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Between Russia and Iran: Room to Pursue American Interests in Syria

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Between Russia and Iran: Room to Pursue American Interests in Syria

by John W. Parker



Center for Strategic Research
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Cover: In the Gothic Hall of the Presidential Palace in Helsinki, Finland, President Donald Trump met with President Vladimir Putin on July 16, 2018, to start the U.S.-Russia summit.
(President of Russia Web site/Kremlin.ru)

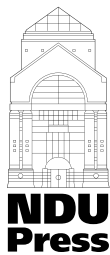
Between Russia and Iran

Between Russia and Iran: Room to Pursue American Interests in Syria

By John W. Parker

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Executive Summary

President Donald Trump has underscored containing Iran's sway as a key element in establishing a "strong and lasting footprint" in Syria as the United States moves toward bringing its Soldiers home. In pursuing this key American objective, this paper recommends that Washington take advantage of the "daylight" between Russia and Iran, and that it be American policy at all levels to work to expand it. This long-existing "daylight" was underscored in 2018 by calls in Moscow for Iran to withdraw its forces from some or all of Syria, and by Putin's positive regard at the summit in Helsinki with President Trump for Israel's security requirements.

Russian acquiescence to U.S. and Israeli strikes against Iranian-associated and other forces in Syria reinforces the conclusion that backing a dominant Iran is not one of President Vladimir Putin's priorities. However, while he will not forcefully oppose the United States and Israel constraining Tehran, Putin will resist pressure to break totally with Iran and with the proxies Iran bankrolls and trains to fight in Syria. In addition, Russia's leverage on Iranian military and political activities in Syria is limited.

Russia's solution to its own dilemma of restraining Iranian behavior in the region has been one of addition and mediation rather than subtraction. Moscow dilutes Iranian influence by working with other powers, including those most antithetical to Iran. Russia's relations with Israel are now arguably closer to a "strategic partnership" than those with Iran. Russia's dealings with Saudi Arabia correspond more aptly to an "oil axis" than the "Shiite axis" description used by some to characterize the ties between Moscow and Tehran. Russia's economic ties and diplomacy with Turkey and greenlighting of Turkish military action in Syria against Kurdish forces have also diluted Iranian leverage in Syria.

America's imposing military capabilities and veto-wielding membership in the United Nations (UN) Security Council will provide it and its allies with continuing leverage on developments in Syria. Putin ultimately will not be able to count on U.S. acceptance of any deal that leaves Bashar al-Asad in place after a transition and new elections. Such an outcome would also dash Russian hopes of significant American, European, and regional contributions to the immense costs of reconstruction that lie ahead in Syria. Russia is unlikely to link its actions with the United States in Syria to U.S. policy toward Iran on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal, or to U.S. sanctions on Russia.

To attain the conditions that will make possible the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, the United States needs to maintain a properly resourced military presence on the ground and in Syrian airspace. Only if it does so will Russia regard the United States as the most important

counterweight to Iran with which Moscow will want and will need to deal. Even after the April 13–14, 2018, U.S.-UK-French strikes on Syrian chemical weapons facilities, President Putin remained eager for talks with President Trump and addressed Syria at their summit in Helsinki. The Trump administration should therefore continue judiciously to engage Russia as the United States works toward the goals of assuring the defeat of the so-called Islamic State (IS), constraining Iran's malign activities, bolstering Israel's security, and deterring Syrian government use of chemical weapons, without conceding anything in advance on Asad's future or Iran's place in the region.

This paper is based on information that was current as of August 1, 2018.¹

“A Very Good Question”

Working together, Russia and Iran have succeeded in preserving the regime of President Asad in Syria from internal and external opposition since the civil war commenced in 2011. This achievement owes much to what is often described as the “Shiite axis” of Iran, the Lebanese Hizballah, and various Iranian-supported Shiite militias from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, whose ground forces Russian airpower has supported. Russia now is widely recognized as the central international player in Syria. This centrality rests in part on Russian coordination of military activities with Iran.

What Russia and Iran have accomplished in Syria is important for American national security interests and policy in the region because it frames some of the hard choices Washington faces. Discussing U.S. policy in Syria with the press at the Pentagon on November 13, 2017, Secretary of Defense James Mattis praised a reporter for asking a “very good question”: is there any “daylight” between Russia and Iran in Syria?² The answer to this question is strategically important to the Trump administration's new U.S. policy toward Iran's activities in and around Syria. It is also critical for assessing to what extent President Putin can follow through on his agreements with President Trump.

On July 7, 2017, on the margins of the G-20 summit in Hamburg, the two presidents agreed on a de-escalation zone in southwest Syria, which Moscow and Damascus then destroyed in June–July 2018.³ In Danang, Vietnam, on November 10–11, 2017, on the margins of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, Presidents Trump and Putin “confirmed their determination to defeat ISIS in Syria” and “agreed to maintain open military channels of communication between military professionals to help ensure the safety of both U.S. and Russian forces and de-confliction of partnered forces engaged in the fight against ISIS . . . until the final defeat of ISIS is achieved.” They “confirmed that the ultimate political solution to the conflict

must be forged through the Geneva process pursuant to UNSCR [UN Security Council Resolution] 2254.”⁴

In Helsinki on July 16, 2018, the two presidents discussed a variety of issues, including the Syrian conflict. In that context, President Trump stated that “creating safety for Israel is something that both President Putin and I would like to see very much.” The two leaders agreed that representatives of their national security councils would follow up on the issues they had discussed.⁵ The following day in Washington, President Trump reiterated that “We discussed Israel and the security of Israel, and President Putin is very much involved now with us and the discussion with Bibi Netanyahu on working something out with surrounding Syria . . . and specifically with regard to the security and long-term security of Israel.”⁶

As set out by President Trump in Washington on April 13, 2018,⁷ and in Helsinki and Washington on July 16–17, and elaborated in various settings by Defense Secretary Mattis,⁸ UN Ambassador Nikki Haley,⁹ White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders,¹⁰ and Secretaries of State Rex Tillerson¹¹ and Mike Pompeo,¹² U.S. goals in Syria include: put an end to Syrian government use of prohibited chemical agents; eliminate IS; contain Iranian influence in Syria and the region; buttress the security of Israel; encourage U.S. allies to increase their engagement in Syria; support pursuit of a UN-led political solution to the Syrian crisis; and bring American Soldiers home.

In his exchanges with the Pentagon press pool on November 13, 2017, Secretary Mattis twice complimented a reporter for the “very good question” as to whether he was “seeing any daylight between” Russia and Iran in Syria.¹³ Given the importance to the United States of pushing back Iranian influence in the Middle East, this is indeed a critical question. Some expert observers of the region have long seen little daylight between Iran and Russia in Syria. Shortly after Secretary Mattis’s remarks, for example, James Jeffrey wrote of “Iran’s Russian-enabled power projection against Arab states, Israel, Turkey, and U.S. regional interests,”¹⁴ and testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee of a “detailed plan for the region” being pursued by “Iran, enabled by Russia.”¹⁵

The present study, however, argues that the complex ties between Iran and Russia create sufficient room for the United States to maneuver in the area and, with persistence and patience, further American priorities in Syria, though there are limits to what Russia will go along with and can actually accomplish. From 2006 to 2015, for example, Russia voted for a series of UNSC sanctions resolutions against Iran and then joined the P5+1 (the Permanent Members of the UN Security Council and Germany) that worked to halt Iran’s military nuclear enrichment program, eventually producing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA. At the very

beginning of that process, however, Russia in July 2006 successfully negotiated to rule out the threat of military force against Iran under the UN Charter's Chapter VII, Article 42, to compel Tehran to agree.¹⁶

Similarly, in December 2015, Russia supported UNSC Resolution 2254's call for negotiating an inclusive political transition "governance" for Syria that would be followed by adoption of a new constitution and the holding of new elections. Earlier, however, in negotiations that in June 2012 produced the Geneva Communiqué, to which Resolution 2254 harks back, Russia ensured that any transitional government could not in principle exclude President Asad.¹⁷

If the main premise of this paper is off the mark and there is no "daylight" between Russian and Iranian goals in the region, the prospects for success in advancing the American goal of constraining Iranian influence in Syria are minimal. The consequence of failure in this regard will be a further slippage of U.S. influence throughout the Middle East and beyond. Regional powers opposed to the spread of Iranian influence, but demonstratively ready and able to work with Russia even while opposing the Asad regime in Damascus, will look all the more attentively to Moscow as the power broker best able to mediate and perhaps even marginally blunt the extension of Iranian power.

Tainted Success

Some analysts posit that Putin "had plans for the Middle East, particularly Syria, from the very beginning, and pursued them consistently."¹⁸ Putin, however, owes his present position in Syria to aggressively taking tactical advantage of a series of fortuitous opportunities, not to disciplined pursuit of some detailed long-term strategic plan for increasing Russia's stature in the region and decreasing U.S. importance.¹⁹ Throughout, Putin has benefited from what Moscow has judged as weak American resistance to Russian moves in Syria, and Iran's welcoming of Russian help in saving the Asad regime. After nearly 3 years of direct military involvement in Syria, however, the complexities of the military and diplomatic tracks have driven home the conclusion that there will be no easy exit option for Russia from Syria, and Moscow has settled in for the long haul.

Putin's efforts in Syria have been aimed at elevating Russia's standing among the world's great powers, as well as at solidifying his political standing at home. To this end, Russia has focused on preventing externally sponsored "regime change" in Damascus and securing Moscow's paramount role in deciding Syria's political future. Russia wants any future leadership in Damascus to respect Russian access to its two bases in Syria and its wider interests in Middle East politics. Russia cooperates as well as competes with Iran in Syria, and together they have

succeeded in keeping President Asad in power. But Putin has little interest in backing a dominant Iran in Syria or a resurgent Iran in the region, and he does not want Iran to limit Russia's relations with other powers.

While working with Moscow, Tehran supports Asad in his resistance to Russian pressure that would affect what Tehran evidently sees as Iran's vital need for a land bridge through Syria to the Lebanese Hizballah and for a military footprint in Syria from which to challenge Israel. Iran also backs Asad's opposition to any compromise short of complete recovery of and control over all Syrian territory lost to a variety of opponents since 2011. Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) leaders have explicitly stated that their goals are to oust the United States from the region and to cement Asad's hold on power in Damascus. Iran does not like it that Russia does nothing to prevent Israeli attacks on Iranian interests in Syria, and that Russia is not interested in helping Hizballah on the Golan Heights. Russia, however, tolerates and even benefits from counterbalancing Iranian, Turkish, Saudi, Israeli, and American activity in Syria as long as none ultimately are able to nullify Russian gains.

Saudi Arabia and Turkey have been forging new relations with Russia even as they pursue their own particular interests in Syria, bringing little comfort to Tehran. Despite differences over Syria driven by competition with Iran for regional supremacy, Saudi Arabia moved closer to Moscow as Riyadh perceived an American retreat from the region, was impressed by the increasingly central role that Russia was coming to occupy in Syria, and increasingly shared an interest with Russia in elevating and stabilizing world oil prices. Ankara, for its part, is focused on preventing an autonomous "Rojava" Kurdish region in northern Syria, linking the cantons of Jazeera, Kobane, and Afrin across the border from Turkey's own restless Kurdish region. Ankara and Moscow have used each other to undermine the U.S. partnership with Kurdish forces in eastern Syria as well as to limit Iranian power in the regions abutting Kurdish cantons. Moscow has taken advantage of tensions over the Kurdish issue to try to sap the abilities of Ankara and Washington to manage their ties as longstanding North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has met repeatedly with Putin since 2015 to lobby Israeli security interests in Syria. As a result, Israel has been able repeatedly to hit Iranian and Hizballah associated targets in that country while Russia has looked the other way in public silence. Russian acquiescence to these strikes permits Israel to degrade security threats emanating from the Golan Heights and to disrupt the air bridge Iran uses to supply Hizballah in Syria and Lebanon.

Against this background of competing and overlapping aims, Syrian forces backed by Russia air power broke the IS siege of Deir ez-Zour City on the Euphrates River in eastern Syria on September 5, 2017.²⁰ It was treated as a banner day, although Damascus still did not control the economically vital oil and gas fields and facilities in the surrounding countryside. An attempt to recover one site by unorthodox means would bring a dramatic clash with the U.S. military and loss of lives for a Russian mercenary force in February 2018. Moreover, having already caused nearly half a million dead, over five million refugees, and six million internally displaced, and significant destruction to major cities, the war was still far from over.²¹ American-supported Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in particular neared total control of the IS stronghold of Raqqa and began pivoting toward major objectives in Deir ez-Zour Province.²² Asad, however, calculated that his forces and their allies—while still not totally victorious—had at least prevented his enemies from winning and had started to think out loud about the postwar world and Syria's strategic orientation toward the East going forward.²³

In a lengthy interview at the end of December 2017, Valery Gerasimov, chief of the General Staff of the Russian armed forces, suggested that the top priority of the U.S.-led coalition campaign in Syria had never been to vanquish IS but rather to topple Asad.²⁴ However, more objective Russian observers punctured the veneer of triumphalism in Moscow by reminding that it was the U.S.-led coalition that had achieved the roll-back of IS first in Iraq and then in Syria.²⁵ (In fact, outside Russia one study has concluded that only around 14 percent of Russian and Syrian strikes from 2015–2018 targeted IS.²⁶) Moreover, it became clearer that any earlier thoughts in Moscow of an exit strategy involving political compromise and a military drawdown would have to be seriously revised.²⁷

Nevertheless, suggestions began to surface—culminating with Putin's announcement on December 11, 2017²⁸—of another partial drawdown of Russian air assets in Syria.²⁹ They could always be reinserted as the need arose,³⁰ a point reinforced when Putin signed the law ratifying Russia's agreement with Syria on usage and enlargement of the port facility at Tartus,³¹ and Defense Minister Shoigu commented on Russia's "permanent presence" in Syria.³² Putin made yet another partial withdrawal announcement at the end of June 2018.³³

Meanwhile, another round of the talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, initiated by Russia and cosponsored by Iran and Turkey, came and went on October 30–31, 2017, with few signs of progress toward a political solution to the conflict.³⁴ At the UN-sponsored talks in Geneva, the Syrian government delegation, led by veteran negotiator Bashar al-Jaafari, walked in and out and in of the round held December 1–14, refusing to meet face-to-face with the opposition delegation or to discuss political issues of the transition called for by UNSC Resolution 2254.

