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Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria

The Russian military intervention in Syria's civil war, which began in September 2015, surprised even the closest observers of Moscow's foreign and security policy. The longstanding consensus view among Russia watchers was that the military would not be called upon to engage in expeditionary missions beyond the so-called near abroad, Russia's immediate neighborhood in post-Soviet Eurasia. In Syria, Russia's stakes in President Bashar al-Assad's regime were clearly significant, but the idea that the Kremlin would risk its own forces to save it seemed far-fetched. And yet that is precisely what occurred.

In light of this analytical oversight, it is important to ask the question of where Russia could surprise the United States again by engaging in an expeditionary intervention outside of post-Soviet

KEY FINDINGS

- The decision to intervene in Syria in 2015 resulted from an extraordinary confluence of political drivers and military enabling factors.
- Three political factors emerge as primary drivers of the decision: the perception that an adverse military outcome—the collapse of the Assad regime—was imminent and that it could be prevented by intervening; the belief that this outcome would have had grave security implications; and the view that alternative means (e.g., diplomacy) had proven futile.
- Several enabling factors specific to the Syria case constituted necessary preconditions for the intervention: air access to the theater, permission to use ports and airbases, and the presence of allies on the ground.
- Intervention short of the direct, overt use of the military we saw in Syria in 2015, but greater than mere diplomacy, requires that the conflict in question present a high level of threat (as in Afghanistan), promise significant geopolitical benefits (as in Libya), or demonstrate moderate levels of both (as in Syria pre-2015). The lack of a direct threat and the minimal geopolitical payoff explain why Russia's involvement in Yemen has thus far been limited to diplomacy.
- Russia is unlikely to intervene on a scale comparable to the 2015 action in Syria in any of the other three countries examined in this report—Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan. The drivers for such an action are currently absent.
- However, should the drivers that were present in Syria emerge—for example, an ISIS advance on northern Afghanistan—Russia is likely to step up its involvement.

Eurasia. The relative success of Russia’s Syria operation makes answering this question more urgent since that success could make future interventions more likely.

This report addresses the questions of where outside of post-Soviet Eurasia—and under what conditions—Russia could intervene again by analyzing the factors that drive Moscow’s decisionmaking on intervention. We address these questions in two parts. First, we begin by closely examining Russia’s decision to intervene in September 2015. By isolating the key political and military factors that precipitated intervention in the Syria case, we can better understand what might drive future decisions to escalate Russia’s interventions to the scale observed in Syria. It also gives us a basis for comparing the Syria case to other, lesser-scale Russian interventions in recent years. Second, we derive insights from these latter cases regarding Moscow’s approach to lesser-scale actions. We also can draw implications for what might have to change in those cases to increase the scale of Russia’s intervention.

Abbreviations

BAA	Basel al-Assad airbase
EU	European Union
GNA	Government of National Accord (Libya)
HOR	House of Representatives (Libya)
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
USAF	U.S Air Force
USAFE- AFAFRICA	U.S. Air Forces in Europe–Air Forces Africa
VKS	Russian Aerospace Forces

Methodology

We approached the challenge of understanding the Russian interventions by looking closely at Russian leaders’ decisionmaking and analyzing the factors that drove that decisionmaking. None of these actions can be explained purely by reference to structural factors in the international system and the constraints and incentives they create. In the tradition of Robert Jervis’s scholarship, we sought to document Russian decisionmakers’ perceptions, particularly of their country’s national interests, on the assumption that major foreign policy decisions are generally driven by leaders’ perceptions.¹ While other factors, such as bureaucratic politics or clan interests could have played some role in these outcomes, our focus is on the factors that influenced leadership decisionmaking, which tends to be decisive on questions of war and peace.

The cases we examined, in addition to Syria post-2015, were all recent civil conflicts outside of post-Soviet Eurasia in which Russia had some degree of involvement: Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria itself in the period prior to the 2015 intervention. We excluded conflicts within Russia’s immediate environs since the circumstances of Moscow’s involvement there are largely *sui generis* and the military challenges attendant to intervening are vastly different. We looked at Russia’s involvement in other civil conflicts so as to have a basis of comparison with the Syria intervention. To facilitate a systematic comparison between Russia’s intervention in Syria and its behavior in other civil conflicts, we define three categories (or degrees) of involvement. These categories are intended to describe the observable scale and scope of a state’s involvement in a civil conflict abroad; we do not suggest that Russia’s leadership conceives of its actions in these categories.²

- **Small-scale intervention** refers to cases of diplomatic intervention only, which is “non-coercive, nonviolent, and, ultimately, non-binding,” and may include mediation among the parties, offers to mediate that are not accepted, holding international fora, or the recall of an ambassador.³
- **Medium-scale intervention** refers to “convention-breaking military and/or

economic activities”—that is, actions that go beyond “the normal course of international influence,” “in the internal affairs of a foreign country” that affect the balance of power among the parties.⁴ *Military activities* here encompass supplies, intelligence, aid, and small or covert deployments of troops in an advisory and assistance capacity. These actions are considered “convention-breaking” when they differ from established practices. An example would be Russia’s increased military assistance to Assad in the years before its direct intervention; Moscow delivered significantly greater quantities of equipment on a more frequent basis than it had in the past. *Economic activities* include granting or withdrawing aid or imposing sanctions or embargoes. *Medium-scale intervention* can also include diplomatic intervention in addition to these convention-breaking military and/or economic elements.

- **Large-scale intervention** refers to cases where, in addition to these activities, an external actor’s military is overtly and directly engaging in combat in the civil conflict. The term *large-scale* does not refer to the size of the military footprint of the intervening state, but simply denotes overt introduction of military power. Thus, the Russian intervention in Syria that began on September 30, 2015, qualifies as large-scale.

We refer to both *small-* and *medium-scale* interventions as *lesser scale*, when compared with large-scale interventions.

The evidence used in this report includes Russian- and English-language newspapers, books, think-tank assessments, journal articles, official press releases, published interviews, speeches, and other open sources. The lead author also conducted more than a dozen interviews with members of the foreign policy community in Moscow in March and April 2018. Interview subjects included Middle East experts, former officials, and government advisors. These interviews were on a not-for-attribution basis, so no names are provided here. While the Russian decisionmaking process is fairly opaque, the vibrant

public discussion and debate within the broader foreign policy establishment has served as an accurate reflection of thinking within the Kremlin in the post-Soviet period. However, our conclusions must be considered tentative to a certain extent, since we could not interview the principal decisionmakers themselves or scrutinize internal Russian government documents.

The next section of this report examines Russia’s decision to launch its large-scale intervention in Syria in September 2015. We analyze the key political drivers of that decision and the supporting military factors that enabled it. The third section examines the four lesser-scale interventions. We briefly describe Russian actions in these cases and then identify the key factors in the decisionmaking behind those actions. The fourth section draws on these case studies to derive general observations about the drivers of Russia’s interventions. The concluding section suggests some implications of this analysis for the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and U.S. policy more broadly.

Why Did Russia Intervene in Syria?

This section seeks to explain why Russia decided to deploy its expeditionary joint air-ground capability to Syria in September 2015. We begin with the primary factors that immediately precipitated the decision. These were the central drivers of the intervention in this case. We then analyze several secondary factors that played a role but would not have precipitated the intervention if the primary factors had been absent. In addition to these two sets of political drivers, several military factors were present that made the operation in Syria possible. These were not drivers of the decision but instead key—and, in some cases, necessary—enablers of it.⁵

Primary Factors

Assad’s Dire Straits

The timing of Russia’s decision to intervene is central to understanding Moscow’s decisionmaking. Russia’s support for the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war

In the Kremlin's view, Assad's defeat would have had disastrous consequences for regional and global stability.

dates from the beginning of the conflict in 2011, but the decision to intervene with the overt use of military force was likely made only in the spring of 2015. In May 2015, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seized the Syrian city of Palmyra at the same time that a loose coalition, assembled by the extremist group Jabhat al-Nusra, launched an assault on the regime in northwest Syria.⁶ While Assad's forces had previously rebounded from setbacks on the battlefield, Moscow saw these developments as portending the decisive defeat of the regime and allied forces.⁷ Interviewees consistently emphasized that the Russian leadership believed the regime would have fallen—or at a minimum, remained in control of only a small piece of territory—in months, if not weeks, had Russia not intervened.⁸ As Valery Gerasimov, chief of the Russian General Staff said,

If we had not intervened in Syria, what would have happened? Look, in 2015 just over 10 percent of the territory remained under government control. A month or two more, by the end of 2015, and Syria would have been completely under ISIS [rule].⁹

Even interviewees who disagreed with that analysis of the situation on the ground agreed that the Russian leadership believed it to be true. Avoiding this imminent adverse military outcome was a primary driver of the Russian decision to intervene.¹⁰

Large-scale military intervention was not part of Russia's original plan for the Syrian conflict. On the contrary, Russia had consistently emphasized

the need for a political solution and sought to avoid any direct military action. Only when Assad's defeat seemed imminent did senior officials in Moscow decide to take action.¹¹ They concluded that regime collapse in Syria would entail grave and irreversible consequences for Russia. In particular, Assad's downfall was understood to mean both a victory for the forces of transnational terrorism (and thus an increased terrorist threat to Russia) and a legitimization of Western-backed regime change, which also represented a threat to Russia's national security.

Implications of Regime Collapse: The Terrorist Threat

In the Kremlin's view, Assad's defeat would have had disastrous consequences for regional and global stability.¹² The Kremlin saw the Syrian conflict as a battle between disparate religious extremist forces and a secular state, a reprise of conflicts such as Russia's own struggle with Chechen separatism and the Soviet Union's war against the mujahedeen in Afghanistan.¹³ The immediate lens through which developments in Syria were filtered was the Western military-backed overthrow of the Muammar Qaddafi regime in Libya and the resulting chaos that allowed ISIS to flourish there.¹⁴ The Kremlin equated Assad's defeat with a Sunni extremist takeover of Syria, which represented a threat that could not be contained within Syria's borders. As Gerasimov put it,

ISIS would have continued to gather momentum and would have spread to adjacent countries. We would have had to confront that force on our own territory. They would be operating in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Volga region [of Russia].¹⁵

Although Gerasimov appears to be overstating his case, it seems clear that Moscow saw a direct link between extremists' gains in Syria and the threat of domestic terrorism. Russia is home to the largest indigenous Muslim population in Europe, around 16 million (approximately 11–12 percent of the country's population), and borders Muslim-majority states in the Caucasus and Central Asia.¹⁶ Russia has fought two wars to subdue an Islamist rebellion in Chechnya and has faced horrific terrorist attacks, including in

Moscow. Extremists in Russia have long had links to the Middle East, including with Salafi and Wahabi groups. Chechen rebels have received direct support from entities in the Gulf.¹⁷

The emergence of ISIS in Syria and Iraq amplified Russia's threat perceptions. ISIS's declared objective of establishing a caliphate was precisely the kind of extremist religious vision that resonated with some of Russia's disenchanting Muslim population and those in neighboring states.¹⁸ Thousands of Russian-speaking fighters, from both Russia itself and Central Asia and the Caucasus, joined the ranks of ISIS and other jihadi groups.¹⁹ Although there were reports that Russia tacitly permitted many of them to leave for Syria, the prospect of their victory and potential inspiration to Muslims in Russia—or their return—certainly raised the stakes for Russia in the Syrian conflict.²⁰ Additionally, some feared that the Syrian battlefield would integrate previously isolated Russian extremists into broader international terrorist networks, connecting them with radicals from other corners of the former Soviet Union and beyond who share anti-Russian grievances.²¹ Thus, President Vladimir Putin pointed to the need to “take the initiative and fight and destroy the terrorists in the territory they have already captured rather than waiting for them to arrive on our soil.”²²

ISIS and the terrorist threat to Russia featured prominently in Moscow's public explanations for the intervention. Western observers expressed skepticism about the sincerity of this motive, in view of Russia's subsequent targeting of moderate opposition groups.²³ Putin's plan, some suggested, was to create a binary choice between Assad and extremists such as ISIS.²⁴ Others contended that fighting ISIS was just a convenient cover story for Russia's support to the regime.²⁵ By contrast, several Russian analysts argue that the initial selection of targets for the bombing campaign was consistent with the declared objective of fighting terrorism. They claim that there is no such a thing as a “moderate” opposition, alleging close links between Western-backed groups and al-Nusra.²⁶ More broadly, Moscow emphasized that restoring Syrian statehood (*gosudarstvennost'*) was the only viable long-term counterterrorism strategy. As Putin said, “We are not so much defending President Assad as we are Syrian statehood. We don't want

there to be a situation similar to Libya, or Somalia or Afghanistan, in Syria.”²⁷ He has also stated, “As soon as [Syrian] statehood was destroyed, the resulting vacuum was filled by whom? Terrorists.”²⁸ According to this logic, it was consistent with a counterterrorist objective for Russia to concentrate attacks on elements of the opposition that represented the greatest threat to the Assad government.²⁹ Since preserving the regime (what Putin calls “Syrian statehood”) was a necessary precondition for any effective counterterrorism strategy, attacking those groups that were threatening the regime's survival was the most urgent priority. Therefore, the initial focus of the bombing on the non-ISIS opposition does not necessarily undermine the case that Moscow genuinely feared the terrorist threat stemming from the Assad regime's collapse.

