkey's geographical location, which is the first and most to face negative spillovers of a deepened civil war in Syria due to its close proximity, did not allow such a luxury in foreign policy. Various factors accounted for Turkey's early and daring decision to support the opposition vis-à-vis the regime like moral responsibility, the early misleading results of the "Arab Spring", and Turkey's overconfidence in its foreign policy initiatives in the Middle East at that time. As different from the preceding period, the new era's *proactivizm* in Turkey's Syria policy assumed a different nature as it aimed at regime change in Syria. III) In time, it did not take much to realize that Turkey's ruling conviction that Assad would be soon overthrown like the other authoritarian leaders in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya was short-sighted. Throughout 2013, it ultimately turned out that many factors like the resilience of the regime, sustained support from external actors and the fracturing nature of the Syrian opposition had not been taken much into consideration. This was a period in which Turkey's *proactivizm* was deeply exhausted and in one sense came to a halt as a result of many factors like the weakening of the Syrian opposition, increasing foreign involvement by Russia and Iran, radicalization on the ground and the Western allies' shift of their focus from the removal of Assad to the dealing with the spread of radical organizations and terrorism, thereby leaving Turkey alone in its Syria policy. IV) Unlike its Western allies, Turkey sustained the removal of Assad as the very epicenter of its Syrian policy for a longer time. Because of the path dependency which was created in time and the domestic-foreign policy interaction, it was really a difficult task for Turkish politicians to accept the mistakes and the changing realties on the ground. Yet, increasing negative spillovers of the conflict like the refugee crisis, spread of the PYD and growing number of radical terrorist organizations have ultimately changed Turkey's priorities in its Syrian policy. As a result, as of the second half of 2016, Turkey started to have a more ambiguous hierarchy of priorities in its Syria policy as the management of new challenges became as much important as, even more important than, the removal of Assad. In this respect, the period following 2013 in Turkey's Syria policy could be argued to be characterized by a considerable *reactivism* as Turkey's capacity to force a change on the grounds in Syria has been highly diminished and Turkey has ended up having to find reactive solutions to the unforeseen challenges. During this recent phase of the Syria policy, particularly 2016, Turkey has started to seek for pragmatic changes in its Syria policy, by taking account of Russia, Iran and even the Syrian regime itself more.

After this introductory section which has outlined the main points of the study here, the following sections will explain Turkey's changing Syria policy phase by phase. In doing so, the study will try to unpack causal variables which have led to

changes and revisions in Turkey's foreign context with respect to Syria. The last sections mostly include dynamic debates and fresh explanations aiming to illustrate the highly limited policy space for Turkey's foreign policy as this space is deeply constrained by multiple and complex setting of various international, regional and even non-state actors' policy preferences.

From Hostility to Aspirations for Regional Integration

To speak for general Turkish foreign policy, up until the late 1990s, Turkey had never developed a long-running engagement towards Syria. What is known as "Turkey's Syria Policy" is actually something new that has been evolving since then.[2] Until the late 1990s, a general sense of disengagement from the Middle East affairs and orientation towards the West in Turkey's traditional foreign policy had mainly limited Turkey's interactions with its counterparts in the region including Syria. As a matter of fact, the bilateral relations between the two countries had been even characterized by a number of contentious issues like Syria's claims over Hatay and disputes over water of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers as well as Syria's support to PKK terrorist organization. The accumulation of such challenges finally resulted in a significant tension between the two countries in the mid-1990s. However, the peak of tension, particularly aggravated by Syria's hosting PKK camps including its leader Abdullah Ocalan, also pushed both countries to establish a new *modus operandi* in their bilateral relations mostly on a positive ground. At this point, Adana Agreement was signed on 20 October 1998 and the agreement constituted a turning point in the relations considering that it put the basis for mutual cooperation against PKK terrorist organization and improvement of the bilateral relations in various aspects including political, economic, cultural ones.[3] This improvement in the relations further increased in the aftermath of Syrian President Bashar Assad's taking office in 2000.

During the succeeding era of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) beginning in 2002, Turkey started to experience a significant foreign policy activism. In the emergence of such a foreign policy dynamism, two well-known motives, which are generally associated with Ahmet Davutoglu, mattered: i) "zero problem" with the neighbors and ii) regional cultural and economic integration

[2] For outstanding works on Turkey-Syria relationship see: Raymond Hinnebusch and Ozlem Tur, *Turkey-Syria Relations — Between Enmity and Amity* (Ashgate: London, 2013); Fred Lawson, "The Beginning of a Beautiful Friendship: Syrian-Turkish Relations since 1998", in Fred Lawson (Ed.), *Demystifying Syria,* (London: SAQI, 2009).

[3] See the MFA's website for further analyses: http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-%E2%80%93syria.en.mfa.

based on an alternative civilizational perspective.[4] The activism driven by these two important features as well as a considerable pragmatism soon began to demonstrate itself particularly in the context of the Middle East. The relations with Syria also took their share from this Turkish proactivizm, leading to an extensive progress in bilateral relations. The gains were visible especially in the second half of the 2000s. During this time, official visits at various levels of Presidential, Prime Ministerial and Foreign Ministerial increased and considerable efforts to expand the relations accompanied this. This was even ornamented by a vacation that both Erdogan and Assad families spent in the Western coast of Turkey in August 2008.[5]

On 1 January 2007, a Free Trade Agreement was put into force in the name of enhancing bilateral trade. In September 2009, the parties also signed "Joint Political Declaration on establishing High Level Strategic Cooperation Council (HLSCC)." This was followed by a "Visa Exemption Agreement" in October 2009 within the scope of HLSCC and ensuing a total of 50 agreements which emphasized cooperation on various areas, such as politics, commerce, security, agriculture, culture, health, transportation, environment, education and water. In addition, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed in December 2009. In 2010, a further 13 agreements were also added to these. Also, as an attempt to turn the region into a site for economic opportunity and interdependence, in June 2010, Turkey, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon established a Quadripartite High Level Strategic Cooperation Council, which aimed to create a zone for free movement of goods and persons among the four countries. All these established a good ground so that the bilateral relations, having already started to thrive since early 2000s, could further develop in a more institutional framework.[6]

The flourishing relations between Turkey and Syria were clearly observed in bilateral trade, investment and tourism. For instance, following the entry of the Free Trade Agreement into force in 2007, there took place a drastic increase in the volume of bilateral trade, which, almost tripling, rose from US $797 million in 2006 to US $1,998 in 2010 (see the graph below). Beyond being an important foreign trade destination, Syria also turned into Turkey's vital gateway to the Middle East as Turkish exporters mainly used the Syrian route in reaching their goods to the rest of the region due to its cheapness and feasibility. The increasing Turkish investment in Syria also accompanied all this, while there was also a considerable increase in the number of tourists who travelled across the two countries' borders.

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4 Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik,* (Istanbul, Küre Yayınları, 2001), 13-93; Nurullah Ardıç, "Modernite, Kimlik, Siyaset: Ahmet Davutoğlu'nun Medeniyet Söylemi" in Talha Köse et al. (Eds), *Stratejik Zihniyet: Kuramdan Eyleme Ahmet Davutoğlu ve Stratejik Derinlik*, (Istanbul, Küre Yayınları, 2014), 47-88.

5 Yaşar Anter, "Hem Tatil Hem Siyaset İçin Bodrum'da", *Hurriyet*, 5 August 2008, http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/hem-tatil-hem-siyaset-icin-bodrumda-9588900.

6 The information in this paragraph highly draws on http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey%E2%80%93syria.en.mfa.