UN Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Syria Staffan de Mistura asserted that “I did not see the government really looking to find a way to have a dialogue” but “I did see the opposition trying to.”³⁵

Friction Among Allies

Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus have coordinated their efforts in the Syrian conflict, but they have sometimes made surprisingly little effort to conceal differences on key military and political issues. There have been several remarkable public spats and repressed tensions between them over tactics and strategic goals. Looking back over the course of Russia’s military and diplomatic involvement in Syria, the Moscow scholar Leonid Isayev concludes that “Asad and Iran are not interested in Russo-American cooperation in Syria.” Asad, according to Isayev, on some issues “simply ignores Moscow and hides behind Tehran.”³⁶ As another Moscow expert on the region put it in May 2018, Russia and Iran are simply riding in the same train; they are not friends or enemies.³⁷

On May 6, 2016, in the battle for Khan Tuman, southwest of Aleppo, Iranian fighters and Iranian-supported militias suffered over 80 deaths at the hands of jihadist al Qaeda al-Nusra fighters and other opposition forces—at the time among the highest casualty counts in one day. The losses provoked bitter hints in Tehran that Moscow should provide air cover to Iran’s pro-Damascus militias rather than wasting time on ceasefire agreements with Washington.³⁸ Three months later, however, Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehqan announced that Russia’s brief use of Hamadan Airbase in western Iran that August to strike targets in Syria had been suspended. Dehqan’s televised statement betrayed distrust of Russia’s ultimate aims in Syria: “The Russians are interested in showing that they are a superpower and guaranteeing their role in deciding the political future of Syria. And, of course, there has been a certain showing-off and ungentlemanly conduct on their part.”³⁹

In December 2016, Iran, Syria, and their militias blocked and delayed implementation of the Russian-Turkish ceasefire-evacuation deal on Aleppo with last minute demands, including for assistance to a couple of Shiite areas near Aleppo. In January 2017, already irritated at Russia for treating it as a junior partner in organizing the Astana talks with Turkey, Iran was further discomfited by Russia’s invitation to the United States to attend despite Iran’s opposition.⁴⁰ After Putin’s summit in Moscow with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on March 28, 2017, veteran Tehran watchers in Moscow argued that the summit had not accomplished all that it could. They suggested that Putin put his foot on the brake of developing Russian-Iranian relations so as not to impede his efforts to repair relations with Washington. Putin was wary about the

U.S. reaction to progress in his dealings with Tehran, some explained. The Iranians especially seemed to have been disappointed by the results, and overall Russian-Iranian relations were still characterized by a profound lack of trust.⁴¹

There is also reason to presume discomfort in Damascus and Tehran over the de-escalation zone agreed upon between Russia and the United States in and around Daraa, in southwest Syria bordering on Jordan, of special interest also to Israel. The terms of the zone were announced after the Trump-Putin meeting on July 7, 2017, on the margins of the G-20 summit in Hamburg.⁴² Moscow reportedly assured Washington that Asad would stand by the agreement.⁴³ However, Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif asserted that "America and Russia cannot make a decision for Iran. We are present in Syria based on a request from the Syrian government and will act upon that request."⁴⁴ Skeptics of the deal could also point to IRGC statements of resistance to pulling out of Syria.⁴⁵ As the Russian pundit Vladimir Frolov put it at the time, "Factually, this is a Russian-American deal limiting the influence of Iran and Syria in the interests of Israel and Jordan."⁴⁶ Under armed attack by Damascus and Moscow, the understandings concerning this zone would collapse in June–July 2018, as will be discussed later in this paper. They would be supplanted by new understandings worked out principally between Putin and Netanyahu, which would be equally if not more troublesome for Tehran.

Putin's interactions with Asad in Sochi in late 2017 underscored Russia's quiet competition with Iran in Syria. The "military operation is nearing completion," Putin told Asad on November 20, and the "main task now is to launch the political process." Asad accompanied Putin to a meeting with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov and other military leaders involved in Russia's Syrian intervention. It was these military leaders who had "played the key role in saving Syria," asserted Putin. Asad expressed his "gratitude for Russia's efforts to save our country." "Success" had been achieved, said Asad, "thanks to cooperation between the Russian Aerospace Forces and the Syrian Army."

Just a year earlier, Asad had given even billing to Iran, the Lebanese Hizballah, and Russia.⁴⁷ Now, however, according to the transcript made available by the Kremlin, the only reference to Iran's role in the fighting was Asad's oblique thanks to the Russian military's actions and "the actions of the Syrian Army and our allies" for making it possible for many Syrians who had fled terrorism to return home.⁴⁸ A month later, Gerasimov would similarly give a lengthy interview in which he completely ignored Iran's contribution to the military effort in Syria. Only in responding to a question as to whether problems had ever arisen in requesting permission for Russian bombers to use Iraqi and Iranian airspace on their way to Syria did Gerasimov laconi-

cally state that “We have a well-established collaboration with the military in these countries and failures did not occur.”⁴⁹

Asad, however, would shift with ease his formulations of the relative importance of Russia and Iran to Syria. In June 2018, as Syrian forces backed by Russian airpower began to press against opposition hold-outs in Daraa Province and shatter the southwest de-escalation zone agreed by Presidents Trump and Putin in Hamburg in July 2017, Asad asserted that Syria would not split with Iran to curry favor with Saudi Arabia or Israel. He regarded the relationship with Russia as strategic, but suggested that statements out of Moscow were provoking unhelpful “speculations.” He insisted there were no “full formations” or Iranian bases in Syria, while conceding that “there are certainly Iranian advisers in Syria, and there are groups of Iranian volunteers who came to Syria, and they are led by Iranian officers.” For the future, however, he was open to a greater Iranian presence. “If we find . . . that there is a need for Iranian military bases, we will not hesitate.”⁵⁰

Strategic Partners?

Moscow’s default setting for dealing with Tehran over the years has been wary engagement, and vice versa for Tehran’s approach to Moscow. This has been ingrained by centuries of wars and mutual grievances. Both sides are used to and adept at mixing cooperation and contention on different issues at the same time, and we can expect this pattern of dealing with each other to continue for years to come.⁵¹

In the decade preceding the beginning of the so-called Arab Spring, Moscow had become increasingly concerned about Iran’s expanding influence in the Middle East. Former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov lamented the consequences of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. This destroyed the Iran-Iraq balance of power that had brought a modicum of stability to the region since the end of the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war. The collapse of Iraqi power, the revelation of Iran’s nuclear program in 2002–2003, and the success of the Iranian-backed Hizballah forces in stymieing the Israeli army in the 2006 Lebanon War all contributed to concern in Moscow over Iran’s seemingly relentless rise in the region.⁵²

In the last decade, however, and especially since the advent of the Arab Spring and the rise of forces such as al Qaeda’s new offshoots in Iraq and Syria—the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, renamed Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in 2016—Moscow has begun to look on Iran with new eyes. Despite its earlier misgivings, Russia has gained appreciation for Iran as a “natural barrier” to Sunni extremism traveling north into Russia and other former Soviet states. At the same time, hoping to project and expand Russian influence south into the Middle East,

Moscow has not wanted Iran to interpose itself as a barrier to Russia's dealings with Sunni states throughout the region, even Iranian *bêtes noires* Saudi Arabia and Israel.⁵³

The ties between Russia and Iran are not really an "alliance" and can never be a "strategic partnership," asserts Vladimir Sazhin, a long-time student of Moscow's relations with Tehran. They are instead a "pragmatic partnership."⁵⁴ To some, this might seem a distinction without a real difference. After all, however one might choose to characterize the relationship they have in Syria, it has produced results. In Moscow, nevertheless, the view among expert observers is that Iran is envious of Russian influence over Asad. Russia is displacing Iran in Damascus, and Tehran does not like this. Russia wants a secular government in Syria, and Iran does not agree with this idea. Russia wants any future leadership in Damascus to respect Russian access to its two bases in Syria and Russian wider interests in Middle East politics.⁵⁵

One expert in Moscow who supports closer Russian-Iranian relations has elaborated on the many obstacles to pursuing a "strategic" relationship. In Syria, Russia is trying to cooperate with Iran but it is not easy, and Russia and Iran have different views on the future. Iran also does not like it that Russia does nothing to prevent Israeli attacks on Iranian interests in Syria, and that Russia is not interested in helping Hizballah on the Golan Heights. In Iraq, Russia is willing to send weapons, but not to engage militarily or to choose sides in the Sunni-Syria confrontation. In Yemen, Russia does not want to engage militarily, but Iran is doing some of that.⁵⁶

Experts in Tehran who watch Moscow have reciprocal concerns.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, alongside irritations on both sides, Russia and Iran in the past have episodically found common ground for cooperation in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, much as they have found more recently in Syria.⁵⁸ The observer Maxim Suchkov has termed them "strategic singles." Despite their lack of trust in each other, they would rather "have each other as partners . . . than adversaries" in the region. As long as Iran's activities in Syria "don't target Russian interests, Moscow doesn't see a need to react harshly."⁵⁹

Over the years, there have been those in Moscow as well as Tehran who have advocated a "strategic partnership" between the two countries. However, Putin's restraint on the phrase has been consistent over the years. While he might hold it up as an aspirational goal, as he did at the summit with Rouhani in March 2017,⁶⁰ Putin is unlikely ever to embrace it. In this, Putin seems to have taken the advice of long-time Middle East expert Yevgeny Primakov. As foreign minister in December 1996, at an earlier high point in Russian-Iranian official ardor, Primakov resisted Iranian hints that Moscow should adopt the term. "I would not use the words strategic partnership regarding anyone," Primakov counseled. "I simply want to stress that our relations are good."⁶¹

The sensitivity in Moscow over embracing the term was again on display during Putin's meeting with Rouhani in Tehran on November 1, 2017, on the margins of the trilateral summit with President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan. Rouhani described Russia as Iran's "strategic partner," and his Web site asserted that Putin had also called Iran Russia's "strategic partner."⁶² However, the account of the meeting on the Russian president's own Web site was unusually truncated and made no mention at all of the phrase, attributing it neither to Rouhani nor to Putin.⁶³ In stark contrast, Putin 7 months later signed a "Declaration of Strategic Partnership" with the United Arab Emirates, the first such Russian agreement with a Gulf state, in this case a leading opponent of Iran.⁶⁴

Sanctions Depress Trade

For many years the impression has persisted that Russia-Iran trade is substantial. In fact, it is not impressive, and Chinese trade with Iran outstrips that of Russia by a factor of 25 to 1.⁶⁵ The Russian government encouraged new business involvement in Iran while the P5+1 nuclear negotiations with Iran were ongoing. However, Russian business did not like the risks of running afoul of Western and particularly American sanctions on doing commerce with Iranian entities. Even Russian advocates of moving toward a "strategic partnership" with Iran conceded that, while Russia-Iran economic cooperation had serious potential, there were no serious achievements because of internal opposition on both sides to moving ahead.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, likely more for political reasons than for profit, Rosatom committed in November 2014 to building at least two new nuclear power generating units at Bushehr.⁶⁷ However, nearly 2 years later, experts in Moscow claimed that money had yet to be appropriated for Bushehr 2 and 3, even if there had already been a ribbon-cutting ceremony.⁶⁸ Whatever that ceremony amounted to, the official start of construction of Bushehr 2 reportedly was finally celebrated on October 31, 2017, clearly to hype Putin's summit meetings in Tehran the following day.⁶⁹ A month later, however, the general contractor for the project announced that construction would not start until June 2019.⁷⁰ Given Bushehr 1's tortured history, implementation of the Bushehr 2 contract will likely again be a long-term and painful proposition.⁷¹

Russia may have hoped to earn substantial income from trade with Iran in the aftermath of the adoption in July 2015 of the Joint Coordinated Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal and UN Security Council Resolution 2231, and the subsequent beginning of the process of lifting financial sanctions and weapons acquisitions prohibitions on Iran. Putin visited Tehran on November 23, 2015, his first visit to the Iranian capital since 2007. The occasion was a Gas Exporting Countries Forum summit, which the Russian president was able to use for meetings

with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Rouhani. The two leaders then met again in Moscow, as noted, on March 28, 2017, and then more recently in Tehran on November 1, 2017.

The economic headline for the last meeting was an agreement announced by Russian Oil (Rosneft) chief Igor Sechin and National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) head Ali Kardor on a “road map” for joint strategic energy investments in Iran that could total as high as \$30 billion and yield as many as 51 million tons of oil annually. Neither side, however, released any details and no concrete contracts were evidently signed. This suggested that skepticism was in order over ultimate implementation of the “road map.”⁷² When asked about this in May 2018, a Moscow expert on economic relations with Iran laughed and replied that there were no tenders yet but at least the “road map” was still in place. Another noted extreme irritation in Moscow at the highest levels over working with energy counterparts in Tehran.⁷³ Separate from these summits, Iran and Russia signed a \$1.6 billion contract in December 2016 to build a gas-powered power plant (TES) with 1,400 megawatts capacity at Bandar Abbas.⁷⁴ However, the same Moscow economic expert commented 18 months later that while the Russian Central Bank claimed to have issued a credit for the project, nothing had happened yet.⁷⁵ Gazprom and Iran signed a separate deal around the same time, but the fine print revealed that it was only to cooperate on studies for two gas fields.⁷⁶

The outlook, therefore, for any dramatic rise in the volume of trade is still not promising despite the three summits in 2 years. Russian business will continue to be reluctant to cross American sanctions on Iran reimposed when President Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018. It will behave just like European businesses, which are backing out of already established ventures, however substantial, note Russian experts, citing the example of French Total.⁷⁷ In 2015, Russia and Iran were agreed upon a portfolio of potential contracts adding up to \$70 billion, but most remain paper aspirations only.⁷⁸ Economic ties remain anemic despite what seem to be continuous consultations on mega-deals. Bilateral trade shrank to \$1.24 billion in 2015 from \$1.68 billion in 2014, then rebounded to around \$2.18 billion in 2016, before falling again to \$1.706 billion in 2017. By comparison, Iran-China bilateral trade in 2014 stood at \$52 billion.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, as mandated by UNSC Resolution 2231, if Iran does not withdraw from the JCPOA, it may start to make significant conventional offensive arms purchases beginning in October 2020, 5 years after the JCPOA's adoption day of October 18, 2015.⁸⁰ For lack of affordable alternatives, we may see a partial repeat of Iran's post-Iran-Iraq war rush to Russian manufacturers three decades ago to replenish depleted and outmoded stocks of military hardware. In 1989–1991, Moscow and Tehran signed contracts worth potentially \$5–6 billion. President

Rouhani, who has a lifetime of experience dealing with the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation, was a core member of the high-level delegation that traveled to Moscow in 1989 with Iran's initial shopping list for replacement weapons.⁸¹ Deals under consideration in recent years could be worth as much as \$8 billion.⁸² "There is a lot they would like," according to Rostec chairman Sergei Chemezov. However, "when it comes to weaponry, they buy that with their own money, not with ours," Chemezov has insisted.⁸³ In 2016, Russia sold almost \$400 million in arms to Iran.⁸⁴ In May 2018, nevertheless, a Russian arms transfers expert noted that Moscow has stopped having any great expectations about the Iranian arms market. Another expert in military affairs judged that Russia will not transfer any major defensive systems to Iran for the remainder of the current Trump administration.⁸⁵

However, one deal with a lot of historical baggage has already gone forward. In spring 2015, as the P5+1 negotiations over Iran's nuclear enrichment program were approaching the endgame, Putin issued a decree permitting resurrection of the contract for the S-300 air defense missile system.⁸⁶ The contract had been a bitter irritant in Russian relations with Iran ever since then-President Medvedev annulled it in September 2010.⁸⁷ After Putin's green light, a new \$1 billion contract for four S-300 divisions was signed on November 9, 2015, at the Airshow-2015 in Dubai.⁸⁸

"Axis of Oil" vis-à-vis "Shiite Axis"

In the meantime, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have been negotiating with Russia—albeit at radically different speeds—for the more advanced next generation S-400 air defense system. At four divisions each for upward of \$2 billion, the Saudi and Turkish deals are playing a role in nailing down new relationships between these countries and Russia, including over Syria, probably bringing little comfort to Tehran.⁸⁹ The improvement in Russia's relations with Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia has not been a flash in the pan but the result of prolonged, if sometimes bumpy, courtship between the two sides. Even before King Salman's October 4–5, 2017, visit to Moscow—the first ever by a reigning Saudi monarch—some began to refer to the Russian-Saudi connection as an "axis in oil affairs" and even an "axis of love."⁹⁰ The day after Putin met with Iran's leaders in Tehran in November 2017, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak conferred in Riyadh with King Salman.⁹¹ With Novak frequently meeting with Saudi counterparts, "oil axis" is perhaps a more apt description of the relationship between Moscow and Riyadh than the "Shiite axis" label all too often hyperbolically applied to the ties between Moscow and Tehran.

