

Chapter 2

THE RUSSIAN WAY OF WAR IN SYRIA:

Threat Perception and Approaches to Counterterrorism

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From the moment Vladimir Putin officially took the reins of power in 2000, he focused on the promotion of the Russia Federation's great power status through zero-sum competition with the West in favor of a multipolar world. This is the broader context that stands in the backdrop of his military intervention in Syria in September 2015. Putin had multiple goals in Syria, but fundamentally, his September 2015 intervention was part of this same pursuit: the erosion of the U.S.-led global order.

Putin calculated correctly that the West would not oppose his military intervention in Syria. The Kremlin interpreted years of Western policies towards Russia as an expression of weakness. In Syria, the West had consistently signaled disinterest in getting involved beyond fighting the Islamic State (ISIS). Putin also supported Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad in multiple ways for years before the military intervention. Moscow's deep and multifaceted ties to Syria, together with Putin's strategic posture

toward the West, put the Kremlin on a path towards supporting Assad to the bitter end.¹ The Syria intervention offers important lessons about Russia's way of war and the links between Russia's political aims and military tactics—indeed, Moscow used both to achieve its aims in Syria, where Moscow's diplomatic campaign supported its military objectives. These efforts showed more continuity than change in the Kremlin's approach to war and counterterrorism, as well as its broader threat perceptions, with adaptations to new realities. Moscow is unable and unwilling to lead reconciliation in Syria and can live with low-level conflict to the detriment of international stability.

Moscow's Approach to War and Counterterrorism

Moscow's approach to war and counterterrorism sets the important context for Russia in Syria. In this regard, there is more continuity than difference in the grand scope of Russia's history—from Muscovy's crushing of its democratic rival Novgorod, which paved the way for the creation of the Russian state, to the brutality of Soviet invasions, to Russia's two wars in Chechnya in the 1990s. Similarly, when it comes to security services, there are parallels between Ivan the Terrible's Oprichniki, Joseph Stalin's NKVD, and Putin's National Guard.² This continuity lies in utilizing terror to subdue the population into submission (both at home and abroad), a paranoid search for internal enemies, and blurring lines between war and peace, as well as domestic and foreign policies as part of a fundamental insecurity that historically drove the Kremlin. The lesson: either control others or be subjugated.

1 Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russia's Many Interests in Syria," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 24, 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-many-interests-in-syria>.

2 Brian Whitmore, "The New Oprichniki," RFE/RL, June 8, 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/the-new-oprichniki/28536410.html>.

Indeed, as Russian military expert Alexander Golts wrote, Russia's "ideology of governing was built on the idea of the country as a military camp, a fortress under siege."³

The state's level of terror has varied. Indeed, it was astronomically higher under Stalin, who tortured and murdered millions and gripped the entire country in constant psychological fear. Indeed, in private, Soviet citizens described life as "behind a barbed wire," meaning that the entire country was one big prison, whether in or out of the Gulag system.

Putin's Russia is not totalitarian and has killed far fewer people for political reasons, even as it continues to incarcerate prisoners of conscience as the Soviet Union had done. Nor does Putin adhere to the revolutionary Communist ideology of the Soviet Union. Yet, the values that guide the Kremlin's thinking ultimately lead it to similar conclusions about its course of action, regardless of the number of victims. Thus, Putin's Russia has seen a revival of a search for internal enemies and paranoid fear of outside (usually Western) influence. It has also seen a frightening revival of Stalinism and broader rehabilitation of the Soviet Union.

Terrorism historically played an important role in Russia. As Russian military expert Pavel Baev wrote, "Russia has a uniquely rich history in facing domestic terrorism, which reached a peak in the late 19th and early 20th centuries."⁴ Vladimir Lenin himself was an extremist. The Bolsheviks rose to power from a small minority, and utilized a combination of propaganda and indiscriminate,

3 Alexander Golts, *Military Reform and Militarism in Russia*, (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2019), p. 9.

