

Geopolitics

AND TRANSNATIONAL THREATS



PER CONCORDIAM ILLUSTRATION

*RUSSIA, CENTRAL ASIA, THE CAUCASUS
AND THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR*

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PHOTOS BY REUTERS

Russia's enduring support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad cannot be sufficiently explained by Russian hostility toward Western interventionism or other common causal narratives. From Moscow's point of view, the growing radical Islamism among Syria's insurgents threatens three key areas of Russian geostrategic interest: the Islamic and turbulent North Caucasus within Russia's borders, the fragile influence of Russia in the South Caucasus, and the stability of the autocracies in Central Asia. Russia tries to retain its interests in these areas by supporting the Assad regime. With an ever less likely diplomatic or military solution in Syria, the West will only be able to mitigate the Syrians' plight by taking Russia's interests into account.

Russia continues its strong diplomatic, economic and military support of the Assad regime. Moscow's rhetoric and behavior at the United Nations is the most visible sign of its patronage of Assad. Wielding its veto power at the Security Council, Russia repeatedly put down diplomatic initiatives to exert pressure on Damascus, resisting any effort that might lead to effective sanctions or intervention. In the fall of 2013, Russia played a major role in averting Western intervention by reshaping the global discourse away from deterrence and punishment for the illegal use of chemical weapons. The agreement that followed effectively rendered the Assad regime the guarantor for the safe transport and destruction of the Syrian chemical stockpile, buying it time to regain military footing.

Less visible, but no less important, is the direct economic and military support that Russia bestows on Syria. The Russian Navy repeatedly held exercises in Syrian waters. Russia, alongside Iran, is helping Syria import fuels for its heavy vehicles and army tanks. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia already provided 78 percent of Syria's arms imports between 2007 and 2011 and has significantly increased this volume since the beginning of the hostilities. Deliveries are said to include guided missiles, drones, vacuum bombs, spare parts for T-72 tanks, Mi-24 attack helicopters and aerial bombs. Russia has equipped the Assad regime with sophisticated medium range surface-to-air anti-aircraft weaponry such as Pantsir-S1 (SA-22) and Buk-M2 (SA-17) systems as well as anti-ship cruise missiles (P-800 Oniks, SS-N-26), thus raising the cost of outside intervention.

THE COSTS OF RUSSIAN SUPPORT

With only China's support, Russia has year after year defied broad majorities in both the UN General Assembly and the Security Council. Russia, therefore, increasingly shares the blame for the horrendous consequences of the civil war: Assad's forces are bombing civilians and deliberately restricting humanitarian aid to rebel areas to starve out the enemy. Meanwhile, the opposition increasingly radicalizes. More than 150,000 people have died and over 9 million are displaced. The conflict has metastasized out of Syria and is visibly flaring up the region's sectarian conflicts, most recently attested by the rapid advance of the Islamist State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Iraq. Russia has consequently lost a lot of its diplomatic standing in the West and the Middle East.

In August 2013, reports surfaced that Bandar bin Sultan, then-Saudi head of intelligence, met with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Bin Sultan demanded Russian support to increase pressure on the Assad regime. In return, Saudi Arabia would comply on a range of economic and energy issues by increasing oil prices through export restriction and by not competing with Russia's strong interests in the untapped oil and gas resources in the Mediterranean and the Russian gas pipeline network toward Central Europe. Bin Sultan also suggested that Russian compliance regarding Syria could cause Saudi Arabia to put effective pressure on Islamist militants within Russia, thereby preventing these militants from attacking the prestigious Sochi 2014 Olympics. Considering Russia's strong commitment to control Europe's energy inflows and make Sochi a soft-power success, it is revealing that Putin flat out rejected these inducements and tacit threats.

IN SEARCH OF RUSSIA'S MOTIVES

So why is Russia willing to bear these considerable costs? Policymakers, scholars and analysts have given various answers, usually citing economic, strategic, ideological and moral reasons. However, these motives are unsatisfactory and insufficient in light of Russia's overall demeanor.

The most common explanation is economic. Russia benefits from selling arms to Syria and engaging in energy relations. In 2011, the Russian state-owned arms trade monopoly Rosoboronexport sold at least \$960 million worth of arms to Syria. The overall Russo-Syrian trade turnover amounted to \$1.9 billion. On Christmas Day 2013, Syria struck a deal that allows Russia to explore Syria's offshore energy resources.