Despite differences over Syria, and in part as an effort to manage the relationship while both are deeply involved in Syria, Moscow and Riyadh have maintained contacts at the highest levels since King Salman succeeded deceased King Abdullah in January 2015. Putin first extended an invitation to King Salman to visit Moscow in a phone call to the new Saudi ruler on April 20, 2015. The Russian leader soon after had a wide-ranging face-to-face first meeting with then–Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in St. Petersburg on June 18, 2015, during which Putin received a reciprocal invitation from the King to visit Riyadh.⁹² Four months later, Putin met yet again with Prince Mohammed, this time in Sochi on October 11.⁹³

These contacts have developed despite vocal Syrian and, presumably, Iranian objections to dealing with Saudi Arabia so intimately, including bringing Riyadh into diplomacy over Syria even as Russia ramped up its air operation there. Putin has long pitched a broad international anti-IS “coalition” or “alliance,” to include Saudi Arabia, an effort Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem ridiculed in June 2015 as a “miracle.”⁹⁴ Since then, Riyadh has balanced President Trump’s May 20–21, 2017, visit to Saudi Arabia with Prince Muhammed’s (also serving as Defense Minister) call on Putin in the Kremlin on May 30.⁹⁵ Both sides touted the occasion, and it followed the first formal meeting between the two countries’ oil industry heavyweights—Rosneft boss Igor Sechin and Aramco chief Amin Nasser—in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.⁹⁶ King Salman promoted his son Prince Muhammed to direct successor 3 weeks later in June. One Russian commentary saw his elevation as portending a “deepening of cooperation between Moscow and Riyadh” despite differences over Syria.⁹⁷ Indeed, the soon-to-be full Crown Prince’s meeting with Putin at the end of May 2017 laid the groundwork for King Salman’s visit to Moscow 4 months later.⁹⁸

Geopolitically, Riyadh early on was motivated to move closer to Moscow by its perception of an American retreat from the region and by its impression of the increasingly central role that Russia was coming to occupy in Syria, both on the battlefield and in diplomatic negotiations in Geneva, Astana, and other venues.⁹⁹ Since then, Russia has avoided being enmeshed in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) dispute with Qatar over ties with Iran and alleged sponsorship of terrorism.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, Russia has courted Saudi Arabia’s good offices and contacts with the Syrian opposition.

In the last few years, Moscow has invited and praised Riyadh’s efforts to unify the various Syrian opposition representations—the so-called Riyadh, Cairo, and Moscow platforms—and getting them to the negotiating table.¹⁰¹ To work toward a better outcome for the eighth round of the UN-sponsored Geneva talks, Russia’s special presidential envoy for Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, met on November 19, 2017, with Crown Prince Mohammad and participated on

November 22 in the so-called Riyadh 2 conference hosted by Saudi Arabia and designed to unify the Syrian opposition representation at Geneva.¹⁰² After the subsequent positions put forward in Geneva by the leaders of the joint delegation disappointed both Moscow and Riyadh, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov excused Riyadh, stating that the opposition's "unacceptable ultimatums" had been aimed "to discredit our Saudi colleagues" and had "deceived [UN Special Envoy for Syria] Staffan de Mistura and, regrettably, also our Saudi partners."¹⁰³

Meanwhile, growing common interests in stabilizing world energy markets have drawn the two countries even closer together. On December 10, 2016, Russia joined the cap and cut production agreement reached by the Saudi-led OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) 10 days earlier.¹⁰⁴ Lifting crude markets at least temporarily, the agreement was extended at the end of May 2017 to March 2018, and then at the end of November 2017 through 2018.¹⁰⁵ Market logic is driving Russian-Saudi cooperation on trying to dampen global oil production in order to raise prices, which by January 2018 had rebounded to over \$70 a barrel and then in May briefly climbed over \$80 a barrel.¹⁰⁶ Since February, there have been suggestions of an impending deal to partner also in the liquefied natural gas sector, as well as to develop a 10- to 20-year oil alliance.¹⁰⁷ In June, Putin and Crown Prince Mohammad discussed bilateral relations and energy cooperation in the Kremlin and then sat side by side at the opening of the FIFA World Cup championship in Moscow as Russia defeated the Saudi team 5-0.¹⁰⁸ Then, Energy Minister Novak and his Saudi counterpart Khalid al-Falih worked out the details of yet another understanding on future oil production.¹⁰⁹

Over previous years, Moscow had become cynical toward repeated Saudi dangling of prospects for substantial arms sales, which in the end always petered out.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile, Riyadh repeatedly concluded impressive arms contracts with the United States, amounting to some \$110 billion at the conclusion of President Trump's visit to Riyadh in May 2017.¹¹¹ Given the slump in world oil prices in 2014 and its impact on the Russian and Saudi state budgets, however, cooperation between OPEC and Russia has become more important in the long run than the arms sales reportedly advanced during King Salman's October 2017 visit to Moscow. The possibilities seem to be improving for steadier and more substantial benefits to Russia from closer relations with Saudi Arabia in the energy sector than from weapons sales.

On the topic of weapons, the two sides agreed on deals totaling upward of \$3 billion during King Salman's October 2017 stay in Russia.¹¹² They included agreements in principle on Riyadh's purchase of no fewer than four divisions of the S-400 Triumf air defense missile system, worth around \$2 billion, and contracts to purchase and manufacture Kalashnikov assault rifles in Saudi Arabia and likewise some elements of TOS-1A heavy flamethrower systems, Kornet-EM

antitank missile systems, and AGS-30 grenade launchers. Arms transfer expert Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Moscow-based CAST (Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies) think tank, expressed the hope that King Salman's word meant that after tricking Russia twice, Saudi interest in purchasing weapons this time around would be for real.¹¹³

On the trade and investment side, understandings on paper at least go beyond what Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir described as the "historic agreement on stabilization of the oil markets" reached earlier in the year and the arms agreements just noted. The two sides have now established a \$10 billion investment fund, with \$2.1 billion already invested. These, Jubeir said, are "laying a firm foundation for the development of relations." Russia is "an important player" and "could perform a positive role in the Near East," affirmed Jubeir. "Politically, our positions are closer than many think."¹¹⁴ Putin reciprocated Jubeir's assessment of the relationship 10 days later. Referring to Saudi Arabia and other states in the region, he told the Valdai conference that "I have a very good personal, almost friendly relationship with almost all the leaders of these states."¹¹⁵

Some of the raised hopes in Russia now seem to have been premature. By May 2018, palpable disappointment but not surprise over relations with Riyadh had returned in Moscow, except in the energy field. An expert on weapons transfers noted that all Russia had from the Saudis on the purchase of S-400s was the original declaration of intent; nothing had happened since then. The only thing solid with Riyadh was the Kalashnikov deal. Separately, a connoisseur of the Saudi press detected increased "digs" or "jabs" (*ukolki*) at Russia in Saudi commentary since the U.S.-UK-French strikes in Syria in April 2018 and the U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA in May. At the same time, he thought these "digs" were somewhat offset by Saudi cooling toward the United States, particularly after the announcement that the American Embassy would move to Jerusalem. On balance, he saw Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia at a standstill. Yes, the two countries still shared an interest in the arrangement with OPEC, but this had no big political content. Russia could easily let the agreement die if it no longer held any further advantage for it.¹¹⁶

Another expert wryly observed that the Saudis talk but they don't deliver. The Crown Prince had made all his early moves toward Russia simply to be able to extract more from the United States when he went to Washington. The expert saw this as "very Arab behavior." For its part, however, Russia was not all that enthusiastic about selling arms to the Saudis because that would bring with it political obligations. Nevertheless, Moscow had certainly enjoyed being courted by the Saudis and others in the region. According to him, Moscow was hearing from Saudi officials such as Foreign Minister Jubeir that "We want Russia to replace Iran in Syria. We

do not mind a Russian presence in Syria on any scale, but we do not want the Iranian position there to strengthen.” This was, said the Russian expert, essentially also the Israeli position.¹¹⁷

Israeli Security Lobby

On several levels the argument can be made that Israel’s relations with Russia are much closer to a “strategic partnership” than those between Russia and Iran. The influence of pro-Israeli views is reportedly strong in Moscow. In contrast, the pro-Iran lobby is small and weak.¹¹⁸ According to Andrey Kortunov, director general of the Russian International Affairs Council, “There is mutual respect between [Putin] and Netanyahu, and Russia has a special attitude toward Israel’s military activity in Syria and has warned Asad and Hizballah not to retaliate.” Sources in Moscow reportedly assert that Putin will propose that no foreign country be allowed to use Syria to attack neighboring countries.¹¹⁹

Indeed, Putin reportedly told King Salman’s son in Sochi on October 11, 2015, and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu several weeks earlier on September 21 in Moscow, that if they lent Russia their support in Syria, Russia would help them contain Iran in the region. According to this same account, Putin told Netanyahu that an expanded Russian role in Syria could dampen Iranian and Iranian-supported Lebanese Hizballah Syrian-based operations against Israel.¹²⁰

Over the years, Israel has lobbied in Moscow on specific Iranian- and Syrian-connected security issues. Israel has built a good relationship with Russia in this regard. Its courtship of Moscow has even included not supporting the March 2014 UN General Assembly resolution declaring Russia’s annexation of Crimea illegal.¹²¹ Putin’s September 2015 agreement with Netanyahu about cooperation at the General Staff level to deconflict operations in the airspace over Syria no doubt irritated Tehran.¹²² Since then, Netanyahu has met with Putin eight more times to lobby Israeli security interests in Syria, including three times in Moscow during the first 7 months of 2018: on January 29, May 9, and July 11.¹²³ Foreign Minister Liberman is said to talk weekly in Russian by phone with Defense Minister Shoigu.¹²⁴

To the extent that Russia has indeed been competing with and displacing Iran in Syria, Russia may be able marginally to improve security for Israel by lessening threats to Israel emanating from the Golan Heights and by active-passively disrupting the air bridge Iran uses to supply Hizballah in Lebanon. Over the course of Russia’s air operation in Syria, Israel has repeatedly hit Iranian- and Hizballah-associated targets in that country, and Russia has looked the other way in public silence.¹²⁵ In September 2017, while not confirming or denying any of these strikes, Major General Yair Golan, former deputy chief of general staff, Israel Defense Forces,

affirmed that Russia can be “a constraining influence on Iran’s ambitions.” Israel and Russia, he asserted, “have a good operational relationship.”¹²⁶

This was strikingly on display on February 10, 2018, when Israeli jets struck at what Israel said were eight Syrian and four Iranian military sites in Syria—the largest such attack since the beginning of the Syrian conflict. The incident began after Syrian antiaircraft fire hit an Israeli F-16, which crashed in Israel. The F-16 was one of eight Israeli fighter jets returning home from bombing what Israel described as the Iranian command and control center at Syria’s Tiyas Military Airbase (T-4 Airbase) between Homs and Palmyra,¹²⁷ from which an Iranian drone had been launched but subsequently shot down over Israel by an Israeli attack helicopter.¹²⁸

It is unknown whether Russia was informed in advance by Damascus and Tehran, or knew from its own channels, about the drone mission that precipitated the incident. Whichever the case, Russia did not protect them when they got in trouble with Israel. Given Russian control of Syrian airspace, the pundit Vladimir Frolov has noted that Israel could not have carried out the massive counterattack, which he asserted knocked out half of Syria’s air defenses in 2 hours, without giving advance warning to Moscow and benefiting from Russia’s non-interference. Moscow’s only response was what Frolov described as the Russian Foreign Ministry’s “banal” call for respecting Syrian sovereignty and Putin’s agreement, after speaking with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on the telephone, to keep the lines of communication open.¹²⁹ According to the official Russian accounts, the Foreign Ministry statement also warned that “the creation of any threat to the lives and security of Russian soldiers [in Syria at the invitation of the Syrian Arab Republic to fight terrorism] was absolutely unacceptable” and Putin called for avoiding a new round of dangerous confrontation.¹³⁰ Only after a repeat strike on April 9 from Lebanese airspace on the Iranian drone facility at T-4 Airbase, killing some 14 personnel, including seven or more Iranians, did Moscow criticize Israel in any way.¹³¹

That that criticism did not amount to much was underscored by the remarkable sequence of events from May 8–10. On May 8, Israel struck Iranian assets at the Syrian army base at Al-Kiswah. On May 9, Putin discussed with his Security Council the strike, his upcoming meeting that same day with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in the Kremlin, and the U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA.¹³² Netanyahu, who accompanied Putin during the emotional Victory Day celebrations in Moscow, used the Kremlin meeting to liken present day Iran to vanquished Nazi Germany and to underscore “the deep bond that exists between our countries and our people.”¹³³ After the meeting, Netanyahu told the press that he “had no basis to think that Russia would limit Israel’s action in Syria.”¹³⁴

A Kremlin source reported that Netanyahu had also used the meeting with Putin to lobby once again against any transfer by Russia of the S-300 air defense system to Syrian disposal.¹³⁵ Moscow had hinted at a high level, including by Foreign Minister Lavrov, that it would finally do so after the U.S.-UK-French strikes of April 13–14, discussed in this paper.¹³⁶ Netanyahu later reportedly told his cabinet that he had again persuaded Putin to delay any transfer of the system to Syrian hands.¹³⁷ Indeed, Vladimir Kozin, advisor to Putin on military-technical cooperation (that is, arms transfers), around the same time told *Izvestia* that there were no Russian-Syrian talks on transfer of the S-300 to Syria and that Syria had everything it needed.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, an expert observer speculated that Russia in time will supply the S-300 to Syria, especially now that Russian forces are switching over to the S-400 for their own use and no longer needed to retain the S-300. However, more important than acquiring the S-300, this expert argued, is that Damascus use its Buk-2 and Pantsir air defense systems—both excellent, he stressed—more effectively and efficiently.¹³⁹

After Netanyahu returned to Israel from Moscow, the Israeli air force launched a massive attack on Iranian facilities across Syria early on May 10, 2018, in response to asserted IRGC Quds Force missile attacks on Israeli Golan Heights positions.¹⁴⁰ Israel reportedly informed Russia before the attack. Russian positions were not threatened so it did not activate its air defense systems.¹⁴¹ Moscow's reaction to the Israeli action amounted to a weak pro-forma admonition to both sides to restrain themselves.¹⁴² An expert observer speculated soon after that Russia in fact was hoping that the Israelis would hit some Iranian targets. The Iranians were getting overconfident, he said, so Israel had taught them a lesson that Moscow did not mind.¹⁴³

For sure, the views on security issues of Putin and Netanyahu and of top-level officials on both sides are often contentious and far from identical. Nevertheless, there is a level of trust in the Russian-Israeli relationship that is definitely lacking in that between Moscow and Tehran.¹⁴⁴ A veteran foreign policy insider in Moscow is of the opinion that Russia can rely on nobody in the region except maybe in a sense on Israel.¹⁴⁵ Even on trade, that of Israel with Russia runs around \$3 billion a year and includes a much larger high technology component than Iran's trade with Russia, which struggles to rise above \$2 billion annually despite Iran's much greater population.¹⁴⁶

In further developing the reported understandings Israel and Russia reached on May 9 regarding Israel's freedom to strike Iranian forces and facilities across Syria, Netanyahu's conversation with Putin in the Kremlin on July 11 in effect framed the context of the public comments on Syria by Presidents Putin and Trump in Helsinki on July 16.¹⁴⁷ Syrian forces were about to raise the national flag over Daraa in southwest Syria on July 12, culminating an offensive that

had begun 3 weeks earlier.¹⁴⁸ State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert had issued a statement on June 21 warning Moscow and Damascus of “serious repercussions” should Syrian regime violations of the southwest de-escalation zone continue.¹⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Hmeimim-based Russian airpower joined the campaign late June 24 through early June 25—the first Russian strikes in the zone since conclusion of the Trump-Putin de-escalation agreement a year earlier—after the U.S. Embassy in Amman reportedly sent a text cautioning rebel groups in the area that they should not count on U.S. military support.¹⁵⁰ Secretary of State Pompeo agreed at Senate hearings on June 27 that Russia was violating the de-escalation agreement.¹⁵¹ Clearly, by openly joining the Syrian campaign against Daraa and surrounding areas, Moscow deliberately terminated the concept that President Putin had endorsed with President Trump in Hamburg just a year earlier.

