

Russia's Military Intervention in Syria: Its Roots, Challenges, and Opportunities for the Kremlin

by

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the reasons for and consequences of Russia's combat mission in Syria, which started in September 2015. Through the analysis of Russian and Western sources, parallels are drawn between the Kremlin's current campaign and the Soviet Union's use of Syria as a base in its ideological conflict with the West during the Cold War. Syria provided an opportunity for both the Soviet and modern Russian governments to project power, primarily through military deployments and diplomacy. It is concluded that the success of modern Russia's Syria operation (i.e. saving Syria from "regime change") has forced the Western governments, who have also taken part in the Syrian conflict, to consider Russia as an important global power.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Civil War has been raging since 2011, killing thousands of people and forcing many others to become refugees. The Russian Federation's entry into this conflict on the side of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad on September 30, 2015 has arguably been one of the most important turning points in this tragedy. Not only did Russia's involvement save the Syrian government from potential collapse, but Vladimir Putin's Russia was very willing and able to flex its muscles abroad and project power to achieve political aims. Until 2015, much of the world's focus on Russia concerned events in Ukraine – Russia's reactions to the Euromaidan protests, the annexation of Crimea, and its role in the subsequent civil war in the Donbass. Russia had long been a major power (but not a global one) but its intervention in Syria – a significant mission outside of Russia's immediate neighbourhood (often called the “near abroad”) – made Russia's role in world politics impossible to ignore.

This study will analyze what advantages Russia hoped to gain by lending military aid to Bashar al-Assad. But Russia's recent actions in the Middle East have a deeper history than the most recent events, such as the potential desire to distract the international community from Ukraine, or the attempt to improve world opinion of Russia by attacking the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union, have had long-term relationships with the Middle East. This historical background will help explain Russia's modern involvement in the Syrian Civil War. This introductory chapter will outline my plans for how this will be done; each major problem or aspect of the thesis will be in a separate part. In each section the relevant topics will be introduced, as well as some of the major sources used to research them.

“Modern and Historical” Approach

A “historical and modern” approach to this project will provide a well-developed background to Russia’s intervention in Syria. Primary sources like the Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 and Nikita Khrushchev’s report to the 20th Soviet Communist Party Congress have been analyzed. Other documents include treaties and agreements such as the 1980 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Syria and the Soviet Union, which formalized the relationship between the two countries, hoping to provide a counter to the United States, Israel, and Anwar Sadat’s Westward-leaning Egypt.¹ Analyzing these documents puts Syria into a Cold War context and explains how the Soviet Union was part of it.

Among secondary sources on Soviet policy is *The Soviet Union in the Middle East: Policies and Perspectives*, co-edited by Adeed and Karen Dawisha. This book describes the Soviet Union’s priority of containing the West through its support of anti-Western Arab nationalists.² It also details the complications of this policy, including the fact that those same Arab nationalists often persecuted communists and that Muslim and Soviet political cultures were different in numerous ways.³ Another useful book was *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, edited by John Donovan. Donovan’s volume contains much information about the American Eisenhower Doctrine and how it was implemented in the Middle Eastern world.⁴ The book also described how the Soviet government reacted to the American plan. The Kremlin,

¹ Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Security International, 2007), 15; Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War Two to Gorbachev* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 153-4.

² Adeed Dawisha, “The Soviet Union the Arab World: The Limits to Superpower Influence,” in *The Soviet Union in the Middle East: Policies and Perspectives*, edited by Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha (London: Heinemann for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1982): 11-14, 16-17.

³ *Ibid.*, 10-1, 19-20.

⁴ For example, U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower authorized military preparation in the Middle East. And as with the Marshall Plan in Europe, financial aid was planned to bolster the local countries’ economic and political independence from communism. See John Donovan, editor, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1972), 24-6.

expressing its outrage in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's (CPSU) newspaper *Pravda*, stated that the Eisenhower Doctrine would "destabilize" the region and "enslave" the Arab people.⁵ Nikita Khrushchev and others in the Soviet leadership called it an element of "post-colonial colonialism." Donovan also wrote about the Arab reaction to the Doctrine: Syria's Foreign Minister said it would work only if the West guaranteed the security of Arabic countries, regardless of whoever attacked them, communists or otherwise.⁶

Many books about Soviet-Middle Eastern relations were written during the Cold War; the two above-mentioned books, for example, were written in the 1970s and 1980s. Secondary sources, covering both the Cold War and modern times, have discussed Russian actions in the Middle East in general, but it was harder to find specific information on Syria, such as the value of Soviet weapons sales. Contemporary reports from the Central Intelligence Agency were very helpful in resolving such research problems.⁷ A 2007 book by international relations scholar Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* has also been useful to this project.⁸ It contains information about Vladimir Putin's relationship with Bashar al-Assad, as well as some background from the Russian Imperial and Communist eras. Kreutz repeated the words of Russia's former Foreign Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, who said that the Middle East was "Russia's underbelly."⁹

Several considerations make Russia interested in the Middle East: terrorism, security of the ex-Soviet Central Asian countries, and American political influence and military

⁵ Ibid., 14-5.

⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, "Memorandum – Subject: Relations Between Syria and the USSR," (OCI No. 0507/76) June 1, 1976: 3-4. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00353R000100290001-4.pdf>.

⁸ "Russia in Syria: Previous History and Present Concerns [Information Page]," *Algora Publishing*, accessed April 27, 2017, <http://www.algora.com/519/book/details.html>.

⁹ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 149-53.

deployments in Central Asia and the South Caucasus (as seen in Kyrgyzstan and Georgia). In his book, Kreutz also argued that Russia has always had to “leapfrog” over Turkey and Western interests to find “friends among Arabs,” but he also suggested that Russia and the West should form partnerships due to shared interests in the Middle Eastern region, such as the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

While reading historical documents and analyses, I have simultaneously consulted many modern sources, including media outlets, thinktanks, and government publications. This constituted my “modern approach” to the project. I used Western media sources such as *BBC* and *The Economist*, and I consulted Russian state-run sources like *Russia Today* and *TASS*. Publications by think-tanks such as the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), The Jamestown Foundation, and the Russia-based foreign policy journal *Russia in Global Affairs* were also valuable, as they offer current analyses of the Syrian conflict. Both Western and the Russian governments have published information useful to this project. For example, the Russian Ministry of Defense has dedicated an entire section of its website to the Syria mission, providing reports on airstrikes and humanitarian efforts.¹⁰

An obvious challenge with using such sources is the danger of propaganda and partisan perspectives on both sides. For example, in March 2016, the U.S.-based think-tank Institute for the Study of War reported on the first Russian-Syrian capture of Palmyra from ISIS.¹¹ The

¹⁰ Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation (hereafter MoDRF), “Humanitarian bulletin of the Russian Centre for reconciliation of opposing sides in the Syrian Arab Republic (March 5, 2017),” March 5, 2017, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12114022@egNews; ---, “In the daytime, Su-34, Su-24M and Su-25 aircraft performed 15 combat sorties from the Hmeymim airbase,” October 5, 2015, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12059705@egNews>; ---, “Russian aviation performed high-accuracy strikes against international terrorist organization ISIS,” last updated October 20, 2015, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12059172@egNews>.

¹¹ Chris Kozak, “Russian-Syrian-Iranian Coalition Seizes ISIS-held Palmyra,” March 27, 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-syrian-iranian-coalition-seizes-isis-held-palmyra>.

Institute's report, while mentioning how the operation would impair ISIS, also framed this victory against ISIS as a negative event: "The regime and its allies will likely leverage Palmyra...as an optimal forward position for follow-on operations against ISIS in Ar-Raqqa and Deir ez-Zour Cities, complicating the position of the U.S.-led coalition in the region." The ISW had this negative reaction even though the Islamic State terrorist group is a mutual enemy of both Russia and the United States. The report argued that Russia and Syria would use Palmyra's liberation for propaganda purposes and reaffirm their anti-terrorism efforts. The Institute's concerns may have been valid from a pro-American perspective. But its narrative regarding Palmyra is just one example of both pro-Western and pro-Russian partisan analyses in sources that may have injected their own agendas into their reports.

The situation in Syria is complicated and constantly changing. Thus, over the course of the research, many events have occurred that make it hard to finalize viewpoints or make any possible predictions. For example, the election of United States President Donald Trump in November 2016 was significant, with many fearing he was at best "too friendly" with Vladimir Putin, or even a "Russian puppet."¹² Because of this supposed relationship, it was suggested that the United States and Russia would cooperate more closely to eliminate terrorist groups operating in Syria. Yet on April 6, 2017, only half a year after his election, Trump unexpectedly ordered the firing of multiple cruise missiles at facilities in Syria – Russia's ally – in retaliation for an alleged chemical weapons attack on civilians.¹³ This action cast Trump's relationship

¹² Neil MacFarquhar, "With Trump, Russia Goes From Thursday's Foe of U.S. to Friday's Friend," *The New York Times*, December 31, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/31/world/europe/trump-russia-us-foe-to-friend.html?_r=0.

¹³ Josie Ensor, "Syria moves its warplanes to Russian bases in anticipation of further American strikes," *National Post*, April 21, 2017, <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/world/syria-moves-its-warplanes-to-russian-bases-in-anticipation-of-further-american-strikes>.

with his “friend” Putin into doubt and confusion. This single example shows how the dynamic of the Syrian Civil War can change so rapidly.

The approach of looking at both the current situation and its long-term historical background has the advantage of bringing the past closer to the present. This way, Russia’s role in the Syrian War will become clearer. To achieve this aim, this project has been broken into two distinct parts. Chapter Two will look at the Soviet Union’s relationship with the Middle East in general: the policy which the Soviet Union followed there, what was at stake for them in that region, and the challenges of Soviet-Middle Eastern relations. While the primary focus will be on Syria, it would be impossible to analyze the Syrian context properly without some analysis of the general situation among that country’s neighbours.

Chapters Three and Four will use a similar strategy, but for the post-Soviet period – looking at the modern Russian Federation’s general foreign policy and then specifically at its relationship with Syria. Separating the Soviet and modern periods is essential, because the dynamic of the post-Soviet period is drastically different from that of the Cold War. Islamic extremism and terrorism, for example, are much more crucial issues today than they were before the Soviet Union’s collapse. Vladimir Putin’s policies are also different from those of the Soviet Union’s leadership. Andrei P. Tsygankov, a professor of international politics at the San Francisco State University, offers much insight into Russia’s post-Soviet foreign policy.¹⁴ Russia under Putin can certainly not be called pro-Western, especially over the last few years. Yet Tsygankov says that modern Russia adopted a policy he calls “Great-Power Pragmatism.”¹⁵ Under this policy, when Putin came to power in 2000, Russia’s top priority was to modernize

¹⁴ “Andrei P. Tsygankov,” San Francisco State University, accessed January 29, 2018, <https://internationalrelations.sfsu.edu/people/faculty/andrei-p-tsygankov>.

¹⁵ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, Second Edition (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 129-42.

and eventually be recognized as a great power. Russia would also cooperate with the West, affording Putin opportunities abroad. Even amidst current Russian-Western tensions and disagreements over Ukraine, Putin's government is still interested in cooperating with Western countries on other geopolitical problems such as terrorism and Arctic land claims.¹⁶ In the 1950s-1960s, Nikita Khrushchev did call for some cooperation between the Soviet Union and capitalist countries, especially in the areas of science and other fields.¹⁷ But the Soviet Union's Cold War policy was still predominantly one of competition – sometimes through proxy wars – against anti-communist blocs.

Scope – Periodization: Starting with the Cold War

To provide an adequate historical context to Russia's role in the Middle East, it was necessary to decide on which time periods to focus. While it might have been useful to comment briefly on the Russian Imperial period or the Second World War, the Cold War alone shows how important the Middle Eastern region was to the Soviet Union in its rivalry with the Western powers. This period foreshadowed the modern situation, in which Russia and the U.S.-led coalition clearly have different goals and ambitions in Syria.

The mid-1950s are an excellent period at which to start this analysis. This was when both sides were formulating doctrines on how to deal with the Middle East. During this decade, Egypt and other Arabic nations embarked on nationalistic paths, resisting “Western imperialism.”¹⁸ According to Adeer Dawisha, the West was not interested in providing arms to Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, so in September 1955 he instead signed such a deal with

¹⁶ Lee Berthiaume, “Russia won't go ‘begging’ for better relations with Canada: Ambassador,” *Ottawa Citizen*, last updated January 26, 2015, <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/russia-wont-go-begging-for-better-relations-with-canada-ambassador>.

¹⁷ N.S. Khrushchev, *Report of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the 20th Party Congress* (Ottawa: The Press Office of the USSR Embassy in Canada, 1956), 45-6.

¹⁸ Dawisha, “The Soviet Union the Arab World,” 8-9.

communist Czechoslovakia. A few months earlier, the Baghdad Pact had also been signed, which cautioned about the spread of “international communism” in the Middle East region. And in January 1956, the Soviet Union’s 20th Party Congress brought the Middle East into focus.¹⁹ During the Congress, Khrushchev specifically named Syria among those countries he saw as “standing for peace” and he praised such nations for resisting the old colonial order.²⁰ Thus Syria had become a natural Cold War ally for the USSR, because Syrian nationalists resisted colonialism.²¹ Finally, the American President Dwight Eisenhower announced a doctrine of his own a year later, on January 5, 1957.²² In this so-called “Eisenhower Doctrine,” the President said that Russia had “long sought to dominate the Middle East” since the Tsarist era. Between the 20th CPSU Congress and the Eisenhower Doctrine, the Middle East became a strategic area of competition between the two superpowers.

Having established a starting point, I decided to end the analysis shortly after the 2016 American election. The election of Donald Trump as President was a good cut-off point because he was expected to overturn the former administration’s policy towards Russia and Syria. With that in mind, and with the unpredictability of the Syrian conflict – and, for that matter, the new U.S. President – the end of 2016 was a good stopping point. Thus, this project will cover Russian-Syrian relations from about 1955 to 2016, from the Baghdad Pact to the early years of Donald Trump’s time in the White House. However, it analyzes some issues and events since November 2016 for an understanding of Russia’s long-term strategic interests in Syria.

Scope – Geography

¹⁹ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 13. The Congress’ official title was the Twentieth Congress of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (hereafter CC CPSU, or CPSU).

²⁰ Khrushchev, *Report of the CCCPSU to the 20th Party Congress*, 24-5, 45-6.

²¹ Dawisha, “The Soviet Union the Arab World,” 8-9.

²² Dwight D. Eisenhower, “January 5, 1957: Eisenhower Doctrine,” *UVA: Miller Center*, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-5-1957-eisenhower-doctrine>.

Focusing research specifically on Russian-Syrian relations was sometimes difficult. As mentioned above, many of the works about the Cold War discussed Soviet interactions with the whole Middle Eastern region. Thus, they discussed how the Kremlin dealt with Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and other places, while Syria might have merited a chapter or a few points throughout a book. But any source about the Soviet Union and the Middle East was potentially useful, because looking at Syria in isolation is impossible. This is the same for the modern Syrian Civil War, because it has had an international scope for years, having drawn in combatants and states from around the world, including other Middle Eastern ones.

The geographic factor is very important to this study, for both the Soviet Union and modern Russia's borders are close to the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea.²³ This made the Middle East important to the USSR for numerous reasons. First, Syria has a Mediterranean coastline, which allowed the Soviet state to establish the Syrian port of Tartus.²⁴ The move countered the American deployment of the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean and the establishment of nuclear missile sites in Turkey. Secondly, Russian access to the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits in Turkey – through which Russian naval ships would have to traverse to go from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean – has long been a contentious issue.²⁵ Thus, it was important for the USSR to maintain good relations with Turkey. However, Soviet naval ships were able to access the Mediterranean via the Black Sea and the Turkish Straits somewhat easily. They were able to do this by using “contingency declarations,” as cited in the Montreux Convention – an agreement meant to restrict warship movements through Turkish waters.²⁶ Thirdly, the oilfields in Soviet Azerbaijan were close to Iran, making the Middle East an

²³ R.D. McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy* (Lexington, MS: Lexington Books, 1975), 15.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17-8, 145.

²⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, “National Intelligence Estimate: The Uses of Soviet Military Power in Distant Areas,” (AR 70-14) December 15, 1971: 18.

important theatre in Soviet strategy.²⁷ Lastly, the Middle East possesses rich resources, which were part of the strategic calculi between the Soviet and Western rivals.²⁸ Modern Russia has smaller borders than the Soviet Union, but the Middle East is still strategically important, and events there have an impact on Russia.

With the chronological and geographical scopes established, now we will look quickly at the factors that have influenced Russian-Syrian relations from the Cold War to the modern day.

Strategic and Economic Factors

Kreutz suggests that the Russians have a presence in Syria because they require access to a year-round warm water port.²⁹ The port is especially valuable after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which “landlocked and isolated [Russia] from Eurasian development.” After the Soviet state dissolved, Russia successfully negotiated with newly independent Ukraine for access to the port of Sevastopol, which is in the Crimean Peninsula and sits on the Black Sea coast.³⁰ After the Crimean crisis of 2014, the city ended up in Russian hands. Still, Crimea is somewhat isolated from the rest of the world’s oceans. Any ship wanting to enter the high seas from the peninsula would have to pass through the previously-mentioned Dardanelle and Bosphorus Straits. If relations between Russia and Turkey ever soured to a significant extent, the latter could theoretically block passage.

However, Russian-Turkish relations have greatly improved recently – “fully recovered,” even, according to Vladimir Putin – from the time when the Turkish air force destroyed a Russian bomber in late 2015 and both countries subsequently imposed economic sanctions on

²⁷ Ibid., 15.

²⁸ Ibid., 16, 30.

²⁹ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 150, 157 (footnote: Chapter 1, 1).

³⁰ John Morrison, “Pereyaslav and after: the Russian-Ukrainian relationship” *International Affairs* 69, No. 4 (1993): 694.

each other.³¹ When a coup attempt failed to topple Turkish President Recep Erdogan in July 2016, Russia increased its support of Turkey, in part because many of the plotters (who were later purged or imprisoned) were pro-NATO and had anti-Russian sentiments.³² There have also been reports of military cooperation as well as the restoration of economic relations; in January 2017, for example, nine Russian and eight Turkish airplanes launched a joint attack on ISIS positions in northern Syria.³³ This attack was carried out after a meeting between “Russian, Turkish, and Iranian officials; American officials were not invited,” the *New York Times* reported. And in September 2017, Turkey agreed to spend \$2.5 billion on Russian surface-to-air S-400 missiles, despite being a NATO member and thus having been urged to buy arms from within the alliance, due to concerns about equipment interoperability and Russian influence.³⁴

Russia expert Jeffrey Mankoff notes that Russia’s actions in Ukraine and Syria, increased access to the Black Sea and Mediterranean, and the “development of anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities in these areas” have increasingly made it harder for NATO to access its Turkish partner, pushing Erdogan further into Putin’s orbit.³⁵ Strained Turkish-NATO relations are also very important in this discussion. Michael Rubin notes that President Erdogan and Turkish media blame NATO for the July 2016 coup, citing Western frustrations with the Turkish

³¹ Pinchuk et al., “Putin says Russia’s relations with Turkey have fully recovered,” *Reuters*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-putin/putin-says-russias-relations-with-turkey-have-fully-recovered-idUSKBN17Z1O8>.

³² Jeffrey Mankoff, “A Friend in Need? Russia and Turkey after the Coup,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, July 29, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/friend-need-russia-and-turkey-after-coup>.

³³ Russia and Turkey also conducted a naval exercise in the Black Sea in April 2017. See Tom O’Connor, “Russia and Turkey Military Drills Come Amid Fresh Syrian War and NATO Tensions,” *Newsweek*, April 5, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-turkey-military-drills-syrian-war-nato-tensions-579485>; Pinchuk et al., “Putin says Russia’s relations with Turkey have fully recovered;” Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “Russians and Turks Conduct Joint Strikes on ISIS in Syria,” *New York Times*, January 18, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/us/politics/russia-turkey-syria-isis.html>.

³⁴ Carlotta Gall and Andrew Higgins, “Turkey Signs Russian Missile Deal, Pivoting From NATO,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/12/world/europe/turkey-russia-missile-deal.html>; Hannah Grabenstein and Meredith Lee, “Why is Turkey attacking northwest Syria?” *PBS*, February 3, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/why-is-turkey-attacking-northwest-syria>.

³⁵ Mankoff, “A Friend in Need?”

government's move away from secularism and towards a "neo-Ottoman" foreign policy.³⁶ There is also Turkey's offensive in early 2018 against Syrian Kurds, whom the Americans have been supporting and arming against ISIS since 2014.³⁷ And while a military confrontation between Turkish and American troops in Syria is certainly avoidable and unlikely, fears of such an event have been raised. Considering Turkey's position between Russia and NATO, Erdogan almost has no choice but to move diplomatically closer to Moscow, allowing the Russian government to drive a wedge between members of the NATO alliance.³⁸ Finally, Rubin worries that Turkey's cooperation with Russia and simultaneous NATO membership could expose the Western alliance's secrets to Russia.³⁹

The newly improved Russian relationship with Turkey is likely to make access through the Turkish Straits less of a problem for the Russian navy. Regardless, access to the Syrian coast still gives Russia an important advantage in the Middle East. Since 1971, the Russians have had access to Tartus, a location that is open to shipping throughout the year.⁴⁰ According to a report by the Institute for the Study of War in 2012, this port is valuable because it allows the Russians to dock and maintain naval ships. The port's importance to the Russians was emphasized on January 20, 2017 when the Syrian government granted its ally a 49-year extension to its lease to the naval base.⁴¹ Russia also has "territorial sovereignty over the port." It is legally able to dock up to eleven warships there, including nuclear submarines. Having access to Tartus not only gives Russia a strategic advantage, but it also makes year-round marine trade more feasible. At

³⁶ Michael Rubin, "Turkey's Turn toward Russia," *National Review*, April 25, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/447009/turkey-russia-alliance-develops-erdogan-spurns-west>.

³⁷ Grabenstein and Lee, "Why is Turkey attacking northwest Syria?"

³⁸ Ibid.; Mankoff, "A Friend in Need?"

³⁹ Rubin, "Turkey's Turn toward Russia."

⁴⁰ Christopher Harmer, "Backgrounder: Russian Naval Base Tartus", *Institute for the Study of War*, July 31, 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder_Russian_NavalBaseTartus.pdf, 1-2.

⁴¹ "Syria transfers port of Tartus to Russian use as naval base, 49-year lease," *Agencia EFE*, January 20, 2017, <http://www.efe.com/efe/english/world/syria-transfers-port-of-tartus-to-russian-use-as-naval-base-49-year-lease/50000262-3154887>.

this facility “every type of commercial cargo” can be unloaded, and in 2008 almost 13 million tons of cargo, shipped over almost 2,800 cargo vessels, were processed here.⁴²

The Cold War period saw a lot of economic deals between the Syrians and the Soviet Union. In October 1957, the two countries concluded negotiations, under which the USSR would give the Arab country money for infrastructural projects.⁴³ Such projects were worth more than a billion dollars, including a hydroelectric dam across the Euphrates River and a road and railway network from Latakia, a Syrian port city. A 12-year loan was also extended to Syria, as well as material and expertise. This was essentially a Soviet answer to the Eisenhower Doctrine. A month before the deal was finalized, the Syrian Economy Minister, Khalil Kallas, said that a “weakened Syrian economy” would have allowed the Western world to infiltrate and take over the country. It was hoped that with Soviet aid, the Syrians could resist “American imperialism.”

Oil and gas have been important in Russian-Syrian relations, as well. In 1982, one source noted that the Middle Eastern “region contains over half of the world’s oil reserves and currently supplies most of Western Europe’s and Japan’s energy needs.”⁴⁴ The Soviet Union did not need Middle Eastern oil. During his “Doctrine speech,” U.S. President Eisenhower said in 1957 that the USSR was in fact shipping oil to Syria, Turkey, Egypt, and other countries.⁴⁵ In modern times, Russia is still a major oil producer. Hence, the Middle Eastern connection is important because the region provides a market to which Russia can sell its product. Thus, Andrej Kreutz

⁴² Harmer, “Russian Naval Base Tartus,” 1.

⁴³ Donovan, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, 78-9.

⁴⁴ Adeed and Karen Dawisha, “Perspectives on Soviet Policy in the Middle East,” in *The Soviet Union in the Middle East: 2*. Since the 1980’s, the Middle East’s importance as an oil producer has been slightly reduced because of the extensive oil industries in Russia, the United States, and Canada.

⁴⁵ Eisenhower, “Eisenhower Doctrine;” Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East from World War Two to Gorbachev*, 15-6.

comments that Putin must maintain strong connections with other oil-rich nations such as those in the Middle East.⁴⁶ The Arab countries will not necessarily be trade partners in the commodity, but they are valuable as co-operators in the business, which has been vital for Putin. Not only did selling oil under the pre-2014 prices bring a lot of funds into his country, but oil also gives the Russian president great geopolitical advantage and leverage against Western Europe, because Russian pipelines feed so much of the resource into the continent.⁴⁷

Political and Ideological Factors

The Soviet Union's activity in the Middle East as an effort to resist the West during the Cold War has already been introduced. Again, the Arab nationalists in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries saw the former Western colonial powers as "imperialists." Such anti-Western sentiment pushed the Syrian government to embrace the Soviet Union.⁴⁸ This was especially due to fears that the Americans had plotted against Syria, supported Israel, and established dictatorships in Jordan and Iraq. The Syrian leadership, even though it had recently shifted to the political left, was not completely committed to joining the Soviet communists, but forced to choose between" the West and the Soviet Union, it picked the latter.

The Syrian Ba'th Party's relationship with the USSR will also be analyzed. The Ba'th Party began with the desire for pan-Arab self-rule before World War I, and its ideology gradually spread from its Syrian home to Iraq and Jordan.⁴⁹ It is beyond the scope of this project to give a detailed account of this history. But Ba'thism's compatibility with Soviet communism is notable. Ba'thist ideology was hardly Marxist-Leninist, because its emphasis on Arab

⁴⁶ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 151.

⁴⁷ For an example of this concept in action back in 2009, see "Russian gas to Europe 'blocked'," *BBC News*, January 13, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7826142.stm>.

⁴⁸ Donovan, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, 74-9.

⁴⁹ John F. Devlin, *The Ba'th Party: A History from Its Origins to 1966* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976), 2-5, 24-5, 99-114.

nationalism was antithetical to Marxism's internationalism.⁵⁰ However, the Ba'thists were anti-Western, anti-Imperialist, and socialist.⁵¹ And though it identified Islam as an important part of Arab national identity (even for non-Muslim Arabs), the Ba'th Party was not a religious organization, and secularism was one of its foundational values.⁵² But this commonality between Ba'thism and communism was not always apparent, as Middle Eastern communists did suffer suppression under the Arab nationalists.⁵³ Such actions posed a problem for the Soviet authorities, who settled for *realpolitik* in exchange for the benefits of building relations with the Arab nations.⁵⁴ Another priority for the CPSU was to avoid direct confrontation with American or Israeli interests in the region; thus during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Soviet forces were pulled away from the warzone and did not give their Syrian and Egyptian allies any significant support.⁵⁵

As for Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad today, we should not make too much of political commonalities between them. They certainly have common concerns, as will be explained. They have both led conflicts against significant radical Islamic forces, and they are valuable allies to each other in their respective fights against terrorists. Because Islamic terror is a concern even for Russia and Syria's rivals, their war with ISIS and other such groups is advantageous for them. For Putin, however, Syria's importance is perhaps more strategic than ideological. Maintaining Tartus as Russia's only port on the Mediterranean Sea is more important than Putin's ruling United Russia party being in the same political camp as Assad's Ba'thist organization.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 33-5.

⁵¹ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 140.

⁵² Ibid; Devlin, *The Ba'th Party*, 24-5.

⁵³ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 54-5.

⁵⁴ Peter Shearman, "Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1991" in *Russian Foreign Policy Since 1990*, edited by Peter Shearman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1995): 15-7.

⁵⁵ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 88; McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 56.

Much of the modern relationship between these two allies is due to the needs of *realpolitik* and international strategy. For example, one can see a parallel between the Soviet wishes to avoid escalation with the United States or Israel and the current Russian policy. Israel has feared Syrian arms shipments to Hezbollah, a Lebanese anti-Israeli militant group.⁵⁶ In reaction, the Israeli military has attacked Syrian facilities, including on September 7, 2017, when a Syrian weapons depot was struck. This was only seventy kilometres from Khmeimim Air Base, which is a Syrian base for Russia's military aircraft. Russia has been largely quite silent regarding such attacks, which numbered between "10 to 15... in recent years," according to an analysis in *The Jerusalem Post*.⁵⁷ And Iran, an ally of both Syria and Hezbollah, has been accused of building weapon manufactories in Lebanon, making that country "one big missile factory" and an Iranian base, according to an Israeli military spokesman.⁵⁸

On January 29, 2018 the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Putin in Moscow and brought up Israel's security concerns.⁵⁹ Despite Israeli airstrikes against Syria and warnings regarding Iran, *The Times of Israel* has reported that Russian-Israeli relations are relatively "friendly and constructive." The two governments also often have meetings to prevent misunderstandings between their militaries over Syria. When Israel attacks Syrian efforts to

⁵⁶ Avi Issacharof, "Why Russia may not respond to the alleged Israeli airstrike in Syria," *The Times of Israel*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/why-russia-may-not-respond-to-the-alleged-israeli-airstrike-in-syria/>; Louisa Loveluck and Loveday Morris, "Israeli airstrike targets Syrian military site as tensions rise," *The Washington Post*, September 7, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/israeli-airstrikes-target-syrian-research-center-linked-to-chemical-weapons/2017/09/07/2230abda-93a5-11e7-b9bc-b2f7903bab0d_story.html?utm_term=.66fba28e2ca3.

⁵⁷ Yossi Melman, "Analysis: What does Russia really think about Israel's Alleged Airstrikes in Syria?" *The Jerusalem Post*, January 14, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Analysis-What-does-Russia-think-about-Israelis-alleged-airstrikes-in-Syria-478428>.

⁵⁸ Toi Staff, "IDF warns Lebanese that Iran is turning their country into a 'missile factory,'" *The Times of Israel*, January 28, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-warns-lebanese-that-iran-is-turning-their-country-into-a-missile-factory/>.

⁵⁹ "PM Netanyahu's remarks upon leaving for Moscow," January 29, 2018, *Israel Ministry for Foreign Affairs*, <http://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2018/Pages/PM-Netanyahu%27s-remarks-upon-leaving-for-Moscow-29-January-2018.aspx>; Toi Staff, "Netanyahu says he will press Putin on Iranian missiles in Lebanon," *The Times of Israel*, January 29, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-says-he-will-press-putin-on-iranian-missiles-in-lebanon/>.

support Hezbollah, Putin does not see this as a threat to Russian interests. Evidently, Russia's support of its Syrian partner is not complete, going only as far as the battle against extremists and rebels, and not to the point of creating diplomatic problems with Israel.

The Islamic Factor: Common Concerns

Throughout its overtures to the Middle East, the Soviet Union also faced the challenge of Islam. It may be true that the Ba'thist nationalists in Syria were secularists, simply seeing the Muslim faith as a part of Arab identity. But Islam was a very important "indigenous factor" in the Middle East during the Cold War, as it still is today.⁶⁰ Communism, which relied on party structures and institutions, failed to account for a supposed Arab Muslim tendency to follow single leaders and personalities, rather than political systems. This point is perhaps debatable, especially considering the modern events of the Arab Spring.

In any case, it is undeniable that Islam posed significant challenges to communism. This was particularly true with regards to the latter's atheistic nature. Finally, by the start of the Cold War, Islam had been in the Arab world for more than a millennium. The Soviet communist state, being only a few decades old, may have had a significant role in the Middle East, but it did not have the cultural capital or strength of Islam. This imbalance was especially true in Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union lost thousands of soldiers trying to impose communism in a country filled with Islamic *mujahedeen* fighters. By the 1970s, as anti-Western revolutionary politics started to die down in the Middle East, politics shifted toward a more Muslim worldview. The change caused the USSR to lose Arab support, as the religiously conservative Saudi government

⁶⁰ Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 19-22.

helped Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Eritrea to resist local communist forces or expel Soviet advisors in the early 1980s.⁶¹

The Islamic factor is also very important to modern Russia's relations with the Middle East. Russia is predominantly Orthodox Christian, but the Muslim faith is still very important in that country. In January 2017, the Central Intelligence Agency estimated that 10-15% of Russian citizens are practicing Muslims.⁶² Andrej Kreutz predicts that with its large numbers, the Russian Muslim community will soon have as much influence as Orthodoxy.⁶³ And Marlene Laruelle, a U.S.-based research professor focussing on social change in Russia and Central Asia, has written that a third of Russia's population will be Muslims by 2050.⁶⁴ Russia's very identity will change, she says, with this drastic shift. Former President Dmitry Medvedev even said in 2009 that Russia is "already an organic part of [the Muslim] world." While some of these predictions may be mere speculation, their potential effects on Russia cannot be ignored.

Clearly, the Russian government must take care of its relations with the Muslim Middle East. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the Russian Federation immediately became neighbours with multiple Central Asian states, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.⁶⁵ In addition to being a predominantly Muslim region, Central Asia also borders the Middle East, which was experiencing a revival of Islam at the Cold War's end. In *Russian Policy toward the Middle East Since the Collapse of the Soviet Union: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Challenge for Putin*, Robert

⁶¹ The Saudis also sent money to the non-Muslim countries Taiwan and South Korea "simply because of their governments' anti-communism." Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 19-22.

⁶² Central Intelligence Agency, "The World Factbook: Russia," last modified May 1, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/rs.html>.

⁶³ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 150-1.

⁶⁴ "Marlene Laruelle," *The Jamestown Foundation*, accessed April 27, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/analyst/marlene-laruelle/>; Marlene Laruelle, "How Islam Will Change Russia," *The Jamestown Foundation*, September 13, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/marlene-laruelle-how-islam-will-change-russia/>.

⁶⁵ Robert O. Freedman, *Russian Policy Toward the Middle East Since the Collapse of the Soviet Union: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Challenge for Putin* (Washington: The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies), 33 (December 2001), 8.

Freedman states that the Russian government has feared the influence of “Iran’s radically religious regime” in these nearby countries. Militant Islam has also grown in these areas, causing concern for the Russian government. The Soviet Union’s 1980s war in Afghanistan, in addition to the current situation there, has also raised fears of radicalism spreading from the unstable country.⁶⁶

Muslim regions within Russia have also caused some issues for the Kremlin. The Republic of Tatarstan, for example, has disagreed with the Russian government on foreign policy issues, such as on Turkey’s relationship with Cyprus.⁶⁷ Islam is also an unavoidable topic when discussing Russia’s two wars in Chechnya, a predominantly Muslim area that tried to break away shortly after the Soviet Union collapsed. Mike Bowker says that the first war, which started in 1994, did not have many Islamic or “jihadist” overtones.⁶⁸ But these were certainly present in the second war of 1999; by then the Chechen “republic had become more Islamicised” and militant Wahhabi Islam had grown in the region. Foreign Muslim fighters were also moving into Chechnya – some supposedly at the command of Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda at that time. These foreign individuals established training camps and planned terror attacks within Russia, such as the 2004 murders at the Beslan school in North Ossetia.

Mike Bowker’s book, *Russia, America and the Islamic World*, also discusses Russia’s response to the 9/11 attacks against the United States. Russia suffered its own share of terrorist attacks during the Chechen War, and in the years just before 9/11, Putin had been warning the international community about the threat of Islamic terrorism.⁶⁹ In the seventeen years since the

⁶⁶ Amin Saikal, “Russian Policy Toward Central Asia and the Middle East,” in *Russian Foreign Policy Since 1990*, edited by Peter Shearman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1995), 269-70.

⁶⁷ Freedman, *Russian Policy Toward the Middle East*, 14.

⁶⁸ Mike Bowker, *Russia, America and the Islamic World* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 79-80.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 90-1.

World Trade Center was destroyed, many high-profile terrorist attacks have struck Russia, the Western world, and the Middle East. They have given Putin a reason to urge foreign leaders to fight the common enemy, even though as of early 2018 the terror group has lost virtually all its territory in Syria and Iraq. It is still active in Libya, the Philippines, Nigeria, and other countries.⁷⁰

Syria also became an ally of the United States immediately after 9/11, allowing American operatives to interview detainees in Syrian prisons.⁷¹ However, U.S. President George W. Bush accused Syria of harbouring weapons of mass destruction and supporting militant groups such as *Hamas* and *Hezbollah* against Israel.⁷² These accusations, along with the American-British invasion of Iraq in 2003, encouraged the Syrian government to follow a similar direction to what it did during the Cold War.⁷³ In response to these Western actions, the Syrian government took up a pan-Arabic, anti-Western, and anti-“neo-imperialistic” position. And by the start of the civil war in 2011, Russia had become an attractive Syrian ally. The problem of Islamic terrorism is probably the most important shared issue between Bashar al-Assad and Vladimir Putin, as they have both experienced it in their own countries. This security concern is made much more important for both leaders because Chechen Muslim fighters have been active in Syria, fighting for a Russian-based organization called the “Wilayat Qawqaz,” according to the Foundation for

⁷⁰ Thomas Joscelyn, “Analysis: ISIS hasn’t been defeated,” February 22, 2018, *FDD’s Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/02/analysis-isis-hasnt-been-defeated.php>.

⁷¹ Carsten Wieland, Adam Almqvist, and Helena Nassif, *The Syrian Uprising: Dynamics of an Insurgency* (Fife: University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2013), 16-7; Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Asad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004), 49.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 49-51, 57-8, 66-7.

⁷³ Wieland, et. al. *The Syrian Uprising*, 18-20.

the Defense of Democracies.⁷⁴ These are foreign fighters with which Assad must contend, and Putin should also be concerned because an ISIS affiliate is active within Russia's borders.

Finally, by appearing fighting terrorism, Assad and Putin hope to gain international legitimacy, because Islamic extremism is a worldwide concern shared even by Syria and Russia's opponents. And when speaking of the international fight against terrorism, the Russian-Western quarrels regarding Syria's fate must also be discussed. The West and Russia clearly have common interests in defeating terrorism, including in Syria. However, they differ in important areas, especially over Syria's future and that of Bashar al-Assad. Putin addressed the United Nations General Assembly in September 2015, just days before Russian planes started striking anti-Assad fighters.⁷⁵ He criticized the Western world for "playing games" with "so-called moderate terrorist groups" in their efforts to resist the Syrian leader. In November that year, shortly after the terror attacks in Paris, then France's President François Hollande indicated a desire to work more closely with Russia against the Islamic State.⁷⁶ But he also said that France would not support the idea of al-Assad remaining in power, claiming that the Syrian leader threatened peace efforts in Syria. And after U.S. President Trump's cruise missile strike against Syria's military in April 2017, some suspected that he would after all support regime

⁷⁴ Caleb Weiss, "Caucasus Emirate branch highlights fighters in Syria," *FDD's Long War Journal*, February 8, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/02/caucasus-emirate-branch-highlights-fighters-in-syria.php>; ---. "North Caucasian group highlights training in Syria." *FDD's Long War Journal*, March 28, 2017, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/north-caucasian-group-highlights-training-in-syria.php>; Thomas Joscelyn, "Islamic State's Caucasus 'province' claims first official attack on Russian forces," *FDD's Long War Journal*, September 2, 2015, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/09/islamic-states-caucasus-province-claims-first-official-attack-on-russian-forces.php>; Joanna Paraszczuk, "Chechen Leader Kadyrov Doesn't Consider IS A Threat To Russia," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 5, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/a/kadyrov-isis-chechnya-russia-threat/26777419.html>.

⁷⁵ RT YouTube Channel, "'Do you realise what you've done?' Putin addresses UNGA 2015 (FULL SPEECH)." September 28, 2015, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q13yzl6k6w0>: 8:30-10:50.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Pineau and Denis Pinchuk, "Hollande, Putin agree to work more closely to combat Islamic State in Syria," *Reuters*, November 26, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-france-idUSKBN0TF1ZX20151126>.

change in Syria.⁷⁷ The United States and NATO had attempted this policy in Iraq and Libya, despite Russian opposition.⁷⁸

Russia's active combat role added another dimension to the Syrian War, giving it more international importance. Like any other country's decision to go to war, this intervention has a lengthy history. As noted, its economic, strategic, and political roots were visible during the Cold War. It is impossible to make predictions about the intervention's ultimate results. How much power will Russia project into the Middle East after the war's end? What role will Russia play in any possible peace talks? But by understanding its background, we can make sense of the current effects of Russia's Syrian venture and have a more informed perspective when the results start appearing.