To illustrate, the number of touristic visits more than doubled following the Visa Exemption Agreement signed in 2009. Even later a common visa for Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey was proposed in early 2011. When it got to 2011, both sides had already started to talk about specific projects like construction of Syrian section of Kilis-Aleppo gas pipeline, restoration of Ottoman-era buildings, Syrian-Turkish dam, and export of Iranian gas to Syria via Turkey.[7]

Taken all this, it is for sure that starting from 2000's, the southern borderline neighboring Syria started to be seen as a site of opportunity. Thanks to its proactive policies, Turkey generally tried to benefit from this geography particularly in terms of its potential for economic and cultural relations with the rest of the region. In this sense, the logic of Turkey's engagement with the Middle East over Syria was underpinned by a win-win setting and mutual interdependency. This was certainly different from the preceding era in which Turkey had generally regarded the region as a contentious site in which it had to either manage or brush off varied challenges. However, following the Arab uprisings, the meaning of the same site started to change for Turkey one more time. Particularly in the context of Syria, the same geographical sphere has in time transformed into an ongoing source of challenges that is characterized by unprecedented instability and turmoil and which have so far created severe disturbances for Turkey on various fronts.

The Start of Arab Uprisings and Turkey's Changing Syria Policy

When the uprisings expanded to Syria, Turkey did not actually have a complete interest in challenging the status-quo in Syria, considering the already improved relations with the country at the very beginning. For this reason, despite the protests movements which started to spread out in March 2011, Turkey adopted a cautious approach. At this point, relying on its close relations with the Syrian administration, Turkey preferred assuming a transformative role by urging the regime to make reforms and address the democratic needs of the Syrian people. In this regard, Turkey continuously kept its pressure over the regime through numerous diplomatic maneuverings particularly led by that time's Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu. Turkey even offered technical assistance and proposed reforms to the regime to ensure a peaceful transition process in Syria.[8]

However, the regime's not implementing desired reforms, the continued violent suppression of protests and the resulting bloodshed slowly caused "a diplomatic dilemma" for many actors including Turkey. Even despite this, Turkey still tried to sustain its ties. At a time in which the US had already started to impose sanctions against the regime, Turkey opposed "Libya-like operations" in Syria and acted

[7] Based on media coverage.

[8] Based on media coverage.

more patiently expecting the regime to implement the demanded reform bills.[9] At this point, Davutoglu-Assad meeting dated August 9, 2011 was critical since before the meeting Turkey underlined that it would follow a different road map, if the talks fail.[10] After the meeting, Davutoglu stated that Assad would "launch reforms within weeks", yet no progress was recorded in ensuing period. That was a time when Turkey lost its patience, bringing its friendship with Syria nears a breaking point. As a result, in August, Turkey's "disengagement policy" started to take its shape. On August 29, Turkey suspended dialogue with Syria and later on it started to think over sanctions against Syria. Turkey's statements that "the regime will fall" was already illustrative in showing Turkey's open confrontation against the Syrian regime. Later, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan also set to cut all Turkey's ties with Syria.[11]

A New Syria Policy: Pouncing Above its Weight

Here, the critical point for Turkey's Syria policy was that it felt an urgency to make a choice between the regime and the opposition, which later created a dramatic path-dependency for Turkish foreign policy. The choice was made in the favor of the opposition. By this choice, Turkey not only gave up on playing a transformative role through its close ties with the regime, but also became a *de facto* part of the conflict in Syria, as Turkey's initial support for the Syrian opposition groups through hosting[12] turned into an open support in many aspects.[13] This was also a time in which Turkey's preceding proactive policies underpinned by mutual interdependency started to acquire a different character as it aimed at changing the regime in Syria.

It is for sure that a number of reasons drove Turkey to take a relatively fast and sharp decision in the favor of opposition. First of all, when the uprisings broke out in the Middle East, extending external support for the protestors rising against their authoritarian regimes constituted a sort of moral responsibility for the regional and international actors. As mentioned above, Turkey's "diplomatic dilemma" as a resultant of its failed attempts to convince the regime to make reforms also added

[9] Ernest Khoury, "Davutoglu: Assad Not Reforming Despite Our Best Efforts", *Al-Akhbar*, January 16, 2012, http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/3411.

[10] "6 Saatlik Kritik Görüşmeden İlk Detaylar", *Hurriyet*, August 9, 2011, http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/6-saatlik-kritik-gorusmeden-ilk-detaylar-18446872.

[11] Thomas Seibert, Erdogan set to cut all Turkey's ties with Syria", *The National,* September 27, 2011, http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/erdogan-set-to-cut-all-turkeys-ties-with-syria.

[12] Ian Black, "Turkey tells Bashar al-Assad to cease Syria repression", *The Guardian*, June 23, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jun/23/syria-bashar-al-assad-turkey-refugees.

[13] Semih İdiz, "How much support did Turkey provide to Syrian opposition?", *Al-Monitor*, March 1, 2016, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/turkey-davutoglu-does-not-trust-arabs.html.

to this. That's why, by giving support for the opposition, Turkey thought that it chose to be "on the right side of history."[14] With its pronounced support for the protest movements, Turkey also expected that it would further enhance its already rising regional and international clout, particularly among the peoples of the Middle East. At that time, surveys reported that the rate of people who had already a good image of Turkey was recorded as high as 75% and Turkey was placed to be second after Saudi Arabia in the ranking of the most favorably perceived countries throughout the region.[15] As a regional player seen highly influential, it was not an option for Turkey to stay neutral in the context of the civil conflict in Syria.

On the other hand, as much as the moral stance, Turkey's increasing foreign policy activism was also effective in its decision to take a daring confrontation against the Assad regime. Here, the foreign policy context during which the Arab uprisings caught Turkey was critical as it was a time in which Turkey's foreign policy activism reached a peak in positive terms particularly in the context of its initiatives concerning the Middle East. In such initiatives, not only being limited to Syria, Turkey had been also successful in rejuvenating its once dormant relations with many other regional countries. For instance, Turkey recorded significant strides in its relations with Egypt during the rule of Hosni Mubarak even though there was a lack of chemistry between the AKP cadres and the Mubarak regime. In a similar vein, despite Turkish state's early cautious approach due to the PKK problem and civil-military balances, Turkey initiated a normalization process with Kurds in the northern Iraq. Moving beyond the improvements in its bilateral relations with the regional countries, throughout the late 2000s, Turkey was also successful in increasing its regional clout in the Middle East through a number of mediation and facilitation efforts, which in turn added to its soft power.[16] For instance, in an attempt to mediate between Israel and Syria, Turkey maintained indirect talks in 2008.[17] In 2010, this was followed by its efforts to deal with the growing Iranian nuclear crisis in cooperation with Brazil.[18] When it assumed the G20 presidency in 2011 for 2015, Turkey, as a rising power, was even seen as a prime example of what then seemed an inexorable global shift in power away

[14] Ahmet Davutoğlu, "The three major earthquakes in the international system and Turkey", *The International Spectator* 48 (2013): 4.

[15] Meliha B. Altunişik, "Turkey: Arab Perspectives", *TESEV Foreign Policy Analyses Series* 11, (2010): 11, http://tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Turkey_Arab_Perspectives.pdf.

[16] Meliha Altunışık, "The Possibilities and Limits of Turkey's Soft Power in the Middle East", *Insight Turkey* 10(1), (2008): 41-54; Tarık Oğuzlu, "Soft Power in Turkish Foreign Policy", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 61(1) (2008): 81-97; These aspects also attracted the attention of Arab intellectuals: See S. al-Jamil, A. al-Qassab and others, *al Arab wa Turkiya: Tahadiyat al-Hader wa Rihanat al-Mustaqbal (The Arabs and Turkey: Present Challenges and Future Stakes),* (Doha: Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2012); Mohammad Abdul-Ati (ed), *Turkiya Bayna Tahadiyat al-Dakhel wa Rihanat al-Kharej, (Turkey between Domestic Challenges and External Stakes),* (Beirut: Aljazeera Center for Studies, 2009).

[17] Peter Walker, "Syria and Israel officially confirm peace talks", *The Guardian*, May 21, 2008.