Regime Change as a Threat to the Homeland

Assad's overthrow at the hands of a rebel coalition backed by the United States and its allies had implications for Moscow beyond the terrorist threat: It would further legitimize the practice of regime change, which the Kremlin believes to be a direct threat to Russia's national security. Russian officials saw the situation in Syria as the latest episode of long-standing Western efforts to undermine and possibly overthrow regimes that do not do its bidding, following the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-backed overthrow of Qaddafi in Libya, the U.S. invasion of Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein, the ouster of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the NATO bombing of Serbia. The Kremlin also saw the “color revolutions” in several former Soviet republics and the Arab Spring as instruments of U.S. policy to achieve the same objective without using military force.³⁰

Russia saw this pattern of Western interventions as a significant threat to its own national security. Western-backed regime change, according to Putin, has been the source of significant instability in the international system:

Unilateral dictates and forcing one's own political framework [onto other states] produces

exactly the opposite [of the intended result]: instead of conflict settlement, escalation; instead of sovereign, stable states, a growing expanse of chaos.³¹

He has also commented that “those who wanted to overthrow undesirable regimes” are responsible for “the countries of the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region transforming into a zone of chaos and anarchy from which threats to the entire world now stem.”³² Additionally, the Kremlin seems convinced that the West, particularly the United States, will use similar tactics to undermine—if not overthrow—the Russian government, its autocratic allies in its neighborhood, or both.³³ Moscow therefore prioritized pushing back against regime change in Syria as a forward defense of its own regime. Russia wanted to prevent the success of a tactic that could eventually be used against it.

Russia’s preoccupation with stopping perceived Western efforts to overthrow unfriendly regimes reached its peak after the NATO intervention in Libya and the subsequent killing of Qaddafi in October 2011. In March 2011, Russia had chosen not to veto United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1973, which authorized “all necessary measures . . . to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack.”³⁴ Many in Moscow were outraged when the resolution was used to justify—cynically, in their eyes—NATO’s bombing of Qaddafi’s forces and provision of decisive support to the rebels to overthrow his government.³⁵ The episode convinced Moscow that humanitarian intervention was simply an elaborate cover for regime change and largely precluded future UNSCRs on Syria that would have authorized international action to stop the war.³⁶ Together with China, Russia vetoed three UNSCRs that would have permitted actions against the Syrian government.

Avoiding what Putin has called a “Libya scenario”—that is, a Western-backed rebel overthrow of the sitting government—in Syria has been a central Russian objective from the start.³⁷ As Russia’s representative to the United Nations (UN) later recounted:

These [UNSCRs], if approved, would have led either to sanctions against Damascus or to military intervention based on the Libyan

model. This is why we took a very tough stand on these resolutions and used our veto right on three occasions.³⁸

But vetoing UNSCRs was not sufficient to shield Damascus from the rebels, whom Moscow saw as proxies for the United States and its regional allies. Once it seemed like only a matter of time until the Assad regime would collapse, intervening became imperative in Russia’s global struggle against regime change. The feeling, according to a former Russian diplomat, was that “enough is enough.”³⁹

Perceived Exhaustion of Other Means

Another key factor driving the Russian decision to intervene in 2015 was the perceived futility of a diplomatic resolution on terms Moscow could accept. UN-led peace efforts had essentially ground to a halt following the deadlocked conclusion of the Geneva II Conference on Syria, an international peace conference held in February 2014.⁴⁰ Even after the talks broke down, Russian diplomacy was extremely active in the months between the conference and the military intervention in September 2015. As seen in Table 1, Russia held dozens of engagements on Syria at the deputy foreign minister, foreign minister, or presidential level in the months preceding the intervention. After UN efforts fizzled, Russia also organized two rounds of talks between the Syrian government and opposition in Moscow, on January 26–29 and April 6–9, 2015. The Western-backed Syrian National Coalition boycotted the meetings, demanding a commitment that the process would lead to the departure of Assad before the talks began.

Generally speaking, none of these intensive diplomatic efforts had any impact on the situation on the ground in Syria, which continued to deteriorate. By the summer of 2015, senior decisionmakers in Moscow came to believe that diplomacy had been tried and had failed to deliver. The perception that nonmilitary means had been exhausted differentiated the situation in 2015 from, for example, the aftermath of Assad’s 2013 chemical weapons attack on a suburb of Damascus. In that case, Russia scrambled to prevent a threatened U.S.-led intervention against Assad, and it was able to broker a deal to remove most of

Syria’s chemical weapons and avert U.S. action. In 2015, no deal was in the offing.

In addition to the futility of diplomacy, by mid-2015, Russia’s medium-scale intervention had also proven to be of limited utility. Moscow had been engaged in a lesser-scale intervention since the beginning of the conflict to prevent precisely the outcome that it saw unfolding in the spring and summer of 2015. As we describe in detail in the next section, Moscow was supporting Assad with increasing amounts of military hardware as the war intensified, in addition to the economic and diplomatic backing it had been providing his government. However, intervention at this scale was not achieving results. Indeed, the situation on the ground was worsening *despite* Moscow’s aid.

Secondary Political Factors

While these three factors—the perception of an imminent adverse military outcome, the assessment that this outcome would pose a significant threat, and the exhaustion of other means to prevent the outcome—were the primary drivers of the Russian decision to intervene in September 2015, other factors also played a role. These were secondary factors, in that they would not have precipitated the intervention in the absence of the primary factors.

Geopolitical Benefits

The decision to intervene in Syria was partially motivated by the geopolitical benefits Russian leaders believed would result. In the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its invasion of eastern Ukraine, the West imposed diplomatic and economic sanctions on Moscow. Intervening in Syria would increase Russia’s leverage with the West and return Russia to its perceived rightful place at the high table of international politics.⁴¹ “The idea,” one prominent Russian analyst said, “was to use Syria as a bargaining chip in relations with the West.”⁴² Indeed, the day before the Russian operation began in Syria, Putin proposed a counterterrorism coalition with the West at the UN General Assembly, comparing it to the alliance among the United States, the United Kingdom,

TABLE 1
High-Level Russian Diplomatic Engagements on the Syria Crisis, January 2014–September 2015

Interlocutor	Number of Engagements
United States	55
Syrian government	52
Syrian opposition	32
European Union (EU) member states	22
United Nations	9
Iran	4
Israel	3
Saudi Arabia	3
Turkey	3
Arab League	2
Jordan	2
Bahrain	1
Iraq	1

NOTE: Calculations by the RAND Corporation based on official U.S. and Russian government websites and (Russian and Western) press reporting. Includes engagements (e.g., phone calls, meetings) at the level of deputy foreign minister, foreign minister, or president.

and the Soviet Union during World War II.⁴³ Russian military officials have consistently pushed for joint counterterrorism operations with the United States in Syria.⁴⁴ Several interviewees in Moscow noted that Russia’s inability to use Syria to improve relations with the West was one of the operation’s major failures, strongly suggesting that this was one of the key drivers of the original decision.⁴⁵

There were other geopolitical motives as well. Assad was one of Russia’s last remaining close partners in the region. Keeping him in power seemed particularly important because Russia had been losing political ground in the region following the Arab Spring.⁴⁶ If Moscow had allowed the Assad regime to collapse, not only would Russia’s influence in Syria have been dramatically attenuated, but also “Russia’s

standing in the region would have suffered.⁴⁷ Syria's geopolitical importance for Moscow was further enhanced by the presence of its naval facility at Tartus. Although it was militarily insignificant until its post-intervention upgrade, Tartus was Russia's only military outpost in the region, and it would certainly have been lost had Assad been ousted.

Cover of International Legitimacy

Moscow has consistently decried Western interventions that lacked UN Security Council sanction or host-state invitation (e.g., Kosovo and Iraq). It was therefore important that Russia's intervention in Syria came at the formal invitation of a UN member state. This contrast has provided a useful talking point, particularly since Washington does not have Damascus's consent for its operations there and thus is acting "illegitimately," as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov often puts it.⁴⁸ More important, Assad's invitation reinforced Moscow's position on regime change and intervention; Moscow acted to assist a sitting government to enforce its writ over its own territory. As one interviewee said, it was important "for Putin to stand for law and order and legitimate leaders against mutinies."⁴⁹ Assad's invitation also came with permission to use the port, airbase, and air corridor that would be necessary to carry out the operation. As one Russian government advisor put it, if Assad had been overthrown, Moscow would not have intervened, in part because there would not have been a request from the new authorities in Damascus and thus no permission to use these facilities.⁵⁰

Significant, but Not Existential Risks

There were, of course, significant risks and potential costs attendant to the decision to intervene. For one, it was not at all obvious, at the time of Russia's intervention, that the operation would produce a geopolitical windfall. According to interviewees, while it was hoped that the intervention would stem Russia's loss of regional influence by keeping an ally in power, no one in Moscow had anticipated that the operation would dramatically improve Russia's relations with a wide range of countries—including governments in Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states, Turkey, Iran, Egypt,

and Israel—when the decision was taken.⁵¹ On the contrary, some anticipated that an intervention in favor of a regime that was opposed by, essentially, the entire Arab League would produce a backlash against Russia. Before the 2015 military intervention, there had in fact been a strong negative reaction to Moscow's more-limited support for Damascus. Prominent Gulf businessmen canceled contracts with Russian firms, citing Moscow's support for Assad; there were violent protests in front of some Russian embassies in the region; and public opinion turned sharply against Russia in several Arab countries.⁵²

In short, the Kremlin was certainly aware of the potential for diplomatic and regional fallout when it took the decision to intervene. Indeed, Moscow expended a lot of effort to mitigate these risks by attempting to bridge divides among its regional partners, including between Iran and Turkey, Iran and Israel, and Iran and the Gulf Arab states.⁵³ The process has been rocky, as demonstrated by the November 2015 Turkish shootdown of a Russian Su-24 FENCER, but overall, Moscow has proven more adept at regional diplomacy than most anticipated when the decision to intervene was taken.