A brief comment should be made on spelling and terminology. Some words are spelled differently than in other works. This includes some Russian names, such as Yevgeniy Primakov, whose first name may sometimes be written as *Evgeniy* or *Evgeny*. Another example is the name of the Arab nationalist party, the *Ba'th*. This is how the organization's name will be spelled in this thesis, but other sources have spelled it like *Ba'ath*. And finally, I have used the terms "Islamic State" and "ISIS" interchangeably. While the former is the terrorist group's official title, the latter name is also very common.

⁷⁷ "Does Trump Want Regime Change in Syria?" *Wall Street Journal*, April 5, 2017, <http://www.wsj.com/video/does-trump-want-regime-change-in-syria/508C6963-56F3-4A4E-84F2-74707B690C2D.html>.

⁷⁸ James Carden, "Nightmare or Necessity: Is it Time for Regime Change in Russia?" *The National Interest*, February 4, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/nightmare-or-necessity-it-time-regime-change-russia-12183>; Peter Leonard, "Putin condemns bloody regime change in Middle East." Yahoo! News. September 26, 2012, accessed April 27, 2017. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/putin-condemns-bloody-regime-change-middle-east-133303391.html>; Steve Gutterman, "Putin's Russia set against regime change in Syria." *Reuters*. January 28, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-russia-un-idUSTRE80R08B20120128>; Robert Bridge, "No UN mandate for Libyan ground operations, regime change – Lavrov," *Russia Today*, last updated April 17, 2011. <https://www.rt.com/politics/nato-russia-berlin-lavrov-rogozin/>; RT, "Do you realise what you've done?": 7:49-8:39.

CHAPTER TWO: THE SOVIET UNION'S MIDDLE EASTERN PRESENCE

The Soviet Union's interaction with Syria can be placed into four categories: political, military, economic, and cultural. Soviet activity in Syria was attributable to the USSR's strategic situation during the Cold War and its rivalry with the United States. Syria provided a base for Soviet influence in the Middle East, allowing the USSR to counter the USA and its allies in NATO and Israel. Before specifically focussing on Soviet-Syrian relations, we will look at how the whole Middle East region became a Cold War theatre. Soviet-Egyptian interaction must also be briefly analyzed, as this relationship was more important to the Soviet Union than that with Syria. There are also some key parallels between the Soviet-Egyptian and Soviet-Syrian relationships.

Soviet Focus on the Middle East

Before the end of World War II, the Soviet attitude towards the Middle East was markedly different from its later policies. R.D. McLaurin, writing for The American Institutes for Research in 1975, argued that in the aftermath of the Communist Revolution of 1917, the Soviet Union's priority was to pacify its southern border by abandoning Tsarist ambitions there.⁷⁹ They did negotiate some deals with Iran and Turkey at this time, but the Middle East was less important than consolidating control over the old Russian Empire. This situation changed after the Second World War, when the Soviet Union took a much more active role in the region. The Cold War between the communist and Western capitalist worlds was beginning. Entire world regions became battlegrounds between the competing ideologies, as seen in the American theory of the "domino effect," which posited that if one country fell to communism, its neighbours would follow. This competition led to proxy wars in Africa, Southeast Asia, and political dramas in Europe.

⁷⁹ McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 5.

The Middle East was also drawn into the communist-capitalist strategic struggle by January 1956, the date of the 20th Congress of the CC CPSU, which took place under Nikita Khrushchev. The 20th Congress defined Khrushchev's foreign policy, emphasizing the CPSU's ideological opposition to capitalism. Khrushchev believed that the colonialist histories of the United States and the other "imperialist, capitalist" powers lived on through their participation in arms races, formation of anti-socialist blocs, and building military bases close to the Soviet Union.⁸⁰ Khrushchev also said that the West's donation of weapons to foreign countries was a grand capitalist conspiracy.⁸¹ This "aid," the Soviet leader proclaimed, was "granted on definite political terms" and on the basis of the recipients joining American-supported alliances.

However, Khrushchev also believed that the capitalist world was in crisis and that the old colonial empires were collapsing: the destruction of this system was "on the order of the day."⁸² His speech to the 20th Congress spoke about the goal of "world revolution" – the fortification of the "great socialist camp" by developing trade and cultural exchange between the USSR and other socialist-oriented countries.⁸³ Marxism-Leninism was the CPSU's key to building world peace, exhibited through the so-called "Five Principles:" non-interference, non-aggression, building positive foreign relations, "peaceful co-existence," and "economic cooperation."⁸⁴ Quoting Vladimir Lenin, the General Secretary predicted that all countries would eventually transition to socialism, creating a peaceful, prosperous world.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ N.S. Khrushchev, *Report of the Central Committee of the Communist Part of the Soviet Union to the 20th Party Congress* (Ottawa: The Press Office of the USSR Embassy in Canada, 1956), 23, 146.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 26-7.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 23, 146-7.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11, 145.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 144, 148.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

To implement this Leninist dream, Nikita Khrushchev's foreign policy plans at the 20th CPSU Congress can be broadly summarized under the following points:

1. The CPSU had to build ties with other communist countries (i.e., Vietnam, China, and Yugoslavia) and neutrals (such as Sweden). Khrushchev even wanted to increase cooperation with capitalist countries, hoping to enhance cooperation in science and other fields.
2. The USSR's defenses were to be maintained "at the level demanded by present-day armaments and science."
3. Khrushchev wanted to support countries which "stood for peace" by not joining military blocs and alliances. He specifically placed the Middle Eastern states of Syria and Egypt in this category.⁸⁶

Point 3 would be put into effect, Khrushchev claimed, through "free, no-strings" aid from socialist countries.⁸⁷ According to this plan, needy countries would get modern equipment from the socialist states, free of any political or military obligations. This approach allowed the USSR to have an appearance of resisting colonialism and capitalism; Moscow claimed, for example, that it had not forced or coerced Egypt into any agreements.⁸⁸ Khrushchev cited an Egyptian publication, *Al Akhbar*, which had recently written that Russia recognized "the peoples'... rights and aspirations and does not demand their adherence to military pacts or blocs."

Three years after the 20th CPSU Congress, from January 27 to February 5, 1959, the 21st Extraordinary Central Committee (CC) of the CPSU Congress was held. This Congress focussed on the Soviet Union's communist education system and both national industrial and

⁸⁶ Ibid., 45-6, 145, 149, 153.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 28-9.

agricultural production.⁸⁹ However, Khrushchev did make a few comments reflecting the foreign policy initiative of the previous Congress. He accused the United States and United Kingdom of making “preparation[s] for war, preparation for aggression” by building military bases around the world.⁹⁰ Khrushchev asserted that the American plan behind this development was to have its allies fight any potential war with the Soviet Union, allowing themselves to safely conduct the war from behind. “It is to be hoped that the British, French, Germans, Turks, Greeks, Italians, and the peoples of other countries on whose territories the American bases are situated, have realized what lies in store for them,” Khrushchev said. The “anti-imperial” Soviet Union, was more peaceful, he claimed: “...we do not pursue any war aims. We have no military bases around the United States, either in Mexico, Canada, or in other countries adjoining the United States.” Khrushchev admitted that the United States had a military advantage over the Soviet Union (including the feared “right to fly over Soviet territory”), but this was due to what he saw as American aggression and expansion of the States’ military infrastructure.

The Middle East as a Cold War Theatre

Khrushchev’s foreign policy outlined at the two Congresses was a reaction against Western efforts to influence the Middle East. The previous decade had seen the formulation of the Truman Doctrine on March 12, 1947, in which American President Harry Truman called on his government to support Greece and Turkey against Soviet interference.⁹¹ This Doctrine also committed the United States to an overall policy of protecting democracies against “totalitarian regimes,” giving the Americans licence to intervene in regional conflicts outside its immediate

⁸⁹ The Press Office, The USSR Embassy in Canada, *Documents of the 21st Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: January 27 to February 5, 1959* (Ottawa: The Press Office, The USSR Embassy in Canada, 1959), 36, 42-52.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 17-8, 29.

⁹¹ Office of the Historian, “The Truman Doctrine, 1947,” *Department of State of the United States of America*, accessed February 5, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine>.

neighborhood. As part of this initiative, Truman wanted to send both financial and military aid to Greece and Turkey.

Khrushchev's speech to the 20th CPSU Congress in January 1956 occurred in the midst of the anti-communist SEATO alliance of 1954, the Baghdad Pact of 1955, and American President Dwight Eisenhower's announcement of the "Eisenhower Doctrine" on January 5, 1957.⁹² The Baghdad Pact was a locally created alliance signed on February 24, 1955 between the Iraqi and Turkish governments, and it was ratified by their legislatures two days later.⁹³ The background to this agreement goes back to 1941, when Soviet and Allied military units were sent to stop a pro-Nazi coup in Iran.⁹⁴ But Soviet-Allied cooperation in this theatre ended almost immediately after the war was won. From December 1945 to February 1946, Soviet forces remained in northern Iran, hoping to create an Autonomous State of Azerbaijan neighboring on Soviet Azerbaijan.⁹⁵ The Soviet Union also claimed the Kars and Ardhan provinces in north-eastern Turkey after a rejected proposal to create a Soviet-Turkish alliance, which would have given the USSR unrestricted access to the Mediterranean Sea.⁹⁶

⁹² Khrushchev, *Report of the CCCPSU to the 20th Party Congress*, 20, 26-7; Adeed Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World: The Limits to Superpower Influence," in *The Soviet Union in the Middle East: Policies and Perspectives*, edited by Adeed Dawisha and Karen Dawisha (London: Heinemann for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1982): 8-9; Dwight D. Eisenhower, "January 5, 1957: Eisenhower Doctrine," *UVA: Miller Center*, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-5-1957-eisenhower-doctrine>. The SEATO alliance was otherwise known as the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization. Formed in September 1954, it aimed to protect Southeast Asia from communism. However, the Philippines and Thailand were the only local countries that joined, in addition to Great Britain, France, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Pakistan. SEATO was not very effective, having failed to prevent South Vietnam from falling to communism in the 1970s. It also did not allow for much intelligence sharing between partners, hindering the alliance's ability to counter internal subversion. After the Vietnam War, it became defunct in 1977. For more information see Office of the Historian, "Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), 1954", Department of State of the United States of America, accessed February 5, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/seato>.

⁹³ Great Britain. Central Office of Information, London, *The Baghdad Pact: Quote No. R.3782 (Superseding R.3491 and R.3569)*, *Classification I.2c* (London: Reference Division, Central Office of Information, 1957), 2-3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*; The USSR also wanted fellow communist Bulgaria to be given territory near Greek Thrace. McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 18, 21. Jamil Hasanli, an historian from Baku State University, has written a very extensive account on Turkish-Soviet relations at the start of the Cold War. Hasanli says that the idea of a Soviet

In response to these Soviet provocations, the Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri es Said suggested in August 1954 to form an Arab League Collective Security Pact. This alliance was to oppose communist forces directly, and its attitude was to never “collaborate with Communist countries.”⁹⁷ It was proposed that once the Pact was formed, signatories could ask for American and British support; the Pact would be Western-oriented because it would be very difficult to resist the Soviet Union as neutral or non-aligned countries.⁹⁸ The alliance was going to be open, and any state that could contribute to the Middle East’s defense was encouraged to do so. Once a fourth country signed it, the Baghdad Pact would be composed of several different governing bodies: a Ministerial Council on which member countries’ leadership, ministers, and ambassadors would attend; Military and Counter-Subversion Committees – the alliance’s armed wing; an Economic Committee for economic cooperation and development – such activities, like those of the Marshall Plan in Europe, were seen as vital as the Pact’s military planning; a Secretariat which helped facilitate the Pact’s operation.⁹⁹

The United Kingdom was the third country to join the Baghdad Pact, doing so on April 5, 1955. Britain saw the alliance as a deterrent against the USSR and its previously-mentioned attempts to encroach upon the Middle East’s northern borders. The Baghdad Pact would defend NATO’s “extreme right flank,” and it would allow Western countries to coordinate with Middle

presence in Iran and Turkey was causing concern as early as 1944. World War II was still being fought, and the Soviet Union was still allied with Britain and the United States. But rifts were starting to show in this alliance, and this eventually led to the rivalry of the Cold War. The USSR was achieving major victories against Nazi Germany, and the Western Allies were concerned about possibly losing access to Iranian and Turkish oil resources. The United States thus identified Iran and Turkey as key areas of Soviet interest. See Hasanli’s book for more information on related topics such as Soviet desires to renegotiate access to the Turkish Straits and Soviet land claims in Azerbaijan. See Jamil Hasanli, *Stalin and the Turkish Crisis of the Cold War, 1945-1953* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011), 1-173.

⁹⁷ However, fighting communism was not the proposed Alliance’s only purpose. It was also hoped that Pact members could also help create solutions with the West regarding Palestine and the Suez Canal. See Central Office of Information, *The Baghdad Pact*, 2-3.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 7, 10.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-1.

Eastern nations more effectively. By the end of 1955, Pakistan and Iran joined the Baghdad Pact.¹⁰⁰ The alliance now stretched from Turkey to Pakistan, which effectively blocked the Soviet Union from the Middle East.¹⁰¹ The United States did not join the Baghdad Pact, but it did support it, proclaiming that: “a threat to the territorial integrity or political independence of the members [of the Pact] would be viewed by the United States with the utmost gravity.”¹⁰² The Americans also sent observers to the Ministerial Council meetings, and they had seats on the Military, Counter-Subversion, and Economic Committees.¹⁰³

The Baghdad Pact led to various supportive and cooperative actions between the signatories. On the military front, in June 1957, Britain promised to send financial aid to develop the members’ militaries. A radar network covering the alliance’s territory was planned, it sold four destroyers to Turkey, and Iraq acquired British fighter planes. All members also took part in November 1957 military exercises with naval and aerial assets. Economically, the Americans and British contributed millions of dollars, and even non-member Western states such as Canada and Australia donated money to the Pact countries.¹⁰⁴

However, the Pact was weakened significantly only three months after its creation when Iraq’s Hashemite monarchy was overthrown in an anti-Western coup.¹⁰⁵ The country left the Baghdad Pact in 1959, at which point it was renamed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).¹⁰⁶ Although the United States offered military aid to members, CENTO was more of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 8-9; George Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1971), 47.

¹⁰² Central Office of Information, *The Baghdad Pact*, 5.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 10-11.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 11, 13.

¹⁰⁵ McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 21.

¹⁰⁶ “The Baghdad Pact (1955) and the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO),” *U.S. Department of State*, accessed March 1, 2018, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/98683.htm>.

an economic alliance than a military one. The organization formally dissolved in 1979, after Pakistan gave up its membership and following the Iranian Revolution.

Though the Baghdad Pact lost one of its co-founders very early, it is still a significant part of the Middle East's Cold War history. The USSR warned that "aggressive military blocs" were forming in the Middle East due to the Western coercion, which was supposedly meant to preserve colonial control.¹⁰⁷ It also threatened the Iranian government that such alliances – "instruments of aggression" – would strain Soviet-Iranian relations. Iran's membership in the Baghdad Pact prevented the Soviet government from having a free hand to either annex Middle Eastern territory or expand its interest in the region.¹⁰⁸ The Western-friendly Baghdad Pact was a direct affront to Soviet interests.

After the Middle East became a focus of the Nikita Khrushchev's policy at the 20th CC CPSU Congress, US President Dwight Eisenhower gave a speech on January 5, 1957 that became the guiding document of the "Eisenhower Doctrine."¹⁰⁹ The President argued that Russia had "long sought to dominate the Middle East" and that such designs on the area originated in the Tsarist period. Echoing the purposes of the Baghdad Pact, Eisenhower named the Middle East a critical area in the Cold War against "International Communism." He directly countered Khrushchev's accusations regarding "imperialism," asserting that Americans were happy to see colonialism ending in the Middle Eastern countries.

However, Eisenhower did warn that the region could become unstable, especially as its political landscape changed. This could open the way for communists to seize power there. He noted that the Soviet government was not interested in the region's oil, as the USSR was an oil

¹⁰⁷ Central Office of Information, *The Baghdad Pact*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁸ McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 11, 18.

¹⁰⁹ Eisenhower, "Eisenhower Doctrine."

exporter. The Soviet interest in the region, Eisenhower believed, lay in the potential of spreading the communist worldview. If the “Red plague” reached the Middle East, it could more easily spread throughout the world. The Middle East was a central place – a “crossroads of the continents of the Eastern Hemisphere,” especially with the Suez Canal’s ability to let ships bypass Africa. In addition to the ideological dangers of communism taking over the Middle East, such a scenario would sever the Americans and their allies from vital economic resources in large parts of Eurasia.¹¹⁰ To highlight the Middle East as an ideological theatre of the Cold War, the American President cited cultural influences. The world’s three largest religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – all came from the Middle East. He argued that the region was the cradle of religions that cherish freedom and human dignity, but atheistic, “materialistic” communism did not share these values.

The Eisenhower Doctrine called on Americans to take seriously the communist menace in the Middle East, especially if Baghdad Pact members were threatened. Eisenhower wanted to slate \$200 million for 1958-9 for measures such as cooperation with the United Nations, military cooperation with local allies (including the deployment of American troops), and economic development. The Eisenhower Doctrine thus became like a Marshall Plan for the Middle East. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles said the “dollar was a powerful weapon” against communism.¹¹¹ He suggested that American aid could even be sent to Egypt and Syria (potential rivals which had not signed the Baghdad Pact, but they were not communist) if it would help stop communism’s spread. Vice President Richard Nixon agreed by saying that allies’ economic

¹¹⁰ Comments written in the 1970s are relevant here, a time when the United States was not self-sufficient in petroleum. If the West was cut off from Middle Eastern oil reserves at that time, it could no longer pose a long-term threat to the Soviet Union because the Middle East supplied the Western countries with 80% of their fuel demand. This, combined with Soviet airfield and overflight denial to the Western militaries, would cause a greater disaster. See McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 16, 30.

¹¹¹ John Donovan, editor, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1972), 6-7.

development was just as important as military aid. This assistance, according to Eisenhower's logic, would help local non-communist countries resist Soviet advances themselves: "...any lack of power in the area should be made good, not by external or alien force, but by the increased vigor and security of the independent nations of the area."¹¹² Such thinking explains the United States' fervent support of and involvement in the Baghdad Pact, even though the country was not a full signatory of that agreement. Through his Doctrine, Eisenhower linked America's security with potential for confrontation with Communism in the Middle East, requesting authorization to use the U.S. military in the region to "repel Communist aggression."¹¹³

Moscow perceived the Eisenhower Doctrine in the same way as it had regarded the Baghdad Pact. The Soviet government predicted that Eisenhower's policy would enslave the Middle East and transform it into an American "protectorate."¹¹⁴ Khrushchev accused the United States of wanting to replace the weakening British and French presence there with its own form of post-colonial colonialism.¹¹⁵ In February 1957, the Soviet Foreign Minister, Dmitri T. Shepilov listed the Eisenhower Doctrine as "proof" that the Americans would use the Middle East as a military beachhead.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Eisenhower, "Eisenhower Doctrine."

¹¹³ Donovan, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, 24. The U.S. Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees denied this appeal, noting that any anti-communist deployments would need to be consonant with the UN Charter.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-5.

¹¹⁵ Rami Ginat has noted that in February 1947, the United States sent military and financial aid to Turkey and Greece. The British would have normally sent this aid to push back against communist actions there, but due to its very strained financial resources as a result of World War II, the British government asked the Americans for aid. This American takeover of a British obligation could have given credence to the Soviet idea that the United States was simply replacing the old colonial powers. See Rami Ginat, *The Soviet Union and Egypt, 1945-1955* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1993), 94-5. For background on Britain's economic situation after World War II, see "Britain to make its final payment on World War II loan from U.S. – Business – International Herald Tribune," *The New York Times*, December 28, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/28/business/worldbusiness/28iht-nazi.4042453.html>.

¹¹⁶ Donovan, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, 30-1.

Soon after these accusations, in April 1957, the American policy led to confrontation with the Soviet Union over the fate of Jordan.¹¹⁷ It started when the Jordanian King Hussein I purged elements of supposed Soviet sympathizers in his government, including attacks on and arrests of political leftists and Arab nationalists. The king accused “international communism” of trying to subvert him. One of the supposed aspects of this conspiracy was a proposed union with leftist-leaning Egypt and Syria, which was perceived as a communist plot against Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab countries. The United States extended support to King Hussein, using the Eisenhower Doctrine as justification. Between April and late June 1957, the Americans sent \$30 million worth of military and financial aid to Jordan. The US Sixth Fleet was dispatched to the Middle Eastern part of the Mediterranean on April 25, 1957; it consisted of two aircraft carriers, a battleship, two cruisers, two dozen destroyers, two submarines, and 1,800 marines. Naval exercises caused most of this force to be deployed back to its Italian base on May 3, though the marines remained in the eastern Mediterranean.¹¹⁸ The Soviet Union denounced the Sixth Fleet’s mobilization as a sign of planned American “colonialist oppression” against the Middle Eastern nations. It also denied that international communism was the cause of Jordan’s internal crisis.

The Soviet-Egyptian Relationship

Egypt had become a British protectorate in 1914, and in the early 1920s, an Egyptian communist movement was formed in resistance to colonial control. Though Egypt achieved formal independence in 1922, the British maintained significant influence there for decades. The communists were still active in the former colony, enjoying popularity during World War II and

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 69-73.

¹¹⁸ The Sixth Fleet’s presence in the Mediterranean throughout the Cold War is also important because the Soviet Navy would later deploy a force in response – the Fifth “Eskadra.” More details on this will be given later.

having some influence among the working class, the military, and the police force. In the 1950s Soviet propaganda was praising Arab communist parties for being very “advanced... numerous and influential,” helping to cultivate “the national and class self-consciousness of Arab workers.” The reality was very different, though, as Egypt’s communists were never able to gain significant traction under the anti-communist government. The dream for an Egyptian proletarian revolution ended in July 1952, when a “Free Officers” coup took over. One of the plotters, Colonel Abdel Nasser, became Egypt’s Prime Minister in 1954. He concluded a treaty with the British Empire which forced its soldiers out of Egypt. Two years later, Nasser was made President. Nasser maintained that Moscow was behind the communist movement in his country, and his government continued suppressing Egyptian communism.¹¹⁹

But after the Free Officers’ coup, Egypt took a surprising turn toward the Soviet bloc. Though the Egyptian government was suppressing local communists, it was very much against the Baghdad Pact. Iraq was an Egyptian rival, and Nasser viewed Turkey as “the main auxiliary of Israel.”¹²⁰ Nasser proposed an alternative to the Baghdad alliance, preferring to lead his own Middle Eastern bloc. As evidence of this, the Iraqi government was even told to get permission from the Egyptians before it could sign any agreements of its own. In October 1955, Nasser formed numerous multilateral alliances to counter the Baghdad Pact: an Egyptian-Syrian-Saudi alliance, improved relations with Yemen and Jordan (though, as noted, King Hussein I rejected a full union with Egypt), and yet another third, separate alliance with Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

¹¹⁹ For a thorough account of communism’s history in Egypt from 1920 to the 1950s, see the second chapter in Ginat, *The Soviet Union and Egypt*, 22-52; John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: The New Press, 2015), 133-4. A timeline of modern Egyptian history can be found at “Egypt profile – Timeline,” *BBC News*, November 6, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13315719>.

¹²⁰ McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 18-20; Central Office of Information, *The Baghdad Pact*, 5-6. Nasser also believed that Zionism, in addition to the Soviet Union, was also using communism to destabilize Egypt. See Ginat, *The Soviet Union and Egypt*, 45.

Arab nationalists rejoiced at Nasser's rejection of the Baghdad Pact.¹²¹ He was perceived as an Arab leader against imperialism, which was consistent with his reputation for being progressive and anti-conservative.¹²²

In early 1955, the Egyptians hoped to buy American weapons, desperately needing them to counter Israel.¹²³ But the United States rejected this request. For one, the British were wary of weapons shipments to their former Egyptian colony, and the fact that these weapons would have been used against Israel could not have impressed the Americans. Snubbed, Nasser had to fulfill Egypt's military needs elsewhere.

Having been confronted with the Baghdad Pact's wall of unfriendly nations to its south, the USSR now had an opportunity to build relations with the Egyptian government, which did not join the anti-communist alliance and needed weapons.¹²⁴ On September 27, 1955, the Egyptians accepted a weapons shipment from communist Czechoslovakia.¹²⁵ The Soviet Union sponsored this deal, which was one of the USSR's first Middle Eastern Cold War manoeuvres.¹²⁶ Arms shipments are a clear sign of support towards a prospective ally, and Egypt's internal anti-communist policies were not enough to deter the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia from proceeding with the deal.¹²⁷ The Soviet Union could also establish a military presence in Egypt

¹²¹ Arab Ba'th Socialist Party, *A Survey of the Ba'th Party's Struggle: 1947-1974* (No Place or date of publication), 48-9, 51.

¹²² Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 80.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 78-9, 81-2.

¹²⁴ McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 18-20.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*; Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 78-9.

¹²⁶ Rami Ginat talks about some of the first post-war diplomatic contacts between Egypt and Soviet Union. Diplomatic relations were officially started in 1950. The USSR advised the Egyptians to adopt socialism, and the two countries spoke in 1951 about the possibilities of a non-aggression pact. Ginat, *The Soviet Union and Egypt*, 108-9, 118-19.

¹²⁷ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 81; Ginat, *The Soviet Union and Egypt*, 45.

(Port Said, Sollum, Mersa Matruh, and Alexandria became convenient ports of call for Soviet naval ships) and sign further military deals with Nasser's government.¹²⁸

Through the 1955 deal, the Egyptians received an estimated \$250 million worth of military equipment: 200 warplanes (including 150 MIG-15 fighters and 40 Ilyushin-18 light bombers), 100 T-34 tanks, numerous armoured personnel carriers (APCs), self-propelled artillery, mortars, and six submarines were promised in addition to trucks and small arms.¹²⁹

Another, slightly smaller deal was struck in 1957, which helped replace the losses suffered during the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956. There were yet four more subsequent arms sales, taking place every two years between 1959 and 1965. Through them Egypt acquired more advanced tanks and fighter aircraft, such as the MIG-19 and the supersonic MIG-21. By 1967, Egypt had received between 600 and 800 combat aircraft from the communist world. The Soviet Union also sold Egypt surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and minesweeper ships. The total value of all six of these arms deals (1955, 1957, 1959, 1961, 1963, and 1965) was approximately \$1.5 billion.¹³⁰

The sale of such a great amount of military equipment shows that the USSR was anxious to ensure that its Arab ally could defend itself.

The Soviet military never directly participated in combat on Egypt's behalf. Still, the USSR went to great lengths to protect the Arab country diplomatically and replace its wartime losses in three specific conflicts with Israel. The first conflict was the Suez Crisis of 1956.¹³¹

On July 26, Nasser nationalized the company in charge of the Suez Canal, the channel which

¹²⁸ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 58; Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 14.

¹²⁹ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 146-9.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Abdel Nasser, "Egyptian Law Nationalising the Suez Canal Company, 26 July 1956," in *Documents on the Suez Crisis: 26 July to 6 November 1956*, selected and introduced by D.C. Watt (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs), 39-41; Office of the Historian, "The Suez Crisis, 1956," Department of State of the United States of America, accessed March 9, 2018, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/suez>; Michael Peck, "In 1956, Russia Almost Launched a Nuclear War against Britain, France and Israel," *The National Interest*, January 8, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/1956-russia-almost-launched-nuclear-war-against-britain-18978>.

was constructed in 1869 between the Mediterranean and Red Seas. In response the British, French, and Israeli governments invaded the Suez a few months later, on October 29. The Eisenhower administration condemned the action, fearing Soviet intervention. The USSR had recently repressed a rebellion in communist Hungary, thus there were concerns about the Soviet reaction. Indeed, the USSR warned Israel, France, and Britain to abandon their plans. Moscow even threatened to fire nuclear missiles upon the three invading countries.¹³² Faced with this threat and enjoying little support for the mission, the aggressors withdrew from Egyptian territory.

The Six-Day War of June 1967 was the second Egyptian-Israeli conflict that the Soviet government watched very closely.¹³³ This war started on June 5 when the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) launched a massive military operation against Egypt. Israel was responding to Nasser's amassing of troops in the Sinai Peninsula, his removal of UN troops from that region, and his blockade against Israeli ships trying to access the Straits of Tiran. Syria, Jordan, and Iraq were also drawn into this conflict, forcing Israel to fight a multi-front war. However, Israel survived, and its Arab enemies were defeated. The war worked out well for Israel, which occupied the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank. Egypt suffered the brunt of the Israeli assault. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *Military Balance* report for 1967, Israeli airstrikes hit 19 Egyptian airbases. The Egyptian Air Force reportedly lost 340 combat aircraft, four ships, 600 of the army's tanks, and at least 15,000 troops. Kenneth M.

¹³² Peck, "In 1956, Russia Almost Launched a Nuclear War against Britain, France and Israel."

¹³³ Avi Shlaim has written an excellent chapter about Israel's motivations for starting the war. He not only analyzes the external pressures that caused Israel to decide to go to war, but also relationships and conflicts between various elements of the Israeli military and government. Avi Shlaim, "Israel: Poor Little Samson," in *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War: Origins and Consequences*, edited by Wm. Roger Louis and Avi Shlaim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 22-55; International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Appendix: Military activity and arms deals between July 1966 and July 1967," *The Military Balance* 67, no. 1 (1967): 50; Brian Bond, *The Pursuit of Victory: From Napoleon to Saddam Hussein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 184-6.

Pollack, a former military analyst for the CIA and National Security Council, has written the following about the Soviet reaction to Egypt's losses in 1967: "...the Soviets – who had also been deeply embarrassed by the poor performance of one of their most prominent clients – quickly replaced virtually all of Egypt's lost equipment..."¹³⁴

A third war began when Egypt (now under the Presidency of Anwar Sadat) and Syria returned the favour, pre-emptively attacking Israel on October 6, 1973.¹³⁵ The so-called Yom Kippur War was very different from the previous conflict because this time, Israeli forces suffered massive casualties on both the Egyptian and Syrian fronts. Soviet-supplied anti-air missile systems also prevented Israeli warplanes from achieving total air superiority.¹³⁶ However, over the next few days the IDF was able to regain the initiative, pushing deep into Egypt and Syria. Following the deaths of 8,500 Arab soldiers and 2,800 Israelis, both the United States and the Soviet Union helped negotiate a ceasefire on October 22. A few months later, the Suez Canal's eastern bank was returned to Egypt, and the Egyptian-Syrian offensive proved to Israel that its Arab neighbours could still fight effectively. In this way, the Yom Kippur War was a diplomatic victory for Egypt that helped reverse some of the losses of 1967.

The Six-Day and Yom Kippur Wars' effects on Egypt provide an important parallel to the situation in fellow combatant Syria, which also suffered significant losses. The Soviet Union, for example, helped both of its Arab clients rebuild their militaries after 1967 and

¹³⁴ Kenneth M. Pollack, *Arabs at War* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 90, 105-6.

¹³⁵ Eugene Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 368-73; Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 106-131.

¹³⁶ The Israelis might not have had complete command of the skies, but they still performed extremely well against the Egyptian Air Force. The Egyptians did not utilize their air assets to a great extent, largely limiting them to conducting hit-and-run attacks against Israeli ground forces. The Egyptian command was afraid of committing planes against the superior Israeli air force. Egyptian pilots' orders were thus very restrictive, which compounded their lack of experience. Israeli pilots conducted almost seven times more missions, and they shot down 172 Egyptian fighter planes while losing only 5-8. Even worse, Soviet anti-air systems were very inefficient, and even "brought down somewhere between 45 and 60 [Egyptian] aircraft during the war." For more details, see Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 123-5.

1973.¹³⁷ More information will be given later on the Soviet role in Syria during these conflicts and in their aftermaths.

In addition to helping to develop Egypt's military, the Soviet Union contributed to the Arab nation's infrastructure. During Egypt's tensions with the West over arms shipments and the Baghdad Pact, plans were being made to finance the construction of the enormous High Aswan Dam.¹³⁸ Both the United States and Britain refused to finance the project in 1958. So, Nasser once again approached the Soviet Union. On October 23, 1958, a financial deal was struck: the Soviet Union would loan \$80 million to Egypt for 12 years at 2.5 percent interest. After about eleven years of construction, the 366-foot tall dam was inaugurated on January 15, 1971. In total, the project cost about \$1 billion to build. The Aswan Dam project was the Soviet Union's first "economic penetration of the Middle East."

A Soviet-Egyptian trade relationship was also developing at this time.¹³⁹ George Lenczowski notes that by 1958, three years after the first weapons sale, Egypt's exports to the Soviet Union were almost equal to trade in the reverse direction. Six years later, Egypt sent \$142.6 million worth of goods to the Soviet Union and bought \$93.7 million worth in return. Though the USSR lost money on this trade, they obtained very valuable Egyptian cotton in exchange for selling aging, obsolete military equipment to Egypt.¹⁴⁰ The Soviet Union hardly needed Egypt as a trade partner, for the USSR could produce enough cotton and oil (Egypt's main export goods sent to the Soviet Union) to fulfill its own needs for those raw materials.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Ibid., 90, 105-6; Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 15.

¹³⁸ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 93-8.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 91-3.

¹⁴⁰ By sending old equipment to the Egyptians, the Soviet military saved money on maintenance and storage costs. See Bruce D. Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 40.

¹⁴¹ John W. Copp, "Egypt and the Soviet Union, 1953-1970," (MA diss., Portland State University, 1986), 191-2. https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4806&context=open_access_etds.

As a result, the Soviet-Egyptian trade relationship constituted only three percent of Soviet international trade. However, trade with the USSR was vital for Egypt. Egypt was heavily reliant on Soviet experts and weapons. In 1970, Egypt sent 38 percent of its exports to the USSR, and 22 percent of its imports were from the Soviet Union.¹⁴² Soviet-Egyptian trade was valued at \$673.8 million during that year. Finally, Egypt did provide a market for the Soviet Union's petroleum industry; in 1969, for example, a deal was struck in which 700 Soviet experts would be sent to Egypt to drill forty oil wells.¹⁴³

In May 1971, the Soviet and Egyptian governments cemented their partnership with a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.¹⁴⁴ The document was wide-ranging, and it was mandated to be active for fifteen years before re-evaluation. The Treaty promised cooperation between the two countries in areas as varied as defeating colonialism, advancing socialism (or at least "reconstructing society along socialist lines," as Egypt had been doing), expanding trade connections, and promoting cultural and media exchanges. The Soviet Union continued its commitment to train the Egyptian military, and each side would not enter an alliance "directed against the other high contracting party."

This friendship was not to last for very long, however. Abdel Nasser had died in September 1970, and his vice president, Anwar Sadat, subsequently replaced him.¹⁴⁵ Though Sadat did sign the Friendship Treaty with the USSR, all was not well between the two countries.

¹⁴² R. D. McLaurin notes that the Egyptians did miss out on some benefits through their trade relationship with the USSR. He says, "Egypt became a microcosm of the difficulties encountered in trade with the Soviet Union: Soviet dumping and reexportation [sic] led to lower prices; diversion from Western markets to Moscow meant loss of convertible currencies and threatened potential loss of traditional markets; and Soviet goods were of inferior quality." McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 94-5.

¹⁴³ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 99.

¹⁴⁴ Anwar Sadat, "Text of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation Signed by Soviet and Egypt," *The New York Times*, May 28, 1971, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/05/28/archives/text-of-the-treaty-of-friendship-and-cooperation-signed-by-soviet.html>.

¹⁴⁵ BBC News, "Egypt profile – Timeline."

Just before the Yom Kippur War, the Soviet Union had reduced the amount of weapons it was selling to Egypt, and it also refused to sell the latest military equipment.¹⁴⁶ Kenneth Pollack explains that the Soviet Union was now in *detente* with the United States, and Moscow was reluctant to give Cairo the latest weapons systems, fearing that this would encourage Sadat to go to war.¹⁴⁷ Consequently, the Egyptian President expelled many Soviet advisors and military technicians in July 1972, though he did not throw out those engineers needed for the most advanced equipment. After 1973, however, the political situation completely changed. Sadat was much more conservative than Nasser and not so anti-Western. He wanted to move Egypt in a different direction, and perhaps the clearest sign was his signing of an American-supported peace deal with Israel on March 26, 1979.¹⁴⁸ Up to that point, Egypt had relied on the Soviet Union for its military equipment. But now Sadat wanted more flexibility, suggesting that the Americans could help supply Egypt's forces. On March 14, 1976, Sadat finally scrapped the Soviet-Egyptian Friendship treaty. The next year Sadat decided that for a decade, Egypt would not make payments against its \$11 billion debt to the USSR. With his abrogation of the 1971 Treaty, all remaining Soviet military personnel were expelled from Egypt indefinitely. This decision was a disaster for the Soviet Union, which had threatened nuclear war on Egypt's behalf in 1956. But now the Americans were taking over the Soviet Union's long-held role. This change forced the USSR to put more into its relationship with Syria, its other prominent Middle Eastern partner.

¹⁴⁶ Pollack, *Arabs at War*, 105-6.

¹⁴⁷ See also Amnon Sella, *Soviet Political and Military Conduct in the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin's Press Inc., 1981), 122-3. Sella lists key priorities in Soviet relations with Arab countries: "The Soviet government still adhered to a modicum of restraint... (a) not to allow any one Arab country to become so strong that it could go to war against Israel alone; (b) not to allow the Arab countries a configuration of their armed forces such that they would be tempted to go for an all-out offensive war..."

¹⁴⁸ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 114-5. Through this peace deal, Israel also returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. David W. Lesch, "Syria: Playing with Fire," in *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War*, 94.

The Soviet-Syrian Relationship: The Political Aspect

A Soviet-Syrian relationship started very early in the socialist period, when the CPSU helped form the Syrian Communist Party in 1925.¹⁴⁹ During World War II, the Soviet Union ordered the Syrian communists to cooperate with the colonial powers, who were common enemies with the Nazis.¹⁵⁰ The USSR continued to influence Syria after the war, when Syria became a front in the Soviet Union's ideological war against "capitalist imperialism." The CPSU found an ally in the Syrian Arab nationalist movement, with the common enemy of Western colonialism and interference.¹⁵¹

Soviet Compatibility with Syrian Arab Nationalism

The CPSU's anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and socialist mentality was an important component of "soft power" in Soviet foreign policy because it resonated with workers' and post-imperial parties outside the USSR's borders.¹⁵² In brief, the movement known as "Ba'thism," an Arabic word meaning "revival" or "renewal," became the primary home for Arab nationalists.¹⁵³

Ba'thism originated in Syria before World War I, when the region was still part of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁵⁴ After the war's end and the Ottoman Empire's dissolution, the French took over

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵⁰ Arab Ba'th Socialist Party, *A Survey of the Ba'th Party's Struggle*, 19.

¹⁵¹ Michel Aflaq, Ba'thism's founder, was himself a communist when he studied in France during the 1930s. Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 102; Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 8-9.

¹⁵² In 1968, an Arab nationalist, socialist-oriented government took control of Iraq. Four years later, it signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, creating "a strategic and ideological alliance between to regimes bound by a *common revolutionary bond against Zionism and Western imperialism* [emphasis mine]." See Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 16; S. Neil MacFarlane, "Russia, NATO enlargement and the strengthening of democracy in the European space," in *NATO-Russia Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Aurel Braun (New York and London: Routledge, 2008), 43-4.

¹⁵³ Arab Ba'th Socialist Party, *A Survey of the Ba'th Party's Struggle*, 7.

¹⁵⁴ John F. Devlin, *The Ba'th Party: A History from Its Origins to 1966* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976), 2-5, 24.

Syria according to the French and British “Sykes-Picot” Agreement of 1916.¹⁵⁵ The French gains encompassed the territories of modern Syria and Lebanon, while the British Empire got control of Palestine and the Transjordan. French control over Syria was cemented on July 23, 1920 after a battle in Damascus between a native Syrian and the colonial army; the Syrians were roundly defeated.¹⁵⁶ This defeat motivated the Ba’thists to continue working towards Arab self-rule; the Syrian movement’s goal was to oust foreign governments and to create Pan-Arab unity.¹⁵⁷ Under the guidance of its founder “Comrade” Michel Aflaq, Ba’thism spread from its Syrian base into Iraq, Jordan, and other Arab countries.¹⁵⁸

In addition to Arabic unity and freedom, Ba’thism espoused democracy and socialism.¹⁵⁹ Party literature declared that the movement’s “social base was to be the working classes which were looking for a united, socialist and democratic Arab society.” Unlike Soviet socialism, Ba’thism was not Marxist-Leninist because its Arab nationalist foundation trumped the internationalism of Marxist communism.¹⁶⁰ Arab socialism also focussed less on proletarian struggle, emphasizing national and social unity.¹⁶¹ In Ba’thism, Islam was a critical mark of Arab identity even for non-Muslim Arabs, and it was also perceived as an inherently socialist religion, reinforcing the Arab nationalists’ socialist politics.¹⁶² Despite these differences between Arab socialism and Marxism-Leninism, Ba’thists and the CPSU did have much in common. They were both anti-colonial and anti-Western, as seen in Khrushchev’s speech to the

¹⁵⁵ The first two chapters of John McHugo’s history of Syria give a more complete picture of Syria’s Ottoman and French colonial periods including the negotiation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, Syria’s ethnic and religious makeup, and other information. See McHugo, *Syria*, 35-110.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 66-7.

