

Superpower Hybrid Warfare in Syria

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Abstract: This article examines superpower hybrid warfare in four parts. First, it provides an overview of hybrid warfare and its tactical, if controversial, uses. Second, it analyzes Russia's hybrid warfare in Ukraine. Third, it compares U.S. and Russian hybrid techniques in Syria. Finally, it assesses the conditions under which Syria could be a flashpoint for superpower conflict. The essay argues that American and Russian policy in Syria represents a unique case where military interventions attained objectives at a relatively low cost because determined local partners facilitated the realization of superpower goals.

Keywords: hybrid warfare, superpower competition, Syria civil war, gray zone conflicts, war on terrorism

This article analyzes hybrid warfare by major powers in Syria. Though *hybrid warfare* interpretations vary, they sketch a military-political strategy that mixes conventional and irregular warfare techniques.¹ Recently, this new way of war has proven effective for the United States and Russia in Syria. Superpower success, however, reflects unique circumstances. American and Russian policy in Syria represents a rare case where military interventions attained objectives at a relatively low cost. Capable local partners facilitated the realization of superpower goals because their interests converged with those of their patron.

Washington's policy to *degrade and dismantle* the Islamic State's (IS) caliphate and Moscow's equally ambitious strategy to secure the survival of President

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Bashar al-Assad's regime were obtained. Antigovernment rebels and IS's forces were seriously weakened. Superpower intervention in Syria contrasts with the problematic record of America's large conventional deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan and Russia's disastrous wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya.²

America's Special Forces, local allies, and targeted air power from 2014 to 2018 helped destroy IS's state building. Proxy Kurdish forces and their Arab allies played a critical role in U.S. combat operations against the caliphate. Combined with American directed air strikes against IS's positions, local auxiliaries drove the caliphate's soldiers from most of northeastern Syria. IS lost much of its Syrian territory to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose military backbone is the Kurdish Popular Defense Units—known by its Kurdish name, *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG).³ Greatly aiding the U.S. mission were determined local allies willing to bear the cost of fighting a fanatical enemy. Kurdish forces in 2017 alone lost almost 1,000 fighters.⁴

Moscow's use of Hezbollah, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Russian mercenaries, and Shia militias and its own brutal air war against anti-Assad rebels secured Damascus and Aleppo, turning the tide of the war.⁵ The martyrdom culture of Shia groups fighting in Syria assisted the ground campaign and allowed Russian forces to avoid most of the hard fighting. Having secured Syria's two major cities, Assad and his allies drove IS forces from the Roman-era ruins of Palmyra and some of the Deir ez-Zor region. Without Russian airpower, Iranian assistance, and Shia militiamen, Assad's regime would have succumbed to rebel forces. By 2015, Damascus was experiencing severe manpower shortages and rebels were advancing on Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia.⁶ Faced with a weakened strategic ally, Moscow intervened militarily in September 2015. Russia and Iran's support played a pivotal role in stemming rebel advances and forcing secular and jihadi forces back to Idlib province where they face bombing and ground assaults.⁷

Though American and Russian hybrid strategy had different goals, they relied on similar methods. Since 2015, Washington and Moscow's military approach upended irregular forces whose asymmetrical guerrilla strategy failed to effectively counter massive airstrikes and determined ground forces. Russia's targeting of rebel civilian supporters and its destruction of the infrastructure necessary to sustain life in insurgent areas prevented jihadist forces from effectively using human shields.

Faced with a bombing campaign that made existence untenable in opposition-held towns, rebels capitulated. Moscow's bombing of hospitals, water facilities, and food-distribution sites was designed to force the population to submit and undermine guerrilla support. It worked spectacularly well. The effectiveness of Russia's intervention raises serious questions about the utility of a hearts-and-minds strategy popular among counterinsurgency theorists.⁸

The success Washington and Moscow attained could presage future destabilizing conflict. Aside from combating jihadist forces, Russia and America's goals in Syria diverge.⁹ The Kremlin's support for Iran, Hezbollah, and Shia militias' expanded presence in Syria undermines U.S. interests. Tehran's intent to establish a land bridge funneling weapons and supplies to IRGC forces across Iraq to Syria imperils U.S. forces and the SDF.¹⁰

Iran's projection of aligned military force toward the Golan Heights, moreover, endangers Israeli security. Jerusalem has responded. Since 2014, Israel has attacked Hezbollah interests in Syria more than 150 times.¹¹ Tehran's missile and drone production facilities in Syria also have been targeted by Israel. Israel's downing of an Iranian drone that penetrated its airspace and its bombing of IRGC bases in Syria have invited tit for tat retaliation.