Damage to Russia's regional standing was not the only significant risk. The Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) had not been tested since the 2008 war in Georgia, when its performance was abysmal. Despite progress on reform since then, there was a risk of failure in Syria, especially because the intervention required the VKS to operate out of area. A poor military performance could have failed to stem the opposition's gains, potentially leaving Moscow with nothing to show for its involvement.

However, the Kremlin saw the most catastrophic potential consequences—risks to the security of its own regime and direct conflict with the United States—as unlikely. There were no significant domestic political constraints on intervening per se, and backlash for doing so was a remote prospect. Since Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, and particularly since the Ukraine crisis began in 2014, the domestic political climate had been conducive to a more assertive foreign policy. The public saw Putin as the defender of the country against external threats, an image which granted him a fair degree of leeway in responding to such threats. More important,

the Kremlin was confident that it could control the domestic narrative well enough to ensure that there was no significant organized opposition to the intervention, even though there was not overwhelming public support *for* it.⁵⁴

Moreover, Moscow entered the conflict determined to limit the scale of the intervention. The Kremlin planned for a limited engagement with a clear time horizon, with particular efforts taken to minimize active ground combat operations.⁵⁵ Limiting ground operations, in turn, would prevent significant human losses, which could have produced a domestic backlash.⁵⁶ The use of mercenaries likewise helped to create an impression at home that the human cost of the conflict was low: The state does not report or admit mercenary deaths, and the public appears to be indifferent to losses experienced by soldiers-for-hire.⁵⁷ In sum, as a recent RAND study concluded, “militarily . . . Russia has yet to risk substantial resources” in any of its recent operations, Syria included.⁵⁸

As for the possibility of direct conflict with the United States, the other existential risk, the Kremlin seemed to assess it as unlikely. Moscow reportedly saw the administration of then-President Barack Obama as averse to increasing its direct military involvement in Syria beyond the counter-ISIS mission and unlikely to escalate conflict with Russia over its intervention.⁵⁹ The USAF and allied air operations in Syria were concentrated on ISIS strongholds far away from the initial focus of the VKS bombing campaign, which centered on the opposition groups threatening Assad regime forces. The United States and its allies had been operating in Syria for over a year by the time Russia began its air campaign; Moscow therefore would have had a thorough understanding of which parts of Syrian airspace it could operate in without encountering a superior adversary.

Military Factors

Several military factors, particular to Syria and the Syrian civil war, played a role in Russia’s decision-making process on intervention. Whereas the political factors described above in principle drove the decision to intervene, these military factors enabled

the types of capabilities that planners and commanders were able to employ, as well as the way in which they were employed. In other words, the military factors determined the form the Russian intervention would take.

Here we identify seven such factors. The first four—air access to the theater, permission to use ports and airbases, the possibility to partner with friendly ground forces, and effective non-contestation of the airspace by a peer rival—were necessary preconditions for the Russian operation. The following three—history of defense ties with the regime, on-the-ground sources of intelligence, and maritime ease-of-access—facilitated the intervention in important ways, but likely did not play directly into the calculus of the Russian leadership.

Air Access

Russia’s operation in Syria would have been impossible without the overflight rights that allowed its aircraft to access the theater. Moscow was able to secure overflight rights through Iraqi and Iranian airspace, enabling access to Syria for the airframes that would be based there, as well as for the missions launched from airbases in Russia to attack targets in Syria and to resupply the expeditionary force.⁶⁰ Since Turkish airspace was off-limits to the VKS, the route over the Caspian Sea, through Iranian and Iraqi airspace and into Syria, was essentially the only way to get there from southern Russia.⁶¹ Without these overflight rights, Russia would most likely not have been able to carry out the operation.

Permission to Use Port and Airbase Facilities In or Near Syria

Russia’s ability to use two military facilities in Syria, with the consent of the government, was crucial for the intervention. Russia has two military facilities on Syria’s Mediterranean coast: a naval facility at Tartus, and the Basel al-Assad (BAA) airbase (referred to as Hmeymim by the Russians),⁶² around 35 miles north of Tartus in Latakia province, southeast of Latakia City (see Figure 1).

At the start of the Syrian civil war, Tartus was just a small support and maintenance facility.⁶³

However, its importance has grown as Russia's involvement deepened. In 2015, Moscow upgraded the facilities to support its logistical operations, including extending the berth in front of the port facilities and dredging the port.

On August 16, 2016, the VKS launched a bombing mission from Shahid Nojeh airbase, near Hamadan in western Iran.⁶⁴ This was the first time since World War II that a foreign military had used Iranian military facilities to support combat operations.⁶⁵ By launching from Iran, the mission was estimated to be around 1,000 miles shorter than flying from Russia, enabling a heavier payload of munitions.⁶⁶ The Iranian government was not pleased that its role supporting these operations became public knowledge, and, on August 22, 2016, it declared that Russian use of its airbases was suspended.⁶⁷ Interviewees, however, reported that the VKS continues to use Iranian airbases for refueling purposes.⁶⁸

While the use of the Iranian facilities merely eased operational burdens, access to Tartus and BAA was a military necessity for the Russian intervention.

Friendly Ground Forces

The Russian military has not fielded significant ground forces in its Syria campaign. Indeed, the

low overall number of Russian personnel in Syria demonstrates that Moscow never sought to fight the ground battles itself. Although the Russian military does not publish such numbers, reports suggest that no more than 4,500 personnel were on the ground as of September 2016 and 3,000 by March 2018.⁶⁹ As a result, the Russian army has not been the primary ground force in the campaign. Instead, Iranian forces, Hezbollah, and the Syrian military constituted the main ground element.⁷⁰ Essentially, the VKS acted as a coalition partner for these forces as they made gains on the ground.⁷¹

Russian analysts openly acknowledge the importance of coordination with regime and Iranian ground forces, as well as Hezbollah, in the success of the campaign.⁷² Gerasimov has said that “the most difficult thing during the preparation and in the initial period of the operation was organizing cooperation with the government troops and with all the various groups. . . . It was difficult to establish collaboration between all these detachments and our aerospace forces and to organize the logistics.”⁷³ But on the whole, Russia has been able to manage coordination with the ground elements of its coalition relatively effectively.

In addition to coordinating with existing ground forces, Russia helped rebuild and lead the Syrian

FIGURE 1
Map of Air and Naval Facilities Used by Russian Military



military. According to Gerasimov, “there is a group of [Russian] military advisors in every [Syrian] unit—battalion, brigade, regiment, or division. Essentially they plan combat operations.”⁷⁴ As the leading Russian military analyst Ruslan Pukhov writes,

Syrian units were often bolstered by a small but highly capable contingent of Russian support personnel and elite Spetsnaz troops. Even more importantly, high-ranking Russian officers . . . led Syrian troops on many important stretches of the front, bringing in much-needed military experience and expertise.⁷⁵

The existence of partners on the ground was a necessary precondition for the intervention. Moscow never planned for its forces to take the lead on ground operations in Syria itself. Thus, a coalition with forces on the ground was likely a key factor that enabled the decision to intervene.⁷⁶

Peer Rival’s Presence

U.S. presence in the Syrian theater certainly factored into Russian decisionmaking on the intervention. Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S. military’s operation against ISIS, had been underway for more than a year at the time that Russia’s air operations began. Syria’s airspace was congested, and, by intervening, Russia increased the risk of an inadvertent conflict between the VKS and the USAF. On the one hand, Russian planners had to consider the prospect of a direct clash with a peer rival, even though the United States and its partners were operating in different parts of the country at the start of Russia’s intervention. On the other hand, based on the U.S.-led coalition’s focus on ISIS and U.S. reluctance to target the regime directly, Moscow was likely confident that allied planes would not actively contest the areas where the VKS planned to operate. Otherwise, Moscow would have been significantly more reticent to intervene. In effect, the nature of the peer rival’s presence in this case merely created a “congestion” challenge for the VKS rather than a contested airspace problem. The former did not deter Moscow, but the latter might well have.

History of Defense Cooperation

Moscow’s military ties with Syria date back to the Cold War, when Syria and the Soviet Union developed an extensive, if occasionally testy, partnership.⁷⁷ The Soviet Union established the naval facility at Tartus and a base in Latakia province in the early 1970s, partly to compensate for the loss of North African basing after the downturn in its relations with Egypt. Moscow provided arms and advisors to Syria in the 1960s and was instrumental in reequipping the Syrian military following its defeats at the hands of the Israelis in 1967 and 1973. Additionally, Syria was one of the Soviet Union’s most significant arms importers in the Middle East and remained one of Russia’s customers in the post-Soviet period.⁷⁸

But Syria was more than just a platform and a market for Moscow. By the mid-1970s, the Soviet Union had posted more military advisors to Syria than to any other nation. In 1980, the two countries signed a bilateral treaty of friendship and cooperation. In the post-Soviet period, Russia and Syria maintained a diminished, but nonetheless robust, military-to-military relationship. Moscow was Damascus’s principal supplier of arms. Dozens of officers in the Syrian army studied at Russian military academies.

This relationship between the Syrian and Russian militaries, and the continued sale of Russian weapons to Damascus, certainly facilitated the 2015 intervention. The existing ties likely served to lessen the inevitable challenges of coalition warfare. For example, Gerasimov could communicate with his Syrian counterpart in Russian, since the latter studied at a military academy in Moscow.⁷⁹ It was not a necessary condition for Moscow’s decision to intervene, but this history certainly made the operation less challenging at the tactical level.

Significant On-the-Ground Sources of Intelligence

Russia is reported to have had at least two signals intelligence facilities in Syria that predate the conflict.⁸⁰ One of these, “Center S,” located near the Israeli border, was captured by the Free Syrian Army in October 2014. A YouTube video from inside the

Moscow saw the collapse of the Assad regime as imminent and believed it could prevent this outcome with a large-scale intervention.

site shows that a Russian military signals intelligence unit operated the facility in partnership with the regime's intelligence services. A photo on the wall shows Russian and Syrian officers "jointly processing information."⁸¹ This reporting is a graphic representation of what was known before: Russia had both its own intelligence presence on the ground in Syria and close ties with the regime's intelligence apparatus. This meant that the Russian military had greater prior knowledge of the terrain and more effective collection there than in any other country of the region. Clearly, this factor helped facilitate Russia's operation and therefore enabled the decision to intervene, even if it was not a central driver of that decision.

Maritime Ease-of-Access

The most significant maritime capabilities Russia has employed in Syria have been cruise missiles launched from ships and submarines in the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas. On October 7, 2015, four Russian Navy missile ships, *Dagestan*, *Grad Sviyazhsk*, *Veliky Ustyug*, and *Uglich*, all in the Caspian Sea, fired Kalibr cruise missiles at targets in Syria.⁸² On December 5, 2015, the Russian Navy diesel-electric submarine, the *Rostov-on-Don*, launched Kalibr cruise missiles from the Mediterranean Sea at targets in Syria.⁸³ In May

2017, the frigate *Admiral Essen* and the submarine *Krasnodar* launched Kalibr cruise missiles from the Mediterranean.⁸⁴ This component of the Russian operation would not have been possible in seas less accessible to the Russian navy or in areas beyond the range of Kalibrs launched from the Caspian. In short, Syria's relative maritime proximity significantly eased the operational burden on the Russian navy. This factor was not likely to have been a major consideration in the initial decision to intervene, but it did facilitate the operation in important ways.