[18] Parisa Hafezi, "Turkey, Brazil seal deal on Iran nuclear fuel swap", *Reuters*, May 16, 2010.

from great powers.[19] In short, when the Arab uprisings actually erupted, it did not actually catch an unprepared and weak Turkey. In contrast, there was a rising Turkey with a booming economy, an improving democracy, and most importantly with a considerable self-confidence in its foreign policy initiatives towards the Middle East as its preceding opening towards the region gained certain successes. However, the same self-confidence resulting from the feeling that it could change something in the Middle East later turned out to be a weakness rather than a strength for Turkey since it encouraged or even galvanized Turkey to take daring initiatives concerning the "Arab Spring" countries, pouncing above its weight and ignoring the complex realities of the uprisings.[20] Perhaps, Turkey's self-confidence is best illustrated by the following statement from Mr. Erdogan as the Premier vowed to pray in Damascus mosque 'soon'. In one occasion he stated:"We will go there [Damascus] in the shortest possible time, if Allah [God] wills it; and embrace our brothers. That day is close. We will pray near the grave of Salahaddin Ayyubi and pray in the Umayyad Mosque. We will pray for our brotherhood freely in Hejaz Railway Station."[21]

In the same context, it should be also noted that the early results of the Arab Spring also contributed to the overconfidence in the Turkish foreign policy by generating a misleading signaling effect. At that time, driven by the developments in the Middle East, minister Davutoglu held the conviction that the "Arab Spring" offered a promising opportunity for Turkey to lead a new order in the region.[22] Similarly Davutoğlu also claimed: "Whatever will be talked on Syria outside the country itself, from now on, it will be talked in Ankara, Istanbul and in the places where we are. Whatever steps will be taken concerning the future of Syria in the name of helping the country in reaching peace and prosperity, we will be in all."[23]

He also went on to argue that Turkey "represents a new idea and a new leadership that has the capacity to determine the future of the region."[24] As the master mind of Turkey's Middle East opening until that time, Davutoglu's conviction later highly underpinned Turkey's Syria policy.

On the other hand, while accounting for Turkey's changing Syria policy, the Muslim Brotherhood factor should not be also disregarded. Turkey's AKP

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19 "Political uncertainty costs G20 host Turkey its golden glow", *Financial Times*, September 21, 2015.

20 Osman B. Dinçer and Mustafa Kutlay, "Turkey's power capacity in the Middle East: limits of possible", *USAK Reports,* April 2012.

21 "Premier vows to pray in Damascus mosque 'soon'", *Hurriyet Daily News*, September 6, 2012, http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/premier-vows-to-pray-in-damascus-mosque soon.aspx?pageID=238&nID=29505&NewsCatID=338.

22 Kemal Kirişci, "Is Turkish foreign policy becoming pragmatic again?", *Brookings*, July 11, 2016, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2016/07/11/is-turkish-foreign-policy-becoming-pragmatic-again/.

23 Speech on the events in Syria at the Parliamentary General Assembly, 26 April 2012, available at http://www.mfa.gov.tr/sub.tr.mfa?52e904f9-78af-49b3-89b5-5b4bdb38d51f.

24 *Ibid*.

is known to have remained close to the organization thanks to their ideological proximity based on political Islam, as the Brotherhood, whose members were mostly in exile, tried to organize opposition to the Assad regime. It is also known that before the dialogue was suspended in August 2011, Turkey asked Assad to let the return of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria during the official talks with regime.[25] According to some, Turkey even offered the regime the assignment of "Muslim Brotherhood members to posts in the government in exchange of Ankara's support in ending the domestic turmoil."[26] In this regard, at that time the ideological roots of Turkey's hard decision between the regime and the opposition was also important. To put it differently, for the Turkish authorities there was not an ordinary Syrian opposition to which Turkey decided to support vis-à-vis the regime for no reason.

In a similar context, it was frequently argued that Turkey supported the Syrian opposition as it wanted to acquire more compatible allies in the "Arab uprising countries" by helping political Islamist movements rise to power. Even though these arguments might have some merits, it is evident that they do not explain the entirety of the story. As indicated in our coverage of Turkey's evolving Syria policy, Turkey's initial objective was to ensure a "soft transition" in the regime's secular state structure in a way that the opposition elements including political Islamists could get a better representation. Given its already improved relations with the regime, Turkey did not already have much reason to challenge the status quo in Syria. However, as time went on, the opportunity costs of different options changed dramatically and supporting the regime ceased to be a feasible option at least for Turkey itself.

Growing Exhaustion with the Syrian Conflict Engagement

In fact, up until mid-2013 the Syrian opposition made significant strides against the regime, especially when there was also an increasing number of defections from the Syrian army.[27] With this, the early impression was again that the regime would collapse, though not as fast as expected previously. However, 2013 showed that the conflict itself was sliding into a bloody stalemate rather than a conclusive victory of one side. The "revolution" once used to depict the opposition fight against regime became a lost cause and the Syrian conflict, in Hobbesian understanding, turned into "war of all against all." To the conflict which just started between the regime and the protestors, new actors like radical terrorist organizations were also added as

[25] "Syria rejects imposed reforms, Muslim Brotherhood not to form a party: Syrian FM to Turkish newspaper", *Al-Arabiya*, February 28, 2012, https://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/28/197511.html; Also see http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/48370.

[26] "Turkey 'offered Syria support' if Brotherhood given posts", *Ahramonline,* September 29, 2011, http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/22896.aspx.

[27] One of the authors' fieldwork observation in Syria (Tel Abyad) and Turkey's border to Syria between January 2013-October 2013.

new parties. This situation implicitly provided opportunities for different actors to make gains in the field (Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Daesh, etc.), which brought a multitude of problems with it and paved the way for further radicalization.[28] A point of no return was crossed and there emerged a vicious circle: the need to continue fighting against the regime led foreign countries to support the most effective groups on the ground and these were the more radical and religious-oriented groups. The more they received support, the more effective they became and the weaker the democratic groups became.[29] At this point, an incurable and irreparable breach occurred in Syria, solidifying the schism between the opposition and the state. In al-Taqi's words "there is no way for a zero sum game, there will be no winner in Syria".[30] In Ghailoun's words "the regime really succeeded to a large extent, not because it was the better choice in this gamble but on the contrary because it was able to distort the revolution and make the international community fall into doubt regarding the real aims of the revolution".[31] Moreover, as the civil conflict in the country drew on and deepened, not only did such challenges concerning the endurance of the Syrian regime get more visible, but also the conflict turned into a more convoluted and fiercer form in which even the chemical weapons were used against civilians (i.e. the Ghouta attack on August 21, 2013).

These realities of the ground deeply impacted on Turkey's Syria policy in practical terms even though they did not still make Turkey revise it. As Fred H. Lawson put it, there was a "mutating" war in Syria.[32] As it mutated, the war actually slide into a sphere different from the beginning in terms of the varying comparative advantages of the different parties involved. This definitely held for Turkey as well. As a protest movement in quest for dignity, equality, and justice, the Syrian uprisings were highly in civilian character at the beginning. As a rising power with a considerable soft power at that time, the initial peaceful protest movements were actually something Turkey could positively impact on. Yet as the protest movement turned into armed conflicts in line with the regime's desire, it acquired a new ground on which Turkey's influence was highly diminished as it did not have relevant experience. What is more, the moderate elements of the Syrian opposition (like the Free Syrian Army mostly consisting of officers defecting from the Syrian army) also started to be increasingly dominated by the radical groups. The new face of the uprising which demonstrated itself as an all-out civil war actually started to play more and more into the hands of different regional and international actors such as Russia, Iran and Hezbollah which do not either abstain from using overt military engagement in the favor of the regime or have

[28] E. O'Bagy, "Jihad in Syria, Middle East Security", *Report 6*. Washington DC: Institute for the Study of War.

[29] Bassma Kodmani, one of the authors' interview via skype, November 13, 2014.

[30] Samir Al-Taqi, one of the authors' interview, April 24, 2013, İstanbul.

[31] Burhan Ghailoun, one of the authors' interview via email, November 23, 2014.

[32] Fred H. Lawson, "Syria's mutating civil war and its impact on Turkey, Iraq and Iran", *International Affairs* 90: 6 (2014): 1351-1365.

a considerable experience in leading proxy war. From some time on, rather than Turkey, the actors like Saudi Arabia and Qatar which could somehow counter-balance Iran on the ground in military terms gained importance.

