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## **RUSSIA-US RELATIONS AND THE FUTURE OF SYRIA**

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## About the Author

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*The views and opinions expressed in this Paper are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Valdai Discussion Club, unless explicitly stated otherwise.*

## Summary

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The greatest analytical challenge in trying to understand the Syrian civil war is overcoming the propensity to see the world as it was and not as it is. It is tempting to look at Syria on a map and imagine that one day soon it could be put back together – if only a resolution could be found during diplomatic meetings in Astana or Istanbul. It is also tempting to view the U.S. and Russian interventions in Syria as an extension of the Cold War, and to interpret every move by each side as part of a zero-sum contest for influence. But these frameworks are outdated, and they are inadequate for either the current situation in Syria or its future.

Syria is six years into its civil war, and many more lie ahead. At the local level, the country has become a hodgepodge of countless groups, the strongest of which is the remnants of the Baathist Assad regime. Sunni Arab rebel groups of varying stripes continue to hold territory, mainly south of Damascus on the border with Jordan. Jihadist groups with constantly changing names and affiliations hold fiefdoms of varying size. Syrian Kurds have taken advantage of the chaos to carve out a fragile statelet whose viability is uncertain at best. At this point, the best-case scenario for Syria is that it will one day resemble Lebanon on a larger scale. The worst-case scenario is 30 years of war that will make the Balkan Wars of the 1990s look tame.

The Syrian civil war began as its own conflict, distinct from the other unrest in the region. But it and the Iraqi civil war, which has been waged off and on since the ill-fated U.S. invasion in 2003, have since become part of the same conflict. The wars were bound together by the Islamic State, which took no heed of the arbitrary political boundaries between the countries. The Sunni-dominated parts of Iraq border the Sunni-dominated parts of Syria, creating a vast desert through which IS fighters and other radical Sunni elements can move with relative ease. To speak of Syria's civil war today is to speak of Iraq's civil war, and vice versa.

But the Syrian war has become more than its name suggests in other ways as well. The war has gotten too big for anyone to reasonably expect the Middle East to return to its previous political geography once it is over. Instead, the war is an overture for a much greater, asymmetric war to come in the Middle East. This is a war that will take place (and in some instances, is already taking place) on at least five fronts.

The first front is between secularists and Islamists. The former believe political regimes should be organized on a secular basis. The latter believe Islam is the only answer to the failure of Arab nationalism and the post-colonialist challenges – namely, the arbitrariness with which political boundaries were drawn in the 20th century – that stifles prospects for regional stability. The secularists are losing the fight, and there will be ramifications for the remaining secular regimes in the region.

The second front is between the predominantly Sunni religious groups themselves, which range from the more politically inclined chapters of the Muslim Brotherhood to the religious totalitarianism of the Islamic State. The split between al-Qaida and the Islamic State is one iteration of this kind of conflict.

The third front is at the sectarian level and pits Sunnis against Shiites. Iraq is the main battleground for this front, but it will not be limited to Iraq, especially as the remaining Sunni Arab states weaken and Shiite minorities, supported by Iran and emboldened by regional events, grow stronger.

The fourth front is between the two rising powers of the region: Iran and Turkey. In this sense, as the Arabs tear themselves apart, Iran and Turkey will support sides that advance their own interests. Direct conflict between the two countries is extremely unlikely, but conflict between their proxies is already happening in Iraq and Syria. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states will continue to try to insert themselves into this larger battle, but the foundations of Saudi power are beginning to buckle. Saudi Arabia's weakness will threaten the viability of the monarchy by the end of the next decade.

The fifth front is at the highest level, one that all Middle Eastern conflicts reach eventually. For over two centuries, Middle Eastern countries have been the pawns on the chessboard of the great powers. The list of non-Middle Eastern powers that have officially participated in military activity in Syria and Iraq is striking: the U.S., Russia, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The unofficial list is even longer. The U.S. boasts it has assembled a 68-state coalition to defeat the Islamic State. Russia, meanwhile, leads its own diplomatic coalition to show off its influence in the Middle East.

This paper will touch on all these fronts, but it will focus on two key aspects of this much larger war. The first aspect will be the Syrian civil war itself. The goal will be to forecast how the conflict will evolve in the next 10 years. This will necessarily mean discussing the future of the Islamic State's caliphate in Syria and Iraq. The future of Syria cannot be understood without also understanding the future of these actors. It will conclude that Syria has, for all intents and purposes, ceased to exist as a country and that destroying the Islamic State is an unrealizable goal. Containment is the best that can be accomplished.