4 Pavel Baev, "Why Russia is Failing the 'Syria test' for counterterrorism cooperation with the West," PONARS Eurasia, May 2018, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/why-russia-failing-syria-test-counterterrorism-cooperation-west>.

brutal, and often arbitrary terrorism.⁵

Russia's counterterrorism typically focused on brutal repression and murder. This is how imperial, and later Stalinist, Russia sought to subdue the Caucasus—an approach that created more problems than it solved, as it only hardened resistance to the Russian state. Indeed, this is how post-Soviet Russia approached the Caucasus. Thus, veteran Russia expert Fiona Hill wrote that unlike the United States, which suffered from external terrorism, Russia is “inadvertently spawning” its own terrorist problem.⁶ Indeed, Moscow's heavy-handed approach in Chechnya in the 1990s, coupled with its focus on pushing out or ignoring moderate and secular leaders in favor of those who professed loyalty, only fueled radicalization and helped turn what began as a secular separatist struggle in Chechnya into a more extremist one, with a radical Islamist component.⁷

During two of the most high-profile terrorist events during Putin's tenure—the October 2002 Moscow seizure of the Dubrovka theater and the September 2004 seizure of a school in Beslan, North Ossetia—hostages died primarily as a result of the Russian government's botched rescue attempts than actions of terrorists. To be sure, terrorism posed a real problem, but a different one than Western societies faced. The radical Sunni terrorist group Caucasus Emirate, or *Imarat Kavkaz*, formed officially in October 2007, during the second Chechen war, and prioritized local attacks,

5 See, for example, Richard Pipes, *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime*, (Vintage Books, Random House: New York, 1995).

6 Fiona Hill, “Putin and Bush in Common Cause? Russia's View of the Terrorist Threat After September 11,” Brookings Institution, June 1, 2002, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/putin-and-bush-in-common-cause-russias-view-of-the-terrorist-threat-after-september-11/>.

7 “Chechnya and the Bombs in Boston,” *The Economist*, April 20, 2013, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2013/04/russian-politics-0>.

especially on Russian officials, despite its professed allegiance to the global jihad in April 2009. The Kremlin exaggerated Imarat Kavkaz's connections to al Qaeda and other Sunni terrorist groups operating outside of Russia. This approach helped Putin to style himself as a leader fighting global terrorism. His official reason for the Syria intervention was that "thousands" from Russia and the former Soviet Union joined ISIS in Syria, and Russia had to intervene to prevent terrorist attacks inside Russia.⁸

The real number of Russian citizens who joined ISIS is hard to verify, but more to the point, the Kremlin exaggerated the threat that the group posed to Russia. Furthermore, as one analyst observed, "Paradoxically [ISIS] helped Putin by destroying the North Caucasian resistance as an organized force."⁹ Russia's own investigative journalists concluded that the Russian FSB (Federal Security Service) directly forced North Caucasians out of Russia to join ISIS and other terrorist groups in Syria after traveling to Turkey, especially in advance of the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi.¹⁰ In other words, the FSB controlled the flow of fighters going into Syria. Even if this approach saved Russia from possible attacks (though that remains unclear at best), it certainly shows Moscow's disregard for international security because it was willing to add to the ranks of a terrorist organization. The

8 Andrey Biryukov, "Putin Says Thousands From Russia, CIS Joined Islamic State," *Bloomberg*, October 16, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-16/putin-says-5-000-7-000-from-russia-cis-fight-for-islamic-state>.

9 "Dmitry V. Shlapentokh, "Russia's Approach to ISIL: the Hidden Benefit of Evil," *NATO Review*, October 30, 2015, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2015/10/30/russias-approach-to-isil-the-hidden-benefit-of-evil/index.html>.

10 Elena Milashina, "Халифат? Приманка для дураков! [Caliphate? A bait for fools!]," *Новая Газета*, July 29, 2015, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/07/29/65056-171-halifat-primanka-dlya-durakov-187>.

Kremlin's primary motivation in Syria was limiting American influence in world affairs and projecting its own great power status, not fighting terrorism.

Moscow's Threat Perception

The Kremlin's support for terrorist tactics abroad and towards its own population stems from a historic disregard for individual rights and fundamentally different threat perceptions from those of Western governments. The Kremlin always perceived a link between external and internal threats and centered on "the need to maintain sovereignty and stability. . . . This consists primarily of defense of the sovereign," as Russia expert Keir Giles put it.¹¹ Regime survival is the primary goal, and, for the Kremlin, survival is linked to deterring the West. As one analyst explained, "The Kremlin places regional influence and counteraction of the American hegemony as a greater priority than fighting terrorism."¹² This focus comes from the Kremlin belief that the U.S.-led global order had disadvantaged Russia, which explains why Russian officials had been calling for a "multipolar world" since the 1990s, even prior to Putin taking power. It was a vision first articulated by former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeniy Primakov.