Nevertheless, the same day Secretary Pompeo testified before Congress, National Security Advisor John Bolton traveled to Moscow and met with Putin, and the next day—June 28—Washington and Moscow announced that Presidents Trump and Putin would meet in Helsinki on July 16.¹⁵² With U.S.-Russian summit preparations proceeding even as Syrian forces backed by Russian air support regained control of Syrian territory right up to the border with Israel, Netanyahu on July 11 reportedly won an agreement in principle from Putin to keep Iranian and Iranian-supported forces away from the very same border. In return, Israel would not object to Damascus regaining control of the region and Asad remaining in power.

The understanding on keeping Iranian forces out of this key border area with Israel did not meet Israel’s hope that Russia would commit to ousting them from all of Syria. On the other hand, Israel apparently would continue to be able to attack Iranian-related targets at will in this and other areas without any obstructions from Russia.¹⁵³ Putin also met with Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei’s advisor Velayati shortly after meeting with Netanyahu, but probably more to convey the understandings already reached with Israel than to open the negotiation to further Iranian input.¹⁵⁴ Presumably referring to Iranian-affiliated forces, Anatoly Viktorov, Russia’s ambassador to Israel, could subsequently report that Putin and Netanyahu had reached “an understanding” on the withdrawal of “certain well-known armed units . . . so many kilometers” from Syria’s border with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, while Levan Dzagharyan, Russia’s ambassador in Tehran, without contradiction could reassure Iranians that their military presence in Syria was entirely legal and insist that Russia had no intention of pressing Iran to withdraw them.¹⁵⁵ However, negotiations continued on just how deep this Russian-enforced restricted zone should be. Not many months earlier, Russian Defense Minister Shoigu had told Israeli Foreign Minister Liberman that Israel’s request for a 40-kilometer buffer zone keeping

Iranian-backed militias away from the Golan Heights went too far.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, during a visit to Jerusalem on July 23, 2018, Foreign Minister Lavrov and General Staff chief Gerasimov reportedly conveyed an offer from Moscow to enforce a 100-kilometer strip, but Jerusalem upped the ante and insisted on the total removal of Iranian forces, allied militias, and the Lebanese Hizballah from all of Syria.¹⁵⁷ On July 30, Ambassador Viktorov pushed back against this Israeli demand, stating that while only Syrian forces should be deployed in the southwest along the Golan Heights border, Iranian and other “foreign forces” were playing a valuable role in fighting “terrorists” elsewhere in Syria. Russia could and would not force them out. At the same time, Russia could not prevent Israel from striking Iranian elements and allies across Syria.¹⁵⁸

The day before the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki, Netanyahu asserted at a Cabinet meeting in Jerusalem, on July 15, that “We will not allow entry into our territory and we will demand that the 1974 Separation of Forces Agreement with the Syrian army be strictly upheld.”¹⁵⁹ This was a reference to the ceasefire and disengagement agreement brokered by U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger that concluded the Yom Kippur War and implemented UNSC Resolution 338 of September 1973.¹⁶⁰ The demand was presumably a talking point that Netanyahu used with Putin in person on July 11, and probably also conveyed in a phone call to President Trump on July 14.¹⁶¹ The Russian president picked up on the concept and ran with it in Helsinki on July 16:

*Crushing terrorists in the southwest of Syria—the south of Syria—should be brought to the full compliance with the Treaty of 1974 about the separation of forces—about separation of forces of Israel and Syria. This will bring peace to Golan Heights and bring a more peaceful relationship between Syria and Israel, and also to provide security of the state of Israel. . . . Thus far, we will make a step toward creating a lasting peace in compliance with the respective resolutions of Security Council, for instance, the Resolution 338.*¹⁶²

Putin’s press conference remarks in effect implicitly suggested that Russia’s willful collapse of his agreement with President Trump on a de-escalation zone in southwest Syria would ultimately contribute toward establishing greater security for Israel along its borders with Syria, a goal shared by Moscow, Washington, and Jerusalem. Invoking the 1974 treaty and calling for more vigorous and rigorous enforcement of its provisions—as suggested by Netanyahu—provided Putin an elegant way to portray the brutal Daraa campaign as aimed at doing just this. The interactions between Putin and Netanyahu in arriving at this common language

underscored the strength of the relationship that had developed between Moscow and Jerusalem throughout the course of the Syrian conflict and that now presented Tehran with new and growing challenges.¹⁶³

Russian-American Deconfliction

American dealings with Russia over deconfliction in the skies above Syria go back as far as Israel's and have been just as productive. In fact, U.S. warplanes were striking IS targets in Syria long before the Russian air campaign began. Early on, the two countries in October 2015 negotiated a memorandum of understanding on what Defense Secretary Ash Carter insisted on calling deconfliction rather than cooperation. As Carter recounts, American policy was that "our fight in Syria was against ISIS" and "had nothing to do with what the Russians were doing."¹⁶⁴ All the same, Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, observed in December 2017 that the memorandum was being "scrupulously observed by both parties."¹⁶⁵ In Helsinki the following July, Presidents Trump and Putin agreed that the militaries of the two sides "get along."¹⁶⁶

After Syrian government warplanes attacked Khan Shaykhun with sarin gas on April 4, 2017, the American cruise missile strike on Shayrat Airbase renewed public attention on the issue of U.S.-Russian deconfliction efforts in Syria. The attack took out 20 percent of the Syrian government's air force.¹⁶⁷ Although Moscow after the incident said that it would close down the hotline between the two countries, it stayed up.¹⁶⁸ According to Brett McGurk, the U.S. Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, U.S.-Russian contacts on deconfliction actually accelerated after the Tomahawk salvo.¹⁶⁹ As Dmitry Yefremenko has noted in the mainline *Russia in Global Affairs* journal, the American move on April 7, 2018, sent "a strong signal to Russia, whose response to the U.S. attack was quite reserved, which not only made it possible for Russia to maintain contact with the U.S. on the crisis settlement process in Syria, but also work out initiatives that take into account Trump's new approaches."¹⁷⁰

Attention was sharpened further by several incidents in June 2017 in eastern and southeastern Syria. Damascus forces and Iran-backed militias were racing with U.S.-backed opposition forces toward the oil- and gas-rich region of Deir ez-Zour while the latter forces' campaign to liberate Raqqa from IS was still in progress.¹⁷¹ Under these competitive circumstances, U.S. jets shot down Iranian-made drones on June 8 and June 20 and a Syrian jet on June 18. Russia again announced that it would suspend the use of a hotline dedicated to defusing clashes over Syria, but, as happened in April after the Tomahawk strike on Shayrat Airbase, the militaries on both sides continued to use the hotline without interruption.¹⁷²

Tensions rose again in September 2017. First, the United States charged that Russian warplanes had attacked an SDF position where U.S. Soldiers were also present north of Deir ez-Zour. Then, several days later, Russia charged that the U.S.-backed SDF had fired twice on Syrian government positions, where Russian special operations forces were also present, outside Deir ez-Zour City, and threatened retaliation in the case of further such incidents. Again, however, Russian and American battlefield commanders reportedly continued to hold meetings focused on ways to lessen the chances of future such incidents.¹⁷³

The two sides appeared to be refining rules of engagement (ROEs) or, rather, non-engagement, as the forces they each supported battled toward Deir ez-Zour. The main problem from the Russian point of view appeared to be potential clashes between Syrian government and Iranian-supported militias and U.S. forces, with Russia not wanting to get caught in the middle. Russia could countenance with relative equanimity the American cruise missile attack against Damascus's Shayrat Airbase in April. The same could be said of multiple Israeli strikes on Syrian-Hizballah-Iranian targets. But the more recent SDF strikes on Syrian forces accompanied by Russian special forces raised more serious concerns in Moscow.

These concerns contributed to consultations between Russian and American battlefield commands that soon resulted in agreement on deconfliction guidelines to govern activities on both sides of the Euphrates River Valley by their respective forces in order to ensure their safety. At the end of 2017, Secretary Mattis stated that the resulting deconfliction line running down the river "has held, pretty much," and those problems which have arisen have been "resolved."¹⁷⁴ Russian Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov shared this assessment. After agreement on the deconfliction measures was reached, he said, "there were no problems."¹⁷⁵

Russia itself, however, has continued to test and cross the limits of the ROEs agreed upon with the United States. Since November 2017, Russian jets have crossed into skies east of the Euphrates a half dozen times a day, flying dangerously close to American aircraft, which, in at least one case on December 13, fired flares to warn them off.¹⁷⁶ Even Gerasimov has alluded to the "unpleasant incident" that occurred on this day.¹⁷⁷ Russia also pushes the envelope in continuing to support Syrian ground forces and then warning that it will strike back at U.S. allied opposition forces that hit Russian forces. The upside may be, however, that Russia—if it wants to—can move the dial on Syrian and Iranian activity and consequent vulnerability to American attack by deciding where and when Russia's own special forces will operate alongside Syrian-Iranian forces. After all, it is Russia, not Iran, that is negotiating ROEs with the United States in Syria. According to one Israeli account in September 2017, "In a number of cases in recent months, Russia refused to help Iranian-backed forces in the Euphrates Valley, eastern Syria,

when they clashed with Kurdish fighters supported by the United States and came under fire from U.S. aircraft.”¹⁷⁸

This option may have been put on open and painful display on February 7, 2018, when U.S. forces supporting SDF fighters at a base outside Deir ez-Zour—3 miles east of the Euphrates demarcation line near an oil complex—repulsed and decimated an attack by pro-Damascus forces. By some accounts, over 200 (perhaps well over 300) attackers died.¹⁷⁹ The United States had detected preparations for the assault a week earlier and conveyed this knowledge to Russian deconfliction interlocutors, along with the warning that force would be met with force. The two sides remained in contact during and after the attack, with the Russian side claiming throughout that there were no Russian military units in the area.¹⁸⁰

First reports indicated that the attackers had consisted of various pro-Damascus militia groups, according to some accounts under the direction of Iranian IRGC advisors.¹⁸¹ Soon, however, it became clear that a substantial number of the advancing force had consisted of Russian mercenaries working for the so-called Wagner Group.¹⁸² Not long after, it was reported that Wagner’s ultimate main owner, Yevgeny Prigozhin, informally known as “Putin’s chef,” had been in contact with high Syrian and Russian government officials shortly before the attack about a “good surprise” being prepared for Assad. Prigozhin was also a main investor in Evro Polis, which had a contract with Damascus to receive 25 percent of the oil and gas profits from any fields recaptured from IS.¹⁸³

Nevertheless, the Russian Defense Ministry initially ascribed the February 7 assault on the SDF camp entirely to Syrian militias who, it claimed, suffered only 25 wounded, and asserted that they had not coordinated their plans with Russian forces.¹⁸⁴ However, well-informed journalists in Moscow soon reported that their sources claimed that around 600 Wagner mercenaries had been involved in the conflict but that the Russian command in Syria had neither sanctioned nor supported the operation, deeming it a “dangerous independent initiative.”¹⁸⁵ The Russian Foreign Ministry also initially stressed that no Russian servicemen had been involved in the attack, although it acknowledged that five Russians, presumably, had died in the action. It later reiterated that “Russian service members did not take part in any capacity and Russian military equipment was not used,” while conceding that assistance was being provided to those Russians who had been injured to return home for medical assistance.¹⁸⁶

As of this writing we do not know who was in the loop on the Russian side—aside from Prigozhin and those he reportedly was in contact with—at each step of the unfolding debacle on February 7, 2018. It could have been a straightforward case of his mercenaries attacking American forces with the full backing of the Kremlin and the military command, which had

the option of so-called plausible deniability should the assault not go well. It could have also been a case in which Prigozhin and his Wagner agents ignored the advice not to go forward from detractors in the professional military and possibly also political rivals. They in turn stood by, watched the escapade fail badly, and washed their hands of any responsibility for the entire bizarre incident.¹⁸⁷ In any event, as had the U.S. cruise missile operation against Shayrat Airbase in April 2017, the lack of a Russian effort to respond militarily again suggested a healthy respect in Moscow for American warfighting capabilities.¹⁸⁸ In addition, some of the early assignments of blame for the debacle outside Deir ez-Zour reflected suspicion on the Russian side that Iran was involved, or at least the eagerness of some Russians to use Iran as a scapegoat.

Three months later, visiting Moscow in May 2018, this author found the fog of war and awkward embarrassment still heavy in conversations about the February incident with half a dozen seasoned Russian observers of the conflict in Syria. While clearly seeing it as an example of bad coordination, several firmly rejected any possibility of more than 30 to 40 Russian casualties. Others had no problem accepting that there had been six or seven dozen Russian fatalities when the Wagner forces encountered more than a Kurdish irregular force and were mowed down by a regular American military opponent. In most of the reconstructed speculative narratives this author heard, the Wagner force had not notified the local Russian command. Several of these interlocutors, however, assumed that the Russian command nevertheless was indeed aware of what the Wagner force intended to do but acted under standing instructions never to acknowledge such awareness to its American deconfliction counterparts. At the same time, these interlocutors explained to this author, the Russian command in Syria was also operating under another standing instruction: not to interfere with the Wagnerites, let things proceed as they might, and watch and assess the results of the Wagner force's testing of the U.S. presence.