¹⁵⁷ Devlin, *The Ba’th Party*, 2-5, 24. During the Second World War, in 1941, the Syrian Ba’thists went as far as supporting Iraqi nationalists who attempted to push out their British governors.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-6; “Choice of Texts,” *AlBaath.com*, accessed January 19, 2018, <http://albaath.online.fr/English/index-English.htm>.

¹⁵⁹ Arab Ba’th Socialist Party, *A Survey of the Ba’th Party’s Struggle*, 10-1; Devlin, *The Ba’th Party*, 24-5, 32-7.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 33-5.

¹⁶¹ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 68-9.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*; Devlin, *The Ba’th Party*, 24-5.

20th CPSU Congress and in Ba’thist resistance to colonial powers.¹⁶³ And even though Islam was a critical aspect of Arab nationality, the Ba’thist parties were secular like the CPSU.¹⁶⁴

Syria became independent in 1946 after decades of anti-French demonstrations, rebellions, and the French authorities’ heavy-handed rule.¹⁶⁵ Yet Syria had to contend with much internal division. George Lenczowski has noted that Syria’s parliamentary political system was divided into four ideological political camps: “(a) Pan-Arab-Socialist [Ba’thist]; (b) Greater Syrian [Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) that had elements similar to fascism, including armed wings]; (c) Islamic [a Syrian branch of the Egypt-based Muslim Brotherhood created in 1945-6], and (d) Communist.”¹⁶⁶ The SSNP won the election of July 1947, and the party’s leader, Shukri al-Quwwatli, became Syria’s first post-colonial president.

Arab nationalism of the Ba’thist variety, however, was still an important influence in Syrian political life. Ba’thism was particularly attractive to Syrian academics and young military recruits, who resented Western influence. They saw Abdel Nasser and Egypt as key in the resistance against the West, and both the Syrian Ba’thists and Communists benefited from this trend. The popularity of radical, anti-Western politics and the development of the Cold War in the Middle East worked out well for the Soviet Union. This was in part thanks to Khrushchev’s speech at the 20th CPSU Congress, which had legitimized the existence of such “anti-imperialist” movements. Soviet backing gave the Syrian Ba’th a boost in moral support and confirmed ideological compatibility between the Syrian and Soviet governments. By the mid-1950s, Ba’thism had gained significant power in parliament, thanks to Michel Aflaq’s popularity with

¹⁶³ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 140.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. Michel Aflaq was an Orthodox Christian, not a Muslim. However, he viewed Islam as the “supreme achievement of the Arabs as a people.” Aflaq was also very wary of division among Arabs along religious lines. See McHugo, *Syria*, 120.

¹⁶⁵ McHugo, *Syria*, 75-110.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 115-22; Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 101-5.

young people, a merger with a rural-based party, and the ouster of an unpopular dictator in 1954. Though the Ba’thists did not gain actual control of the country until another coup on March 8, 1963, their powerful position allowed them to influence foreign policy so that a relationship could grow between Syrian nationalism and the Soviet Union.¹⁶⁷ For instance, Michel Aflaq himself was Education Minister for a time, and a Ba’thist named Salaheddin al-Bitar was Syria’s Foreign Minister when the Soviet-Syrian ties were first being formed.¹⁶⁸

The “United Front”

In September 1947, Soviet Central Committee Secretary and communist cultural ideologue Andrei Zhdanov had categorized international politics as a conflict between the communist camp based in Moscow and the Washington-centered capitalist/imperialist world.¹⁶⁹ In Zhdanov’s model, a “third option” of neutrality was impossible, forcing all countries to be either communist or capitalist. However, by the early 1950s, the CPSU started supporting non-communist, anti-Western, nationalist “socialist oriented” groups, including Syrian Ba’thists and Nasser’s Egypt.¹⁷⁰ This “united front” policy against the West was written into the Soviet Communist Party’s draft platform.¹⁷¹ It posited that socialist and non-socialist nations had the same goals and that they could all contribute to peace building. As part of this mandate, the Soviet Union saw the Syrian Ba’thists as natural allies, and it provided a way for the USSR to build relations with Syria. Later during the Cold War, in the 1970s, the CPSU even encouraged the Syrian

¹⁶⁷ Ibid; McHugo, *Syria*, 115-22, 130-1, 143-4.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 130; Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 104-5.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid; C.N. Boterbloem, “The Death of Andrei Zhdanov,” *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 80, No.2 (April 2002): 267. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4213439>.

¹⁷⁰ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 11-3, 16-8; McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 7-8, 17, 53. McLaurin notes that supporting anti-colonial movements was also important to the Soviet government during the time between the Bolshevik Revolution and the start of World War II. See also Peter Shearman, “Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1991,” in *Russian Foreign Policy Since 1990*, edited by Peter Shearman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1995), 15.

¹⁷¹ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 15.

communists to merge with the Ba’thist party, hoping that a one-party system would be created.¹⁷²

Soviet involvement in Syrian politics was also about legitimacy. The Soviet Union was the first Marxist-Leninist state in the world. If it did not support socialist movements abroad – even those that were not truly communist – the Soviet state would have lost political capital and legitimacy as a revolutionary government.¹⁷³ However, spreading communist ideology was not the main reason for Soviet activity in Syria.¹⁷⁴ Syria and other Middle Eastern states that cooperated with the USSR (i.e. those that did not sign the Baghdad Pact) were valuable tools in the containment of, deterrence against, and resource denial to the Western countries. As shown earlier, the Soviet Union cooperated with Egypt, even though it persecuted communists within its borders. This shows that *realpolitik* and strategy – not ideology – were the key motivators in Soviet policy toward Arab countries.

As with the Egyptians, one of the Soviet Union’s first major interactions with the Syrian government was the conclusion of an arms deal in January 1956, and diplomatic relations were officially created the following August.¹⁷⁵ To demonstrate this new cooperation, two Soviet naval vessels were deployed on diplomatic visits to the port city of Latakia in October 1957. As a relatively new independent post-colonial country, Syria felt under pressure, especially after the Suez Canal Crisis saw nearby Egypt suffer a Western invasion very soon after its freedom from colonial rule. Arab expert John McHugo has also cited American fears of Syria becoming a

¹⁷² Dawisha, “The Soviet Union in the Arab World,” 12-3.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 44-5. During its existence, the Moscow-centred Comintern became an organization that controlled communist movements outside the Soviet Union. Through it the USSR was able to appoint and depose worldwide communist leaders. Yugoslavia and China, however, were two communist countries that were able to move away from Soviet oversight. See Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 10-1.

¹⁷⁴ McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 44.

¹⁷⁵ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 104-5; McHugo, *Syria*, 136-7.

“Soviet satellite.” In response, Syrian Defense Minister Khaled el-Azm emphasized the country’s “non-aligned” stance, but he also believed that the United States was forcing Syria to choose between the “new American imperialism” and the communist Soviet Union.¹⁷⁶ The Syrian Ba’thists preferred the latter to the Americans, and such anti-Western attitudes pushed them towards the USSR. In fact, on September 12, 1957, the Saudi Arabian King had urged the Americans not to take too hard a position against the Syrian leftist government for fear that it would build relations with the Soviet Union.¹⁷⁷

The United Arab Republic – 1958-1961

The creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR) should be covered briefly. We have seen that fears of Western aggression encouraged Syria to lean on the Soviet Union. But Syrians also wanted a closer relationship with Egypt, which had faced similar threats. Egypt also had the popular, charismatic Arab nationalist Abdel Nasser as its President. A UAR treaty was thus concluded on February 1, 1958, and through it Egypt and Syria were blended into one country.¹⁷⁸ The agreement was ratified three weeks later, and through referendums in both countries, Nasser was named the new nation's President.¹⁷⁹ The partners hoped that now the Eisenhower Doctrine would no longer threaten Arab unity.¹⁸⁰ But Syrian officers seized power in Damascus on September 28, 1961, and they broke away from the UAR.¹⁸¹ Syrian grievances against the Egyptian-dominated union were extensive: Syrian businessmen faced significant restrictions, Syria’s diplomatic offices were reduced to the status of consulates, military officers were

¹⁷⁶ Donovan, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, 74-7.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁷⁸ McHugo, *Syria*, 137-9; Devlin, *The Ba’th Party*, 85-9.

¹⁷⁹ Robert W. Olson, *The Ba’th and Syria, 1947 to 1982: The Evolution of Ideology, Party, and State* (Princeton: The Kingston Press, Inc., 1982), 30.

¹⁸⁰ Devlin, *The Ba’th Party*, 85-9.

¹⁸¹ McHugo, *Syria*, 143.

constantly being redeployed, Syrian parties were ordered to dissolve, and there were the practical difficulties of blending French practices in Syria with British ones in Egypt.¹⁸²

Egypt and Syria's brief union was not of great consequence to their relations with the USSR. Weapons sales, financial aid, and other diplomatic events took between the Soviet Union and the two Arab nations before, during, and after the UAR's existence. Yet Nikita Khrushchev did express support for the union, and the Soviet leader endorsed Nasser as the main figure of Arab nationalism.¹⁸³ After all, Nasser was popularly seen as such, and he had opposed the former colonialists during the Suez Crisis of 1956, giving the socialist world an important Cold War victory. At the same time, Egyptian control of the UAR was of some concern to the Soviet Union, because the Soviet government feared that the good relations it had recently built with Syria would be diminished or even soured.¹⁸⁴

The Israeli Factor

The Arab-Israeli conflict was a key aspect of the USSR's relationship with both Syria and Egypt. The Soviet Union started supplying both countries with weapons at almost the exact same time in response to Western/Israeli pressure. Israel became a chapter in the Cold War just like Korea and Vietnam, for although no communist forces fought directly in Arab-Israeli wars, that theatre still became an area of contention between the United States and the Soviet Union. David W. Lesch notes that part of this rivalry was the perception of Israel in socialist/communist circles as

¹⁸² Ibid., 138-43; Devlin, *The Ba'th Party*, 94-5, 116, 131-47; Donovan, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, 96.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 150.

¹⁸⁴ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 54.

a proxy of Western imperialism.¹⁸⁵ This belief was very strong in Syria after the Ba’th Party took control in 1963 with its radical anti-imperialist and pan-Arab ideology.

The USSR refused to accept such threats to an Arab ally, just as the United States adamantly supported Israel.¹⁸⁶ However, the Soviet leadership was also very wary of letting a major conflict between Israel and the Arabs escalate. Direct confrontation with the United States was out of the question, especially because the Americans were superior to the USSR in terms of conventional and nuclear warfare; this same imbalance had forced Khrushchev to withdraw nuclear missiles from Cuba in 1962.¹⁸⁷

The Soviet Union also helped broker diplomatic initiatives meant to curb Israeli-Arab violence. This included Resolutions 242 and 338 of the United Nations Security Council. Resolution 242 was passed on November 22, 1967, which ordered the Israeli military to leave the territories it had taken during the Six-Day War earlier that year.¹⁸⁸ Resolution 338, which was passed on October 22, 1973, not only ordered a ceasefire ending the Yom Kippur War, but also reaffirmed Resolution 242 and called for the start of peace negotiations.¹⁸⁹ By participating in these processes, the USSR was able to exert influence upon the strategic Middle Eastern zone (at least until the Americans became the primary peace broker in 1979) and also help save its Arab allies from a defeat in their conflict with Israel.

¹⁸⁵ Lesch, “Syria: Playing with Fire,” 80-1.

¹⁸⁶ Sella, *Soviet Political and Military Conduct in the Middle East*, 26-7.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁸⁸ United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 242 (1967) of 22 November 1967,” November 22, 1967, <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/7D35E1F729DF491C85256EE700686136>.

¹⁸⁹ United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 338 (1973) of 22 October 1973,” October 22, 1973, <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/7FB7C26FCBE80A31852560C50065F878>; Olson, *The Ba’th and Syria*, 142.

Another Syrian coup occurred on November 13, 1970.¹⁹⁰ Syria fell under the control of General Hafez al-Assad, the former Defense Minister, who had major disagreements with the government over intervention in Jordan. He also wanted to prepare Syria for war with Israel, instead of focusing on the nation's economy as the previous administration had done. On October 6, 1973, Assad launched his attack against Israel in conjunction with Egypt's own offensive.¹⁹¹ Assad hoped to reclaim the Golan Heights region which Syria had lost in 1967.¹⁹² Israel's conquest of the Heights was a great embarrassment to the Arab world, especially for a Syrian Ba'thist government which touted Arab unity as one of its main purposes. Syria's ability to defend itself was also much in doubt. Finally, according to analysis from The Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), 80,000 Syrian refugees had also been forced from the Golan Heights. Any one of these factors could have made Assad wish to reclaim the region. But increasing the likelihood of war were the Israeli air raids of September 1972, which applied pressure upon Syria not to support Palestinian movements.¹⁹³ The Yom Kippur War went well for Syria at first, as it reclaimed much of the Golan Heights. But an Israeli counterattack recaptured it and even posed a potential threat to Damascus and Assad's government.¹⁹⁴ The Israeli Defense Force also attacked Latakia and Tartus, focussing on infrastructural and oil facilities.¹⁹⁵ The Syrian government estimated \$386 million in damages, and civilians were killed in Israeli airstrikes upon Damascus and Homs. Syria lost an estimated 8,000 of its

¹⁹⁰ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 116; John Galvani, Peter Johnson, and Rene Theberge, "The October War: Egypt, Syria, Israel," *MERIP Reports*, No. 22 (November 1973), 11-2. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012270>.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 10, 13; Hafez al-Assad saw it as his "personal responsibility" to reclaim the Golan Heights, according to British journalist Patrick Seale. Al Jazeera, "The October Arab-Israel War of 1973: What happened?" October 8, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/10/arab-israeli-war-of-1973-what-happened-171005105247349.html>.

¹⁹³ Palestinian terrorists had just recently attacked and killed Israeli athletes during the Olympic games in Munich. Galvani et. al, "The October War," 13.

¹⁹⁴ Olson, *The Ba'th and Syria*, 141-2.

¹⁹⁵ Galvani et. al, "The October War," 14.

350,000 active troops during the 1973 war. The most reliable reports for Israeli estimate losses cite between 2,500 and 2,700 killed in combat.¹⁹⁶

The Soviet Union's involvement in the conflict went further than just sending anti-air missile systems. According to The Jewish Policy Center, the Soviet Union's leader Leonid Brezhnev contemplated sending troops to Syria's defense.¹⁹⁷ And nuclear weapons were even reportedly made ready in the Egyptian port of Alexandria. Considering that the Soviet Union was thinking about drastic steps, however, Hafez al-Assad's attitude towards Israel was both useful and problematic for the USSR. Although he adopted Resolution 338 two days after it passed, Assad continued a war of attrition against Israel, unwilling to negotiate directly with Israel through American mediation.¹⁹⁸ It was a stated goal of Assad's government to "keep Israeli reserves mobilised and paralyse Israel's economy." This goal posed a problem for the USSR, which had called for peace between Israel and its Arab proxies in the past. The Soviet Union also initially favoured the multilateral "Geneva framework" for peace negotiations between itself, America, Israel, and the Arab world. But Assad kept to his policy of not negotiating with Israel, especially if the Geneva meetings would lead to separate negotiations that neglected his own country. The Soviet Union's wish for Syria to be involved in the Geneva process changed in 1977 when the American, Israeli, and Egyptian governments discussed the possibility of peace talks without Syrian involvement. Assad's fears of a separate "Pax Americana" had been confirmed.

¹⁹⁶ Judge Dan, "BBC Yom Kippur war accuracy failure perpetuated over years," *BBC Watch*, October 7, 2013, <https://bbcwatch.org/2013/10/07/bbc-yom-kippur-war-accuracy-failure-perpetuated-over-years/>; "Israel Defense Forces: Military Casualties in Arab-Israeli Wars (1948-1973)," *Jewish Virtual Library*, accessed March 16, 2018, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/military-casualties-in-arab-israeli-wars>.

¹⁹⁷ Michael Sharnoff, "The Syria-Soviet Alliance," Spring 2009, *Jewish Policy Center*, <https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2009/02/28/the-syria-soviet-alliance/>.

¹⁹⁸ Olson, *The Ba'th and Syria*, 141-2; Sella, *Soviet Political and Military Conduct in the Middle East*, 113-4; Efraim Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria: The Asad Years* (London: Routledge, 1988), 22-5, 40-4.

The USSR was pleased with Syria's refusal to be involved in the Geneva proceedings, and it continued to support Assad, despite his protracted conflict with Israel. Soviet backing was especially evident when the two countries engaged in hostilities over Syrian anti-air missile sites and Israeli support of Christian Phalanges militias in Lebanon.¹⁹⁹ The Lebanese crisis started in April 1981, and combat occurred between Israeli and Syrian forces from June 6, 1982 until the crisis' end three weeks later. During the Israeli intervention, the Soviet Union supported Assad against "Israeli aggression" (with perceived American help) in propaganda but also with weapons deliveries and an increased naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean.

On October 8, 1980, the USSR and Hafez al-Assad's government signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.²⁰⁰ Aided Dawisha said that Syria had become the "linchpin for [Soviet] influence in the area." The Soviet Union had lost its foothold in Sadat's Egypt, especially after the American-brokered Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt in 1979.²⁰¹ The Treaty of Friendship allowed the USSR, through Syria, to counter the improved Egyptian-Israeli relations, as explicitly implied in the Treaty's text:

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the Syrian Arab Republic... *determined* to give a firm rebuff to the policy of aggression pursued by imperialism and its accomplices, to continue the struggle against colonialism, neo-colonialism and racialism in all their forms and manifestations, including [Israeli] Zionism.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 54-72.

²⁰⁰ Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 17; International Institute for Strategic Studies (hereafter IISS), "Soviet-Syrian treaty of friendship and co-operation 8 October 1980." *Survival* 23, No. 1 (1981), 43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338108441945>.

²⁰¹ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 15.

²⁰² Ibid; Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 153-4; IISS, "Soviet-Syrian treaty of friendship," 43.

Article Six was a de-escalation clause, which ordered the Soviet Union and Syria to coordinate in countering any threat to security or peace. The Friendship Treaty of 1980 thus provided a mechanism for the USSR to diminish the importance of American diplomatic power in the Middle East. Very shortly after this agreement was signed, Syrian-Jordanian relations deteriorated due to Jordanian support of the anti-Assad Muslim Brotherhood.²⁰³ Fearing another conflict within the Arab world and subsequent Israeli intervention, the Soviet Union was able to use Article Six to force Assad to withdraw after he had deployed forces on the border with Jordan. Moscow had a legal provision through which it could directly communicate with or even apply pressure on Damascus for the sake of “de-escalation.” This provision lessened the (admittedly, already very small) likelihood of Syria going to the United States to resolve its conflict with Israel, as Egypt had done. The Treaty of Friendship could also deflect the Muslim world’s complaints against the USSR for the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979: “The Syrian Arab Republic respects the peace loving foreign policy pursued by the USSR, which is aimed at strengthening friendship and co-operation with all countries and peoples.”²⁰⁴ Hafez al-Assad actually supported the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, for which the Soviet Union gave thanks with the gift of “extensive debt relief.”²⁰⁵

In addition to these moral points, the Soviet-Syrian Treaty included articles aimed at practical collaboration. Almost exactly like the earlier Egyptian Friendship Treaty, it provided provisions for exchange and cooperation in economic, trade, and cultural aspects.²⁰⁶ Military cooperation was another priority, and according to Article Six, both countries committed

²⁰³ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 55-6.

²⁰⁴ IISS, “Soviet-Syrian treaty of friendship,” 43.

²⁰⁵ Carsten Wieland, Adam Almqvist, and Helena Nassif, *The Syrian Uprising: Dynamics of an Insurgency* (Fife: University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2013), 19. Syria abstained from the UN vote meant to denounce Soviet policy in Afghanistan. Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 153-4.

²⁰⁶ IISS, “Soviet-Syrian treaty of friendship,” 43-4.

themselves to mutually countering any threats and restoring peace. The tenth point is similar, calling for military cooperation to increase Syria and the Soviet Union's "defence capacity." And, like with the Egyptian agreement, the Soviet Union and Syria were forbidden to enter any alliances that posed a threat to the other signatory power. Finally, this agreement was to last for twenty years – until the year 2000 – before renegotiation, indicating Syria's importance in Soviet Middle Eastern strategy.

Towards 1991

Soviet-Syrian relations had some troubles during Konstantin Chernenko's administration (1984-5).²⁰⁷ For example, the USSR entertained strengthening relations with other Arab nations, which would lessen Syria's importance to the Soviet Union. There were also plans to hand over the anti-air missile systems in Syria to the Assad government, indicating "Moscow's decreasing readiness to take risks on Syria's behalf."²⁰⁸ However, Chernenko's government also recognized Syria's interests and "central role" in Lebanon, and it supported its rivalry with the Palestinian Liberation Organization. When Chernenko died on March 10, 1985, Syria went through three days of mourning.

Under the new leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the USSR's foreign policy went through the changes of the "New Thinking" paradigm.²⁰⁹ This was a significant break from Gorbachev's predecessors, for he was skeptical of the Cold War Soviet propaganda regarding imperialism and capitalism. In 1988 he said that a country would not cause wars or be "imperialist" just because it was capitalist. Democracy was a limiting factor in capitalist

²⁰⁷ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 81-5.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, Second Edition (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 36-8.

societies, he explained. Andrei P. Tsygankov writes that this new perspective on the capitalist world encouraged a diminished importance on arms procurement and defense spending. He argues that the withdrawals from Eastern Europe and Afghanistan in the 1980s “could now be presented as a net ‘gain’ in a general calculus of creating a favorable international environment.”²¹⁰ The New Thinking program was intended to strengthen socialism within the Soviet Union. But without complete Western recognition or cooperation, it did not work as Gorbachev had hoped. It also did not prevent communist regimes from falling in Eastern Europe and ultimately the USSR itself in 1991.

Gorbachev’s interactions with Hafez al-Assad’s government were largely the same as before.²¹¹ The two countries were still signing arms deals. The USSR still supported Syria publicly in its relations with Israel. And despite the New Thinking policy, the Soviet Union still saw the United States as a competitor in the Middle Eastern region. Yet, like Chernenko, Gorbachev developed relations with other Arab countries, including conservative, “non-radical” ones like the United Arab Emirates. The Soviet Union indicated a slightly diminished focus on Syria by stating that the Israeli situation was an Arab responsibility. Stressing that only a political solution would be acceptable for fixing Syrian-Israeli relations, Gorbachev denied Assad’s request for enough arms to achieve “military parity” with Israel.²¹² The Soviet Union was withdrawing from its Cold War Syrian commitment, which was consistent with the New Thinking. At the same time, Moscow and Jerusalem improved relations, and many Soviet Jews were permitted to move to Israel, causing concern in Damascus. This forced Syria to find other allies. Andrew Kreutz commented that this move prompted Assad to improve relations with

²¹⁰ Ibid., 37-8, 40-2.

²¹¹ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 85-93.

²¹² Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 17-8.

Egypt, and it even caused him to support the United States in its 1991 war against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, who was a fellow Ba’thist.²¹³

Military/Strategic Dealings

Military involvement in the developing world conflicts, whether through troop deployments or weapons sales, was a good way for the Soviet Union to increase its power abroad.²¹⁴ After World War II, the USSR also had excess military equipment, which it could offer to any progressive third-world regime. With the Soviet Union’s political penetration of Syria came arms deals between the two countries. As noted above, the first such agreement was in January 1956. But, as with Egypt, Syria also bought weapons from other Communist countries, including East Germany and Czechoslovakia.²¹⁵ According to the United States, these military transfers were giving Syria “great offensive capability.” Before this time, Syria and the other Arab countries were undersupplied, and this deficiency provided the Soviet Union with the chance to insert itself into the region.²¹⁶

Syria as a Soviet Naval Base

Aside from the “goodwill visits” of Soviet ships to Latakia in September 1957, the Mediterranean Sea also became a key place where the USSR could project power against the United States and its allies’ navies. In April of that same year, the Americans had first deployed their Sixth Fleet to the eastern Mediterranean during the Jordanian crisis.²¹⁷ But the American force was a constant presence in that body of water. And it was a massive commitment, with the

²¹³ However, Iraq and Syria had had major diplomatic disagreements surrounding the PLO. Syria also supported Iran during its war with Iraq from 1980-8. The USSR expressed concerns about these aspects of Syrian policy. See Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 90-3.

²¹⁴ Porter, *The USSR in Third World Conflicts*, 1-3, 5-7.

²¹⁵ Olson, *The Ba’th and Syria*, 28; Donovan, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, 78-9.

²¹⁶ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 154.

²¹⁷ Donovan, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, 88.

Americans usually stationing more than forty ships at one time in the Sea – “about 5 percent of the total of 800 active U.S. navy ships.”²¹⁸ This force included two of America’s aircraft carrier strike groups, as well as nuclear missile-armed submarines. Speaking of these submarines, A.A. Koryakovtsev and S.L. Tashlykov, Russian historians from the Military Academy of the Russian Federation Armed Forces’ General Staff, said that the Sixth Fleet was the most dangerous threat to the Soviet Union’s southwestern flank.²¹⁹

The Soviet Union had to play catch-up with the Americans in setting up a naval presence in the Mediterranean naval theatre. Between 1964 (when the Soviet Mediterranean Squadron was created) and 1967 there were sporadic, “episodic” Soviet deployments and manoeuvres in the area.²²⁰ Vladimir Zaborskiy, a retired Captain First Class and former head of Operations Management of the Soviet Naval Chief of Staff, has written about the Soviet deployments to the Mediterranean Sea. He noted that during this early period of the Cold War, submarines would independently conduct patrols in the sea for about three to four months. Small groups of ships would form, known as “mixed squadrons,” referencing their composition of ships from the Baltic and Northern Fleets.²²¹ A “First Mixed Fleet” was formed in May 1965, made up primarily of ships from the Black Sea Fleet. But in December 1966, the naval Commander-in-Chief Admiral S.G. Gorshkov argued that the current “mixed” structure and limited commitment in the

²¹⁸ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 154-5.

²¹⁹ A.A. Koryakovtsev and S.L. Tashlykov, “The Advanced Defence Naval Line in the South-Western Strategic Area: The 50th anniversary of creation of the 5th Operational Squadron of the Navy [Peredoboi Morskoï Rubezh Oborony na Ūgo-Zapadnom Strategicheskom Napravlenii k 50-letiiu Sozdanniia 5-i Operativnoi Ėskadry VMF.]” *Voенno-Istoricheskiĭ Zhurnal* No. 7 (2017): 4.

²²⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, “National Intelligence Estimate: The Uses of Soviet Military Power in Distant Areas,” (AR 70-14), December 15, 1971: 7; Vladimir Zaborskiĭ, “Sovetskaia Sredizemnomorskaia Ėskadra.” October 13, 2006, http://nvo.ng.ru/history/2006-10-13///5_eskadra.html.

²²¹ Ibid; Koryakovtsev and Tashlykov, “The Advanced Defence Naval Line in the South-Western Strategic Area,” 5.

Mediterranean was impeding combat performance.²²² More was needed to effectively counter the American Sixth Fleet and other nearby NATO forces.

Gorshkov's requests to restructure the Mediterranean naval forces were largely dismissed until June 14, 1967, immediately after the Six Days War. This was the date when Naval Command Order No. 0195 was issued. This order formed the Fifth Eskadra (otherwise known as the Fifth "Squadron" or the "Mediterranean" fleet), bringing organization and increased strength to Soviet naval forces present in the Mediterranean. Vessels were transferred into the Fifth Eskadra from the Northern, Black Sea, and Baltic Fleets, and they would serve there in four or five-month rotations.

By the early 1970s, the Fifth Eskadra was made up of 35-60 ships, with higher numbers on station during the warm seasons.²²³ Zaborskiy described the force's "everyday" composition:

3-5 atomic multi-purpose (rocket and torpedo) submarines and a group of 8-10 diesel submarines; a group of 8-12 surface warships for ocean zones (cruisers, destroyers, antisubmarine, and reconnaissance ships), landing ships... which could hold a battalion of maritime soldiers onboard... and a detachment of 15-20 special purpose ships and auxiliary vessels.²²⁴

The Six Day War emphasized the need for better Soviet organization in support of its Middle Eastern strategy.²²⁵ After the Arab world's defeat in this conflict, the Fifth Eskadra's capabilities

²²² Before the "First Mixed Fleet" was created, Gorshkov tried to emphasize the Mediterranean's importance to Soviet strategy. He wanted two or three surface strike groups to be stationed there and he suggested that supply bases be established. Ibid.

²²³ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 154-5.

²²⁴ Zaborskiĭ, "Sovetskaĭa Sredizemnomorskaĭa Ėskadra."

²²⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, "The Uses of Soviet Military Power in Distant Areas," 14.

were enhanced with the addition of amphibious landing craft, naval aircraft, and submarines capable of firing cruise missiles. The battle group eventually became a well-equipped, “balanced force” with minesweepers, logistical support, and anti-submarine units. The inclusion of troop ships showed preparation – or at least the appearance of such – for direct military involvement in land battles. In 1979, the fleet was even augmented with two aircraft carriers – the *Minsk* and the *Kiev* – which conducted drills all throughout the Mediterranean.²²⁶

During its deployment, the Fifth Eskadra mainly surveyed the American Mediterranean forces, which was primarily done by submarines.²²⁷ Tupolev-16 bombers were also used for this purpose, but they were painted in the colours of the United Arab Republic/Egyptian military, with Soviet crews inside. Sometimes these planes flew dangerously close to the American ships. The Fifth Eskadra also had so-called “AGIs,” which were ships with electronic equipment that could gather intelligence.²²⁸ *Primorye*-class vessels were specially built to collect information through antennas, cameras, and tracking equipment and then process the intelligence onboard.²²⁹ Such units had been used in the Mediterranean before 1967, but after the Six Days War, their operations were greatly increased, especially the collection of data along the Israeli coast.

A good measure of the Eskadra’s increased importance comes from a report that the Central Intelligence Agency completed in 1971 on the Soviet Union’s foreign military activities. In *National Intelligence Estimate: The Uses of Soviet Military Power in Distant Areas*, the cumulative days of Soviet and American navies on deployment are compared for each year

²²⁶ Zaborskiĭ, “Sovetskaia Sredizemnomorskaia Èskadra.”

²²⁷ Ibid; Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 154-5.

²²⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Uses of Soviet Military Power in Distant Areas,” 14-5.

²²⁹ National Photographic Interpretation Center, “Soviet Primorye-Class Intelligence Collection Ships (S),” December 1984: 1-5.

between 1965 and 1970.²³⁰ In 1965, the Soviet Navy was estimated to have spent 4,007 cumulative days on Mediterranean deployments during the “mixed Soviet squadrons” era, while the Americans spent 18,011. In 1967, the year of Command No. 0195, the Soviet Navy had doubled its time in the region. Three years later, these deployment times finally surpassed the United States, having spent 17,669 ship days in the Mediterranean, compared to the American 16,714.²³¹

Critically, according to these CIA estimates, the Soviet navy’s time was concentrated in the Mediterranean. From 1965 to 1970, Soviet ships in the Mediterranean logged an average of almost exactly 10,150 cumulative ship days each year. During the same period, only 4,500 average days were recorded annually for the USSR’s time in the Atlantic Ocean, which was the second most active theatre for the Soviet Navy. Because this data came from a foreign intelligence report, we must account for the possibility of uncertain information. But they still tell us how important the Mediterranean Sea was to Soviet strategy. Deployments for Soviet ships in this theatre were almost three times as long as for those in the Atlantic Ocean, where the Soviet Union had a coastline; the USSR did not have a direct coastline with the Mediterranean. A likely reason was that the Soviet ships had little access to warm-water ports on the Atlantic, which prevented them from docking or disembarking during the winter. This lack of suitable year-round ports was not a problem in the warm Mediterranean, and access to Syrian and Egyptian ports allowed the Soviet Navy to spend much time there. The Mediterranean bases were not the Soviet Union’s only ice-free ports, as Murmansk on the Kola Peninsula and

²³⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, “The Uses of Soviet Military Power in Distant Areas,” 4.

²³¹ From 1965-70, the Americans in the Mediterranean Sea logged an average of just under 18,050 cumulative ship days each year. Ibid.

Kaliningrad, the base of the Baltic Fleet, also fulfilled this role.²³² But Murmansk and Kaliningrad are both far from the Mediterranean, and any ships moving between those areas would use up a lot of supplies and face interception from NATO vessels. Such trips would have been impractical for maintaining a Mediterranean naval presence.

Bases were a crucial part of the American-Soviet naval showdown in the Mediterranean. The American Sixth Fleet had access to ports in Italy and Spain and at the British colonies of Gibraltar and Malta.²³³ The Sixth Fleet was resupplied with shipments from tankers and other supply ships, rather than being able to stock up at a coastal base. Initially, the Soviet Union did not officially lease or own Mediterranean facilities, perhaps fearing accusations of imperialism.²³⁴ Before the Six Days War and the Fifth Eskadra's formation, the Soviet Union was sending military equipment and made port visits to Egypt and Syria, but otherwise its ships made only "limited use" of Arabic naval installations. But as they helped Syria and Egypt rebuild their militaries after June 1967, the Soviet government demanded increased use of naval facilities, allowing them to set up "forward bases." By maintaining a presence in the Middle East, Soviet personnel were at risk due to Israeli air raids carried out post-1967. Thus, they needed more concessions from the Arab states they were supplying.

Thanks to harbouring arrangements negotiated between the Soviet government and Syria and Egypt, the Fifth Eskadra could dock at local ports for repairs, resupply, and shore leave. From July 1, 1967, Soviet vessels were authorized to dock at Egypt's Alexandria, Mersa

²³² John S. Reshetar, Jr., *The Soviet Polity: Government and Politics in the USSR*, 3rd edition (Harper & Row, Publishers, 1989), 8; Tom Parfitt, "Stranded port still strategic base," *The Guardian*, November 7, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/07/russia>.

²³³ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 156-7.

²³⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, "The Uses of Soviet Military Power in Distant Areas," 35-6.

Matruh, and Port Said.²³⁵ They were also allowed to use Syria's facilities at Latakia, and Tartus was accessible after 1971. A repair ship was used at Tartus, making the Fifth Eskadra's mission more viable.²³⁶ These Syrian ports became even more vital after Sadat's diplomatic change of course prevented the Soviet navy from docking at Alexandria.

The Soviet Fifth Eskadra had two important advantages over the American Sixth Fleet. First, the Soviet ships were newer than many of those in the Sixth Fleet.²³⁷ Secondly, the Fifth Eskadra could receive reinforcements from the Soviet Union through the Black Sea and the Turkish Straits. As discussed in the previous chapter, this freedom was due to "contingency measures" allowed by the Montreux Convention, which regulated naval ship movement in Turkish waters.²³⁸ Having access to bases in the Mediterranean, and with the ability to cut through the Dardanelles Straits, Soviet ships could directly act in the region while being relatively close to their home base in case of retreat or reassignment. By contrast, to reinforce their Mediterranean deployments, American ships would have to cross the Atlantic Ocean from their home bases.

Through the Fifth Eskadra, the Soviet Union could show public support for its Arab allies. Between 1961 and 1971, the USSR reportedly made 44 port visits to Syria and 867 to Egypt.²³⁹ Not only could the Soviet Union show its flag at Mediterranean ports, it could directly confront the Sixth Fleet, albeit through reconnaissance rather than combat. There were two

²³⁵ The Soviet Navy could also dock at the Algerian ports of Algiers, Mers el-Kebir, and Bone. Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 157; Koryakovtsev and Tashlykov, "The Advanced Defence Naval Line in the South-Western Strategic Area," 6; Christopher Harmer, "Backgrounder: Russian Naval Base Tartus", *Institute for the Study of War*, July 31, 2012, http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Backgrounder_Russian_NavalBaseTartus.pdf, 2.

²³⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, "Memorandum – Subject: Relations Between Syria and the USSR," (OCI No. 0507/76) June 1, 1976: 3. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00353R000100290001-4.pdf>.

²³⁷ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 156-7.

²³⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, "The Uses of Soviet Military Power in Distant Areas," 18.

²³⁹ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 158; Central Intelligence Agency, "The Uses of Soviet Military Power in Distant Areas," 7-8, 13, 17-9.

advantages to this. First, monitoring the Sixth Fleet gave the Soviet crews valuable, low-risk peacetime practice in the Mediterranean theatre. Augmented with regular exercises – sometimes with the Syrian and Egyptian navies – the Soviet Navy could test new technologies and tactics such as in anti-submarine warfare.

Secondly, the Soviet naval presence was an effective deterrent and power projection instrument. It forced the Americans to rethink any intervention measures in the Middle East. For example, if the Americans wanted to send their forces to protect friendly Middle Eastern states (such as when Libya erupted in revolution in 1969), they had to consider the possible involvement of the Soviet navy. This was not a concern before the Fifth Eskadra's formation in 1967. In 1963, American forces were involved in Yemen's civil war, without fears of Soviet reaction. But the Fifth Eskadra was able and ready to respond to a crisis if so ordered. With its bases in Syria and Egypt, it had "strategic defensive capability and a limited intervention capability." The CIA even predicted that the squadron's submarines could be deployed near Sicily, Gibraltar, and other "various Mediterranean choke points." Koryakovtsev and Tashlykov have called the Fifth Soviet Eskadra the "first operational unit that could really resist the American fleet" in the strategically important Middle Eastern zone.²⁴⁰

Rebuilding Syria's Military

The Six-Day War devastated Syria's armed forces. Before June 1967, Syria's military suffered a series of purges while its government had to contend with multiple coup attempts.²⁴¹ These setbacks made Syria unprepared for a large-scale war with Israel, with inexperienced and incompetent officers, even though the Syrian army did fiercely defend the Golan Heights in the

²⁴⁰ Koryakovtsev and Tashlykov, "The Advanced Defence Naval Line in the South-Western Strategic Area," 8.

²⁴¹ Lesch, "Syria: Playing with Fire," 86-7, 92-3.

war's final days. There was also little coordination and military cooperation between Syria, Egypt, and Jordan. According to one estimate, the Syrian military had lost "32 MIG-21s, almost her entire fleet, 23 MIG-15/17s, 2 IL-28s and 3 MI-4 helicopters... about two-thirds of her air force."²⁴² Soviet military equipment was desperately needed in Syria after the war. As seen in the previous section, the debacle gave the USSR the chance to expand its naval presence in the Mediterranean, and the Soviet Union spent a lot of time rebuilding the Syrian armed forces.²⁴³

In the 1970s, Hafez al-Assad kept Soviet Middle Eastern ambitions alive when he accepted Soviet advisors into his country after Sadat forced them out of Egypt.²⁴⁴ In response, the USSR rewarded Syria with more sophisticated military equipment. Assad received much of the same Soviet equipment that Egypt did during this time, such as T-62 tanks, other vehicles, and older MIG fighters.²⁴⁵ But Syria also received newer MIG-23 interceptors. During the Yom Kippur War of October 1973, Soviet forces were removed from Syrian and Egyptian territory.²⁴⁶ The Soviet Union was also not initially informed about the Syrian-Egyptian offensive plans, but during the fighting Soviet crews for anti-air missile systems were deployed in Syria.²⁴⁷

As during the Six-Day War a few years earlier, the Soviet Union did not wish to provoke Israel or its American ally, and it wanted to end the Yom Kippur War as soon as possible.²⁴⁸ Consequently, the USSR, together with the United States, sponsored the previously-mentioned UN ceasefire Resolution #338 on October 22. Still, the Soviet government returned to its old

²⁴² Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 152-3.

²⁴³ Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 14; Rami Ginat, "The Soviet Union: The Roots of War and a Reassessment of Historiography," in *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War*, 218.

²⁴⁴ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 79-80; Olson, *The Ba'th and Syria*, 140.

²⁴⁵ IISS, "Tables and Analyses" in *The Military Balance* 74, no. 1 (1974): 90.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/04597227408459845>.

²⁴⁶ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 85.

²⁴⁷ Ibid; Central Intelligence Agency, "Relations Between Syria and the USSR," 3.