Summary

Moscow's decision to intervene in Syria in 2015 resulted from an extraordinary confluence of political and military factors. The three principal drivers related to the situation on the ground. Moscow saw the collapse of the Assad regime as imminent and believed it could prevent this outcome with a large-scale intervention. Russian officials believed that such an outcome would have had significant negative repercussions for the country's national security, both in terms of the terrorist threat and the legitimization of Western-backed regime change. The Kremlin had tried a range of other tools in its bid to prevent this outcome, and these were seen to have failed. Three additional political factors also played an important, though secondary, role in the decision to intervene: the perception that it could lead to geopolitical benefits, particularly in Russia's relations with the West; the conviction that the potential existential risks posed by it, in terms of domestic backlash and potential for conflict with the United States, were manageable; and the Syrian government's invitation, which provided the cover of international legitimacy. Several military factors specific to Syria were key enablers for the intervention. Four were necessary preconditions: air access to the theater, permission to use facilities, partnership with the various forces on the ground in Syria, and lack of U.S. contestation of the airspace where the VKS was operating. Three additional factors facilitated the intervention, but were not essential factors in decisionmaking: Russia's on-the-ground intelligence sources, its relatively close relations with the Syrian military, and Syria's maritime proximity to Russia.

Russia's Lesser-Scale Interventions

Varieties of Intervention

The direct military engagement in Syria is the most strategically significant out-of-area intervention Moscow has undertaken since the Soviet period. But there have been several other, lesser-scale Russian interventions in the past several years in conflicts beyond post-Soviet Eurasia. We examine four such examples in this section: (1) Syria pre-September 2015, (2) Libya since 2015, (3) Afghanistan since 2016, and (4) Yemen since 2015. All four of these cases have involved a degree of Russian involvement in a civil conflict that falls short of overt military intervention.

In any external intervention in a civil war, the intervening state's relations with the warring parties shape the nature of its involvement. The outside power could be supportive of just one party, in which case a patron-client or proxy relationship tends to develop. In some cases, the intervening state provides support to multiple parties to, for example, hedge its bets about which party might ultimately prevail. The outside power could also refuse to support any party and seek to play the role of neutral arbiter, maintaining an equidistant stance.

Table 2 categorizes all five cases of Russian intervention discussed in this study—the four examined in this section as well as the post-September 2015 Syria case—according to the scale of interventions described in the introduction and the nature of Russia's relations with the conflicting parties. The remainder of this section assesses the factors driving Russian decisionmaking in the four lesser-scale examples. We compare these cases with the post-2015 Syria case to develop a better understanding of how Russia might act in the future.

Syria, Pre-2015

Moscow had been intervening in Syria's civil war in limited ways almost since it began in 2011. At the international diplomatic level, Moscow consistently sought to undermine any justification for a Western military intervention to oust Assad. It vetoed resolutions authorizing action under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, which can be invoked to sanction the use of force, on three occasions—in October 2011 and again in February and July 2012. In June 2012, Russia successfully prevented any hint of regime change from appearing in the Geneva Communiqué, the peace plan for Syria that eventually was adopted as an UNSCR.

In terms of military assistance, Moscow started directing a steady supply of materiel to Damascus as the Assad regime began to lose ground to the opposition in 2012. According to press reports, initial deliveries were mostly ammunition, small arms, and light weapons, but eventually Moscow began supplying attack helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles, air-defense systems, armored vehicles, radars, electronic warfare systems, and guided bombs.⁸⁵ The flow of *Tapir*-class landing ships from Russia's Black Sea Fleet was so regular—seven ships making ten trips to Syria each year—that Russian pundits dubbed it the “Syrian Express.” Some shipments were arranged under commercial contracts.⁸⁶ Moscow also supported the regime economically, for example by minting and shipping Syrian bank notes.⁸⁷

Notably, Moscow's support for Assad had its limits before the fall of 2015. Unlike Iran, Russia did not send its own forces to fight in Syria. Moreover, Moscow brokered a deal with Washington to destroy the vast majority of Assad's chemical weapons in 2013 and committed to a “political transition” as the final endpoint of a settlement process.⁸⁸

TABLE 2
Varieties of Russian Interventions

Nature of Relations with Parties	Small-Scale Intervention	Medium-Scale Intervention	Large-Scale Intervention
Equidistant or neutral arbiter	Yemen		
Support for multiple parties		Libya, Afghanistan	
Single proxy		Syria, pre-2015	Syria, post-2015

Throughout the first four years of the conflict, the Russian leadership did not seriously contemplate large-scale intervention, as none of the drivers of the September 2015 decision were present.

We therefore categorize the pre-fall 2015 Russian intervention in the Syrian civil war as medium-scale.⁸⁹ Moscow supported the Assad regime diplomatically, militarily, and financially, but without overt and direct intervention using its own forces. Several factors explain the Kremlin's support for Assad. First, the Kremlin anticipated and gained some geopolitical benefit from being the regime's international voice at negotiations; its profile at the regional and global levels grew as a result. Moreover, supporting Assad was an unambiguous way of opposing Western regime-change policies, which, as noted above, Moscow saw as threatening its own security. At the same time, the risks and costs of Russia's involvement—such as the reputational risks associated with Moscow's policy, particularly in the Arab world—were deemed acceptable or manageable.⁹⁰

Throughout the first four years of the conflict, the Russian leadership did not seriously contemplate large-scale intervention, as none of the drivers of the September 2015 decision were present. There was no imminent adverse outcome on the battlefield: Despite its steadily worsening fortunes, the Assad regime was not near collapse. In addition, the extent

of the ISIS threat did not become fully apparent until early- to mid-2015. While the caliphate was proclaimed in June 2014, it was the capture of Palmyra in May 2015 that demonstrated the group's strength. Furthermore, Moscow had not yet exhausted diplomacy and assistance to Assad as means to achieve its objectives. The geopolitical benefits from increasing the scale of the intervention did not fully materialize until late 2014 to early 2015, after the breakdown in Russia's relationship with the West in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Moreover, U.S. and allied airstrikes on ISIS targets in Syria did not commence until September 2014, and therefore the prospect of using counterterrorism cooperation as leverage with the West was not evident until after that campaign had begun. When these factors changed in mid-2015, that created the conditions for increasing the scale of the intervention.

Libya

Russia began to play a more active role in Libya's civil war in 2015, with its involvement reaching the level of a medium-scale intervention. Moscow made inroads with the two most prominent factions on the ground: the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) Presidential Council, led by Prime Minister Fayez al-Serraj in Tripoli; and the Libyan National Army, led by Kahlifa Haftar and supported by Libya's House of Representatives (HOR), based in the eastern city of Tobruk. Moscow had also reached out directly to smaller factions, including the militias that control Misurata.

Initially, many observers came to believe that the Kremlin was throwing its weight behind Haftar, who controlled more territory than his rivals. Haftar has traveled to Moscow twice since 2016 and also made a widely publicized visit to Russia's only aircraft carrier when it was stationed off Libya's shores. Press reporting suggests that Russia provided Haftar's forces weapons and advisers, and printed currency for his administration.⁹¹ The president of the HOR stated that his government requested Russian military assistance with training and equipment repair. One Russian private military contractor claims to have an arrangement to provide security in Haftar-controlled territory.⁹² Other reports suggest that Moscow treated

hundreds of Haftar's wounded soldiers at Russian hospitals.⁹³ In October 2018, another press story suggested Russia had deployed small numbers of special forces to support Haftar.⁹⁴

The Russian military has allegedly deployed in small numbers on the Egyptian side of the Egypt-Libya border to assist Haftar's forces. Russian special operations forces and drones have been sighted at Sidi Barrani, about 60 miles from the border.⁹⁵ In November 2017, the Russian government published draft text of a bilateral Russia-Egypt agreement on reciprocal use of airspace and air bases, which many assumed was related to joint efforts in Libya.⁹⁶ Since the publication of the draft, however, there have been no further public reports about the status of the agreement.

But Russia has not bet all its chips on Haftar. As Lev Dengov, a businessman who heads the foreign ministry— and Duma-endorsed Russian “contact group” for Libya, said, “In Libya, we don't want to associate ourselves with any side of the conflict.”⁹⁷ Indeed, al-Serraj and other members of the GNA have regularly traveled to Russia and met with senior officials; the GNA's foreign minister visited Russia twice in May 2018 alone.⁹⁸ Dengov seems to have the lead on liaison with al-Serraj in close coordination with Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic. Kadyrov directly negotiated the release of a Russian commercial ship crew jailed by the GNA in 2016 and hosted al-Serraj's deputy in the Chechen capital of Grozny before the latter traveled to Moscow in 2017.⁹⁹ Russia's state-controlled oil firm, Rosneft, has also signed contracts with the GNA-run state oil firm.

Beyond the GNA and Haftar, Russia has engaged with other prominent factions in Libya, particularly the group controlling the city of Misurata. Dengov reports leading a Russian delegation to Misurata and arranging a visit to Moscow for the Misuratan fighters who retook the city of Sirte from ISIS.¹⁰⁰ A Misuratan delegation did indeed travel to Russia in April 2017. In addition to meetings at the defense and foreign ministries, the group was also received by Kadyrov in Grozny.¹⁰¹

In addition to this engagement with Libyan factions, Russia has been actively involved in the regional and international diplomacy surrounding

Libya. Besides Egypt, Moscow has worked with the UN, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), France, and Italy to facilitate a political settlement. Russia's newfound clout in the conflict has forced the EU, led by Italy, to reach out to Moscow.¹⁰² Italy has praised Russia for its role in the conflict and invited Lavrov to Rome for negotiations.¹⁰³ Paris had no choice but to invite Moscow to its Libya-related high-level meetings. In contrast to Syria, Russia appears to be pursuing a compromise outcome to the conflict, negotiated under UN auspices.¹⁰⁴ In 2017, together with the UAE, Moscow cajoled Haftar and al-Serraj into their first talks in 16 months.¹⁰⁵ Russia has established itself as a power broker in any future Libyan political settlement.

Russia's medium-scale intervention in Libya has produced myriad geopolitical benefits—and Moscow seemed to have banked on these benefits when it became more deeply involved. Before it increased the scale of its intervention in 2015, Russia was on the margins of international diplomacy on Libya. As of 2018, it was at the center of these efforts. All the key players on the ground now seek to curry favor in Moscow. Russia's role there has boosted its standing with such regional powers as Egypt and the UAE and with EU and NATO member-states France and Italy. In fact, one interviewee said that Russia's Libya policy is mostly “about rebuilding relations with France and Italy.”¹⁰⁶ Meanwhile, Russia's intervention thus far has incurred relatively limited costs. By engaging with multiple Libyan factions, Moscow has minimized risks to its interests that aligning with Haftar alone would have entailed.

Beyond assistance to Haftar, the Russian military has not overtly intervened in the conflict. Dengov has said that he “had a hard time imagining” a Syria-like VKS operation in Libya.¹⁰⁷ In particular, it would be unclear which side the Russian military would support, given that none of the involved parties appears likely to win the conflict outright. Additionally, interviewees report that different Russian bureaucracies favor different constituencies. Kadyrov and Dengov seem to be partial to the al-Serraj government, while the Ministry of Defense prefers Haftar. Meanwhile, the Foreign Ministry reportedly seeks a diplomatic compromise.¹⁰⁸

Yemen

The outbreak of civil war in Yemen in 2015 pitted the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels against the Saudi-backed government of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi and supporters of the late President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The resulting power vacuum allowed al Qaeda and ISIS to gain footholds. While the Saudi-led coalition continued air strikes into 2018, the Houthis retained control of the capital, Sana'a.