The second aspect will be U.S.-Russia relations in the context of the forecast for Syria. This will necessarily include discussion of the balance of power in the region, as well as the multiple axes on which the region's wars will be fought. It will conclude that unlike in places such as Eastern Europe or the Caucasus, where U.S. and Russian interests are diametrically opposed, the two countries share certain interests in the Middle East. The stakes are also much lower in the Middle East for both countries than they were during the Cold War, though this is not always appreciated by mainstream observers or even by policymakers in both governments. The obstacles to U.S.-Russia cooperation in the Middle East have far more to do with inertia and distrust than with clashing strategic interests.

This is not to say that Russian and U.S. interests will line up perfectly or that this will lead to a U.S.-Russia detente. Overall, however, Russia and the U.S. will have more shared strategic interests than differences in the Middle East for the next 10 years.

## Roads Less Traveled

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Many countries are participating to varying degrees in Syria, but none have intervened with greater effectiveness than the United States and Russia. Retracing the steps both took to enter the conflict sheds light on what both have at stake in Syria.

### *The United States*

The story of the U.S. intervention in Syria begins on Sept. 11, 2001. Al-Qaida's terrorist attacks had the effect Osama bin Laden had hoped they would. They whipped the U.S. into a frenzy that resulted in two American wars in the Muslim world. The first target was Afghanistan, a battlefield deeply familiar to Russia. By this point, however, radical Islamist ideology had been developing throughout the Arab Muslim world for decades; bin Laden, after all, came from a Saudi clan that was an ally of the Al Saud family. The U.S. was ill-prepared to combat al-Qaida and groups like it. U.S. intelligence in the region was poor enough that the U.S. had to rely on partners like Saudi Arabia, which had been complicit in the rise of radical Islamist ideology in the first place.

It is easy with the benefit of hindsight to say the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq was unnecessary, but at the time there was a dangerous combination of three realities: a lack of reliable information, a potential that Saddam Hussein's regime was pursuing weapons of mass destruction, and fear that a group like al-Qaida might get its hands on some of those resources. To fight al-Qaida, the U.S. needed more cooperation from countries like Saudi Arabia. Toppling Saddam was a way to show those countries how serious the U.S. was. The problem with the invasion of Iraq, however, was that the strategic goals laid out by the George W. Bush administration were unachievable. Strategic necessity brought the U.S. to Iraq, but the Bush administration confused the issue by making the invasion about two things: the war on terror and the cultivation of a liberal democracy in Baghdad.

The problem with the war on terror was that terrorism is a tactic designed to scare and provoke an enemy, and it is impossible to wipe out a tactic. The problem with cultivating a liberal democracy in Baghdad was twofold. First, Iraq was a 20th-century creation combining three groups that hated each other: Kurds, Sunni Arabs and Shiite Arabs. And these groups can be even further subdivided: Iraqi Kurds, for instance, fought their own civil war from 1994 to 1997. Second, the U.S. assumed democracy could work in Iraq.

The obsession with spreading democracy was a symptom of the post-Cold War hangover of neoconservatism. After 1991, there was a heady optimism in the West that Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" was nigh and that the world was about to become a liberal democratic paradise. The Balkan Wars, the Rwandan genocide and even the 9/11 attacks did not alter this U.S. belief. So the Bush administration decided that it was in the national interest not just to eliminate the threat of radical Islamism, but also to spread democracy in Iraq. The U.S. then oversaw the creation of a system of governance in Iraq that was completely unequal to the task of ruling such a fractured and weakened country. It may have been that Iraq could not have been governed by any system besides that of a strongman like Saddam, but certainly the system the U.S. attempted to impose exacerbated rather than improved the problem.

The destruction of Saddam's regime in Iraq created a vacuum of authority. In what was left, al-Qaida's ideology found a fertile breeding ground. The Sunni Islamist insurgency against U.S. forces after the failure of the political reconstruction gave rise to al-Qaida in Iraq – which would eventually become the Islamic State.

Though a positive development for al-Qaida, this was not exactly what bin Laden had had in mind. Bin Laden had hoped that 9/11 and the U.S. response would lead to popular revolutions throughout the Arab world to overthrow dictators, some of whom owed their positions of power to either the Soviet Union or the United States. The revolutions eventually came, but it took several years, and they didn't happen the way al-Qaida had expected.

In 2010, a vegetable salesman in Tunisia lit himself on fire to protest his harsh treatment at the hands of a female police officer, sparking a series of protests and revolutions across the Arab world. Al-Qaida had been wrong about how to set off unrest in the Arab world, but it had been correct in its evaluation that Arabs across the Middle East were fed up with their governments and were suffering from both a lack of economic opportunity and a complete loss of faith in the secular, nationalist dictatorships that dominated the political landscape. 2011 was dubbed the "Arab Spring" by the U.S. news magazine *Foreign Policy*, but the risings in the Arab world shared little in common with the "Prague Spring" of 1968 that inspired their name.