²⁴⁸ However, the Soviet Union did give some warnings to Israel, as some Soviet citizens were killed in the fighting. See Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 88.

habit of sending Syria weapons and equipment, and Syria's wars with Israel had put Assad into a dependent relationship with the USSR.²⁴⁹ After Sadat's turn towards Israel and the United States, Syria was increasingly reliant on Soviet military supplies. In June 1976, the CIA reported that since the first arms deal of 1956, the USSR had sent "\$2.5 billion of military assistance to Syria...almost 90 percent since the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war."²⁵⁰ And in 1974-85, according to one source, Syria bought "about 550 [Soviet] warplanes... 2,500 tanks, and 1,200 armored personnel carriers."²⁵¹ By the early 1980s, the USSR had become Syria's sole military supplier, and in 1982-4 the Soviet Union sent Assad weapons to the sum of \$2.8 billion.²⁵² During Syria's intervention in Lebanon, advanced SAM-5 anti-air missiles were positioned near the Syrian capital.²⁵³ These weapons had never before been deployed outside of the Soviet Union, showing the firm commitment of the USSR to the Assad government.

Economic Relations

As well as sending military equipment and experts, the Soviet Union ran an extensive program of economic and infrastructural aid in Syria from 1957, when the first arms deal was signed. On October 28, 1957, Soviet Department of Foreign Aid chief Petr Nikitin finalized a Soviet assistance plan with the Syrian Defense Minister Khaled el-Azm.²⁵⁴ It included \$400 million worth of investment in nineteen infrastructural projects. Such initiatives included roads and rail yards around Latakia, as well as plans for a railroad factory and a dam across the Euphrates River.²⁵⁵ Such deals were important for the Syrian government, which had accumulated \$60-70

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 87-8; Central Intelligence Agency, "Relations Between Syria and the USSR," 1.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

²⁵¹ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 15.

²⁵² Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 17; Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 72.

²⁵³ Ibid., 73.

²⁵⁴ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 78-9.

²⁵⁵ Ibid; Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 112.

million in debt for Soviet weapons, according to a July 27, 1957 report. Syria needed \$100-200 million in aid to avoid bankruptcy! Using information from the U.S. Department of State, R.D. MacLaurin wrote in 1975 that between 1954 and 1972, the Soviet Union gave Syria up to \$317 million US in aid.²⁵⁶ However, such aid deals came with stipulations. For example, in 1966, the USSR apparently made three demands in return for help to build the Euphrates Dam: a communist had to become a Syrian cabinet minister; *Sawt al-Shaab*, a communist paper, had to be allowed to be published; and the Syrian Communist Party leader, Khaled Bakdash, had to be allowed return to Syria from exile.

Soviet advisors helped to develop Syria's infrastructure, including its oil industry. Soviet oil shipments were imported into Syria, but the USSR also wished to help transform Syria into an oil producer.²⁵⁷ In 1960 Soviet teams started exploring Syria for prospective oil drilling sites, and contracts were later created for the construction of forty-three Soviet-manufactured oil tanks in Damascus, Homs, and other Syrian cities.²⁵⁸ Later in the decade, agreements were made for oilfield development across the country. The Euphrates Dam project also received much Soviet help and attention.²⁵⁹ The USSR committed to helping with the project in 1957, and a construction plan was drawn up three years later. It took time for these plans to come to fruition, due to Syria suddenly negotiating for a deal with West Germany. The situation changed when the Ba'th party took power in March 1963, however, which saw the Syrian government return to the USSR. A deal was finally made on April 22, 1966. It included a twelve-year Soviet loan of \$132 million at a 2.5 percent interest rate. The Soviet contribution to the Euphrates Dam was significant – so large in fact that the “Second Five-Year Plan was adjusted to accommodate the

²⁵⁶ McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 82-3.

²⁵⁷ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 15-6.

²⁵⁸ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 109, 112, 114-5.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 120-3.

dam project....” The dam was very important to the Ba’thist party because it was seen as forming the basis of Syria’s dreamed of socialist society. The Soviet government was happy to cover more than half of the dam’s costs through financing agreements. Three hundred and twenty Soviet technicians were sent to help supervise the project.

Soviet-Syrian Cultural Exchanges

Scholarships to Students Abroad

The Soviet Union tried to implement “cultural penetration” into the Middle East in a variety of ways, hoping to improve the image of communism and the country abroad.²⁶⁰ One tool in this strategy was education; the Soviet Union offered scholarships to thousands of Arab students to study in the USSR and in Eastern Europe. The U.S. State Department reported that between 1965 and 1968, 1,090 Syrians took advantage of such programs, more often studying in the USSR than in other communist countries. These students would have the opportunity to learn advanced skills at communist institutions, which were considered to give superior education to those in the Middle East. However, the USSR also hoped that such programs would help propagate communist ideas when these students returned to their homelands. Thus, the students would be taught both Soviet and communist history alongside their technical or academic courses.²⁶¹

These efforts were inconsistent, according to Lenczowski. The results were disappointing from the Soviet point of view, because some Arabic students resisted attempts to

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 61-4.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

indoctrinate them.²⁶² Usually, only the most radical Syrian students were interested in studying Soviet ideology. Also, though studying in the Soviet Bloc was apparently better than studying in Syria, Western technology and science was even better in the eyes of many students. In the early 1980s, the Bloc was offering 5,000 scholarships to Syrian students annually.²⁶³ But the Syrian embassy hoped to send more students to the United States, regardless of the Soviet-Syrian Friendship Treaty and American support of Israel.

The International Damascus Fair

The International Damascus Fair showed the cultural connections that developed between the Soviet Union and Syria. This fair is an annual exhibition in Syria's capital that first took place on September 1, 1954.²⁶⁴ Here companies displayed products at pavilions from their respective home countries, but during the Cold War they gave a public manifestation of the Soviet Union's support for Syria. A contemporary author on the subject, Frederick Barghoorn, lamented in 1960 that no British companies appeared at the first Fair, and France was not represented either (hardly surprising, since France was Syria's former colonial master until a few years earlier).²⁶⁵ The United States did show, but its pavilion was meagre and unimpressive. The Soviet Union, however, had a "brilliant" pavilion with "scientific and technological displays." Barghoorn said that such fairs were effective avenues for Soviet propaganda because they were able to

²⁶² Lenczowski speaks of one case in which Iraqi students in Odessa complained about communist propaganda being taught while they took their engineering courses. This objection reached Moscow, and the students no longer had to study the communist material. Ibid.

²⁶³ Pranay B. Gupte, "Syrian-Soviet Friendship is on Paper, Not Streets," *The New York Times*, May 27, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/05/27/world/syrian-soviet-friendship-is-on-paper-not-streets.html>.

²⁶⁴ Public Establishment for International Fairs and Exhibitions, "Damascus International Fair," accessed May 5, 2018, <http://peife.gov.sy/en/an-overview-of-the-damascus-international-fair/>. The International Damascus Fair is still held today, though between 2012 and 2016 it was cancelled due to the current civil war. Associated Free Press, "Damascus International Fair makes return after 50 year hiatus [sic]," August 14, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2017/08/syrie-conflict-fair-economy.html>.

²⁶⁵ Frederick Charles Barghoorn, *The Soviet Cultural Offensive: The Role of Cultural Diplomacy in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 91-2.

demonstrate the USSR's cultural and technological achievements. Using this tool of soft power would be much less costly and risky than arms transfers or other diplomatic maneuvers.

Pravda spoke of friendly Soviet-Syrian relations at these expositions. The Third Damascus Fair was held in September 1, 1956, just after the first Soviet arms sale to Syria. On this first day of the event, the propaganda publication said that A.A. Nikiforov, the Soviet pavilion's director, said that the USSR's government "accepted an invitation to participate at the fair, guided by the friendly feelings of the Soviet people to the Syrian nation."²⁶⁶ Other *Pravda* articles spoke of Syrian President Shukri Quwatli and other politicians using the exposition as a platform to denounce colonial imperialism and advertise Syria's economic growth "with the help of friendly governments."²⁶⁷ The Soviet pavilion was reportedly visited with "great interest." Quwatli gave a speech wishing the Soviet Union success at the Fair, and he said that the displays engendered increased Soviet-Syrian cooperation. In November 1956 *Pravda* correspondent P. Demchenko conveyed his experience while visiting Syria during the Fair two months earlier. He recalled Syria's centuries under imperial control before praising the newly independent country for its great recovery.²⁶⁸ Syria had built 900 school buildings over the past five years, doubling that number since the French Mandate ended. The port at Latakia was being modernised with the help of communist Yugoslavian funds, cement and textile factories were being built, and the cities had advanced public transportation. Moreover, Demchenko continued, the Syrian people had a hospitable, peace-loving nature akin to that of Soviet citizens. As they treated the Soviet visitors like "best and welcome guests," Syrians shouted "Down with Imperialism! Down with the Baghdad Pact!" According to Demchenko, the Syrians who visited the Soviet pavilion saw

²⁶⁶ "Mezhdunarodnaia iarmarka v Damask," *Pravda*, September 1, 1956, No. 245 (13908), 3.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, September 3, 1956, No. 247 (13910), 3.

²⁶⁸ P. Demchenko, "V druzhestvennoi Sirii," *Pravda*, November 3, 1956, No. 308 (139711), 4.

the USSR as a natural ally and an “important factor” in Middle Eastern peace. Consistent with this view from *Pravda*, during the next Damascus Fair the Syrian National Economy Minister Khalil Kallas stated that the USSR was “the great power that backed our cause” against imperialists who were supposedly trying to weaken and retake Syria.²⁶⁹

Media

The USSR also used its media. As soon as the Soviet-Syrian relationship began, Arabic newspapers started devoting more space to the Soviet news agency TASS, especially in Syria and Iraq.²⁷⁰ Previously, Middle Eastern papers were mostly using Western sources. The local Soviet embassies helped by making their own contributions to local papers. They submitted articles on Soviet “life, achievement, and arts,” continuing the work of the Soviet pavilion at the Damascus Fair. As for Soviet publications in the Middle East, Lenczowski has noted that when it covered the region (which was rarely), *Pravda* usually wrote official reports about diplomatic meetings. Otherwise, the above-mentioned articles were much like the rest:

Such articles invariably emphasized Soviet goodwill toward the aspirations of the Arab peoples, anti-colonialism, American “imperialism,” Soviet support for national self-determination and development, criticism of Israeli aggressiveness, advocacy of the national front in which Communists and other “progressive forces” should cooperate, and an occasional cautious praise for the reforms carried out by the governments of the radical Arab states.

²⁶⁹ Donovan, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, 79.

²⁷⁰ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 65-6.

The language barrier restricted Soviet media's influence in the Middle East, as very few Arabs could read Russian.

Soviet Successes in Syria

By “setting up shop” in Syria, the Soviet government was able to “outflank Turkey and Iraq, which were firmly in the Western camp” after World War II and the Baghdad Pact's creation.²⁷¹

The alliance became especially important after Turkey joined NATO in 1952 and when missile sites were established there, posing a threat to the Soviet Union.²⁷² Turkey was perceived as a fellow militant when the Americans expressed concerns about Syria, since Turkey had bases and forces which could place pressure on the Soviet Union's Arab ally. In return, by sending weapons to Syria, the Soviet Union could threaten Turkey on two fronts – from the south through Syria and from the north through the Soviet-Turkish border. The Syrian-Turkish front became an important strategic area, evident in the military exercises carried out on both sides.²⁷³

The Syrian government also received economic developmental help from non-Soviet communist states.²⁷⁴ In March 1957, the Czechoslovakian government was awarded a contract to build an oil refinery in Homs; in 1965 the East Germans provided \$25 million worth of loans for infrastructure projects and sent a financial expert to help Syria rebuild its economy along socialist lines; and in 1966 Poland helped build a steel-rolling mill. This economic cooperation with communist countries brought Syria further into the socialist camp, even though it was in Khrushchev's “neutral, socialist-aligned” category.

²⁷¹ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 13.

²⁷² NATO, “NATO on the Map,” accessed March 16, 2018, <https://www.nato.int/nato-on-the-map/#lat=36.99558094674963&lon=33.8836597387708&zoom=0&infoBox=Turkey>; Donovan, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, 85-92.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁷⁴ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 123.

Problems in Soviet-Syrian Relations

Communism's Failure in the Middle East

As mentioned earlier, Arab nationalists were not communist, either in Syria or Egypt. Robert W. Olson has noted that within Syria there was a wing known as the “Neo-Ba’thists.”²⁷⁵ This group was far more Marxist than the original Ba’thists, and when they gained control over the party, they spoke about the “popular struggle” and used other communist jargon. The Ba’th party took power in Syria 1963, and by 1966, the Neo-Ba’thist ideology had become dominant.²⁷⁶ They implemented socialist policy by restricting private enterprise and expanding the government’s control of the economy. Hafez al-Assad, however, disagreed with the Neo-Ba’thists’ emphasis on socialism. The Neo-Ba’thists had believed that they had to create a socialist utopia in Syria before defeating Israel. As we saw earlier, Assad thought in the reverse direction, focussing on defeating Israel and realizing the dream of national Arabic unity. When he was President, al-Assad reversed the Neo-Ba’thists economic constraints, expanding opportunities for businesses in the construction, import, and industrial sectors.²⁷⁷

Thus ended Syria’s path to becoming a fully Marxist country. In addition to Assad’s reduced focus on socialist policy, many Ba’thists were also worried about the local communists’ international connections.²⁷⁸ They were also concerned that communist activities in Syria would encourage the Americans to get involved in their country’s internal affairs. Communism was suppressed in the Arab nationalist countries; in Egypt during the late 1950s, for example, the authorities feared that the Soviet Union and Iraqi communists were conspiring against Abdel

²⁷⁵ Olson, *The Ba’th Party and Syria*, 16-19.

²⁷⁶ Galvani, et. al., 11-12.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 13.

²⁷⁸ Olson, *The Ba’th and Syria*, 28.

Nasser's government.²⁷⁹ A campaign against Egypt's communists ensued, and Soviet-Egyptian relations suffered a setback.

The communists failed to gain influence in Syria, even after Assad's government officially became "friends" with the Soviet Union in 1980.²⁸⁰ By 1981, there were two communists in Assad's cabinet, but that same government prevented Syrian communists from founding their own newspaper. Marxism was not popular in the Arab world. Dawisha argues that Arab culture has naturally been drawn to single leaders and not necessarily single-party politics, which the CPSU preferred.²⁸¹ Even though Syria's Ba'thist party was secular and treated religion with mistrust, there was also the very important factor of Islam. The Prophet Mohammed had founded this faith in the Middle East approximately 1,400 years before the Soviet Union, which was merely decades old, tried to impose its young Marxist philosophy. Atheism was "repugnant to most Muslims," and many Arabs associated the USSR with godless belief.²⁸² This connection remained in Middle Eastern minds even when the CPSU realized that it had to abandon Arab communists in favour of the "bourgeois nationalists" who persecuted them but also resisted the Soviet Union's Cold War enemies.²⁸³ Hafez al-Assad's turn away from Marxist, Neo-Ba'thist legislation proved that Khrushchev and the other Soviet leaders were wise to follow the ideology of the "united front" instead of trying to spread worldwide Marxist revolution.

²⁷⁹ Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East*, 54-5.

²⁸⁰ Gupte, "Syrian-Soviet Friendship is on Paper, Not Streets."

²⁸¹ Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 19-20.

²⁸² McLaurin, *The Middle East in Soviet Policy*, 65.

²⁸³ Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 18.

An article in *The New York Times* in 1981 surveyed multiple problems in the Soviet-Syrian relationship, despite the previous year's Friendship Treaty.²⁸⁴ One Western diplomat to the area suggested that the Syrian people were actually Western-oriented for the following reasons: they had a history of French colonial rule; French, and not Russian, was a common language in the country; many Syrians (including more than half of Assad's cabinet) were educated in France, the United States, and Britain; and Western publications were easy to obtain in the Ba'thist country. The Soviet Union's attempts to influence Syrian culture and society were clearly limited, thanks to Arab hostility to communism and the CPSU's inability to completely erase the effects of the colonial past.

Syria's Neighbourhood

We saw earlier how the Soviet Union had responded to the Israeli-Syrian conflict. But Israel was not Syria's only national security problem. In 1957, Lebanon had promised to support Syria in the case of aggression.²⁸⁵ But civil war started there in 1975, which threatened to split the country along religious lines.²⁸⁶ Hafez al-Assad saw this conflict as an Israeli plot against Arab unity, and Syria eventually invaded Lebanon on June 1, 1976.²⁸⁷ Ironically, Assad intervened to support Christian, Western-learning militias which were losing their battle against Lebanon's leftist Muslim government and Palestinians that were fighting in its name. At the same time, Syria directly attacked Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO).

The USSR had great difficulty with this turn of events, as Adeed Dawisha commented: "The Soviets... watched their 'client' state [Syria]... launching an offensive against a 'liberation

²⁸⁴ Gupte, "Syrian-Soviet Friendship is on Paper, Not Streets."

²⁸⁵ Donovan, *U.S. & Soviet Policy in the Middle East: 1957-66*, 85.

²⁸⁶ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 26-8.

²⁸⁷ Ibid, Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 17-8; Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 16.

movement' which had always been a close Soviet ally." But Assad was determined to stay the course in Lebanon, despite Soviet pressure and even greatly reduced military supplies shipments. In 1983, Syria took further military action against the PLO, and the USSR was unable to prevent it.²⁸⁸ Andrew Kreutz briefly mentions Syrian diplomatic problems with the fellow Ba'hist country of Iraq, with which the Soviet Union had signed another Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in April 1972.²⁸⁹ The USSR was also not able to help improve relations between its two Arabic allies. Considering Syria's conflicts with its Arab neighbors and the failure of communism to gain a foothold in the Middle East, it is evident that Soviet foreign policy did not adequately account for the Middle East's very complicated "indigenous factors" at work between its various countries and ethnic groups.²⁹⁰

Strategic Value

Egypt was also of more strategic value to Moscow than Syria. Latakia and Tartus did not have as much capacity as the Egyptian ports such as Alexandria and Port Said, so the Soviet Navy could not dock as many ships in Syria.²⁹¹ Syria was also much less politically stable than Egypt. In Egypt the Soviet Union only had to deal with Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat. On the other hand, between independence in 1949 and 1971, when Hafez al-Assad took power, Syria went through 11 coups and 11 power seizure attempts.²⁹² Assad attempted to stabilize the country by creating a National Progressive Front through the merger of Syria's Ba'hist Party with other "progressive" organizations.²⁹³ In addition to encouraging private enterprise, he also relaxed censorship and made government positions more accessible. But even by the mid-1980s, a weak

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Ibid; IISS, "The Middle East and the Mediterranean" in *The Military Balance 79*, no. 1 (1979): 36.

²⁹⁰ Dawisha, "The Soviet Union in the Arab World," 19-22.

²⁹¹ Sella, *Soviet Political and Military Conduct in the Middle East*, 79-80.

²⁹² Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 101.

²⁹³ Galvani et. al, "The October War," 12.

Syrian economy made Assad's hold on power more uncertain.²⁹⁴ However, though this instability must have caused concerns for the Soviet Union, arms deals continued to be made when Syria needed more equipment.

There was also the issue of military power. Table 1 provides 1979 estimates of Egyptian, Syrian, and Israeli man power, defense expenditure, number of tanks, and number of warplanes:

Table 1: Egyptian-Syrian-Israeli Military Balance, 1979 Estimates by IISS

Military Balance, 1979 Estimates	Egypt	Syria	Israel
<i>Military personnel (Total Population)</i>	395,000 (40,460,000)	227,500 (8,370,000)	165,600 (3,820,000)
<i>Defense Spending</i>	\$2.17 billion (US) (11.9% of GDP)	\$2.04 billion (US) (28.7% of GDP)	\$1.62 billion (US) (15.4% of GDP)
<i>Tanks</i>	1,680	2,700	3,115
<i>Warplanes</i>	~563	~389	576

Source: IISS, "The Middle East and the Mediterranean," in *The Military Balance 79*, no. 1 (1979), 38-41, 45.

Because these numbers are from 1979, when Sadat made peace with Israel, they emphasize Soviet losses in Egypt and what forces remained in Syria. How could Syria hope to counter Israel after Sadat left the Soviet-Egyptian-Syrian axis?²⁹⁵ This Arab weakness made Soviet efforts to prop Syria against Israel and the West much more vital, but arguably less practical.

²⁹⁴ Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria*, 86-7.

²⁹⁵ Sella, *Soviet Political and Military Conduct in the Middle East*, 79.

Table 2 shows the same estimates for 1986. According to Andrew Kreutz, in this period Syria was the biggest non-communist customer of Soviet-made equipment and weapons:²⁹⁶

Table 2: Egyptian-Syrian-Israeli Military Balance, 1986 Estimates by IISS

Military Balance, 1986 Estimates	Egypt	Syria	Israel
<i>Military personnel (Total Population)</i>	445,000 (49,500,000)	392,500 (11,250,000)	149,000 (4,400,000)
<i>Defense Spending</i>	\$5.215 billion (US) (11.97% of 1984 GDP)	\$3.623 billion (US) (18.20% of 1984 GDP)	\$5.378 billion (US; 1986-7) (24.42% of 1985 GDP)
<i>Tanks</i>	2,265	4,200	3,660
<i>Warplanes</i>	~443	~483	~629

Source: IISS, “The Middle East and North Africa,” in *The Military Balance* 86, no. 1 (1986): 94-5, 98-9, 108-9. The IISS did not have estimates for these nations’ 1986 GDP numbers, so the most recent figures were used in this Table.

These figures show that in 1986, Syria was still important in Soviet foreign policy, especially since the United States had signed deals with Egypt allowing American forces to use Egyptian bases.²⁹⁷ However, how useful was this Soviet commitment to its Arab client? Even though *perestroika* and *glasnost* had begun, the Cold War was still in progress, and the Soviet Union could hardly stop supporting Syria against Israel and American military expansion into Egypt. But we can certainly question the USSR’s wisdom of continuing this policy. Gorbachev’s “New Thinking,” after all, was at that time reassessing military spending and shifting focus towards the USSR, rather than on commitments abroad.

²⁹⁶ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 16.

²⁹⁷ IISS, “The Middle East and the Mediterranean” in *The Military Balance* 86, no. 1 (1986): 89.

Conclusion

The Baghdad Pact and the Eisenhower Doctrine are essential to understanding the Cold War in the Middle East. In reaction to the Soviet Union's attempts to create friendly territories in Azerbaijan and Turkey immediately after World War II, the Pact of 1955 denied the USSR a free hand in the Middle East by forming a wall of Western-friendly countries. U.S. President Eisenhower then formulated his anti-communist doctrine in 1957, identifying the region as a key strategic zone in the developing stand-off with the Soviet bloc. The United States deployed a sizeable naval force in response to Jordan's internal crisis. Simultaneously the USSR's leadership accused the U.S. of pursuing an aggressive, new form of colonialism. It also listed Syria and other Middle Eastern nations among the countries that were ideologically compatible with the CPSU's claimed practice of "peace building." The Soviet commitment to the area went beyond rhetoric, as shown in the USSR's efforts to rival the United States through Middle Eastern proxies including Syria.

There are uncanny parallels between the Soviet Union's relationships with Syria and Egypt. Indeed, it is impossible to discuss the former without analyzing the latter. This is because the two Arab countries were briefly united as the United Arab Republic and they had a common enemy in Israel. Soviet activities in Egypt and Syria followed almost the same pattern. They started with arms deals in the mid-1950s and subsequent ones throughout the Cold War. Every time the two nations suffered heavy losses in wars against Israel, the USSR was there to resupply their militaries. The Soviet treatment of the Israeli crisis was somewhat confused or even contradictory. The Soviet Union supported Resolution 338, the Geneva conference, and other proposed solutions. It was also sometimes reluctant to provide its Arab proxies with the most advanced weapons, fearing that they would be emboldened to attack Israel and disrupt any

peace solution. However, the USSR constantly supplied its Arab allies with weapons when needed, especially after heavy Arab losses in 1967 and 1973. Both Egypt and Syria also provided bases on the Mediterranean for the Soviet Fifth *Eskadra* so it could conduct its operations against the American forces in the area. The Cold War parallels between Egypt and Syria ended in 1979 when Sadat signed his separate peace with Israel through the United States. This volte-face caused the Soviet government to concentrate on Syria, which would not directly negotiate with the Israeli enemy. Given the choice between a lasting peace or supporting Syria against the so-called “imperialist pawn” Israel, it ultimately opted for the latter, if reluctantly.

Syria was useful to the USSR as a bastion against United States. The USSR saw an opportunity to equip Syria’s military with weapons it urgently needed against the American-supported Jewish country. The military was crucial to the Soviet-Syrian relationship, because Moscow was also able to resupply and rebuild Syria after its wars with Israel. This gave the USSR the chance to project power and actively counter American movements. When Sadat forced Soviet personnel out of Egypt in 1976, Syria became the USSR’s last Middle Eastern partner neighbouring Israel.²⁹⁸ And while the USSR was active in other Middle Eastern countries and in North Africa, Syria was the closest to that American ally. Finally, Syrian relations also gave the USSR access to the Mediterranean Sea, allowing its military to carry out extensive reconnaissance missions against the American Sixth Fleet and protect its Arab ally’s coastlines. Modern Russia still has a military presence at Tartus and Latakia today – a vestige of the Cold War strategic-ideological partnership between the Soviet Union and the socialist Syrian state.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ Lenczowski, *Soviet Advances in the Middle East*, 152.

²⁹⁹ This article notes that in modern times, Russia uses the port at Tartus and an airbase at Khmeimem; Tartus is “Russia’s only Mediterranean port.” Rod Nordland, “Russia Signs Deal for Syria Bases; Turkey Appears to Accept

CHAPTER THREE: RUSSIA'S POST-SOVIET FOREIGN POLICY AND THE STRUGGLE WITH RADICAL ISLAM

Westerners, Eurasianists, and Centrists

In 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved, creating the Russian Federation and fourteen other countries from the USSR's constituent republics. The USSR's collapse forced the new Russian Federation government to determine its foreign policy. Several schools of policy developed as a result: Western, Eurasian, and Centrist.³⁰⁰ Firmly believing in the West's system of capitalist democracy, the Westerners sought to fully merge Russia into the world of the USSR's former enemies.³⁰¹ They predicted that undemocratic China and the Middle Eastern countries would dissolve just like the Soviet Union.³⁰² Because of its previous centuries as an autocratic Empire and then as the single-party USSR, Russia, from the Westerners' perspective, was historically part of this Eastern or "Asiatic" system. To save Russia from repeating the failure of the Soviet Union, they advocated the adoption of Western civilization and politics.

Assad," *The New York Times*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/world/middleeast/russia-turkey-syria-deal.html>.

³⁰⁰ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, Second Edition (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 62, 69-77; Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics*, 2nd Edition (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012), 67-77.

Scholars have used different words to describe the Western and Centrist schools. Andrei Tsygankov uses the word "Statist," while Russianist Jeffrey Mankoff uses the word "Centrist" for that same philosophy. Tsygankov uses "Statist" because after the failure of the Westerners, "a number of members of the political class began to advocate a principally different vision of national interest that included a stronger role for the *state* [emphasis mine] and revival of Russia's great power status." Mankoff uses the word "Centrist" to show the balance act this school of thought played between East and West. Instead of saying "Western," Mankoff also uses the word "Atlanticist." See Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 71-7. For the sake of simplicity, I will borrow from both writers and use the words "Westerner" and "Centrist," as I believe they communicate the philosophies of their respective schools most clearly.

³⁰¹ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 69.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 73.

Andrei Kozyrev, the first Foreign Minister to Russian President Boris Yeltsin, was a key proponent of pro-Western diplomatic thought.³⁰³ Taking office in 1991, he started by sacking many of his department's former Soviet staff members.³⁰⁴ Yeltsin and Kozyrev also supported Western actions against North Korea, Iraq, Libya, and Yugoslavia, including sanctions and the possibility of military force.³⁰⁵ By doing this, Russia lost billions of dollars in potential arms sales to some of these countries. Clearly, under Kozyrev's pro-Western stances, Russia was ceding much control to the West, hoping to become a strategic partner of the United States.³⁰⁶

During its move towards the West, Yeltsin's government made some withdrawals from Central Asia and the Middle East.³⁰⁷ This included the USSR's old battlefield of Afghanistan, where the fundamentalist Muslim Taliban government eventually took control in 1996.³⁰⁸ Russia's waning interest in these former Soviet regions of influence allowed the United States to make gains in the Russian Federation's backyard. As soon as the USSR was no more, American governments became active in Central Asia for many reasons. The United States was worried about Islamic terrorism, the rise of the Taliban, and old Soviet nuclear weapons in Kazakhstan.³⁰⁹ However, the region also provided opportunities for the Western world to

³⁰³ Ibid., xxiii.

³⁰⁴ Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 54.

³⁰⁵ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 72-5.

³⁰⁶ Ibid; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 76.

³⁰⁷ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 7273-4. Andrei Tsygankov writes that in 1992, Kozyrev's department also did not work very hard to improve relations with China. In that year Kozyrev took a diplomatic trip to China after Russian officials had refused to meet with their Chinese counterparts. But Kozyrev's trip "lasted only thirty hours," and no new economic deals were formed between the two countries, due to significant disagreements over human rights.

³⁰⁸ Zachary Laub, "The Taliban in Afghanistan," *Council on Foreign Relations*, July 4, 2014, <https://www.cfr.org/background/taliban-afghanistan>.

³⁰⁹ Reuel R. Hanks, *Global Security Watch: Central Asia* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2010), 126-9.

promote democracy, encourage growth of the oil sector, and take part in military cooperation and exercises.³¹⁰

The second diplomatic philosophy active in early post-Soviet Russia was that of the Eurasians. This doctrine stated that Russia should protect its interests and expand them, instead of joining with and thus “selling out” to the United States.³¹¹ The Eurasianist sphere has encompassed numerous figures and groups, including the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) of political veteran Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and Alexander Dugin, who has had some say in the Russian government and intelligence services. Essentially, Eurasianists believe that Russia should form relationships with countries such as Iran and Germany to counter and actively resist the United States. They even hoped for a new Russian Empire that would incorporate the old Soviet republics. This hypothetical nation would promote Russian Orthodox Christianity at the expense of democracy and individualism. Like during the Cold War, the world would be divided between the ideologically-opposed Russian and American systems. Elements of Eurasianism have promoted racism and anti-Semitism.

Russia’s pro-Western direction under Minister Andrei Kozyrev eventually faltered for several reasons. First, the Russian public was displeased with Western financial advice and proposed economic reforms.³¹² Meant to help Russia’s struggling economy, these measures were perceived as attempts to impose external control – a form of economic colonialism. Coupled with a drastic decline in Russian salaries, living standards, and economic shrinkage, they made the notion of Western-based economic planning unpopular.³¹³ Second, many Russian officials did not agree with Kozyrev’s practices in foreign affairs. The Balkans were an area of

³¹⁰ Ibid., 129-30.

³¹¹ Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 62-3; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 67-71.

³¹² Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 75.

³¹³ Ibid., 75, 93-4.

concern for these officials, for they disliked Russia's support of Western actions against Serb-dominated Yugoslavia in 1992, during the brutal civil war being fought there.³¹⁴ Initially, Russia did not block the United Nations vote to oust Yugoslavia from the organization, nor did Kozyrev's ministry oppose the possibility of UN-sanctioned force being used in the Yugoslavian conflict. However, internal pressure from worried politicians led Russia to step back from this Balkan direction in December 1992. The turn was reflected in Russia's abstention from a UN vote to impose more anti-Yugoslav sanctions. The United Nations-brokered peace agreement in Bosnia-Herzegovina took place without Russian peacekeepers.

NATO's expansion was a third factor that ended the Westerners' time in control of Russian foreign policy. During this expansion, NATO moved east towards Russia, gathering to itself many former communist countries, including some that were once republics in the USSR: Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic joined in 1999, and the alliance was much expanded in 2004 with the accession of Slovenia, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Slovakia.³¹⁵ Nationalistic Russians and those in the military and intelligence service saw NATO's growth as a looming threat and attempt to isolate Russia, especially because their country would not be included in the growing alliance.³¹⁶ Direct NATO military action increased Russian fears about the West. NATO did attack Bosnian Serb forces during the Yugoslavian War in 1994 without much response from Russia.³¹⁷ The Western alliance's attack on Serbia during the Kosovo crisis in March 1999 was a final straw for Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, who cancelled a trip to Washington. Russians perceived NATO as becoming

³¹⁴ Ibid., 72.

³¹⁵ "NATO on the Map," accessed April 11, 2018, <https://www.nato.int/nato-on-the-map/#lat=51.72673918960763&lon=4.849117014409103&zoom=0&layer-2&layer-1>.

³¹⁶ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 76, 103.

³¹⁷ Ibid., 76, 107-8.

the “cornerstone of European security”³¹⁸ indicating that Russia’s future was no longer to be found in the Western world.

Russian foreign policy eventually found a way between these two extremes of the American-friendly Westerners and the nationalistic Eurasianists. Primakov’s appointment as Russia’s new Foreign Minister in 1996 confirmed the primacy of the Centrists, the third school of diplomatic thought introduced above.³¹⁹ Before arriving at this post, Primakov resisted the Westerners’ policies as the head of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service.³²⁰ The Centrists were concerned about Russia being overwhelmed in a “unipolar” world under the United States, and they wanted to create a “multipolar” one.³²¹ In 1997, the Russian “National Security Concept” stated that Russia was an important political player in both Europe and Asia. The idea of Russia being a “cultural bridge between... East and West” was a key Centrist belief.³²² Unlike the Westerners who wanted to join the American order and in contrast to the Eurasianists who wanted to oppose it vehemently, the Centrists followed a policy toward balancing Great Power relations, i.e., Russia against the American superpower. Equality, not confrontation, was to be achieved with the West.

As part of this multi-lateral world, Primakov reversed Kozyrev’s retreat from non-Western countries. The move in part was to conduct “non-confrontational competitiveness” with the United States in Central Asia and act as a mediator between Western and local interests.³²³ Russia would also assert its right to secure interests in its immediate neighborhood, otherwise

³¹⁸ Ibid., 103.

³¹⁹ Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 65, 93; Paul Gould, “Yevgeny Primakov, Kremlin politician, 1929-2015,” *Financial Times*, June 26, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/adb842cc-1bf6-11e5-a130-2e7db721f996>.

³²⁰ Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 65.

³²¹ Ibid., 96-99.

³²² Ibid., 66.

³²³ Amin Saikal, “Russian Policy Toward Central Asia and the Middle East,” in *Russian Foreign Policy Since 1990*, ed. Peter Shearman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1995), 269.

known as the “near-abroad.”³²⁴ The “near-abroad” consisted of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a body formed just before the USSR’s collapse to encourage future cooperation between Russia and most of the former Soviet republics.³²⁵ This organization will be analyzed at various points throughout this work to see how it has influenced Russia’s relations with the West and Central Asia.

Russia’s Foreign Ministry also worked to increase contact with the Middle Eastern countries. By education, Primakov was an Orientalist, and during the Cold War he was a Middle Eastern correspondent for *Pravda*.³²⁶ In 1997-8 Primakov protested American and United Nations economic pressure upon Iraq’s Saddam Hussein over his refusal to cooperate with weapons inspectors, but Russia ultimately did little to lift anti-Iraqi sanctions.³²⁷ Unfortunately for Primakov, this situation did not help Iraq repay its \$7 billion of debt to Russia. Iran was a potential Middle Eastern ally to help the Russians create their desired “multi-polar” order.³²⁸ The Persian state helped limit both Taliban ideology and Turkish influence on Central Asia. However, Iran also posed some problems for Russia. Iran developed itself as an “alternative export route for central Asian oil and gas,” and as head of the Organization of the Islamic Congress, it criticized Russia’s conduct of the First Chechen War.³²⁹ Iran’s hostile relationship

³²⁴ Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 66, 98.

³²⁵ Ispolnitel’nyĭ Komitet SNG, “O Codruzhestve Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv,” accessed April 11, 2018, <http://www.cis.minsk.by/page.php?id=174>. The original signatories were Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, having created a first agreement on December 8, 1991. Two weeks later, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan joined as well. Georgia became a member in 1993, but it withdrew in August 2009, a year after a brief war with Russia over Georgia’s breakaway regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia. See “Georgia Finalizes Withdrawal from CIS,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 18, 2009, https://www.rferl.org/a/Georgia_Finalizes-Withdrawal_From_CIS/1802284.html.

³²⁶ Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 103; Andrew E. Kramer, “Yevgeny Primakov, Former Russian Premier and Spymaster, Dies at 85,” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/27/world/europe/yevgeny-primakov-former-premier-of-russia-dies-at-85.html?module=ArrowsNav&contentCollection=Europe&action=keypress®ion=FixedLeft&pgtype=article>.

³²⁷ Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 106-7.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 111-2.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*; According to analysis from the Middle East Policy Council, the Iranian government limited its “support” of Chechnya to the sending of humanitarian aid and condemning Russia’s bombing and shelling of Grozny. Iran

with the United States helped act as a “counterbalance” against American power, but this also forced Russia to consider how to avoid antagonizing Washington. How flexible should Russia’s alliances be?³³⁰

During the two Presidential terms of Vladimir Putin (2000-2008, 2012-present) and Dmitriy Medvedev’s single term in office (2008-2012), Russia adopted the policy of what Andrei Tsygankov has called “Great-Power Pragmatism.”³³¹ In some ways, it resembled the Centrist policy of Great-Power Balancing. Before Putin became President in 2000, he made state visits to Central Asian countries as well as China, North Korea, and other states, which Kozyrev and his Westerners would have not considered as key focus areas for diplomacy.³³² Putin also emphasized Russian identity, values, morals, and patriotism, which borrowed somewhat from the Eurasianists’ view of Russian exceptionalism.

Under Putin’s government, Russia was to revive as a military power. In contrast to Great-Power Balancing, however, Pragmatism added a new crucial element – Russia’s modernization and economy.³³³ Tsygankov and Jeffrey Mankoff note that during Putin’s time as President, Russia was recovering from the economic troubles that emerged after the USSR’s collapse. This improvement was due to a more open market, surplus in Russian trade, and high worldwide oil prices.³³⁴ Thanks to this situation, Russia had the prospect of working towards obtaining the desired “Great Power” status. The Putin and Medvedev administrations concentrated on improving the Russian economy so that, like the Soviet Union, Russia would be

publicly considered the situation in Chechnya to be an internal Russian affair. However, Russia also expressed concerns about Iranian citizens and members of the Iranian-supported Lebanese group Hezbollah trying to join the Chechen militias and train them. See A. William Samii, “Iran and Chechnya: Realpolitik at Work,” *Middle East Policy Council* VIII, no. 1 (Spring 2001), <https://www.mepc.org/journal/iran-and-chechnya-realpolitik-work>.

³³⁰ Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 97.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

³³² *Ibid.*, 131.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 131, 133.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 129-30; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 13-4, 91-2.

able to project hard and soft power.³³⁵ Great Power Pragmatism focussed less on “balancing” against the United States, as Primakov had practiced. It acknowledged the need to have relations with the West to help Russia join the world economy; by working with the Western world in areas of mutual interest, Putin and Medvedev also thought that Russia would have the chance to cooperate in counter-terrorism and energy deals.³³⁶ Cooperation with the West was especially important after the 2008 financial crisis, which coincided with Dmitry Medvedev’s first year as Russian President.³³⁷ It also demonstrated that Russia’s policy of Great Power Pragmatism had a Centrist view towards the West.

Yet Russia would not fully integrate with the West under Great Power Pragmatism. During the time of Putin and Medvedev, disagreement with the West resulted from U.S. President George Bush’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the so-called “Colour Revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine. These issues will be discussed below. For now, it is sufficient to note that disagreements showed the more “Eurasianist” elements of Russia’s foreign policy. Russia had its own direction that was not subject to Western control or influence. Medvedev reiterated the concept of the multilateral world, in which different countries have separate spheres of influence, and Russia had the right to act in its “near abroad” of the CIS members and other neighbors.³³⁸ This claim fit neatly with popular Russian resentment toward the idea that America had “defeated” the USSR in 1991 and attempted to turn Russia into a “junior” partner in the post-Cold War world.³³⁹

³³⁵ Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 87.

³³⁶ Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 133-4, 140-3; Robert O. Freedman, “Can Russia be a partner for NATO in the Middle East?” in *NATO-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Aurel Braun (New York: Routledge, 2008), 124.

³³⁷ Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 14-15, 93.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 90-1.

As the country's economy recovered and grew, Russia "pushed back" against NATO in Georgia, which it invaded in 2008, reportedly in defence of pro-Russian regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia.³⁴⁰ This action, as well as Russian interference in Ukraine following the Euromaidan uprising against President Viktor Yanukovich in 2014 is another manifestation of "Eurasianism." Ukraine is considered part of Russia's "near abroad"; hence Putin's government, ostensibly to protect Russian speakers and state interests, intervened by annexing Crimea and supporting pro-Russian rebels in the Ukrainian Donbass (Donetsk and Luhansk regions). In 2015, the Russian ambassador to Canada, Alexander Darchiev, emphasized the Eurasian nature of this involvement when he simply said that the two countries had to "agree to disagree on Ukraine."³⁴¹

Russia's combat mission in Syria that started in September 2015 is a conglomeration of the Eurasian and Centrist models – a perfect example of Great Power Pragmatism. The operation saw Russia acting unilaterally to support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. This intervention was in direct opposition to United States and its allies, which had carried out many actions against Assad short of launching a war to depose him; Western leaders have at various points hinted at "regime change" since the Syrian conflict started in 2011, supported the

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 13-4.

