



# The Mythical Alliance

## Russia's Syria Policy

**Dmitri Trenin**

**FEBRUARY 2013**



CARNEGIE MOSCOW CENTER

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## Summary

The Syrian conflict, now almost two years old, has claimed over 60,000 lives, bringing destruction to the country and destabilizing the Middle East. Joint international action is needed, but deadlock at the United Nations Security Council has so far prevented it. U.S. and European hopes that Russia would simply join them in pushing Bashar al-Assad out of power have proven wrong. A new approach is necessary to stop the carnage and create a transitional authority in Damascus that can foster national reconciliation.

### Moscow's Calculus

- On Syria, Russia took a clear position early on and has not shied away from very strong disagreement with the United States and Europe.
- Refusing to use its influence to pressure President Assad and urging both sides in the conflict to work toward reconciliation, Russia sees itself as evenhanded.
- Russia's position on Syria is governed by its concept of the world order, which calls for the use of force to be controlled by the Security Council and rejects regime change from abroad.
- Moscow views the Arab Spring as an Islamist revolution likely to be dominated by extremists. It fears the Syrian conflict will become more radicalized and spread further.
- The Kremlin's policies have not worked and are seriously damaging Russia's relations with the West and the Arab world.

### Toward Deeper Russian-Western Cooperation

- Russia cannot be ignored, and Western countries cannot deal with Moscow on their own terms.
- The West should embrace cooperation with Russia on the basis of shared interests. In Syria, no matter how strongly Moscow and Washington disagree about Assad's departure from power, neither Americans nor Russians want chaos or the establishment of a radical Sunni Islamist regime.
- Western countries should make use of Russia's unique and pragmatic perspective in the Middle East in general and Syria in particular. Moscow's

view has sometimes been closer to reality than a succession of Western enthusiasm and despair.

- The United States and Europe should acknowledge that the world order is transforming. Russia is not and will not be part of the West, but it sees itself as a stabilizing force, favoring tradition and procedure over emotion and ideology. Russia is a natural ally of those seeking more predictability in international relations.

### **Toward a New Approach in Syria**

- Russia should drop its notional hands-off attitude toward political developments in Syria. And the United States should focus on a political settlement as its immediate goal instead of an overthrow of the Assad regime.
- The United States and Russia need to work out a practical mechanism for implementing the political transition in Syria.
- Moscow and Washington should identify and incentivize those elements in the warring camps that are most amenable to dialogue and should apply pressure to those unwilling to engage in order to bring them to the negotiating table. They should isolate and sanction those totally opposed to reconciliation.
- Russia and the United States need to work closely with all parties in the region—the Arab states, Turkey, Israel, and Iran—to secure their support for the Syrian peace process. The process should be “owned” by the United Nations to improve its credibility.

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## The Russia Factor

The Syrian uprising that began in March 2011 has morphed into a violent civil war with strong sectarian overtones. And the intrastate armed conflict, resulting by late November 2012 in an estimated 60,000 deaths,<sup>1</sup> has divided the international community.

While the United States, the European Union, Turkey, and the Gulf countries—particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia—have openly sided with the armed opposition to President Bashar al-Assad, Russia and China have opposed any pressure on Damascus. Iran has materially supported the Assad regime. India and Brazil, both seeking United Nations (UN) Security Council membership, are engaged in a tough balancing act. The Syrian crisis is testing the strength of the United Nations and, in particular, the credibility and effectiveness of its Security Council.

Much has hinged on the Russian government's attitudes and policies toward the recent developments in Syria. Two decades after the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia continues to be a major international player as a permanent member of the Security Council. Moscow espouses a distinct worldview that increasingly diverges from that of the West, and it is not shy about offering alternative solutions to a range of international issues. This is particularly important because it has the power to block U.S. policies at the Security Council, rendering them illegal in terms of international law should Washington proceed without the Security Council's consent. But given Moscow's international weight, U.S.-Russian collaboration on Syria could pave the way toward an end to the conflict.

Russia's position is also important in light of China, a rising global power that is still generally reluctant to oppose the West alone on issues that do not affect its own immediate interests. However, Beijing has occasionally joined Moscow in opposing selected issues, allowing the Russians to take the lead (and the heat), thus creating a pattern of Sino-Russian opposition to the United States and Europe.

Moscow often has international support for its high-profile efforts to stand up to Washington. Less often overtly than otherwise, support for Russia's stances is found among a number of governments and nonstate actors that are opposed to U.S. policies or are simply wedded to the traditional values of international relations, such as state sovereignty and nonintervention, which Russia defends against the current Western practice of humanitarian intervention.

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Such opposition risks permanently dividing the UN Security Council on the issues of sovereignty and human rights. Since most armed conflicts in the world now tend to be within states, rather than between them—which was the case in the mid-twentieth century when the UN Charter was written—this disagreement can paralyze the principal organ of the world body responsible for international peace and security.

Still, with global Western domination on the wane, and many things in flux, Russia is putting itself forward as a counterweight to the West that can influence the shape of the emerging international order.

In reality, the wrangling over Syria represents a contest of different views of the global order, of the issues of sovereignty and human rights, of the use of force, and of the responsibility to use force rather than allow a conflict to “burn itself out.” This contest is fundamentally different from the U.S.-Soviet Cold War rivalry in the Middle East, which was essentially about ideology and regional dominance. The situation is also different from the past because in Syria there is now an international crisis atop an acute domestic conflict, which itself is part of a nationwide process dubbed the Arab Spring.

Syria exemplifies in many ways a quintessential early-twenty-first-century confrontation, and the contestation that pits Russia against the West and the Arab world at the Security Council represents the difficulties of dealing with such conflicts at the global level. The United States and its allies can no longer solve those issues alone. Successful conflict management and resolution require global and regional cooperation even when values are divergent.

Effective cooperation, in turn, demands at a minimum that the parties clearly understand their motives and aims—especially Russia's. Understanding Russia's approach to Syria begins in Libya.

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## **The Origins of Russia's Approach: The Libya Prelude**

The Syrian crisis came on the heels of the outbreak of the crisis in Libya, but the situations evolved quite differently from one another. In Libya, the uprising against the regime of Muammar Qaddafi, which began in February 2011, received decisive support from the international community. In March 2011, as Qaddafi's forces were preparing to put down the resistance in Benghazi, the UN Security Council passed resolutions 1971 and 1973, condemning the Libyan leader's actions and imposing a no-fly zone over the country in order to protect civilians from massacre at the hands of the regime's forces. The international effort in Libya led to the downfall of Qaddafi's regime by October 2011.

The experience both helped solidify Moscow's position on the evolving crisis in Syria and revealed to the international community where Russia was coming from on the issue of outside military intervention in domestic conflicts.

With Libya, Russia took an unprecedented step—it allowed the use of force against a sovereign government in a domestic conflict. The rhetoric of then Russian president Dmitri Medvedev did not differ much from that of Western leaders. Medvedev called Qaddafi a “political corpse” more than six months before the Libyan dictator's ouster. The Russian ambassador to Libya, Vladimir Chamov, appeared to dissent from the Kremlin's new line in diplomatic cables and was summarily dismissed and retired in March 2011.

This new approach was not solely Medvedev's. When the Russian National Security Council debated the issue ahead of the crucial Security Council vote, two options were offered: abstain from the vote or join the Western powers. In the end, Russia abstained, opting for the more cautious approach. The Russian National Security Council did not consider the proposed parameters for the use of force entirely to its satisfaction.