In May 2018, IRGC units fired 20 missiles at Israeli army positions in the Golan Heights, impelling Jerusalem to respond with sustained air strikes designed to cripple Tehran's military infrastructure across Syria.¹² Today, observers speak of a coming war between Israel and Iran.¹³

Underscoring Syria's complexity as an arena for conflict are many external actors with contending interests. Turkish, Russian, Iranian, and American forces in Syria support different parties in a multisided civil war where divergent interests have resulted in repeated clashes. U.S. military strikes in July 2017 and February 2018 killed hundreds of Russian mercenaries, IRGC soldiers, and Hezbollah soldiers, and that breached negotiated territorial demarcations separating combatants.¹⁴

De-escalation agreements made by the Americans, Russians, Iranians, and Turks are inherently ambiguous and transitory.¹⁵ Conflict is inevitable. Ankara's military campaign to drive Kurdish YPG forces from Syria's northwest border threatens U.S. soldiers. Finalizing future rules of engagement that avoid military conflict between regional and international powers in Syria will be challenging.

This article examines the concept of superpower hybrid warfare in four parts. First, it provides an overview of hybrid warfare and its tactical if controversial uses. Second, it analyses Russia's hybrid warfare in the Ukraine. Third, it compares U.S. and Russian hybrid techniques in Syria. Finally, it assesses the conditions under which Syria could be a flashpoint for superpower conflict.

Hybrid Warfare

Though the concept's origins are contested, Frank G. Hoffman in 2007 coined the modern usage of the term *hybrid warfare*.¹⁶ He did so after analyzing Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel in Lebanon. Largely viewed as Tehran's proxy force, Hezbollah's media propaganda campaign, use of underground tunnels, guerrilla tactics, and deployment of Iranian-built missiles succeeded in fighting a technologically superior Israeli force to a standstill. During that conflict, Hez-

bollah synchronized its military and communication strategy to highlight its own battlefield achievements and the setbacks of its enemy.

Jerusalem's inability to inflict a devastating defeat on Hezbollah was widely celebrated throughout the Arab world. Israel's use of mass bombing was, moreover, condemned by global media outlets for the civilian casualties it caused and for its destruction of Lebanon's infrastructure. Israel's 2006 war with Hezbollah proved an embarrassing public-relations disaster and tactical military blunder.¹⁷

Assessing the group's strategy, Hoffman writes, "hybrid threats incorporate a full range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics, terrorist acts, including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder."¹⁸ These techniques, moreover, can be employed by state and nonstate actors. Given Hezbollah's successful strategy against Israel's conventional forces, state mastery of hybrid warfare is critical.

Rand analyst Andrew Radin defines *hybrid warfare* as "covert or deniable activities, supported by conventional or nuclear forces, to influence the domestic politics of target countries."¹⁹ Examining Russia's use of hybrid warfare in Ukraine, Radin sees Moscow employing a combination of tactics whereby conventional forces support and defend irregular forces.²⁰ Vital to the success of any hybrid warfare campaign is an information strategy designed to deny the perpetrator's direct military involvement. Russia, for example, has consistently denied the existence of its armed forces in Ukraine despite compelling contradictory evidence.²¹ Scholar Emilio Iasiello views Russian actions in Ukraine as effectively "leveraging the information space to bolster its propaganda, messaging, and disinformation capabilities in support of geo-political objectives."²²