All but one of the author's interlocutors had no idea whether Iranians had participated in the fighting on February 7. The one who was certain that Iranians had been present elaborated that there had not been many and that they had been at the battle outside Deir ez-Zour in a "watchdog," and not fighting, capacity. Given the decreasing confidence between Russia and Iran and the rising tension between them, he explained, the Iranians wanted to keep track of every operation in Syria that Russians were involved in.¹⁸⁹

Subsequently, after the Syrian government attack on Douma on April 7, 2018, which killed dozens of civilians, U.S.-Russian deconfliction channels served well—by all accounts—in planning and executing the U.S.-UK-French strikes on April 13–14. These successfully launched 105 weapons against three Syrian chemical weapons facilities: the Barzeh Research and Development Center, in Damascus; the Him Shinshar chemical weapons storage facility, outside

Homs; and the Himshar chemical weapons bunker facility, also near Homs.¹⁹⁰ In briefing the press, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr., stated, “We used the normal deconfliction channels to deconflict the airspace that we were using. We did not coordinate targets or any plans with the Russians.”¹⁹¹ Joint Staff Director Lieutenant General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., described the deconfliction channel as “a multilevel, robust system of communication that we’ve employed for some time.” It “operated frequently over the past few months” and “continued to operate frequently leading up to this strike and a routine basis after the strike.” Emphasizing that “The Russians don’t have a veto on anything we do,” General McKenzie reported that “None of our aircraft or missiles involved in this operation were successfully engaged by Syrian air defenses, and we have no indication that Russian air-defense systems were employed.”¹⁹² Soon after, it appeared that Moscow had finally decided—once again—to transfer the S-300 system to Syrian disposal, for which there originally had been a contract signed in 2010. However, as we have seen in an earlier section of this paper, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu once again successfully lobbied against such a move during his May 9, 2018, meeting with Putin in the Kremlin.

Addition, Not Subtraction

Russia’s solution to its own dilemmas with aggressive Iranian behavior has implicitly been one of addition and mediation rather than subtraction. Russia’s approach to blunting Iranian leverage in Syria without boldly proclaiming this aim has been to dilute Iranian influence by dealing with other powers over Syria rather than trying to shun them. Refusing to pick sides between Iran and Israel, for example, can mean setbacks, concedes Vitaly Naumkin, dean of Russian Middle East experts, but it also puts Moscow in a better position to ease conflicts.¹⁹³ From Moscow’s perspective, this approach—combined with Russia’s increased involvement in Syria—enhanced Russia’s leverage or, at least, aspirations for leverage, on other issues in the region: Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, Quartet and bilateral; the Qatar versus GCC Gulf crisis; Yemen; and Iraq.¹⁹⁴

A corollary of this development was the rebalancing of the instrumental value to Russia flowing from its dealings with the United States in Syria. This was not Putin’s original intent. However, regional powers began to pay greater attention to Russia because it was in Syria, and the United States appeared to be playing a secondary role to that of Russia. Polling across the region found that respondents in all countries except Iran viewed Russia as playing a negative role in Syria but, nevertheless, saw relations with Russia as significantly more important in 2017 than in 2016.¹⁹⁵ America’s instrumental value to Putin in Syria was consequently declining, and

the value to Russia of the regional powers was appreciating. The instrumental value of Russia's military and political intervention in Syria was beginning to rest more on multiple regional and other power relationships and less on the appearance of Russia's engagement as an equal and independent power on the world stage with the United States.¹⁹⁶

In 2015, as we have seen, Asad's Foreign Minister Moallem was discomfited by Putin's efforts to bring powers other than Iran into what the Russian president portrayed as an international coalition against IS. Two years later, nevertheless, Putin told Asad in Sochi in November 2017 that Russia maintained "constant contact" with its "partners" Iraq, the United States, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Indeed, Putin followed up his talks with Asad with phone calls to President Trump, King Salman, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and Prime Minister Netanyahu.¹⁹⁷ Two days later, in Sochi, Putin also convened a meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and got their assent for holding a "Syrian National Dialogue Congress."¹⁹⁸ A month later, in Astana, representatives of the three agreed to hold the Congress on January 29–30, 2018, in Sochi.¹⁹⁹

As Russia cooperates as well as competes with Iran in Syria, Putin does not want Iran to limit Russia's relations with other powers in the region. Putin has long been personally courting the Saudis, other Gulf Sunni Arabs, and Israel, and in this pursuit does not want to get boxed in by overly intimate ties with Iran.²⁰⁰ Russia, however, will never part company with Iran in Syria and needs Iranian help there. Moscow, therefore, cannot and will not solve all of Washington's issues with Iranian policy in Syria. Nevertheless, Putin does have some interests in common with the United States in constraining Iran in Syria and beyond. Russia has little interest in backing a dominant Iran in Syria or a resurgent Iran in the region.

The demonstrations across Iran at the turn of the year (2017 to 2018) may reinforce the success of Russia's "addition not subtraction" handling of Tehran's aspirations in Syria and the wider region. Moscow paid close attention to the weeklong wave of protests that broke out on December 28, 2017, in Mashhad.²⁰¹ There was some trepidation in the Russian capital given likely concern over the example that successful Iranian demonstrations could set for a Russia heading toward presidential elections in March 2018.²⁰² There was probably also relief that there was no repetition of the "Death to Russia" chants that were heard in the protests that followed the fraud-filled reelection of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president in 2009.²⁰³ While Russia dodged a bullet this time, historical animosities will always provide the kindling for potential explosions of anti-Russian sentiment in Iran. However, piggybacking on Iranian official propaganda, recent demonstrations instead gave Moscow another opportunity to play up the theme of Russia as defender against externally stoked "color revolutions." Deputy Foreign

Minister Sergey Ryabkov put out the official line, portraying Russia as the protector of Iran—Russia’s “friendly” neighbor—against U.S. interference and once again warning that the JCPOA was non-negotiable.²⁰⁴

However, some protestors this time around did pointedly question Iran’s engagement in Syria. There were widely reported chants of “Leave Syria alone, think about us!”; “Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, I will give my life for Iran”; and “Death to Hizballah.”²⁰⁵ Such sentiments evidently reflected deteriorating economic conditions affecting young people, especially in Iran’s provinces. In the sparring between hard-line conservatives and reformers, it had been revealed that funding for the IRGC had jumped to around \$8 billion in the newly unveiled budget for 2018.²⁰⁶

If opposition to such largesse for the IRGC leads to hesitation in Tehran to stake more resources on its operations in Syria, Moscow may judge it a positive development to the extent that it tempers any inclination in Tehran to challenge Russia’s ascendancy in Damascus and claw back some of Iran’s lost advantages. However, Moscow will not want the fallout from the demonstrations to undercut Iran as a useful counterbalance to American activities and influence in Syria. So far this does not appear likely. Expert observers report that “at street level across Iran, the Syrian venture—as well as Iran’s other Arab pursuits—are overwhelmingly viewed as nothing but a drain.”²⁰⁷ Nevertheless, in reacting to the demonstrations and to then-Secretary Tillerson’s speech at Stanford University not long after outlining American policy toward Iran, Iranian security institutions such as the IRGC, with significant stakes in Syria, have shown no signs of any intention to pull back from a forward-leaning posture. They have instead explicitly stated that their goals are to oust the United States from the region and to cement Asad’s hold on power in Damascus.²⁰⁸

Push-Pull with Turkey

Russia’s handling of Turkey’s Operation Olive Branch in northern Syria against Afrin in Idlib Province reflects another variation in Moscow’s pursuit of a flexible “addition not subtraction” approach to Syria. The evolution of American partnering with the Syrian Kurdish YPG (People’s Protection Units) in the fight against IS in Iraq and then in Syria opened up new opportunities, as well as some complications, for Moscow’s ties with Ankara. Ankara has objected to U.S. partnering with the YPG in any form since the beginning of the relationship in 2014, even when subsumed with Syrian Arab opposition forces within the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces). The YPG is the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (YPD), which Turkey considers a terrorist organization along with its Turkish “parent,” the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). Turkey’s fear has been that the U.S.-YPG fighting partnership will ad-

vance the Kurdish political project to create an autonomous “Rojava” Kurdish region linking the cantons of Jazeera, Kobane, and Afrin across the border from Turkey’s own restless Kurdish region. Turkey’s strategic obsession has been on defeating the PKK together with the PYD and the YPG, and to control the 800-kilometer border with Syria.²⁰⁹

Even as the United States, in early 2018, wrestled with the dilemmas and consequences of continuing to partner with the YPG, Turkish threats against Manbij, further to the east of Afrin, raised the possibility of Turkish forces clashing with a fellow NATO member—America’s special operations personnel stationed there.²¹⁰ The gravity of the situation spurred then-Secretary Tillerson’s meetings with President Erdogan and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu in Ankara on February 15–16, at which the two sides agreed to set up formal talks to sort out their differences.²¹¹ Despite a first round in Washington on March 8–9, however, the issue of Turkey’s objections to U.S. partnership with the YPG and Turkey’s threats to their joint presence in Manbij remained unresolved.²¹²

Prior to that, Russia, on January 20, had withdrawn its personnel from around Afrin and did not interfere as some 72 Turkish fighter jets struck over 100 targets.²¹³ The initial Russian reaction to the operation was relatively mild. “This information was received with concern in Moscow,” stated the Russian Foreign Ministry. “We are closely monitoring the development of the situation.”²¹⁴ Earlier in January, even after reports surfaced that armed drones targeted at Russia’s Hmeimim Air Base had been launched from an area in Idlib Province controlled by Turkey,²¹⁵ Putin quickly asserted that “I am sure that neither the Turkish military, nor the Turkish authorities, nor the Turkish state has anything to do with this incident.” It was a case of “provocateurs” trying to “destroy” Russia’s relations with Iran and Turkey.²¹⁶

The hard-knuckled but essentially transactional back-and-forth between Ankara and Moscow over Afrin was reminiscent of that over Aleppo in 2016, as the two sides worked to put behind them the grave crisis that ensued in November 2015 after Turkish F-16 fighter jets downed a Russian Su-24M bomber over the Turkish-Syrian border.²¹⁷ Then, Moscow had not impeded Ankara’s Operation Euphrates Shield, also aimed at disrupting a viable Rojava Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria, and in return Ankara had helped Russia resolve its challenge in Aleppo by withdrawing Turkish support for rebel opposition forces there. Now, Ankara largely withheld criticism of Russia’s cooperation with Syrian forces in brutally hammering opposition holdouts in the Damascus suburbs in Douma and elsewhere in Eastern Ghouta, in return for which Moscow did not impede Turkey’s Operation Olive Branch move into Afrin.²¹⁸

As Ankara threatened to push east from Afrin toward Manbij, it used Turkey’s warming ties to Russia to encourage the United States to break with the YPG, and Turkey’s cooling ties

to the United States within NATO to prod Russia to ease, especially, air defense barriers to attacking the YPG. Turkey also appeared to hope eventually to displace Iranian influence across northern and eastern Syria. Without advertising it, Russia appeared not averse to using its cooperation with Turkey to reduce Iranian activity in the area and diplomatic leverage over Syria, while also increasing friction between NATO allies Turkey and the United States.²¹⁹ A long-time Russian analyst of the Middle East cautioned not long after these events, however, that Turkey would remain in NATO. Erdogan's goal is not to get close to Russia but to minimize conflict with Russia, and use Russia as an argument or card in dealing with Europe and the United States. The Turkish president's moves toward Russia are tactical, this analyst maintained, not part of some strategic vision of partnership with Russia.²²⁰

In any event, any reduction of U.S. military leverage on the ground east of the Euphrates would have the downside for the United States of undermining the U.S.-SDF campaign against remaining IS forces in that region. At the same time, there would be an upside for Moscow as well as Ankara because their side of the equation would improve in the balance, not only of military forces but also diplomatic leverage in the Astana process, as well as eventually in Geneva.²²¹ An experienced observer of military-diplomatic developments in Syria notes that while Moscow wants stability more than control in Syria, Russia would certainly gain should the Syrian Kurds abandon their partnership with American forces, as the United States would then find that it cannot stay in Syria.²²²

In the short-term, however, the situation has been a wash for both Turkey and Russia. The United States reportedly set up a base in Manbij after Turkey launched its operation against Afrin and threatened to extend it to Manbij. But Ankara and Washington continued to discuss their differences and, on June 4, agreed to a "road map" under which Turkish troops would reportedly displace Kurdish fighters in Manbij; work jointly with the United States to provide security and stability in the area; and the current Kurdish-dominated local council will give way to local forces, primarily Arab.²²³ In fact, already on June 5, the Syrian Kurdish YPG announced that its military advisors would be leaving Manbij.²²⁴ Meanwhile, the U.S.-backed SDF, after suspending operations in March against IS in Deir ez-Zour because of the transfer by the YPG of its fighters to the Afrin theater, resumed the offensive against IS in Deir ez-Zour by early May as Kurdish fighters returned from Afrin.²²⁵

The trilateral summit in Ankara on April 4, 2018, and the follow-up meeting by Astana foreign ministers in Moscow on April 29, appear to have left these dynamics between Russia, Tehran, and Turkey largely intact, with Iran the marginal loser.²²⁶ At the same time, Ankara has kept its approaches to Moscow and Washington fluid as it continues to explore its options in

the context of the evolution of Trump administration policy toward Russia, Syria, and the Iranian presence in Syria.²²⁷ Kurdish explorations of their options in Syria, including dealing with Damascus and the Trump-Putin summit in Helsinki, have reportedly heightened wariness in Ankara over possible Russian-American and Russian-Kurdish understandings in Syria.²²⁸

All the regional and external parties involved have underscored their support for maintaining a unified Syria. Turkey, however, has been isolated in resisting a role for Syria's Kurds in the search for a political solution to the conflict, a position which it may find untenable in the longer run.²²⁹ The outcome of the Astana meetings in April was consistent with the remarks by Vitaly Naumkin, the long-time head of the Oriental Institute in Moscow who has been deeply involved in the Astana process. He emphasized at a public gathering of the Valdai Discussion Club in the Russian capital on May 21 that Astana partners Russia, Iran, and Turkey are not a strategic alliance. None of the countries are giving up their own sovereign interests. All are following their own national interests.²³⁰

Russia can thus live with and tolerate continuing and counterbalancing Iranian, Turkish, Israeli, and American activities in Syria as long as none seeks to challenge and contest Russian gains.²³¹ As summer 2018 approached, Turkey moved to solidify its presence in northwestern Idlib Province and even encroach on Latakia Province.²³² As Ankara's Operation Olive Branch launched toward Afrin early in the year, the Russian Foreign Ministry quickly posted on its Facebook page a report on Lavrov's phone call with Secretary Tillerson. The account ended with the statement that the two men had committed to staying in "close contact."²³³ Officials in Tehran may well have squirmed as they followed Moscow's direct interactions with both Ankara and Washington over Turkey's military activity in Syria, bypassing Tehran.