Vladimir Putin, formally the prime minister at the time but still Russia's top leader and Medvedev's mentor, was evidently more skeptical than his junior colleagues, but he did not object to Russia's abstention, thus allowing the resolutions to pass. However, soon after the Security Council vote, Putin publicly voiced his concerns about the “new crusaders” supposedly cavalier behavior while de facto allowing the no-fly zone in Libya to take effect.

The visible rift between Russia's nominal president and its all-powerful prime minister was, in reality, an attempt by Moscow to play both sides of the issue in order to maximize the gains and minimize any losses from the conflict. Medvedev's part in the game was to get the West's support for Russia's modernization drive and achieve a compromise solution on missile defense in Europe; Putin's was to salvage the \$8 billion worth of contracts signed with Qaddafi's Libya.

As the situation in Libya evolved, Russian skepticism became more pronounced. Organizing the no-fly zone became the job of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), evoking unhappy memories of the Alliance's previous military interventions in the Balkans, including in Kosovo in 1999. Then, Moscow expressed a particular allergy to any suggestions that NATO would assume a global mission, which it read as potentially covering the former Soviet space.

After having watched, in disbelief, a long standoff between the NATO-assisted rebels and the regime in the middle of the Libyan civil war, the Russians were struck by the swift endgame, which saw covert Western support for the ouster of Qaddafi followed by the former ruler's brutal killing at the hands of the rebels. The war in Libya over, Russian officials, including Medvedev, accused the West of hypocrisy in killing people in Qaddafi-held

towns in order to save lives in rebel-dominated territories and of mendacity in helping to overthrow the regime while professing no intention of doing so.

Moscow was also unpleasantly surprised by the swift evolution of the U.S. position on the Libyan crisis. Initially, the Kremlin was led to believe that the United States would not intervene in Libya. The Russians were convinced by the hard-headed arguments in favor of staying away from the Libyan conflict, publicly made by then U.S. secretary of defense Robert Gates—who made it clear that the establishment of a no-fly zone would mean an offensive military operation and warned against the United States becoming involved in a third conflict in a Muslim country, alongside Iraq and Afghanistan. When two weeks later President Barack Obama, persuaded by his aides, took the opposite view and ordered preparations for a military operation, Moscow was stunned by Washington's apparent unpredictability.

In practical terms, the position that Russia took on Libya in 2011 meant that Moscow would not automatically protect regimes that run afoul of the West. Qaddafi had never been a Soviet stooge during the Cold War, and he had made peace with the West as far back as 2003. Russia had business dealings with Libya right up until the uprising, though far less extensive ties than the Europeans. President Putin traveled to Libya and hosted Qaddafi in Moscow, but Russian leaders felt no responsibility and no sympathy for the Libyan dictator. They were not sorry to see him go.

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### **Moscow's willingness to cooperate with the West stops short of outright regime change.**

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It also became apparent that if Russia were considered on equal footing with its Western counterparts, Moscow would cooperate with the West in organizing and conducting military operations under Security Council auspices involving the use of force to protect human lives and freedoms in third countries. Moscow's willingness to cooperate with the West, however, stops short of outright regime change, plotting a coup d'état, or pressuring foreign leaders to give up power.

Russia's objections to regime change in third countries are rooted not only in the twin principles of state sovereignty and noninterference in states' internal affairs but also in concerns about what happens after a leader is deposed. In post-Qaddafi Libya, Russian observers have worried about the general chaos, a de facto breakup of the country, and the proliferation of the deposed regime's weapons stocks.

Qaddafi had few friends in Russia, and Putin was not among them; the dictator's overthrow, however, raised the question of Western credibility. Russia expects the West to see it as an equal partner and to respect its views and interests. But in Libya, Moscow soon discovered that it had no leverage left with the West as far as the conduct of the mandated operation was concerned. And when Qaddafi was finally overthrown, the new Libyan authorities quickly renewed contracts with the Western companies that had been concluded with

Qaddafi. Contracts with Russian companies, however, were not renewed. This material injury added to the insult of NATO going beyond its Security Council mandate to protect Libyan civilians by establishing a no-fly zone when it began a broader military campaign in the country. This combination provoked serious resentment in Moscow, which was soon felt in Syria. The Libyan lesson would be remembered.

## Russia's Deep Syrian Roots

It is hardly surprising that the Syrian crisis evolved differently from Libya's given the stark differences between the two states. Libya is a sparsely populated country of oases in the desert, largely peripheral to the rest of the Arab world. Syria, with its over 22 million inhabitants, is situated in the heart of the Middle East and has been central to the region's history for the past three thousand years. In very practical terms, the armed forces available to President Bashar al-Assad are far superior to the Libyan military under the late Qaddafi. It should have been clear from the beginning that there could be no room for a Libyan scenario to play out in Syria.

And it certainly has not. As of January 2013, Syrian rebels and Syrian government forces have reached a temporary stalemate on the battlefield. The rebels gained much ground toward the end of 2012 but are not yet capable of defeating the regime, and both sides are resolutely pursuing the goal of full military victory. The Syrian people, caught in the cross fire, are bleeding, losing numerous lives every day. Many Syrians are certainly opposed to the Assad regime, but many also fear the victory of the rebels. In the two years since the start of the uprising, the Syrian army has not disintegrated, nor have the merchant classes of war-devastated Aleppo and the semi-besieged capital Damascus risen up against the regime.

Moscow's attitude toward the developments in Syria certainly has been informed by the lessons it learned in Libya, but Russians are no strangers to Syria. From the 1960s to the early 1990s, Moscow maintained close, quasi-alliance relations with Damascus, ruled from 1970 until 2000 by Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father. In 1980, Moscow and Damascus signed a treaty that provided for consultation in case of a threat to peace and for military cooperation.

During the second half of the twentieth century, Syria was second only to Egypt in importance among the Arab countries involved in the conflict with Israel—a conflict that was a key expression of the broader Cold War standoff between the Soviet Union and the United States. As a result, for a quarter century following the 1967 Six-Day War in which Israel wrested control of the Golan Heights away from Syria, the Soviet Union supported Damascus politically, economically, and, above all, militarily.

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Even though Hafez al-Assad heavily depended on the USSR, he remained a full master in his own house and in Syria's own "near abroad." In 1976, Syrian forces invaded Lebanon, and they remained there for thirty years. In 1982, Assad's troops crushed an uprising in the Syrian city of Homs with the reported loss of 20,000 lives. The Soviets may have at times lamented the senior Assad's willful behavior, but he was their safest bet in the region.

When then Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat "defected" to the American camp in 1972, Syria became the de facto main Soviet ally in the Middle East and held that position until 1991. Not only were virtually all its weapons Soviet made, but Syria also hosted up to 6,000 Soviet military advisers and technicians as well as civilian personnel and dependents. Tens of thousands of Syrian students graduated from Soviet universities, colleges, and military academies, and many of them also married Soviet citizens.

Even after the breakup of the Soviet Union, a number of military advisers, now representing the Russian Federation, continued to lend their services to the Syrian government. Tartus, a Syrian port that during the Cold War was used by the Soviet Navy's Fifth Mediterranean Squadron, became Russia's only naval resupply facility outside the former Soviet Union. Moscow continued to arm Syria—even though in order to sell new weapons to Damascus, it had to forgive \$10 billion of Syria's \$13 billion Soviet-era debt in 2005.