Dmitri Trenin argues that Russia and America are waging a hybrid war globally as Moscow seeks to resurrect its historic position as a great power by undermining American geopolitical interests across the globe.²³ In this war, each antagonist uses information, economic, political, and military means to promote their own national security objectives and constrict their rival's strategic interests. Hybrid warfare strategy combines a range of cyber, propaganda, irregular, and conventional weapons to facilitate national security goals short of full-scale war. It represents a range of limited warfare techniques designed to coerce and intimidate opponents and manipulate domestic and international audiences. This type of combat has a past legacy. Athenian and Roman military strategies frequently employed mercenaries and other auxiliaries to complement their conventional forces. Such forms of warfare persisted well into the nineteenth century. Robert D. Kaplan's book *Imperial Grunts* speaks of how the U.S. Army used to excel at asymmetric warfare against North American indigenous tribes.²⁴

The American military campaign to quash the Moro insurgency in the Philippines also involved hybrid warfare against an irregular enemy. The Army's

use of targeted killing, its mass expulsion of civilian populations, and use of indigenous auxiliaries weakened the insurgency. It was, furthermore, the first encounter fighting Islamist guerrillas the U.S. Army experienced. Kaplan argues that today's military planners should study the success America achieved in that campaign.

Other examples of effective state-directed irregular warfare abound. Though referred to as the "graveyard of empires," Britain's second foray into Afghanistan (1878–80) relied on its own forces and Indian auxiliaries to defeat the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, allowing the deposed Sher Ali Khan's successors autonomy, provided that their foreign policy advanced London's strategic interests.²⁵

Such state-directed hybrid warfare, however, became less common with the professionalization of militaries. Most twentieth-century adversaries were conventional states making hybrid techniques less necessary. Though the British did use irregular Arab forces to fight the Ottoman Turks in World War I, the use of such auxiliaries was more the exception than the rule.²⁶ Combat between standing armies in two world wars and the strategic use of mass bombing created a distinct military culture that viewed conflict mostly from a conventional prism.

The spread of nuclear weapons after World War II and the Cold War period, however, reinvigorated hybrid warfare strategies and the use of proxy forces by international powers. Given the nonutility of a war between the United States and the Soviet Union, they fought each other indirectly through patron states and insurgent groups. Throughout the Cold War, the major powers supported insurgencies designed to weaken their main adversary. Regional powers such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran followed suit. Though Russia achieved success in their support for the Viet Cong fighting U.S. soldiers in Southeast Asia, and America effectively supported Afghan rebels resisting Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Iran pioneered a modernized version of hybrid warfare.²⁷ It remains the prototype for other states.

Tehran's irregular military tactics against U.S. and Israeli interests has been widely studied.²⁸ Its terror attacks against Western and Israeli forces in Lebanon were especially devastating. As a pioneer in asymmetric warfare, Iran's military involvement in Syria has married its use of proxy forces with its own conventional military power. This is evidence of the evolutionary character of hybrid warfare. Iran's mastery of hybrid techniques has matured into a full range of coercive capabilities. It was, however, not an easy task.

The overthrow of the U.S.-supported Reza Shah Pahlavi's government in 1979 by Shia Islamist revolutionaries produced shockwaves across the globe. Decrying the United States as the "Great Satan" and committing itself to the destruction of Israel, Tehran's revolutionary regime sought to reorder geomilitary power across the Middle East. Since the revolution, it has relentlessly pur-

sued this strategy. Iran's ambitions, however, go beyond attacking Western and Jewish interests. Tehran's promotion of sectarian movements across the Middle East, moreover, threatens Sunni states who fear Shia rebellions against their rule.²⁹ With significant Shia minorities in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gulf Arab states and majorities in Iraq and Bahrain, Tehran's sectarian policy raises significant anxiety across the region.

Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1980 hoped to contain Tehran by exploiting its post-revolutionary vulnerabilities. With a weakened economy exacerbated by a violent political transition, the new regime tenuously clung to power. The revolutionary regime's internal weakness and threatening posture toward its neighbors incentivized Iraq to annex Iranian territory. Hussein's regime, however, underestimated Tehran's resilience, for the Islamic Republic of Iran sent thousands of religiously motivated warriors unafraid of death against its forces. An estimated 1 million people died during the eight-year conflict.³⁰ The war devastated both sides, with no clear winner.