On the other hand, as the Syrian war mutated, not only comparative advantages but also the priorities for the concerned parties altered. Here, the most glaring changes has been so far observed in the Western actors. Starting from 2014,[33] particularly the US focus shifted from the removal of Assad to the dealing with the spread of radical organizations. In that sense, particularly the developments that occurred both during and after the Geneva II Conference on Syria, which took place in late January 2014[34], illustrate how the grounds for negotiations and the focus on Assad were shifted to the fight against terrorism.[35] With a West tuning its Syrian policy more towards the fight against the radical terror threat, another practical implication of the changing realities of the ground in Syria was that Turkey was left more and more alone as it still put the removal of Assad at the epicenter of its Syria policy. This situation was also further deteriorated by its worsened relations with its Western allies during the upcoming periods.[36] Taken all this, Turkey's power to make a change by supporting the opposition was significantly diminished. In this way, its *proactivizm* to change the Syrian regime was also considerably exhausted.

In time there emerged a growing perception that Turkey's conviction that Assad would be soon toppled like the other authoritarian leaders was short-sighted. It became visible that the resilience of the regime, sustained support from external actors like Iran, Russia and Hezbollah and the incohesive nature of the Syrian opposition were underestimated vis-à-vis the prospects for an opposition victory. In the end, for Turkey, its Syria policy came to be a very example of the risky nature of upholding morality and aspiration at the expense of classic realists' responsible statesmanship and statecraft. At this point, it has to be underlined that Turkey was not an exception. Actually many other actors have made the same mistakes and also experienced similar expectation/capability gaps. It was also case that Turkey's Western partners were very unsuccessful in fostering a political deterrence against the regime and its supporters. Yet difference with Turkey was that it was Turkey who had to pay for the greatest bill in Syria as both Turkey and Syria, in close

[33] As a breaking point, particularly the eruption of Daesh problem in June 2014 rendered the right against radical terrorist organizations as the first priority for the US and other western actors.

[34] The conference took place on January 22, 2014 in Montreux and on January 23-31, 2014 in Geneva (Switzerland), the second round of negotiations took place on February 10-15, 2014.

[35] The aim of the conference was to pave the way for a political solution to the crisis. Yet, it is clear that in parallel to the weak performance of the UN and the entire international society, including the states that endorsed the conference, the Ba'ath regime tried to reorient the conference toward their own goals of dealing with the terrorism issue. It is necessary to remember that the stance of Russia was also responsible for the failure of the Geneva II Conference. To be sure, the failure of the conference in producing a political solution helped religious and nationalist forces gain momentum.

[36] Kadri Gürsel, "Türkiye'nin Tehlikeli Yalnızlığı", *Al-Monitor*, October 29, 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2014/10/turkey-perilous-loneliness-turkey-middle-east.html.

proximity to one another, represent different extensions of the intertwined human and physical geography. In this regard, while deciding in between the regime and opposition, Turkey perhaps ignored its likelihood of being a *de facto* part of the conflict by being drawn into it.

The Era of "Muddling Through" in the Syria Policy

In the aftermath of 5 years of the Syrian civil conflict, it is now evident that the Western actors are quite far away developing a collective action in the context of Syria. There is in fact a muddling through in practice in which the Western actors think over the options to minimize the growing cost of the Syrian conflict by taking more into consideration Russia, Iran and even the regime. The Western actors stand quite limited in demonstrating a commitment with respect to forcing a change in Syria. It is for sure that unlike its western actors, Turkey was not successful to revise its Syria policy in time. It was really too late when the Turkish authorities realized the necessity of revision in their Syria policy. Due to both domestic-foreign policy interaction and the path dependency which was created in time, it became increasingly difficult for Turkish politicians to accept the mistakes and adapt to the changing realties on the ground. However, for the time being, like its western counterparts which already stopped topping the removal of Assad in their Syria policy agenda, Turkey, too, seems to be less committed in its Syria policy as a resultant of tremendous exhaustion which has accumulated during the last 5 years. Pragmatism now stands a dominant strategy. To be sure, there are certain reasons that that have been pushing Turkey to think more on adopting a more pragmatic approach in the context of Syria. They mostly stem from the emergence of new challenges targeting Turkey. To put it more specifically, Turkey now has to care about around three million Syrian refugees in its country, the unchecked expansion of the PYD and worrying spread of radical terrorist organizations as much as it has done so about the removal of Assad. Having become more visible recently, these negative spillovers of the Syrian conflict currently constitute the main determinants of Turkey's changing Syria policy. This also means a new period in the Syria policy in which the preceding *proactivizm* left its place to *reactivizm* as Turkey has increasingly found itself in having to find palliative reactions to deal with these new challenges. It is now these three challenges that we will unpack in the following part.[37]

[37] For further analyses on these three challenges see the authors' previous report prepared for Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Drawing on that particular study, we have revised and revisited the arguments and data we used in that report. See Osman B. Dinçer and Mehmet Hecan, "The Changing Geo-strategy of Turkey's Foreign Policy along its Southern Border: From Aspirations for Regional Integration to the need for Crisis Management", *Institute for Strategic Dialogue*, June 2016, http://www.strategicdialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ISDJ4677_Turkey_R2_WEB.pdf.

Unbridled Waves of Migration

In addition to the thousands of deaths and injuries, unbridled waves of migration have so far become another major consequence of the warfare sweeping across Syria. According to UN estimates and local observers, the continuing crisis has caused the displacement of more than half of Syria's population. Starting from September 2015, the displacement re-escalated with Russia's intervention, in a way changing the balance in favor of the Assad regime. The most striking outcome of this was observed when tens of thousands of Syrians mobilized towards the border of Turkey as the regime forces launched operations to retake Aleppo's northern towns from opposition forces in collaboration with Russia, Iran, Hezbollah, and PYD/YPG forces in February 2016.[38] However, this was not a recent or ephemeral phenomenon as millions of Syrians had been fleeing the conflict-ridden country in a systematic fashion since the onset of the conflict in 2011.[39] In this context, countries in close proximity to the conflicts of the region are forced to shoulder a majority of the burden resulting from Syrians' quests for security, with many transforming into veritable open-air refugee camps. Turkey, which is affected most by the challenge of managing the huge waves of refugees, currently hosts almost 3 million Syrians, only 10% of whom are living in camps[40] while the rest find respite in urban areas across the country void of a well-planned monitoring mechanism.

It is for sure that the presence of refugees in Turkey will continue to pose severe political risks no matter how they are integrated or provided citizenship. Security-related (crime or involvement with the PKK, ISIS, and other terrorist groups) and socio-cultural risks (societal tension, lack of access to education, or questionable marital practices such as child marriage and polygamy), both of which increase with each passing day, have become a sad fact. 53% of the refugees in Turkey are under the age of 18[41], and the radicalization of these vulnerable and desperate youth has become a reality, as has been demonstrated in multiple cases where the refugee population has been approached by various radical groups including ISIS. The refugee issue is open to exploitation by many others, as seen in the fact that the perpetrators of the recent terrorist attacks in both Ankara and Istanbul were both carrying refugee identity cards, no matter whether authentic or forged.[42]

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[38] "Syrians flee to Turkish border as Aleppo assault intensifies", *Reuters,* February 6, 2016; www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idUSKCN0VF087.

[39] For the pattern of the increasing refugee influxes see UNHCR website: http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php.

[40] For the details about Syrian refugees in Turkey see the AFAD data: www.afad.gov.tr/tr/IcerikDetay1.aspx?ID=16.

[41] This figure is probably much higher than 2013 now: "Syrian Refugees in Turkey, 2013: Field Survey Results", *AFAD Reports*, 24.

[42] "Istanbul suicide bomber 'registered as a refugee a week before attack'", *The Telegraph*, January 13, 2016; www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/12097587/Istanbul-suicidebomber-registered-as-a-refugee-a-week-before-attack.html.

