

Why Russia Is Failing the “Syria Test” for Counterterrorism Cooperation with the West

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As the confrontation between the West and Russia matures, the proposition that the West should combine military containment with engagement in areas of mutual interest has been gaining wider popularity than have *Putinverstehers* calls for empathy with Russia.² Cooperation in the fight against terrorism is typically identified as one of the most obvious areas of mutual interest. The rationale for this cooperative exemption from the pattern of confrontation appears impeccable, and many experts are [eager](#) to elaborate on it. It was indeed one of the topics that Presidents Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin found easy to [agree](#) upon during their only and rather unconventional meeting at the G20 summit in Hamburg. It was [discussed](#) again in a recent telephone conversation between them (when Trump famously overruled his advisors’ “do not congratulate” advice). In Europe, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov met with EU High Representative Federica Mogherini and [argued](#) for the removal of “artificial barriers” that hamper the partnership and noted with great satisfaction “the resumption of our dialogue on counterterrorism after a long pause.” However, this analysis suggests that the real state of affairs is exactly the opposite. The incompatibility of political agendas between the West and Russia is deep and profound, while the prospects for cooperation in counterterrorism are poor and artificially amplified.

Vladimir Putin’s Track Record

The fight against terrorism is Putin’s trademark policy, which, for all intents and purposes, delivered him into the position of supreme power back in September 1999 when he executed a brutal response to explosions that destroyed two apartment buildings in Moscow. That response was a massive military intervention in Chechnya that flattened Grozny. While over the years the content of Moscow’s counterterrorism policies has evolved, it has a static core, which is presently revealed by Russia’s military

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² Those in the West who excessively sympathize with Russia and defend Putin’s policies are sometimes called *Putinverstehers*. Coined in Germany, it is now a widely accepted word in the English vocabulary.

intervention in Syria. The main aim of the Kremlin's loosely defined struggle against terrorism has involved defeating armed separatist rebellions in Chechnya, suppressing extremist networks in the North Caucasus, and turning back the tide of color revolutions. The first wave of these revolutions, which hit Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, and Moldova in 2003-2006, was successfully [broken](#) by Russia with a combination of economic pressure, political intrigue, and limited use of military force culminating in the August 2008 war with Georgia. The second wave, which started with the sudden arrival of the Arab Spring in 2011, turned out to be even more dangerous from the Kremlin's perspective when unexpected street protests in Moscow resonated with the victorious Euromaidan in Kyiv in early 2014. The annexation of Crimea was, in Putin's strategy, a direct response to this eruption of Ukrainian "extremism," which is treated the same way as terrorism.

Putin has good reasons to see his struggle against the specter of terrorism as consistently successful: Chechnya is under the control of his loyal henchman Ramzan Kadyrov, the North Caucasus is largely pacified, Georgia is dismembered, Ukraine struggles under severe pressure maintained by manipulating the war in Donbas, and Assad's regime in Syria is secured. Each entry in this list of "victories" is, in fact, a big problem because every Russian projection of power has turned into a self-made trap demanding allocation of more and more financial and military resources in order to sustain the suppressive status quo. The resource base of this policy is shrinking—the 2018-2020 Russian state budget envisages significant cuts in defense [expenditures](#) while increasing allocations for internal security.

In the autumnal phase of Putin's regime, as Russia proceeds along its track of [decline](#), the strengthening of protest-suppression instruments is being prioritized by the Kremlin. Putin's beefing up of the National Guard exemplifies this trend. The effectiveness of this hodgepodge "praetorian" structure, which was established in the spring of 2016 and entrusted to Victor Zolotov, the former chief of the Presidential Security Service, is rather uncertain and its [loyalty](#) cannot be taken for granted. What is certain is there is deep mistrust among other regime "guardians" in the National Guard, including its reputedly arrogant commander. This mistrust is cherished even by the mighty FSB, which continues to control the workings of the National Anti-Terrorism Committee (NAC). Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu needs to uphold his hard-earned respect in the officer corps by securing priority in resource allocation, and that means resisting the redistribution of funding in favor of the privileged National Guard. Overstretch is therefore exacerbated by inter-service rivalries (not to mention corruption) and aggravated by poor leadership, as Putin insists on the irreversibility of his "victories" and remains [in denial](#) of the arrival of new terrorist threats, one manifestation of which was the St. Petersburg metro bombing on April 3, 2017.