The West, particularly the U.S., assumed that the outburst of democratic movements in the Middle East was similar to the anti-Soviet movements in Eastern Europe, and it leapt to embrace the spirit of the time. But though there were moderates and liberals among the Arab protesters, what was happening was no rebirth of liberal nation-states longing for political freedom. The Islamists were the most politically organized groups on the ground, and they took advantage of the movement to start an Islamist awakening. Islam remains the only political force that has ever unified the Arab world, and in 2011, Islamists rebelled against a system that for decades had tried to relegate Islam to the private sphere. By the time the U.S. realized what was happening, it was already too late. Whatever moderate groups it could have supported had already been sidelined. Even if it had realized it sooner, there was little the U.S. could have done.

The U.S. gave some aid to the Free Syrian Army after hostilities began in Syria, but by 2013 it became clear that there was no real opposition to the Assad regime that was palatable for the U.S. to continue to support. The U.S. had taken a harsh rhetorical line against Assad's regime, culminating in the August 2013 threat to bomb Assad forces over their use of chemical weapons. But by that point, the Islamic State was consolidating its control in Raqqa and was gaining ground in both Syria and Iraq. The U.S. was forced to the conclusion that the fall of the Assad regime would have meant more chaos, which would only strengthen IS forces. In June 2014, IS swept into Mosul and conquered the city in 10 days. A few months later, the Obama administration declared a de facto war against IS and began direct military intervention against the group in both Syria and Iraq.\*

Even after the U.S. entered the conflict, IS continued to strengthen. By 2015, there was a real fear in the U.S. policy community that IS might be contemplating an assault

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\* US operation in Syria officially started much later.

on Damascus – and that it might win. The U.S. did not feel it could back the Assad regime, nor was there the political will to commit U.S. ground forces to do battle with IS forces. The situation looked dire.

## *Russia*

It is tempting to assume that Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war is a product of its Soviet-era ties to the Assad regime. The Soviet Union had good relations with many of the secular, left-wing Arab nationalist states and in Syria was dealing primarily with Bashar's father, Hafez Assad. But Russia's intervention did not stem solely from some ironclad alliance with Syria or the strategic benefit that comes from a Russian naval facility in the Syrian port city of Tartus – a facility to which Turkey could deny Russia access at a moment's notice. The story of Russia's intervention in Syria begins in 2004 with Ukraine's Orange Revolution.

Vladimir Putin came to power precisely because his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, had shown himself to be weak and unable to manage Russia's relationship with the West in a way that advanced Russian interests. Between this and the dismal state of the Russian economy at the time, Putin sought to restore Russian power and to give Russia the ability to defend its national security imperatives. Controlling Ukraine is one of the most important of those imperatives. Every Russian empire, from the czars to the Soviets, has depended on the buffer space that Eastern Europe provides Russia's core from the other strong powers on the European plain. Ukraine, the second-largest country in Europe after Russia, makes up a significant chunk of that real estate.

In November 2004, there was a presidential election in Ukraine. The two main contenders were the sitting prime minister and pro-Russia candidate, Viktor Yanukovich, and the opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko. Yanukovich was declared the winner of the election, a result that sparked protests throughout Ukraine, the largest of which occurred in Kiev. The opposition alleged that there were electoral irregularities and demanded a revote, which Ukraine's Supreme Court ordered in December. Yanukovich lost that election, and with it, Russia lost control over the political situation in Kiev. The possibility of a pro-West Ukraine was now a reality. At the time, Putin accused the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies of organizing the protests that led to Yanukovich's demise. For Russia, there was no other way to read the situation than that the U.S. had hostile intent toward key issues of Russian national security, and so plans to reverse the results of the so-called Orange Revolution began, and the U.S. and Russia entered a new period of distrust.

Yanukovich won the next presidential election in 2010. Russia had spent the years after the Orange Revolution building up its military forces, deepening its economic influence and expanding its intelligence capabilities in Ukraine, particularly in the eastern portions, which remained largely pro-Russian and pro-Yanukovich. All seemed to be well until November 2013, when Yanukovich declined to sign an association agreement with the European Union, instead signing a deal securing a multibillion-dollar loan from Russia. Protests erupted again. What would come to be known as the Euromaidan protests steadily increased in size.

The decade of Russian preparation that had begun after the Orange Revolution was unable to keep opposition forces from taking control of the government, with Western backing and approval. Yanukovich was unconstitutionally removed from office in February 2014 and fled to Russia. A pro-Western government was installed in Kiev and threatened once more to take Ukraine out of the Russian sphere of influence. Russia responded by annexing Crimea and helping pro-Russian separatists claim two eastern Ukrainian oblasts, but the Russian leadership had little else to show for its decade of work. Small-scale fighting continues in eastern Ukraine.