Russia has been careful to avoid fully backing any side. Moscow received a range of delegations representing nearly all the factions. In April 2015, Russia did not veto UNSCR 2216, which imposed a ban on the export of weapons to the Houthis. After Hadi was forced to flee Yemen, Moscow recalled its ambassador from the capital. In 2017, Russia formally recognized an ambassador from Hadi's government and reportedly printed currency on its behalf.¹⁰⁹

At the same time, Houthi delegations visited Moscow, offering economic incentives to entice Russia to recognize them as the legitimate government.¹¹⁰ Russia also sent humanitarian aid to Sana'a.¹¹¹ However, interviewees report that Russian officials, particularly in the Foreign Ministry, distrust the Houthis.¹¹² Russia only expressed "concern" over the Saudi-led coalition's airstrikes, while it condemned the Houthi missile attacks on the Saudi capital of Riyadh.¹¹³ Yet, Russia used its UN Security Council veto to block a resolution blaming Iran for arming the Houthis, while still voting to uphold the embargo.¹¹⁴ Moscow seems wary of souring relations with Iran (which are essential for Russia's operations in Syria) over its support for the Houthis.¹¹⁵

According to interviewees, several actors have reportedly sought Russian intervention in Yemen: the Iranian government, on behalf of the Houthis, in early 2017; the Houthis themselves, during their visits to Moscow; President Hadi; and the UAE.¹¹⁶ Indeed, Hadi's foreign minister has publicly called on Russia to pressure Iran.¹¹⁷ Moscow has apparently declined all these entreaties. One Russian commentator critiqued Moscow's position as "passive"; Vitaly Naumkin, Russia's leading Arabist, called his country's involvement "nothing more than routine diplomatic work."¹¹⁸ We therefore characterize Russia's involvement in Yemen as small-scale, and its posture toward local

actors as equidistant with no significant direct support provided to any side but dialogue with all.

Afghanistan

Since 2015–2016, Russia has taken a more active role in Afghanistan's civil war, particularly by increasing outreach to the Taliban. The rise of ISIS there, with its vision of a global caliphate, made the Taliban, with its focus on gaining power within Afghanistan, a more appealing partner for Russia. Moscow considers ISIS in Afghanistan a direct threat to Russia's national security. As Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special envoy for Afghanistan, said,

ISIS has significantly increased its strength in Afghanistan. According to our estimates, there are already 10,000 members of the group [as of December 2017] and that number continues to grow, in part thanks to fighters who gained battlefield experience in Syria and Iraq. I would like to draw your attention to the concentration of ISIS fighters in the north of Afghanistan. . . . ISIS clearly has stated the goal of spreading its influence beyond Afghanistan. . . . This presents a serious security threat first of all to the Central Asian countries and the southern regions of Russia.¹¹⁹

This threat drove Moscow to engage with the Taliban, which was actively fighting ISIS in Afghanistan. Kabulov has said that "the Taliban interest objectively coincides with ours" in the battle against ISIS.¹²⁰ Additionally, Moscow wanted to bolster its influence with a group that controls up to 70 percent of the country and would clearly have a major role in any future political settlement.¹²¹ Press reports, citing Taliban sources, claim that the group's representatives "have met Russian officials inside Russia and 'other' countries several times."¹²² This diplomatic outreach provides the Taliban with an additional degree of international legitimacy and diversification of external relations.

Since 2016, some U.S. officials have accused Russia of providing military assistance to the Taliban.¹²³ Russian-made supplies, such as night-vision goggles, were discovered in the possession of Taliban fighters. However, no publicly available

evidence confirms that Moscow provided this equipment to the Taliban.¹²⁴

We categorize Russia’s intervention in Afghanistan as medium-scale, and it has been engaged with and supportive of multiple parties to the conflict. Mostly its efforts have been confined to diplomacy. But it has provided assistance to Afghan government security forces,¹²⁵ and might be providing some military assistance to the Taliban. In addition to countering the ISIS threat and maintaining influence with the Taliban, Moscow stands to gain other geopolitical benefits from its current medium-scale involvement. Russian intervention thus far has put it back at the center of international mediation efforts. Moscow is also seeking regional partnerships with countries such as Iran, Pakistan, and China to manage the security situation in Afghanistan. While Moscow’s relations with Kabul may have suffered over the allegations of support for the Taliban, the fallout has been minimal.

What Drives Russian Interventions?

The analysis presented in the previous section highlights key political and military factors that played a role in Russian decisionmaking on out-of-area intervention in a civil conflict. In this section, we identify the central drivers for large-scale interventions, as in Syria post-2015, through a comparison with the other

lesser-scale interventions. We then isolate the central drivers for medium-scale interventions through a comparison of the three medium-scale actions with Yemen, the only case of a small-scale intervention.

Large-Scale Interventions

In Table 3, we compare the Syria post-2015 case with the other four interventions by assessing the extent to which the key factors we identified in the former are present in the latter. In other words, Table 3 covers the following elements for each case:

- *Whether an adverse military outcome would have occurred in the conflict absent a large-scale intervention.* An adverse military outcome, in this context, is one that carries grave and irreversible consequences for Russia, akin to those that were expected to follow the fall of Assad’s regime.
- *Whether the Kremlin perceived that significant security concerns were at stake in the conflict, such as terrorist threats to the homeland.*¹²⁶
- *Whether other, lesser-scale means of achieving Russia’s objectives were exhausted.*
- *The extent of geopolitical benefits anticipated from escalating to a large-scale intervention.* Geopolitical benefits could come in the form of a central role for Russia in negotiations on the conflict, the additional leverage Russia could gain with third countries (within or

TABLE 3
Political Factors Driving Large-Scale Russian Intervention: Comparing Other Cases with Syria

Political Factor	Syria Post-2015	Syria Pre-2015*	Libya*	Afghanistan*	Yemen*
Imminent adverse military outcome (that could be prevented by large-scale intervention)	Yes	No	No	No	No
Grave security implications	Yes	No	No	No	No
Exhaustion of other means	Yes	No	No	No	No
Geopolitical benefits from large-scale intervention	High	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Manageable existential risks from large-scale intervention	Yes	Yes	Yes	Maybe	Yes
Cover of international legitimacy for large-scale intervention	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

NOTE: * = cases of medium- and small-scale interventions.

outside the region) from intervention, or increased influence over the future of the country where Russia is intervening. We assess expected geopolitical benefits on an admittedly subjective scale of low, moderate, or high.

- *Whether existential risks would be manageable if a large-scale intervention were to be launched.* Existential risks are understood to mean threats to regime survival, territorial integrity, or risk of armed conflict with a superior adversary, specifically the United States. We assess risks to be perceived as “manageable” if they are either small or can be mitigated through unilateral Russian actions.
- *Whether a large-scale intervention would have formal international legitimacy.*

This comparative assessment demonstrates that the single case of large-scale intervention—Syria post-2015—has several unique factors. Most significant, the three key political drivers of the Russian intervention are absent in the other four cases. First, in none of the other cases has there been an imminent adverse military outcome that required a large-scale intervention to prevent it: Indeed, as discussed above, that is the key factor that changed in Syria, shortly before Moscow decided to escalate its involvement. By comparison, in both Afghanistan and Libya, there have been no particular adverse military outcomes that could be prevented by a large-scale intervention.

Second, security concerns stemming from the conflicts in these four cases are seen as less direct and more manageable. In Libya, unlike in Syria, Russia has few direct security interests at stake: Although some Russian aid has been geared toward assisting groups fighting ISIS, Moscow does not perceive a direct terrorist threat to the homeland. There are no Russian-speaking Islamic extremists in the country, according to Dengov.¹²⁷ Thus, the transnational terrorism factor is essentially absent in the Libya case. Likewise, there are no reports of Russian-speaking extremists in Yemen, and no known links between Yemeni extremist groups and Russia. In Afghanistan, Moscow does perceive a terrorist threat, but it is more long-term and diffuse than in Syria in 2015.

Third, other, less-intensive means of achieving Russia’s objectives are or were still producing results in the other cases. In Afghanistan, for example, Russia is still seeking to engage, short of large-scale intervention, using diplomacy—and possibly arms provision—to shape the situation according to its preferences. In Libya, Russia’s medium-scale intervention seems to be producing significant results.

As captured in Table 3, geopolitical benefits that are anticipated to result from a hypothetical escalation to a large-scale intervention are not unique to Syria in 2015. However, these expected benefits are more limited in the four other conflicts. Our qualitative analysis of Russian perceptions and decisionmaking in Syria indicates that geopolitical benefits mattered but were not a primary driving factor. Comparative analysis suggests that Syria was nonetheless unique in presenting Russia with greater expected geopolitical benefits compared with the other cases of civil conflict considered. To be sure, the assessment of Moscow’s perception of geopolitical gains to be had from a hypothetical decision to escalate the scale of its intervention is by necessity speculative to some degree. Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to conclude that the anticipated geopolitical benefits from a large-scale intervention were distinctly higher in Syria in 2015, compared with earlier periods in the conflict—that is, prior to Russia’s post-Ukraine crisis breakdown in ties with the West and the start of U.S. counter-ISIS operations.

In Libya, by all indications, Russia stands to gain little by further increasing the scale of its involvement. Escalating its intervention would not necessarily deliver greater leverage over third countries or within the country, beyond that achieved by the current medium-scale intervention. On the contrary, overt military intervention on one party’s behalf would threaten Moscow’s relations with the other factions, as well as its diplomatic ties with those factions’ external patrons. Russian experts are thus dubious about the prospect of a large-scale intervention in Libya. The Libyan civil war is “not our conflict,” as one interviewee put it.¹²⁸

In Yemen too, geopolitical benefits from potential greater involvement are unclear. The potential for a naval base in Yemen (or access to one) has been posited as a potential incentive, but Moscow does

not seem interested in having a base on the Red Sea or the Gulf of Aden.¹²⁹ Furthermore, given the state of the civil war, Moscow is unlikely to take seriously promises from any of the parties about the future. On the contrary, the Kremlin appears mindful that by favoring the Houthis, Russia would alienate Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and, by intervening on behalf of Hadi, Moscow would anger Tehran. As of mid-2019, these bilateral relationships are more important to Russia than any potential benefits from larger-scale intervention in Yemen's civil war, as Russia needs Saudi Arabia's cooperation for coordination on oil prices, and Iran's cooperation to manage the Syria conflict.

As Table 3 suggests, the remaining two factors that played a role in the decision to escalate to large-scale intervention in Syria—manageable existential risks and international legitimacy—are not unique to this case. Notably, both were present in Syria long before the decision to intervene in 2015. There is little doubt that Assad would have granted Russia formal permission to escalate its involvement long before 2015. And the most significant existential risks—that is, potential threats to regime security or risk of armed confrontation with an adversary, such as the United States—are likely seen as manageable in all cases, with the possible exception of Afghanistan, where we assess the perceived manageability of existential risks to be unclear. A large-scale intervention in Afghanistan could provoke strong domestic resistance given the memories of the Soviet invasion or lead to a direct clash with the United States, which maintains forces in the country and would likely contest the airspace.

Thus, the imminence of an adverse military outcome, the attendant grave security implications, and the exhaustion of other means emerge as the three pivotal factors that produced the large-scale intervention in Syria. These factors would likely have to change in the other cases analyzed here to raise the probability of an escalation of Russia's involvement. The perceived geopolitical benefits were an important reinforcing factor in the Syria case, but our comparative analysis suggests that the absence of those benefits would not have precluded the Russian decision to increase the scale of its intervention. It is also worth noting that we have yet to see a large-scale

Russian out-of-area intervention without the cover of international legitimacy.

International legitimacy is by no means a sufficient condition, as we note above, but it appears necessary. Several interviewees emphasized that this factor is important for Moscow, as part of its effort to portray itself as a responsible great power.¹³⁰ Thus, the difficulty Russia would have in obtaining an official invitation from an internationally recognized government in the three other countries makes large-scale intervention less likely. For instance, in Libya, the internationally recognized GNA is unlikely to invite Russia to intervene. Nor does it seem plausible that Kabul would invite Moscow to do so.