The “Victorious” Syrian Quagmire

The preamble for the Russian intervention in Syria was Putin’s address to the UN General Assembly in September 2015 in which he called for the [building](#) of a “broad anti-terrorist coalition,” although he knew full well that nothing of this sort was going to happen. There were indeed no takers for his plan on making the Assad regime the fulcrum of a coalition. His public proposition, nevertheless, provided a useful pretext for the beginning of Russian battles against rebels of various persuasions. In Syria, the targets included some ISIS positions, but the Russian priority was to demolish groupings engaged in intense clashes with Assad’s forces. During Russia’s first year in Syria, some setbacks happened, like the crisis in relations with Turkey [caused](#) by a Turkish F-16 fighter downing a Russian Su-24M bomber. Russia had several public relations disasters, particularly with [strikes on](#) humanitarian aid convoys. Only the capture of Aleppo in December 2016 – the focal point of the Russian campaign – helped Moscow turn the war’s tide and gave it the role of a key maker of the region’s post-war order.

A “peace-making” format, often referred to as the “Astana process,” was established by Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran in early 2017. It produced a series of [agreements](#) on “de-escalation zones,” which helped Assad’s forces consolidate control over all major urban centers. Characteristically, 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 U.S.-led coalition to wage. Moscow emphasized instead that groupings affiliated with al-Qaeda had to be exterminated, which was a reasonable argument, but the [accusations](#) advanced by Lavrov that the United States “spared” *Jabhat al-Nusra* (renamed as *Jabhat Fateh al-Sham*) in order to use it to overthrow the Assad regime turned a sound proposition into an exercise in dirty propaganda. The Idlib province, which is designated as the largest “de-escalation zone” and is effectively under control of the *Tahrir al-Sham* coalition (led by *al-Nusra*), constitutes the main “black hole” in the Russian [design](#) for localizing the civil war in Syria and is a [target](#) of Assad offensives.

At the start of 2018, however, the main task was set on preventing the capture of the oil-rich areas in eastern Syria by the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), building on the success of Assad’s forces lifting the ISIS blockade on Deir ez-Zor. Russia delivered special equipment and deployed engineers for [constructing](#) a bridge across the Euphrates so that the offensive could proceed into SDF-controlled territories. The risks were clearly underestimated, and General Valery Asapov, who was [seconded](#) to the Syrian army to command this operation, and Colonel Valery Fedyanin, the [commander](#) of the Northern Fleet marine brigade who directed the crossing of the Euphrates, were both killed in action. Moscow tried to [blame](#) U.S. “hypocrisy” and its collusion with ISIS for this setback and proceeded to test U.S. resolve on the ground. The outcome was no less than devastating. The attempt by a battalion-size band of mercenaries (Russia’s Wagner group) and local fighters to capture the area was met by [airstrikes](#) of such

overwhelming power that only a few survivors managed to escape. Both Moscow and Washington opted to downplay the clash. Only in April 2018 did U.S. officials [confirm](#) that “a couple of hundred” of Russian mercenaries were indeed killed in what Trump [described](#) as a “very, very severe fight.”

Even the April 2018 U.S. missile strike on the Syrian chemical bases did not bring Moscow to acknowledge the vulnerabilities within its “winning” strategy, which is supposed to guarantee the elimination of chemical weapons from Assad’s hands. It cannot, however, fail to see that the effectiveness of operations by the government army can only be achieved by ongoing deployments of Russian advisers, special forces, military police, Chechen para-militaries, and private security contractors. Costs and casualties for Russia are mounting accordingly. Moscow is not prepared to sustain this engagement but cannot find a way out.

What is clear beyond doubt is that in the post-ISIS phase of the Syrian civil war, the emphasis on counterterrorism can help neither in cultivating cooperation with the West nor in holding the Russia-led, pro-Assad, quasi-coalition together. Turkey disapproves of Russian strikes on rebels in the Idlib province while supporting U.S. air strikes and insisting on treating the forces of the Syrian Kurds (YPG) as terrorists. Russia has [given](#) the “green light” for Turkish offensives in the Afrin enclave but refuses to add the YPG or the Turkish PKK to its list of terrorist organizations, while including on the list the Muslim Brotherhood, which Ankara embraces. An indispensable party to the quasi-coalition is Iran, which [aims](#) primarily at strengthening Hezbollah and various Shia militia and taking control over [some units](#) of the Assad military. Meanwhile, many developments are unacceptable for Israel, which has increased its bombing campaign against Iranian forces in Syria and keeps trying to dissuade Russia from alliance-building with Iran. The Trump administration may have nothing resembling a [strategy](#) for stabilizing Syria, but the proposition for granting Iran a role in post-war power-sharing is definitely a non-starter.

Moscow needs a closure in Syria that would justify phasing down its high-risk intervention and grant it a position of influence with minimal costs. Its expanded support for the Assad regime in defiance of U.S. and Western criticism cannot, however, deliver anything resembling an honorable outcome.