³⁴¹ Darchiev also desired to keep discussion open on topics of mutual Canadian-Russian interest, such as terrorism and land claims in the Arctic. This was an example of "pragmatism," in that Darchiev did not reject all contact with a NATO country like Canada, but he rather hoped to reach agreements where possible. Also, despite Darchiev's statement about "agreeing to disagree," Russia has participated in the Minsk ceasefire process in Ukraine, thus suggesting some willingness to compromise. See also Lee Berthiaume, "Russia won't go 'begging' for better relations with Canada: Ambassador," *Ottawa Citizen*, last updated January 26, 2015, at <http://ottawacitizen.com/news/politics/russia-wont-go-begging-for-better-relations-with-canada-ambassador>; John Paul Tasker, "Canada should align with Russia to fight ISIS in Syria, ambassador says," *CBC News*, October 7, 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-election-2015-russia-canada-syria-isis-1.3261432>; and N.S., "The Economist explains: What are the Minsk agreements?" *The Economist*, September 14, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/09/economist-explains-7>.

“moderate” anti-regime rebels, and passed sanctions targeting Assad and his government.³⁴² The Russian military has persistently supported Assad, regardless of Western hostility and even the potential danger of direct confrontation between the two sides’ military forces. Yet Russia’s Syrian ambitions also have major Centrist elements, for Putin’s government has consistently urged the West to fight terrorism alongside Russia. Communication lines have also been established between Russia and the American-led coalition to prevent military miscalculations and consequent escalations. We will return to this topic later.

Russia’s Most Crucial Foreign Policy Concerns

To understand Russia’s Syria mission, we must determine Russia’s key interests in this Middle Eastern country. Key factors that influence Russia’s activity in Syria are: security and counterterrorism; relations with the Muslim world, both outside of and within Russia’s borders; affairs within Russia’s “near abroad;” and cooperation or competition with NATO and the Western world in general.

³⁴² Nikki Haley, the American Ambassador to the United Nations, however, has maintained that removing Assad is not an American priority, even after U.S. missile strikes upon Syrian facilities in April 2017. She commented that the main American goal was to defeat the Islamic State, but Assad would eventually have to leave if there was to be peace in Syria. See Angela Dewan, “US envoy Nikki Haley says Syria regime change is inevitable,” *CNN*, April 10, 2017, at <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/09/middleeast/syria-missile-strike-chemical-attack-aftermath/index.html>. France’s former President, François Hollande, said the same thing in 2015, believing that the Syrian war would continue as long as Assad was in power. Like the United States, France has also supported anti-Assad forces, such as Kurdish militias, while simultaneously attacking ISIS. See Ian Black, “France more active than rest of the west in tackling Syria,” *The Guardian*, November 14, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/14/france-active-policy-syria-assad-isis-paris-attacks-air-strikes>. Two other documents provide details on American economic sanctions imposed on Assad and other Syrian government officials. The sanctions enacted after the start of the Syrian conflict were in addition to sanctions imposed during George W. Bush’s administration, in retaliation to Syria’s occupation of Lebanese territory, reported state sponsoring of terrorism, and for “pursuing weapons of mass destruction and missile programs.” See Barack Obama, “Executive Order 13573 of May 18, 2011: Blocking Property of Senior Officials of the Government of Syria,” *Federal Register: Presidential Documents* 76, No. 98 (May 20, 2011), <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/13573.pdf> and Office of Foreign Assets Control, “Syria Sanctions Program,” Department of the Treasury, last modified August 2, 2013, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/syria.pdf>. This page includes links with more information on American anti-Syrian sanctions: “Resource Center: Syria Sanctions,” *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, last modified March 12, 2018, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/pages/syria.aspx>.

Central Asia

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia suddenly shared new borders with former Soviet republics that were now independent states, such as Ukraine and the Baltic countries of Eastern Europe.³⁴³ The periphery with Central Asia was of significant concern because of the threat of Muslim radicalism in that region.³⁴⁴ Though the formation of the CIS gave Russia some control over the situation, the fear of terrorism caused uncertainty. Would violent forms of Islam link with the nationalism of Central Asian Turkic majorities and pose a security risk to Russia?³⁴⁵ What about Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union had fought a bloody war from 1979-1989? While that country was falling apart in an internal conflict between multiple factions, radical Islam from Central Asian countries gained influence.³⁴⁶ With the USSR's dissolution, the Russian Federation lost the "buffer zone" it had enjoyed as the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). It now bordered potentially dangerous areas.

Aside from the Taliban, which won the Afghan civil war in 1996, other Islamist militant groups became active in Central Asia. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was an organization of Uzbek militants that carried out attacks in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, launching raids from bases in Tajikistan.³⁴⁷ Likely formed in 1998, the group's members had experience in larger scale wars. IMU fighters participated in the Tajik Civil War of 1993 and some had joined the Taliban, once the American-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 offered an opportunity to wage jihad against the West. The IMU's actions have certainly caused security concerns for

³⁴³ Peter Shearman, "Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1981" in *Russian Foreign Policy Since 1990*, 13.

³⁴⁴ Saikal, "Russian Policy Toward Central Asia and the Middle East," 269.

³⁴⁵ Graham E. Fuller, "Russia and Central Asia: Federation or Fault Line?", in *Central Asia and the World: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan*, ed. Michael Mandelbaum (New York, Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1994), 117-9.

³⁴⁶ Saikal, "Russian Policy Toward Central Asia and the Middle East," 270. For background information on the Taliban, see Laub, "The Taliban in Afghanistan" and Alexandra Poolos, "Afghanistan: The Taliban's Rise to Power," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Free Liberty*, September 18, 2001, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1097442.html>.

³⁴⁷ Hanks, *Central Asia*, 53-5, 59.

Uzbekistan and its neighbours.³⁴⁸ But Russian citizens from the federal subject of Chechnya and Uighurs from the Chinese Xinjiang Autonomous Region were also going to Afghanistan to help the Taliban. According to a report from the counter-terrorism think-tank Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the IMU had a major split in 2015 when its leader Usman Ghazi and many other members pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.³⁴⁹ Other followers refused to go along with this change of allegiance and decided to stay with the Taliban.

In 2000, under Yevgeny Primakov's foreign policy direction, the Russian government sent \$30 million worth of weapons, helicopters, and armoured personnel carriers to Uzbekistan for counter-insurgent actions.³⁵⁰ The IMU and other security risks have also encouraged the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).³⁵¹ China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan created this multilateral group on June 15, 2001.³⁵² The SCO's mission statement can be retrieved from its website:

The SCO's main goals are as follows: strengthening mutual trust and neighbourliness among the member states; promoting their effective cooperation in politics, trade, the economy, research, technology and culture, as well as in education, energy, transport, tourism, environmental protection, and other areas; making joint efforts to maintain and ensure peace, security and stability in the

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 123.

³⁴⁹ Caleb Weiss, "Islamic State eulogizes former Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan figure killed in Iraq," *FDD's Long War Journal*, November 8, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/11/islamic-state-eulogizes-former-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistan-figure-killed-in-iraq.php>.

³⁵⁰ Ahmed Rashid, *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), 172.

³⁵¹ Morena Skalamera, "Russia's Lasting Influence in Central Asia," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 59 (No. 6, December 2017- January 2018), 125.

³⁵² Ibid., 125; "About SCO," *The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, accessed April 12, 2018, http://eng.sectsco.org/about_sco/.

region; and moving towards the establishment of a democratic, fair and rational new international political and economic order.³⁵³

Morena Skalamera sums up the SCO's mission as countering the various "-isms" that pose problems in Russia's Central Asian environs: terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism.³⁵⁴

Reuel Hanks affirms that most SCO member nations have had to deal with these "-isms:" Russia had fought two wars against a Chechen separatist movement that had morphed into a jihadist one, China was trying to control Uighur dissenters from the above-mentioned Xinjiang, and as noted, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan had problems with the IMU.³⁵⁵ The SCO has not been without its problems and hindrances, partially due to rivalry between Russia and China over control of the organization.³⁵⁶ But the situation in Syria could help encourage cooperation between SCO members. Like Russia, China also has interests in Syria, which include access to Middle Eastern energy resources and trade.³⁵⁷ But perhaps more urgent is the fact that ethnic Uighurs are fighting in Islamic militias in Syria, which prompted the Chinese government to deploy troops in 2016 in support of Assad's regime.

Like the CIS and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the SCO is part of Russia's security mechanism that also allows it to maintain influence in the Central Asian region.³⁵⁸ Jeffrey Mankoff argues that this complex of organizations allows Russia to essentially create a "kind of replacement for the old Warsaw Pact," except the replacement is in Asia, not

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Skalamera, "Russia's Lasting Influence in Central Asia," 125.

³⁵⁵ Hanks, *Central Asia*, 122-3.

³⁵⁶ Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 181-2.

³⁵⁷ Christina Lin, "China could be wild card if US attacks Syria," *Asia Times*, April 12, 2018, <http://www.atimes.com/china-wild-card-us-attack-syria/>; Yaron Friedman, "Commando units and rice: the Chinese are coming to Syria," *i24 News International*, updated on April 12, 2017, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/161888-171204-commando-units-and-rice-the-chinese-are-coming-to-syria>.

³⁵⁸ Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 181.

Eastern Europe. Through the SCO, Russia is also able to counter NATO, even though they are concentrated in different theatres (NATO in North America and Europe and the SCO in Asia).

Hanks also noted that America's diplomatic efforts in Central Asia after the Soviet Union's collapse "would pay enormous dividends for American security interests after September 2001."³⁵⁹ When the United States needed bases from which to supply its troops in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan allowed the Americans to use an airbase at Khanabad, and Kyrgyzstan did the same at Manas. The other Central Asian countries permitted American forces to move supplies and troops through their territories. All of this afforded to the United States a significant advantage during the war in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. At the time, Russia welcomed the American presence, because the United States would now be fighting the extremists, which had been a problem for the SCO.³⁶⁰ However, Russian attitudes changed after the deposal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 and the Ukraine crisis a decade later. These events caused the American presence to be viewed as a destabilizing influence.

Russia has been actively involved in Central Asia for several reasons. One is that many ethnic Russians live in the former Soviet republics in that region, and the Russian language is commonly used.³⁶¹ A second reason is drug trafficking, which has increased as the American/NATO force in Afghanistan has been gradually reduced.³⁶² Drugs produced in Afghanistan are moved through Central Asia, and from there they may enter Russia, which has a massive addiction problem. Oil is a third factor for Russian interest. The energy industry is most developed in Kazakhstan, but the whole area shows great promise in oilfield development

³⁵⁹ Hanks, *Central Asia*, 129-30.

³⁶⁰ Skalamera, "Russia's Lasting Influence in Central Asia," 125. Skalamera also notes that with their superior military, the Americans "could fight local Islamic extremists more effectively than Russian and its local allies could."

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 135-6; Hanks, *Central Asia*, 117-8.

³⁶² Skalamera, "Russia's Lasting Influence in Central Asia," 127-8; Hanks, *Central Asia*, 119.

and pipeline construction.³⁶³ Russia is obviously interested in the economic potential of Central Asian oil, hoping to channel it through Russian pipelines.³⁶⁴ Russia's pipelines have been vital for Central Asian producers hoping to get their oil to markets, and Farkhod Aminjonov of the Almaty-based Central Asia Institute for Strategic Studies says that Russia is "the major transit country for Kazakh oil headed for Europe."³⁶⁵ World events also play a role, because Central Asia is more reliable as a partner than the unstable Middle East.³⁶⁶ Increased access to oil also affords Russia the opportunity to engage in coercive "fuel diplomacy." Examples of "fuel diplomacy" occurred in 2006 and 2009, when Russia stopped delivering oil to Ukraine in retaliation for the pro-Western direction of its government at that time.³⁶⁷

Fourth, there is the possibility of Central Asia becoming a base for jihadist groups, as the IMU and Taliban have demonstrated. The Islamic State (ISIS), has also been active in that region. Ruslan Pukhov, director of Center for Analysis and Strategies (an organization connected with the Russian military), noted again the example of IMU members joining ISIS, as well as "Gulmorod Khalimov, a senior Tajik police commander who defected to ISIS."³⁶⁸ ISIS has also been active in Afghanistan through a version known as "IS-Khorasan," ("IS-K" for short), named after the province in which it appeared.³⁶⁹ Afghanistan's northern border also

³⁶³ "Central Asia: a major player in the oil and gas energy industry," *World Finance*, January 16, 2014, <https://www.worldfinance.com/markets/central-asia-a-major-player-in-the-oil-and-gas-energy-industry>.

³⁶⁴ Hanks, *Central Asia*, 118; Russia's interest in having a major part in the oil industry to its south is consistent with its desire to be involved in "economic blocs" with its Central Asian neighbours, such as the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) and the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB). See Hanks, *Central Asia*, 124-6.

³⁶⁵ Aminjonov notes however, that Russia's dominance in the Central Asian oil industry has recently faced the challenges of Western sanctions, the declining ruble, and China's construction of Central Asian pipelines. Farkhod Aminjonov, "Russia's Evolving Energy Interests in Central Asia and Afghanistan," *Bishkek Project*, April 12, 2017, <https://bishkekproject.com/memos/26>.

³⁶⁶ "Central Asia: a major player in the oil and gas energy industry."

³⁶⁷ Hanks, *Central Asia*, 118-19.

³⁶⁸ Ruslan Pukhov, "The Russian Military Campaign in Syria: The Balance of Forces and Possible Risks," *Russia in Global Affairs*, October 21, 2015, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/The-Russian-Military-Campaign-in-Syria-The-Balance-of-Forces-and-Possible-Risks-17764>.

³⁶⁹ In the autumn of 2015, Valery Gerasimov, the Russian military's Chief of Staff, claimed that up to 3,000 fighters were part of ISIS' Afghan branch. A.A. Kazantsev, "Central Asia: Secular Statehood Challenged by Radical Islam,"

touches Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, causing fears of Islamist militias crossing these borders.³⁷⁰ The terrorist group is thus a factor in Central Asia, and ISIS recruiters and propagandists have taken advantage of sociopolitical problems in the area.³⁷¹ The Fragile States Index of 2015 places Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in the “High Warning” category, while Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan received more favourable risk scores.³⁷² The bad situation for the three former states were due to drug trafficking, corruption, interstate quarrels over water resources, poverty and economic instability, and oppressive suppression of Islamic movements.³⁷³ If for any reason these states failed, ISIS and other such groups would have fertile ground to grow and potentially attack Russia.

Russia’s concerns about Central Asian security are obvious. Previously, as Russian foreign policy became more skeptical of the West, the government simultaneously acted to prop up the local regimes. Worried about the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan, Russia helped broker a peace deal in 1997 between Tajikistan’s warring Islamist and communist factions, which had fought a civil war for five years.³⁷⁴ Since then, Russian secret services have been called upon to suppress undesired political movements within the Central Asian countries.³⁷⁵ Morena Skalamera asserts that the Russian government has used the jihadist threat

Valdai Papers, 42, No. 2 (January 2016): 1, <http://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/central-asia-secular-statehood-challenged-by-radical-islam/>. See also James Dobbins and Seth G. Jones, “The End of a Caliphate” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 59 (No. 3, June-July 2017), <https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/survival/sections/2017-579b/survival--global-politics-and-strategy-june-july-2017-3a5f/59-3-03-dobbins-and-jones-0abe>; Lauren McNally, et. al, “The Islamic State in Afghanistan: Examining its Threat to Stability,” *Middle East Institute: Policy Focus Series* (May 2016), “Abbreviations” page, https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF12_McNallyAmiral_ISISAfghan_web.pdf.

³⁷⁰ Kazantsev, “Central Asia: Secular Statehood Challenged by Radical Islam,” 1.

³⁷¹ Alexei Malashenko, “The Lessons of Islamic State,” August 8, 2017, *Russia in Global Affairs*, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/The-Lessons-of-Islamic-State-18887>.

³⁷² Kazantsev, “Central Asia: Secular Statehood Challenged by Radical Islam, 2.”

³⁷³ *Ibid*, 2-6.

³⁷⁴ Rashid, *Jihad*, 86-92.

³⁷⁵ Skalamera, “Russia’s Lasting Influence in Central Asia,” 136.

to justify its continuing influence in the region.³⁷⁶ Russia also brings up its own fears of regime change, asking the Central Asian governments to imagine what would happen if Pakistan fell to Islamists. In this way, Russia has convinced its southern neighbours to adopt a pro-Russian position so that Russia could secure a role as a “key guarantor of stability” against religious extremism.³⁷⁷

Russian Islam

Countering extremism in Central Asia is important to the Russian government because it is within the “near abroad,” but also because of Russia’s significant Muslim population. The most notable of the Russian Federation’s battles with radical Islam were the Chechen Wars of the 1990s and ongoing insurgencies in the Russian federal subjects of Dagestan, Ingushetia, and its neighbours. This section analyzes the effects of these conflicts on Russia and how they influenced Russian interests in the Syrian Civil War.

During the 1960s and 1970s, decisions were made to concentrate industrial growth in the USSR’s Slavic centre instead of Muslim republics, such as Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.³⁷⁸ New factories were not built here, which led to decreased economic diversification among the Soviet Muslim societies. This policy in turn, hindered their economic power and ability to incorporate

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 127-8.

³⁷⁷ Barack Obama’s drawback from Afghanistan, along with the closure of the NATO liaison office in Tashkent, helped Russia increase its role in Central Asia. However, Donald Trump has since reversed Obama’s downsizing of the Afghan mission, sending thousands of troops in 2017. According to *Newsweek*, 14,000 American soldiers were in Afghanistan by October 2017, and American aircraft have also been carrying out more airstrikes against Taliban forces and those of ISIS-K. It is expected that the Trump administration will send another 1,000 troops in 2018. See Skalamera, “Russia’s Lasting Influence in Central Asia,” 136-7; Jack Moore, “Trump’s Afghanistan Troop Surge Complete, Raising Total Number of Servicemen to 14,000,” *Newsweek*, November 17, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/trumps-afghanistan-troop-surge-complete-raising-total-number-us-servicemen-714588>; and Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan, “Up to 1,000 more U.S. troops could be headed to Afghanistan this spring,” *The Washington Post*, January 21, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/up-to-1000-more-us-troops-could-be-headed-to-afghanistan-this-spring/2018/01/21/153930b6-fd1b-11e7-a46b-a3614530bd87_story.html?utm_term=.aa36bfb16fc0&noredirect=on.

³⁷⁸ Gordon M. Hahn, *Russia’s Islamic Threat* (New York and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 2-4.

into the Soviet economy. The USSR's internal passport regime and the government's concerns about bringing Muslims into the Slavic industrialized core further hindered Central Asian economic integration. For their part, Muslim populations were reluctant to move north to the Slavic regions and, also, many did not want to serve in the Soviet military, especially during the war in Afghanistan.³⁷⁹ By the time of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*' reforms in the 1980s, the damage had been done, and the Muslim republic leaders did not support him against the anti-reformist communists. Among ethnic Tatars, within Dagestan (then part of the RSFSR), Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, some radical Islamic movements were formed during the *perestroika* period.³⁸⁰ However, unlike in the Russian Federation, there was no significant armed resistance from Muslim populations against the Soviet centre.³⁸¹

Russia's Caucasus region has seen the greatest extremes of Muslim violence, especially the federal subjects of Adygea, Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Karachay-Cherkessia, Karbardino-Balkaria.³⁸² It is worth looking at some of the factors that feed Muslim extremism within Russia. Gordon Hahn, a researcher on terrorism and Russian studies, has identified four key areas of Russia's Muslim community: the growth and expansion of Islamist groups, unemployment and economic opportunity, culture, and religion.³⁸³ The first factor – the spread of extremism – has taken place after war in the breakaway republic of Chechnya. These wars took place in 1994-6 and 1999-2000, and these conflicts, along with terrorist attacks against Russian cities taking place during this time, are the most famous examples of Russian-Muslim

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 4-5. Hahn notes that in the war's first stages, many of the soldiers taking part were Central Asian Muslims, and many of them defected. This forced the USSR to deploy more non-Muslim European troops.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 27-8.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 5, 25.

³⁸² Ibid., 1, 6, 10.

³⁸³ Ibid; Gordon M. Hahn, "About," accessed April 18, 2018, <https://gordonhahn.com/about/>.

conflict.³⁸⁴ But as Chechnya began to stabilize and Russia won the war, more attacks were carried out in Dagestan and the other Muslim areas listed above.³⁸⁵ These regions were fertile ground for Chechen-like Islamist groups because they already had significant Muslim populations, which were growing at a very high rate.³⁸⁶

The long-term consequences of the Soviet Union's unwillingness to develop Muslim areas can be seen today. Many Muslim areas of the modern Russian Federation are poor and receive relatively low investment.³⁸⁷ This is the second factor of economic development and opportunity. Federal subjects in the Caucasus are the most destitute and suffer from very high unemployment rates. In 2005, Ingushetia had a reported unemployment rate of 51.2%. By late 2017 it had dropped to 26.8,³⁸⁸ but it was still the highest in the country. The unemployment rates of the other previously-mentioned Caucasus areas are as follows: Chechnya: 13.9%, Dagestan: 11.7%, Karachay-Cherkessia: 11.2%, Karbardino-Balkaria: 10.7%, and Adygea: 8.7%.³⁸⁹ Not all unemployed Muslims will join terrorist organizations. And those who focus on poverty as a primary cause of terrorism, such as journalist and Central Asia expert Ahmed Rashid, underestimate factors like individual religious zeal and political ideology.³⁹⁰ However,

³⁸⁴ "Chechnya profile – Timeline," *BBC News*, January 17, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18190473>.

³⁸⁵ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 173.

³⁸⁶ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 10.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-8. This is mostly true of the country's Muslim republics in the Caucasus. Russia's two Volga Muslim republics, Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, are much richer than the other Muslim areas, and Moscow has invested a lot of money into these two republics. Some Bashkir and Tatar Muslim towns are still undeveloped, however – less so than the more Russianized centres in those same republics. See *Ibid.* for a chart of data from 2005 of economic data on Russia's Muslim societies.

³⁸⁸ Federal'naia sluzhba gosudarstvennoï statistiki (Rosstat), "Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe polozhenie Rossii: ianvar'-noiabria 2017 goda," 400. http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/doc_2017/social/osn-11-2017.pdf.

³⁸⁹ The federal subject with the second highest unemployment rate was the Tyva Republic in Siberia, with 17.4%. *Ibid.*, 401.

³⁹⁰ Rashid himself notes that government repression of religious groups due to fears of terrorism is also cited as a factor in radicalization. Rashid, *Jihad*, 75-6, 84-6, 154-5. One should also consider Osama bin Laden. The late al-Qaeda leader had inherited a vast business empire from his father, and by the time of his assassination in 2011, he had reportedly dedicated \$29 million to the waging of jihad in his will. See: Dan Ackman, "The Cost Of Being Osama Bin Laden," *Forbes*, September 14, 2001, <https://www.forbes.com/2001/09/14/0914ladenmoney.html#6fcfdc0e32a3>; Greg Myre, "Osama Bin Laden's Will:

when discussing the resentment of Russia's militant Muslims towards Russia's Christian Moscow centre, unemployment and the lack of economic opportunity in the Caucasus are impossible to dismiss.³⁹¹

Culture is the third factor. Hahn notes that Muslim Tatar culture within Russia is different from that of the Caucasus; over centuries of Russian rule, Tatars have become heavily Russianized – speaking Russian and marrying Russian spouses.³⁹² The more rural Muslim centres are more traditional (they reject birth control), less Russianized, and they have larger families.³⁹³ As the ethnic Russian population decreases in these less urbanized areas, Muslim communities have the potential to replace the Russian population and also supplant the Russian Orthodox Church's dominance in their local regions. Russia's "hedonistic" urban culture, which is seen to espouse promiscuous sexual attitudes and have problems with alcohol and drug addiction, also disgusts many conservative Caucasus Muslims, further widening the cultural divide between Russian Muslim believers and nonbelievers.

Religion is a fourth factor. The collapse of the atheistic Soviet Union allowed Islam to grow; in 1991, there were 150 mosques, but by 2005 there were 6,000.³⁹⁴ At that time, approximately fifty mosques were being built annually in the more moderate Muslim Tatarstan Republic. According to an Al-Jazeera report, Russia's Muslim population is growing because of immigration from Central Asia, in addition to the previously-mentioned high birth rate among Caucasus Muslim families.³⁹⁵ This report also suggests that by 2020, twenty percent of Russia's

\$29 Million That Should Be Spent on 'Jihad,'" *National Public Radio*, March 1, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/03/01/468692846/osama-bin-ladens-will-29-million-that-should-be-spent-on-jihad>.

³⁹¹ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 8.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 8-9.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 10-2.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁹⁵ "Islam in Russia," *Aljazeera*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/islam-russia-180307094248743.html>.

population could comprise Muslims, and another article from the Jamestown Foundation estimates that Muslims could constitute between a third or even half of Russia's population by 2050.³⁹⁶

As for a massive, violent “Muslim front” against Moscow, several factors work against this possibility.³⁹⁷ Gordon Hahn's work *Russia's Islamic Threat* provides a detailed analysis of these subjects. First, Russia's Muslims are a minority in a Slavic-dominated state. Vast distances also separate them; the Caucasus region is far away from the “more moderate” Volga Bashkir and Tatar Republics. The Caucasus hotspot is also very far away from Moscow, so any direct militant action against the central government would take a lot of effort. Hahn also notes that there is significant division amongst Russia's Muslim population, which is split up into forty different ethnic groups. Some of these groups have quarrels with each other, and “non-traditional Muslims” such as ethnic Russians are converting to Islam, making the religious community more diverse and less unified. Consequently, many branches of Islam are active within Russia; Tatars, for example, fall under the largely tolerant and “theologically flexible” Hanafi Sunni school, while Chechens follow the more fundamentalist and conservative Shafi Sunni teachings. Finally, there are pro-government Muslim organizations and clergy, which temper anti-Russian attitudes.³⁹⁸ Ramzan Kadyrov, the President of Chechnya since 2011, is a prime example.³⁹⁹ He and his father Akhmed fought against Russia in the first Chechen War,

³⁹⁶ Ibid; Marlene Laruelle, “How Islam Will Change Russia,” *The Jamestown Foundation*, September 13, 2016, <https://jamestown.org/program/marlene-laruelle-how-islam-will-change-russia/>.

³⁹⁷ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 19-28.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 28. Interestingly, some of these Muslim organizations have adopted a Eurasianist philosophy, espousing anti-Western and anti-Zionist views. Some Eurasianist leaders have even suggested the creation of a partnership between Russian Muslims and the Russian Orthodox Church to push back against the Western world.

³⁹⁹ Joshua Yaffa, “Putin's Dragon: Is the ruler of Chechnya out of control?” *The New Yorker*. February 8 & 15, 2016. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/08/putins-dragon>; Jon Lockett, “Putin's Pitbull: Who is Ramzan Kadyrov? And why is the leader of Chechnya so close to Vladimir Putin?” November 10, 2016, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2156944/who-is-ramzan-kadyrov-and-why-is-the-leader-of-chechnya-so-close-to-vladimir-putin/>.

but during the second conflict, the Kadyrovs sided with the Kremlin. Since then Kadyrov has shown “unquestionable” loyalty to the Russian government, though he also has significant power and popularity of his own within Chechnya.

Hahn also places some blame on the Russian side for escalating the conflict, however. Vladimir Putin has centralized power around Moscow, which Hahn has called a “counter-revolutionary” reversal of the USSR’s collapse.⁴⁰⁰ This centralization came in the form of de-federalization by forcing local governments to pass laws through the Kremlin, allowing Moscow to dismiss and appoint governors, and the creation of “federal districts.”⁴⁰¹ A policy of cultural assimilation was pursued in all federal subjects.⁴⁰² In the Muslim regions, religious and ethnic political parties were prohibited, and the Muslim regional languages, such as Tatar, were forced to continue using the Cyrillic alphabet. Hahn lists two other measures that were proposed but ultimately not passed due to Muslim pressure: the traditional Muslim woman’s head covering – the *hijab* – would have been banned, and Russian Orthodox Christianity would have been promoted in schools. Moscow’s government was especially enlarged during the Chechen conflicts and the terror attacks which occurred in parallel.⁴⁰³ Anti-terrorism laws and amendments were passed, which allowed wiretapping and warrantless searches.⁴⁰⁴ As a result, mosques were searched, and thousands of Muslims were arrested on suspicion of terrorism.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁰ Hahn, *Russia’s Islamic Threat*, 1, 6, 14-15.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 16. In 2012, the law was changed so that local populations elected their governors. See Jens Kai Perret, *Knowledge as a Driver of Regional Growth in the Russian Federation* (Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, 2014), 20, http://www.springer.com/cda/content/document/cda_downloaddocument/9783642402784-c2.pdf?SGWID=0-0-45-1458937-p175378844.

⁴⁰² Hahn, *Russia’s Islamic Threat*, 15-17.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 14-5.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 54-5.

⁴⁰⁵ Hahn also speaks of how terror attacks such as that on the Beslan school in 2004 were socially divisive. Some Russians showed racist and anti-Muslim attitudes, which led to attacks against Muslim minorities. Some Muslims were also guilty, however, of sometimes downplaying the realities of Islamic terrorism. See *Ibid.*, 55-8.

The Chechen Wars' International Context

Having a background on Russia's internal situation with its Muslim citizens, we should now look at the Chechen Wars of 1994-6 and 1999-2001. These conflicts saw the involvement of international terrorist militias, which took part in combat against the Russian military and helped carry out attacks on civilians.⁴⁰⁶ The first war's origins can be traced back to 1991, with the formation of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya (ChRI), which claimed sole legal authority over Chechnya and asserted its independence from the Soviet Union on September 6.⁴⁰⁷ After a Russian military deployment to the Chechen border and a two-year stalemate, a full-scale war began by the end of 1994.⁴⁰⁸ At this point, the conflict was mostly a political one, in which the Chechen President Dzhokar Dudayev had simply seized an opportunity to depart from the weakened Soviet Union and struggling Russian Federation.⁴⁰⁹

In 1995, Dudayev declared the fight to be a holy jihad, perhaps encouraged by significant victories against Russia's army.⁴¹⁰ He started using Islamic symbolism and propaganda, giving the insurrection a more religious flavour.⁴¹¹ Since September 1993, Afghani *mujahideen* Islamic militants had been active in the nearby Caucasus country of Azerbaijan, which used them in its conflict with Armenia.⁴¹² When that struggle ended in 1996, many militants moved to Chechnya

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁰⁷ Yossef Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 21-2; Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 14, 37; Liz Fuller, "What Direction for Chechnya?" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Free Liberty*, July 8, 2008, https://www.rferl.org/a/What_Direction_For_Chechnya/1182441.html.; Mapping Militant Organizations, "Chechen Republic of Ichkeria," *Stanford University*, last modified February 19, 2014, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/369?highlight=Chechen+Republic+of+Ichkeria>.

⁴⁰⁸ Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad*, 22-4; Maria Galperin Donnelly, Thomas M. Sanderson, and Zack Fellman, "Case Studies in History: Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya," *Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS)*, accessed April 28, 2018, <http://foreignfighters.csis.org/history/case-studies.html>.

⁴⁰⁹ Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad*, 21-2; Mike Bowker, *Russia, America and the Islamic World* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 79-80.

⁴¹⁰ Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad*, 25, 28.

⁴¹¹ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 36.

⁴¹² Bodansky, *Chechen Jihad*, 25-28.

to fight for Allah. Joining them were also fighters from Pakistan, the Middle East, and Bosnia-Herzegovina – a country that had experienced the destruction of the Yugoslavian Civil War. What had started as a political conflict had turned into a wider war in which a sort of “Islamic front” had been formed against Russia.⁴¹³ Dudayev’s desire for independence, in fact, enjoyed the support of the “Islamic Path Party, a Chechen branch of the [Egypt-based] Muslim Brotherhood.”⁴¹⁴ Muslim charities sent money to Chechnya, and organizations in Wahhabi Saudi Arabia were establishing religious schools in Russia. Towards the war’s end, Ayman al-Zawahiri created the idea for a “Eurasian Caliphate.” This man was part of Osama bin Laden’s leadership; al-Qaeda was involved in Chechnya, too. Zawahiri’s imagined Caliphate would destroy Russia, pose a direct threat to the United States, and create a Muslim heartland all the way from the Caspian Sea to al-Qaeda’s base in Afghanistan.⁴¹⁵

The First Chechen War’s cost was very high, both in terms of money spent and lives lost. According to Emil Pain in a paper from 2001, the conflict’s economic price tag was US\$5.5 billion (which was a factor in Russia’s economic crisis of 1998), and 4,300 Russian troops were killed, in addition to at least 30,000 Chechens.⁴¹⁶ The war was brutal and Russia’s military action was unpopular in the media. Two years of war under such circumstances forced Russian forces to retreat from the breakaway Chechen region. Fighting officially ended in 1996 with the Novye Atagi ceasefire, and a formal (but also seen as vague with regards to Chechnya’s legal

⁴¹³ Ibid. 29.

⁴¹⁴ Hahn, *Russia’s Islamic Threat*, 36. For more information on the Muslim Brotherhood’s origins and ideology, see “Muslim Brotherhood,” *Counter Extremism Project*, accessed April 20, 2018, https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/muslim-brotherhood?gclid=Cj0KCQjw_ODWBRCTARIsAE2_EvUaCwTxP17BDsyNnaNo6TiB0dNydOAKyCpMBNwMZTU-uysmDOvK-BlaAqSyEALw_wcB.

⁴¹⁵ Hahn, *Russia’s Islamic Threat*, 36-7.

⁴¹⁶ Emil Pain, “From the First Chechen War Towards the Second” in *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 8, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2001): 7-8.

status) peace treaty followed in May 1997.⁴¹⁷ The Russian-Chechen struggle was not over, however, as the rebels moved underground and switched to insurgent tactics.⁴¹⁸ Within Chechnya the ChRI also ran religious *sharia* law courts and camps for training jihadists, which were mostly formed under the leadership of foreign *mujahideen*.⁴¹⁹ The ChRI became an umbrella for terrorist groups, and Al-Qaeda continued sending money, weapons, and personnel to assist its efforts.⁴²⁰ Chechen terrorists adopted al-Qaeda's methods in bomb making and communications, solidifying Bin Laden's group as the "base" of terrorist networks.⁴²¹ Links between the Chechen rebellion and international terrorism were solidified.⁴²² After the first war, the ChRI became a "government in exile," and Chechen insurgents expanded their networks into the rest of the Caucasus region and gained the allegiance of non-Chechen members.⁴²³ For instance, in 2003, Moscow appointed Murat Zyazikov as the Ingushetia Republic's President.⁴²⁴ His authoritarian rule motivated Ingushetia-based jihadists, leading to the republic seeing a rise in terror attacks in 2005.

In August 1999, Chechen warlord Shamil Basaev (who had developed strong ties with Abu Ibn al-Khattab, a Saudi-born Jordanian al-Qaeda operative) left Chechnya to launch raids against the Russian Republic of Dagestan.⁴²⁵ The goal was to absorb radical Dagestani Muslims, thus forming a Dagestani beachhead for expanding the jihadist base across the Caucasus region.

⁴¹⁷ Salome Asatiani, "Chechnya: Why Did 1997 Peace Agreement Fail?" *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 11, 2007, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1076426.html>.

⁴¹⁸ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 14, 37.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 36-39. The ChRI's *sharia* courts reportedly banned New Year's celebrations, claiming that they were a hedonistic tradition which Christianity had corrupted. "Chechen Islamic court bans all New Year celebrations," *BBC News*, December 11, 1997, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/38938.stm>.

⁴²⁰ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 36-39, 46.

⁴²¹ Hahn notes that during their takeover of the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow, the Chechen terrorists publicly announced their actions to the media, specifically to the Arabic al-Jazeera network in this case. This procedure followed al-Qaeda's methods "to the letter." *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 48-49. For details on the ChRI's internal operations and leadership, see *Ibid.*, 40-43, 48-54, 59-93.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 31-3, 73.

This campaign consolidated control of the area and allowed the terrorists to launch attacks further into Russia, leading to the Second Chechen War.⁴²⁶ During this time, the ChRI became more radicalized, due to the September 11 attacks on the United States.⁴²⁷ The United States' subsequent War on Terror was a radicalizing factor for many Muslims outside of Chechnya, too, because it had the perception of a war between the Western and Muslim civilizations.⁴²⁸

American anti-terrorist actions directly affected Russia, a non-Muslim country that was fighting an Islamic movement with international connections. Between the Chechen Wars, radical rebels roamed the Caucasus, kidnapping and beheading Russian citizens and foreign aid workers.⁴²⁹ Hahn reports 73 terrorist attacks in Russia in the inter-war period.⁴³⁰ This pattern continued throughout the Second Chechen War and afterwards; between January and October 2005, over 200 terrorist attacks occurred in the North Caucasus region alone.⁴³¹ Due to the ChRI's adoption of jihadist ideology, it focused on local targets, instead of on the distant Russian centre.⁴³² But from 1999 to 2005, over 2,000 attacks happened throughout the country.⁴³³ In addition to attacks on Russian government and law enforcement officials within the Caucasus, Chechen attacks focused on the Moscow metro, the downing of two passenger planes, and the infamous attack on Beslan School No. 1 in North Ossetia on September 1, 2004, which killed 333 people.

⁴²⁶ Ibid. Basaev's attack on Dagestan was a major reason for restarting Russia's military action in Chechnya. Other supposed terrorist attacks at apartment buildings in Moscow and Buinaksk in September 1999 were also cited as justifying the renewed mission. Some have suspected Russian operatives for carrying out the apartment building attacks as part of a "false flag" operation to blame the Chechen separatists. Skepticism was leveled at Moscow due to the fact that no Chechens were suspected in the apartment attacks and that their timing was "perfect" for a retaliatory military operation. Most of Basaev's men in his Dagestan campaign were also Dagestani, not Chechen. See Pain, "From the First Chechen War Towards the Second," 9-10.

⁴²⁷ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 40-3.

⁴²⁸ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 173.

⁴²⁹ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 37.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 49.

⁴³¹ Ibid., 53.

⁴³² Ibid., 219; Mapping Militant Organizations, "Chechen Republic of Ichkeria."

⁴³³ Ibid., 49-50.

Successful Russian anti-terror operations mitigated the damage which the Caucasus militias could carry out.⁴³⁴ The Russian Federation suffered many insurgent attacks during the Second Chechen War, but it was also a fatal time for terrorist leaders. In 2005, for example, Russian forces killed the ChRI's leader, Aslan Maskhadov, as well as Abu Dzeit, an al-Qaeda member who had helped train and sponsor Ingushetian militants.⁴³⁵ The Russian government also offered some amnesties, which led to the surrender of many jihadists, including the ChRI's defense minister Magomed Khambiyev. Russia eventually won the second conflict. The installation of pro-Moscow rulers in Chechnya, such as the late Akhmed Kadyrov and his son Ramzan, have solidified Russian control of the Chechen Republic and reduced the threat of organized terrorism.⁴³⁶ In the words of Russian historian Sergei Karaganov, "Moscow lost the first Chechen war politically but won the Second.... Chechnya has remained part of Russia. A chain reaction of disintegration was averted. Russia has proved its will and ability to defend its territorial integrity, and its right to be called a state."⁴³⁷

The global war on terrorism also helped the Russians. Economic sanctions restricted funds transfers from al-Qaeda to Russian jihadists.⁴³⁸ The United States' involvement in Afghanistan since 2001 and Iraq since 2003 has also reportedly drawn Chechen fighters out from Russia, who moved there to combat the US.⁴³⁹ The question of Chechen fighters in Afghanistan has been debated among analysts. Christian Bleuer, writing for the independent Afghanistan

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 219-21.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 30, 72, 219-21.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 226; "Russia appoints Chechen leader," *BBC News*, June 12, 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/787811.stm>; Steven Lee Myers, "Putin makes a feared former rebel president of Chechnya," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/02/world/europe/02iht-chech.4773393.html>; Reuters, "Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov 'ready to step down'," *The Guardian*, November 27, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/27/chechen-leader-ramzan-kadyrov-ready-to-step-down>.

⁴³⁷ Sergei Karaganov, "Lucky Russia," *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 29, 2011, <http://www.eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Lucky-Russia-15154>.

⁴³⁸ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 219.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 221.