Yet, Damascus was not Russia's "last remaining ally in the Middle East" as many commentators have recently called it. Moscow simply withdrew from geopolitical competition in the region as early as 1990. Then, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze turned away from their other ally, Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which had invaded and annexed Kuwait, allowing a U.S.-led coalition to defeat Saddam's forces in the first Gulf War. In the fall of 1991, just before the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow restored diplomatic relations with Israel and "rebalanced" its approach to the Palestinian issue.<sup>2</sup>

Ever since, Russia's presence in the region has been guided by a combination of commercial interests, concerns about the support that comes from the region for insurgents and terrorists in Russia's North Caucasus, and the newly discovered spiritual attractions of the Holy Land and the more mundane beaches of the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the Gulf. Two figures tell the story of the metamorphosis of Moscow's presence in the region better than anything else. When Anwar al-Sadat switched Egypt's allegiance from Moscow to Washington, he sent home no fewer than 20,000 Soviet military advisers. When Hosni Mubarak, Sadat's heir, was toppled in a revolution almost forty years later, over 40,000 Russian holidaymakers were stranded in Hurghada, Sharm el-Sheikh, and other Egyptian resorts. Revolution or not, they continued with their vacations.

## Four Layers of Moscow's Position on Syria

Russia's approach to Syria is best analyzed at four levels, in diminishing importance: calculations based on the changing international order, the effects of the Arab Spring, the material interests in Syria, and the role of religion.

### The International Order

At level one comes Russia's concern about the international order. Russian officials often refer to the United Nations Charter, in particular its support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of UN member states. While the Soviet Union often only paid lip service to the UN Charter, relying instead on its military power and politico-ideological control over its vast global empire, the much smaller Russian Federation, no longer revolutionary or a superpower, really sees the Security Council and traditional international law as a bulwark of the world order. Moscow insists that the Security Council should focus on matters related to the maintenance of international peace and security. Thus, it should abstain from supporting parties in an internal conflict, such as in Syria.

But Russia accepts, in principle, the gradual and consensual change of international law. It formally recognizes the responsibility to protect—that is, the principle that human rights considerations can make a military intervention by the UN or one of its members necessary. Moscow actually referred to the doctrine during the brief war with Georgia in 2008, which it ostensibly fought in defense of the South Ossetian population.

Even when the intervention on humanitarian grounds is duly approved, the military operation, in Moscow's view, should be confined to protecting civilians, not changing the regime or helping the armed opposition fighting the regime. There should be no "mission creep" into outright involvement in a local civil war. "We are not in the business of regime change," and the Security Council "does not deal with revolutions," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov declared.<sup>3</sup> To the Russians' credit, their own brief operation in Georgia in 2008, while stepping out of the conflict zones in South Ossetia and Abkhazia into Georgia proper, did not lead to a march on Tbilisi and the toppling of the Georgian government, as many in the West feared—and some in Russia definitely wanted—at the time.

The Russians are also adamant that there shall be no use of force or threat of such use, except when the UN Security Council, where Moscow has the right of veto, decides otherwise. Failure to seek, or obtain, such a mandate makes an intervention illegal, in Russia's view.

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Russia does seem to acknowledge exceptions to that rule. In South Ossetia, Russia acted without an international mandate, implying that in certain cases Moscow believes intervention may be urgent and justified even without a green light from the UN Security Council. Then military action becomes a matter of political choice laden with international political and legal consequences.

Russia abhors in particular the liberal use of force by the United States. As a permanent, veto-wielding member of the Security Council, Russia has the ability to protect its immediate interests and ensure a more predictable international environment. In broader terms, ideal world governance, in Moscow's view, is built on a great-power consensus: exactly the Rooseveltian idea of four global policemen. The vaunted "multipolarity" is just the most recent iteration of the concept first embodied in the nineteenth-century Concert of Europe, within which the Russian Empire felt quite at ease.

Syria, from the Kremlin's perspective, is just another case where the West is in the business of regime change. In Iraq, the United States invaded to topple Saddam Hussein. Iran has long lived under a similar threat. In Yugoslavia, NATO's air war led to the separation of Kosovo from Serbia; Slobodan Milosevic was overthrown shortly thereafter, in a first of what would be known as the color revolutions. Most recently, in Libya, the Kremlin first chose not to oppose a "no-fly zone" to save innocent lives but was later angered as the humanitarian operation morphed into the familiar regime change.

### The Arab Spring

At level two, there is the Russian government's assessment of the domestic developments in Syria and, more widely, of the Arab Spring, which put an end to Mubarak's dictatorial rule and led to the overthrow of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya. From the very start, Russian Middle East watchers have been markedly less upbeat than their Western counterparts about the nature and direction of change in the region. What most of them see can be termed a "Great Islamist Revolution."<sup>24</sup> While Europeans and Americans saw in the Arab world a repeat of Europe's democratic upheavals of 1848 or 1989, the Russians drew parallels to their own of 1917—the only question was which month would be the equivalent of Red October.

Early on, Russian policymakers feared an Islamist takeover would follow the overthrow of secular authoritarians. They regarded Western countries and pro-Western liberals in the Arab countries as paving the way for religious radicals or al-Qaeda allies. For Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, references to the Arab Spring and democracy in this context were "baby talk."<sup>25</sup>

There was almost no jubilation in Russian society at the "people's victories" in Egypt and Tunisia, which had become tourist attractions to many Russians (2.8 million Russian holidaymakers went to Egypt in 2010 and 2.5 million in 2012). Political freedom is one thing, but economic well-being is another, and bitter disappointment is just a matter of time, skeptical Russian observers

reasoned. Moreover, freedom in an immature society gives an advantage to the strongest and most ruthless. Russian state-owned television richly supplied its viewers with pictures of the unfolding political drama, particularly in Cairo, where the voices of hope and aspiration were intermingled with those of fear and despair.

The message the Russian viewers received was that even those revolutions that do not end in civil wars—such as in Egypt and Tunisia—mean death and destruction and result in chaos, which can lead to an even more brutal regime than the one they did away with. To the Russian audience, sufficiently aware of their own country's history in the last century, this was often a compelling argument. In Libya, where liberals rather than Islamists emerged victorious at the polls in 2012, the issue the Russians raised was the plunder by revolutionaries of Qaddafi's vast weapons arsenals and the proliferation of these weapons across the region, starting with Mali. There, separatists and Islamist radicals close to al-Qaeda managed to take over the northern part of the country to establish a stronghold.

This fear is quite pronounced with regard to Syria, where Bashar al-Assad's opponents include jihadi elements, some with links to al-Qaeda, and where the danger of a sectarian war between Sunni and Shia, Arabs and Kurds, Muslims and Christians is very real. Assad's arsenals, moreover, contain missiles and chemical weapons that could find their way out of the country and fuel conflicts elsewhere, this time—unlike in Libya—much closer to Russia's borders. After all, the distance from Damascus to Makhachkala, in Russia's Republic of Dagestan, is less than 1,000 miles.

It needs to be remembered that ordinary Russians recently witnessed large-scale violence much closer to home than ordinary Americans or even Europeans. For almost a decade at the turn of the present century, Chechnya was a bleeding wound, with the Russian army using a lot of firepower to crush the rebels. Grozny, Chechnya's capital, had to be rebuilt almost from scratch. Even today, the North Caucasus—from Dagestan in the east to Kabardino-Balkaria in the west—remains restless, even though Chechnya itself, counter-intuitively, has become a bulwark of relative stability in the region.

In the Russian government's initial calculus, Assad was likely to hold on to power for quite some time—and this has proven to be a more accurate assessment than repeated Western predictions of Assad's days being "numbered." The Russians also believed that Assad's eventual overthrow would not mean the end of the civil war but only the beginning of its next phase. In President Putin's words, the Syrian government and the opposition in this case would just switch places, but the fighting would continue. Having such a cauldron of large-scale violence only a few hundred miles from Russia's own troubled North Caucasus is not good news to Moscow, especially with the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi just a year away.