But political factors cannot fully account for the decision to intervene in Syria in 2015; the enabling military factors—particularly the presence of allies on the ground, air access to the theater, ability to use airbases and a port, and uncontested airspace—were necessary conditions. As seen in Table 4, Syria was uniquely conducive to a large-scale intervention, compared with the other three countries. However, several factors present in Syria, such as air access to the conflict zone, are also present in Libya and Afghanistan. (Afghanistan is arguably more problematic for the VKS, because it is more likely that the USAF would contest the airspace.) But even under permissive military conditions, Russia is unlikely to engage in a large-scale intervention, absent the key political factors identified above. The military factors *enable* large-scale intervention; they do not drive it.

In short, in the fall of 2015, the following highly atypical set of circumstances came together in Syria:

- The Kremlin believed that an irreversible adverse military outcome was imminent, absent large-scale intervention.
- Without intervention, Moscow assessed that there would be grave security implications.
- Alternative means of preventing this course of events were tried and failed to achieve results.
- There was an expectation of significant geopolitical benefits from intervening.
- There was an assumption that potential existential risks were manageable.

TABLE 4
 Military Factors Enabling Large-Scale Russian Intervention

Factor	Syria	Libya	Afghanistan	Yemen
Friendly ground forces	Yes	Yes	Possible	No
Air access to conflict zone	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unlikely
Permission to use airbases	Yes	Possible	N/A	No
Port accessible to Russian navy	Yes	Possible	N/A	Undetermined
Peer rival absent from conflict zone; airspace uncongested	No	Yes	No	No
Airspace uncontested/largely uncontested	Yes	Yes	Possible	Yes
History of defense cooperation (mil-mil relationship or arms sales)	Yes	Some	Some	Some
Significant on-the-ground intelligence sources	Yes	Some	Yes	No
Maritime ease-of-access	Yes	Yes	N/A	No

NOTE: N/A = not applicable; mil-mil = military-to-military.

- Local and regional partners provided international legitimacy, access, ground forces, and bases.
- Russia’s VKS could operate in uncontested airspace.

It is difficult to see such circumstances materializing in any of the other countries under consideration. The Syria case was indeed unique. Several factors would have to change to shift Russia’s calculus with regard to escalating its involvement in the three other civil conflicts considered here. Afghanistan may be the most plausible case where such changes are possible. When compared with Libya or Yemen, the terrorist threat from Afghanistan is more immediate and could plausibly become more acute. Moreover, there are relatively few logistical challenges, given its proximity to Russia and Moscow’s Central Asian allies; many of the military enabling factors are present, possible, or not relevant because of differences in geography. For example, Russia maintains an airbase in nearby Kyrgyzstan. If its relationship with the Taliban were to deepen, Russia would have a partner on the ground to counter the ISIS threat, which is likely a necessary precondition

for intervention; as one interviewee put it, “the Taliban is potentially Russia’s ground force.”¹³¹ Even under such circumstances, however, other factors—notably, the presence of existential risks and the absence of international legitimacy—would militate against large-scale intervention.

Lesser-Scale Interventions

By contrast, the drivers of lesser-scale interventions examined in this report are likely not unique to the countries examined here. Table 5 compares the political factors underlying decisionmaking in the three cases of medium-scale intervention with the one case of small-scale intervention. (For these cases, where there is no overt military involvement, military-enabling factors are not relevant by definition.) Drawing on the analysis in the previous section, we summarize the following factors across these cases:

- the extent of geopolitical benefits perceived to result from escalating to a medium-scale intervention

TABLE 5
Political Factors Driving Medium-Scale Russian Intervention

Factor	Syria Pre-2015	Libya	Afghanistan	Yemen*
Geopolitical benefits from medium-scale intervention	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low
Manageable costs or risks from medium-scale intervention	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Direct threat to national security stemming from the conflict	Moderate	Low	High	Low

NOTE: * = case of small-scale intervention.

- whether the costs and risks of a medium-scale intervention were perceived as manageable
- whether direct threats to Russia’s national security were perceived to stem from the conflict.

In terms of political factors, Moscow likely anticipated at least moderate geopolitical benefits to accrue as a result of increasing its involvement to a medium-scale intervention in the three cases where such an intervention occurred. As noted above, in Syria, starting around 2012, the Kremlin appears to have perceived—and indeed reaped—geopolitical gains from supporting the Assad regime, in terms of its regional and international standing. In Libya, Moscow’s decision to increase its involvement appeared to be aimed in part at growing its influence and leverage within the country, as well as with countries such as Egypt, the UAE, France, and Italy. In Afghanistan, greater involvement was in part a bid to reassert Russia’s role in that region, shore up influence with other regional powers (e.g., China, Pakistan, India), and assert its centrality to the settlement process. In Yemen, by contrast, Moscow appeared to perceive few geopolitical benefits from greater involvement and significant potential negative geopolitical consequences, specifically for its relations with key regional powers.

The costs and risks of escalating to a medium-scale intervention appear manageable in all cases. This is largely a function of the nature of medium-scale intervention, which, by definition, is highly unlikely to lead to a conflict with a near-peer adversary or to domestic political unrest.

The level of direct security threats differs across the four cases. It was highest in Afghanistan because of the country’s proximity to Russia and the perceived risk that destabilizing developments could spill across Afghanistan’s borders into Russian-allied Central Asian states. We determined that the threat from Syria was seen as moderate prior to 2015, when the extent of ISIS’s gains and Assad’s weakness were not yet manifest. In Libya, the threat to Russia is seen as relatively low, since there are no transnational terrorism links to Russia, as there were in Syria, nor do the two countries share geographical proximity, as with Afghanistan. The conflict in Yemen is also not believed to pose a direct threat to Russia.

In sum, manageable costs appear to be a prerequisite for a medium-scale intervention, but perceived geopolitical gain, security threat perceptions, or a combination of both are the key drivers. The comparison suggests that a conflict must either present a high level of threat (as in Afghanistan), promise a high level of geopolitical benefit (as in Libya), or there must be moderate levels of both (as in Syria pre-2015) to produce a medium-scale intervention.

We can see how all of these factors militate against an escalation of Russia’s intervention in Yemen. As noted above, the levels of both potential geopolitical benefit from escalating and threat to Russia’s national security are low. Additionally, as several interviewees noted, the risks to Moscow’s ties with key regional players from a higher level of involvement are quite significant.

Conclusions

This study of Russian decisionmaking on out-of-area interventions suggests several implications.

- **First, a large-scale intervention in Libya, Yemen, or Afghanistan is unlikely under current circumstances.** For one to materialize, there would need to be an imminent adverse military outcome that would have grave security implications for Russia, which could be prevented by a large-scale intervention (e.g., ISIS on the verge of taking control of northwestern provinces of Afghanistan).
- **Second, Moscow would likely have tried other means of addressing the problem, including diplomacy and greater medium-scale intervention, before resorting to this step; a large-scale intervention is not likely to come out of the blue.**
- **Third, it would be important for Russia to obtain some form of international legitimization for a large-scale intervention, and that seems unlikely in the cases of the three other countries.**
- **Fourth, of the three other countries under consideration, the greatest number of the military-enabling factors for a large-scale intervention are present in Libya.** Afghanistan is perhaps equally (if not more) manageable for the Russian military, were it not for the presence of the United States and the likely willingness of the USAF to contest control of the country's airspace. Yemen would pose significant logistical challenges.
- **Fifth, if there were to be greater geopolitical benefit from a medium-scale intervention in Yemen (e.g., the prospect of playing peacemaker between Riyadh and Tehran) or greater direct threat stemming from the country (e.g., the emergence of extremists in Yemen with links to Russia), Moscow is likely to scale up its involvement, so long as the costs are seen as manageable.** This same logic, about the drivers for the progression of small- to medium-scale intervention, is generalizable to potential future cases of Russian involvement in civil conflicts.

- **Finally, we have yet to observe a large-scale intervention where Russia is supporting multiple parties on the ground.** Greater Russian involvement in Libya or Afghanistan would seem to be more probable if Moscow were to throw its weight completely behind one of the parties. As of this writing, such a development seems unlikely.

The large-scale Russian intervention in Syria since 2015 was the result of an extraordinary set of circumstances. These circumstances seem unlikely to materialize in the context of the other civil conflicts under consideration. However, our analysis suggests that the bar for Russia to engage in medium-scale interventions is quite low. If the risks of such an intervention are manageable and the conflict promises a high level of geopolitical benefit for Moscow, presents a high level of threat to Russian security, or demonstrates moderate levels of both, medium-scale Russian action seems likely.¹³²

Even though a Syria-scale out-of-area operation in the other conflict zones examined here is unlikely, the USAF may still want to plan for such a contingency, particularly in contexts where the strategic stakes for the United States are significant. Russia's VKS has demonstrated that it is capable of operating out-of-area, and it would be prudent to assume that circumstances could materialize in the future that would drive the political leadership to decide to intervene. The USAF should specifically be aware that its presence in a given conflict zone will not deter the VKS from operating in near proximity.

However, the research presented here also suggests that there will be significant prior indications of a large-scale Russian intervention, in both the military and diplomatic realms. Moscow is likely to try other, lesser-scale means before it escalates to overt military intervention. We should see Moscow trying these means, and failing to achieve its objectives, before it contemplates large-scale action. Russian threat perceptions are also an important factor to watch closely; Moscow is only likely to use overt military force when it sees a direct security threat to the homeland. United States Air Forces in Europe–Air Forces Africa (USAFE-AFAFRICA) and USAF intelligence collection can be usefully oriented

on these indicators to provide warning of potential future Russian interventions.

Russia's increased willingness to intervene at a lesser scale has more immediate implications for U.S. interests, the U.S. military, and specifically the USAF. U.S. civilian and military decisionmakers should assume that Russia will not refrain from getting involved in any conflict that affects its interests. The U.S. military should expect Russian forces, even if only covertly or in low numbers, to be present in nearly any conflict zone in the MENA region and beyond. This presents significant operational and escalatory risks for U.S. forces operating in the same theaters. Planners should always be cognizant of Russian interests in each country in the region and expect competition both for basing and for influence in those states where Moscow has made diplomatic and political-military inroads. Moscow is increasingly cultivating partners in areas where it was previously absent. The USAF will, in the future, encounter more "congested," and at times contested, airspace in the USAFE-AFAFRICA area of responsibility. In addition to considering the prospect that the regular Russian military will be more active, the potential presence of covert Russian forces or contractors introduces a different set of complications for planners. Standing command guidance and procedures should be developed to address any potential threats emanating from these forces while avoiding unintended escalation. Russia's increased activism represents a new reality that should be incorporated into USAFE-AFAFRICA's regional strategy and contingency planning. The command's planning toward Africa has traditionally been cooperative in nature. Moscow's growing involvement on the continent suggests that planners should consider taking into account strategic competition with Russia in the regional strategy for Africa. Security cooperation could be leveraged to boost influence with key partners that Moscow is now seeking to cultivate. USAFE-AFAFRICA can also work with European allies, several of which are increasingly preoccupied with threats emanating from North Africa, to counter problematic Russian behaviors in the region.

Notes

¹ Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017. We refer to the broad elite group involved in the policy process regarding national security issues as "decisionmakers" in the Russian context.

² This typology is derived from Patrick Regan's large-*N* studies of intervention in civil wars. See, Patrick M. Regan, *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers: Outside Intervention in Intrastate Conflict*, Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2000.

³ Regan, 2000.

⁴ Regan, 2000, pp. 9–10.

⁵ Throughout this section, we refer to Russia's 2015 decision to intervene militarily as the "decision to intervene" for the purpose of readability; as we will discuss below, Russia was, of course, intervening in Syria long before it launched the air operation on September 30, 2015.