Moreover, terrorism for the Kremlin can be a useful political tool, domestically and internationally. Thus, Moscow's partnership with Hezbollah, outreach to the Taliban, and friendly relations with Hamas are not irrational. Indeed, taking a strong public

11 Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West*, The Chatham House Insights Series, Royal Institute of International Affairs: London, January 29, 2019, p. 90.

12 Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "Russia's Counterproductive Counter-Terrorism, Testimony presented to the US," Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, June 12, 2019, <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/events/russia-counterproductive-counterterrorism>.

stance against terrorism took Putin out of obscurity and into the presidency. Furthermore, domestically, the Kremlin uses such a vague definition of terrorism that allows it to de-legitimize regime critics as “extremists.” The Kremlin also perceives a threat to its regime from anti-government protests, such as the “color revolutions” and the Arab Spring, which in the Kremlin’s view was orchestrated by the West in pursuit of undermining the Kremlin. In this view, the West utilizes protests to move countries closer to the Western sphere of influence to undermine and destabilize Russia, especially countries on Russia’s periphery. Part of this Kremlin narrative is that the West sows chaos and fuels terrorist activities inside Russia and beyond towards the same aim and that the West created ISIS and other terrorist groups in the Middle East. In this narrative, Russia is a more stable and reliable alternative to the United States in Syria—indeed, Russian officials never fail to point out that Moscow entered Syria upon a “legitimate” request of Assad, while the United States was there illegally. Russia, in this narrative, seeks stability in contrast to havoc-wreaking United States.

The Military Campaign in Syria

Moscow focused primarily on deterring the West as part of its military campaign in Syria. Saving Assad is a subset of this approach and, in this sense, a chief military objective. The intention to save Assad and deter the West was obvious from the weaponry that Moscow brought into Syria and from the types of operations that it conducted. In the broader context of the Kremlin’s threat perception, this made sense. Whether it was first intended as a short-term operation or not, Moscow soon showed that it desired to stay for the long term.

Moscow quickly and methodically set up an anti-access area

denial (A2AD) layout by bringing in S-400 surface-to-air missile (SAM) system, tactical ballistic missiles, and advanced anti-ship cruise missiles, as well as establishing airspace control. Another important component of this layout was electronic warfare. Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergei Lavrov described SAMs as an “exclusively a defensive weapon,”¹³ which again highlighted the difference between Russian and Western threat perception. While SAM systems are indeed partly defensive, they also help to contest and control an airspace and thus augment the regional military balance of power. That Russian (and incidentally, Iranian) officials refer to SAMs as exclusively defensive suggests that they see the alteration of the regional power balance as defensive.

ISIS and other terrorist groups operating in Syria never had an air force, so the weapons that Moscow brought into the Syrian theater showed that ISIS was not the primary target. Most of Moscow’s strikes were outside ISIS territories—in fact Russian airstrikes at times indirectly strengthened it. The moderate anti-Assad opposition that the Kremlin bombed also opposed ISIS, so, in effect, Moscow helped eliminate ISIS opponents or reduce their ability to operate. Once Russia entered the Syrian theater, ISIS used “the newfound air cover to maneuver and reposition fighters.”¹⁴ Indeed, early in the Russian military intervention, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond said, “Their [Russian] intervention is strengthening [ISIS] on the ground, doing the

13 Carol J. Williams and Paul Richter, “Putin lifts Russia’s ban on delivery of S-300 missile system to Iran,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 13, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-lifts-ban-missiles-iran-20150413-story.html>.

14 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “ISIS attacks increase in Syria despite Russian air strikes, report says,” *Washington Post*, February 24, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/02/24/isis-attacks-spike-in-syria-with-help-from-russian-air-cover-report-says/>.

very opposite of what they claim to be wanting to achieve.”¹⁵ To give another example, Moscow rejected a coalition request for permission to strike Islamic State targets near al-Tanf, used by American troops.¹⁶ These actions show that ultimately it was Western efforts, not Russia’s, that eventually rolled ISIS back.