Morally, it is not acceptable to prevent entrance to those fleeing to Turkey; yet, it is also against the international treaties. At the same time, however, it must be realized that most urban refugees move across the country without being subject to proper state regulatory measures and that some refugees have been misled into the lap of criminal groups such as human-smugglers or traffickers largely as a direct result of their desperation and hopelessness.[43] Turkey has already witnessed various social tensions between Turkish and Syrian communities in which Syrians have faced various accusations by Turkish people like theft, verbal harassments, bringing down labor wages in local job market, causing social unrest, Syrian's women going into polygamous marrying arrangements with Turkish men etc. In addition, those familiar with the nature of migration know well that refugees do not always regard the countries in which they first arrive as their final destination, but instead generally use them as a temporary transit site or route from which to pass on to the countries they believe to be more prosperous. Such a reality is evidenced by increasing waves of refugees continually moving to and across Europe's borders. In this sense, as a transit country, Turkey, also faces the challenge of dealing with various aspects of the mounting humanitarian tragedy (i.e. human smuggling, border control, settlement of illegal migrants, and caring for the injuries of thousands) considering the limited ability of the EU countries to stop the illegal arrival of the refugees and Turkey's patchy control over borders and coastal passages.

The Expansion of PYD

Another acute problem along Turkey's southern border region is the growing number of non-state actors that have exploited the collapse of state authority and prevailing insecurity in Syria. One of them is Northern Syria's PYD (The Democratic Union Party). The organization have come onto the radar, employing coercion both "in the classical sense of terrorist activities" and "in the name of conquering physical territory".[44] For instance, since the start of the war, the PYD, with the help of the Assad regime and the PKK, has steadily expanded its control over a large swathe of territory (encompassing 9% of Syrian territory in 2012 to 14% in 2016), though not united, stretching from Aleppo to Qamishli.[45] Over time, it has come to establish a monopoly of sorts, proclaiming itself as the sole advocate of the Kurdish cause by intimidating or convincing other Kurdish and Arab groups through the employment

[43] Oğuzhan Ö. Demir et al., "Küreselleşen Dünyada "Satılık Göçmen Çocuklar", *Global Politika ve Strateji Raporları 3*, June 2015, 26, 35.

[44] Osman B. Dincer and Mehmet Hecan, "The Legacy of Statehood and its Looming Challenges in The Middle East and North Africa", *Valdai Paper 36,* November, 2015; http://valdaiclub.com/publications/valdai-papers/valdai-paper-36-the-legacy-of-statehood-and-its-loomingchallenges-in-the-middle-east-and-north-afri.

[45] "Suriye'de rejim ve PYD topraklarını genişletti", *Hürriyet*, February 18, 2016.

of different means, including by assassinating influential leaders, just as the PKK had done in Turkey, and eventually by silencing all oppositional voices.[46]

For Turkey, the critical part with the PYD is that the organization is the extension of the PKK. Considering the PKK related problems in Turkey, the PYD's growing power poses different national security entanglements for Turkey. The spread of PYD has already generated a geopolitical maneuvering space for the PKK. For instance, in the face of the PYD's increasing control in Northern Syria, numerous PKK members have started to inhabit this area as their new camping area from which they could plan and launch their attacks against Turkey. According to the reports, for the PKK, the PYD-controlled Northern Syria is a now a second "Qandil" — the mountainous region in the Northern Iraq which the PKK have been using as a camping area for a long time.[47] According to the same sources again, the PKK has established 33 new camps in the Northern Syria.

The Growing Number of Radical Terrorist Organizations

For Turkey, terrorist organizations spreading and fanning the flames of radicalization constitutes the other side of the violent non-state actors problem in its Southern border line. This process in fact began its evolution in 2003 with the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent unsuccessful attempts to install a new Iraqi state. In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, the conflict in Syria later added to this as the country came to host and attract a great number of terrorist organizations. Such a dynamic fueled a geopolitical shift that facilitated popular radicalization as these two countries were transformed into safe havens for various radical non-state actors and foreign fighters.[48] Currently, the most attention-grabbing of these groups seem to be organizations such as Daesh and al-Nusra.

Although different actors, especially the US, have adopted a number of immediate measures by declaring that ISIS is a 'global threat', ISIS is also a great problem for Turkey particularly due to its close proximity to both Syria and Iraq. The main trouble for Western countries relates to the fact that their citizens who left to join ISIS may eventually return and potentially wreak havoc. Nonetheless, no one has a comprehensive and functioning road map on how to resolve the problems at the local level in Syria and Iraq, meaning that Turkey will continue to face this immediate threat to a much higher degree than most others. Turkey has been already targeted by such groups, particularly Daesh for more than one year. The Suruç, Istanbul, and Ankara bombings in 2015 and more recently Ataturk

[46] Based on authors' interviews with several Syrian locals in Southeast Turkey and Tel Abyad, January-February 2013.

[47] "Suriye'nin kuzeyi yeni 'Kandil' oldu", *Hürriyet*, March 18, 2016, http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/suriyenin-kuzeyi-yeni-kandil-oldu-40071553.

[48] Osman B. Dincer and Mehmet Hecan, "Radikalizmde Jeopolitik Kayma", *Analist* 54, (2015): 25-32.

airport and Gaziantep attacks which claimed tens of lives and injured many in June and August 2016 respectively cannot be assessed without considering the turmoil in Syria. According to reports, the Daesh members were involved in these attacks.

Beyond being a target for radical terrorist organizations, another dramatic side of the problem for Turkey is that the war between Daesh and the PYD in Syria has now enlarged to include Turkey. What happened in Diyarbakir in 2014 (the bloody tension between the religious Kurdish groups and PKK sympathizers) just after the events at Kobani, is a clear indication of how vulnerable Turkey is to developments in Syria.[49] Moreover, the Suruc and Ankara bombings in which mostly Kurdish people died, were also done by Daesh as a retaliation against the PYD. What is worrying is that the PKK generally attempt to retaliate against such incidents by arranging terrorist attacks targeting Turkish security forces and civilians. This situation practically pushes Turkey into a bloody vicious circle between the Daesh and PYD. Considering Turkey's military plunge into Syria in August 2016 in order to force the PYD to withdraw to the eastern side of the Euphrates River in northeastern Syria, the brutal vicious cycle is more likely to grow further in a way that involves Turkey more.

In Quest for a New Brand Syria Policy

It is evident that 2015 and 2016 have recorded as the years in which the above-mentioned challenges have overwhelmingly demonstrated themselves for Turkey. That's why, it could be argued that the pressures for revisions and changes in Turkey's Syria policy have peaked during this time. This also points to a new period in the Syria's policy characterized *reactivizm* rather than *proactivism* as Turkey has increasingly found itself in having to find palliative reactions to deal with these severe challenges. In fact, for a long time, the Turkish government had felt the need to revise its Syria policy. However, beforehand the problem was how this would be implemented. As indicated previously, there was a path dependency which did not allow for great revisions. Yet, the increasing burden of the negative spillovers deriving from the Syrian conflict in time started to tilt Turkey's cost and benefit analysis in the favor of revision. At this point, while Turkey preparing itself for major changes in its foreign policy, one recent critical development happened in Turkey's domestic politics and Ahmet Davutoğlu was dismissed as Turkey's Prime Minister in May 2016. In this way, a new page for Turkey was opened, as it was generally Davutoglu which was held accountable for Turkey's so called "adventurism" in the Middle East[50] in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.

[49] "Turkey Kurds: Kobane protests leave 19 dead", *BBC News*, October 8, 2014; www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29530640.

[50] Umit Kıvanç, *Pan-İslâmcının Macera Kılavuzu: Davutoğlu Ne Diyor, Bir Şey Diyor mu?,* (Istanbul: Birikim Yayınları, 2015).

Davutoglu's leaving the office to Binali Yildirim practically suggested a new foreign policy less constrained by the preceding path-dependency since it was relatively much easier for a government with a new face to undertake revisions.