Three Non-Options for Cooperation

While denouncing the West for its failure to cooperate with Russia on counterterrorism, Moscow typically makes Syria the key case presenting itself as a champion in the fight against terrorist groups. The two are, however, entirely different matters, and the good reasons for condemning Russia’s intervention in Syria may not apply to the broader counterterrorist agenda. Indeed, Moscow has deliberately excluded the West from the “Astana process,” while expecting that the United States would opt for withdrawing its

forces from Syria and that the EU would cover large parts of the bill for the post-war reconstruction of devastated Syria. Western policymakers must make sure that these expectations are frustrated, but at the same time, there is certainly more to the hugely important problem of countering terrorism, even if we bracket out Afghanistan, where Moscow is not exactly helpful. Three possible areas for cooperation could be identified and examined to supplement the Syrian test.

The first one is to engage in joint efforts to uncover and undo the networks of radicalized migrants originating in Russia and its neighborhood. For many years, it was the Chechen diaspora that generated the most risks, particularly considering that Kadyrov was [dispatching](#) hitmen to Vienna and Istanbul to assassinate malcontents. The 2013 Boston marathon bombing proved the danger of radicalization spreading through these networks, but the U.S. attempts at expanding cooperation with Russian special services [were](#) fruitless. Moscow knew full well the capacity of these networks for transforming discontent into terrorism, as demonstrated yet again by the 2013 Volgograd bombings, but the FSB was not just reluctant but firmly opposed to sharing any data with Western agencies. Presently, new kinds of networks uniting migrants from Central Asia are turning into conduits of radicalization and terrorism, as proven by attacks in Istanbul, Stockholm, and St. Petersburg. Russian authorities have been showing surprise by these mutations of long-known social [problems](#), and their haphazard responses cannot address the root causes of these risks, which increases further their aversion to cooperation.

The second area is the disruption of funding channels that support the growth of terrorist networks. International cooperation is crucial for sustaining the effectiveness of this work. Moscow may fail to become an international financial center, but it concentrates significant flows of money from the North Caucasus as well as [remittances](#) to Central Asia. What makes cooperation in this area all but impossible is that the EU has recognized the Russian export of corruption as a security challenge. The U.K. is [investigating](#) the origins of Russian fortunes parked in tax havens and Germany continues to [investigate](#) the laundering of enormous amounts of dirty money originating in Russia. The enforcement in April 2018 of new U.S. sanctions on Russia targets the connections between Russian interference in the U.S. election and the corruption proliferated by such notorious oligarchs as [Oleg Deripaska](#). As an asymmetric response, Moscow may resort to directly sabotaging international efforts aimed at interdicting terrorist financing.

The third area is joint efforts in countering propaganda that incites radicalization, with a high priority on blocking the channels of ISIS propaganda. Russia makes much effort in this direction, and besides the [list](#) of terrorist organizations compiled by NAC (which currently has 27 entries of which 23 are Sunni Islamic), there is a long list of “extremist materials” compiled by the Russian Ministry of Justice. The problem is that many entries in this “extremist” list pertain to publications or websites critical of various Russian state

policies. This reflects the Kremlin strategy of de-legitimizing the political opposition as “extremist.” The execution of this strategy has indeed become quite extreme, such as the ban on activities by Jehovah’s Witnesses, ban on the Linked-In job-seeking social network, pressure on Open Society activists, and attempts to block the Telegram digital messenger service, to name a few. A further problem is that NATO duly treats Russian propaganda as part and parcel of Russia’s “hybrid war” strategy, and the U.S. State Department has a unit that [deals](#) with countering *both* Russian and ISIS propaganda. No stretch of imagination can justify a joint Western-Russian venture that operates in the contemporary info-war scene.

Conclusion: Forestalling a Spoiler Act

It is still politically useful for Moscow to advocate for cooperation in counterterrorism, despite the obvious lack of answers to this call and the exposure of it as merely a cover-up for Russia’s own unwillingness and inability to contribute to this international struggle. Trump actually finds himself in the minority on this issue, defying the deepening consensus that Russia makes at best a “[terrible ally](#)” in the complex struggle against terrorism and quite possibly is a big part of the problem. The question is whether Russia might find it more useful in the near future to act as a spoiler against Western efforts aimed at suppressing any new post-al Qaeda/post-ISIS terrorist threats. If Moscow can officially blame the United States for collusion with ISIS, what would dissuade it from accusing Western special services of, say, planning and executing terrorist attacks in Russia aimed at disrupting the start of Putin’s new term? If this kind of blame game is enacted, would the Kremlin feel justified in following up with proactive steps aimed at sabotaging Western counterterrorism policies? The USSR had few scruples funding and harboring various dark elements, and today it is noteworthy that the Kremlin feels perfectly at ease being in a brotherhood-in-arms with Islamist Hezbollah. In order for these hard questions to remain hypothetical, it is essential to engage in preventative dissuasions, explaining in greater detail than a flow of Twitter messages can carry that every spoiler act in the ever-changing and never-ending fight against terrorism comes at a price that cancels out the joy of scoring a fleeting, low-cost point.