Another important aspect of the campaign is assurance of access for Moscow, chiefly expansion of the Tartus naval facility and establishment of the Khmeimim airbase, which the Kremlin used as a springboard for greater power projection and to support operations throughout the region. This aspect also shows the long-term view that Moscow has taken in Syria. It is an extension of the historic Kremlin push for influence in the Eastern Mediterranean that always mattered in Russian great power ambitions.

More fundamentally, Moscow’s operations in Syria highlighted how little the Russian approach to counterterrorism changed over the years, despite improvements in technology. Chief to this approach in Syria was the belief that anyone who is armed and opposes Assad is a terrorist—a view that Assad himself also holds. This view was also an extension of the Kremlin’s historic definition of terrorism and approach to it, as outlined earlier. Indeed, Moscow’s airstrikes aimed to give the West a choice: ISIS or Assad, chaos or stability.

This view was a classic Kremlin false dichotomy. Assad can never stabilize Syria under the guise of a “secular dictator.” Without

15 “Putin is strengthening Isis in Syria, says UK foreign secretary,” *Guardian*, February 1, 2016,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/02/putin-strengthening-isis-syria-uk-foreign-secretary-philip-hammond-russia>.

16 Ryan Browne, “Russia hindering fight against ISIS in Syria, says coalition official,” *CNN*, January 8, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/01/08/politics/us-russia-hindering-isis-fight-syria/index.html>.

Russian help, Assad would have fallen. His forces often could not even hold territory after they conquered it, despite Assad's promise to regain "every inch" of Syria.

The atrocities that Assad committed spread rather than smothered the initially peaceful uprising, which, at its initial stage, merely demanded government reform, rather than for Assad to step down. It was Assad who injected Islamist radicals into the protest movement, and his presence had been the single greatest recruiting tool for ISIS.

Moscow's and Assad's bombing of civilian targets like hospitals was meant to inflict terror on the general population and beat it into submission. The bombing of Aleppo in particular bore striking resemblance to Moscow's scorched earth tactics in Chechnya, where, for example, Moscow essentially razed the republic's capital, Grozny, to the ground in the December 1999-January 2000 siege. While no one disputed Moscow's legitimate right to fight terrorists, its methods, according to many observers at the time, fell into the category of war crimes, and world leaders expressed shock at the violence. Moscow's approach stands fundamentally at odds with Western, and internationally recognized, standards for conducting war. Western militaries have carefully established procedures to hit targets with as much precision as possible, to minimize, if not avoid entirely, civilian casualties. More fundamentally, Western militaries draw sharp distinctions between war and peace and combatants and civilians, whereas for the Russian state, the line is blurred: war is more of a spectrum than the clear-cut perception in Western countries.

Another tactic that the Kremlin used was to engage in risky behavior to get the West to back down, knowing that the West was more risk averse than Russia. As Andrew Weiss and Nicole

Ng wrote, Moscow engaged in risky military maneuvers, for example, to force American counterparts into a conversation or amend deconfliction agreements in Russia's favor. They add, "Robert Hamilton, the first head of the U.S. ground deconfliction cell, has memorably described these tactics as a variation on the Russian military's controversial 'escalate to deescalate' doctrine in the nuclear realm."¹⁷

An important evolution of the Russian tactical approach has been reliance on proxies to do the heavy lifting. Moscow's military involvement in Syria remains limited. Most of Moscow's participation has been to provide air support. This reflects the Kremlin's aversion to casualties, given the risk of domestic blowback and its awareness of the dangers of overextension. Moscow has relied primarily on Iran and Hezbollah to do the heavy fighting on the ground. Moreover, Moscow's reliance on so-called private military companies (PMCs) in Syria is another important aspect of this growing trend.¹⁸ These developments show that tactics evolve, but the underlying deeper drivers of Kremlin behavior remain the same.

Although the Russian government remains non-transparent about true numbers, Russian soldiers appear to have been far more likely to die in Ukraine than in Syria. Especially in Ukraine, it is almost impossible to distinguish between the so-called

17 Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, "Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 20, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/03/20/collision-avoidance-lessons-of-u.s.-and-russian-operations-in-syria-pub-78571>.

18 Anna Borshchevskaya, "Russian Private Military Companies. Continuity and Evolution of a Model," Foreign Policy Research Institute, December 18, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/12/russian-private-military-companies-continuity-and-evolution-of-the-model/>.