Analysts Network, argues that the Russian government has tried to connect its domestic terrorist groups with the more widely-known group al-Qaeda, and he claims that the American-led forces in Afghanistan have not captured or otherwise positively identified Chechen fighters.⁴⁴⁰ Others have made similar claims, suggesting that the Russian-speaking militants in Afghanistan were probably confused with Tajiks or other post-Soviet nationals. Others, including American soldiers, have confirmed the presence of Chechens – some as members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. It is not possible here to give a precise judgment of the impact of the Afghan war on the Russian front. If the reports of Chechen fighters coming from Russia to Afghanistan are true, the jihadists had to lose some soldiers on the “home front.” It is very likely that Chechen fighters have been in Afghanistan, considering al-Qaeda’s support of their movement in Russia, Chechen membership in the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the international nature of Islamic jihad. Either way, Afghanistan is another arena where Islamist militants have spent their resources over almost the last two decades, perhaps distracting some focus away from the Russian Caucasus region.

An Islamist insurgency has been active in the Caucasus since the end of the Second Chechen War.⁴⁴¹ The war in Afghanistan reduced al-Qaeda’s role in Chechen terrorism, as that conflict required the organization to focus on survival rather than training jihadists abroad,

⁴⁴⁰ For Bleuer’s denials of Chechen fighters being present in Afghanistan, see Christian Bleuer, “Chechens in Afghanistan 1: A Battlefield Myth That Will Not Die,” *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, June 27, 2016, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/chechens-in-afghanistan-1-a-battlefield-myth-that-will-not-die/>. ABC News published an article in 2014 that provided the arguments of both those who believed in the presence of Chechen fighters in Afghanistan, and of those who did not. See James Gordon Meek, “The Secret Battles Between US Forces and Chechen Terrorists,” *ABC News*, February 19, 2014, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/secret-battles-us-forces-chechen-terrorists/story?id=22580688>.

⁴⁴¹ Sergei Markedonov, “Dagestan’s Main Problem Isn’t Clans. It’s the Russian System,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, October 25, 2017, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/73528>; Alexey Malashenko, “Islamic State Menaces Dagestan,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, January 21, 2016, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/62528>; Andrew C. Kuchins, Sergey Markedonov, and Matthew Malarkey, “CSIS: The North Caucasus: Russia’s Volatile Frontier (Introduction Page),” *Circassian World*, April 3, 2011, <https://www.circassianworld.com/headlines/1550-csis-the-north-caucasus-russias-volatile-frontier>.

especially immediately after Osama bin Laden was killed in 2011.⁴⁴² However, enough was done to turn the Caucasus region into a base for Islamic terror and insurgency against the Russian government.⁴⁴³ In 2007, the ChRI's President, Doku Umarov, renewed al-Qaeda's 1996 vision for an Islamic government in the region.⁴⁴⁴ Through his new organization, the Caucasus Emirate (CE), he subsequently threatened Russia, America, and the United Kingdom. Similarly to al-Qaeda, the CE became a base for Islamic militants, acting as a big tent for multiple terrorist groups. It officially declared loyalty to international jihad in 2009. In 2013 one of its affiliate organizations launched attacks against Volgograd's train station and Umarov suggested attacks against the Sochi Olympics in the following year. Like the original ChRI, the Caucasus Emirate was originally allied with al-Qaeda.⁴⁴⁵ However, this group suffered from internal division and Russian anti-terrorist operations, which allowed al-Qaeda's rival, the Islamic State, to gradually take over the Caucasus Emirate.⁴⁴⁶ ISIS-supporting members within the CE officially switched sides on June 23, 2015 and became known as an ISIS "province" called "Wilayat Qawqaz" (WQ).⁴⁴⁷ That September, the WQ claimed attacks upon Russian barracks in southern Dagestan,

⁴⁴² Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 75; Brian Michael Jenkins, "Five Years After the Death of Osama bin Laden, Is the World Safer?" *RAND Corporation*, May 1, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2016/05/five-years-after-the-death-of-osama-bin-laden-is-the.html>.

⁴⁴³ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 226-7.

⁴⁴⁴ Fuller, "What Direction for Chechnya?"; Mapping Militant Organizations, "Caucasus Emirate," *Stanford University*, last modified April 11, 2014, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/255>.

⁴⁴⁵ Transnational Threats Situation Report Series (TNTSITREP), "Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria: Assessing the Threat from (and to) Russia and Central Asia," *Center for Strategic & International Studies* (December 2017), 11, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180122RussianSpeakingForeignFight_web.pdf?LykbSt9xPi89yGJ5JR5LgLrkdHRMGAg0.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid; Thomas Joscelyn, "Islamic State's Caucasus 'province' claims first official attack on Russian forces," *FDD's Long War Journal*, September 2, 2015, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/09/islamic-states-caucasus-province-claims-first-official-attack-on-russian-forces.php>.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid; Akhmet Yarlykapov, "Russian Islam and the Situation in the Middle East," June 14, 2016, *Russia in Global Affairs*, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/valday/Russian-Islam-and-the-Situation-in-the-Middle-East-18211>; Radio Free Europe reported in 2015 that the original Caucasus Emirate's elements loyal to al-Qaeda existed for some time, splitting Russia-based jihadists into the al-Qaeda and ISIS camps. See Joanna Paraszczuk, "IS's North Caucasus Affiliate Calls For Recruits To Join It In Dagestan," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 3, 2015, <https://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-north-caucasus-affiliate-call-for-recruits-dagestan/27285024.html>; But Mairbek Vatchagaev also states that when Robert Zankishiev (who led insurgents in the Karbardino-Balkaria Republic) defected in August 2015, ISIS had effectively taken control of all jihadist elements in the Caucasus. See

though doubt has been cast on the group's boasts. The years 2017 and 2018 saw more attacks from Muslim militants, including suicide bombs and the assassination of police officers.⁴⁴⁸ Attacks on civilians were also carried out, such as the April 6, 2017 bomb attack on the subway in Saint Petersburg and shootings of Christians in northern Dagestan in February 2018. Multiple counter-terror missions were conducted during that period and several planned terror attacks were reportedly thwarted.

Russia's predominantly Muslim region of the Caucasus is an important strategic area. Since ancient times, the Caucasus has acted as a gateway between the Middle East and Asia, and the activity of jihadist networks here and in Central Asia has been a very important concern to Russia since the Soviet Union's end.⁴⁴⁹ The protracted conflict between Caucasus radicals and Russia has taken on a new character with the rise of the Islamic State, which has made inroads through the Caucasus Emirate and the "Wilayat Qawqaz." Both during the Chechen Wars and in the current fight against ISIS, foreign jihadists have used Russia's Muslim heartland as a foothold from which they could pursue their so-called "holy war" against Russia and other enemies.

Many Russian Muslims and Central Asian citizens have indeed joined ISIS and other terrorist groups outside of Russia. Russian territory has in fact become a very unfortunate and unwilling "transit hub" for Islamic militias; ISIS recruiters are very active on the Internet, and numerous Central Asian migrants who moved to Russia for work have become radicalized, being

Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Islamic State Apparently Wins Its Competition With Caucasus Emirate," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 12 (No. 207) by *The Jamestown Foundation*, November 13, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-state-apparently-wins-its-competition-with-caucasus-emirate-2/#.VklVaHYrLIV>.

⁴⁴⁸ Neil Hauer, "An Uncertain Year Ahead for the North Caucasus," *Terrorism Monitor* 16 (No. 5) by *The Jamestown Foundation*, March 9, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/program/uncertain-year-ahead-north-caucasus/>.

⁴⁴⁹ Robert W. Schaefer, *The Insurgency in Chechnya and the North Caucasus: From Gazavat to Jihad* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 49-51; Saikal, "Russian Policy Toward Central Asia and the Middle East," 269.

separated from home and family.⁴⁵⁰ When Russian counter-terrorist operations pressured the Caucasus Emirate, radicals went to ISIS, which had a wider support network and greater capabilities. Since ISIS' main battle was in Iraq and Syria, many would naturally feel the urge to join the wars there. Akhmet Yarlykapov, a historian of the Caucasus region, and Olga Oliker, director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), have noted that some Muslims also felt the moral obligation to move to the Middle East – some to Egypt when the Muslim Brotherhood was in power there and some to Iraq or Syria after Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the ISIS “Caliphate” in 2014.⁴⁵¹ Russian-based militants in the Middle Eastern organizations also have the reputation of being “battle-hardened,” because they have fought two brutal conflicts and engaged in long insurgent warfare against the Russian Federation since 1994.⁴⁵² These factors helped Caucasian terrorists gain leadership positions in ISIS.

It is impossible to say exactly how many terrorists have left Russia and the Central Asian countries to fight for ISIS abroad. In 2017, Vladimir Putin estimated that between 4,000 and 5,000 Russian citizens had joined the Islamic State, while other assessments place that number anywhere from 2,500 to 8,500.⁴⁵³ Analysts have raised concerns about terrorists returning to Russia through the Caucasus or through Central Asia.⁴⁵⁴ Located directly north of the Middle East and west of Central Asia, the Muslim Caucasus is much more vulnerable to potential

⁴⁵⁰ Yarlykapov, “Russian Islam and the Situation in the Middle East”; Olga Oliker, “Myths, Facts, and Mysteries About Foreign Fighters Out of Russia,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/myths-facts-and-mysteries-about-foreign-fighters-out-russia>; TNSITREP, “Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters,” 6, 13-4.

⁴⁵¹ Oliker, “Myths, Facts, and Mysteries About Foreign Fighters Out of Russia”; Yarlykapov, “Russian Islam and the Situation in the Middle East.” Yarlykapov writes that Russian Muslims have been closely watching the wars taking place in the Middle East. The Syrian conflict has been divided along multiple sectarian and ethnic lines, for example, with Bashar al-Assad’s Alawite ruling minority and Shia Iranian militias fighting ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates, which are Sunni. This has caused some Russians to become more conscious of Sunni identity.

⁴⁵² TNSITREP, “Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters,” 11, 18.

⁴⁵³ While ISIS has gained most of these foreign recruits, some of them have joined other groups. *Ibid.*, 1, 12-3.

⁴⁵⁴ Skalamera, “Russia’s Lasting Influence in Central Asia,” 123, 126-7; Malashenko, “The Lessons of Islamic State.”

militant attacks and propaganda than the more distant Volga Muslim republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan.⁴⁵⁵ The international problem of returning ISIS fighting has been especially pertinent as the group's power has greatly declined in the Middle East.⁴⁵⁶ With an estimated 900 fighters making their way back to Russia and Central Asia, the question of how to prevent further attacks from these terrorists is a potentially difficult one.⁴⁵⁷

Ruslan Pukhov has described Russia's mission in Syria as an expeditionary operation, meant to divert ISIS' resources away from Russia and Central Asia and kill militants abroad before they can launch domestic attacks.⁴⁵⁸ It is clear that Russia's Muslim factor is a strategic consideration that cannot be ignored. The lack of economic opportunity, Russian-Muslim cultural tensions, and the spread of jihadist propaganda are issues with which all countries must wrestle, but they are especially vital for the Russian Federation, which has been fighting Islamic rebel movements and terrorism almost every year since the Soviet Union was dissolved.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁵ Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 20.

⁴⁵⁶ TNSITREP, "Russian-Speaking Foreign Fighters," 3.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid; Oliker, "Myths, Facts, and Mysteries About Foreign Fighters Out of Russia"; Yarlykapov, "Russian Islam and the Situation in the Middle East."

⁴⁵⁸ Pukhov, "The Russian Military Campaign in Syria."

⁴⁵⁹ Some analysts have tackled the question of how Russian Islam will affect the country. Gordon Hahn, writing in 2007, went as far to suggest that terrorism could lead to Russia's very disintegration, arguing that if enough Islamic regions declared independence, sedition could spread. If combined with Russia's concerns about NATO, illegal immigration, drug trafficking, and a hypothetical Pan-Turkic movement, this could cause great headaches for Moscow. He also wrote about the possibility of terrorists acquiring Russian weapons of mass destruction, due to lax facility security measures. See Hahn, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 5, 226-30. More recently, Marlene Laruelle, a scholar who studies Russian politics and ideology, wrote an article in 2016 that appeared in The Jamestown Foundation's "Russia in Decline" series. Laruelle's work asserts that while views on the future of Russian Islam are varied, the Muslim faith will greatly change the country because of Russian Islamophobic attitudes, the Islamic population's rapid growth, and the increased importance of religion as a personal identifier for Russian Muslims. See Laruelle, "How Islam Will Change Russia." Akhmet Yarlykapov warns, however, that the threat of militant Islam should not be exaggerated. He says that Muslim Russians form 15% of the country's population, making them a significant minority. Very few of these people left Russia to join ISIS, he adds. He suggests that the Russian government should be careful so that its Syria mission is never perceived as a "Shia-Orthodox [Christian]" war against Sunni Islam. He also sees Russia's Muslim leadership as a very important asset, having the capability to cooperate and stop the spread of violent ideology. Care must also be taken to prevent security risks stemming from returning combatants. Yarlykapov, "Russian Islam and the Situation in the Middle East."

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MIDDLE EAST—RUSSIA’S “SOFT UNDERBELLY” AND THE SYRIA MISSION

Due to their strategic importance to Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus region can be considered part of Russia’s “soft underbelly.”⁴⁶⁰ Political scientist Robert O. Freedman used this term to describe Central Asia, but this metaphor originally came from Yevgeny Primakov, the Centrist-oriented Foreign Minister, to describe the Middle East. In stark contrast to Andrei Kozyrev and the other pro-Westerners, Primakov believed that it would be “catastrophic” for Russia to leave the Middle East, due to its geographic proximity to the “near abroad” and the variety of interests and groups acting there.⁴⁶¹ Iran and Russia, for example, shared common interests in this strategically sensitive region.⁴⁶² Pressured by American interference in the Gulf War of 1991, Iran looked to the Soviet Union and subsequently Russia for weapons. In addition to forming trade deals with Russia. Iran also helped broker peace in Tajikistan, and both Iran and Russia cooperated in an attempt to prevent the Taliban from taking power in Afghanistan. Iran was a Russian ally that could help stabilize Central Asia and the Russian territories that were experiencing terrorist violence. Iran recognized Russia as the leader of the post-Soviet world and committed to forming relations with those countries “through the Moscow gate,” in the words of its Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Velayati.

Geography is an aspect of Russian foreign policy that cannot be ignored. The Soviet Union was a contiguous land empire that spanned a vast distance across the Eurasian

⁴⁶⁰ Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Security International, 2007), 11, 149; Freedman, “Can Russia be a partner for NATO in the Middle East?,” 125.

⁴⁶¹ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 11, 152.

⁴⁶² Peter Shearman, “Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-1991,” in *Russian Foreign Policy Since 1990*, edited by Peter Shearman (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc., 1995), 272-3; Robert O. Freedman, *Russian Policy Toward the Middle East Since the Collapse of the Soviet Union: The Yeltsin Legacy and the Challenge for Putin* (Washington: The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, 33 (December 2001)), 20-5.

continent.⁴⁶³ As we saw earlier, affairs in the “near abroad” are of significant interest to Russia. Countries immediately outside this circle - Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, for instance - are part of the “Russian underbelly” which Primakov described. When civil wars, strife, and terrorism are present in these countries, the Russian Federation also potentially has a lot at stake because of geographical distance and the reality of a single landmass connecting Russia with its regions of strategic concern.

The American-led War on Terror connects with this idea. The United States’ counter-terrorist operations may have helped Russia with its Chechen separatist problem, but American strategy in the War on Terror has also led to aggressive actions against regimes accused of sponsoring terrorism, seen most clearly in the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Russian government has seen such actions as contributing to the problem of terrorism, not diminishing it.⁴⁶⁴ To counteract this, Russia has adopted the strategy of increased dialogue with Muslim countries. This policy alone would not prevent terrorist attacks on Russia. Regardless, it was hoped that this diplomatic contact or “intercivilizational alliance” would take advantage of American failures and provide an alternative for Middle Eastern nations. In March 2008, Vladimir Putin told the Organization of the Islamic Conference that Russia was “on the junction between Europe and Asia,” and it was a Russian strategic goal to form stronger ties with the Middle East. A year later, at a meeting between leaders of the Arab League in Cairo, Russian president Dmitriy Medvedev mentioned Islam’s sizeable population in Russia, saying: “Russia does not need to seek friendship with the Muslim world: Our country is an organic part of this world.”⁴⁶⁵ He also

⁴⁶³ Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (Oxon and London: Routledge for The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017), 52-3.

⁴⁶⁴ Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 188-9.

⁴⁶⁵ Laruelle, “How Islam Will Change Russia.” <https://muslim.ru/en/articles/144/3254/>; Ravil Gainutdin, “Russia and the Islamic World: Interaction through Close Cooperation,” *Russia Mufties Council*, September 24, 2009, <https://muslim.ru/en/articles/144/3254/>.

advised that trying to impose a single political system worldwide would lead to disaster – a comment aimed at the US policy of “regime change.”

The Russian Federation’s Relationship with Syria before 2015

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in December 1991, Hafez al-Assad’s government quickly gave Russia official recognition as the USSR’s successor state.⁴⁶⁶ Andrew Kreutz notes, however, that Syria saw the collapse of the Arab world’s most powerful Cold War ally as a disaster, and the resulting adjustment in relations was initially a tough one. Under Andrei Kozyrev, the Russians had turned toward the West, and they were transforming their communist society into a capitalist one. Consequently, the Russian government advised Hafez al-Assad to follow American initiatives for the peace process with Israel. This advice greatly reduced Hafez’s trust in the Russian Federation as a potential ally, and in late 1992 he did not repay the debt which Syria had owed to the USSR (around \$7-11 billion). Russia also did not honour the Soviet Union’s unfulfilled arms deals with Hafez al-Assad.⁴⁶⁷ During this transition to the post-Soviet reality, the Syrian government questioned the very legitimacy of Russia’s inheritance of the Soviet Union, despite its official recognition of the Russian Federation as such.

Boris Yeltsin (president of Russia 1991-99) faced several challenges from within his own government over Russian-Syrian relations. The Duma was divided between the Westerners, Eurasianists, and Atlanticists, making it difficult to pursue a consistent foreign policy.⁴⁶⁸ The Atlanticists were focused on building relations with Europe, whereas the Eurasianists warned

⁴⁶⁶ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 18-9.

⁴⁶⁷ Saikal, “Russian Policy Toward Central Asia and the Middle East,” 278-9. According to Vitaly Gelfgat of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Russian government claimed legal succession to the USSR and stopped sending spare parts to Syria as punishment for Assad’s unpaid Cold War debts. Eventually though, Assad recognized Russia as the Soviet state’s successor in 1993 and started to repay what Syria owed. See Vitaly Gelfgat, “Russian Arms Sales to the Middle East,” *The Washington Institute*, August 26, 1999, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russian-arms-sales-to-the-middle-east.

⁴⁶⁸ Freedman, *Russian Policy Toward the Middle East*, 10-1.

against offending China, India, and the Muslim countries.⁴⁶⁹ Many different Russian interest groups were also competing with each other, such as government ministries, arms merchants, and banking oligarchs.⁴⁷⁰

During the Putin era, Russia and Syria were able to solve some of the problems that had existed in their relations under Yeltsin.⁴⁷¹ In January 2005, the new Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, visited Moscow on a state visit, during which Putin's government forgave 73% of the Middle Eastern country's debt to Russia, which by then had risen to between \$13.4 and \$14.5 billion US.⁴⁷² There were some other concerns which helped form renewed associations between Moscow and Damascus. The first issue was peace negotiations between Syria and Israel. During Primakov's term as Foreign Minister and after the talks broke down in 1996, the Russian government took Syria's side, calling for the Israelis to return the Golan Heights to Syria.⁴⁷³ Under Putin, the Russians suggested that peace would only be possible if Israel would conclude separate unilateral agreements with Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.⁴⁷⁴ It was also believed that as Russian-Syrian relations improved, such peace deals would become more likely.

As during the Cold War, arms sales were an important part of Russian-Syrian relations. The Syrian military was Soviet-equipped, making it very reliant on Russian replacements, spare parts, and ammunition.⁴⁷⁵ Starved for funds, Russia was happy to sell these to Syria, as well as Iraq, Venezuela, and China.⁴⁷⁶ This was one area in which Russia could easily compete with the

⁴⁶⁹ Saikal, "Russian Policy Toward Central Asia and the Middle East," 268.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11-4.

⁴⁷¹ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 29-30.

⁴⁷² Andrej Kreutz, "Syria: Russia's Best Asset in the Middle East," (Paris: IFRI Russia/NIS Center, 2010), 14, <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/kreuzengrussiasyrianov2010.pdf>; International Institute for Strategic Studies (hereafter IISS), "Middle East and North Africa," in *The Military Balance* 105, no. 1 (2005): 217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597220500387639>.

⁴⁷³ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 21, 24.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁷⁵ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 19.

⁴⁷⁶ Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy*, 184; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 200.

West, as many countries were willing customers and they still used equipment from the former USSR. The 1992 edition of The International Institute for Strategic Studies' (IISS) *Military Balance* reported that Syria was buying tanks and missile systems from Czechoslovakia, China, and North Korea rather than Russia.⁴⁷⁷ With Syria's debts owed to Russia being largely forgiven, Assad was able to pursue further arms deals,⁴⁷⁸ and Syria agreed to buy Russian anti-air missile systems (despite American and Israeli objections), in addition to MIG-29 and MIG-31 fighter aircraft.⁴⁷⁹ Arms sales continued throughout the Syrian Civil War before Russia began direct military involvement; Syria mostly received surface-to-air missiles, fighter planes, and training aircraft.⁴⁸⁰ Richard Connolly and Cecile Sendstad of Chatham House report that the Syrian Civil War has helped Russian arms exporters because the Russian Federation is more willing to sell weapons to the Assad regime.⁴⁸¹ Russian equipment – especially aircraft – has also been effective in that conflict, at least against Syrian rebels and ISIS, who do not have the advantage of air superiority.⁴⁸² Russia has asserted its power as the second most powerful player

⁴⁷⁷ IISS, "The Middle East and North Africa," in *The Military Balance* 92, no. 1 (1992): 104, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597229208460042>.

⁴⁷⁸ ---, "Middle East and North Africa," in *The Military Balance* (2005): 217.

⁴⁷⁹ The negotiations for some of these sales began in 1999, and some were finalized in 2003. Ibid., 217; ---, "Middle East and North Africa," in *The Military Balance* 107, no. 1 (2007): 252, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597220601167757>; ---, "Middle East and North Africa," in *The Military Balance* 108, no. 1 (2008): 271-2, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597220801912796>.

⁴⁸⁰ The Syrian Civil War delayed the shipment of some of this equipment, which was agreed upon before the conflict started. See the *Military Balance* editions for 2013, 2014, and 2015: ---, "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance* 113, no. 1 (2013): 413, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2013.757003>; ---, "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance* 114, no. 1 (2014): 354, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2014.871884>; ---, "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North Africa," *The Military Balance* 115, no. 1 (2015): 362, <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2015.996362>.

⁴⁸¹ Richard Connolly and Cecile Sendstad, "Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter: The Strategic and Economic Importance of Arms Exports for Russia," (Chatham House: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, March 2017), 18, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2017-03-20-russia-arms-exporter-connolly-sendstad.pdf>. This paper gives a general analysis of Russia's arms export industry and its impact on the whole Russian economy. The authors conclude that Russia is a "superpower" in the weapons trade, and its influence on this industry will grow as its market expands beyond Russia's traditional arms customers. See Ibid., 26-28.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 18, 27.

in the worldwide weapons market behind the United States.⁴⁸³ The Middle East is a very competitive market, reflecting the conflict of international interests in that region. Russia can project power through the sale of weapons to its Syrian ally and other countries that are not pro-Western.⁴⁸⁴

After 9/11, security was the most important shared Russian and Syrian concern. Immediately after al-Qaeda's attacks on America, Bashar al-Assad cooperated with the United States and even Israel. The threat of terrorism overrode these countries' past disagreements, and Syria allowed American intelligence agencies to conduct interrogations in Syrian prisons.⁴⁸⁵ This cooperation soon stopped, however, because of Syria's relationship with Hezbollah and the United States' accusations of Assad having weapons of mass destruction.⁴⁸⁶ When the United States and its "Coalition of the Willing" invaded Iraq, Syria focussed on developing relations with other countries, including Russia.⁴⁸⁷ At this point, Putin stepped in, warning that Syria's government should not be changed from the outside.⁴⁸⁸

The second common issue between Russia and Syria was the fear of Western-imposed "regime change." Very soon after its invasion of Iraq, the United States stepped up a diplomatic campaign against Syria in 2004-5.⁴⁸⁹ Syria lost a valuable trade partner when Saddam Hussein's Iraqi government fell in 2003, and its support of Hezbollah and other anti-Israel militant groups

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 2, 27-28.

⁴⁸⁵ Carsten Wieland, Adam Almqvist, and Helena Nassif, *The Syrian Uprising: Dynamics of an Insurgency* (Fife: University of St Andrews Centre for Syrian Studies, 2013), 16-17; Volker Perthes, *Syria under Bashar al-Assad: Modernisation and the Limits of Change* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004), 49.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 49-51, 57-58, 66-7.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 19-20.

⁴⁸⁸ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 28; However, Russia did not make much use of its UN Security Council seat as the Iraq War approached. Other countries, including France, "were willing to do the heavy lifting," with Russia encouraging French and German resistance to American ambitions. See S. Neil MacFarlane, "Russia, NATO enlargement and the strengthening of democracy in the European space," in *NATO-Russian Relations in the Twenty First Century*, 45.

⁴⁸⁹ Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East*, 28-9.

branded it as a terrorist-sponsoring state.⁴⁹⁰ According to *Time* magazine, George W. Bush's administration also hoped to influence Syrian legislative elections in 2007 through anti-Assad organizations.⁴⁹¹ All of these elements of American pressure against Syria fit into the United States' policy of "democracy promotion," which raised fears in Damascus and Russia of another Middle Eastern conflict.

In 2012, when the Syrian Civil War broke out, Russia stuck to its anti-regime change policy. Along with China, Russia vetoed the United Nations Security Council's proposed sanctions against the Syrian regime, preventing them from being passed.⁴⁹² Russia continued supplying Syria with weapons.⁴⁹³ With increased international involvement and the rise of ISIS, the Russian government had increased reason for concern in July and August 2015.⁴⁹⁴ Bashar al-Assad's regime was suffering heavy losses in combat with the Syrian rebels, and it appeared that the government could fall. The Russian government recalled the chaos resulting from "Western regime change" operations in Iraq and Libya, fearing that Assad's removal would leave a power vacuum. The leaderless Syria could then split between different groups, and ISIS could hypothetically defeat other opposition groups and add the country to its "Caliphate." Russia would be under direct threat.

⁴⁹⁰ ---, "Middle East/Gulf," *Strategic Survey 2005: The Annual Review of World Affairs* (May 24, 2005), 178-9. In October 2005, the US, UK, and France proposed United Nations sanctions against Syria for its suspected role in the murder of Lebanon's Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, in February 2005. See Ibid., 178-9 and the following article: Alexander Nicoll and Jessica Delaney, eds. "Syria under siege: Bashar's greatest test," *Strategic Comments* by IISS 11 (No. 9: November, 2005), <https://www.iiss.org/-/media//silos/strategic%20comments/2005/syria-under-siege/syria-under-siege.pdf>.

⁴⁹¹ Adam Zagorin, "Syria in Bush's Cross Hairs," *Time*, December 19, 2006, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1571751,00.html>.

⁴⁹² China's ambassador to the UN, Li Baodong said in 2012 that passing Western sanctions against just one party – Assad's regime – would have caused further division and "would not help resolve the Syrian issue." See Michelle Nichols, "Russia, China veto U.N. Security Council resolution on Syria," *Reuters*, July 19, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-caravan/central-american-migrants-from-mexico-caravan-camp-out-on-u-s-border-idUSKBN111YB>.

⁴⁹³ Brian Michael Jenkins, "The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War," *Perspective* (Rand Corporation: 2014), 7. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE115/RAND_PE115.pdf.

⁴⁹⁴ Pukhov, "The Russian Military Campaign in Syria."

According to Ruslan Pukhov, the military situation in Syria had somewhat stabilized by September.⁴⁹⁵ This time, however, the Russians were not content to cast veto votes in the UN Security Council. The stabilized front in Syria made it safer for the Russians to get involved militarily, and they wanted to consolidate Assad's position. Already in August, the Russian and Syrian governments had signed a legal agreement to fight terrorism and "protect the territorial integrity and security of the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic."⁴⁹⁶ These measures added to the Soviet-Syrian Treaty of Friendship from October 8, 1980 and the Russian-Syrian Military Cooperation Treaty of June 7, 1994.⁴⁹⁷ By the terms of the 2015 contract and by the Syrian government's request, a Russian military force would be deployed to Khmeimim Air Base, located on Syria's Mediterranean coast between the naval bases of Latakia and Tartus.⁴⁹⁸ The Russian government would determine the composition of this military force, and it could import equipment and other needed resources to Khmeimim without interference from Syrian customs, legal, and tax authorities.⁴⁹⁹ Russian personnel were to have diplomatic immunity, while being obligated to respect Syrian law and customs. And as in the 1980 Friendship Treaty between the USSR and Syria, both countries had the legal right to change or renounce the agreement.⁵⁰⁰ Otherwise, it would last "indefinitely."

Russia's war in Syria started in earnest on September 30, 2015 with the first of many airstrikes against opponents of the Assad government. Over a very short time, hundreds of such

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ "Soglashenie mezhdru Rossijskoj Federatsiej i Sirijskoj Arabskoj Respublikoj o razmeshchenii aviatsionnoj gruppy Vooryzhennykh Sil Rossijskoj Federatsii na territorii Sirijskoj Arabskoj Respubliki," *Ofitsial'nyj internet-portal pravovoj informatsii*, August 26, 2015, 1, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201601140019?index=0&rangeSize=1>.

⁴⁹⁷ Under this agreement, Russia would provide Syria with defensive weapons and spare parts to help maintain its Soviet-era equipment. "Russia and Syria Sign Military Agreement," *The New York Times*, April 28, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/04/29/world/russia-and-syria-sign-military-agreement.html>.

⁴⁹⁸ "Soglashenie mezhdru Rossijskoj Federatsiej I Sirijskoj Arabskoj Respublikoj," 3.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 4-6.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 6-7.

missions were undertaken. As of October 21, there were approximately thirty Russian warplanes and sixteen helicopters stationed in Syria, some armed with anti-aircraft weapons, as Pukhov writes: “12 Su-24M, 12 Su-25 and six Su-34 bombers, and four Su-30SM jets with air defense capability.”⁵⁰¹ This “not large force” was very busy. Russian military expert Dmitry Gorenburg writes that in October 2015, the Russian Air Force contingent carried out an average of 45 sorties every day.⁵⁰² When thirty-seven more planes were deployed in mid-November, this number increased to an average of 127 daily missions.⁵⁰³ In addition to the aircraft stationed locally, long-ranged planes (such as the Tupolev Tu-95 “Bear” bomber) based in Russian territory fired cruise missiles from as far as 2,000 kilometers away.⁵⁰⁴ The Russian Navy also contributed, firing cruise *Kalibr* cruise missiles at enemy targets from ships and submarines stationed in the Mediterranean and Caspian Seas.⁵⁰⁵

The aerial assets are the main components of the Russian mission in Syria. But to support the military arm, Russia also established a “Russian Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides.”⁵⁰⁶ According to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), this organization has been active in humanitarian aid distribution and the evacuation of people from Ghouta and other

⁵⁰¹ Pukhov, “The Russian Military Campaign in Syria.”

⁵⁰² “Dmitry Primus Gorenburg,” *Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies*, accessed April 28, 2018, <https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/about-us/people/dmitry-gorenburg>; Dmitry Gorenburg, “What Russia’s Military Operation in Syria Can Tell Us About Advances in its Capabilities,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, April 26, 2016, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/PONARS-Eurasia/What-Russias-Military-Operation-in-Syria-Can-Tell-Us-About-Advances-in-its-Capabilities-18126>.

⁵⁰³ The Russian Defense Ministry reported that over the weekend of January 22-4, 2016, 169 sorties were launched, targeting “484 objects of terrorists’ infrastructure.” Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation (hereafter MoDRF), “In the course of the last three days the Russian aviation group performed 169 combat sorties engaging 484 objects of terrorists’ infrastructure,” January 25, 2016, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12074558@egNews>.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid; Gorenburg, “What Russia’s Military Operation in Syria Can Tell Us.”

⁵⁰⁵ Ordinances fired from the Caspian flew through Iranian and Iraqi airspace. Ibid; MoDRF, “Russian Navy ships conducted strikes by four Kalibr cruise missiles on objects of ISIS terrorist grouping near Palmyra,” May 31, 2017, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12126444@egNews>.

⁵⁰⁶ ---, “In the course of the last three days the Russian aviation group performed 169 combat sorties”; ---, “Russian Defence Ministry’s official website continues broadcasting withdrawal of insurgents and their families from Douma, Eastern Ghouta,” April 5, 2018, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12169965@egNews>.

combat-ravaged cities – including insurgents and their families. To facilitate this, military police officers have been deployed with the stated mission to secure areas that have been cleared of enemy forces, provide order, enforce ceasefire agreements, and coordinate humanitarian aid.⁵⁰⁷ They have also assisted in the removal of mines and other explosive devices.

Three Syrian bases form the hub of all these Russian military activities: two naval bases at Tartus and Latkia, as well as the air base at Khmeimim. Both naval bases were centres of Soviet naval activity in the Mediterranean, as we saw in the previous chapter. The Russian navy has used Tartus since the end of the Cold War, and Russian defensive systems deployed there had been cited as a factor complicating Western intervention before 2015.⁵⁰⁸ In 2013, a US source reported that Russia's military garrison and ships had left Tartus, leaving only civilians workers behind at the base.⁵⁰⁹ This was not a “withdrawal,” the Russian government said, but some suggested that since Russia was not committed to a military mission in Syria at that time,

⁵⁰⁷ ---, “Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces and Defence Minister hold videoconference with Palmyra on issues of mine-clearing operation,” April 21, 2016, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12083644@egNews> “Russian military police starts operating in Syria's Douma”, *TASS*, April 13, 2018, <http://tass.com/world/99948>. The YouTube channel “Russia Insight” has posted a video documentary that follows a battalion of Military Police on duty in Aleppo. The documentary's focus on the group's ethnic diversity is interesting. The battalion is mostly Chechen, and the battalion commander mentioned directly reporting to Ruslan Kadyrov, the Chechen Republic's President. But during interviews, the commander also spoke about the other ethnic and religious backgrounds of his men. He concludes by saying that they are all Russian citizens “first and foremost,” and that they are soldiers of the Russian Federation ready to serve the local population. They were also ready for combat. The Military Police conducted readiness drills, they were constantly heavily armed, and they had access to combat vehicles. See Russia Insight YouTube Channel, “Russian Report on Russia's Chechen Soldiers in Syria,” January 21, 2017, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6PEzqc7kUQA>; Minoborony Rossii YouTube Channel, “Briefing by Colonel General Sergei Rudskoy (December 7, 2017),” December 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xPGaHU9VGy4>, 6:00-18.

⁵⁰⁸ Andrew E. Kramer, “Russian Warships Said to Be Going to Naval Base in Syria,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 2012. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/19/world/europe/russian-warships-said-to-be-going-to-naval-base-in-syria.html>.

⁵⁰⁹ Christopher Kozak, Hugo Spaulding, and Daniel Urchick, “Warning Update: Russia Expanding Facilities at Tartus Naval Base,” September 30, 2015, *Institute for the Study of War*, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.ca/2015/09/warning-update-russia-expanding.html>; “Russia not withdrawing its base from Syria's Tartus,” *Pravda.ru*, June 27, 2013, http://www.pravdareport.com/news/russia/27-06-2013/124965-russia_tartus-0/.

keeping forces there was not worth the risk.⁵¹⁰ Russia also had access to ports at Cyprus, which were much safer.

With the arrival of Russian forces in 2015, the port was modernized with repair equipment and its dock was rebuilt. Khmeimim provides an ideal base for Russia's air operations; being much closer to the frontlines than airbases in Russia, allowing for multiple daily sorties. It also acts as the port of entry for Russian personnel and equipment, supporting Russia's non-military tasks.⁵¹¹ Over the course of the mission, the region around the eastern city of Deir ez-Zor was liberated from ISIS, and Russian aircraft started operating from the airfield there.⁵¹²

Russian Relations with the West and NATO

Russia's relations with the Western world run parallel to and have much influence on Russian military actions in Syria. It is evident that tensions between Russia and the West have been at their highest since the Cold War, due to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its direct involvement in the civil war in Ukraine. Some have described the new dynamic as a "new Cold War," though others have disagreed with this assessment.⁵¹³ A decade after the Soviet Union

⁵¹⁰ Fred Weir, "Why Russia evacuated its naval base in Syria," *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 27, 2013, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2013/0627/Why-Russia-evacuated-its-naval-base-in-Syria>; "Russia denies military withdrawal from Tartus," *Zaman Alwasl*, June 29, 2013, <http://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/509>.

⁵¹¹ MoDRF, "Second group of Russian sappers arrived at Hmeymim airbase in Syria," April 1, 2016, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12082062@egNews>.

⁵¹² Minoborony Rossii, "Briefing by Colonel General Sergei Rudskoy," 3:12-21.

⁵¹³ An article published on *The Nation* (this website was described as a "reliable, non-mainstream media" source on the website NewColdWar.com) said that current Russian-Western relations are headed in a very dangerous direction, with diplomatic expulsions and military deployments on both sides. See: Katrina vanden Heuvel, "Why the New Cold War Is So Dangerous," *The Nation*, April 5, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/why-the-new-cold-war-is-so-dangerous/>; "About," *The New Cold War: Ukraine and Beyond*, accessed April 30, 2018, <https://www.newcoldwar.org/about/>. On the other hand, Lyle Goldstein of the US Naval War College suggests that the crises in Georgia and Ukraine are very complicated, arising from border and ethnic identities. These factors were not as prevalent or important in international politics during the Cold War as they are now. Michael Kofman of the CAN Corporation says that the modern troubles in Russian-Western relations are primarily centred on

dissolved, the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) was created in March 2002.⁵¹⁴ Meant to provide a forum for positive dialogue between Russia and the Western alliance, the diplomatic body has been somewhat ineffective, according to military analysts Jens Ringsmose and Sten Rynning.⁵¹⁵ The NRC, they say, is “tightly scripted,” and instead of achieving actual results and significantly improving relations, it acted more as a “barometer of political tensions.” NATO officially broke off relations with Russia through the NRC due to Russia’s role in the Ukraine crisis. The rationale for such action was that the situation in Ukraine changed the Russian-Western relationship fundamentally, creating a “new normal,” which was characterized by an inherent mistrust towards Russia and the formation of a policy of containment towards Moscow.

This new dynamic is on full display on the NRC’s website. As of April 23, 2018, the page had not been updated since April 1, 2014, which was very shortly after Crimea’s addition to the Russian Federation.⁵¹⁶ This final update reads:

...We have decided to suspend all practical civilian and military cooperation between NATO and Russia. Our political dialogue in the NATO-Russia Council can continue, as necessary, at the Ambassadorial level and above, to us to exchange views, first and foremost on this [the Ukrainian] crisis. We will review NATO’s relations with Russia at our next meeting in June...

geopolitics. This is not an “existential” ideological struggle like the Cold War. See Jonathan Marcus, “Russia v the West: Is this a new Cold War?” *BBC News*, April 1, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43581449>.

⁵¹⁴ Anne le Huérou and Amandine Regamey, “Russia’s War in Chechnya: The Discourse of Counterterrorism and the Legitimization of Violence,” in *Democracies at War against Terrorism: A Comparative Perspective*, edited by Samy Cohen, translated by John Atherton, et. al. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 215.

⁵¹⁵ Jens Ringsmose and Sten Rynning, “Now for the Hard Part: NATO’s Strategic Adaptation to Russia,” in *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 59, no. 3 (June-July 2017), 132, 139-40.

⁵¹⁶ “NATO-Russia Council,” *NATO Russia Council*, last updated April 1, 2014, <https://www.nato.int/nrc-website/en/index.html>.

Simultaneously, a commitment was made to the creation of a NATO-Ukraine Commission.⁵¹⁷

The NRC's statement continues:

Over the past twenty years, NATO has consistently worked for closer cooperation and trust with Russia. However, Russia has violated international law and has acted in contradiction with the principles and commitments in the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council Basic Document, the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and the Rome Declaration. It has gravely breached the trust upon which our cooperation must be based.