Indeed, having assumed the premiership, the new Turkish premier Yildirim was not late to give signals to fix uneasy relations with its onetime partners. Before long, Turkey and Israel announced that they reached an agreement to restore diplomatic relations and President Erdoğan sent a letter in which he spoke of his deep regret for the Russian warplane shot down by a Turkish F-16 to his Russian counterpart, President Putin. Both of these developments took place on just one day — June 27. This was a sort of bringing back the "zero-problem" policy — which had been an absolute lost cause for a long time, or pragmatism which had traditionally characterized Turkey's foreign policy. Given this demonstrated enthusiasm, the following question was: Who would be next? Then, on July 11, Binali Yildirim also gave signals for changes in the uneasy relations with other countries, pointing out Egypt, Iraq and Syria. Thus, it could be argued that since the onset of Yildirim's premiership, the ground has been practically ripened for revisions in the country's Syria policy. Nonetheless, it is still not clear what sort of a change this will be. But in the upcoming periods, it is likely to see concrete changes unlike the previous terms in which Turkey stayed dormant even though it desired to make changes in its Syria policy. This has been already verified by Turkish Prime Minister Yildirim saying that "Turkey will play a more active role in upcoming six months."[51]

As of August 2016, a number of concrete developments have already become harbinger for prospective changes in Turkey's Syria policy. Turkey's recent rapprochement with Russia and Iran through official meetings is one of them. The parties' demonstration for routine talks on Syria shows that Turkey are more willing to get closer to those allies of Assad in the context of Syria. Perhaps, a more concrete development is the official statement of Turkey's Ambassador to Russia that "Ankara thinks that the existing administration in Syria can take a part in peace talks" signaling a green light to the regime[52], while beforehand Turkey insistently emphasized that there was no role for the regime in the fate of Syria. Yildirim's own statements also verify this as he has put that that "regardless of whether we want it or not, Assad is one of the actors in Syria." [53] In this respect, the official statements from the Turkish side corroborates many commentators' argument that Turkey could accept a "transition period" with Assad in power.[54] In such a case, while it seems that Turkey and the Western allies can consent the staying of Assad during

[51] "Yıldırım: Geçiş sürecinde Esad'ın rolü olabilir", *BBC Türkçe*, August 20, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-37142759.

[52] Türkiye'den Esad'a Yeşil Işık", *Cumhuriyet,* August 20, 2016, http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/dunya/582785/Turkiye_den_Esad_a_yesil_isik.html.

[53] "Yıldırım: Geçiş sürecinde Esad'ın rolü olabilir", *BBC Türkçe*, August 20, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-37142759.

[54] Kirişci, "Is Turkish foreign policy".

a transition period, they still seem to keep their reservation that Assad himself will not assume any role in the ultimate settlement for the future of Syria. At this point, another argument is that Turkey is in a minimalist position to seek even for a solution that will let the Baath regime stay but not Assad himself.[55] Yet, it should be noted that Turkey and the Western actors have not been successful even in achieving such a name change with Assad's departure during the recent years. In this sense, it is still ambiguous whether Turkey and the Western actors could be still forced to take a new position concerning the future of Assad himself.

There are not still clear signs that Russia and Iran are not ready for the departure of Assad as a part of a tit-for-tat policy in exchange for Turkey and the Western actors' accepting the staying of the regime, as the removal of Assad potentially sounds a symbolic defeat for the pro-Assad allies. Here two things seem to be important. First, there is not only a Turkey which has been not only exhausted by the negative spill-overs of the Syrian conflict, but also a Turkey whose sanctioning power over Syria has been diminished due to growing domestic tensions, the PKK terrorism and the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016 which has resulted in an extensive purge inside the Turkish army. Second, the Western actors have been sustaining their barely committed stance for the resolution of the Syrian conflict. On the other hand, two important external supporters of Assad, that is, Russia and Iran, have been successful in staying relatively more resilient and committed in supporting the regime. Yet, it should be again noted that Russia itself has also started to go through at least a quest for final settlement process. In this context, UN resolution dated December 18, 2015 endorsing the cessation of hostilities and road map for peace process in Syria, and Russia's partial withdrawal of its forces out of Syria in March 2016 should be noted. In short, we speak of a Syrian conflict which has exhausted its international and regional actors even though some of them, mostly pro-opposition ones, are more depleted than others.

In this context, it is pretty much pragmatic for Turkey to experience rapprochement with Russia and Iran given their upper hand in the power balances of the Syrian conflict. In one sense, it is also a reaction from the Turkish side who thinks it has been considerably left alone by its Western allies in its Syria policy and bearing the costs of the conflict. Moreover, both Russia and Iran are two actors which increase the cost of the Syrian conflict for Turkey especially with respect to abovementioned challenges. With closer links to them, Turkey can at least get a chance to maintain a better crisis management with respect to unbridled waves of Syrian refugees, the spread of PYD, and the growing number of radical terrorist organizations. This became pretty much clear in the context of Russia, particularly after the jet downing incident in November 2015. To illustrate, as a result of the advance of the regime forces with the help of Russian air strikes in February 2016, many of the civilians still residing in Aleppo have been killed or injured,

[55] Murat Yetkin, "Suriye'de nereden nereye?" *Hurriyet*, August 15, 2016, http://sosyal.hurriyet.com.tr/yazar/murat-yetkin_575/suriyede-nereden-nereye_40195328?utm_source=t.co.

and thousands were forced to flee to the Turkish border to escape the violence. In a similar way, Russia also resorted to extending support to the PYD/YPG, and bombed Syrian Turkomans in the name of punishing Turkey. Moreover, after the jet downing crisis, Turkey could not also participate in international coalition's airstrikes against Daesh by which Turkey also tried to check the spread of PYD and bomb PKK targets. To be sure, other pro-Assad ally, Iran, has been also accountable for the increasing cost of the Syrian conflict for Turkey in varying degrees. There is no need to say that the unchecked involvement of pro-Assad actors in the conflict also constitutes a radicalization dynamic given that thousands of opposition fighters get radicalized or join the ranks of radical groups considering that these groups and their tactics better serve for countering against the Assad and its allies' increasing atrocities and war crimes. Thus, closer links with these actors are likely to lessen the negative impacts of the Syrian conflict, even though they do not totally eradicate them.

Here, Turkey's into military plunge into northern Syria on August 24, 2016, sending tanks, warplanes and special operations forces, actually conveys what we try to explain above better.[56] Even though the stated objective is to capture the Daesh strongholds, it is quite evident that the main objective of the military operation is pressuring the PYD to withdraw to the eastern side of the Euphrates River in northeastern Syria. The point here is that Turkey's attainment of such maneuvering ability in northern Syria has only come after its rapprochement with Russia, Iran and even the Syrian regime. To be sure, such a maneuvering space never gives Turkey the opportunity to eradicate the PYD, but only check its spread. This is quite demonstrated by the fact that both Russia and US have only consented a limited intervention by Turkey in northern Syria. In this context, Turkey's last move with respect to the PYD also exemplifies the recent period in its Syrian policy which we have designated as reactivizm here due to Turkey's efforts to generate palliative solutions to the unforeseen challenges in its Syrian policy.

Observing the Balances While Seeking for Adjustment

Turkey is one of the actors whose policy space has been dramatically narrowed since the onset of the conflict. As noted previously, there are many priorities for Turkey and the hierarchy among them is highly ambiguous. What is more, be it the spread of the PYD, radical terrorist organizations, the refugee crisis or a final settlement concerning the prospective political configuration of Syria, Turkey's policy options considerably draw on the policy choices of other international and regional actors. That's why, it is a sort of requirement for Turkey to observe many

[56] "Turkey's Military Plunges into Syria, Enabling Rebels to Capture ISIS Stronghold", *The New York Times*, August 24, 2016, nytimes.com/2016/08/25/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-isis.html?ref=europe&smid=tw-nytimesworld&smtyp=cur&_r=2.

balances while seeking for pragmatic revisions in its Syria policy. It could be quite pragmatic to establish closer relations with the Assad's supporters, but it is also a necessity for Turkey to be aware that there are challenges with which it can both handle better and cannot with the help of closer relations with Russia and Iran. Here, the point is to be able to establish a balance that it has not so far observed in its Syria policy as Turkey's Western allies still remain vital to successful adjustment of its Syria policy.