However, a look at the context discards trade as a significant reason: Even before the war, Syria had proved to be a bad debtor to Russia. A large majority of arms deals were canceled, postponed or left unpaid. Effective arms trade to Syria accounts for less than 5 percent of Russia's overall arms sales, and the Syrian share of the Russian general trade turnover accounted for a meager 0.26 percent in 2011. Russia is globally competitive with energy and weapons; it therefore does not depend on Syria's minor share of that trade. Furthermore, Russia has stronger economic interests with countries in the region that are hostile to Assad, as it trades in much higher volumes with Turkey and Israel. Russia is also trying to get into the potentially huge offshore gas reserves near Cyprus, Israel and Lebanon.

Some pundits, especially on the fringes of the political spectrum, hold the view that Russia's Syrian policy is a principled defense of state sovereignty, international peace and the Westphalian system. Another version of this argument, put forward by prominent experts such as Carnegie's Dmitri Trenin and Roy Allison, former head of Chatham House's Russia and Eurasia Program, regard Russia's resistance to intervention in Syria as a strategy to prevent the establishment of foreign intervention and regime change as an international norm and practice, thus protecting its own authoritarian regime in the long run.

While an instrumentally motivated defense of noninterventionism and support for the authoritarian status quo play a role in Russia's conduct abroad, it evidently does not override all other strategic goals. In 2001, Russia did not oppose regime change in Afghanistan and actively supported the United States. It did nothing to prevent

its former ally Kurmanbek Bakiyev, then president of Kyrgyzstan, from being ousted by a popular revolution in 2010 that resulted in the establishment of a comparatively democratic government. It also allowed for intervention in Libya in 2011. Russia's own conduct abroad also testifies to its flexibility on intervention, witness its long-lasting support of Armenia's de facto occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, its enduring support of illegal enclaves on the sovereign territories of Moldova and Georgia, as well as its annexation of Crimea and its more recent activities in Eastern Ukraine.

Lastly, Russia's strong assistance to Syria is regarded as being part of a wider effort to engage in an aggressive

zero-sum competition for strategic influence with the U.S. and its allies. Russia's support of Syria is largely seen as a part of its support for Iran, which, in turn, staunchly supports the Assad regime. But again, Russia's actions show that this is not the paramount priority of its approach. The Kremlin is withholding deliveries of S-300 (SA-10) missiles to Iran. These sophisticated and advanced long-range anti-aircraft systems would give the Islamic Republic considerable defensive and offensive capabilities in interstate conflicts. Russia also played a hesitant, yet crucial, role in enabling international sanctions to pressure Teheran and prevent the production of nuclear weapons, thereby siding with the U.S. on a major strategic issue. As for Syria itself, Russia has postponed the delivery of S-300 systems, MiG-29 jet fighters and Yak-130 training/fighter aircraft to the Assad regime and annulled existing contracts for MiG-31 advanced fighter jets.

Well before the civil war, Russia had announced that it would transform its tiny Syrian military port in Tartus into a major hub for Russian influence in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. During the civil war, however, Russia did not use Damascus' increasing dependence to enlarge its presence there. On the contrary, it quietly dropped its grandiose scheme by withdrawing all military and civilian personnel. All in all, Russia displays an unwillingness to overly antagonize the U.S. and its regional allies by strongly empowering their antagonists. It is also well aware that Syria is ill-suited to be a platform for Russian power projection.

THE OVERARCHING RUSSIAN GOAL: CONTAINING MILITANT ISLAM

What then explains Russia's strong, enduring and costly



Workers unload humanitarian aid sent from Russia to the Syrian government, in this photograph distributed by Syria's national news agency SANA in February 2014. Despite international criticism, Russia persists in supporting the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad.

support for the Assad regime? The answer lies in three geographical areas that Russia deems to be of vital importance: the North Caucasus, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. An examination of its conduct in these areas reveals that the Putin administration tries to contain various threats to its influence and security that are all connected to militant Islamism. Russia's Syria policy is thus largely determined by its interests in areas outside of the Middle East.

NORTH CAUCASUS

North of the Caucasus Mountains lie Russia's southern provinces. They encompass two districts and seven ethnically defined republics. Roughly 10 million people, most of them Muslims, live there. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has struggled to maintain authority over the region. It fought two brutal wars against secessionist Chechnya in 1994-1996 and 1999-2009, in which about 100,000 people lost their lives. After losing several conventional battles, the insurgents resorted to guerrilla tactics and terrorism. They have spread throughout the whole North Caucasus, especially Dagestan, and are taking on an ever more militant and Islamist character. They are organized in the networked "Caucasian Emirate" (CE) that calls for a caliphate in the North Caucasus ruled by a fundamentalist interpretation of Shariah.