The NRC did meet for the first time since 2014 on July 13, 2016.⁵¹⁸ The future of Russian-NATO relations has been much discussed elsewhere. NATO members are not completely clear what to do, however, say Ringsmose and Rynning. Maintaining balance between the potentially contradictory goals of containment and de-escalation of potential conflict will be difficult, and it will depend much on the outcome of the war in Ukraine and the willingness of both sides to reach a compromise.⁵¹⁹

Regardless of significant diplomatic problems, the Russian government sees itself as a potential “partner” of the West in numerous areas. We noted earlier that Russia's ambassador to Canada, Alexander Darchiev, has spoken of the potential for Russian-Canadian cooperation.⁵²⁰ In May 2016, the Russian Federation also offered aircraft and personnel to assist in fighting the

⁵¹⁷ “Statement by NATO Foreign Ministers,” *NATO-Russia Council*, April 1, 2014, <https://www.nato.int/nrc-website/en/articles/20140327-announcement/index.html>.

⁵¹⁸ Ringsmose and Rynning, “Now for the Hard Part,” 140.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 140-1.

⁵²⁰ Berthiaume, “Russia won't go ‘begging’ for better relations with Canada: Ambassador”; Tasker, “Canada should align with Russia to fight ISIS in Syria, ambassador says.”

forest fire that was threatening Fort McMurray and nearby communities in Alberta.⁵²¹ Vladimir Puchkov, the Russian Minister of Emergency Measures, stated that Russia was willing to “help our Canadian *partners* to fight the ongoing wildfires in Alberta [emphasis added].” If the Canadian government had accepted Russia’s proposal, it would have been part of an international effort, as the United States, Israel, Taiwan, and the Palestinian Authority had also put forward offers of aid. Russia’s offer was consistent with Putin and Medvedev’s policy of cooperation with the United States, Canada, and other Western countries in such areas as the Arctic and in counter-terrorism, but without actually “joining,” “integrating,” or compromising more vital interests (i.e. Ukraine) with Western institutions such as NATO and the European Union.⁵²² Timothy J. Colton, an expert in Russian politics, makes an interesting observation about the Russian ambition to be “partner” with the West.⁵²³ He observes that Putin often uses the word “partner” (*partnër* in Russian) instead of “ally” (*soyuznik*): “*Partner* signifies a more informal, a more contingent and discretionary, and a less exclusive relationship.” Partnerships are more flexible than alliances, as the “partner” label can be applied to countless goals or aspects of international relations, while not being applied to others. This way, the Russian government can form multilateral relations between the United States, Europe, and China; it may also appear willing to cooperate in the Arctic and on the war against extremism, yet show less

⁵²¹ The Canadian Press, “Trudeau turns down Russian, U.S., Mexican offers to help battle Fort McMurray wildfire,” last modified May 10, 2016, <https://globalnews.ca/news/2689492/trudeau-turns-down-russian-u-s-mexican-offers-to-help-battle-fort-mcmurray-wildfire/>; Murray Brewster, “Russia offers water bombers, specialists to help fight Fort McMurray fire,” *CTV News*, last modified May 9, 2016, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/russia-offers-water-bombers-specialists-to-help-fight-fort-mcmurray-fire-1.2893439>.

⁵²² Berthiaume, “Russia won’t go ‘begging’ for better relations with Canada: Ambassador” Tasker, “Canada should align with Russia to fight ISIS in Syria, ambassador says Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 62-5.

⁵²³ Aurel Braun, editor, *NATO-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, x; Timothy J. Colton, “Post-postcommunist Russia, the international environment and NATO,” in *NATO-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, 31.

compromise with regards to Ukraine.⁵²⁴ This is Russia's "version" of the West's policy of simultaneous "containment and de-escalation."

As part of the "new normal" which has existed since the start of the Ukraine crisis, the West has largely rejected Russia "as a partner." There were problems in the NATO-Russian relationship before the start of the Syrian and Ukrainian crises, namely the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Russia's fears of Ukraine and Moldova joining the Western alliance.⁵²⁵ And even though both Russia and the West have had their own struggles with terrorism, in the West the conflict in Chechnya was seen as a civil war against freedom fighters, rather than an anti-terror campaign.⁵²⁶ R.O. Freedman, for example, expressed some scepticism about Putin's narrative of fighting Chechen terrorism, despite the rebels' terror attacks in Moscow and the Beslan school massacre.⁵²⁷ He criticized Russia for trying to rally the world to its side of the war with Chechen terrorism while not labelling Hamas a terrorist organization. He was also wary of Russia's installment of Akhmed Kadyrov as President of the Chechen Republic, due to its non-democratic nature and its supposed use by Russia as a ploy to develop better relations with Saudi Arabia. These manoeuvres, Freedman believed, prevented Russia from being a "genuine partner in the war on terrorism."

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, Georgia and Ukraine sent troops to assist.⁵²⁸ Georgia and Ukraine were also founding members of the "GUAM" alliance, which also included Azerbaijan and Moldova, in opposition to Russia's CSTO and its Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).⁵²⁹ The US also gave some support to GUAM, causing fears in the

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 31; MacFarlane, "Russia, NATO enlargement and the strengthening of democracy in the European space," 44.

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 43; Colton, "Post-postcommunist Russia," 36.

⁵²⁶ Stanley R. Sloan, "NATO beyond Russia," in *NATO-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, 81.

⁵²⁷ Freedman, "Can Russia be a partner for NATO in the Middle East?," 125-9.

⁵²⁸ Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, 68-9.

⁵²⁹ Ibid., 62.

Russian government of Western subversion.⁵³⁰ To Russia, the Georgian and Ukrainian commitment to the war in Iraq – a mission that Russia strongly opposed – showed that it was being ostracized in the fight against terrorism.⁵³¹ This led to the existence of two separate “Wars on Terror:” an American-led one taking place in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a Russian one in the Caucasus.

Because it is relevant to the whole of Russian-Western relations, we will briefly revisit the Russian perspective on regime change. Putin rejected the Bush administration’s assertion that Saddam Hussein needed to be eliminated as a “sponsor of terrorism.”⁵³² The Russian leader believed that stable states were the best antidote to “stateless” terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and the Chechen rebels. Regime change was thus not a solution to terrorism. Putin’s concerns turned to the “Coloured Revolutions” in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan, which received much Western support.⁵³³ NATO’s military intervention in Libya in 2011 was perhaps an even stronger example of “regime change,” as it helped the rebel forces to topple Muammar Qaddafi and the country soon fell into another civil war.⁵³⁴ In a June 2013 interview on *Russia Today*, Putin lambasted the West for intervening in the Libyan Civil War and then trying to apply that

⁵³⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁵³¹ Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton note an exception to this – the American presence at the Manas airport in Kyrgyzstan. In the section about Central Asia, we saw the American forces’ use of Manas as a base from which they could launch attacks against the Taliban. In 2009, Dmitry Medvedev’s government feared that Manas was part of a plan to encircle Russia, because the Bush administration had made a unilateral deal with Kyrgyzstan for the deployment of American troops there. Russia offered \$2 billion US to Kyrgyzstan in return for pushing the Americans out. The situation was resolved two years later, however, and American supplies were even permitted to go through Russia in order to reach the front in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan, however, is far from Europe and has no prospects of joining NATO or the EU. According to Charap and Colton, this fact made Russia more willing to compromise on the issue of the Manas base. See Hanks, *Central Asia*, 129-30 and Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, 107-8.

⁵³² Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 144, 155.

⁵³³ Ibid., 172-3.

⁵³⁴ Eliza Relman, “The US intervention in Libya was a key turning for Putin in his attitude toward the US,” *Business Insider*, February 24, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/putin-us-libya-intervention-hillary-clinton-2017-2>.

same tactic in Syria.⁵³⁵ He said that it was very irresponsible of Western countries to intervene militarily in the Middle East without an appreciation of its local history and customs. Instead of bringing democracy to the Middle East, Putin argued, the West threw the region “into a state of conflict and undecidedness.”⁵³⁶

Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, wrote a paper titled “Russia’s Foreign Policy in a [sic] Historical Perspective,” in which he outlined Russia’s role in the world since medieval times.⁵³⁷ The paper stated that after the Cold War, there was great hope of forming a unified political system between the West and Russia, such as through the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). “Unfortunately,” wrote Lavrov, “our Western partners chose a different path to follow by expanding NATO eastward and moving the geopolitical space under their control close to Russia’s border.” He blames NATO’s post-Cold War growth for the “transition from the Cold War to a new international system [that] turned out to be much longer and more painful than was expected 20-25 years ago.” Ideological differences between Russia and the West remain, even though the Cold War ended long ago. To maintain its power, Lavrov asserts, the United States has put pressure upon Russia by engaging in propaganda and economic sanctions. However, the apex of American power projection came in the form of “unconstitutional regime change techniques involving ‘color revolutions’.”⁵³⁸ He cites the bombing of Serbia in 1999, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and combat operations against Libya in 2011 to demonstrate that the West has broken international law. Yet Lavrov submits Russia’s military mission in Syria (which is meant to preserve the state power of Bashar al-Assad and

⁵³⁵ Inessa S YouTube Channel, “Putin on the destruction of the Middle East – Must watch!” September 1, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jy5F5nDuXYY>.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 4:13-23.

⁵³⁷ Sergei Lavrov, “Russia’s Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 30, 2016, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Russias-Foreign-Policy-in-a-Historical-Perspective-18067>.

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

achieve a political solution to the war) as a guarantor of peace and an effective response to the terrorist threat.⁵³⁹

The Ukraine Crisis and Russia's Syrian Intervention

The Euromaidan Revolution took place in 2013-14, about two years before Russia's military mission in Syria. A decade earlier, during the "color revolutions," Western governments became involved through the training of activists.⁵⁴⁰ And as a result of Ukraine's Orange Revolution and consequent runoff election in 2004, a new government was formed under President Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko, who were much more pro-Western than their predecessor, Leonid Kuchma.⁵⁴¹ During Euromaidan, Moscow watched the anti-government demonstrations taking place in Kyiv and again feared regime change; they appeared to be a continuation of Lavrov's idea of Western "unconstitutional regime change techniques."⁵⁴² When U.S. Republican Senator John McCain appeared in Kyiv in December 2013 to tell the protestors that their desired future was to be found in Europe, this only seemed to confirm Russian fears.⁵⁴³ In February 2014, President Viktor Yanukovich fled Ukraine as the Euromaidan movement gained momentum, and new parliamentary and presidential elections soon followed. In late March,

⁵³⁹ The Foreign Minister also tried to dispel any accusations of "Russian aggression" by pointing out Russia's commitment to positive diplomatic relations through the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) economic alliance, the EEU, CSTO, and CIS organizations: "In other words, Russia is not fighting against someone but for the resolution of all issues in an equal and mutually respectful manner..." Ibid.

⁵⁴⁰ This may be true, assert Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton, but the "color revolutions" were not so much a Western-hatched scheme as the Russian government would suggest. These two analysts say that when Kyrgyzstan's revolution replaced its government, the new administration acted towards Russia just like the old one. Russia also intervened during Georgia's revolution – more so than did the U.S. Perhaps most importantly, these political events were domestic movements that grew because of "outrage about poor governance," and not foreign plots. See Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, 75-6.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid. The Orange Revolution was a pro-Yushchenko protest movement which started after it was revealed that Yushchenko's opponent, Victor Yanukovich, had committed election fraud. See Natalie Prescott, "Orange Revolution in Red, White, and Blue: U.S. Impact on the 2004 Ukrainian Election," *Duke Journal of Comparative & International Law* 16 (No. 219): 219-227.

⁵⁴² Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, 74-6, 123; Lavrov, "Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective."

⁵⁴³ The Guardian YouTube Channel, "John McCain addresses Ukrainian protesters in Kiev," December 16, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=93eyhO8VTdg>.

Russia annexed Crimea, and two eastern Ukrainian regions – Luhansk and Donetsk, which had strong pro-Russian tendencies – declared independence from Ukraine, forming the Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR) and Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) respectively. A civil war ensued, with the pro-Russian separatist regions receiving Russian military support.⁵⁴⁴

After suffering heavy losses at the Battles of Ilovaisk and Debaltseve, the Ukrainian government had lost much bargaining power with the separatist forces. Support of the Luhansk and Donetsk rebels allowed Russia to enforce the “Minsk” ceasefire protocols, which contain clauses guaranteeing the rights of Russian ethnic and language minorities in Ukraine.⁵⁴⁵ Point 11 of the Minsk-II Treaty, for example, called for a new Ukrainian constitution that would decentralize the national political system. Point 11 referred to the unique “characteristics of individual areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.”

By the Russian definition, the “Western regime change tactic” resulted in the ouster of Ukraine’s president Yanukovich. But Russia’s involvement in the conflict since then has slowed down Ukraine’s entry into NATO and the European Union. If the Minsk agreements were to be implemented fully, Russia could potentially hold more political power over Ukraine through the separatist regions, even if they were not actually added to the Russian Federation’s territory. Yet the Western countries still speak of eventually bringing Ukraine into the NATO/EU fold, and countries such as the United States and Canada have been training the

⁵⁴⁴ This article by a U.S. Army Major summarizes some of the battles in which Russian troops have reportedly participated. It also discusses the Russian military’s seeming propensity to besiege opposing forces in order to achieve political aims: Amos C. Fox, “The Russian-Ukrainian War: Understanding the Dust Clouds on the Battlefield,” *Modern War Institute at West Point*, January 17, 2017, <https://mwi.usma.edu/russian-ukrainian-war-understanding-dust-clouds-battlefield/>. The following article also addresses Ukraine and Syria as “testing grounds” for new Russian weapons and tactics: Keir Giles, “Assessing Russia’s Reorganized and Rearmed Military,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 3, 2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/03/assessing-russia-s-reorganized-and-rearmed-military-pub-69853>; see also Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, 140-2.

⁵⁴⁵ See the full text of the Minsk-II agreement at UNIAN Information Agency, “Minsk Agreement: Full text in English,” February 12, 2015, <https://www.unian.info/politics/1043394-minsk-agreement-full-text-in-english.html>; Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, 140-6.

Ukrainian army.⁵⁴⁶ The Minsk Protocols, which were potentially Putin's trump card in Ukraine, have also been violated very often. The ceasefires did successfully lead to the exchange of prisoners, which the agreements did mandate.⁵⁴⁷ But in November 2017, the OSCE's mission to Ukraine estimated that both the Ukrainian military and the separatists violated the ceasefires an average of 220 times per week.⁵⁴⁸ According to the ceasefire agreements, heavy weapons such as rocket artillery launchers are supposed to be moved away from the front lines. However, such systems are often as close as ten metres apart from each other on opposite sides of the fighting. Such an unstable ceasefire hardly helps Putin (or Ukraine and the West, for that matter) achieve the aims he hoped for through the Minsk process. Also, decentralization has been a slow process and some political elites in Ukraine fear losing their influence should it be fulfilled.⁵⁴⁹

Russia's seizure of the Crimean Peninsula and support of Ukrainian separatists have greatly soured relations with the West and Ukraine.⁵⁵⁰ There have also been disagreements between Moscow and the rebels in the DPR and LPR. A key rift in their relationship has been the concept of "New Russia," or *Novorossiya*. In April 2014, Adam Taylor of *The Washington Post* reported on Putin's use of this term, which was the Tsarist-era name for the area encompassing the modern Donetsk and Luhansk regions, but also included what is now southern

⁵⁴⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, "U.S. Troops Training Ukrainian Soldiers, Mattis Says," February 2, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1431947/us-troops-training-ukrainian-soldiers-mattis-says/>. The webpage for "Operation UNIFIER," Canada's training mission, never explicitly mentions Russia. It also reports that the 200-man Canadian force was sent to Ukraine at the request of the Ukrainian government. See National Defense and the Canadian Armed Forces, "Operation UNIFIER," *Government of Canada* last modified April 5, 2018, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/operations-abroad/op-unifier.page>.

⁵⁴⁷ Gwendolyn Sasse, "To Be or Not to Be? Ukraine's Minsk Process," *Carnegie Europe*, March 2, 2016, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=62939%20>.

⁵⁴⁸ Reuters, "OSCE sees increase in ceasefire violations in east Ukraine," November 8, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-osce/osce-sees-increase-in-ceasefire-violations-in-east-ukraine-idUSKBN1D81H3>.

⁵⁴⁹ Balázs Jarábik and Yulia Yesmukhanova, "Ukraine's Slow Struggle for Decentralization," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 8, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/03/08/ukraine-s-slow-struggle-for-decentralization-pub-68219>.

⁵⁵⁰ Alexander Baunov and Thomas de Waal, "Red Scares, Then and Now," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, November 17, 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/2017/11/17/red-scares-then-and-now-pub-74784>.

Ukraine, going all the way to Odessa and the Moldovan border.⁵⁵¹ Since the term covered regions outside of the current rebels' territories, Putin's utterance of this word at a news conference sparked fears of a broader campaign against Ukraine. In May 2015, however, the *Novorossiya* idea was abandoned, as even the LPR and DPR leaders recognized.⁵⁵² By this time the conflict was turning into a protracted stalemate. As difficult as they were to implement, the Minsk agreements were a desirable way for Russia and the separatists to manage the conflict; the creation of *Novorossiya* would violate those agreements. Even as early as 2015, Paul Sonne of *The Wall Street Journal* noted the toning down of Moscow's rhetoric, which included talk of the Luhansk and Donetsk regions' possible reintegration into Ukraine.⁵⁵³ Russia had narrowed its scope to focus just on the LPR and DPR. The Kremlin would retain influence in Ukraine through the LPR and DPR's Russian majorities and Ukraine's hypothetical decentralization, a more realistic goal than *Novorossiya*.

But two years later, in 2017, the separatists revived the dream of a larger pro-Russian nation in eastern Ukraine; this time they called the proposed nation *Malorossiya*, or "Little Russia," another Tsarist-era name for a region that contained most of the territory of modern Ukraine.⁵⁵⁴ The Donetsk separatist leader, Alexander Zakharchenko, announced the creation of a "*Malorossiyan* Constitution," and the new country was called the "successor to Ukraine." The idea fell flat, however, with Moscow seemingly not appreciating the DPR's initiative in

⁵⁵¹ Adam Taylor, "'Novorossiya,' the latest historical concept to worry about in Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, April 18, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/04/18/understanding-novorossiya-the-latest-historical-concept-to-get-worried-about-in-ukraine/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.273d9f72b951.

⁵⁵² Andrei Kolesnikov, "Why the Kremlin is Shutting Down the Novorossiya Project," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 29, 2015, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/60249>.

⁵⁵³ Paul Sonne, "'Novorossiya' Falls From Putin's Vocabulary as Ukraine Crisis Drags," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/novorossiya-falls-from-putins-vocabulary-as-ukraine-crisis-drags-1432936655>.

⁵⁵⁴ Daria Litvinova, "Separatists in Ukraine declare creation of new 'state' Malorossiya," *The Telegraph*, July 18, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/07/18/separatists-ukraine-declare-creation-new-state-malorossiya/>; Gwendolyn Sasse, "Little Success for Little Russia," *Carnegie Europe*, July 24, 2017, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/72618>.

declaring the creation of a new state.⁵⁵⁵ This episode suggested that the separatist leaders were not deferring to Moscow's direction. Finally, the instability of the Luhansk People's Republic, with its internal factions and political rivalries, make it a less valuable and less reliable proxy for the Kremlin.⁵⁵⁶

Charap and Colton argue that the “zero-sum game” between NATO and Russia in Ukraine and the rest of the post-Soviet space has led to “hot proxy wars in Ukraine and Syria.”⁵⁵⁷ Involvement in the Ukrainian crisis did bring Russia some victories, including the slowdown of Ukraine's long-anticipated integration with the West and the negotiation of the Minsk protocols. Yet it has also brought with it many problems – a “new normal” of hostility and intransigence between Russia and the West and an ultimately stagnant (or at least very slow) Minsk process.⁵⁵⁸ This situation made Russia's mission in Syria potentially much more profitable and plausible. Islamic terrorism and extremism, which was running rampant in Syria, was a common threat to both the Russian Federation and its Western “partners.” Its ally in that fight – Syrian President Bashar al-Assad – was also more capable, powerful, and had more political legitimacy than the relatively weak separatists in Eastern Ukraine. For Russia, the Syrian expeditionary combat mission brought two potential benefits: mitigating terrorist threats against Russia, and also putting Russia back onto the world stage through actions against the universally despised ISIS and al-Nusra terror organizations.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.; EURACTIV.com and Reuters, “Rebel leader: New state of ‘Malorossiya’ will replace Ukraine,” *EURACTIV.com*, July 18, 2017, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/rebel-leader-new-state-of-malorossiya-will-replace-ukraine/>.

⁵⁵⁶ The LPR suffered a coup in November 2017, in which personnel from the DPR intervened to stabilize the situation. Oliver Carroll, “Ukraine: Luhansk coup attempt continues as rival militias square off against each other,” *Independent*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/luhansk-coup-ukraine-russia-igor-kornet-igor-plotnitsky-military-operations-training-exercise-a8068656.html>; Maxim Vikhrov, “The Luhansk Coup: Why Armed Conflict Erupted in Russia's Puppet Regime,” *Carnegie Moscow Center*, November 29, 2017, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/74864>.

⁵⁵⁷ Charap and Colton, *Everyone Loses*, 161.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 163.

Evaluation of Russia's Syria Campaign

On December 7, 2017, the Russian MoD reported that Russia's mission in Syria was "accomplished."⁵⁵⁹ Assad had survived the desperate situation of 2015. ISIS now no longer had significant amounts of territory in Syria, being reduced to individual groups and units. Russian forces would remain in the country, however, to ensure the smooth transition from wartime to peace.⁵⁶⁰

Putin's direct engagement in the Syrian Civil War has had a few negative consequences. The first one is connected with the "new normal" we discussed earlier with regards to Russian-Western relations over Ukraine. In the West, Russia's Syria mission is often seen as an act of aggression, even when ISIS has been attacked in Russian strikes.⁵⁶¹ Western countries and their allies point out that the Russian military has attacked the "moderate anti-Assad opposition," and not concentrated on ISIS. According to maps produced by the Institute for the Study of War at the start of the campaign, Assad's regime centers, including the capital of Damascus and the coastal port cities Latakia and Tartus, were mostly under threat from the non-ISIS opposition - the so-called "moderate" rebels.⁵⁶² A week after the first Russian airstrike, the US State Department even suggested that Russia was barely attacking ISIS.⁵⁶³ These Western

⁵⁵⁹ Steven Rosenberg, "Syria war: Putin's Russian mission accomplished," *BBC News*, December 13, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42330551>; Minoborony Rossii, "Briefing by Colonel General Sergei Rudskoy," 1:58-2:07, 4:27-5:00.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 5:01-8:18.

⁵⁶¹ Georgy Bovt, "Why every side in Syria has a hidden agenda," *Russia in Global Affairs*, October 16, 2015, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Why-every-side-in-Syria-has-a-hidden-agenda-17759>.

⁵⁶² ISW Research Team, "Russia's First Reported Air Strikes in Syria Assist Regime with Targeting Broader Opposition," *Institute for the Study of War*, last updated October 2, 2015, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.ca/2015/09/russias-first-reported-air-strikes-in.html>.

⁵⁶³ Associated Free Press, "'More than 90%' of Russian airstrikes in Syria have not targeted Isis, US says," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targeting-isis>.

perspectives of the Russian mission have delegitimized it, exacerbating political tensions between the two sides.

Secondly, Syria's very complicated reality should be considered. The country has long been divided between many different rival ethnic groups.⁵⁶⁴ This was a leftover of the Ottoman Empire's *millet* system, in which each confessional group was governed separately. During the rule of Hafez al-Assad, his minority Alawite ethnic group came to dominate the political scene.⁵⁶⁵ Ethnic and religious heritage became more of a determinant than Ba'thist socialist philosophy. Today, Syria remains the same, broken up into Alawite, Kurdish, Christian, Sunni, Druze, and other areas.⁵⁶⁶ Russia has decided to intervene in a conflict involving these varied groups, many of whom have opposing international allies. Russia supports the ruling Alawite group, the Americans have supported the Kurds, the Turks have seen the Kurds as a threat, while Israel has launched airstrikes against the regime, as we saw in the first chapter.⁵⁶⁷ Considering the complexities of Syria's social composition and the international involvement in that country, the medieval Italian political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli might have said to Vladimir Putin, "People may go to war when they will, but cannot always withdraw when they like."⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁴ Robert W. Olson, *The Ba'th and Syria, 1947 to 1982: The Evolution of Ideology, Party, and State* (Princeton: The Kingston Press, Inc., 1982), 42-3.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 61-2.

⁵⁶⁶ Max Fisher, "The one map that shows why Syria is so complicated," *The Washington Post*, August 27, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2013/08/27/the-one-map-that-shows-why-syria-is-so-complicated/?utm_term=.c34d6a52ca52.

⁵⁶⁷ Huseyin Bagci, "Strategic Depth in Syria – from the Beginning to Russian Intervention," *Russia in Global Affairs*, December 14, 2015, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/valday/Strategic-Depth-in-Syria--from-the-Beginning-to-Russian-Intervention-17882>; Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia's Policy on Syria after the Start of Military Engagement," *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 28, 2016, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/PONARS-Eurasia/Russias-Policy-on-Syria-after-the-Start-of-Military-Engagement-18065>.

⁵⁶⁸ Niccolo Machiavelli, *History of Florence and of the Affairs of Italy: From the Earliest Times to the Death of Lorenzo the Magnificent* (New York and London: W. Walter Dunne, 1901), Book III, Chapter II, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2464/2464-h/2464-h.htm>.

According to the CIA World Factbook, Syria covers 183,630 square kilometers, which is less than twice the size of the state of Pennsylvania.⁵⁶⁹ The complicated nature of the Syrian Civil War thus works with geography to create a third difficulty for the Russian forces: the risk of escalation with unintended or international players in the region. The Russian Ministry of Defense acknowledged in a statement on October 5, 2015 that Khmeimim Air Base is only thirty kilometers south of the Syrian-Turkish border.⁵⁷⁰ When weather conditions are unfavourable, aircraft must land at Khmeimim approaching from the north, which increases the likelihood of a Russian violation of Turkish airspace. Seeking to reassure the Turkish government and its NATO allies, the Defense Ministry statement explicitly said: “There are no conspirational reasons to look for.” The potential for a Turkish-Russian confrontation became a reality when a Russian Sukhoi Su-24 aircraft was shot down in late November 2015 over Turkey.⁵⁷¹ According to the Russian media website *Russia Today*, the Turkish government claimed that the Su-24 had crossed the border ten times, and after multiple warnings, it was shot down, killing one of the crew members. War did not erupt between Russia and NATO member Turkey over the incident. However, the diplomatic situation quickly became tense, and Vladimir Putin accused Turkey of hindering Russia’s anti-terrorist mission because it was under the influence of ISIS and its vast financial resources. Syrian aircraft have also been reported to have entered Turkish airspace, leading to some Syrian helicopters and planes being shot down.⁵⁷²

⁵⁶⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, “The World Factbook: Syria,” last modified April 24, 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>.

⁵⁷⁰ MoDRF, “In the daytime, Su-34, Su-24M and Su-25 aircraft performed 15 combat sorties from the Hmeymim airbase,” October 5, 2015, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12059705@egNews>.

⁵⁷¹ “Russian Su-24 fighter jet shot down over Syria – Russian MoD (VIDEO),” *Russia Today*, last modified November 27, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/323215-warplane-crash-syria-turkey/>; “Putin: Downing of Russian jet over Syria stab in the back by terrorist accomplices,” *Russia Today*, last modified November 27, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/323262-putin-downing-plane-syria/>.

⁵⁷² Samuel Osborne and Caroline Mortimer, “Syrian pilot crashed in Turkey says his plane was shot down,” *Independent*, March 5, 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-mig-plane-crash-turkey-shot-down-idlib-hatay-ahrar-al-sham-a7612836.html>.

Russia must also contend with the presence of the local powers. Not wishing confrontation with Israel, Russia needs to address that country's concerns about the involvement of Iranian-sponsored militias in the Syrian war.⁵⁷³ These Iranian organizations have fought on the regime's side against the opposition, but both Iran and Assad have been propping up Hezbollah.⁵⁷⁴ Russia has repeatedly desired a "political solution" to the war instead of "regime change," as we have seen. Yet how much will Assad cooperate with a "political solution" in which he could potentially lose power? Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Moscow Center has noted that while Assad has participated in ceasefire talks, he wants more political control. After all terrorist elements have been defeated, achieving a lasting peace and rebuilding the country will require varying levels of cooperation or compromises between Syria, Russia, the United States, Iran, Israel, Turkey, the Kurds, and whatever opposition groups may remain at whatever time such a peace settlement would be reached. How this will be done is impossible to predict, but in committing to stabilizing its Arab ally, Russia has also started on the path of reconstruction, which will demand a lot of time and investment.

The Russian military has also had to consider the presence of U.S. forces and American-supported militias. In September 2017, Russian bombers fired cruise missiles at targets belonging to ISIS and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra group.⁵⁷⁵ The targets were situated near Deir ez-Zor, where American troops and the Syrian Democratic Forces, a U.S.-supported opposition group, were operating. The Russian MoD report on this airstrike said the following: "It is to be stressed that all the targets were located out of settlements and in a safe

⁵⁷³ Jonathan Schanzer, "How Putin's Folly Could Lead to a Middle East War," *Foundation for the Defense of Democracies*, April 9, 2018, <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/schanzer-jonathan-how-putins-foolly-could-lead-to-a-middle-east-war/>.

⁵⁷⁴ Dmitry Trenin, "Putin's Plan for Syria," *Russia in Global Affairs*, December 18, 2017, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Putins-Plan-for-Syria-19228>.

⁵⁷⁵ MoDRF, "Tu-95MS bombers fired cruise missiles at terrorists' objects in Syria," September 26, 2017, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12143592@egNews>.

distance from strongholds of the US SOF [Special Operations Forces] and Syrian Democratic Forces in the ISIS-controlled territories.” No former ISIS structures currently occupied by American troops were targeted either, said the report. The reassurance of this statement was very different from the rhetoric stemming from an American airstrike in that same area the previous year. On September 17, 2016, American planes carried out four strikes upon Syrian regime troops near Deir ez-Zor Airport, killing about sixty of them.⁵⁷⁶ The state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) claimed that this was a deliberate attack meant to allow ISIS militants to take the area, which they did soon after the bombings. The U.S. Secretary of Defense reported that the strikes were accidental, and happened only because the pilots thought that they were hitting terrorist forces. Mistakes such as these are common in combat. But they can lead to disastrous escalation.⁵⁷⁷

To lessen the risk of such incidents, Russia and the United States have used “deconfliction lines” to notify the other side of upcoming strikes and ask if the other country has assets in the vicinity of those proposed operations.⁵⁷⁸ Despite recent Russian-American tensions, the deconfliction line is used 15-20 times per day between the American-led coalition’s headquarters in Qatar and the Russian contingent at Khmeimim Air Base.⁵⁷⁹ This avenue of communication and coordination has become especially important as the American coalition’s

⁵⁷⁶ “Russian army says US-led coalition has killed 60 Syrian soldiers in strikes,” *SAMAA TV*, September 17, 2016, <https://www.samaa.tv/international/2016/09/russian-army-says-us-led-coalition-has-killed-60-syrian-soldiers-in-strikes/>; “US alliance aircrafts target Syrian Army position in Deir Ezzor, Israeli enemy targets position in Quneitra,” *Syrian Arab News Agency*, September 17, 2016, <https://sana.sy/en/?p=88303>; Anne Barnard and Mark Mazzetti, “U.S. Admits Airstrike in Syria, Meant to Hit ISIS, Killed Syrian Troops,” *The New York Times*, September 17, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/world/middleeast/us-airstrike-syrian-troops-isis-russia.html>.

⁵⁷⁷ Fyodor Lukyanov, “Fighting Evil Separately,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, October 2, 2015, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Fighting-Evil-Separately-17720>.

⁵⁷⁸ Guy Taylor, “U.S. military uses Russian ‘deconfliction’ line 20 times a day to separate jets over Syria,” *The Washington Times*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/oct/5/us-russia-use-military-deconfliction-phone-20-time/>.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid; “US, Russia keep using deconfliction channels to prevent incidents in Syria – Pentagon,” *TASS*, April 11, 2018, <http://tass.com/defense/998951>.

goal of defeating ISIS and Russia's other goal of preserving the Syrian regime are both realized, increasing the possibility of a clash.⁵⁸⁰ On February 7, 2018, Coalition forces attacked pro-regime forces for reportedly crossing a deconfliction boundary at the Euphrates River and posing a threat to Syrian Democratic Forces. A Coalition spokesperson stated that before, during, and after this incident, the deconfliction line was used to keep in contact with the Russian military. Such de-escalation tools have been important when such incidents take place, particularly after it was revealed that members of the Russian military contract company, the Wagner Group, were killed in the attack.⁵⁸¹

Regardless of deconfliction lines, Russian and American involvement in the Syrian war conjures up images of “great game”-style confrontation. Both sides seem to have been conducting two different “Wars on Terror.” This was not always the case, for after 9/11, Putin sent his condolences to the United States and said that such Islamic terror attacks affected everyone.⁵⁸² The Americans designated some Chechen groups as terrorist organizations, and they froze insurgent leaders’ bank accounts. In taking these steps, the U.S. legitimized Russia’s war in Chechnya, and the Russian government helped the Americans by offering intelligence about the Taliban in Afghanistan.⁵⁸³ This cooperation between Russia and America lessened however, due to criticism of Russia’s conduct of the Chechen War, which included restrictions on the media, increased military presence in the Caucasus, and reports of human rights abuses

⁵⁸⁰ Colonel Ryan Dillon, “Telephonic Press Briefing with Colonel Ryan Dillon, Spokesperson for Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve,” *U.S. Department of State*, February 26, 2018, <https://translations.state.gov/2018/02/26/operation-inherent-resolve-telephonic-briefing/>.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid; Neil Hauer, “Russia’s Mercenary Debacle in Syria,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 26, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2018-02-26/russias-mercenary-debacle-syria>.

⁵⁸² le Huérou and Regamey, “Russia’s War in Chechnya,” 214-5.

⁵⁸³ According to Andrei Tsygankov, the Russians wanted the Taliban, an old enemy from the Soviet era, to be removed. Consequently, the Russian government had long supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Tsygankov, *Russia’s Foreign Policy*, 140-1, 143.

such as rape, torture, and executions.⁵⁸⁴ The American invasion of Iraq in 2003, which the Russian government opposed, also did little to help Russian-American cooperation against terrorism.

Though ISIS and al-Qaeda are common threats to both Russia and the West, there are different narratives about the two parallel missions against them. Alexander Bortnikov, the Director of Russia's Federal Security Service ("FSB," according to the Russian acronym), has alleged that the United States "uses terrorism and flirts with it" to "destabilize nearby countries."⁵⁸⁵ Bortnikov points to the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, which supposedly helped international terrorism to spread and grow. Because of the Taliban's collapse and more than a decade of war in the region, Russian, Chinese, and Iranian territory and interests came under threat. The FSB head also said that American support of the Syrian "democratic forces" had the same effect, recalling again the Russian government's views of American "regime change" operations. Bortnikov proposed an alternative to the American War on Terror: he suggested that non-Western countries must use the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to deal with the problem of international terrorism.

Differences between the Russian and Western wars on terrorism can be seen in the narratives surrounding the October 31, 2015 crash of Flight 9268, a Russian airliner flying from Egypt to St. Petersburg when it suddenly exploded.⁵⁸⁶ An Egyptian ISIS-affiliated group boasted

⁵⁸⁴ le Hu rou and Regamey, "Russia's War in Chechnya," 212-6. Of course, the Chechens also committed atrocities of their own: mass attacks upon civilians, kidnapping, and using civilians as human shields. Hann, *Russia's Islamic Threat*, 33-4.

⁵⁸⁵ Andrei Polunin, "Kak IGIL otomstet Rossii za porzhenie v Sirii," *Svobodnaia Pressa*, October 4, 2017, <http://svpressa.ru/war21/article/182755/>.

⁵⁸⁶ Igor Rozin, "Russia launches a probe into the crash of a Russian aircraft in Egypt," *Russia Direct*, October 31, 2015, <http://www.russia-direct.org/russian-media/russia-launches-probe-crash-russian-aircraft-egypt>; Dmitry Poliakanov, "Why Russia and the West won't be teaming up against ISIS anytime soon," *Russia in Global Affairs*, November 11, 2015, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Why-Russia-and-the-West-wont-be-teaming-up-against-ISIS-anytime-soon-17799>; Mostafa Hashem, Ahmed Aboulenein, and Ralph Boulton, "Islamic State claims responsibility

about the attack on Twitter. Writing about the incident on November 11, Dmitry Poliakov did not definitively indicate his opinion on whether the crash was an accident or a terror attack. But he predicted the Western response to the crash thus: “according to its narrative, the West will use this to blame Putin for aggression. Putin will lie about it for propaganda purposes.” Almost proving Poliakov’s point, Brian Whitmore wrote an opinion piece for the American journal *The Atlantic* which argued that elements of the Russian media – specifically the news site *Sputnik* – were blaming the West for the attack.⁵⁸⁷ In his view, Russia’s military campaign in Syria was merely a form of bloodless, consequence-free propaganda for a Russian public: “All patriotic citizens needed to do was sit back and enjoy the grainy footage of terrorists being obliterated by Russia’s shiny new military machine.” Then when Flight 9268 was downed, Whitmore opined that the Kremlin needed to blame the West to distract the public from the human cost of the campaign. It is certainly true that anti-Western attitudes are prevalent in Russia’s state-run media outlets. However, it should be noted that *Sputnik* also published an

for Russian plane crash in Egypt,” *Reuters*, October 31, 2015, <https://in.reuters.com/article/motor-f1-azerbaijan/motor-racing-lucky-hamilton-wins-chaotic-azerbaijan-grand-prix-idINKBN11>.

⁵⁸⁷ Brian Whitmore, “Egypt Plane Crash: The Russian Media Veers Into Conspiracy,” *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/11/russia-metrojet-flight-9268/415161/>; The British website of the *Sunday Express*, went even further, citing a former KGB operative who claimed that Putin deliberately ordered the terror attack in order to increase support for the campaign in Syria. The article fails, however, to mention Russia’s current problem with radical Islam in the Caucasus and Putin’s popularity. Putin’s approval rating was reported as being 89% in July 21, 2015, which was months before Flight 9268 was lost - a fact that rendered the imagined “need” to blow up a passenger plane for the sake of domestic support unlikely. Conservative American news site *The National Review* debunked conspiracy theories surrounding the airliner by citing American and British intelligence agencies who were “highly confident” that an Egyptian ISIS-aligned group was responsible. See also Tom Batchelor, “Did Putin plant bomb that downed Russian passenger plane? Amazing claims from ex-KGB man,” *Sunday Express*, December 28, 2015, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/629571/Russian-Metrojet-jet-crash-KGB-agent-Putin-bombing>; Dimitri Alexander Simes, “5 Things You Need to Know about Putin’s Popularity in Russia,” *The National Interest*, July 21, 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/5-things-you-need-know-about-putins-popularity-russia-13380>; Tom Rogan, “Why It Appears That the Sinai Flight Was Bombed – Possibly by ISIS,” *National Review*, November 5, 2015, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2015/11/russian-airliner-crash-bombing-appears-likely/>.

article on the attack's one-year anniversary that clearly blamed terrorism, and not the West, for the plane crash.⁵⁸⁸

Poliakanov suggested that Western attitudes like those shown in *The Atlantic* article would be used to impose more sanctions upon Russia.⁵⁸⁹ He laments the West's sharp disagreements with Russia over terrorism, asking why the differences in opinion should prevent closer cooperation against the common enemy. During the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45, the Soviet Union and the Western Allies fought together against Nazi Germany: "It's a real pity that even the global evil of ISIS cannot help Russia and the West to overcome their ambitions and form a new 'anti-Hitler coalition,' as it was in the previous period of a deep ideological gap between the Soviet Union and the capitalist world."

These arguments about morality and a common enemy, however, are rhetorical. The Russian MoD often makes more practical arguments about its role against terrorism. It does this by comparing the number of times it attacks enemy militias with the number of airstrikes carried out by the American-led Coalition. On February 1, 2016, the Russian military reported that over the previous week, the Coalition launched "73 combat sorties and 50 missile and bomb strikes" in the Aleppo, Raqqah, Hasakah, and Homs regions.⁵⁹⁰ This number pales in comparison to the reported number of Russian missions during that same time: 468 sorties. The Russian MoD uses video evidence to support these claims, and it criticizes the American-led anti-ISIS Coalition for supposedly giving updates through a "few official representatives" without much video footage

⁵⁸⁸ "Putin Vowed Retribution for A321 Attack; One Year On, Moscow's Not Backing Down," *Sputnik News*, October 31, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/society/201610311046914740-a321-attack-anniversary/>.

⁵⁸⁹ Poliakanov, "Why Russia and the West won't be teaming up against ISIS anytime soon."