To illustrate, Turkey's priority not to let the establishment of an autonomous region led by the PYD more depends on its coordination with the US, as it gives significant military and associated political support to the organization which is seen as a necessary ally in the international fight against ISIS as ground forces, while the same PYD is also being supported by Russia to weaken the Sunni Arab opposition. On the other hand, Turkey's priorities concerning the role of the Assad regime in Syria's future looks more at Russia and Iran, while Turkey also needs its Western allies' support, particularly the US, in order to counterbalance pro-Assad allies' likely pressure to force Turkey to accept its least favorable preference in the relevant context.

When it comes to the refugee crisis, this time, a different actor's inevitable role shines out, that is the European Union. A game theory approach serves to best illustrate that the lack of cooperative action in the realm of migration is highly likely to result in a situation deleterious to both Turkey and the EU, if the parties try to shift the burden onto the other, by undertaking unilateral actions (i.e. EU's failure to alleviate Turkey's heavy duty of caring for the nearly 3 million Syrians already residing within its territories and Turkey's, as retaliation, skirting the necessary precautions meant to prevent refugees from passing to EU territories and thereby facilitate their inflow into the EU). So far the both sides have mostly failed to establish an effective cooperation mechanism with respect to the refugee crisis among the exchange of various accusations (i.e. Turkey's use of refugee issue as trump card against the EU or the EU's failure to offer acceptable assistance arrangements to Turkey) even though they have been long working on a refugee deal for a long time. It would be ironic for the EU and Turkey to fall out with one another due to a humanitarian tragedy that has been aggravated not by themselves but instead primarily by the Assad regime and its allies like Russia and Iran, as the latters' assaults, including those directly affecting the civilian population, have put pressure on Syrian inhabitants to flee their country.

Taken all this, it is quite challenging for Turkey to make its desired revisions in its Syria policy without compromising its interests. The context of the Syrian conflict harbors multi-faceted entanglements as it does not only involve a regime and its opposition but also a wide spectrum of regional and international actors with different interests and orientations as well as numerous belligerent non-state actors. As a result, Turkey has a quite narrow space of policy options which is conditioned and constrained by many actors and dynamics. Here, what remains to Turkey is to set preserve its surviving interests within this framed policy space,

which can potentially involve such attainable objectives as a less strong PYD, a southern border line freer of radical organizations, better cost-share arrangements with respect to the humanitarian crisis, while all parties to the conflict seek for a peace settlement in Syria ensuring territorial integrity and political compromise among the regime, the opposition and the Kurds and other fractions.

Conclusion

As a country sharing an intertwined human and physical geography with Syria, Turkey's Syria policy has always occupied a central place in Turkey's regional initiatives towards the Middle East. Even though it has been subject to dramatic changes throughout the time, it is possible to argumentatively summarize Turkey's Syria policy as a shift from a desired *proactivizm* to *reactivizm*. While Turkey's desire to play a proactive role in Syria mostly through lucrative economic, political and cultural relations gave considerable fruits, the same could not be said of its similar proactive desire to change the Syrian regime by supporting the opposition groups in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings. In the due course, not only did Turkey resent the staying of Assad in power, but also have started to face growing challenges like the spread of violent non-state actors and the overwhelming waves of the Syrian refugees. With a diminished capacity to generate impacts on the grounds in Syria, it is evident that in recent years Turkey's Syria policy has been increasingly characterized by *reactivizm*, as it has ended up having to find reactive solutions to the unforeseen challenges.

When compared to the past, Turkey now has a more ambiguous hierarchy of priorities in its Syria policy as the management of the unforeseen challenges like the refugee crisis, spread of the PYD and growing number of radical terrorist organizations is as much important as, even more important than, the removal of Assad. As different from the past, Turkey's growing recognition of the Syrian regime's role in a possible settlement, including the possibilities to concede to the staying of both Assad and regime in power, could be likened to Khomeini's depiction of his ending war with Iraq as "drinking from the poisoned chalice." Yet, it is evident that the negative spillovers of the Syrian conflict have accumulated a dramatic pressure that makes impossible for Turkey to sustain its insofar Syria policy. At this point, it should be noted that it is not fair to argue that Turkey is the only actor that misinterpreted the course of events in the Syrian crisis. At a time when the Western actors started to impose sanctions against the Assad regime as early at as summer 2011, Turkey was pursuing a more prudent policy by trying to convince the regime to make desire reforms in order to ensure a soft transition in Syria. The breaking point for Turkey was that it was relatively short-tempered in giving up its transformative role on the regime by feeling to have to decide between the regime and opposition and its following failure to adopt a more flexible foreign policy and make necessary revisions, while its Western allies already started to

revise their Syria policies in a gradual manner. Turkey continued to insist on regime change, and kept almost the same strict stance despite power balances changed dramatically following the heavy involvement of Iran and subsequently Russia. Presumably, the main problem for Turkish elite was their belief that the subversion of Assad would be actualized in a short period of time.[57] The AKP ruling elite did not abstain to raise ambitious words against the regime at the initial phases of upheavals in Syria. As a matter of fact, AKP elite grounded themselves on a moral interpretation of the events rather than changing balance of power dynamics, since they believe, in Davutoğlu's words that "if you adopt a position based on principles that are compatible with the flow of history, then your position will not disappoint you."[58] On that note, Davutoğlu prioritized "being on the right side of history" rather than changing power constellations, as he perceives the history to be the ultimate judge.[59] In time, this conviction turned out to be costly, even though it was not morally incorrect. However, as different from many actors which stumbled in their Syria's polices as well, it was Turkey which came to be the main actor facing severe challenges of the Syrian civil war due to its close proximity to Syria.

As indicated beforehand, even though its ultimate form has not been known yet, a change has been already undergoing in Turkey's Syria policy. As things stand, beyond being a simple country policy, Turkey's Syria policy seems to leave many legacies. First, Turkey's bitter experience in its Syria policy seems to be a drive in its turning back to the basics of its once pragmatism which had traditionally characterized Turkey's foreign policy. Second, the Syria policy is likely to leave a discouraging legacy for Turkey's prospective initiatives towards the Middle East due to the growing perception both among the public and elites that the region is a convoluted quagmire from which Turkey is better to exclude itself. As much as the supply side, this situation also relates to the demand side given that favorable perception of Turkey, once as "an honest broker without secret agenda", has been diminished in the Middle East partly due to its perception as an actor in pursuit of sectarian policies in Syria.[60] Third, Turkey's Syria policy is also likely to leave a huge impact on Turkish-Western partnerships as they have not only demonstrated collective action failures in regional policies but also have been highly characterized by mistrust and growing disparities with respect to common objectives and priorities which have become more visible recently.

[57] İbrahim Karagül, "Oyun Bitti Esad İçin Yolun Sonuna Gelindi", *Yeni Şafak*, November 16, 2011.

[58] Davutoğlu, "The three major earthquakes", 5; Also see: İbrahim Kalın, "Türkiye Batı'dan Kopuyor … Yeniden", *Sabah*, October 31, 2009.

[59] Davutoğlu, "The three major earthquakes", 6.

[60] See the TESEV survey on this subject: Mensur Akgün and Sabiha S. Gündoğar, "The Perception of Turkey in the Middle East 2013", January 2014, TESEV http://tesev.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/The_Perception_Of_Turkey_In_The_Middle_East_2013.pdf.

CONCLUSION

USA

The US approach to the Syrian problem has been quite cautious, especially in the initial phase of the conflict. The case of Iraq was a bitter reminder of the risks of getting stuck when "there is no reason to stay but the withdrawal is neither reasonable." To a certain extent the US wariness was linked to Obama's wish "no to become another Bush" and to exercise a different type of foreign policy with an emphasis to the soft, not hard power. A part of international audience has welcome such a move whereas others expect more decisive steps by the US government. It is clear that there is no way to please everyone; whatever the global player like USA would do, it would be subject to the criticism. Albeit US is just slightly involved in the war in Syria it is still the most significant outside player, carefully watched by everyone. Still anti-Assad narrative without a more detailed vision and concrete steps for the future setting of the Syrian state and prospective development of the country shows weakness of the West.