Broadly speaking, the Arab Spring has already reverberated across the former Soviet Union. There have been no serious attempts to date to unseat the rulers of ex-Soviet republics, but many of the problems those countries faced were not dissimilar from those of the Arab world. When Russia's urban middle classes, angered by the flawed parliamentary elections of December 2011, staged mass protests in Moscow, some of Vladimir Putin's would-be detractors at home and abroad hoped that a "Russian Spring" would lead to a meltdown of what they called Putin's Russia.<sup>6</sup>

The Kremlin rulers themselves were wary not so much of the "huddled masses" of Russia who would rise up against them as they were of Western meddling, whether in the form of encouraging revolution within countries or intervening from the outside. Putin publicly accused Russian protesters of being on the payroll of the U.S. government. To some of Putin's close aides, like former deputy prime minister and current head of Russia's state oil company Rosneft, Igor Sechin, the Arab Spring was but the newest form of Western-inspired, Western-led regime change.<sup>7</sup>

Against this backdrop, after Putin's formal return to the Kremlin in May 2012, the Syrian crisis became a crucible for a new iteration of Moscow's foreign policy.

### **Russia's Material Interests**

Russia's material interests in Syria itself are relatively modest and are only placed at level three. Damascus stopped being Moscow's ally two decades ago, when Russia withdrew from geopolitical competition in the region. Bashar al-Assad, like his father, continues to buy Russian arms, but he does so as a commercial client rather than as a strategic partner. The relationship is not particularly lucrative given the terms of the debt-repayment deal.

The Tartus facility is useful for the Russian Navy, especially as it is the only such asset anywhere outside the former USSR. With a personnel of about 50, it is a far cry, of course, from being a naval base. Still, the Syrian crisis has become an occasion for the Russian Navy to remind others of its existence. Since 2011, Russian naval ships have made several port calls at Tartus. In January 2013, ships from all four Russian fleets assembled in the eastern Mediterranean for their biggest naval exercises since the downfall of the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of the exercise was not to evacuate Russian citizens from Syria, as many observers had concluded, but to send the message that the Russian Navy, after a twenty-year break, was back in international waters.

There are also thousands of Russian citizens living in Syria. They are mostly wives of Syrians, many of them military officers, who once studied in the Soviet Union, and of course their children. Only 3,000 of them, however, are properly registered with the Russian consulate in Damascus. About 1,000 of these Russian passport holders have gone to Russia since the beginning of the war in Syria, but the vast majority remain.<sup>9</sup> With Moscow's foreign policy now

paying more attention—both rhetorically and in practice—to the well-being of Russian citizens abroad, this is certainly an issue that cannot be ignored.

Moscow has been much more cautious with regard to the roughly 200,000 Circassians, whose ancestors went to Syria and other parts of the Middle East in the nineteenth century, fleeing from the Russian conquest of the North Caucasus. In the midst of the Syrian conflict, several thousand of these people, the *mubajees*, applied for permission to resettle in the Russian North Caucasus. The Russian government, however, has only allowed a handful of people back, careful not to add to the complex ethno-political situation in the North Caucasus.

### The Role of Religion

At level four is the “spiritual” element of Russia’s position on Syria and, more broadly, the Middle East. The conservative version of Russian nationalism, which is becoming the Kremlin’s new mainstream, is closely related to Orthodox Christianity. Religion is being upgraded to be a centerpiece of Russia’s national identity, and its traditional ethics are being adopted as a foundation of Moscow’s foreign policy. The values espoused by the Russian leadership are based, in the words of Sergey Lavrov, on the “thousand-year-old traditions common to the world’s main religions.”<sup>10</sup>

Russian leaders, officials, and many ordinary citizens have recently become frequent visitors to the Holy Land, helped by the introduction in 2008 of a visa-free regime between Russia and Israel. The reinvigorated Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, founded in 1882 and enjoying the Kremlin’s support, has been able to reclaim or repair property in Jerusalem, Bethlehem (which now even has a Putin Street, just like Grozny), and elsewhere, thus increasing Russia’s presence in the Holy Land. Patriarch Kirill, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church, visited Syria in 2011 and traveled to Israel, the Palestinian territories, and Jordan in the following year.

In Syria, as in Egypt and Iraq, Russian officials have publicly expressed concern over the safety and rights of Christian minorities caught in the whirlwind of Islamist resurgence. It is in Russia’s interests, Sergey Lavrov told the Orthodox Palestinian Society, “to do everything to prevent formation of states which are dominated by extremist groups and where any ethnic or religious group is discriminated against.” Lavrov went even further. “The practice used by *the descendants of European Christians in the sphere of human rights*” (emphasis added) he said, “increasingly proves that the truth is not there.”<sup>11</sup> This quote illustrates the conviction of many in Moscow that present-day Europe has distanced too much from its roots, allowed far too much tolerance, and denied its Christian identity.

In this situation, Vladimir Putin and his ally Patriarch Kirill are seeking to pick up the mantle of defenders of Christian faith, not so much against other religions, which are treated with respect, but from “blasphemers” at home,

like the Pussy Riot punk group and the “godless Europeans” next door—yet another striking metamorphosis in Russian history. President Putin, of course, is not exactly Czar Nicholas I, who formally assumed the role of protector of Orthodox Christians in the former Ottoman Empire, but religion certainly factors into the Kremlin's thinking.

## Moscow's Other Relationships

The Russian position on Syria is also informed by Moscow's relationships with other players that have interests in the region, including Iran, Israel, and the West.

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a common desire to rob Iran of its most important Arab ally—Syria. Moreover, the Alawite regime's ouster would harm Iran in other ways as well, weakening Lebanon's Shia militant group Hezbollah, a proxy that both Tehran and Damascus support, as well as other Shia forces in the region that are allied with Iran. For Moscow, that conclusion applies to the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Israel alike. In addition, the United States and its allies stand to gain a stronger position in a future showdown with Iran should the Syrian regime fall. Russian officials publicly suspect that NATO's deployment of Patriot

missile defense batteries on the Turkish-Syrian border is actually aimed at Iran rather than Syria.

Russia recognizes the Iran-Syria nexus but has taken a wholly different perspective on it. Tehran, the Russians believe, should be part of a solution to the Syrian issue. Moscow has been dismayed at the Sunni Saudis' refusal to discuss Syria with Shia-dominated Iran as well as by the U.S. support for the Saudi position. To Russian Middle East watchers, the United States is not leading from behind on Syria; it is largely following Saudi policy, which is informed by Riyadh's regional agenda, centered on the Sunni-Shia rivalry.

The Russians have interpreted the fact that Israel joined the anti-Assad camp as influenced by the Netanyahu government's growing concern over the Iranian nuclear program. Even if they dispute parts of the Israelis' analysis regarding Iran, the Russians still understand Israel's position. Ironically, given the history of the Cold War, Russians now show a lot of empathy toward the Jewish state. Israel has become home to over a million of Russians' former compatriots who continue to speak Russian, and the two states face many of the same challenges (such as terrorism) and enemies (such as jihadis). President Putin visited Israel in June 2012 soon after his inauguration, and on the nature

of the Arab Spring, most Russians and Israelis agree that it is a fundamentally Islamist, not democratic, awakening.

