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The Future of Putin's War in Syria

by [Anna Borshchevskaya](#), [Lester Grau](#), [Michael McFaul](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya](#)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



[Lester Grau](#)

Lester Grau is the research director for the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.



[Michael McFaul](#)

Michael McFaul is director of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University and a former U.S. ambassador to Russia.



A former U.S. ambassador to Russia joins two experts for a discussion on what the six-year intervention can tell us about Moscow's broader foreign policy.

On November 4, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Anna Borshchevskaya, Lester Grau, and Michael McFaul. Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at the Institute and author of the new book *Putin's War in Syria: Russian Foreign Policy and the Price of America's Absence*. Grau is the research director for the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and one of the Army's leading experts on Russia. McFaul is director of the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University and former U.S. ambassador to Russia. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

[Learn more about *Putin's War in Syria*.](#)

Anna Borshchevskaya

Vladimir Putin's current involvement in Syria is partly a natural extension of his country's centuries-long interest in the Middle East, and the East Mediterranean specifically. Historically, Russia has worried a great deal about its southern borders, viewing them as its soft underbelly. Certain aspects of Moscow's intervention in Syria are unique to Putin, and some are short-term and transactional, but Russian interests in the region run much deeper than just the current leader's pet project.

To understand these interests, one must acknowledge that Russia has a vision for a polycentric world, and that this vision is inherently at odds with U.S. foreign policy objectives. As a result, Moscow has long focused on checking U.S. influence abroad. Putin inherited that viewpoint and has acted on it in new ways. From the beginning, he sought to return Russia to the Middle East, and he is more pragmatic and willing than his predecessors to cultivate relationships with all parties in the region. Even so, his anti-Western vision has led him to foster the deepest ties with like-minded leaders such as Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

Hence, from the start of the Syria war, Putin was determined to keep Assad from falling. He did not want to see the United States topple another authoritarian leader, so he began protecting Assad in multiple ways even before Russia's 2015 military intervention. Today, he has achieved his goal, and he did so without getting bogged down in a quagmire or incurring excessive costs. The rest of the region has taken note of Russia's enhanced position in Syria—in their eyes, Putin's commitment to protecting Assad stands in sharp contrast to Western ambivalence.

More likely than not, Syria will now turn into a frozen conflict. This may be ideal for Russia, which has substantial experience handling such conflicts and can sustain its presence in that environment. Moscow can also serve as an intermediary, talking to certain actors that others cannot. If the parties were to reach a real resolution in Syria, no one would need Putin, but everyone needs him if the conflict is merely managed.

For now, the world is still unipolar and the United States retains many advantages. But it may squander these advantages if it mishandles the Middle East. China is rightfully Washington's top priority, but Syria should not be treated as a mere distraction. The real question is not whether the United States can push back against Russian influence in Syria, but whether it will recognize the conflict's strategic importance and invest the necessary

resources to achieve its own goals there. Syria was never going to be an easy file to address no matter what approach Washington took. But Assad is one of the worst dictators of our time, so taking a stronger and more principled stance was essential from the outset, and remains so today.

Ideally, Russia will rehabilitate itself someday and turn away from its current behavior. To be sure, there are not many precedents for such a shift—although liberal voices could be found among Russia’s leadership early in Boris Yeltsin’s tenure during the 1990s, they were soon pushed out, and that window of opportunity closed. Hopefully it can reopen in the future.

Lester Grau

Far from being a quagmire, the Syrian conflict has proved an ideal arena for the Russian military to hone its edge, experiment with new combat systems, stress-test and repair old systems, and provide combat experience to entire staffs. Its losses have been very limited on balance—the only exception was its amphibious landing fleet, which was deployed extensively to support Assad, took considerable damage, and is now being rebuilt at substantial cost.

Russian forces have also used the intervention to sharpen some of their capabilities. For example, their deployment of a new pontoon bridging system along the Euphrates River was an amazing engineering feat. The military has achieved its strategic goals in support of Assad while also deriving more immediate benefits for itself.

The Wagner Group and other private military companies (PMCs) aligned with the Russian government have likewise gained valuable combat experience in Syria. These organizations have enabled Moscow to engage in operations that it might not want itself directly linked to, providing plausible deniability while still advancing the Kremlin’s goals in Syria.

Moscow’s involvement has not been without challenges, and various tensions simmering beneath the surface could pose issues going forward. For instance, Russia has a significant Muslim minority, and the Syria intervention could exacerbate this group’s occasionally rocky relations with the country’s Christian community. But the bottom line is that Moscow has achieved its core goal—survival of the Assad regime—without getting into the quagmire that many predicted, and with some additional benefits to its military.

Michael McFaul

Although 2015 was the year the Russian Air Force began bombing opposition elements in Syria, Moscow has had a strong diplomatic and military presence in the country for decades. During my time in government, Syria was the most salient foreign policy issue on the agenda, and the reality is that we failed there, dramatically. I think we need to be clear about that—our approach did not work. The question, then, is what could we have done differently?

Putin felt very strongly about propping up dictators in the face of Western-backed revolutions. Will Russia always behave this way, or can that mindset change, perhaps under a new leader? I was in the room in March 2011 when President Dmitry Medvedev acquiesced to a UN intervention against Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi. We know Putin did not respond favorably to that. So the durability of Moscow’s anti-Western strategy is an open question.

For now, Putin has achieved his primary goal in Syria, which was keeping Assad in power. He has achieved some secondary benefits as well, particularly in testing and demonstrating new types of military power. Still, there are limits to his success. Syria remains a highly fractured conflict zone. Is he comfortable with that arrangement? Does he care about unifying the country? Washington and its partners need to establish whether he can live with that status quo.

Currently, Putin seems happy with the frozen conflict so long as nobody pays serious attention to Syria. U.S. officials often believe they need to “solve” global problems like the Syria conflict, but Putin sees it differently. He is happy to

let problems sit until U.S. interest wanes. He has a general strategy of waiting things out.

Some of the Biden administration's messaging indicates that they are likewise comfortable with a frozen conflict, both in Syria and with Russia more generally. Yet the White House's strategy toward Syria remains confusing. They seem very concerned about small-picture issues such as negotiations on cross-border humanitarian aid. The fact that Washington is spending the U.S. president's time on lobbying for a single border crossing shows that the balance of power in Syria has shifted dramatically in a direction favorable to Russia.

This summary was prepared by Calvin Wilder. ❖



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THE
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
for Near East Policy

1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
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