The Russo-American cooperation in the Syrian conflict is treated differently by both parties. Russia sees the opportunity to break the partial international isolation in which it has found itself after the annexation of the Crimea, while US comes out from a tactical necessity for the military actions in Syria. No party wants incidents, thus a certain level of agreement and coordination is achieved. However, USA and Russia still have divergent interests if we look at the attitudes regarding the regime of Basher al-Assad and the future of the country. US follows its own interests in the region and likewise is interested in Syria as a stable and democratic country that could positively influence the whole region. Meanwhile Russia cares more about its own influence in the region. The cooperation between the two is deeply damaged and did not seem very realistic in the initial phase of the conflict; still the summer 2016 gave ground for hope in such a cooperation. In September, though, both parties accused each other for use of inappropriate means and targets in the warfare and it is hard to predict how relation between two countries will develop because trust in Russia is totally lost.

Iran — an ally of the Russian and Syrian governments views the conflict from the zero-sum game perspective. It engaged in the conflict much earlier than Russia. The timing of the conflict misfortunately coincided with the progress in controlling the Iranian nuclear programme. Obama was not willing to confront Iran in this situation. The main focus of USA was, of course, ISIS not Assad's regime. Kremlin's careless attitude about the nuclear programme of Iran or the state of democracy

and rule of law there can be viewed as Russia's comparative advantage. Cynicism with regard of the values is typical to the Putin's elite. The recently propagated conservative values are used to persuade the ordinary Russian citizens, not the elite who still follows the best Lenin's tradition viewing the people as a mass which can be moulded in virtually everything.

Russia's Propaganda

Russia has actively used the war in Syria for its propaganda purposes. Firstly, the people of the country are told that Russia's involvement in the conflict is highly effective, contrary to the US. The cynicism has come that far, that by the start of the military campaign in Syria, the Russian media presented it as a cheap military exercise... According to the Russian TV channels, US is not fighting terrorists, but Assad's regime and it cooperates not only with moderate opposition but also with terrorists. Habitually under Putin, the West is blamed for dual standards, whereas Russia portrays itself as fighter for justice. The discontent by some social strata in the West of their respective governments' performance is a fruitful soil for Russia's propaganda. The Kremlin's propagandists do not invite to contemplate the things against the background of facts but disseminate doubts about everything. Meanwhile the Kremlin's controlled media inside Russia present Putin's policies as excellent and always correct. Russia images itself as a champion of critical thinking and healthy scepticism although in reality no freethinking is tolerated in the country, leaving space for the criticism of Putin and the power elite to the 'conversations in kitchen' — similar to the times of Leonid Brezhnev. The problem is that also western mass media falls prey to Russian propaganda.

It is not Russia only, which is actively using propaganda and disinformation to persuade about its just cause in Syria. Daesh demonstrates a certain level of craft when creating its informative and visual image in the international arena. The flag, the coat of arms and the anthem, together with success stories and vision of the future are used to persuade the potential warriors, that ISIS is a state and not just a group of terrorists. The European media conveying further these messages pay a sort of service to Daesh which is eager to inform possibly wider audience about itself. Daesh also makes use of the social networks, mainly Twitter, to spread its messages.

Russia sees Syria as a place to revive its superpower's status like the one the Soviet Union had. The construction of Russia's identity under Putin includes the USSR as a normal stage of the development of the country. Russia's policies in Syria starting from the year 2011 should be viewed in a wider context; it comprises the aggression against Ukraine as well as the creation of a multipolar world. Supporting Assad, Moscow is sending a message to other authoritarian leaders: "If you collaborate, you can count on us!" The fear of Russia's elite to lose the *status quo* in their own country motivates to oppose sharply any 'coloured' revolutions and the outside

support for them. The understanding of Kremlin's motives in its relationship with the closest neighbours and also more distant countries are directly linked with the effort by Vladimir Putin to assure a stable position in Russia's Olympus of power for himself and his loyalists. Russia is very much economically dependent on the West, therefore the international isolation after the illegal annexation of the Crimea was quite unfortunate, but the campaign in Syria returned Russia to the "negotiating table where the fate of nations is decided upon." Knowing Russian negotiating habits, it is important that US engages in the tactical cooperation level, but does not make concessions on a strategic level which go beyond Syria and the Middle East and is relevant to the cases like e.g. Ukraine. The West should keep an open door policy to renew a political dialogue with Russia but at the same time realise an open eye policy and to monitor its behaviour.

European Union

Has Europe made use of a grand strategy to end Syria's grand tragedy? The answer is negative. Syria is among the countries of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2003 — 2004. Its goals — to promote secure, democratic and well-governed development of the neighbouring nations are generally positive. However, the members of the European Parliament, commissioners and the bureaucracy in Brussels then hardly comprehended the scope of problems the ENP would face in reaching these goals; a bureaucratic approach would definitely not help here. The EU normative foreign policy is basically good; it is worth to make neighbouring countries havens of peace rather than sources of conflict, but to achieve that a more flexible approach and a grand strategy is needed. Besides there is a need for connection between strategy and action, because without concrete political steps visions will be only book in the shelf. As Julian Lindley-French is pointing out in his article: "[..] the very crafting of a European grand strategy for Syria might if nothing else remind European leaders how to act big, and how to act big and together." Unfortunately, coping with the internal problems the EU has become passive internationally.

The Syrian crisis were among the factors bringing the large influx of the refugees into Europe. Even if Syrian conflict is resolved the problem will not disappear. Migration from Sub-Saharan African countries could bring serious problems in the future if there are no effective action policies designed today. There is no single method or tool to solve the migration crisis. A simple, mechanical distribution of the immigrants among the recipient nations is not a long-lasting solution. The time was waisted while effective boarder control mechanisms were being searched, requiring a close cooperation of the EU members. The refugee crisis displayed the vulnerability of Europe in face of radicalization and wars in its neighbourhood. It is likely active foreign and security policy would hinder such crises in the future.

Turkey and the Region

Turkey is a militarily powerful NATO ally playing a significant role in the Middle East region. The regional interests of Turkey and its boarders with Syria could not leave it aside as a neutral observer. Terrorist activities in the frontier regions and in Turkey proper as well as the Kurdish separatism or refugee crisis were among the challenges Ankara has to cope with in the recent years. It is evident that the negative spillovers of the Syrian conflict have created a strong pressure on the government of the Turkey and urged it to find a new position on the Syrian issues. At the beginning of the turbulence in 2011 as the West started to apply sanctions against Assad's regime, Turkey tried to persuade Syrian authorities to implement reforms, which would allow a rather peaceful transformation. However, the moment came to take sides in a strict way. The governing political force in Turkey, AKP would rather like to see a Sunni government in Syria, which could be a close ally of Ankara.

These events unfolded in a specific context. The Euro-integration hopes decreased in the recent years; the lengthy negotiation process has led to disappointment both in Brussels and Ankara. Of course, the crisis present new possibilities and the visa-free regime with EU serves as a good incentive for involvement in the solution of the refugee crisis where Turkey plays a pivotal role. There is a more limited success in this field as initially envisaged, though. Another political context is related to Turkeys engagement in NATO. Being strategically very important to the West, Turkey has not demonstrated much activity within NATO during the last ten years. Ankara was willing to play a rather independent role in the Middle East region, but the shooting down of the Russian military aircraft pressed Turkish leaders to promptly seek the support of NATO allies. Although a renewal of the relationship with Russia followed the failed coup d'état in 2016, Turkey still supports the idea that Crimea is a part of Ukraine and Moscow's discrimination against Crimean Tatars is unacceptable. The overall trend is Turkey moving away from the Western partners, but it still looks like the war in Syria has somehow corrected the Turkish foreign policy directions back to the West, notwithstanding Ankara's ambition to create its own regional policy.

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The West still has enough resources to solve the migration crisis, to fight back Daesh and to stabilise the situation in Syria. What is needed now is not to fall into pessimistic reasoning and extremes, but to become aware of our potential and to act decisively, thus preventing the achievements of the previous decades from the collapse.

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