Moscow's views on the Syria policies of different Arab countries vary. Moscow has welcomed Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi's effort to bring Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey into the Syrian settlement process. Yet, since 2003, the broader movement to which Morsi belongs, the Muslim Brotherhood, has been on Moscow's list of terrorist organizations as a result of its activities in the North Caucasus during the Chechen war.<sup>12</sup> It was during that long war that Moscow came to see the Arab world as containing some of the hotbeds of Islamist radicalism that posed a threat to Russia and its near neighborhood in Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

Moscow sees the Islamist regimes now in power in Egypt and Tunisia, as well as the revolutionaries in Libya, as ideological supporters of the Syrian opposition, and it sees the conservative Gulf monarchies as the opposition's geopolitical and sectarian allies. From the Russian perspective, exporting Islamist radicalism to various countries has long been a survival strategy for the Saudi and Qatari regimes. The Russians are hardly amused by the surge in anti-Russian sentiments and the loss of residual influence in much of the Arab world, but they have not been impressed enough to change course in Syria.

The Russians are not alone in feeling battered by the changes sweeping the Arab Street. They watched the harsh treatment of the United States on the occasion of the showing of the film trailer, "The Innocence of Muslims." The killing in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, of Christopher Stephens, the U.S. ambassador to Libya, symbolized to many Russians the utter naïveté of Americans when it came to the recent popular upheavals in the Arab world. To the Russian officials' credit, they publicly admitted that "no one fully understands what is going on in the Middle East."<sup>13</sup>

Trying to keep its cool, Moscow has been seeking to control tensions, in particular with Riyadh and Doha. It has reached out to the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council while staying in touch with all of Syria's neighbors, including Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon.

Russia has also refrained from publicly criticizing the hardline Turkish position on Syria and all but ignored Ankara's criticism of the Russian stance. President Putin even traveled to Istanbul in December 2012 to demonstrate goodwill toward Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and to conclude new business deals with Turkey.

Russia has fared even worse in Western public opinion than it has in the Arab world. Moscow has professed to be "evenhanded" in Syria, but those assertions have been dismissed as ludicrous. The West cast Russia in the role of an ally of both Damascus and Tehran, co-responsible for the deaths of

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tens of thousands of Syrian people. The December 20, 2012, cover of the *Economist* featured Vladimir Putin in hell in the unholy company of Assad and Ahmadinejad, with the late Qaddafi nearby. Such a public image, combined with growing concerns in the West about the harshening of authoritarianism within Russia itself in response to the anti-Putin protests of 2011–2012, helped push Western-Russian relations by the end of 2012 to their lowest point since the 2008 Russo-Georgian war.

It was hardly lost on the Russians that the United States and Europe made a distinction between Russia and China, seeing Beijing in a more favorable light. Moscow and Beijing both vetoed two draft Security Council resolutions. But while Russia's position on Syria was vocal, China's was far more muted. Moscow cared mostly about the global order, while Beijing focused on its own interests. China's concerns in the Middle East were mainly about energy supplies, which made Beijing pay more attention to the arguments of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies. While reasserting their own interests closer to home, as in the East and South China seas, the Chinese evidently thought it unwise to overload their diplomatic relations with the West by adding a conflict in a faraway country that was of little interest to them and that they poorly understood. China—in contrast to Russia—refrained from a public debate with the West over Syria. In response, the Americans and the Europeans quietly let Beijing off the hook and focused their criticism on Moscow alone.

Some of Moscow's best-known foreign policy commentators have called the Russian policy in Syria “masterful” for staying away from the conflict yet not betraying a client.<sup>14</sup> The Kremlin's Syria policy, however, is not without critics inside Russia either. Liberal groups within the Russian establishment that look at foreign policy through the prism of the need to modernize the country blame the Kremlin for the worsening of Russia's relations with top energy producers Saudi Arabia and Qatar, foregoing much-needed oil and gas policy coordination with them; continuing to invest in the basket case that is Syria; and consistently backing losers from Saddam to Qaddafi to Assad while ignoring winners who would have been valuable partners.<sup>15</sup>

The conservative—including Communist—and ultranationalist forces, by contrast, demand that Russia stand up to the United States more firmly and make common cause with its enemies. They deplore Moscow's “surrender” of Qaddafi and, before him, of Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic.

These ideologically conditioned opinions are without much consequence, but the Russian arms producers who, if Assad falls, may lose yet another client—so soon after Libya—have real bureaucratic weight in the councils of the Russian government. As a result, even though no new arms contracts have been signed with Assad since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Moscow's deliveries under the existing contracts have run on time.

## Russian Policy Evolution

All of these considerations—from concerns about the international order to the opinions and stances of outside actors through to domestic political concerns—have shaped Russia’s Syria policy, which has changed over time as these forces have evolved.

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis in March 2011, the Russian government saw a friendly but distant authoritarian regime challenged by a motley group of protesters. It realized of course that Syria was suffering from many of the same sociopolitical problems as Tunisia and Egypt: an ossified regime, too long in power and mired in corruption, that had missed changes in a society clamoring for more openness and democracy.<sup>16</sup> It was a potentially dangerous situation that should have been diffused by a combination of government firmness and some concessions to the opposition.

The Russian government’s experts concluded early on that the outcome of the Syrian crisis was not preordained, but they believed Bashar al-Assad could hold out against his enemies for a fairly long time. Indeed, the Alawite enclaves in western Syria, including Tartus, were unlikely to embrace the radical Sunni-led forces. Swift regime change in Damascus, the Russians reasoned, would likely only result from outside intervention.

For the first six months, the deepening of the Syrian crisis was running parallel to the NATO-led military operation in Libya. Thus, Moscow’s central concern became preventing the “Libyan scenario” from being played out in Syria. After Washington’s volte-face on Libya in March 2011, the Russians could not be sure that the United States would not consider some form of attack against the Syrian government’s forces. “Americans,” Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov dryly observed, “never rule out anything.”<sup>17</sup>

As a matter of practical policy, and not only in the Middle East, Moscow prefers to deal with sitting governments, not their opponents—particularly in countries that are nondemocracies. It is clear that Moscow has strongly preferred the government in Damascus, such as it is, to the opposition. The Syrian government, Russian officials have privately admitted, is certainly brutal but not much more so than most regimes in the region. At least, they point out, it is secular and a bulwark against Islamist radicalism and al-Qaeda-type terrorism.

The Russians have never much admired the Syrian opposition. In general, the Kremlin now abhors revolution in principle and posits Russia as a staunch defender of the status quo. Moscow has more or less dismissed the part of the Syrian opposition that is composed of pro-Western intellectuals and former politicians, long based outside Syria and with few ties to the country—including the Syrian National Council, which is now part of a broader opposition group. The Russians have had a warmer opinion of those moderate, secular opponents of the regime within the country who—like the National

Coordination Body for Democratic Change—were amenable to a dialogue with the authorities.

By contrast, the Russians see the radicals from the Free Syrian Army who want to overthrow the Assad regime by force as a dangerous lot. There are some democrats in that group but many more Islamists. Early on, Moscow spotted al-Qaeda types lurking in the wings of the Syrian opposition. As the conflict wears on, the Russians fear, these militants could gain the upper hand among the regime opponents.