The hits did not stop there for Putin's government. The weekly average for the price of oil on June 20, 2014, was \$107.26 a barrel. By January 2015, the price had plunged by more than half. Moscow had created its 2015–2017 budgets with projected oil prices of around \$100 a barrel. Russia's finance minister said at the time that Russia could make do with \$82 a barrel and that oil prices would likely stay between \$80 and \$90 a barrel. Those projections were overly optimistic. Oil prices have continued to track downward and have only risen into the \$50 range in recent months because of a much-lauded cut in production sponsored by both OPEC and non-OPEC oil producers like Russia. That cut proved incapable of sustaining higher prices for very long, but it was necessary to keep them from plunging even further.

Putin, then, was staring down the same barrel that Yeltsin had been. Russia had been embarrassed in Ukraine and had shown itself incapable of resisting Western encroachment in its sphere of influence or of responding in any meaningful way. Any benefits that the 2008 Georgian War produced had evaporated. And Russia's economy was again in tatters because it was too reliant on the price of oil. Without high oil prices, the Kremlin could not sustain the high levels of state spending necessary to control the far-flung and diverse parts of the Russian Federation.

Enter Syria. Russia had three main reasons to join the Syrian conflict in the way that it did in September 2015. The first was for domestic political consumption. Putin needed to demonstrate to the Russian people that Russia's power had not atrophied under his rule. The second reason was for international consumption. He needed to prove to the United States that Russia was still a formidable power and that it would not hesitate to intervene in areas where the U.S. was already engaged. The Assad regime in Syria was a historical friend of the Soviet Union and was both looked down on by Western sensibilities and in danger of being overrun by the various rebel and opposition groups fighting it – the Islamic State among them. The groups arrayed against the Assad regime were small enough that a limited Russian deployment could help stabilize Assad's forces: Russia deployed about 70 aircraft of various types, with around 5,000 support personnel to protect and maintain its air assets. This was not a major deployment, but it was enough to steady the Assad regime and enable it to push back against its enemies.

The third reason, however, was by far the most important. The United States had backed itself into a corner in its standoff with the Assad regime. It had thrown hundreds of millions of dollars at training rebels who never materialized, and it had partnered with Syria's Kurds, jeopardizing its relationship with Turkey. All the while, the Islamic State was consolidating control over a wide swath of territory in Syria and Iraq. The most powerful actor to support in the fight against IS would have been the Assad regime, but after its initial response, this was politically impossible for Washington. The U.S. needed help, and Russia was ready to offer it – but it wanted something in return.



Russia did the United States' dirty work for it. Russia eliminated the possibility that the Assad regime would fall and gave IS a much more formidable enemy. Much has been made in the West of Russia's disproportionate targeting of Syrian rebel groups, but Russia has bombed IS targets and, more important, created a new front that IS had to fight on. Without Russia's involvement and the stabilization of the Assad regime, U.S.-backed forces could not have seized the territories they have from IS in the past year.

Russia's maneuver didn't accomplish what the Kremlin had hoped: it didn't create enough leverage with the U.S. to secure Western concessions on the Ukraine issue. But at the same time, the Ukrainian civil war has become a de facto frozen conflict, and the U.S. has not pushed the envelope there. That's good enough for Russia for now, and combined with the boost in perception from the Syrian intervention and Putin's consistently high approval ratings (87 percent of Russians are confident in Putin's leadership, according to a June 2017 Pew poll). Moscow considers the operation a success overall.

## The Future of Syria

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Both the U.S. and Russia are working under the public supposition that Syria can be put back together once the fighting stops. This is more of a rhetorical position than it is a viable outcome. The main problem with this position is that it assumes the fighting will stop. The immediate goals for both sides are similar: IS and al-Qaida must be defeated before a new political system can be built. But Russia also wants to destroy any other rebel group fighting the Assad regime, which Russia maintains is the legitimate ruler of the country, while the U.S. wants to form a new political system that is democratic and that excludes Assad. Whether both sides realize it or not, this is more of a fantasy than it is a policy. Syria is a broken country, and no amount of diplomatic handwringing or bombing is going to put it back together.

The reason is simple: The single-largest population group within the country is Sunni Arabs, whose main political forces are the Islamic State, al-Qaida and the Free Syrian Army (not counting the large number of Sunnis who still support the Assad regime). The U.S. and Russia will not accept a political system built around either of the first two forces, and the Free Syrian Army is too weak to defeat the radical Islamists or the Assad regime.

It is impossible to know the exact demographic breakdown of the country today because of the fighting and migration, but before the war, roughly 68 percent of Syria was Sunni. Of that, 10 percent were Kurds and the rest were Arabs. Alawites made up another 11 percent of the total population. We can safely assume that the country remains divided between three groups: Alawites, Syrian Kurds and Sunni Arabs. The Alawites are loyal to Assad; the Syrian Kurds are loyal to the People's Protection Units, or YPG; and the Arabs are divided – some Islamist, some champions of Assad, and all competing for influence.