Sanctions, Strikes, JCPOA Withdrawal

As April 2018 began, Moscow and Damascus appeared closer together than at any time since the beginning of the conflict on the way ahead in Syria. Moscow had joined Damascus in the brutal assault on the Syrian capital's Eastern Ghouta suburbs that began on February 4, escalated on February 20, and formally concluded on April 12.²³⁴ The Russian-Syrian campaign continued despite UNSC Resolution 2401's call on February 24 for a ceasefire.²³⁵ It repeated the tactics used against Aleppo in 2016 of targeting noncombatant civilians—this time reportedly even with chlorine gas—and indiscriminately associating all opposition groups with the proscribed al Qaeda al-Nusra front.²³⁶ Unlike Aleppo, however, there was no prolonged arm wrestling between Moscow and Damascus preceding the operation against Eastern Ghouta, which

Russian diplomacy and airpower supported from the very beginning and beyond the UNSC's call for a ceasefire.²³⁷

With the expulsion of all rebel forces from the suburbs of Damascus complete by May 21,²³⁸ Moscow appeared less inclined than ever to work toward a replacement for Asad. In any event, Putin, if necessary, will want to arrange a dignified exit for the Syrian president that does not undermine a key argument for Russia's intervention in Syria: preventing externally sponsored "regime change." Accomplishing this will be difficult, however, no matter how much Putin might want it. Tehran will support Asad in his resistance to Russian pressure that would have an impact on what Tehran evidently sees as its vital need for a land bridge through Syria to the Lebanese Hizballah, and for a military footprint in Syria from which to challenge Israel.²³⁹ But having itself vetoed nearly a dozen Syria UNSC resolutions, Moscow can have no illusions that the United States will approve any Russia-sponsored resolution that legitimizes Asad remaining in place in Damascus past a UN-negotiated transition period.

However, after the United States imposed deep sanctions on key Russian oligarchs on April 6,²⁴⁰ followed by the April 13 U.S.-UK-French strikes in Syria, Putin's hand in Syria began to lose value. Even before these events, Moscow had still faced a hard slog ahead. Convening the Congress of Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi at the end of January had required strenuous Russian efforts that did not yield much.²⁴¹ Any challenges to security at Hmeimim Air Base and Tartus port more successful than the drone and other attacks at the turn of the year could easily throw hopes of creating an aura of success in Syria awry.²⁴² Asad remained a difficult partner. Damascus openly questioned the premises of the de-escalation zones Russia had negotiated and clearly continued to favor the military rather than the diplomatic option.²⁴³

Now, the new sanctions and strikes dented Russia's military reputation in the region, further restricted Russia's access to world capital markets, and improved President Trump's bargaining position in any future meetings with President Putin.²⁴⁴ The strikes had been a "great humiliation" for Russia, according to one independent pundit.²⁴⁵ The trenchant Vladimir Frolov observed that Russia's "status as a great power and key military player in the Middle East suffered considerable damage." The strikes had demonstrated that "the real balance of power in the Middle East as before is not in Russia's favor." They were a reminder that Russia's military victories in Syria had been possible mainly because the United States had abstained from opposing them. Russia's relative military weakness was obvious, in Frolov's view. "Russia cannot pretend to play the role of an alternative to the United States of America as a power center and security provider in the Middle East." It was time to review Russia's potential end goals in the region.

Frolov agreed with Fedor Lukyanov, head of the Russian Foreign and Defense Policy Council, that otherwise Russia's "vulnerability will grow."²⁴⁶

On May 8, President Trump announced that the United States would withdraw from the JCPOA, the nuclear deal agreed upon with Iran by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany (the P5+1) in July 2015, and reimpose financial and oil sanctions on Iran.²⁴⁷ Together with the other parties to the accord, Russia lamented the move, and Tehran debated what to do next.²⁴⁸ Russia's advice to Tehran was clearly to stick with the deal, the terms of which Russia had helped negotiate.²⁴⁹ Even in advance of President Trump's decision ultimately not to certify Iranian compliance with the JCPOA on October 13, 2017,²⁵⁰ Putin's advice to Iranian President Rouhani was to fully implement the agreement.²⁵¹ Russia's interest is to keep the JCPOA's restraints on the Iranian nuclear program, a priority that the long record of Russia's dealings with Iran over the nuclear issue underscores.²⁵² In Moscow, some also speculate that European opposition to the U.S. decision will weaken American standing not only on the world stage but in any summit meeting with Putin.²⁵³

Russia is unlikely, however, to link what it does with the United States in Syria to the U.S. decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal with Iran. Russia has its own objectives in Syria and Putin evidently calculates that the United States will not impinge on them despite its JCPOA decision. Moscow's greatest concern regarding the nuclear agreement will be that future potential Russian military deals with Iran might be postponed. Moscow will talk loudly about forging ahead with increasing ties with Iran, but the reimposition of American financial sanctions will again scare off any Russian investment in Iran that might run afoul of American sanctions.

Russia will publicly disagree with the United States over any challenges to JCPOA and also with American criticism of Iranian policy in Syria. However, while it swallows its own rising losses from increasing U.S. sanctions,²⁵⁴ Russia will quietly pocket any potential lessening of Iranian leverage on Damascus resulting from the economic impact of American measures on Iran. Adding insult to injury, Damascus may even already have begun to resist Iranian economic expansion into Syria in favor of Russian and Chinese business.²⁵⁵ Iran's IRGC and its Quds Force, however, will probably remain politically strong enough to skim any cream off the top of the Iranian economy, but much under increasing stress.²⁵⁶

Meanwhile, as we have seen, the American decision on JCPOA left in place Russian toleration of Israeli strikes on Iranian facilities and interests in Syria, as dramatically demonstrated by the Israeli strikes of May 10. Paralleling Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's likening of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Nazi Germany, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman routinely calls Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei "the new Hitler," and Riyadh joined

Israel in applauding the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA.²⁵⁷ Despite fundamental disagreement with Russia over the wisdom of the nuclear deal, Riyadh and Moscow have enormous interests in common in increasing and stabilizing world energy prices, and both no doubt welcome the return to oil prices above the \$70 per barrel level. The reimposition of American sanctions and consequent reduction in Iranian oil on world markets will necessitate some renegotiation of the Saudi-led OPEC and Russian-led non-OPEC understandings on country output targets and allocations.²⁵⁸ Whether Russia sticks with the agreement, now slated to be operative until the end of 2018, will hinge more on cold-blooded market factors and Moscow's dealings with Riyadh than on any sentimental attachment to Russia's presumed "ally" relationship with Iran. Turkey will again lament the hit that its trade with Iran will take, but it will continue to try to use its relationships with Russia and the United States to bolster its objectives in Syria, including vis-à-vis Iran, Asad, and Kurdish autonomy.

On May 17, Putin again unexpectedly met with Asad in Sochi.²⁵⁹ On the political track, Asad publicly went no further than to commit to sending a list of delegates to the Constitutional Committee to be established to work with UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura "to discuss amendments to the current Constitution," rather than a new Constitution as called for in December 2015 by UNSC Resolution 2254. Damascus would in fact submit a delegate list, but the 10th round of Astana format talks, held on July 30–31, could only report that negotiations continued on putting together a constitutional commission.²⁶⁰ On the economic track, Asad, in Sochi, on May 17, talked up Russian investments in Syria, but in Damascus the next day the Syrian president met with the Iranian delegation to the Syrian-Iranian Joint Ministerial Economic Committee to assure them of the importance of Iranian trade and investment in Syria.²⁶¹

At the end of the Kremlin's transcript of the statements to the press after the Putin-Asad meeting in Sochi, Putin ambiguously stated, "We proceed from the assumption that in view of the significant victories and success achieved by the Syrian Army in its fight against terrorism, and the start of a more active phase of the political process, foreign armed forces will be withdrawing from the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic."²⁶² The ambiguity was removed the next day when the Russian envoy to the Syrian peace negotiations, Aleksander Lavrentiev, stated "This includes the Americans, and the Turks, and "Hizballah," and of course the Iranians." Russia, however, would keep its two bases in Syria to help stabilize the situation in that country. In general, expanded Foreign Minister Lavrov, Russia would maintain its presence in Syria "as long as Syria's legitimate leadership and friendly population needs it."²⁶³ In Tehran, predictably, the

Foreign Ministry underscored that Iran was in Syria at the invitation of its government and that it was the American and Turkish forces that should withdraw from Syria.²⁶⁴

In Moscow, not long afterward, a widely recognized expert on the Middle East assessed Putin's meeting with Asad as a forced and not realistic demonstration of success. Russia is trapped, he said, and it is becoming more obvious that it cannot do anything. The only strategy is to find a way out through negotiations, but everything Moscow tries repeatedly fails. Putin does not want to make any steps that might worsen the situation, which is deadlocked. Putin's dilemma is how to maintain the status quo without sinking deeper into the Syria quagmire. Russia continues to lose lives and military equipment. Strategically, it has now achieved the maximum possible in recovering territory for the Asad regime. Under Asad, Syria will remain divided, with no chance to get the U.S.-led anti-IS coalition to leave. The coalition controls the areas rich in oil and gas, depriving the Asad government of significant income. And Russia is caught between Israel and Iran, a situation that it cannot improve.²⁶⁵

Separately, Irina Zviagelskaya, another well-known and veteran analyst of Russia's relations with the Middle East, publicly agreed that Russia cannot reconcile Iranian and Israeli interests in Syria and that Moscow's ability to deal with the two countries is very limited. It was sad, she mused, but perhaps for the best just to let the two countries shoot at each other from time to time. More widely, however, she stressed that all the regional powers share a concern that Iran will settle militarily in Syria; this is not just an Israeli worry. In fact, a paper she had co-authored and was presenting when she made these comments stated that Russia, "while maintaining a trusting working relationship with Israel, cannot ignore its concern over the possible appearance of Iranian bases in Syria, the creation of a corridor from Iraq to Lebanon, or Hezbollah's advance to the border in the Golan Heights."²⁶⁶ Such comments emanating from Moscow have raised grave concerns in Tehran.²⁶⁷

Despite Zviagelskaya's pessimism about Russia's ability to reconcile Iranian and Israeli interests, however, the Kremlin continues to work the problem with both, and Iran's staying power in Syria cannot be underestimated.²⁶⁸ In addition, and not for the first time, Putin pushed beyond the analysis of many in the expert community in Moscow with surprising moves in Syria. Rather than folding his hand, the Russian president in effect reshuffled the deck, working with Damascus to destroy the southwest de-escalation zone he had agreed to a year earlier with President Trump. Putin then worked with Netanyahu on new principles governing military activities in the area, after which the Russian president attempted to get American agreement at the summit in Helsinki on working together to bolster Israeli security and to bring the Syrian conflict to an end.

Implications for U.S. Policy

During his joint press conference with French President Emmanuel Macron in Washington on April 24, President Trump stated that with the campaign against IS coming to an end, American Soldiers will “be coming home” but “we want to leave a strong and lasting footprint” in Syria. A key element in this would be not giving “Iran open season to the Mediterranean.”²⁶⁹ In pursuing this key American objective, this paper recommends that the Trump administration should continue judiciously to engage and work with Russia where possible. Russia is not joined at the hip to Iran in Syria, and the presence of friction between Moscow and Tehran over Damascus is now clearer than ever. In response to the question posed to Secretary Mattis on November 13, 2017, this paper argues that there are several significant areas where “daylight” exists between Russia and Iran in Syria, and that the United States should discreetly encourage their widening.²⁷⁰ As Secretary Mattis and General Dunford implement U.S. military support for the way forward toward constraining Iran’s activities in the region, this paper suggests several implications for U.S. policy.

The overarching proposition is that President Putin is not inclined to back a dominant Iran in Syria or the Middle East. However much Russia may verbally defend Iran, Moscow actually shares some of the U.S. concern in constraining Tehran. Nevertheless, Moscow will resist any U.S. pressure to break totally with Iran and with the proxy forces Iran bankrolls and trains to fight in Syria. Going forward, Russian-Iranian cooperation on almost all issues is sure to fall well short of 100 percent, but they will more often than not be able to sustain some lesser degree of coordination, although fraught with tension. Iranian and Iranian-sponsored boots on the ground have saved Russia from having to intervene in Syria with sizable ground forces of its own and from suffering the associated casualties. However, they have also allowed Moscow to argue that Russia’s presence there serves as a counterweight and bulwark against Iranian domination.²⁷¹ Nevertheless, Russia will not solve Washington’s issues with Iran and probably calculates that residual Iranian-sponsored and directed militias in Syria will serve as a hedge against what Russia would regard as American overreaching.

Russia will thus not follow Washington’s lead in working against Iran’s military presence and political activities in Syria. However, the record so far supports the conclusion that Russia will not impede U.S. military actions focused on inhibiting and retaliating against Syrian- and Iranian-associated attacks or threats against U.S. and allied forces on the ground or in Syrian airspace, or against sarin and other chemical agent attacks, especially on civilian populations. Russia’s reaction to the American cruise missile attack on the Syrian regime’s Shayrat Airbase in April

2017, to the U.S. defense of the SDF base outside Deir ez-Zour in February 2018, and to the joint U.S.-UK-French strikes against Syrian chemical weapons facilities in April 2018, all bear witness to this, as do Russia's several deconfliction agreements with the U.S. military regulating activities in Syria and the Trump-Putin statement at Danang, Vietnam, in November 2017.²⁷²

In Helsinki, Presidents Trump and Putin agreed that their national security officials would follow up on the issues they discussed. Now, in fact, is a good time for the United States and Russia to explore how they can come to together where their objectives overlap in Syria. Russia is facing the prospect of diminishing, degrading returns.²⁷³ Its temporary tactical advantages are beginning to slip, though this process is still obscured by its, and the Asad regime's, victories in 2018 in finally securing the suburbs of Damascus and regaining Daraa in the southwest, where the Syrian revolt began in 2011. The Islamic State killed as many as nine Russian "advisors" in a firefight on May 23 with Syrian forces in Deir ez-Zour Province, near the town of Mayadeen, for example, and more than 200 people in Sweida Province along the Jordanian border on July 25.²⁷⁴ But to encourage Russia to engage in pursuit of America's goals, including constraining Iran's leverage in Syria and the wider region and reinforcing Israel's security, the United States needs to maintain a properly resourced military presence in and around Syria.

As argued at the onset of this paper, failure to maintain such a presence until the IS threat is minimized will lead to the further waning of U.S. influence across the Middle East, not just in Syria, and to the continued waxing of Iranian expansion in the region. Moreover, as the example of Iraq demonstrates, it is difficult to definitively defeat IS.²⁷⁵ Continuing an American presence in and around Syria, however, ensures that Russia will regard the United States as a key counterweight to Iran with which Moscow will want and will need to deal. The decline in the instrumental value of dealing with the United States on Syria, not only for Russia but also for the regional powers, will continue to reverse and start to rise again. Washington, however, should have little expectation that Russia will have much interest in sharing its gains in influence in Syria at Iran's expense with the United States to any significant extent.

Consequently, as the United States continues to address the IS threat in Syria, an active American military presence that retains Russian respect will be necessary to resist and degrade Iranian influence in Syria, and to support the security interests of America's allies in the region, including Israel. This means maintaining robust stand-off sea and air assets around Syria capable of striking chemical weapons research, development, production, and storage facility targets and disabling airbase infrastructures used by the Asad regime to inflict chemical weapon attacks. The United States must also maintain ground forces and advisors east of the Euphrates for as long as it takes and in sufficient numbers to confront the IS and Iranian challenges. This

includes disrupting Iranian land supply routes to Hizballah through Iraq and Syria at key crossing points such as the Al Bukamal and Al-Tanf areas.²⁷⁶ At the same time, the United States should continue to engage with Russia on deconfliction in Syria, while not ruling out U.S. and allied strikes on Syrian, Iranian, and Iranian-supported forces to prevent their attacks on U.S. and allied forces, as well as defend against and repulse any Russian mercenary attacks, as was done on February 7, 2018.