Throughout the conflict, Moscow has regarded the radical opposition as constantly seeking to provoke the government into using a massive and indiscriminate amount of force that would bring maximum suffering to the population and sensitize Western public opinion. The Russians also suspect the opposition of working to provoke conflict between Syria and Turkey by bringing the fighting directly to the Syrian-Turkish border. And they believe that the massacres of innocent civilians, which Western publics and governments have blamed on the Syrian government forces, may have been organized by the opposition. For their part, Russian officials have criticized their Western counterparts for failing to condemn terrorist attacks against government targets. In their view, there can be no “good terrorists.”<sup>18</sup>

Of the many issues in the Syrian conflict, the possible use of chemical weapons clearly stands out. Moscow has taken that issue seriously. Many Russian commentators warned that the threat of a chemical attack in Syria could serve as a pretext for a U.S.-led military intervention, on the model of the 2003 invasion of Iraq when the George W. Bush administration accused Baghdad of covertly developing weapons of mass destruction. The main threat in Syria now, in the Russian view, is not that the Syrian army will deploy chemical munitions against the opposition forces. Moscow evidently believed Damascus when it said that those weapons would only be used against a foreign aggressor—in other words, that they would remain a deterrent against an outside intervention. In the Russian thinking, the main threat related to chemical weapons is their potential proliferation if the Syrian government were to lose control of them.

The draft resolutions that Russia and China submitted to the Security Council in fall 2011 called on both Syrian sides to stop fighting and engage in a dialogue. A ceasefire along those lines would have left the Assad government in place, which was unacceptable to the Western countries and, of course, to the Syrian opposition.

The Western counterproposals, by contrast, would have placed the onus on the Syrian government, obligating it, but not the opposition, to withdraw from the cities. Those proposals were twice vetoed by Moscow and Beijing. As a consequence, the Security Council became paralyzed, which led to renewed questions, in the Gulf states and elsewhere, of its legitimacy, particularly in view of Russia's “outsized” role.

The Russian diplomats at the United Nations were very careful that no Security Council resolution should contain language that would give the opposition a tactical advantage and serve as a pretext for intervention. When Moscow saw draft resolutions tilting toward Assad's opponents or imposing Chapter 7 sanctions on the Syrian government, it did not hesitate to veto them.

In January 2012, the Kremlin appointed a presidential special envoy to Syria, a deputy foreign minister with excellent knowledge of the Middle East, Mikhail Bogdanov.<sup>19</sup> The message he was to convey to both sides of the Syrian conflict was "start talking and work toward national reconciliation." Russia preached the end of violence in Syria and mourned the mounting death toll, which it blamed mostly on the opposition, including indirectly by fighting in the cities and provoking the military into counterattacks.

The Russians—ever politely—suggested that Damascus liberalize the tightly controlled political system and engage with the opposition. Alas, to no avail: Assad and his associates needed no outside advice, whether from Moscow or from Ankara, which also tried conciliation and mediation first but soon gave up. Even though Moscow had a thriving business relationship with Assad, it had no leverage over him. The much talked-about Russian-Syrian alliance was a myth. As President Putin later quipped (correctly), Assad was a more frequent visitor in Paris than in Moscow.<sup>20</sup> And as a result of the animosity that developed between Russia and the Syrian opposition, except for a few people in Damascus, there were practically no takers on the opposition side for Russian-favored reconciliation efforts.

The diplomatic reality of Russian-Western contacts on Syria has been nuanced, much more so than the public image of near-Cold War rivalry. Russia and the West supported the observer mission of the Arab League and thereafter the peace mission by Kofi Annan, the joint envoy of the United Nations and the Arab League, even though Moscow had more faith in Annan's ability to achieve success than did Washington. In the spring of 2012, Moscow and the Western capitals formally backed the so-called Annan Plan, which foresaw a national dialogue leading to a Syrian-led solution, though again the West was more skeptical than Russia. Meeting at the G20 summit in Las Cabos, Mexico, in June 2012, Presidents Obama and Putin reaffirmed their support for this general principle.

Essentially, the main point of disagreement between Moscow and the Western, Turkish, and Arab capitals was that the Russians insisted that Syria was up to the Syrians themselves to fix and that outsiders should abstain from interfering or from sanctioning Damascus. Instead, Moscow urged that outsiders lean on the Syrian partners over whom they had influence—Moscow on Damascus, and Washington and its allies on the opposition—in order to push them, kicking and screaming, to the negotiating table.<sup>21</sup> In a way, this was a Dayton formula, with the important distinction that there would be two



main conveners—Russia and the United States—rather than just one, as in the Balkans in 1995.

In Geneva on June 30, 2012, an accord was reached among the UN-backed Action Group for Syria, which included the P-5, Turkey, the United Nations, the Arab League, and the European Union. The Geneva Communiqué referred to a “transitional governing organ,” composed of elements of the current government and the opposition, which would assume full executive power in the country and lead the Syrian people toward national reconciliation and a political settlement.<sup>22</sup> What the Geneva conferees failed to do was to agree on immediate practical steps toward forming the transitional authority.

This proved fatal. Virtually all the elements in the Syrian opposition refused to deal with Damascus, and the Western powers said that the agreement on the formation of a transitional government implied the removal of the Assad regime at the start of the process. Frustrated, Kofi Annan abdicated his role as the chief international mediator for Syria. Angered, Moscow said that those who scuttled the agreement wanted “Assad’s head” more than the cessation of carnage in Syria and thus were co-responsible for the mounting death toll in the country.

Even though Moscow’s attempts to foster intra-Syrian dialogue were largely in vain, it claimed credit first for Assad’s acceptance of the Arab League peace initiative and the UN observer mission to Syria, then the Annan Plan, and, finally, Assad’s decision after the Geneva Communiqué to appoint a negotiator with the opposition. These moves, according to the Russians, were hardly appreciated by the West and derided as a sham by the opposition.

## Moscow’s Missteps

Russia has rebuked Western governments for openly favoring the Syrian opposition and even for being influenced by it. But Moscow has allowed its own policy to be held hostage by Assad. Privately, senior Russian officials have

complained that the Syrian president has not listened to them and that they lack leverage to make him listen.

This is not exactly true. Throughout the conflict, Russia has continued to supply the Syrian armed forces with weapons and equipment under past contracts and even printed banknotes for the Syrian national bank. Russia

pledged “noninterference” in the Syrian conflict and has refused to use incentives and disincentives with Assad—such as security guarantees or threats of cutting aid—to make him more amenable to dialogue. That choice has had its own price, including for Russia itself.

Foreign Minister Lavrov has claimed that the arms sent to Syria, such as air defense systems and helicopters, were meant to be used in repelling foreign aggression rather than in a domestic conflict. As to the bombing strikes by

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the Syrian air force, he has dismissed them as having been carried out with Soviet-provided weapons and ammunition. Russian officials have also pointed out that even as they were arming a legitimate government overtly—without breaking any international sanctions, which Moscow itself had prevented from being imposed—the West, Turkey, and the Arabs were arming the opposition covertly. And those actors were unable to provide a guarantee that the weapons would not find their way to jihadi elements such as Jebhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate, that are also fighting Assad.

There are clear drawbacks to Russia's policies. Refusing to influence Assad in any way except pleading with him to stop violence was a doomed course. In reality, Russia has been arming one of the sides in a de facto civil war—a situation in which arms shipments can be prohibited under Russia's domestic legislation. Claiming that the West and its allies were essentially doing the same by arming the opposition did not bring much comfort: If others were making a bad mistake, as the Russians were convinced, why follow them? Moscow was getting closer and closer to becoming involved in something it said it was trying to avoid—a foreign domestic conflict.

Moscow's Syria policy, pursued in the name of a set of principles fundamental to the global order, claiming evenhandedness, and aimed at bringing peace to a war-torn country, has revealed a substantial underside. The Kremlin, unwittingly, has allowed Russia to be used by all sides in the conflict, to the detriment of Russia's national interests.

When the early fears of a U.S.-led intervention had subsided, even Sergey Lavrov had to admit that the West had no appetite for military intervention and was only using Russia's recalcitrance as a pretext for doing nothing.<sup>23</sup> This is certainly plausible, but Russia was to pay heavily for its resistance in terms of its international reputation among both Westerners and Arabs.