The Assad regime, the Alawites and other minorities that Assad protects will never consent to democracy in Syria. To do so would open those communities to certain reprisal by Sunni Arab forces should they come to power. The same is true of the Syrian Kurds, who, despite being the smallest and newest Kurdish population in a Middle Eastern country, have secured a de facto state for themselves and are taking as much territory as they can to try to lend strategic depth to their indefensible position on the border with Turkey. Even if an agreement emerged that all sides agreed to, the system would collapse just as the U.S.-backed political system in Iraq collapsed.

Lebanon offers a useful picture of what the future of Syria will look like. Lebanon is much smaller than Syria, and its ethnic groups were more evenly proportioned before its civil war. Even so, in 1975, to war it went – and at war it stayed for 15 years. The post-war years have not exactly been peaceful either. Hezbollah, an Iranian proxy group, became a de facto fifth column in Lebanon. Meanwhile, Saudi meddling in Lebanese political affairs exacerbated the political instability. The result is a tangle of sectarian disagreements, though all sides have (mostly) avoided serious fighting. Further illustrating the region's complexity, Hezbollah entered the Syrian civil war in defense of the Assad regime because it fears what a Sunni Arab government in Damascus would do to its position in Lebanon. Ensuring that Sunni power is contained is of existential importance for Hezbollah.

The civil war in Lebanon, a country far smaller than Syria with a much richer tradition of political cooperation, lasted 15 years. We expect Syria's civil war to last at least as long. Syria is 14 times as large as Lebanon and has almost four times as many people. Many of the areas dominated by Sunni Arabs are in the desert, in cities hugging the Euphrates River. Attacking these cities is difficult: It requires long supply lines through the desert, which opens the attacking force to the guerrilla tactics at which IS excels. Similarly, the Alawite stronghold on the coast is mountainous and thus very defensible. Little suggests that these dynamics will change soon.

The most likely scenario is that Syria will eventually be divided into three main areas. The first area will be controlled by the remnants of the Assad regime, which will maintain authority over the major cities and the coastal strongholds that are the Alawites' core territories. The second area will be the Syrian Kurdish territories. There are two main pockets of Syrian Kurds: an isolated and small group in Afrin Canton and a larger group in northeastern Syria, which before the breakout of war had significant natural resources and decent farmland. The Syrian Kurdish territories are on a relatively flat plain and are vulnerable to attack, both from IS and from Turkey that has thus far not attacked the Syrian Kurds besides the occasional artillery shelling. The future of Syria's Kurds is one of the areas in which Russian and U.S. interests align and will be discussed later on.

The third area will be a lawless swath of Sunni Arab territory. The precise names of the groups and the ideologies they employ are almost impossible to track, but they will be fighting each other for supremacy in these areas, as well as launching opportunistic attacks against Assad forces and Syrian Kurdish forces. Fighters will continue to move across the porous Iraq-Syria border and will increasingly put pressure on neighboring countries.

## The Future of IS and al-Qaida

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This Sunni Arab territory deserves a closer look, which means looking specifically at the future of jihadist forces not just in Syria, but throughout the region. The Islamic State and al-Qaida are the most significant of these forces today, but this will not always be the case. Eventually, IS and al-Qaida will lose their strongholds. They will melt back into the civilian population until foreign forces leave. Another group may arise in their place, or they may regenerate their fiefdoms and even pursue additional land grabs to the south, greatly straining two Sunni Arab countries that have thus far stayed out of the fray: Jordan and Saudi Arabia. They will not be able to stay on the sidelines forever.

### *Islamic State*

At its height, the lands over which IS exerted direct political control amounted to roughly 50,000 square kilometers (19,500 square miles), roughly the size of Croatia. Taking into account the sparsely populated deserts and other areas where IS can operate with relative freedom, even though it is not directly in control, this territory expands to approximately 250,000 square kilometers, roughly the size of Great Britain.

The U.S. State Department boasts on its website that U.S. coalition partners have recaptured 62 percent of IS territory in Iraq and 30 percent in Syria. In war, such statistics are meaningless. What matters is not the size of the territory controlled but whether that territory is strategically important. So far, anti-IS forces in Syria and Iraq have not conquered enough territory from the Islamic State to cripple its ability to operate.

The Islamic State's core territory is the stretch of land from Raqqa to Deir el-Zour in eastern Syria. The most recent Syrian census, done in 2004, estimated that close to half a million people lived in these two cities alone. In recent weeks, this territory has come under serious threat. Syrian Kurdish forces have closed in on Raqqa, and despite the Islamic State's diversionary attacks, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have advanced methodically on the city. Meanwhile, the Russia-backed Syrian army has been making gains of its own. Syrian government forces crossed into Raqqa province at the beginning of June, and more important, they have begun an offensive into eastern Syria targeting Deir el-Zour and al-Mayadin.