While a renewal of serious secession efforts seems unlikely, the CE remains a serious challenge to Russia. According to the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, 460 people were killed in 2013 as a direct result of terrorist attacks, ambushes and shoot-outs. In 2008, when Russia still regarded the matter as an internal war, only 340 died. Russia has dealt with the insurgency by resorting to blunt and often indiscriminate force. However, the underlying local problems that fuel the insurgency remain unresolved and are often exacerbated by Moscow's heavy hand. Unemployment is very high; an estimated 70 to 80 percent of those under 30 years old are out of work. Wages are low, corruption is enormous, and the attempts of the Russian state and its local governors to control and contain political Islam are viewed with spite by the North Caucasus' growing Salafist movement.

Militant Islamism in Russia's south even spread to Syria via the hundreds, if not thousands of North Caucasian jihadists, who are fighting on the side of al-Nusrah, al-Sham, the Army of Mujahedeen and ISIS. Thus, North Caucasians are found in all factions of the quarreling militant Islamist groups in Syria. They often hold commanding positions, such as Tarkhan Batirashvili, who, in the summer of 2013, was selected high commander of the northern front of ISIS. With the Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, there exists a group almost exclusively comprised of North Caucasians and Russian-speaking fighters who pledge official allegiance to the CE and played significant roles in some of the fiercest battles in Syria.

Russia's actions and rhetoric show that Moscow's political elite acutely fears that militant Islam will spread,

intensify and refocus on the North Caucasus. Southern Russia has been attractive to global jihadist forces before: al-Qaida took part in the North Caucasian insurgency, especially during the second Chechen war and before 9/11. Prominent members of the global terror network were present, including Abu Omar al-Seif and Abu Omar al-Kuwaiti. Russia is well aware that the same Arab countries that support militant Islam in Syria, most prominently Saudi Arabia, have previously fueled the massive insurgency within its own borders. Qatar even offered its territory as a safe haven for Chechen separatist leader Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, who was then murdered in an attack linked to the Russian secret services. Russian officials regularly denounce Russian Islamists as "Wahabis," a term that technically applies only to Saudi Arabian Salafism. They report that tens of thousands of radicalized Muslims in the North Caucasus support the Syrian Islamist opposition. Ramzan Kadyrov, president of the Chechen Republic, has even announced the formation of a special unit to combat terrorists from Syria that threaten to bring the battle to Russia.

Global jihadism is highly sensitive to changes in media attention, available funds and the existing conflict landscape. Due to the strong presence of North Caucasians in Syria and the prestigious successes of militant Islam against Russia in Chechnya and Afghanistan, the enduring insurgency in Russia's south could clearly present itself as an attractive jihadist project to join. If radical groups in Syria – or, considering recent developments, in Iraq – were to gain effective control, be it through government participation, occupation of vital territory or outright military victory, the fighters and resources devoted to jihad will find a new place to exert their momentum. Since militant Islam in Russia is already spreading from the North Caucasus to its formerly stable and strategically important regions of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, Russia is eager to prevent the re-emergence of outside support for its domestic Islamist militants.

SOUTH CAUCASUS

South of the Caucasus Mountains, Azerbaijan experiences similar problems with Sunni militants. As in Russia, the state controlled media refers to them as "Wahabis." Militant Islamist groups in Russia and Azerbaijan are highly interconnected: Azerbaijan is located directly south of Dagestan, now the main focus of CE militancy. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, radical Islamists from the North Caucasus joined the wars of secession in neighboring Georgia and in Nagorno-Karabakh on Azerbaijan's own territory. Azerbaijani militants are said to have fought in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Iraq and even Mali. The CE supports these militants, has planned major attacks in Azerbaijan and funnels money and fighters into the country. Due to loose visa agreements with Turkey, Azerbaijan has become the foremost transit country for Islamist fighters from Russia and Central Asia moving to Syria. For all these reasons, Russia has obvious and strong motives to contain

militant Islam in Azerbaijan, but its concerns run even deeper.