While recognizing that Russia is now an influential player in Syria with substantial military and political assets, the United States should not seek to reverse these Russian accomplishments. Instead, the United States should exercise strategic patience as Russia and Iran's differences on Syria's future widen largely on their own. Russia and Iran are historical rivals, and U.S. objectives toward Iran are now served by the presence of Russia in Syria. This includes Russia's bases at Hmeimim and Tartus, which Moscow intends to keep under the terms of its long-term agreements with Damascus. Although it was not Moscow's original intent, these bases now help anchor Russia's influence, counterbalancing that of Iran in Syria, diminishing Iran's sway over the Asad regime.²⁷⁷

This recommended U.S. posture will also bolster American leverage at the Geneva negotiating table and increase U.S. ability to stabilize the 30 percent of Syrian territory that lies to the east of the Euphrates river, out of the control of Damascus.²⁷⁸ In Helsinki, Putin called on the United States to work with Russia to address Syria's humanitarian and refugee crises.²⁷⁹ Those challenges, together with the immense cost of reconstruction—put at over \$250 billion by the United Nations²⁸⁰—will give the United States and European and Arab supporters of Syria's moderate oppositions and surviving civil society continuing leverage with Russia over how long Asad remains in power in Damascus.²⁸¹ Asad's tenure will remain an open issue as peace negotiations continue, the search for aid becomes more serious, and increasing stability east of the Euphrates sets an example for an alternative to the Asad regime.²⁸² According to polling, the majority of respondents across the region, even in Iran, do not believe that there can be a solution in Syria that leaves Asad in power.²⁸³ Moscow appears at times to recognize this reality. Although Tehran still insists on keeping Asad, Foreign Minister Lavrov, in April 2018, reportedly told a closed-door session of the Russian Council of Foreign and Defense Policy that Moscow is pushing for reforms and a change of leaders in Syria, for without it Syrian society cannot be reunited.²⁸⁴ So far, however, such suggestions must be regarded with extreme skepticism.

The continuing requirements of deconfliction and the potential of the United States as one of several counterweights to Iranian aspirations for dominance in Syria and the region will spur Putin to keep the door open to dialogue with the Trump administration. Setting the stage for

their summit in Helsinki, Putin quickly endorsed President Trump's March 20 proposal to meet and his suggestion that the venue might even be the White House.²⁸⁵ Earlier, at the Valdai Conference in October 2017, Putin was not just jollying President Trump out of principle or good manners but pursuing his own objectives when he castigated a questioner for his lack of respect for the American president.²⁸⁶ Reacting to the April 13 strikes, Putin called for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, but still abstained—as usual—from any *ad hominem* lashing out at President Trump.²⁸⁷ Sources in Moscow asserted that Putin had put out the order to tone down the anti-United States rhetoric.²⁸⁸ Some in Moscow reportedly actually saw “new opportunities for a *détente* on Syria” after the strikes.²⁸⁹

The United States is still relevant to Moscow on several levels in Syria, and that is why Russia will not abandon its efforts to engage Washington on the conflict and what comes afterward. The Trump administration should therefore work with Russia toward a UN-led political solution to Syria, without conceding anything in advance on Asad's future or Iran's place in the region.

Notes

¹ The paper also draws on the author's May 2018 visit to Moscow and previous visits and work on this and related topics: John W. Parker, *Persian Dreams: Moscow and Tehran Since the Fall of the Shah* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, Inc., 2009), *passim*; John W. Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program: Replay or Breakthrough?* Strategic Perspectives 9 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, March 2012), *passim*, available at <<http://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-9.pdf>>; John W. Parker, *Understanding Putin Through a Middle Eastern Looking Glass*, Strategic Perspectives 19 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, July 2015), *passim*, available at <<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-19.pdf>>; and John W. Parker, *Putin's Syrian Gambit: Sharper Elbows, Bigger Footprint, Stickier Wicket*, Strategic Perspectives 25 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, July 2017), *passim*, available at <<http://inss.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-25.pdf>>.

² Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, "Hallway Press Gaggle by Secretary Mattis," transcript, Department of Defense (DOD), November 13, 2017, available at <www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1371000/hallway-press-gaggle-by-secretary-mattis/>.

³ Karen DeYoung, "U.S., Russia Agree to Collaborate on Backing Cease-Fire in Southwest Syria," *Washington Post*, July 7, 2017, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-russia-agree-to-collaborate-backing-cease-fire-in-southwest-syria/2017/07/07/2fcfb5e-633b-11e7-a4f7-af34fc1d9d39_story.html?utm_term=.3d0c32acf371>; and Gardiner Harris, "U.S., Russia and Jordan Reach Deal for Cease-Fire in Part of Syria," *New York Times*, July 7, 2017, available at <www.nytimes.com/2017/07/07/us/politics/syria-ceasefire-agreement.html?ref=todayspaper>.

⁴ In Danang, Vietnam, the two presidents also reviewed progress on the ceasefire in southwest Syria that they had finalized at their July summit in Hamburg, and "welcomed" the Memorandum of Principles just concluded on November 8, 2017, in Amman. The memorandum agreed upon between Jordan, Russia, and the United States, the two leaders stated, "reinforces the success of the [southwest Syria] ceasefire initiative, to include the reduction, and ultimate elimination of foreign forces and foreign fighters from the area to ensure a more sustainable peace." See "Statement by the Presidents of the Russian Federation and the United States of America," President of Russia Web site, November 11, 2017, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5252>>.

⁵ "Remarks by President Trump and President Putin of the Russian Federation in Joint Press Conference," The White House, July 16, 2018, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-putin-russian-federation-joint-press-conference/>.

⁶ "Trump Addresses Criticism of Appearance with Putin: Full Transcript," *New York Times*, July 17, 2018, available at <www.nytimes.com/2018/07/17/us/politics/donald-trump-putin.html>.

⁷ Announcing the coordinated U.S.-UK-French strikes on April 13, 2018, on Syrian chemical weapons facilities, President Trump explained that "The purpose of our actions tonight is to establish a strong deterrent against the production, spread, and use of chemical weapons. Establishing this deterrent is a vital national security interest of the United States. The combined American, British, and French response to these atrocities will integrate all instruments of our national power: military, economic and diplomatic. We are prepared to sustain this response until the Syrian regime stops its use

of prohibited chemical agents.” He went on to say that “In Syria, the United States, with but a small force being used to eliminate what is left of ISIS, is doing what is necessary to protect the American people. Over the last year, nearly 100 percent of the territory once controlled by the so-called ISIS caliphate in Syria and Iraq has been liberated and eliminated.” President Trump added that “The United States has also rebuilt our friendships across the Middle East. . . . Increased engagement from our friends, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, and others, can ensure that Iran does not profit from the eradication of ISIS. America does not seek an indefinite presence in Syria, under no circumstances. As other nations step up their contributions, we look forward to the day when we can bring our warriors home.” See “President Trump on Syria Strikes: Full Transcript and Video,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2018, available at <www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/trump-syria-airstrikes-full-transcript.html>.

⁸ Discussing Syria after the Danang summit, Secretary of Defense Mattis on November 13, 2017, stated that the U.S. “goal right now [is] to continue until ISIS is extinguished and . . . until the Geneva process can give us a diplomatic solution and a way ahead.” See Mattis, “Hallway Press Gaggle by Secretary Mattis,” November 13, 2017. For Defense Secretary Mattis’s preview of the role U.S. troops remaining on the ground in Syria would play, see Mattis, “Press Gaggle with Secretary Mattis,” transcript, DOD, December 29, 2017, available at <www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1406278/press-gaggle-with-secretary-mattis/>.

⁹ Expounding on President Trump’s position, United Nations (UN) Ambassador Nikki Haley stated on April 15, 2018, that “At some point we want to see our military come home. . . . But there are three things that we have to do to get there. First of all, the President made it very clear we cannot have chemical weapons usage anywhere and we will continue to combat that in any way we need to protect American interests. Secondly, we want to make sure that they understand that ISIS has to be defeated completely and wholly in a way that we know that we have stabilized the region. . . . And then thirdly, we want to make sure that the influence of Iran doesn’t take over the area. . . . The President has asked the allies to step up and do more when it comes to Syria. And so all of these things are being done in the name of bringing our military home.” See “UN Ambassador Nikki Haley,” transcript, *Face the Nation*, CBS News, April 15, 2018, available at <www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-u-n-ambassador-nikki-haley-on-face-the-nation-april-15-2018/>; Ambassador Haley repeated these same points the same day on Fox News. See “Amb. Nikki Haley on Trump Administration’s Syria Strategy,” *Fox News Sunday*, April 15, 2018, available at <www.foxnews.com/transcript/2018/04/15/amb-nikki-haley-on-trump-administrations-syria-strategy.html>.

¹⁰ On April 16, 2018, the White House Press Secretary stated that “We don’t have a timeframe” on bringing American troops home. “It’s not based on an arbitrary timeline, but on defeating ISIS and also getting the Gulf partners in the region to step up and do more both militarily and financially.” See “Press Gaggle by Press Secretary Sarah Sanders,” The White House, Aboard Air Force One, En Route Miami, Florida, April 16, 2018, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-gaggle-by-press-secretary-sarah-sanders-041618/>.

¹¹ On January 17, 2018, in remarks delivered at the Hoover Institute at Stanford University, former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson expanded on “the way forward for the United States in Syria.” The United States desired “five key endstates”: the “enduring” defeat of the so-called Islamic State

(IS) and al Qaeda; a “stable, unified, independent,” and “functioning” Syrian state under a post-Asad leadership attained through pursuit of a UN-led political process as spelled out in UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254; the diminution of “Iranian influence” in and across Syria and security for Syria’s neighbors “from all threats emanating from Syria”; conditions conducive to the safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons to Syria; and the removal of all weapons of mass destruction from Syria. See Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson, “Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria,” Hoover Institute at Stanford University, Stanford, CA, January 17, 2018, available at <www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2018/01/277493.htm>.

¹² Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, “After the Deal: A New Iran Strategy,” The Heritage Foundation, May 21, 2018, available at <www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/05/282301.htm>.

¹³ Secretary Mattis also twice stated that he was “not prepared to answer” the question. See Mattis, “Hallway Press Gaggle by Secretary Mattis,” November 13, 2017.

¹⁴ James F. Jeffrey, “U.S. Troop Deployment in Syria: Potential Pitfalls,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 12, 2017, available at <www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-troop-deployment-in-syria-potential-pitfalls>.

¹⁵ Senate Armed Services Committee, testimony by James F. Jeffrey, “U.S. Policy and Strategy in the Middle East,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 14, 2017, available at <www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/u.s.-policy-and-strategy-in-the-middle-east>.

¹⁶ Parker, *Persian Dreams*, 250, 270; Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program*, 44–45, passim; and Parker, *Understanding Putin*, passim.

¹⁷ Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 14; and Andrew J. Tabler, “Beyond Deconfliction in Syria,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 16, 2017, available at <www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/beyond-deconfliction-in-syria>. For the relevant documents leading up to and including UNSCR 2254, see UN, “Action Group for Syria,” Final Communique, 30.06.2012 (also, “Geneva Communique”), available at <www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf>; UNSCR 2118, September 27, 2013, available at <www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2118.pdf>; “Statement of the International Syria Support Group,” Vienna, Austria, October 30, 2015 (also, “Vienna Statement”), available at <<https://documents.aucegypt.edu/SyriaReader/Documents/2-Vienna%2030%20Oct%202015.pdf>>; UN Department of Political Affairs, “Statement of the International Syria Support Group,” Vienna, Austria, November 14, 2015, available at <www.un.org/undpa/en/Speeches-statements/14112015/syria>; and UNSCR 2254, December 18, 2015, available at <www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2254.pdf>.

¹⁸ Anna Borshchevskaya, “Russia’s Goals Go beyond Damascus,” *Middle East Quarterly* 24 (Winter 2018), January 1, 2018, available at <www.meforum.org/articles/2017/russias-goals-go-beyond-damascus>.

¹⁹ For a look back at the slowly rising rank of Syria and the Middle East as a priority in Russian foreign policy under Putin, see Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 7, 14, 21, 39, 62–65, and 68–73; and “Putin’s Syrian Gambit,” 32–35. Now, of course, it is at the top, or at least at the top of media attention, as acknowledged by Foreign Minister Lavrov. See “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Statement and Answers to Media Questions at a News Conference on Russian Diplomacy in 2017,” Russian Foreign

Ministry Web site, January 15, 2018, available at <www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3018203>.

²⁰ Ellen Francis and Laila Bassam, “Syrian Army, Allies Thrust East to Break Siege in Deir Al-Zor City,” Reuters, September 4, 2017, available at <www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-army-allies-thrust-east-to-break-siege-in-deir-al-zor-city-idUSKCN1BF1G0?utm_source=Boomtrain&utm_medium=manual&utm_campaign=20170905>; Liz Sly, “A Boost for Assad as the Syrian Army Makes Gains Against ISIS in Eastern Syria,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2017, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrian-backed-forces-reach-besieged-allies-outside-islamic-state-held-city/2017/09/05/75ce908e-922b-11e7-8754-d478688d23b4_story.html?utm_term=.4e7109ded4a1>; and Louisa Loveluck and Zakaria Zakaria, “Syria’s World Cup Soccer Bid Mesmerizes a Divided Nation Badly in Need of Hope,” *Washington Post*, September 6, 2017, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrias-world-cup-soccer-bid-mesmerizes-a-divided-nation-badly-in-need-of-hope/2017/09/05/d5eb422e-91da-11e7-8482-8dc9a7af29f9_story.html?utm_term=.8fa7aa0f945d>.

²¹ “Syrian Refugee Crisis: Facts, FAQs, and How to Help,” World Vision, July 13, 2017, available at <www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts>.

²² Louisa Loveluck, “U.S.-Backed Forces Announce anti-ISIS Push in Syria’s Oil-Rich East,” *Washington Post*, September 10, 2017, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-backed-forces-announce-anti-isis-push-in-syrias-oil-rich-east/2017/09/09/f79f5536-94e1-11e7-8482-8dc9a7af29f9_story.html?utm_term=.c4b56e16a9f1>; and Liz Sly, “The Syrian War Is Far from Over. But the Endgame Is Already Playing Out,” *Washington Post*, September 27, 2017, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-syrian-war-is-far-from-over-but-the-endgame-is-already-playing-out/2017/09/24/4361a55e-9d67-11e7-b2a7-bc70b6f98089_story.html?utm_term=.3a074bec37ef>.

²³ “President al-Assad: Everything Related to the Destiny and Future of Syria Is a 100% Syrian Issue, Unity of Syrian Territory Is Self-Evident and Not up for Debate,” Syrian Arab New Agency (SANA), August 20, 2017, available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=112238>>; and “Syrian and Russian Businessmen Discuss Enhancing Cooperation,” SANA, August 19, 2017, available at <<http://sana.sy/en/?p=112176>>.