While Bashar al-Assad is not Moscow's man in any conceivable way, Moscow has wound up being his international protector. Saying it had no stake in keeping Assad in power, the Russians have refused to discuss his ouster or give him an asylum. "Let others try to talk him into that," Lavrov shot back at a press conference, "but Assad is not going anywhere."<sup>24</sup>

Even though the Russian government professes no aversion to the Syrian opposition figures and has repeatedly invited them to Moscow for talks (some have come), the opposition has accused the Russians of assisting in the regime's crimes and even demanded that they "apologize" for the support given to Assad.

Moscow evidently has no plans for "the day after" in Syria. It may be that Russia simply believes the only credible alternative to Assad in Damascus is a radical Islamist regime, which would not be Moscow's partner by definition. It may also be the case that the Russians fear that making preparations for a

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post-Assad future would undermine Assad from within and bring forward the radicals' victory. Be that as it may, Russia finds itself in a clear minority at the UN—in the company of China and several Latin American nations—while over 130 other member countries condemn the Assad regime.

This underside notwithstanding, Moscow has continued on its course. It strongly deplored the recognition of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, an umbrella body formed in Doha in November 2012, by the Gulf Arabs, Turks, Europeans, and eventually the United States and about 100 other countries as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. In addition, Russian diplomats called the UN General Assembly's passage of a resolution that gave legitimacy to the National Coalition an infringement of the exclusive powers of the UN Security Council.

President Obama's reelection in November 2012 led to a more active search for a diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis. Lakhdar Brahimi, the Algerian who succeeded Kofi Annan as the international envoy to Syria, launched in December 2012 a dialogue with the United States and Russia on the way out of the crisis, which is ongoing.<sup>25</sup> Brahimi later protested that there was no "secret Russian-American plan" for Syria, but the fact was that Washington and Moscow ended up—for the first time since the end of the Cold War—as two partners in conflict management and resolution. The result of their joint effort remains to be seen.

## The Potential for Russian-Western Cooperation

The Syrian crisis has become a watershed in Moscow's foreign policy. Russia has stopped being an angry but essentially passive onlooker, as in Iraq in 2003, or a powerless and unhappy fellow traveler, as in Libya in 2011. Early on, it took a clear position, did not shy away from very strong disagreement with the United States and Europe, bore the brunt of Western and Arab public opprobrium, and refused to be swayed to change course. At the same time, Moscow demonstrated its willingness to collaborate with other parties, and particularly Washington, on a co-equal basis and with due respect for traditional international law.

This raises a dilemma. Should the West, and the United States above all, engage with Russia more or less on Moscow's terms, or should it simply ignore Russia? The case for the latter is strong and also emotionally driven. To many, Moscow is not only an unequal but also an unworthy partner. Russia is deemed to be a country on a steadily declining path, with waning influence in the world. It also continues to be ruled by an authoritarian government that has recently reconsolidated power after having been challenged internally and has virtually eliminated the entire infrastructure for U.S. democracy support

inside Russia. Its leader for the past dozen years, Vladimir Putin, is a *bête noire* of the Western media.

In the view of those who question the relevance of Russia to a future Syrian settlement, Moscow does not have a commanding influence over Bashar al-Assad and is reviled by his opponents. When Assad is toppled, as he eventually probably will be, Russia will prove to be a loser yet again, as it was after the toppling of Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, and Muammar Qaddafi. The Russia skeptics point out further that the Sino-Russian alliance on Syria has proven to be somewhat soft: the pragmatic Chinese, while not changing their official position in support of state sovereignty and against foreign intervention, have quietly distanced themselves from the Syrian issue to focus on those areas where they have a direct interest.

Some argue that Russia should be ignored on Syria and that the time has come to oppose the Kremlin along a broad front—from its domestic authoritarian policies to its attempts to rebuild a power center in former Soviet Eurasia to its unfair dominance in European energy markets. Such a broad and united front, linking Americans and Europeans, would also put the Kremlin under increasing pressure internally and empower the domestic Russian opposition. Over time, it is argued, the end of Russian authoritarianism, coming after the end of Soviet Communism, would constitute another glorious victory for both the West and the Russian people.

This line of argument has the merit of consistency and may sound stimulating, but as Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan have all demonstrated, deep involvement in other countries' domestic politics seldom brings positive results. Divorcing values from interests, whichever direction it goes, is also a recipe for failure. A new crusade against the “Putin regime” is likely to do more damage than good inside Russia and put the West in a more difficult position internationally.

Unpalatable as it may be, U.S. policymakers can ill afford to ignore Russia and cannot deal with it on Washington's own terms. In 2012, the terms of U.S.-Russian engagement changed, ending the two decades of Russia's mental deference to America and Europe. This came on top of Russia's political “decoupling” from the West, which happened in the mid-2000s. Vladimir Putin, when he was reelected president in 2012 for a third term, began to vigorously promote Russia's distinct identity, which now openly differs from the West at the values level, not just diplomatically. This policy, supported by a rise in Russian nationalism, represents a fundamental shift in Russia's standing and position in the world. Syria is just one example of this.

There is value for the West in cooperating with Russia even if it does not set the terms. The difficult issue for Western countries is acknowledging the value of cooperation after it has been made clear that Russia will not “join” the West or simply “help” it in places like Syria.

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There are three main elements on which a new Western approach to Russia should be based.

First, the West should embrace cooperation on the basis of shared interests. In Syria in particular, no matter how strongly Moscow and Washington disagree on whether and when Bashar al-Assad should be pushed or eased out of power, neither Americans nor Russians want chaos to follow his departure. And neither the United States nor Russia would welcome a radical Sunni Islamist regime in Syria with ties to al-Qaeda. Focusing on these common goals may encourage Russia and the West to work side by side.

This pattern of interests-based U.S.-Russian collaboration can apply to a number of conflict situations, from Nagorno-Karabakh in the Caucasus to Afghanistan. It certainly applies to the two principal cases of nuclear proliferation—in Iran and North Korea, both Russia's neighbors with which it has a long history of relations.

Second, the West should acknowledge that the world order is transforming. The long era of Western domination, seriously challenged but not overturned by the Soviet Union in the last century, is now finally coming to an end. Russia is not and will not be part of the West, but it sees itself as a stabilizing force, favoring tradition and procedure over emotion and ideology. This posture often irritates those in the West who have come to embrace revolutionary change. But should the revolutionary fervor dissipate, Russia would be a natural ally of those seeking more predictability in international relations.

Third, Western countries should make use of Russia's unique and pragmatic perspective born of a hundred years' worth of experience with imperialism, followed by revolution and the rule of ideology, the achievement of superpower status, systemic disintegration, and eventual reconstitution. Usually, this experience is dismissed in the United States as essentially worthless; Rome and Britain are the favorite imperial examples to measure oneself against.

Russia, of course, is not an ideal a model, but its historical experience—whether it is Leon Trotsky's permanent-revolution theory and practice or the Soviet invasion and ultimate withdrawal from Afghanistan—offers an interesting perspective that it would be foolhardy to overlook completely. In the Middle East in general and in Syria in particular, a more sober and skeptical view from Moscow, while obviously tending to err on the conservative side, has sometimes been closer to the reality than a succession of Western enthusiasm and despair.