Russia has major interests in the South Caucasus' pipeline architecture, the most likely obstacle to Russian efforts to control Europe's fossil fuel imports. However, Russia's influence in the region is limited. Its relations with Georgia are fraught on account of the war in 2008 and Russia's ongoing support for the secessionist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia exerts major influence on Armenia by enabling it to maintain its de facto military occupation of Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region. Azerbaijan, in turn, wields its position as the main energy transit hub connecting Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe to balance Russian influence. However, Russia provides 80 percent of Azerbaijan's weapons and has privileged access to Azerbaijan's powerful southern neighbor, Iran. The Islamic Republic, which like Azerbaijan features a Shiite majority, tries to use the existing ethnic and religious relations between the two countries to exert its influence in Azerbaijan. Sunni militants are hostile to Shiites whom they consider heretical. Due to geographical proximity, security relations, the confessional landscape and the shared goal of state and regime stability, Russia therefore maintains a certain, yet shaky, influence in Azerbaijan, which is directly connected to the successful containment of militant Sunni Islam.

CENTRAL ASIA

Jihadists transiting through Azerbaijan to Syria are not only emerging from Russia and Azerbaijan, but also from other former Soviet republics, especially those in Central Asia. There, a large majority of people profess adherence to the Muslim faith, and since the end of the Cold War, religious observance and the politicization of Islam have been growing. But so has militant Islamism. During the civil war in Tajikistan from 1992-1997, domestic Islamist groups fought besides Taliban units from Afghanistan and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which still maintains ties to al-Qaida and remains active in the region. To varying degrees, all the Central Asian countries experienced bombing and suicide attacks throughout the last decade. As in the North Caucasus, militant Islamism is fueled by staggeringly high degrees of political and economic exclusion, unemployment — especially among the young — poverty, repression, a huge shadow economy and widespread criminal networks. Groups in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia provide funding, manpower, education and training for Muslim extremists in the region. Since Central Asia's authoritarian leaders are rapidly aging and face increasing popular discontent, they look for patrons to maintain state and regime stability.

However, Russia's considerable influence in the region is waning. Although it retains some cultural influence, the use of Russian and the Cyrillic alphabet is declining while more and more ethnic Russians leave the region. China is increasingly penetrating the economies of Central Asia and has already surpassed Russia as the largest trading partner of Uzbekistan, which, next to Afghanistan, is the region's

most populous country. Russia's conduct in Ukraine caused considerable reluctance in Central Asia to continue further integration into Russia's Eurasian Union.

Anticipating the International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) departure from Afghanistan, as well as China's growing influence in Central Asia, Russia has stepped up its military presence in the region to act as a military hegemon. It is the leading member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which also comprises Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Moscow leads regional anti-terrorism efforts and contributes the majority of troops to the CSTO's rapid response forces. Russian assurances to provide for regional security after the withdrawal of ISAF coincided with increased troop presence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. These countries, incidentally, border directly on Afghanistan and China. Lending its considerable intelligence apparatus and military might to a joint effort of regime and state stability is one of the few possibilities left for Moscow to retain regional influence. Hence, with security and state stability linked to militant Islam, Russia is bound to contain it in yet another region.

MOSCOW'S STRATEGIC HORIZON

In the Russian geostrategic view, militant Islam in Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East presents an interconnected, albeit not monumental or even coherent, host of direct and indirect threats to some of Moscow's core strategic interests.

One of the Russian regime's sources of legitimacy is Putin's image as a strong protector of the integrity and security of the motherland. Since the beginning of his first presidency, Putin has made secessionist Chechnya his issue. A rekindling of wide scale conflict in the North Caucasus and a resurgence of major terrorist attacks in Russia's big cities would cast serious doubts on his ability to continue to deliver on his promises. The regime has also increasingly picked up the rhetoric of Russian and Christian Orthodox supremacism and is reluctant to counter Russian right-wing extremists who, in Russia's main cities, are hunting down the "blacks," an ethnic slur assigned to migrant workers from the Caucasus and Central Asia. This is also reflected in an unwillingness to effectively integrate Russia's rapidly growing Muslim population, which according to various estimates already amounts to nearly 16 percent of the population and could reach 20 percent by 2020. With the ethnically Russian share of the population dramatically shrinking, Russia faces severe societal challenges. Because of the regime's reliance on Russian ethnic nationalism, as witnessed in the Ukrainian crisis, an effective integration of these Muslims, predominantly members of ethnic minorities, is not a viable option. By trying to hold on to its remaining sources of legitimacy, Moscow is set on a path to closely control domestic Islam and fight its militant outliers with brute and what is thought to be preventive force.