²⁴ Victor Baranets, “Nachal’nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennyh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov: ‘My perelomili hrebet udarnym silam terrorizma.’ Razgrom vooruzhennyh formirovanij terroristov v Sirii stal odnim iz glavnyh voennyh itogov uhodjashhego goda. I v jetom Rossijskaja armija, bezuslovno, sygrala reshajushhuju rol” [The Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Army General Valery Gerasimov: “We broke the backbone of the strike forces of terrorism.” The defeat of the armed groups of terrorists in Syria became one of the main military highlights of the year. And in this the Russian army played a crucial role], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 26, 2017, available at <www.kp.ru/daily/26775/3808693/?geo=0>.

²⁵ Prime Minister Abadi declared victory over IS in Iraq on December 9, 2017; See Tamer el-Ghobashi, “Iraq Declares Complete Victory in the War Against Islamic State,” *Washington Post*, December 10, 2017, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/world/iraq-declares-complete-victory-in-the-war-against-islamic-state/2017/12/09/9a0c5ea6-dce3-11e7-8e5f-ccc94e22b133_story.html?utm_>

term=.680ecab0bcb6>, several days after President Putin declared the defeat of IS on both sides of the Euphrates in Syria on December 6; See “President on Situation in Syria,” President of Russia Web site, December 6, 2017, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56321>>. However, the pundit Vladimir Frolov wrote that it had been the U.S.-led campaign that had freed up Syrian government and Iranian forces, Iranian-supported militias, and Russian airpower to concentrate their fire on the Damascus regime’s non-IS opponents, who as time went on received less and less assistance from the outside. See Vladimir Frolov, “Kak rascenivat’ poezdka Putina v Siriju?” [How Should We Assess Putin’s Trip to Syria?] *Republic* (Moscow), December 12, 2017, available at <<https://republic.ru/posts/88333>>. With even more detail, the journalist Maksim Yusin pointed out that Russia did not focus on IS until after the December 2016 victory in Aleppo; that Syrian government forces did not score a significant victory over IS until November 2017, when they took Deir ez-Zour; and that by that time the Western coalition had already taken Raqqa in October 2017, after Turkish forces had earlier taken al Bab in February 2017, and Kurdish forces supported by the United States had captured Manbij in August 2016. See Maksim Yusin, “Nepodelennaja pobeda. Maksim Jusin—o tom, kto vnes reshajushhij vklad v razgrom IG” [The Uncut Victory. Maxim Yusin—On Who Made the Decisive Contribution to the Defeat of ISIS], *Kommersant* (Moscow), December 12, 2017, available at <www.kommersant.ru/doc/3493833?from=doc_vrez>.

²⁶ IHS Jane’s Terrorism and Insurgency Center (JTIC), as cited in Agence France-Presse, “Study: Russian Support Gave Assad Half of Syria,” VOA, May 15, 2018, available at <www.voanews.com/a/russian-support-gave-assad-half-of-syria-study-says/4394613.html>. For an analysis of the Russian air intervention in Syria, see Anton Lavrov, “The Russian Air Campaign in Syria: A Preliminary Analysis,” CNA, Arlington, VA, June 22, 2018, available at <www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/COP-2018-U-017903-Final.pdf>.

²⁷ As Dmitry Yefremenko put it: “Russia’s exit from Syria, whether voluntary or due to some extraordinary circumstances, would create a power vacuum that the U.S., Turkey, and the Gulf countries, on the one hand, and Iran, on the other hand, would immediately try to fill. Adverse consequences for the region would not be far off. In other words, the time when Russia could contemplate an exit strategy seems to have passed. It would be virtually impossible now to guarantee a negotiated settlement in Syria or at least a lasting truce without Russia’s substantial military presence in that country.” See Dmitry Yefremenko, “By the Rivers of Babylon,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, October 5, 2017, available at <<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/By-the-Rivers-of-Babylon-19037>>. On several waves of earlier hopes, see Parker, *Putin’s Syrian Gambit*, 20–32.

²⁸ “Vladimir Putin posetil aviabazu Hmejmim v Sirii” [Vladimir Putin Visited Hmeimim Air Base in Syria], President of Russia Web site, December 11, 2017, available at <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56351>>. The Russian version makes clear Putin said “significant portion.” On March 14, 2016, Putin had used the phrase “main part”; See Parker, *Putin’s Syrian Gambit*, 28–29; and on December 9, 2016, had ordered Defense Minister Shoigu to begin the scaling back of Russian forces in Syria; See Parker, *Putin’s Syrian Gambit*, 60.

²⁹ For speculation on what would be withdrawn from Hmeimim, see Ivan Safronov and Aleksandra Dzhordzhevich, “Net povoda ne vyjti. Rossijskie voennye pristupili k zaversheniju operacii v Sirii” [There Is No Reason Not to Leave. The Russian Military Has Begun Wrapping Up Operations in

Syria], *Kommersant*, December 12, 2017, available at <www.kommersant.ru/doc/3494094>.

³⁰ Ivan Safronov and Alexandra Dzhorzhevich, “Politicheskoe uregulirovanie—ne delo tehnik. Rossiya mozhet nachat’ sokrashhat’ kolichestvo samoletov i vertoletov v Sirii” [A Political Settlement Is Not a Matter of Technique. Russia May Begin Reducing the Number of Aircraft and Helicopters in Syria], *Kommersant*, October 30, 2017, available at <www.kommersant.ru/doc/3454164?utm_source=CGI+Daily+Russia+Brief&utm_campaign=a0322d60fd-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_08_02&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_814a2b3260-a0322d60fd-281718393&mc_cid=a0322d60fd&mc_eid=3826ac3356>; and comments on November 3 by Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov, as reflected—among several sources—in “Russia Prepares to Withdraw Forces from Syria,” *Asharq Al-Awsat* (London), December 1, 2017, available at <<https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1100156/russia-prepares-withdraw-forces-syria>>. This revived speculation on the expansion of Russian “private” fighter deployments to Syria; See Metin Gurcan, “Private Military Companies: Moscow’s other Army in Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, November 29, 2017; and was accompanied by news of talks between Russia and Egypt on an agreement for reciprocal access to airbases and airspace for a period of 5 years; See “Russian Military Working on Deal to Use Egyptian Airbases: Document,” Reuters, November 30, 2017, available at <www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-egypt-military-airspace-planes/russian-military-working-on-deal-to-use-egyptian-air-bases-document-idUSKBN1DU11D?utm_campaign=20171130&utm_source=sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=Middle%20East%20Minute>. When Putin stopped in Cairo on December 11, a \$30 billion nuclear power station construction contract was announced but nothing further was said about the airbase agreement; See Neil MacFarquhar and Anne Barnard, “A Quick 3-Nation Tour for Putin Highlights Moscow’s New Reach in the Middle East,” *New York Times*, December 12, 2017, available at <www.nytimes.com/2017/12/11/world/europe/putin-syria-russia.html?ref=todayspaper>.

³¹ See Russia’s Official Internet Portal for Legal Information, “Federal’nyj zakon ot 29.12.2017 # 441-FZ ‘O ratifikacii Soglashenija mezhdru Rossijskoj Federaciej i Sirijskoj Arabskoj Respublikoj o rasshirenii territorii punkta material’no-tehnicheskogo obespechenija Voenno-Morskogo Flota Rossijskoj Federacii v rajone porta Tartus i zahodah voennyh korablej Rossijskoj Federacii v territorial’noe more, vnutrennie vody i porty Sirijskoj Arabskoj Respubliki” [Federal Law No. 441-FZ, December 29, 2017, On Ratification of the Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Syrian Arab Republic on Expansion of the Material-Technical Logistics Center of the Navy of the Russian Federation in the Area of the Port of Tartus and the Visits of Warships of the Russian Federation in the Territorial Sea, Internal Waters and Ports of the Syrian Arab Republic], available at <<http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201712290024>>. Putin signed a similar document covering Hmeimim Air Base over a year earlier, on October 14, 2016, available at <<http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001201610140012>>.

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³⁹ *Ibid.*, 38–39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

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⁴⁸ "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad Made a Working Visit to Russia," President of Russia Web site, November 21, 2017, available at <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56135>>.

⁴⁹ Baranets, "Nachal'nik Genshtaba Vooruzhennyh sil Rossii general armii Valerij Gerasimov."

⁵⁰ "President al-Assad to Iranian Al-ALAM TV: Syrian-Iranian Relation Is Strategic . . . the Strongest Response to Israel Is to Strike Its Terrorists in Syria," SANA, June 13, 2018, available at <<https://sana.sy/en/?p=140166>>. Asad's thumbnail recounting in this interview of Syria's earlier major battlefield mileposts parallels that suggested by the present author in *Understanding Putin Through a Middle Eastern Looking Glass* and *Putin's Syrian Gambit*: Qusayr in 2013, Aleppo in 2016, Deir ez-Zour in 2017, and the Damascus suburbs in 2018.

⁵¹ For examination of this conclusion from various perspectives over time and for the sources consulted, see Parker, *Persian Dreams*, passim; Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program*, passim; Parker, *Understanding Putin*, passim; and Parker, *Putin's Syrian Gambit*, passim.

⁵² Parker, *Persian Dreams*, passim; and Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program*, passim.

⁵³ Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 24–25.

⁵⁴ Igor Subbotin, “Tegeran ishhet ukrytiya v al’janse s Moskvoy. Iran nameren sblizit’sja s Rossiej na fone konfrontacii s SShA” [Tehran Seeks Shelter in Alliance with Moscow. Iran Intends Rapprochement with Russia Against Background of Confrontation with United States], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (Moscow), February 21, 2017, available at <www.ng.ru/world/2017-02-21/1_6934_iran.html>.

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⁵⁷ Mark N. Katz, “Moscow’s Balancing Act in Syria,” *Lobe Log*, November 21, 2017, available at <<http://lobelog.com/moscows-balancing-act-in-syria/>>.

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⁵⁹ Maxim A. Suchkov, “Moscow’s Leverage in Syria Is Strong, but Limited,” *Al-Monitor*, December 8, 2017.

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⁶² “President in a Meeting with His Russian Counterpart,” President of the Islamic Republic of Iran official Web site, November 1, 2017, available at <<http://president.ir/en/101403>>.

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⁸⁰ UNSCR 2231 (2015), adopted by the Security Council at its 7488th meeting, July 20, 2015, S/RES/2231, annex B: statement, paragraph 5, 100, available at <www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2231.pdf>. Paragraph 4 of this

same statement limits the sale of nuclear weapon delivery systems and their components for 8 years after Adoption Day. UNSCR 1929 (2010), adopted June 9, 2010, had embargoed transfers of all these systems to Iran. For background on that earlier UNSC action and Moscow's surprising decision pursuant to UNSCR 1929 to include the S-300 among the systems that Russia would not export to Iran, see Parker, *Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Program*, 11–17.

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⁹² For a review of Russian-Saudi relations from Putin’s first years as president until June 2015, see Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 21–28 and 54–59.

⁹³ “Joint news conference by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia Adel bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir, Sochi, October 11, 2015,” Russian Foreign Ministry Web site, October 12, 2015, available at <www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/1838901>; and Igor Delanoë, “Is a Russia-Saudi Deal on the Horizon?” *The Moscow Times*, October 12, 2015, available at <<https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/is-a-russia-saudi-deal-on-the-horizon-50218>>.

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¹⁸¹ On the possible Iranian connection, see Yusin, Belenkaya, and Safronov, “Sirijskie otrjady popali pod nedruzhestvennyj ogon’. SShA zajavili ob unichtozhenii bolee sta bojcov sil, lojal’nyh Basharu Asadu”; and Tom Cooper, “The U.S. Military Bushwacked Iranian Forces in Syria,” *War Is Boring*, February 12, 2018, available at <<http://warisboring.com/the-u-s-military-bushwacked-iranian-troops-in-syria/>>.

¹⁸² Wagner mercenaries had earlier fought in eastern Ukraine. Their training facility for operations in Syria was located next to the official Main Intelligence Directorate training camp for Russian special forces at Molkino in Krasnodar territory in southern Russia. Their deployment in Syria had enabled Putin to claim “no boots on the ground” and keep the official tally of Russian casualties low; See Parker, *Putin’s Syrian Gambit*, 19. For more on the history of private military contractors and Wagner specifically, see also “Private Military Companies in Russia: Carrying Out Criminal Orders of the Kremlin,” *Inform Napalm*, n.d., available at <<http://informnapalm.rocks/private-military-companies-in-russia-carrying-out-criminal-orders-of-the-kremlin>>; and Ilya Rozhdestvenskiy, “O rospuske rech’ ne idet. Kak sejchas funkcioniruet i vo skol’ko obhoditsja ‘gruppa Vagnera’” [“There Is No talk of Disbanding It.” How the ‘Wagner Group’ Functions Now and How Much It Costs], *Republic*, February 21, 2018, available at <https://republic.ru/posts/89612?utm_source=slon.ru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=morning>. For reporting on a visit to Molkino in March 2018, replete with photographs, see Igor Pushkarev, “Vrut vse, synok, oni neft’ deljat! Na krovi rebjat zarabatyvajut’ Kak vygljadit lager’ ChVK Vagnera pod Krasnodarom.” Wagner contractors fresh from Syria were still using the Molkino facility as recently as April 2018. See Maria Tsvetkova and Anton Zverev, “Exclusive: Russian Civilians Helping Assad Use Military Base Back Home—Witnesses,” *Reuters*, April 25, 2018, available at <www.reuters.com>.

reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-military/exclusive-russian-civilians-helping-assad-use-military-base-back-home-witnesses-idUSKBN1HW0LX?utm_source=applenews>.

¹⁸³ Ellen Nakashima, Karen DeYoung, and Liz Sly, "Putin Ally Said to Be in Touch with Kremlin, Assad before His Mercenaries Attacked U.S. Troops," *Washington Post*, February 23, 2018, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/putin-ally-said-to-be-in-touch-with-kremlin-assad-before-his-mercenaries-attacked-us-troops/2018/02/22/f4ef050c-1781-11e8-8b08-027a6ccb38eb_story.html?utm_term=.f7c476412d6c>. Prigozhin's connections to Evro Polis and the latter's business ties with the Syrian government began to develop in December 2016 under the auspices of Russia's Energy Ministry. They first came to light in June 2017 in the St. Petersburg online publication Fontanka. They were exposed by online journalist Denis Korotkov, who had earlier done the first reporting on the Wagner Group (see Parker, *Putin's Syrian Gambit*, 71). See Denis Korotkov, "Nem-nogo biznesa v sirijskoj vojne" [A Little Business in the Syrian War], *Fontanka* (St. Petersburg), June 26, 2017, available at <www.fontanka.ru/2017/06/26/084/>; and Andrew Kramer, "Russia Deploys a Potent Weapon in Syria: The Profit Motive," *New York Times*, July 6, 2017, available at <www.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/world/middleeast/russia-syria-oil-isis.html?ref=todayspaper>.

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campaign=morning>. In its lack of participation by serious elements of the real Syrian opposition and the rigidity of Damascus representatives, who were under instructions not to discuss a new constitution and other key issues (see Barnard, “Russia Hosts Peace Talks on Syria, but Rebels Stay Away”), the Congress was in many ways a repetition on a larger stage of the inconsequential intra-Syrian talks that Russia hosted in Moscow in January and April 2015. Those also served to portray Putin as working for peace, but solved nothing and were soon followed by Russia’s decision to intervene militarily in Syria that summer. See Parker, *Understanding Putin*, 71; and Parker, *Putin’s Syrian Gambit*, 23–24.

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