⁶ John W. Parker, *Putin's Syrian Gambit: Sharper Elbows, Bigger Footprint, Stickier Wicket*, Strategic Perspectives 25, National Defense University, July 6, 2017, pp. 10–12; A. V. Lavrov, "Khod boevykh deistvii v 2011–2015 godakh," in M. Yu. Shepovalenko, ed., *Siriiskii rubezh*, Moscow: Tsentral'nyi tsentr analiza strategii i tekhnologii, 2016.

⁷ For a Russian analysis of the situation, see, for example, Maksim Yusin and Sergei Strokan, "Ni mira, ni Pal'mira," *Kommersant*, May 22, 2015. To be sure, not all Russian analysts agree that the Assad regime was on the verge of collapse. See, for example, Mikhail Barabanov, "Why Russia Needs an Exit Strategy in Syria," *National Interest*, October 9, 2015.

⁸ Lead author's interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

⁹ Viktor Baranets, "Nachal'nik genshtaba vooruzhennykh sil Rosssii general armii Valerii Gerasimov: 'My perelomili khrebet udarnym silam terrorizma,'" *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, December 26, 2017.

¹⁰ In the months leading up to the Russian intervention, there were troubling signs for Moscow, in addition to the situation on the ground: Western diplomats were reportedly negotiating an agreement to establish a no-fly zone in parts of Syria. The looming prospect of another U.S.-led no-fly zone, perceived as the opening act to a regime change operation, weighed heavily on Russian decisionmaking. Indeed, some analysts suggest that the intervention was prompted more by Western plans for the no-fly zone than the precariousness of Assad's position, although the former would have certainly contributed to the latter. In any case, Russia's move addressed both challenges. Sam Jones, "Moscow Scuppers U.S. Coalition Plans for No-Fly Zone in Syria," *Financial Times*, October 4, 2015. See also Barabanov, 2015.

¹¹ Parker, 2017, pp. 12, 16; Samuel Charap, "Russia's Use of Military Force as a Foreign Policy Tool: Is There a Logic?" Policy Memo No. 443, PONARS Eurasia, October 2016.

¹² Parker, 2017, p. 5; Angela Stent, "Putin's Power Play in Syria: How to Respond to Russia's Intervention," *Foreign Affairs*, No. 95, 2016, p. 106; Fiona Hill, "Putin Battles for the Russian Homefront in Syria," Brookings Institution, May 23, 2016a.

¹³ Fiona Hill, “The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad, Mistaking Syria for Chechnya,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 25, 2013.

¹⁴ As Russia’s National Security Strategy makes explicit, Moscow connected the overthrowing of existing regimes to destabilizing proliferation of terrorism and extremism. See President of Russia, “O strategii natsional’noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” December 31, 2015d.

¹⁵ Baranets, 2017.

¹⁶ “Muslim Populations by Country: How Big Will Each Muslim Population Be By 2030?” *Guardian*, January 28, 2011.

¹⁷ Aleksei Malashenko and Akhmed Yarlykapov, *Radicalisation of Russia’s Muslim Community*, MICROCON Policy Working Paper 9, May 2009, p. 30.

¹⁸ As Hill points out, “an Islamic caliphate established either by the Islamic State or by any religiously-based extremist group in the region” would have the potential to resurrect “efforts by militant groups to create their own ‘caliphate’ or ‘emirate’ in the North Caucasus,” which “have created headaches for Moscow since the early 2000s” (Hill, 2016a). Nikolai Patrushev, for example, alluded to the existence of ties between ISIS and the North Caucasus. See Security Council of the Russian Federation, “Interv’yu Sekretarya Soveta bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii N. P. Patrusheva ‘Komsomol’skoi pravde,’” March 5, 2015.

¹⁹ Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, New York: Soufan Group, December 2015.

²⁰ There have been credible reports that Russia allowed radicals from the North Caucasus to leave Russia for Syria to lower the chances of domestic terrorism, particularly in the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics. See, for example, Maria Tsvetkova, “How Russia Allowed Homegrown Radicals to Go and Fight in Syria,” *Reuters Investigates*, May 13, 2016.

²¹ See Nikolay Kozhanov, *Russian Policy Across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods*, London: Chatham House, Royal Institute of International Affairs, February 2018. As Kozhanov notes, there is evidence that leadership of extremist groups in the North Caucasus encouraged members to go to Syria as practice for a future struggle with Moscow.

²² President of Russia, “Meeting with Government Members,” September 30, 2015b.

²³ For example, Charles Lister, “Russia’s Intervention in Syria: Protracting an Already Endless Conflict,” Brookings Institution, October 21, 2015.

²⁴ See, for example, Michael Kofman, “The Russian Intervention in Syria: Policy Options and Exit Strategies,” *War on the Rocks*, October 21, 2015.

²⁵ For example, Maks Czyperski, Eliot Higgins, Frederic Hof, Ben Nimmo, and John E. Herbst, *Distract, Deceive, Destroy: Putin at War in Syria*, Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2016.

²⁶ For a representative Russian view on the character of the Free Syrian Army, see Gennadii Gatilov, “Formula uregulirovaniia v Sirii: mezhsiriiskii dialog, pomnizhennyi na effektivnuiu rol’ vneshnikh igrokov,” *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn’*, No. 11, November 2013, p. 35. Gatilov, Russia’s deputy foreign minister at the time, wrote that “it soon transpired that the Free Syrian Army is not a single entity. It consists of dozens of groups of various orienta-

tions, including extremist ones, and its members actively transition into jihadist structures, which receive from their supporters superior allowances and command more modern armaments.” Moreover, the view that there was no such thing as a “moderate Islamic opposition” does not appear limited to Russian officials but is also expressed by leading Russian experts on the Middle East. For example, Vitaly Naumkin, Russia’s leading Arabist, argued that the “moderate Islamic organizations” assisted by the United States are no better than the “[ISIS] radicals,” and that distinguishing between “good” and “bad” “bandits” is “extremely dangerous.” “Vitaly Naumkin: ugroza teraktov IGIL v Rossii vpolne real’na,” *Argumenty i Fakty*, June 18, 2015.

²⁷ President of Russia, “St. Petersburg International Economic Forum Plenary Meeting,” June 2, 2017.

²⁸ President of Russia, “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,” October 27, 2016.

²⁹ Yuri Barmin suggests that the initial goal was to strengthen Assad’s forces, which entailed “targeting rebel groups, including those supported by the West,” but that “[o]nce the collapse of the Syrian army was averted and Assad’s rule was no longer on the defensive Moscow moved on to targeting ISIS among other armed groups” (Yuri Barmin, “A Critical Look at Mainstream Analysis of the Russian Operation in Syria,” Russian International Affairs Council, April 6, 2016). Other Russian experts offer a parallel justification for targeting the moderate opposition: It was necessary to allow Assad’s regime forces to concentrate on defeating ISIS, the most threatening enemy (Ruslan Pukhov and M. S. Barabanov, “Rossiiskaya vozdukhnaia operatsiia v Sirii,” in Shepovalenko, ed., *Siriiskii Rubezh*, Moscow: Tsentr analiza strategii i tekhnologii, 2016, p. 109; Kozhanov, 2018, p. 7).

³⁰ For a more extensive treatment of Putin’s long-standing objections to Western interventions, see Roy Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013. See also Fiona Hill, “Understanding and Detering Russia: Testimony Submitted for the Hearings on Understanding and Detering Russia: U.S. Policies and Strategies,” testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, February 10, 2016b; James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement, *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-236-RC, 2017. For a Russian view on U.S. and Western motivations behind these interventions, see, for example, Artur Lyukmanov and Darya Kovalyova, “New Foreign Intervention Scenarios and New Antiterrorism Goals,” *International Affairs* (Moscow), No. 4, 2017, p. 134.

³¹ President of Russia, “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,” October 24, 2014.

³² President of Russia, “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly,” December 3, 2015c.

³³ See Samuel Charap, “Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention,” *Survival*, Vol. 55, No. 1, 2013; Roy Allison, “Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 89, No. 4, July 2013.

³⁴ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1973 (2011), U.N. Doc. S/RES/1973, March 17, 2011.

³⁵ See, for example, Sergei Lavrov, “Interview of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Published in the Newspaper Moskovskiy Novosti on May 12, 2011,” May 12, 2011; and Ellen Barry,

“Putin Criticizes West for Libya Incursion,” *New York Times*, April 26, 2011.

³⁶ Moscow’s conviction that humanitarian concerns were merely a pretext is expressed in many official documents, including the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, which criticized attempts to bypass the prerogatives of the UNSC through a distortion of its resolutions and the “realization of ideas, aimed at overthrowing of legitimate authorities in sovereign states under the guise of protecting the civilian population.” See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Kontsepsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii,” February 12, 2013.

³⁷ As Putin wrote in one of his articles published during his presidential campaign in 2012, “We cannot allow anyone to realize the ‘Libya scenario’ in Syria” (Vladimir Putin, “Rossiya i menyayushchiysya mir,” *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, February 27, 2012).

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Vitaly Churkin, Permanent Representative to the United Nations, in an Interview with Kommersant Daily, Published on February 19, 2016,” February 19, 2016.

³⁹ Lead author’s interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

⁴⁰ “Syria Peace Talks Break Up as UN Envoy Fails to End Deadlock,” *Guardian*, February 15, 2014.

⁴¹ Many analysts accord significant weight to this consideration in Russian decisionmaking. See, for example, Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, “What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?” *Military Review*, January 24, 2018; Barabanov, 2015.

⁴² Lead author’s interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

⁴³ President of Russia, “70th Session of the UN General Assembly,” September 28, 2015a.

⁴⁴ As Gerasimov said, “All our proposals [to the Americans], including organizing joint planning, gathering intelligence, and destroying the terrorists encountered a lack of understanding and rejection. . . . We did not see any desire for collaboration on their part. Although of course this would have been of great benefit. Joint planning, joint airstrikes, and joint operations” (Baranets, 2017).

⁴⁵ Lead author’s interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

⁴⁶ Kozhanov, 2018, pp. 10–11

⁴⁷ Lead author’s interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

⁴⁸ “Rossiya osuzhdaet nelegitimnoe prisutstvie inostrannykh sil v Sirii,” *RIA Novosti*, March 17, 2018.

⁴⁹ Lead author’s interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

⁵⁰ Lead author’s interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

⁵¹ Lead author’s interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

⁵² Samuel Charap, “Is Russia an Outside Power in the Gulf?” *Survival*, Vol. 57, No. 1, 2015.

⁵³ Yuri Barmin, *Russia in the Middle East Until 2024: From Hard Power to Sustainable Influence*, Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, March 8, 2018.

⁵⁴ There was never a majority in public opinion surveys in favor of the operation, and the public has apparently become less supportive of the intervention over time. In September 2015, only 14 percent of those polled by the Russian pollster, the Levada Center, were for direct military support for the Syrian state; the percentage of those in favor increased to 40 percent by October of 2015, after the VKS operation had begun. See, for example, Vladimir Razuvaev, “Chto oznachaet operatsiya v Sirii dlya rossiiskoi politiki,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, November 3, 2015. In the longer term, public opinion proved to be not very supportive of the Syria campaign: In a September 2017 Levada poll, 49 percent opposed continuing involvement, with only 30 percent supporting it (see Levada Center, “Voina v Sirii,” September 5, 2017).

⁵⁵ President of Russia, 2015b.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Barabanov, 2015.

⁵⁷ See Parker, 2017, p. 9; Mark Galeotti, “Moscow’s Mercenaries Reveal the Privatisation of Russian Geopolitics,” *openDemocracy*, August 29, 2017; Ruslan Pukhov, “Russia’s Unexpected Military Victory in Syria,” *Defense News*, December 10, 2017; “How ‘Wagner’ Came to Syria,” *Economist*, November 2, 2017.

⁵⁸ Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stephen Watts, Miranda Priebe, and Edward Geist, *Assessing Russian Reactions to U.S. and NATO Posture Enhancements*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1879-AF, 2017.