⁵⁹⁰ MoDRF, "In the course of the last week, the Russian aircraft in Syria have performed 468 combat sorties engaging 1354 terrorists' infrastructural facilities," February 1, 2016, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12075950@egNews.

or media visits at Coalition airbases.⁵⁹¹ Many videos of Russian airstrikes, in addition to progress reports and press conferences translated into English, are readily available on the Defense Ministry's YouTube channel.⁵⁹² They are a clear manifestation of the Russian government's habitual use of modern media to promote its worldview and actions.⁵⁹³

One final drawback to the combat mission in Syria must be addressed. Ruslan Pukhov said that the mission would help suppress the Islamic State abroad and away from Russia.⁵⁹⁴ Yet Russia's war against extremism in Syria might invite retaliation, as the bombing of Flight 9268 demonstrates. ISIS remains very dangerous and is still active in Egypt, Libya, the Philippines, and elsewhere. The group remains as an insurgency in these countries, in addition to being responsible for multiple attacks in Russia, England, Turkey, Iran, and Spain since 2015.⁵⁹⁵ As suggested earlier, ISIS' base in Afghanistan could be a particularly important hub through which terrorists could launch further strikes against Russia.⁵⁹⁶

However, the Islamic State has also lost most of its territory in Iraq and Syria, perhaps lessening some of this risk. It has nowhere near the "conventional power" it had in 2014, when it almost took the Iraqi capital and had between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, according to one CIA

⁵⁹¹ ---, "In the course of the last 24 hours, aircraft of the Russian air group in the Syrian Arab Republic have performed 59 combat sorties engaging 212 terrorist objects," December 16, 2015, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12071930.

⁵⁹² Minoborony Rossii YouTube Channel, Channel's Main Page, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCQGqX5Ndpm4snE0NTjyOJnA>; ---, "Media briefing 'Russian Federation Armed Forces fighting against international terrorism. New data,'" December 2, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hQey-FCHhb0>.

⁵⁹³ Pukhov, "The Russian Military Campaign in Syria."

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ "IS portrays Messi on his knees, threatens to terrorize FIFA World Cup," *i24 News International*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/sport/170432-180321-isis-portrays-messi-on-his-knees-threatening-to-terrorize-fifa-world-cup>.

⁵⁹⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, "Analysis: ISIS hasn't been defeated," February 22, 2018, *FDD's Long War Journal*, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/02/analysis-isis-hasnt-been-defeated.php>. For a more in-depth analysis of "ISIS-Khorasan's" plans for Russia, read an article and watch the following documentary by *Al-Jazeera*: "ISIL: Target Russia," *Al-Jazeera*, May 27, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/specialseries/2017/05/isil-target-russia-170522095304580.html>; Pukhov, "The Russian Military Campaign in Syria."

estimate from that time.⁵⁹⁷ As its territory in Syria and Iraq has shrunk, the Islamic State has lost much power and access to funds, which relied on the sale of oil from occupied oil refineries, and taxes imposed on the local people.⁵⁹⁸ This statement was especially true regarding the large urban centres they had seized, such as Mosul. However, terrorism was already a problem in Russia before the rise of ISIS, and the Caucasus Emirate had joined the Islamic State in June 2015, which was three months before the Russian government sent military forces to Syria.⁵⁹⁹ From Russia's perspective, the threat of attack already existed, so acting in Syria to reduce the power of groups like ISIS has strategic merit.

Russia's Syrian mission has also brought its advantages, particularly in its military and strategic aspects. The combat operations have demonstrated an improvement in the Russian military, especially since the Georgian War of 2008. This conflict saw the Russian Federation invade the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, ostensibly to protect Russian minorities in those areas. The war was a political success for Russia, which was able to seize and occupy the two regions.⁶⁰⁰ Yet the Russian military's ineffectiveness was evident. Before and during the war, all coordination ran through the central command in Moscow, which greatly increased the difficulty of issuing and carrying out orders.⁶⁰¹ Despite having made detailed strategic plans and committing almost 20,000 soldiers to the fighting, the Russian military had numerous problems in Georgia: lack of standardized equipment and insignias,

⁵⁹⁷ Jim Sciutto, Jamie Crawford, and Chelsea J. Carter, "ISIS can 'muster' between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters, CIA says," *CNN*, September 12, 2014, <https://www.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq/index.html>.

⁵⁹⁸ Yaya J. Fanusie and Alex Entz, "Islamic State: Financial Assessment," in *Terror Finance Briefing Book* (Foundation for the Defense of Democracies: Center on Sanctions & Illicit Finance, March 2017), 1-10, http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/CSIF_TFBB_IS_Finance.pdf.

⁵⁹⁹ Joscelyn, "Islamic State's Caucasus 'province' claims first official attack on Russian forces"; Yarlykapov, "Russian Islam and the Situation in the Middle East"; Vatchagaev, "Islamic State Apparently Wins Its Competition With Caucasus Emirate."

⁶⁰⁰ Catherine Harris and Frederick W. Kagan, "Russia's Military Posture: Ground Forces Order of Battle," (Washington: Institute for the Study of War, 2018), 10.

http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Ground%20Forces%20OOB_ISW%20CTP_0.pdf

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 10-11; Giles, "Assessing Russia's Reorganized and Rearmed Military."

which increased the number of friendly fire incidents; lack of communication between the Black Sea Fleet, air force, and army assets; the absence of night-vision equipment and drones; Georgia's mountainous terrain and foggy climate, which greatly reduced the effectiveness of Russian precision weapons; and obsolete artillery equipment.⁶⁰² Georgia was also able to launch ambushes and carry out artillery strikes from hidden batteries.

After Georgia, the Russian military was reformed with a more localized, decentralized command structure.⁶⁰³ Some analysts such as Catherine Harris and Frederick W. Kagan of the Institute for the Study of War have noted that due to combat experience in Ukraine and Syria, the Russian military has had a lot of practice working with irregular forces.⁶⁰⁴ Such groups include the DPR/LPR rebels in Ukraine and Iranian troops and militias (such as Hezbollah), which have fought for the Syrian government. Russian strategy may cooperate with these forces, or, according to Harris and Kagan, even incorporate them into the Russian command.⁶⁰⁵

Russia's military commitment in Syria has been directed against militias and terrorist groups. So far, Russian forces have not had to directly confront major organized forces in Syria, like those of the American Coalition or Turkey.⁶⁰⁶ Thus, evaluating the success of Russia's military reforms against similar forces would be a hypothetical exercise not worth pursuing here.

⁶⁰² For a very detailed account of Russia's strategic goals, mistakes, and post-Georgia prospects for reform, see Carolina Vendil Pallin and Fredrik Westerlund, "Russia's war in Georgia: lessons and consequences," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20, no. 2 (2009): 400-24. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592310902975539>.

⁶⁰³ Harris and Kagan, "Russia's Military Posture," 10-11; Gorenburg, "What Russia's Military Operation in Syria Can Tell Us About Advances in its Capabilities."

⁶⁰⁴ Harris and Kagan, "Russia's Military Posture," 10; Jenkins, "The Dynamics of Syria's Civil War," 3-4, 7-8.

⁶⁰⁵ Harris and Kagan, "Russia's Military Posture," 10; Daniel Byman, "Confronting Iran," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 60, no. 1 (February-March 2018): 109-11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1427368>.

⁶⁰⁶ A significant confrontation between Russia and the other major powers intervening in Syria is perhaps possible, though unlikely. These countries have been reluctant to escalate military actions against each other: Turkey's downing of the Russian bomber in 2015 did not lead to retaliatory strikes or war, and Russian forces have not responded in kind to Western and Israeli airstrikes against Syrian facilities. See Avi Issacharof, "Why Russia may not respond to the alleged Israeli airstrike in Syria," *The Times of Israel*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/why-russia-may-not-respond-to-the-alleged-israeli-airstrike-in-syria/>; and Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, and Ben Hubbard, "U.S., Britain and France Strike Syria Over Suspected Chemical Weapons Attack," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/trump-strikes-syria-attack.html>.

However, it is evident that Russia's military reforms have helped the effectiveness of its mission to protect Bashar al-Assad. The Syria campaign has lasted since late 2015 and has been a great military and political success. The war in Georgia in 2008, while a victory, saw Russia suffer significant casualties and it showed the military's ineffectiveness over five days.⁶⁰⁷

Dmitry Gorenburg's analysis effectively sums up the situation: changes to the Russian military post-Georgia "have resulted in a significant increase in Russia's warfighting capability."⁶⁰⁸

Syria became a testing site for new weapons systems in a real-world combat environment. First, "smart" or precision bombs are nothing new to Western militaries, but the Syrian war is the first conflict in which Russia has used them with significant success. More often, however, Russian airstrikes have used conventional "gravity" bombs in Syria, which are still very accurate with proper training. Secondly, the Russian forces have also used drone aircraft, which have helped with target acquisition. Thirdly, night-vision equipment also allowed for 24/7 coverage for pro-regime ground forces and night time operations kept Russian pilots safer from anti-air weapons. The ability of Russia's pilots to run round-the-clock operations also has a detrimental effect on the insurgents' morale, forcing them to deal with a lack of proper sleep. The number of sorties and constant mission readiness has shown the durability of the Russian forces; however, some crashes have supposedly occurred because of harsh desert conditions and pilot fatigue.⁶⁰⁹

On March 15, 2016, Putin called for a partial withdrawal from Syria, now that Assad's authority had been stabilized.⁶¹⁰ On a visit to Khmeimim Air Base in December 2017, he

⁶⁰⁷ Pallin and Westerlund, "Russia's war in Georgia: lessons and consequences," 1.

⁶⁰⁸ Gorenburg, "What Russia's Military Operation in Syria Can Tell Us About Advances in its Capabilities."

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁶¹⁰ MoDRF, "Preparation of aircraft groups of the Russian Aerospace Forces for redeploying to airfields in the Russian Federation has been finished," May 16, 2016, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12080738@egNews>.

announced another withdrawal, which would redeploy most remaining forces back to the Russian Federation.⁶¹¹ The President thanked the deployed soldiers for their service and then proclaimed that: “Syria has been preserved as a sovereign and independent state.” With the fears of “regime change” averted, the Russian President said that a much-desired “political settlement” in Syria was now possible. Some Russian forces would remain at Khmeimim and Tartus.⁶¹² In August and September 2017, the Russian military reported that there were 26,000 ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra extremists still active in Syria, and 27,800 square kilometres of territory were still in ISIS hands.⁶¹³ In response, Russian pilots have still been providing Assad’s military with constant aerial reconnaissance and airstrike support.⁶¹⁴ This air support was to continue until ISIS and al-Nusra were eliminated.⁶¹⁵ Meanwhile, Russia reiterated its commitment to provide humanitarian support and ceasefire monitoring, including the deployment of Military Police officers.⁶¹⁶

This commitment necessitates the continued use of the bases, which the Russians have utilized throughout the course of the combat mission. Considering this commitment, in 2017 the Russian parliament approved a Russian-Syrian agreement that saw an extension of Russia’s lease on Khmeimim Air Base and the Tartus port for an additional 49 years.⁶¹⁷ By this agreement, the

⁶¹¹ ---, “President Vladimir Putin ordered the partial withdrawal during an unannounced visit to Syria on Monday,” December 12, 2017, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12154590@egNews; President of Russia, “Vladimir Putin visited Khmeimim Air Base in Syria,” December 11, 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56351>.

⁶¹² Ibid.; and MoDRF, “Minister of Defence reports Russian troops pulled out from Syria to Supreme Commander-in-Chief”, December 22, 2017, http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12155964@egNews.

⁶¹³ ---, “More than 9,000 insurgents of the ISIS and 15,000 terrorists of Jabhat al-Nusra are operating in Syria,” August 25, 2017, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12139806@egNews>; Minoborony Rossii YouTube Channel, “Mass Media Briefing at Khmeimim Air Base,” September 12, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9a8p7duFflk>, 5:34-45.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., 3:22-4:11.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., 5:45-59.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid., 4:10-5:23.

⁶¹⁷ Defense Ministry, “Russia Extends Syrian Airbase Lease by 49 Years,” *The Moscow Times*, July 27, 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-extends-syrian-airbase-lease-by-49-year-58512>; “Russia says its military will stay in Syria for foreseeable future, following parliamentary agreement,” *The New Arab*, July 14, 2017,

Russian Federation will have a military presence in Syria until 2066. *Russia Today* reported that the military planned to construct “two new piers in Tartus... as well as a complex of residential and office buildings.”⁶¹⁸ These piers will be used to accommodate nuclear-powered warships, including submarines and *Kirov*-class cruisers – some of the Russian navy’s most powerful assets.⁶¹⁹ What began as a mission to prevent Assad’s fall has become an opportunity for a permanent Mediterranean naval and air base. It provides is a strategic boon for Russia, because Tartus is the country’s only naval base outside of the former Soviet Union.⁶²⁰ Just like during the Cold War, this gives Russia the capability to potentially compete with the United States on the high seas, if the Kremlin feels that need.

Russia’s Syria campaign is a form of power projection, being Russia’s first expeditionary mission outside of former Soviet territory.⁶²¹ Russia’s presence at Khmeimim, Tartus, Latakia, and Deir ez-Zor has enabled its growing influence, as does the military’s ability to effectively supply those outposts. According to Dmitry Gorenburg, the Russian troops deployed in Syria have not had problems with supplies since 2015, even though Russia’s military supply and deployment infrastructure is primitive, being done primarily via railroad transportation.⁶²² It is true that Bashar al-Assad requested Russia’s assistance. Thus, it would not be fair to say that this means Russia could instantly deploy forces anywhere, as in the case of a hypothetical full-scale confrontation with the West. Yet Russia’s deployment to Syria shows that it can still mobilize for

<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/7/14/russia-to-have-semi-permanent-military-presence-in-syria>;
 “Russia begins development of Syrian bases to host nuclear ships & warplanes,” *Russia Today*, December 26, 2017,
<https://www.rt.com/news/414261-russia-permanent-bases-syria-nuclear/>.

⁶¹⁸ “Putin drafts bill for expansion of Russian navy base in Syria,” *Russia Today*, December 13, 2017,
<https://www.rt.com/politics/412950-putin-drafts-bill-seeking-expansion/>.

⁶¹⁹ Michael Peck, “How Russia Is Turning Syria into a Major Naval Base for Nuclear Warships (and Israel is Worried),” *The National Interest*, March 18, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/how-russia-turning-syria-major-naval-base-nuclear-warships-19813>.

⁶²⁰ Christopher Kozak, Hugo Spaulding, and Daniel Urchick, “Warning Update: Russia Expanding Facilities at Tartus Naval Base,” September 30, 2015, *Institute for the Study of War*, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.ca/2015/09/warning-update-russia-expanding.html>.

⁶²¹ Bagci, “Strategic Depth in Syria – from the Beginning to Russian Intervention.”

⁶²² Gorenburg, “What Russia’s Military Operation in Syria Can Tell Us About Advances in its Capabilities.”

missions far away from its borders. Finally, Russia's launching of cruise missiles from the Caspian Sea was another instance of power projection; it demonstrated the military's ability to strike enemy targets with conventional weapons, far away from danger.

Russia's battlefield successes have translated into political victories. Syria is a convenient distraction from Russian interference in Ukraine, especially as the civil war there has become somewhat of a stalemate. Russia's Middle Eastern presence has also allowed it to forge relations with local states other than Syria. An intelligence-sharing centre in Baghdad is very clear proof of this. This organization was founded in September 2015 by the Russian, Syrian, Iranian, and Iraqi governments, and through officers representing each country, it coordinates the war effort against the Islamic State.⁶²³ If the centre received intelligence about ISIS movements in Iraq, Iraqi forces would be mobilized against them. If word was received about ISIS in Syria, however, the mission was passed on to the Russian Air Force. The information centre has been operating ever since. As late as April 19, 2018, Iraqi planes launched an attack against ISIS positions fifty miles within Syria, after a meeting between Iraqi, Russian, Iranian, and Syrian officials.⁶²⁴ It is interesting to note that intelligence from the American-led Coalition was also used to plan the attack. Through the coordination centre, Iraq has been able to fight ISIS on "both sides;" an article from *The Arab Weekly* explains: "Iraq has good relations with Iran and Russia, Assad's main backers in the 7-year-old Syrian civil war, while also enjoying strong support from the US-led coalition."⁶²⁵ During a visit to the intelligence centre, Iran's Defense

⁶²³ Lukyanov, "Fighting Evil Separately." In October 2015, an article on *The Arab Weekly* suggested the possibility of Russian planes operating from Iraqi airbases. This possibility did not come to fruition. See Omar Hejab, "Baghdad information-sharing centre up and running," October 30, 2015, *The Arab Weekly*, <https://the arabweekly.com/baghdad-information-sharing-centre-and-running>. See also "Russia, Iran, Iraq & Syria setting up 'joint information center' to coordinate anti-ISIS operations," *Russia Today*, last modified September 27, 2015, <https://www.rtt.com/news/316592-russia-syria-islamic-state/>.

⁶²⁴ The Arab Weekly Staff, "Iraq strikes ISIS in Syria in coordination with US, Assad," *The Arab Weekly*, April 22, 2018, <https://the arabweekly.com/iraq-strikes-isis-syria-coordination-us-assad>.

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

Minister, Brigadier-General Amir Hatami, emphasized the importance of information sharing in the war against ISIS. He also reportedly complemented the Western countries' efforts in defeating the extremist group in Iraq and Syria.

In September 2017, Russia claimed that 85 percent of Syria had been liberated from terrorist groups.⁶²⁶ As Putin said later that year, Russia could now more realistically push its desire for a “political solution” in Syria. Russia has previously been able to negotiate ceasefires and “de-escalation zones” between Assad and the “moderate opposition,” with the United States and Jordan acting as co-brokers with Russia for one agreement in November 2017.⁶²⁷ Ekaterina Stepanova continues the discussion about the difficulties of a long-term “political solution.” In addition to Syria’s ethnic diversity mentioned above, she opines that in Muslim societies, middle and elite classes favour democracy, while lower class citizens often vote for Islamist parties. Stepanova refers to the example of Egypt choosing the Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Spring. Because of this, peace will be difficult to achieve through a democratic model, she concludes. According to this view, the status quo with Assad is the most likely option for now. However, the Assad/Ba’thist polity cannot last for the long term, and an eventual “more pluralistic system is a must.” Regardless of however this transition between political systems

⁶²⁶ MoDRF, “85% of Syria liberated from ISIS by SAA troops supported by Russian Aerospace Forces,” September 12, 2017, <http://syria.mil.ru/en/index/syria/news/more.htm?id=12141936@egNews>.

⁶²⁷ Stepanova also credits the Russian military campaign for forcing the West to step up its campaign against ISIS. She suggests that United Nations Resolution 2254 was passed on December 18, 2015, thanks to Russian actions. The Resolution had called for a ceasefire (this ceasefire did not apply to extremist groups). It also emphasized “that the Syrian people will decide the future of Syria;” in other words, 2254 supported the idea of a “political solution.” See Stepanova, “Russia’s Policy on Syria after the Start of Military Engagement;” United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 2254 (2015),” December 18, 2015, http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf; ---. “Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks,” December 18, 2015, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>. For more on the Russian-US-Jordanian ceasefire, see: Genevieve Casagrande, Patrick Hamom, and Bryan Amoroso, “Southern Syria Deal Fails to Constrain Iran, al Qaeda,” *Institute for the Study of War*, November 15, 2017, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.ca/2017/11/southern-syria-deal-fails-to-constrain.html>; Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Andrew Heavens, “Russia, Jordan agree to speed de-escalation zone in south Syria,” *Reuters*, September 11, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-jordan-russia/russia-jordan-agree-to-speed-de-escalation-zone-in-south-syria-idUSKCN1BM2A5>.

will occur, by preventing the Assad regime from falling, Russia has allowed this transformation to take place, and it will also very likely have a role in how it takes place.⁶²⁸

Finally, Russia was able to gain some international credit and propaganda points for fighting Syria's opposition and extremist movements. An example of this was when Russia worked with the Syrian regime to retake Palmyra from the terrorist group, as mentioned in the first chapter.⁶²⁹ Palmyra was well known for its ancient Roman artifacts, but it was also a stage for ISIS' cruelty. ISIS terrorists destroyed multiple ancient treasures, which they considered to be idolatrous, but they also executed many prisoners, among them a Syrian archaeologist who had studied the site for decades and also managed to save many of the artifacts.⁶³⁰ When Russia – and not the West – helped restore the area to regime control in 2016, it was seen as an important symbolic Russian-Syrian victory against the barbaric, uncivilized terrorists. That May, a pro-Putin classical music conductor named Valery Gergiev performed a concert in the old Roman amphitheatre of Palmyra, where ISIS' executions had taken place not long before.⁶³¹

Conclusion

The Kremlin's Syria campaign showed that Russia was "back" on the world stage. There were potential problems with other powers operating in the region, especially the United States. But the mission was a great success, for it saved Bashar al-Assad's regime, preventing a change of

⁶²⁸ Bagci, "Strategic Depth in Syria – from the Beginning to Russian Intervention."

⁶²⁹ Chris Kozak, "Russian-Syrian-Iranian Coalition Seizes ISIS-held Palmyra," March 27, 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-syrian-iranian-coalition-seizes-isis-held-palmyra>.

⁶³⁰ Andrew Curry, "Here Are the Ancient Sites ISIS Has Damaged and Destroyed," *National Geographic*, September 1, 2015, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/09/150901-isis-destruction-looting-ancient-sites-iraq-syria-archaeology/>; Mark Strauss, "Archaeologist's Execution Highlights Risks to History's Guardians," *National Geographic*, August 20, 2015, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/08/150820-syria-archaeologist-isis-protecting-artifacts/>; Justin Carissimo, "Isis propaganda video shows 25 Syrian soldiers executed by teenage militia in Palmyra," *Independent*, July 4, 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-propaganda-video-shows-20-syrian-government-soldiers-executed-in-palmyra-by-young-islamists-10366533.html>.

⁶³¹ "Russia's Valery Gergiev conducts concert in Palmyra ruins," *BBC News*, May 5, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-36211449>.

leadership and consequent instability that had been seen in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011. Russia was able to fight terrorist groups outside of its own borders and test new military techniques, methods, and weapons in the process. This long-term mission beyond the “near abroad” showed that Russia had the capability to project power outside its own neighbourhood. Putin’s decision to intervene in the complicated Syrian civil war gave him diplomatic advantages. It provided him with more leverage in international policy, allowing Russia to be directly involved in ceasefire treaties and humanitarian projects.

According to Steve Rosenberg, the *BBC*’s Moscow correspondent, Russia had become a “pariah state” after Crimea was taken in 2014.⁶³² But in Syria, Russia forced the hands of Western governments, which now had to form reluctant “partnerships” and negotiate with the Kremlin. This change gave some compensation for the punishments which Russia received during the Ukraine crisis, which has seen Russia’s expulsion from the G8 and economic sanctions being imposed upon it.⁶³³ The Syrian mission has effectively countered comments from Barack Obama, who in 2014 called Russia a mere “regional power,” and John McCain, who more derisively said that Russia is a “gas station masquerading as a country.”⁶³⁴

⁶³² Steve Rosenberg, “Syria campaign boosts Russian influence,” *BBC News*, December 11, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42307365>.

⁶³³ Bagci, “Strategic Depth in Syria – from the Beginning to Russian Intervention.”

⁶³⁴ *CNN* YouTube Channel, “Obama: Russia a regional power,” March 25, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PkQUzeZbLEs>; Washington Free Beacon YouTube Channel, “McCain: Russia Is a ‘Gas Station Masquerading As a Country,’” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYW0PvZwG_E; Andrew Klavan, an American political commentator, made a very similar comment saying that Russia is a mere “gas station with nuclear weapons.” He also suggested that Russia no longer had an ideology since the USSR’s collapse. Andrew Klavan, “The Deep Significance of Stormy Daniels | The Andrew Klavan Ep. 485,” *The Daily Wire* YouTube Channel, March 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGrMrCk5ItU>, 4:17-6:04.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Soviet Union and Russian Federation's involvement in Syria are both similar and different. Both countries have established a military presence at the Syrian naval ports of Latakia and Tartus, and the Russian Federation's main airstrike force has been stationed at Khmeimim Air Base since its mission started in 2015. During the Cold War, Latakia and Tartus acted as bases for the Soviet Fifth Squadron (or *Eskadra*), which ran extensive patrols in the Mediterranean to track Western ship movements.⁶³⁵ And as we saw in the previous chapter, Russia's agreement with the Syrian government to keep ships at Tartus until 2066 emphasizes Syria's strategic importance to Russia, considering that the base is Russia's only port outside of the former USSR.⁶³⁶ Tartus is about 1,600 kilometres away from the Russian border, but it is one of the country's few ports that are ice-free all year round, with the others being Murmansk (in Russia's northwest), Sevastopol (since the annexation of Crimea in 2014), Kaliningrad (in Russia's Baltic "enclave"), and Vladivostok (on Russia's eastern Pacific coast).⁶³⁷ The Russians have used

⁶³⁵ A.A. Koryakovtsev and S.L. Tashlykov, "The Advanced Defence Naval Line in the South-Western Strategic Area: The 50th anniversary of creation of the 5th Operational Squadron of the Navy," *Voenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal* No. 7 (2017): 4-8.

⁶³⁶ Christopher Kozak, Hugo Spaulding, and Daniel Urchick, "Warning Update: Russia Expanding Facilities at Tartus Naval Base," September 30, 2015, *Institute for the Study of War*, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.ca/2015/09/warning-update-russia-expanding.html>; Defense Ministry, "Russia Extends Syrian Airbase Lease by 49 Years," *The Moscow Times*, July 27, 2017, <https://themoscowtimes.com/news/russia-extends-syrian-airbase-lease-by-49-year-58512>; The New Arab, "Russia says its military will stay in Syria for foreseeable future, following parliamentary agreement," July 14, 2017, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2017/7/14/russia-to-have-semi-permanent-military-presence-in-syria>; "Russia begins development of Syrian bases to host nuclear ships & warplanes," *Russia Today*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/414261-russia-permanent-bases-syria-nuclear/>.

⁶³⁷ Tom Parfitt, "Stranded port still strategic base," *The Guardian*, November 7, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/nov/07/russia>. The access to year-round warm-water ports has been a key objective for Russia, as Iassen Donovan and many other Russian experts have written. Pointing to Sevastopol in Crimea and the possibility of a future port in the Russian-allied breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia, Iassen Donovan suggested in 2014 that the Black Sea area would see future conflict due to Russia's need for access to warm-war ports. See Iassen Donovan, "Russia's Ever-Elusive Warm-Water Quest," *SOFREP News*, December 26, 2014, <https://sofrep.com/39102/russias-ever-elusive-warm-water-quest/>. Edward Delman wrote an article for *The Atlantic* which argued that port access was not Russia's key motivation for intervening in Syria. Saving Assad and fighting extremism were more important than the use of Tartus. However, Delman points to Russia's naval strategic plan from 2001, which emphasized the importance of Russia's western frontiers as NATO expanded eastward. Tartus also has a geographical advantage over Sevastopol, whose location requires Russian ships to pass through the

Tartus since the end of the Cold War. But by the time that Vladimir Putin declared in late 2017 that the Syria campaign had achieved the political goal of keeping Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power, the Middle Eastern country was relatively stable, allowing Russian forces to establish a permanent position in the port city.⁶³⁸

The deployment of anti-air defenses at Tartus, both during the Cold War and Russia's modern Syria mission, emphasizes the importance of the port in both Soviet and Russian strategy.⁶³⁹ These anti-air defenses are useless against Syria's opposition and extremist forces, which do not have the air power of Russia, the United States, or Syria. This fact leads to the second similarity between the USSR and Russia's involvement in Syria: the competition between two geopolitical systems. During the Cold War, Soviet communism was pitted against Western capitalism, and Syria became an important Middle Eastern base in that worldwide ideological struggle, especially as a proxy against Israel, which in turn was perceived as a front for "Western imperialism."⁶⁴⁰ Today, Vladimir Putin's Russia often finds itself at odds with Western democracy. The destruction of the Islamic State and other extremist groups is a goal for both

Dardanelles Straits, which Turkey, a NATO member, holds. Considering these facts, Tartus was a very important secondary objective for Russia's mission in Syria. See Edward Delman, "Military Campaigns in Syria and Ukraine," *The Atlantic*, October 2, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/navy-base-syria-crimea-putin/408694/>. The "Maritime Doctrine of Russian Federation 2020," which Delman cited, contained the following comment: "National Maritime Policy for the Atlantic regional direction is determined by the growing economic, political and military pressure from NATO countries, promoting it to the east, a sharp decline in the capacity of the Russian Federation to implement its maritime activities. The basis of the national marine policy in this area is long-term objectives in the Baltic, Black and Azov seas, as well as in the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea." The document stated that establishing "military-political stability and good neighborly relations" in the Mediterranean region was a priority, as was ensuring that Russian Navy had a presence there. See "Maritime Doctrine of Russian Federation 2020," July 27, 2001, 10-1. http://www.oceanlaw.org/downloads/arctic/Russian_Maritime_Policy_2020.pdf.

⁶³⁸ Steven Rosenberg, "Syria war: Putin's Russian mission accomplished," *BBC News*, December 13, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42330551>.

⁶³⁹ TASS, "Top brass: Missiles of US, allies steered clear of Russian air defenses," April 14, 2018, <http://tass.com/defense/999720>; Central Intelligence Agency, "Air Defense Activity Tartus Port Facilities, Syria," January 21, 1983: CIA-RDP90T00784R000200540001-4, 2. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90T00784R000200540001-4.pdf> and <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp90t00784r000200540001-4>.

⁶⁴⁰ International Institute for Strategic Studies (hereafter IISS), "Soviet-Syrian treaty of friendship and co-operation 8 October 1980." *Survival* 23, No. 1 (1981), 43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338108441945>; David W. Lesch, "Syria: Playing with Fire," in *The 1967 Arab-Israeli War*, 80-1.

sides, but Russia supports Bashar al-Assad while the American-led Coalition against the Islamic State supports Syria's anti-Assad opposition forces.⁶⁴¹ As the Islamic State rapidly loses its territory and power base in Syria, what comes next?⁶⁴² It is inevitable that conflict between Assad and the opposition forces will continue, without the common threat of the Islamic State to distract their attention from each other. As of May 2018, it appears somewhat unlikely that the major powers would go to direct blows to protect their "proxies" in the Syrian Civil War. Yet Syria's post-ISIS future will need a very long time to stabilize, bearing in mind the extent to which Russia and the West have intervened in the country.

Such "geopolitical games" conjure images of Cold War-era struggle. Yet there are also key differences between the Cold War situation and that of the modern day. As we saw in the last chapter, modern Russian-Western strategic competition does not have the same "existential" ideological element as did the battle between communism and capitalism.⁶⁴³ There are certainly cultural differences between Russia and the West – particularly surrounding such liberal institutions as gay marriage – that may seem to be part of a struggle between core values and philosophies.⁶⁴⁴ However, these issues are not as prevalent in Russian-Western relations as fears concerning competition for influence in countries caught in the "crossfire," such as Syria, Ukraine, and Georgia.⁶⁴⁵ Current tensions are no longer about creating a "workers' utopia" in opposition to a prosperous capitalist society, but it is rather primarily about *realpolitik* and

⁶⁴¹ Ruslan Pukhov, "The Russian Military Campaign in Syria: The Balance of Forces and Possible Risks," *Russia in Global Affairs*, October 21, 2015, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/The-Russian-Military-Campaign-in-Syria-The-Balance-of-Forces-and-Possible-Risks-17764>.

⁶⁴² Alexei Malashenko, "The Lessons of Islamic State," August 8, 2017, *Russia in Global Affairs*, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/The-Lessons-of-Islamic-State-18887>.

⁶⁴³ Jonathan Marcus, "Russia v the West: Is this a new Cold War?" *BBC News*, April 1, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43581449>.

⁶⁴⁴ Michael Birnbaum, "Gay rights in Eastern Europe: A new battleground for Russia and the West," *The Washington Post*, July 25, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/gay-rights-in-eastern-europe-a-new-battleground-for-russia-and-the-west/2015/07/24/8ad04d4e-2ff2-11e5-a879-213078d03dd3_story.html?utm_term=.c2f214faca4e.

⁶⁴⁵ Marcus, "Russia v the West: Is this a new Cold War?"

wrestling for strategic advantage and national security between the Russian Federation and Western organizations like NATO and the European Union.

Pavel Andreev of the Valdai International Discussion Club, a geopolitical think tank based in Moscow, has postulated that the American-dominated “unipolar” political system of the post-Cold War era is obsolete.⁶⁴⁶ Andreev says that it is outdated because Russia has intervened unilaterally in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, but the Ukraine crisis includes complicated political factors (including ethno-linguistic demographics, regionalism, and post-Soviet corruption), going beyond the simple Russia-West dichotomy. While the U.S. used to be able to say, “You are either with us or you are against us,” the civil unrest in Ukraine and Syria has allowed Russia to intervene and directly challenge American hegemony, even if not through military confrontation. Russia and the West are also not the only actors in Syria. Israel’s concerns about Syria’s harbouring of Hezbollah and Iranian militias have already been discussed in previous chapters. The Kremlin, no longer holding onto the old Communist Party view that Israel is a “colony” of the United States, must balance its support of Assad and building constructive relations with Israel.⁶⁴⁷ Finally, some Arab interests have expressed concern about Russia’s mission in Syria, claiming that its military actions against Sunni Muslim extremist groups (including ISIS and

⁶⁴⁶ Valdai Discussion Club, “Valdai Club Foundation,” accessed May 2, 2018, <http://valdaiclub.com/about/contacts/>; ---, “Contacts,” accessed May 2, 2018, <http://valdaiclub.com/about/contacts/>; Pavel Andreev, “Is Russia no Longer on the Wrong Side of History?” *Russia in Global Affairs*, November 28, 2014, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Is-Russia-no-Longer-on-the-Wrong-Side-of-History-17152>.

⁶⁴⁷ Yossi Melman, “Analysis: What does Russia really think about Israel’s Alleged Airstrikes in Syria?” *The Jerusalem Post*, January 14, 2017, <http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/Analysis-What-does-Russia-think-about-Israelis-alleged-airstrikes-in-Syria-478428>; Toi Staff, “IDF warns Lebanese that Iran is turning their country into a ‘missile factory,’” *The Times of Israel*, January 28, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-warns-lebanese-that-iran-is-turning-their-country-into-a-missile-factory/>; Vitaly Naumkin, “Despite airstrikes, is Russia still working toward political situation in Syria?” *Russia in Global Affairs*, October 16, 2015, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/book/Despite-airstrikes-is-Russia-still-working-toward-political-solution-in-Syria-17760>.

Jabhat al-Nusra) are part of a Shi'a plot or even a Jewish/Orthodox Christian crusade against Islam.⁶⁴⁸

Another key difference between Russian and Soviet actions in Syria is the fact that Russian forces have been involved in direct combat there. The Soviet Union supplied Syria with weapons and equipment, but its forces never got involved in direct combat for the sake of its Middle Eastern ally, even during its protracted conflict against Israel. Russia has conversely been very deeply involved in the Syrian Civil War, sending warplanes and personnel to Syrian bases, as well as conducting a very high number of airstrikes against opposition and extremist targets. The Russian government considers its Syria mission to be a campaign against Islamic extremism, which has directly affected Russia through two wars in Chechnya, an ongoing insurgency in the Caucasus, and numerous terrorist attacks upon Russian civilians since the start of the first Chechen War in 1994. While it did have to fight Muslim *mujahideen* forces in Afghanistan from 1979-89, the Soviet Union did not have a problem with extremist Islamic groups like Russia does in the form of ISIS and its Chechen branch known as the “Wilayat Qawqaz” (formerly the Caucasus Emirate).

Having distinguished Soviet from modern Russian actions in Syria, it can be concluded that the Russian Federation has numerous reasons for sending its military into Syria. First, the intention was to protect the Arab country from falling into a state of chaos, which would have theoretically happened if Bashar al-Assad fell to either opposition or extremist forces. Secondly, as just noted above, the mission was also linked to Russia's “War on Terror,” which, in concert with domestic anti-terror operations, was meant to destroy terrorist groups abroad before they

⁶⁴⁸ Naumkin, “Despite airstrikes, is Russia still working toward political situation in Syria?”

could act on Russian territory.⁶⁴⁹ This campaign was also undertaken in the context of heightened Russian-Western tensions as a consequence of Russian interference in the Ukraine crisis. As Ukraine descended into a state of civil war between Western-supported Kyiv and Russian-supported rebels in the Donbass region, it became evident that Moscow's desired "political solution" to the strife (i.e. through the Minsk-I and -II ceasefire protocols) had mixed results. The conflict in Ukraine has thus become suspended in an impasse. For Russia, military involvement in Syria to support Assad against ISIS and other factions was a logical alternative. At the same time, the Kremlin hoped that its Western "partners" (but not allies) would cooperate to help destroy the common terrorist threat.

Chechen historian Mairbek Vatchagaev wrote in November 2015 that Vladimir Putin did not want to destroy ISIS, even though Russia "does everything in its power to represent itself as a victim" of the terrorist group.⁶⁵⁰ Vatchagaev said that Russia's sole motivation for intervening in Syria was to "atone" for the annexation of Crimea – "to make the West forgive it" for interfering in Ukraine's post-Euromaidan political climate. This argument has some merit, as Russia has acted in Ukraine to its advantage, seizing Ukrainian territory and supporting the "anti-revolutionary" rebels in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Moscow has hoped to reduce some of the diplomatic damage and its reputation as merely an aggressor state as a result of the Ukrainian conflict. Saving Assad from rebel and extremist forces, preventing a power vacuum, and coordinating anti-terrorist combat operations with Syria, Iraq, and Iran were seen as ways of accomplishing this goal.

⁶⁴⁹ Pukhov, "The Russian Military Campaign in Syria."

⁶⁵⁰ "Mairbek Vatchagaev," *The Jamestown Foundation*, accessed May 3, 2018, <https://jamestown.org/analyst/mairbek-vatchagaev/>; Mairbek Vatchagaev, "Islamic State Apparently Wins Its Competition With Caucasus Emirate," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 12 (No. 207) by *The Jamestown Foundation*, November 13, 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-state-apparently-wins-its-competition-with-caucasus-empire-2/#.VklVaHYrLIV>.

However, Russian forces also have reasons for being in Syria that make strategic sense. When a Russian airstrike destroys an ISIS facility and kills some militants, the extremist group has lost some assets that could be used elsewhere. This is especially important, considering the existence of an ISIS branch in Russia's Caucasus region. We can only imagine this scenario, but how would the United States or Great Britain react if enough citizens within those countries pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and actively took part in its achieving its goals? Their interests in the Middle East would most certainly grow, because that is where ISIS originated. While this imaginary situation is not a reality for Western countries, it is for Russia.

Finally, Russia's bases at Tartus and Khmeimim give it international power, strengthening its ability to act abroad, beyond the Soviet Union's old boundaries. Russia also has a legal reason to be in Syria, for Syrian President Assad requested Russia's military presence, while Western militaries have acted there without his government's permission.⁶⁵¹ Regarding Russia's increased role in international politics resulting from the Syrian mission, it is fitting to conclude with comments from Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov. Speaking of China's rise as a global economy, Lavrov described this event as key to slowly breaking the "unipolar" world which existed since the Cold War's end in 1991.⁶⁵² He said, "This clearly

⁶⁵¹ "Soglashenie mezhdru Rossiiskoi Federatsiei i Siriiskoi Arabskoi Respublikoi o razmeshchenii aviatsionnoi gruppy Vooryzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii na territorii Siriiskoi Arabskoi Respubliki," *Ofitsial'nyi internet-portal pravovoi informatsii*, August 26, 2015, 3, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201601140019?index=0&rangeSize=1>; Canada, under Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government, launched airstrikes against ISIS within Syrian territory, being the only NATO country to do so along with the United States. Before then, Canadian planes were only launching such strikes within Iraq. See "Canada launches first air strikes in Syria," *BBC News*, April 9, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-32227351>; Bashar al-Assad spoke to Chinese media in March 2017. During this interview, he said that any American, Turkish, or other foreign forces acting in Syria without Damascus' authorization were "invaders." Similarly to Vladimir Putin, Assad commented that these forces had acted as destabilizing factors in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Egy Ember YouTube Channel, "Bashar al-Assad interview (Phoenix Chinese Channel, 2017.03.11.)," March 11, 2017, video, 11:48-12:40. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BcAoOaI3DMY>.

⁶⁵² Sergei Lavrov, "Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective," *Russia in Global Affairs*, March 30, 2016, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Russias-Foreign-Policy-in-a-Historical-Perspective-18067>.

illustrates the undeniable plurality of development models and excludes the boring uniformity implied by the Western coordinate system.” Russia’s expeditionary force in Syria does the same, forcing the West to recognize the Kremlin’s role in drastically changing the situation in its war-torn Middle Eastern ally.

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