By actively supporting regimes in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Moscow is not only trying to contain long-range — but still dire — spillover threats into its

own heartland. The predominantly authoritarian rulers of Central Asia and Azerbaijan use the label of “Muslim militants” to defame and fight political enemies. In doing so, they secure their political survival by crude, propagandistic and often brutal means. Moscow uses its remaining assets of geopolitical influence — namely its position at the UN, its intelligence capabilities and its military power — to support these efforts and gain political leverage in these countries to advance other vital interests. First, these consist in preventing other great powers from advancing militarily to Russia’s borders. By pushing to be Eurasia’s indispensable power when it comes to regime and state security, Russia raises the opportunity costs for all countries considering closer relations with the West or China.

Second, through this political leverage, Russia seeks to secure its position as Europe’s paramount energy provider. The prospect of major pipelines that connect the European Union, via Azerbaijan, with the huge oil and gas reserves of Central Asia is consequently seen as a considerable threat. In 2012, 79 percent of Russian oil exports and 76 percent of its gas exports went to the EU. More than half of the Russian state budget revenues are due to oil and gas sales. The \$400 billion gas deal struck with China at the end of May 2014, even if implemented as envisioned, will not shift this general arrangement in the foreseeable future. Moscow has, as of yet, been able to maintain the fragile consent of Russia’s oligarchs and huge swaths of the population that rely on various social services. But this consent is directly connected to Russia’s ability to sell high-priced fossil fuels to Europe. However, in 2013, Russia needed an oil price of \$110 per barrel to balance its budget. But Russian oil production will probably flatten no later than 2020 and dramatically decrease by 2035. This dire outlook is exacerbated by the U.S.’s ongoing shale gas revolution, increased Iraqi oil production, the EU’s reinforced attempts to reach energy independence and the possible opening of Iran. With its immediate neighbors increasingly suspicious of Russia because of its conduct in the Ukraine, Moscow needs to do everything it can to keep its position in today’s global energy architecture.

FEAR AND DECLINE IN PUTIN’S RUSSIA

Considering this strategic horizon, the reasoning of Russia’s political elite seems to be exactly in line with what they say about militant Islam in Syria. Considering Russia’s vital interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as its proven fear

of Islamist spillover into its volatile and already dangerous south, Moscow’s Syria policy proves itself to follow a grim, yet all too logical rationale: By protecting Assad at the UN and empowering him against his domestic enemies, Russia seeks to contain the threat of militant Islamism migrating back to regions about which it genuinely cares. An enduring Assad regime keeps the jihadists fighting and dying at a distant place, prevents the emergence of safe havens and guarantees a more attractive destination for militants and funding than the Caucasus or Central Asia.

In the light of this logic, Russia’s plans seem to be working well. Assad’s regime is still relatively coherent, holds on to strategically vital areas of the country and retains Iran and Hezbollah as powerful regional allies. While the opposition, and especially its Islamist groups, engage in ever more vicious infighting, the loyalist forces are advancing in certain key areas, such as in Yabroud, which cuts into the opposition’s supply lines from Lebanon. At the beginning of May 2014, Assad’s forces retook Homs, Syria’s third most populous city, which had been the opposition’s stronghold for years. Assad was thereby able to extend the range of his mock elections into wide swaths of Syrian territory, thus strongly signaling his staying power. At the same time, the Syrian lira has stabilized and the production of natural gas has surpassed prewar levels.

Today’s Russia is fearful and on the decline in two ways. First, it fears its own decline. While demographics and economics signal severe internal problems in the future, Russia is

internationally isolated over Ukraine and will face serious problems when China decides to reopen the question of contested borders, behind which most of Russia’s energy wealth lies. Second, due to these frightening prospects, Russia will decline any proposal that might jeopardize its current strategic assets. If Western governments want to reach a diplomatic solution, they will have to accept that Russia, with near certainty, will move on Syria only if some key demands are met: a robust guarantee of a reliable and effectively non-democratic government, the general upholding of Syria’s current security and intelligence apparatus, the enduring influence of Iran in Damascus and the continuation of a hard power struggle against Islamist militants. It is very unlikely that the West will commit to these conditions. But with a unilateral option not on the table, a balance of power favorable to the Assad regime’s survival and the worrying advances made by ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the West should start to think in this direction if it really wants to change the status quo. □



Employees stand near a pipe made for the South Stream pipeline at a plant in Russia’s Nizhny Novgorod region in April 2014. The proposed pipeline across the Black Sea is a key part of Russia’s plan to leave Europe dependent on its natural gas shipments.