All evidence seems to indicate that the Islamic State has chosen to retreat from Raqqa to reinforce its position in Deir el-Zour and al-Mayadin. The SDF has made progress in Raqqa, but notably, it left the main highway heading east out of the city open. For months, reports have said IS fighters were leaving the city. When IS convoys have attempted to head west, Russia has made a point of targeting them, but there seems to be a coordinated effort between U.S. and Russian allies on the ground to push IS into a smaller area in eastern Syria that will eventually be attacked head on.

This would all seem to suggest that the defeat of the Islamic State is nigh. That would be a premature judgment. The hallmark of the Islamic State's military capabilities has been its

ability to avoid costly defeats. IS routinely retreats from positions it knows it cannot defend, regroups and then launches new attacks where its enemies are unprepared for them. If it turns out IS cannot protect its territory against the approaching forces, the most likely course of action is that IS fighters will withdraw or blend into the civilian population and give up the city without a fight. For all of the Islamic State's religious bravado, it has shown itself to be pragmatic in its approach to war, and it would be out of character for it to make a suicidal stand against incoming forces. IS uses suicide bombs for offensive purposes; it does not view suicide in defense as any more noble than defeat.

Even if the physical caliphate is destroyed, the Islamic State's ideology will persist in a region that is ripe for recruitment. The attacking armies are united in their opposition to IS but will find little in the way of a common cause if the Islamic State's territorial integrity is broken. They will instead take to fighting among themselves, opening up new spaces for IS to capitalize on and return. The forces will eventually have to withdraw from formerly IS-held territories to attack al-Qaida and other targets in Syria as well, which will mean IS can bide its time. The Islamic State is playing a long game, and its religious ideology can and will preach patience to the faithful. Defeat is not going to be conceded.

## *Al-Qaida*

Al-Qaida's position in Syria is more tenuous than the Islamic State's, and as a result, al-Qaida is not seen as an equal threat and has been able to fly much more under the radar than its territorially focused offshoot. In Syria, the group has changed its name several times (the latest incarnation is Tahrir al-Sham), but it would be a mistake to call it anything but what it is: al-Qaida in Syria. Al-Qaida in Syria has tried to forge connections with other Syrian rebel groups and has captured fiefdoms of its own outside of Aleppo and Idlib. It has fewer fighters than IS, but like the IS fighters, they are extremely capable and have proved much more successful on the battlefield than any of the moderate Syrian rebel groups.

Al-Qaida is surrounded, however, by Assad regime forces. It is only a matter of time before the regime turns its attention to the group. The U.S. has said repeatedly that it plans to solve the IS problem before targeting al-Qaida, and one reason it can afford that approach is that it knows Assad and Russia view al-Qaida, which is closer to the heartland of the regime, as their more pressing problem. Once the Assad regime focuses the bulk of its forces on al-Qaida's territories in and around Idlib, al-Qaida will gradually have to retreat and blend into the civilian population. The operation to retake these areas will come with mass executions and purges of all suspected al-Qaida sympathizers and collaborators.

## The Unbeatable Foe

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The result is that likely in the next one to three years, the entities in Syria currently known as the Islamic State and al-Qaida will be dislodged from full control of their possessions. But the problem is not defeating these groups or taking their lands; with sufficient manpower and foreign support, these groups' grip over their territories can be loosened if not broken entirely for a time. The problem is that unless a foreign force occupies these territories, the groups will reconstitute themselves and recapture the land they lost. And there is no country in the world whose strategic interests are served by holding territory in the middle of the Syrian and Iraqi deserts indefinitely.

Fighting groups like the Islamic State and al-Qaida takes place on two levels. The first is the military level. Tactical difficulties stand in the way of victory, but they can be overcome. The second level, however, is the realm of ideas. That radical Islamist ideology has a force of its own is indisputable at this point. For whatever reason – the lack of economic opportunity, the history of colonial oppression or just something in the water – this ideology has given meaning and organization to a generation of people.

In this sense, then, the Islamic State, al-Qaida and the myriad other groups that have sprouted up out of the power vacuum left by the civil war are unbeatable, because it is impossible to defeat an idea. This is a civil war between Muslims in the Middle East. The religious wars of Europe around the time of the Enlightenment each took decades if not centuries to play out before a somewhat stable system of political entities emerged. And even this system eventually became so unbalanced that in the 20th century it twice descended the entire world into war. There is no reason to expect that the Muslim wars will take less time than that, nor is there reason to posit that the U.S. or Russia or any outside power will be able to subdue these forces with the right combination of coalition fighters.

The best that can be achieved is containing these forces where they are. For the U.S., preventing their spread south into countries that it counts among its allies is of prime importance. For Russia, preventing their spread north into the Caucasus is the bigger priority. Either way, the two sides share an interest in keeping these religious wars confined, as much as possible, to the deserts of the Middle East, rather than the streets of Manhattan or the subway stations of St. Petersburg.