“volunteers” (PMCs) and regular troops, but the overall level of Russian involvement is deeper in Ukraine than in Syria. In Ukraine, Moscow focused on ground operations, but, in Syria, the focus was on aerial ones, which carry less risk. Approximately a year after Moscow annexed Crimea, Russian opposition said over 200 Russian soldiers had died in eastern Ukraine.¹⁹ A group of Russian volunteers in Project Cargo allegedly managed to verify at least 649 Russian soldiers (excluding PMCs) killed in action in Ukraine between 2014–2016,²⁰ but the real numbers are likely higher.

The picture in Syria is a bit clearer, if only in comparison. Moscow officially confirmed 116 total “personnel” deaths in Syria from the start of the intervention until spring 2019.²¹ According to the reputable Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, between March 2011 (start of anti-Assad protests) and January 2020, 264 “Russian soldiers and mercenaries” had died in Syria. The report implies that the vast majority of these individuals (perhaps as many as 200) came from a single episode in February 2018 when U.S. forces shot in self defense at a group of Russian PMCs who violated a de-confliction agreement between the U.S. and Russia.²²

19 Maria Tsvetkova, “Scores of Russian soldiers killed in east Ukraine: opposition report,” *Reuters*, May 12, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-russia-report/scores-of-russian-soldiers-killed-in-east-ukraine-opposition-report-idUSKBN0NX0WA20150512>.

20 “Волонтеры обнародовали список российских военных, погибших в Донбассе,” [Volunteers Unveiled a list of Russian Soldiers who Died in Donbas], *NV*, March 6, 2016, <https://nv.ua/ukraine/events/volontery-obnarodovali-spisok-rossijskih-voennyh-pogibshih-v-donbasse-101773.html>.

21 “4 Russian Special Forces Officers Killed in Syria – Reports,” *Moscow Times*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/02/03/4-russian-special-forces-officers-killed-in-syria-reports-a69139>.

22 Kimberly Marten, “The Puzzle of Russian Behavior in Deir al-Zour,” *War on the Rocks*, July 5, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/the-puzzle-of-russian-behavior-in-deir-al-zour/>.

The Diplomatic Track

Western countries lacked a unifying purpose in Syria. On the one hand, they said that their priority was to fight ISIS in Syria. On the other, they said that Assad had to go and coordinated negotiations with the opposition. However, they did little to back up talk with action against Assad. Moscow by contrast had clear priorities and preferences it pursued consistently. As an authoritarian country, it wasn't hampered by internal government disagreements and differences of opinion. Moscow's political track went hand-in-hand with its military campaign in Syria. Both aimed to keep Assad in power, elevate Moscow's role, entrench its position, and reduce American influence. To achieve these aims, Moscow marginalized genuine anti-Assad opposition, not only militarily, but also politically and diplomatically. Critically, the West was willing to make Russia a partner in Syria. Western leaders assumed that despite certain differences, their ultimate goals in Syria coincided with Moscow's, which highlights Moscow's ability to deceive the West during negotiations, or conversely Western inability to see through the deceptions.

Moscow positioned itself as a critical decision maker. This was a natural extension of Putin's approach to the Middle East, where he had long worked to establish ties to all actors in the region—a contrast to the Soviet Union's ideological and more one-sided approach. The Soviet Union cultivated ideological allies and had clearly defined adversaries in the region in the context of the revolutionary aims of communism. Putin's Russia, by contrast, has built good relations with all governments and major opposition groups to them, both domestically and regionally. Thus, Putin has balanced good relations with Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Hamas and Hezbollah. Although the Russian Supreme Court

had labelled the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, when the organization's member Mohammad Morsi won the Egyptian presidency in 2012, Putin had no qualms reaching out to him.

In Syria, Moscow used its position on the United Nations Security Council to block over a dozen resolutions to ensure no action could be taken against Assad. It also pursued its goals in more subtle ways. In June 2012, the Geneva Communiqué outlined a UN roadmap for ending the violence and establishing a transitional governing body, but used vague language on Moscow's insistence. On this basis, Moscow then engaged in peace talks but with groups that did not demand Assad's departure as a precondition for talks. In other words, Moscow created a veneer of international legitimacy to its actions—also a historic aspiration of the Russian state that predates Putin.