⁵⁹ Razuvaev, 2015.

⁶⁰ Official press releases from the Russian military occasionally mention the use of Iraqi or Iranian airspace as the route for air missions. See Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, “Tu-95MS Bombers Fired Cruise Missiles at Terrorists’ Objects in Syria,” September 26, 2017.

⁶¹ David Cenciotti, “Six Russian Su-34 Fullback Bombers Have Just Arrived in Syria. And This Is the Route They Have Likely Flown to Get There,” *Aviationist*, September 29, 2015b. Press reporting has indicated that Moscow tried to move some aircraft into Syria without being spotted, masking their signatures with larger transport aircraft, to either escape diplomatic agreement requirements or conceal the capability being deployed. It is not always clear if the states granting permission to Moscow knew which capabilities were in transit and for what purpose. See also David Cenciotti, “Here’s How the Russian Air Force Moved 28 Aircraft to Syria (Almost) Undetected,” *Aviationist*, September 23, 2015a.

⁶² Also transliterated as “Khmeimim” airbase.

⁶³ Frank Gardner, “How Vital is Syria’s Tartus Port to Russia?” *BBC News*, June 27, 2012.

⁶⁴ Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, “Tu-22M3 Long-Range Bombers and Su-34 Tactical Bombers Took Off From the ‘Hamedan’ Airbase and Carried Out a Concentrated Airstrike on Objects of the ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra Terrorist Groupings in the Provinces of Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor and Idlib,” August 16, 2016.

- ⁶⁵ Neil MacFarquhar and David E. Sanger, "Russia Sends Bombers to Syria Using Base in Iran," *New York Times*, August 16, 2016. The Russian air force launched the SU-34 tactical bombers and the Tu-22M3 long range bomber from Iranian territory to strike what it claimed were ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra targets in the areas of Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, and Idlib. Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, 2016.
- ⁶⁶ MacFarquhar and Sanger, 2016.
- ⁶⁷ In making the use of an Iranian airbase public, Russia was accused of "showing off" by Iran's Defense Minister ("Russia 'Showed-Off' Over Use of Iran Airbase for Syria Strikes," BBC News, August 22, 2016).
- ⁶⁸ Lead author's interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.
- ⁶⁹ During the 2016 Russian parliamentary election, Central Election Commission data indicated that around 4,500 votes were cast at polling stations in Syria. Since that number would have included diplomats and civilians in addition to military personnel, it is likely a high-end estimate of deployed uniformed military. Anton Baev and Elizaveta Surnacheva, "TsIK rasselkretit kolechestvo golosovavshikh v Sirii rossiiyan," *RBK*, September 21, 2016. Fewer than 3,000 people voted in the 2018 presidential elections ("Vse rossiiskie voennye v Sirii progolosovali za Putina," *RIA Novosti*, March 19, 2018).
- ⁷⁰ The practical distinction between these groups is fluid, as regime forces are reputed to be under the heavy influence, if not control, of Iran or Iranian proxies.
- ⁷¹ Dmitri Trenin, *What Is Russia Up to in the Middle East?* Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017, pp. 71–76.
- ⁷² M. Yu. Shepovalenko, ed., *Siriiskii rubezh*, Moscow: Tsentr analiza strategii i tekhnologii, 2016, p. 90.
- ⁷³ Baranets, 2017.
- ⁷⁴ Baranets, 2017.
- ⁷⁵ Pukhov, 2017.
- ⁷⁶ Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps General Qassem Soleimani's reported visit to Moscow on July 24–26, 2015, was probably to arrange coordination between Russian air power and Iranian ground forces ("Iran Quds Chief Visited Russia Despite U.N. Travel Ban: Iran Official," Reuters, August 7, 2015; Parker, 2017, pp. 6–7).
- ⁷⁷ Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy*, Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2013.
- ⁷⁸ Richard Connolly and Cecile Sendstad, *Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter: The Strategic and Economic Importance of Arms Exports for Russia*, London: Chatham House, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2017.
- ⁷⁹ Baranets, 2017.
- ⁸⁰ Inna Lazareva, "Russian Spy Base in Syria Used to Monitor Rebels and Israel Seized," *Telegraph*, October 8, 2014.
- ⁸¹ Oryx, "Captured Russian Spy Facility Reveals the Extent of Russian Aid to the Assad Regime," *Bellingcat*, October 6, 2014; Abu Amir of Damascus, "Jawlat dubbat almajlis aleaskarii fi alqnitarat dakhil almarkaz (s) fi qimat tala alhara," video, YouTube, October 5, 2014.
- ⁸² "Russian Missiles 'Hit IS in Syria from Caspian Sea,'" *BBC News*, October 7, 2015. See also Douglas Barrie, Joseph Dempsey, and Mark Cazalet, "Russia Pursues Cruise Control in Syria," *Military Balance* blog, International Institute for Strategic Studies, November 24, 2015.
- ⁸³ Christopher P. Cavas, "Russian Submarine Hits Targets in Syria," *Defense News*, December 8, 2015.
- ⁸⁴ "Russia Fires Cruise Missiles at Islamic State Targets from Mediterranean," Reuters, May 31, 2017.
- ⁸⁵ Ian Black and Chris McGreal, "Syria: U.S. Accuses Russia of Sending Attack Helicopters," *Guardian*, June 12, 2012; Jonathan Saul, "Exclusive: Russia Steps Up Military Lifeline to Syria's Assad—Sources," Reuters, January 17, 2014.
- ⁸⁶ Miriam Elder, "Syria Will Receive Attack Helicopters from Russia, Kremlin Confirms," *Guardian*, June 28, 2012.
- ⁸⁷ Dafna Linzer, Jeff Larson, and Michael Grabel, "Flight Records Say Russia Sent Syria Tons of Cash," *ProPublica*, November 26, 2012.
- ⁸⁸ United Nations Security Council, Resolution 2254 (2015), Geneva Communiqué, U.N. Doc. S/RES/2254, December 18, 2015.
- ⁸⁹ To be more precise, the intervention escalated from small- to medium-scale roughly toward the end of 2011 or in early 2012; while at the outset of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, Russia confined its involvement to diplomacy. By 2012, Russia had dramatically increased its military support to the regime from preconflict levels.
- ⁹⁰ See, for example, Patrick Worsnip, "Russia UN Envoy Denies Threat to Qatar Over Syria," Reuters, February 7, 2012.
- ⁹¹ James Marson, "After Military Push in Syria, Russia Plays Both Sides in Libya," *Wall Street Journal*, June 7, 2018.
- ⁹² Maria Tsvetkova, "Exclusive: Russian Private Security Firm Says It Had Armed Men in East Syria," Reuters, March 10, 2017.
- ⁹³ Tsvetkova, 2017.
- ⁹⁴ Vladimir Dergachev and Evgenii Pudovkin, "Novyi platsdarm: chto izvestno o perebroske rossiiskikh voennykh v Liviyu," *RBK Daily*, October 9, 2018.
- ⁹⁵ Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, and Lin Noueihed, "Exclusive: Russia Appears to Deploy Forces in Egypt, Eyes on Libya Role—Sources," Reuters, March 13, 2017.
- ⁹⁶ Government of the Russian Federation, Soglashenie o poryadke ispol'zovaniya vozdušnogo prostranstva i aerodromnoi infrastruktury Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Arabskoi Respubliki Egipet, No. 2644-R, Moscow, November 28, 2017.
- ⁹⁷ Elena Chernenko and Maksim Yusin, "V Livii my ne khotim assotsiirovat'sya ni s odnoi iz storon konflikta," *Kommersant*, August 3, 2017.
- ⁹⁸ Marianna Belen'kaya, "Rossiiskii biznes zhdet v Livii, A liviiskuyu delagatsiyu – na Peterburgskom mezhdunarodnom ekonomicheskome forume," *Kommersant*, May 3, 2018b.
- ⁹⁹ "Osvobozhdennye moryaki tankera 'Mekhanik Chebotarev' pribudut v Astrakhan'," *TASS*, October 25, 2016; Galina Dudina,

“Liviitsy ponyali: nikakaya voiya problemu ne reshit’,” *Kommersant*, September 15, 2017.

¹⁰⁰ Chernenko and Yusin, 2017.

¹⁰¹ Government of the Chechen Republic, “R. Kadyrov vstretilsya s delegatsiei iz Livii,” April 22, 2017.

¹⁰² Patrick Wintour, “EU Reaches Out to Russia to Broker Deal With Libyan General Haftar,” *Guardian*, February 9, 2017.

¹⁰³ Mikhail Korostikov, “Severnoi Afrike otsrochili Strashnyi sud,” *Kommersant*, December 2, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ “Lavrov: vse postrednicheskie usiliya po Livii dolzhny idti na baze OON,” TASS, August 14, 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Vasily Kuznetsov, “Can Russia, West Cooperate on Libya?” *AL-Monitor*, May 1, 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Lead author’s interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

¹⁰⁷ “Lev Den’gov: mne trudno predstavit’ sebe operatsiyu rossiiskikh VKS v Livii,” *RIA Novosti*, December 13, 2017.

¹⁰⁸ Lead author’s interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

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¹¹⁸ Oleg Filimonov, “Krizis v Iemene: perspektivy dlya rossiiskoi diplomatii?” *Rossiiskii Sovet po Mezhdunarodnym Delam*, March 9, 2017; Vitalii Naumkin, “U Rossii ogromnyi opyt raboty s konfliktuyushchimi storonami,” *Rossiiskii Sovet po Mezhdunarodnym Delam*, February 16, 2018.

¹¹⁹ “Zamir Kabulov: ne stoit preuvelichivat’ vozmozhnosti RF po vliyaniyu na talibov,” *RIA Novosti*, December 23, 2017.

¹²⁰ Dawood Azami, “Is Russia Arming the Afghan Taliban?” *BBC News*, March 23, 2018.

¹²¹ Leading Russian conflict specialist Ekaterina Stepanova argues that Moscow’s decision to engage diplomatically with the Afghan Taliban is rational, given prevailing regional trends. In her view, Russia has sensibly concluded that the U.S. strategy in the country has no prospect of success. Moscow is merely following in the footsteps of other regional actors, such as China, which has maintained limited diplomatic engagement with the Taliban for years. Solving longstanding regional challenges requires ending the fighting in the country, and as military force has proved unable to achieve that goal, only a negotiated settlement with all major parties—including the Taliban—has any chance of success (Ekaterina Stepanova, *Russia’s Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Contexts*, IFRI Russie.NEI.Reports, No. 23, May 2018, pp. 16, 27–32).

¹²² Azami, 2018.

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¹²⁴ Indeed, some U.S. officials have expressed doubts that Russia is supplying the Taliban (Azami, 2018).

¹²⁵ See, for example, “Russia Gives a Gift of 10,000 Automatic Rifles to Afghanistan,” *Reuters*, February 24, 2016.

¹²⁶ For examples of such threats, see the enumeration of “main threats to state and societal security” in Russia’s National Security Strategy (President of Russia, 2015d).

¹²⁷ Chernenko and Yusin, 2017.

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¹²⁹ Sudan has already offered Russia port access on the Red Sea, but Moscow declined (“SMI soobshchili o planakh Rossii ustroit’ voennuyu bazu v Somali,” *Lenta.ru*, April 9, 2018).

¹³⁰ Lead author’s interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

¹³¹ Lead author’s interviews with analysts and officials in Moscow, March–April 2018.

¹³² The success of the Syria operation itself could well have made Moscow more willing to undertake these lesser-scale actions. As Ruslan Pukhov writes, “the confidence gained by the Russian military in Syria may steer Russian foreign and military policy toward a more assertive and interventionist course” (Pukhov, 2017).

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