When it comes to Syria, then, the U.S. and Russia are already working together even if they don't include each other in their coalitions. The tacit coordination in the Raqqa and Deir el-Zour offensives is evidence enough of that. Neither wants to see radical Islamism spread into its spheres of influence. Neither wants or has the forces available to commit to conquering radical Islamism in Syria and Iraq – and policing the territories after the fact. The U.S. and Russia do not see eye to eye on the legitimacy of the Assad regime, but the U.S. does not have the luxury of pushing for Assad's downfall because what would arise in his place might be far worse. The U.S. will continue to search for partners to keep IS in a cage, and Russia will continue to prop up Assad as he eventually moves on to targeting al-Qaida. And while Russia and the U.S. continue to butt heads in other parts of the world, in this part of the world, they will quietly work, perhaps not together, but still in pursuit of a similar goal.

## Great Power Politics

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But the Syrian civil war will not stay contained in Syria. Even if the U.S. and Russia succeed in keeping radical Islamism bottled up in the country, Syria has become a battleground for proxies supported by countries around the Middle East. Here, too, Russia and the U.S. share an overarching goal, but occasional disagreements may arise. The only way this could be derailed is if both sides fail to put their Cold War rivalry behind them.

The balance of power in the Middle East mattered during the Cold War – when the region was responsible for a much greater share of global oil production than it is today, and when the balance of power in all regions mattered. The region’s wars were not just local; they were between the U.S. and the USSR. But those days are over. Now, Russia is back to Soviet-era levels of oil production. The U.S. has become one of the top oil producers in the world and no longer depends on Middle East oil. And despite U.S.–Russia tensions since the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, there is no current conflict between the two that has the same weight as the Cold War.

Russia in 2017 is smaller, weaker and less ideological than its Soviet predecessor. This does not mean Russia has given up its position as a global power, but it does mean that a region like the Middle East holds relatively little import for Russia. Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia – all former Soviet lands – are far more important for Russia’s continued power. What the Middle East offers, however, is a chance to distract the U.S. from interfering in the regions where Russia cannot afford to lose influence, as well as the potential to inflate the price of oil – Russia’s top export – by hampering Middle East producers.

The U.S., meanwhile, has been desperately searching for a way out of the Middle East since 2007. The Bush administration tried to end the Iraq War with the overwhelming force of the troop surge, which had no lasting effect. The Obama administration tried to do as little as possible, and when it did act, its policy was largely incoherent. The Trump administration now seems to be contemplating a kind of surge of its own, which is sure to be ineffective. If Russia wanted to take over management of the Middle East and its crises, the U.S. would welcome it. The point is that the Middle East is no longer a battleground for world power. It is an annoyance that neither Russia nor the U.S. particularly wants to face.

## Balance of Power

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The main threat for the U.S. is that a country or group of countries will come to dominate the entire region. Besides the threat of Islamist terrorism, the U.S. views IS and its sister groups as potential unifiers of the Sunni Arab world against the United States. It also views these groups as a direct threat to the countries the U.S. depends on to maintain a balance of power in the region, particularly Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Egypt is an economic basket case with an active IS insurgency of its own in Sinai. That Jordan has gone this long unscathed is a minor miracle. According to the U.N. refugee agency, Jordan has received over 650,000 Syrian refugees since 2011 – and those are just the registered ones. Syrian nationals now make up more than 20 percent of Jordan's population. Saudi Arabia has built the legitimacy of its political system on all the generous services that petrodollars can buy. The decline in oil prices and the kingdom's diminished share of global production have already manifested in significant cuts to social services and to the privileges of the royal family. Saudi Arabia is a breeding ground for the types of Islamist ideologies that have broken Syria and Iraq apart, and the Islamist groups want little more than to control the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

The U.S. upended the regional balance of power in 2003, and in recent years it has tried to re-establish it on the backs of four states: Turkey, Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israel is too small to balance against Turkey and Iran, which makes Saudi Arabia a crucial part of the equation. Without the Saudis, the region devolves into a contest between the Turks and the Iranians, and Turkey has the edge in military strength, economic heft and geography. It would win out in the long term. The U.S. and Turkey have been allies for many decades, and Turkey is a NATO member, but Turkey is strong and growing stronger, and more and more it is disagreeing with Washington on major issues of national interest. Turkey is not yet strong enough to challenge the U.S. on these issues, but that time is coming. When it does, the U.S. will want to be sure that the Turks cannot dominate the Middle East unimpeded.