Another key tactic for the Kremlin was the use of ceasefires and de-escalation zones to prop up Assad. The ceasefires generally did not hold. Moscow served as one of the guarantors of the de-escalation zones, along with Ankara and Tehran under the Astana process—which was meant to promote Assad and to give these efforts international legitimacy. Assad used these de-escalation moments to regroup, gather strength, and retake major urban centers. As Baev notes, “The fight against ISIS was downplayed in these plans, so battles such as for Raqqa in Syria (and Mosul in Iraq) were left for the US-led coalition to wage.”²³ This highlights Moscow's strategic decision to support Assad, not fight ISIS.

23 Pavel Baev, “Why Russia is Failing the ‘Syria test’ for counterterrorism cooperation with the West,” PONARS Eurasia, May 2018, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/why-russia-failing-syria-test-counterterrorism-cooperation-west>.

Indeed, when it came to diplomacy, Moscow took its script from its earlier behavior in Chechnya. In early-mid 2000s, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) wanted formal peace talks with Chechen leaders, so Moscow engineered this process and pushed faux opposition members it had installed in Chechnya. A January 2006 joint report by the Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Center “Demos,” and Human Rights Center Memorial explains that upon Moscow’s insistence “separatists” could participate in the political process if they rejected terrorism and extremism. Theoretically, it made sense, but there were two problems within the Russian context. First, in reality, anyone who said they were a separatist in Chechnya would “issue a death warrant to himself.”²⁴ Second, and more to the point, Russian federal law forbade any activity that infringed upon territorial integrity of the Russian Federation. The law deemed any kind of separatist conviction as extremist, regardless of the methods a person used to pursue separatist aims.²⁵ Thus, the report concluded, at the time, “It is quite obvious that voluntarily or not Europe actually agreed to organize a negotiation ground with participation of only one side to the conflict.”²⁶ In Syria, Moscow’s actions recreated this pattern through the Astana peace talks, which were also meant to create a parallel international diplomatic track that marginalized the United States.

24 International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF), International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Center “Demos,” Human Rights Center “Memorial,” *In a Climate of Fear “Political Process” and Parliamentary Elections in Chechnya*, January 2006, p. 16.

25 *In a Climate of Fear “Political Process” and Parliamentary Elections in Chechnya*, p. 16.

26 *In a Climate of Fear “Political Process” and Parliamentary Elections in Chechnya*, p. 16.

Another key feature of Moscow's diplomatic efforts was to build leverage over political actors and create dependence on Moscow. As a result of these efforts, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan slowly came around to accept Moscow's position on Assad because it had few other options. Moscow leveraged its position in Syria and its relationship with the Kurds to achieve this outcome. Another example is Israel. Once Moscow gained control over Syrian air space, Israel became dependent on Moscow to conduct its airstrikes against Iranian targets. In July 2018, Moscow also promised that Iran would withdraw its forces and proxies at least 85 kilometers away from Israel's border,²⁷ but this, too, failed to diminish Iran's presence—though it succeeded in making Moscow look as if it had tried. Similarly, in Lebanon, Moscow created a perception of a necessary and reliable partner and utilized the issue of refugee return to bolster this position, consolidate ties with Beirut, and gain diplomatic leverage. However, in reality, few refugees returned, and the Assad regime killed or detained many who did.²⁸ In short, Moscow positioned itself as an indispensable power in Syria and the region. Regional players saw that Putin stuck to his guns and kept Assad in power, standing up to the wavering Western leaders. Saving Assad and winning a bigger Russian footprint in Syria allowed Moscow to project power and utilize Syria as springboard for other activities in the region.

27 David Makovsky, "Putin's Golan Comments: Implications for Israeli Security," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/putins-golan-comments-implications-for-israeli-security>.

28 Anna Borshchevskaya and Hanin Ghaddar, "How to Read Lebanon's Acceptance of Russian Military Aid," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-to-read-lebanons-acceptance-of-russian-military-aid>.

Conflict Resolution?

Conflict resolution requires reconciliation. Moscow is in no position to lead this process. Moscow is not even talking about reconciliation in Syria, merely stability—as Moscow defines it—embodied by restoration of Assad’s sovereignty and end of large-scale fighting.