If such an approach takes shape, it may lead to something the United States and Europe have lacked since the end of the Cold War: a viable foreign policy strategy toward Russia. This will not be a strategy for Russia, which of course is a matter for the Russians themselves, and not a strategy against Russia, which would be wrong and end badly. But it would be a long-term concept and

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plan that would identify the areas of common interest and ways to jointly protect and promote those interests. It would identify the areas of disagreement, including those on values issues, and find a way to manage them. Reflecting Russia's continuing evolution, the policies laid out under this strategy would be constantly adjusted accordingly. Developing such a strategy requires taking a long view; implementing it is a case for political courage and leadership.

## Toward a New Approach in Syria

Taking action now on short-term concerns could provide an essential foundation for long-term strategic development. It has become clear that joint international action is needed in Syria, but the deadlock in the UN Security Council has prevented it. Thus far, Moscow's policies of noninterference have not worked and are seriously damaging Russia's relations with both the West and the Arab world. Nor has the West's focus on Assad's departure from power proved fruitful. A new approach is necessary.

Russia should drop its notional hands-off attitude toward the political developments in Syria, and the United States needs to focus on the political settlement as its immediate goal, rather than concentrating on the overthrow of the Assad regime. And instead of bickering over the Geneva Communiqué on Syria, the United States and Russia need to work out a practical mechanism for implementing a political transition.

To push the process forward, Moscow and Washington should identify and incentivize those elements in the warring camps that are most amenable to a dialogue that would lead to national reconciliation. By the same token, the United States and Russia should apply pressure on the Syrian groups unwilling to engage in dialogue to bring them to the negotiating table. They should isolate and sanction those totally opposed to reconciliation.

As they work toward a peace accord reminiscent of the Dayton agreement that ended the Bosnian War, Washington and Moscow need to closely cooperate with all parties in the region—the Arab states, Turkey, Israel, and Iran—to secure their support for the Syrian peace process. Otherwise, the settlement risks being derailed by competing agendas. Above all, to ensure the credibility of the process and reassure Moscow and other states wary of unilateral measures, the Syrian peace process should be first and foremost an effort of the United Nations.

It is time the Obama administration and the Kremlin deepened their cooperation to stop the carnage and create a transitional authority in Damascus that can foster national reconciliation and the rebirth of the Syrian state. The Russians, many in the West privately agree, have half a point. The United States should supply the other half.



## Notes

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- 2 For a first-hand account of Soviet/Russian-Syrian relations, see Evgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 2009).
- 3 “Lavrov: ‘Either Secure Syria’s Chemical Weapons, or Arm Its Rebels,’” interview in *Russia Today*, December 24, 2012, <http://rt.com/politics/lavrov-interview-rt-syria-628>.
- 4 Vitaly Naumkin, *Islamsky radikalizm v zerkale novykh konceptsiy* (Islamic Radicalism in Light of New Concepts) (Moscow: KomKniga, 2005). See also Georgy Mirsky, “Kogda obruch lopnul” (When the belt burst), *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 7, 2011, [www.ng.ru/ideas/2011-09-07/5\\_revolution.html](http://www.ng.ru/ideas/2011-09-07/5_revolution.html).
- 5 “Iz otvetov Ministra inostrannykh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova na voprosy SMI po itogam sammita Rossija-ES v Brjussele” (Foreign Minister Lavrov’s press conference after the 30th EU-Russia Summit in Brussels), December 21, 2012, [www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/newslines/A81DB48408DE76FD44257ADC004D10C7](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/newslines/A81DB48408DE76FD44257ADC004D10C7).
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- 7 See Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin’s interview. Greg White, “Russia’s Sechin Defends Investment Climate,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704476604576158140523028546.html>.
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- 9 “MChS vyvezlo iz Sirii uzhe tysyachu rossijan” (EMERCOM of Russia evacuated 1000 Russians from Syria), *Kommersant*, January 23, 2013, [www.kommersant.ru/doc/2110770](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2110770).
- 10 Speech of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S. V. Lavrov on the Jubilee International Conference, “Russia in the World of Force of the XXI Century,” dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and the tenth anniversary of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, Moscow, December 1, 2012, [www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcb3/1eeac193a9e09f3d44257ad100377746!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcb3/1eeac193a9e09f3d44257ad100377746!OpenDocument).
- 11 Lavrov’s Statement of the Council of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, “On the Need to Maintain the Spiritual and Cultural Heritage of the Holy Land and Protect the Christian Values and Sanctities,” Moscow, November 28, 2012, [www.ipo-palestine.org](http://www.ipo-palestine.org).



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- 12 The Russian court's ruling does not, however, restrict official contacts with individual Brotherhood members.
  - 13 Speech of Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S. V. Lavrov on the Jubilee International Conference, "Russia in the World of Force of the XXI Century."
  - 14 Cf, e.g., "Itogi goda: Mir stal bolee opasnym I nepredskazuemym" (Year in review: The world has become more dangerous and unpredictable), Sergey Karaganov interview, *Ezbednevny Zhurnal*, January 8, 2013, <http://ej.ru/?a=note&id=11612>.
  - 15 Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Voprosy diletenta: Zachem nam Siriya?" (Dilettante's question: Why do we need Syria?), *Vedomosti*, December 24, 2012.
  - 16 Foreign Minister Lavrov's interview with *Al Abram*, November 5, 2012, [www.mid.ru/bdomb/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/14fc5941c3f3147d44257ab0003cfb19!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomb/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/14fc5941c3f3147d44257ab0003cfb19!OpenDocument).
  - 17 "Interv'ju Ministra inostrannyh del Rossii S.V. Lavrova radiostancii 'Kommersant FM'" (Foreign Minister Lavrov's interview to Kommersant FM), March 20, 2012, [www.mid.ru/bdomb/brp\\_4.nsf/2fee282eb6df40e643256999005e6e8c/5dfa97af48053e5e442579c700638ae3!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomb/brp_4.nsf/2fee282eb6df40e643256999005e6e8c/5dfa97af48053e5e442579c700638ae3!OpenDocument).
  - 18 "Lavrov: 'Either Secure Syria's Chemical Weapons, or Arm Its Rebels.'"
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  - 20 Press conference with Vladimir Putin and President of France François Hollande, Paris, June 1, 2012, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/3945>.
  - 21 Speech and Q&A with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia S. V. Lavrov on the results of the meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in St. Petersburg, June 29, 2012, [www.mid.ru/bdomb/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/b214ad5f69fdd1e844257a31003cd438!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomb/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/b214ad5f69fdd1e844257a31003cd438!OpenDocument).
  - 22 Action Group for Syria, Final Communiqué, Geneva, June 30, 2012, [www.mid.ru/bdomb/brp\\_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/6f87414751c6b3a044257a2e0038cfd6!OpenDocument](http://www.mid.ru/bdomb/brp_4.nsf/e78a48070f128a7b43256999005bcbb3/6f87414751c6b3a044257a2e0038cfd6!OpenDocument).
  - 23 Foreign Minister Lavrov's press conference after the 30th EU-Russia Summit in Brussels.
  - 24 Ibid.
  - 25 This dialogue is sometimes referred to as the "Three Bs," for Brahimi, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, and the Russian presidential envoy and Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov.

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## About the Author

**Dmitri Trenin** is director of the Carnegie Moscow Center and has been with the center since its inception in 1994. He also chairs the Research Council and the Foreign and Security Policy Program.

From 1993 to 1997, Trenin was a senior research fellow at the Institute of Europe in Moscow, and in 1993, he was a senior research fellow at the NATO Defense College in Rome. He served in the Soviet and Russian armed forces from 1972 to 1993, including experience stationed in Potsdam from 1978 to 1983, and as a staff member of the delegation to the U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms talks in Geneva from 1985 to 1991. He also taught at the war studies department of the Military Institute from 1986 to 1993.

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