This is another area where the interests of Russia and the U.S. converge. Turkey and Russia have a long history of war between them. The most recent major incident between them was in 2015, when Turkey shot down a Russian aircraft over northern Syria. They have since resolved the dispute, but relations remain uneasy and complicated. As Russia weakens and Turkey rises, Turkey will start to challenge Russian influence in the Caucasus and the Balkans, areas that for Russia hold greater strategic significance than any country in the Middle East.

This is why Russia and the U.S. have both, to varying degrees, reached out to Syria's Kurds. In March 2017, the Syrian Kurds said Russia had agreed to build a base in northern Syria and to send military personnel to train the YPG. Russia's Ministry of Defense disputed this depiction, saying it was setting up a "reconciliation center." Whatever it is called, the construction is a symbol of closer relations.

The U.S., for its part, has come to rely on the Syrian Kurds as the largest ground force in Syria that is both able and willing to take on the Islamic State directly. The Obama administration tacitly supported the Syrian Kurds, but the Trump administration went a step further in May when it announced that it would supply them with weapons to improve their effectiveness against the Islamic State.

The Russian and U.S. support has not gone unnoticed in Turkey's capital. In the same way that Ukraine is of fundamental importance to Russia, or that Cuba is to the U.S., the Kurdish issue is crucial for Turkey. It is also the one issue that could significantly complicate Turkey's rise to power. The Kurds in Syria are not the problem –

at least, they are not the only problem. The issue is that Kurds, with all their separatist ambitions, make up about 18 percent of Turkey's population – about 14 million people – and most of them live in the southeastern part of the country near Syria. The Kurds are not a monolithic group; the roughly 29 million to 35 million Kurds in the Middle East speak different languages, have different tribal and national loyalties, and even have different religious faiths. But Syria's Kurds are closely related to Turkey's Kurds. In Turkey's eyes, the YPG is the same level of strategic threat as IS or the Kurdistan Workers' Party militant group, or PKK.

Both the U.S. and Russia have an interest, then, in preventing Turkey from intervening in Syria in any capacity beyond fighting the Islamic State. For one thing, Turkey is anti-Assad, and the rebel groups with which it is closest are ideologically incompatible with the U.S. and Russia. For another, Turkey would try to destroy the Syrian Kurdish statelet that has popped up during the war for fear that the spirit of independence might spread into Turkey's own Kurdish region in the southeast, which has seen more and more clashes in the past two years between the PKK and Turkish security forces. The stronger both the Syrian Kurds and the Assad regime are, the harder it will be for Turkey to extend its power into the Levant, and the greater the balance against Turkey in the region will be as its strength grows over the next two decades.

Iran is another part of the equation, and here the intersection of U.S. and Russian interests is more complicated. The U.S. signed the nuclear deal with Iran because it needed Iran's help to contain Islamic State forces in Iraq, but the U.S. also does not want to see Baghdad and the Shiite parts of Iraq become de facto provinces of Iran. The Americans need Iran's help – and over the long term need Iran as a counterweight to Turkish power – but they will not allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon. They will block any attempt by Iran to establish regional dominance, just as they would stop Turkey from forming a unified Sunni Arab force.

Russian relations with Iran have historically been fraught, but at the moment they are positive. This is in part because Iran supports the Assad regime and views every group in the region that is not Sunni as a potential proxy group. Iran's Shiite proxies, such as Hezbollah, are also important for keeping up the fight against the Islamic State. Unlike the U.S., Russia is not too concerned with Iran extending its influence westward. It would not, however, tolerate Persian influence in the Caucasus any more than it would accept Turkish influence there.

The U.S. and Russia are not in total agreement in the Middle East, but their disagreements are not close to reaching the scale of the Cold War. And they both share a desire to limit the spread of Islamist ideology and to prevent any country or group in the Middle East from rising to challenge their interests. They will continue to compete in some ways – supporting groups in Syria that are fighting groups the other supports, for instance – but they ultimately want the same thing: for the Middle East's problems to stay in the Middle East.



## Conclusion

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Syria's immediate future is bleak and will be marred by more years of war and Islamist insurgency. IS and al-Qaida will suffer defeats but will not be defeated. Turkey will rise. Saudi Arabia will fall. Iran will scheme. The Kurds will fight. And neither the U.S. nor Russia will be able to wash their hands of the region as this chaos unfolds.

The U.S. and Russia took different routes to Syria – the U.S. through the war on terror and a botched invasion of Iraq, Russia through a revolution in Ukraine and an unexpected drop in oil prices – but both are there to stay. They are at odds in many parts of the world, especially in Eastern Europe. But in the Middle East, they will work side by side – if not together – to eliminate IS and al-Qaida and prevent the emergence of any dominant regional power. The U.S. and Russia face different challenges from an unstable Middle East and will disagree over many of the particulars, but at the broadest level they will be working toward the same goal: a predictable balance of power. The Cold War is over, but for great powers, the world is a small place. The U.S. and Russia cannot help, but run into each other.

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