The Kremlin would tout Chechnya as an example of its success in achieving stability because Chechnya is contained and pacified, while large-scale terrorist attacks in Russia have declined after 2010. But the Kremlin’s definition of stability is fundamentally flawed because repressed problems eventually erupt, and, in Russia, these problems are of the Kremlin’s own making in the first place. Syria is far more complex than Chechnya, and if Moscow could not provide genuine stability in Chechnya, then it could not possibly do so in Syria. Moreover, in Chechnya, Moscow rebuilt Grozny; it does not have the funds to finance Syria’s far more sizable reconstruction and has been working on getting others to foot the bill while gaining access to Syria’s resources.

More fundamentally, Moscow’s aim is not conflict resolution. For all its talk of stability, it does not really aim to achieve it. Moscow benefits from low-level conflicts that continue to simmer, such as the so-called frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space. As Keir Giles has written, “Russia feels secure only when all others are at risk.”²⁹ Oscar Jonsson, author of *The Russian Understanding of War*, finds repeatedly the term “controlled chaos” in Russian writing on this subject.³⁰ Indeed, Moscow’s use of controlled chaos—the spread of disorder in a country through multiple means, either in

29 Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West*, p. 21.

30 Oscar Jonsson, *The Russian Understanding of War*, (Georgetown University Press: Washington, D.C., 2019).

preparation for war or as means of achieving policy goals without resorting to war—has played out over and over in post-Soviet Russia. In Ukraine, Moscow preferred a situation of crisis on its border to one in which its neighbor is connected with the European Union. Moscow had followed a similar pattern in other parts of the post-Soviet space, such as Transnistria in Moldova and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. These conflicts generally cost little, foster dependence on Moscow, and prevent these countries from leaving Russia's sphere of influence—that is, they achieve policy aims through continuous instability, but without resorting to full-scale war. Syria for years has been headed towards a similar scenario. It is also impossible to imagine a genuinely stable Syria with Assad (or someone like him) in power, but that is Moscow's chosen outcome.

Conclusion

Putin's Syria intervention shows that Russia's way of war is evolving to adapt to new realities, while the fundamental values that underpin the reasons for the war in the first place remain largely unchanged. Whether Russia itself became more secure as a result of the Syria intervention is debatable. As mentioned earlier, 2010 saw the highest number of terrorist attacks in Russia, five years before the Syria intervention. Russia also experienced two major terrorist attacks after the military intervention in Syria—the downing of the Metrojet in November 2015 after it took off from Sharm al Sheikh and the April 2017 St. Petersburg metro bombing. More to the point, the root cause of Russia's terrorism problem remains internal. As Russian liberal opposition leader Ilya Yashin has written, “No single politician or government agency can guarantee today that the Islamic state which [Ramzan] Kadyrov has created in Chechnya . . . will not be transformed over

time into another ISIS.”³¹

Moscow’s campaign in Syria shows that while its tools are evolving, the fundamental strategic interests and threat perception remain largely the same. Moscow looks to be a conflict manager, not a country that fosters genuine conflict resolution. Putin’s behavior in Syria fits within the historical Kremlin pattern, just as it does in Ukraine and Georgia, countries that were moving closer to the West and have warm water ports. These countries, just like Syria, also mattered to Russia’s historic efforts to extend influence towards over its southern frontier: the Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, and the Middle East.³² Libya is another country that falls in this category. Libya has emerged as another focal point of Russian activities. Here, Moscow exhibits a similar pattern of behavior that focuses more on securing Russian influence and building leverage than resolving conflicts.³³ Moscow will continue to push for influence in the Black and Caspian Seas and Eastern Mediterranean.

Another chief lesson of Moscow’s Syria campaign is that Putin’s Russia and the West do not, and have never, shared the same goals and threat perceptions. In Syria, as elsewhere, Moscow’s priority is regime survival, which, in the Kremlin’s view, requires it to alter the balance of power in its favor. The West can count on Moscow to stay on this course. It is committed to this game for the long

31 Ilya Yashin, “A Threat to National Security: An independent expert report,” Boris Nemtsov Foundation for Freedom and Free Russia Foundation, Moscow, February 2016.

32 Jakub Grygiel, “Russia’s Return to The Middle East,” Hoover Institution, December 12, 2019, <https://www.hoover.org/research/russias-return-middle-east>.

33 Anna Borshchevskaya, “Russia’s Growing Interests in Libya,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 24, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/russias-growing-interests-in-libya>.

haul, and Western policymakers should craft long-term strategies to counter Moscow's influence.