Faced with a costly war against Iraqi forces, Iran spearheaded an alternative military strategy using nonstate actors to advance its interests.³¹ The IRGC was tasked with projecting a Shia arc of influence across the Middle East by empowering regional militias. Seen by Tehran as an expeditionary force, the IRGC has trained and armed Shia guerrilla forces in Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen, and Iraq.

The IRGC's development of Lebanese Hezbollah in the 1980s created a model applied elsewhere. Hezbollah's formation was a consequence of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The Israeli state's military operation was designed to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization's (PLO) Lebanese military and logistical infrastructure that had launched crossborder attacks.

Israel's policy to disrupt the PLO's presence in Lebanon provided a strategic opening for Iran to support Shia militias resisting Israeli occupation. Recognizing the opportunity to indirectly strike Israeli forces, the IRGC consolidated militias into an insurgent-terror force. Organizing an effective resistance network was impelled by Israel's success in driving the PLO's forces into Beirut. Subsequent developments proved even more fortuitous. Under a United Nations-brokered agreement, international peacekeepers supervised the PLO's evacuation to Tunis.

American and French forces who secured the evacuation plan provided Tehran an opportunity to kill Westerners. Shia martyrs launched devastating suicide bombing attacks across Beirut in 1983, hitting the American embassy, a U.S. Marine barracks, and a French garrison, in which hundreds died.³² Withdraw of international forces from Lebanon was seen by Iran as a victory.

Hezbollah's military capabilities matured during Jerusalem's 18-year Lebanese occupation. More than 1,000 Israeli military personnel died in the group's ambushes and suicide bomb attacks.³³ Israel's withdraw from southern Lebanon

in 2000 allowed Hezbollah to create a network of underground tunnels and accumulate an immense arsenal of Iranian-supplied short- and medium-range rockets.

Central to Hezbollah's development was Tehran's ability to run its weapons through Syria whose Alawite-dominated government and refusal to sign a peace accord with Israel made Damascus a sectarian and strategic partner. Iranian and Syrian support allowed Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas to launch attacks in 2006 against Israel's troops. The resulting war proved to be a publicity boon for Hezbollah and its Iranian patron. The Shia militia's capacity to survive a month-long struggle with Israeli forces contrasted strikingly with past Arab military defeats against the Israeli state.

Fearing a protracted land war with a determined enemy and heavy casualties, Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert hoped to bomb Lebanon into submission, convinced that Beirut would exert pressure on Hezbollah to relent. The damage done to Lebanon's civilian population and international efforts to end the conflict did not permit Jerusalem sufficient time to follow through with its war aims. This outcome was punctuated by widely publicized images of a burning Israeli frigate hit by a Hezbollah rockets in July 2006, which left indelible impressions of the war. Though Hezbollah took heavy losses and did not win, it survived, earning the admiration of the Arab world.³⁴

Since the 2006 war, Iran has strengthened Hezbollah. Tehran has supplied tens of thousands of rockets capable of reaching major Israeli cities.³⁵ With its IRGC training, Hezbollah has also developed conventional capabilities to complement its guerrilla tactics. As Tehran's hybrid war strategy evolves, it has deployed its Lebanese auxiliary force in Syria to advance its strategic interests. Despite its reputation as a guerrilla army, Hezbollah has operated largely as a conventional force in Syria.

Deployed in 2013, Hezbollah coordinated its operations with Assad's regime and with Russia's forces in Syria.³⁶ Though the Shia militia's military operations in Lebanon are controversial and costly, the group has deployed 6,000–8,000 fighters as an expeditionary offensive force.³⁷ Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah justifies the network's Syrian intervention by arguing it secures Lebanon's security.

Without Hezbollah's intervention, the Assad regime may have succumbed to rebels, who early in the conflict made substantial advances. Hezbollah's commitment, coupled with Iran and Russia's support, is credited with turning the tide in Syria's civil war.³⁸ By May 2018, Damascus was advancing on remaining rebel positions in Idlib Province and beleaguered opposition groups in Damascus's Eastern Ghouta region. Augmented by the IRGC's recruitment of thousands of Shia militiamen from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, Hezbollah provided the ground force, strengthening Damascus's military position.³⁹ Based

on its Syrian experience, Tehran is developing a multinational expeditionary militia that can be deployed across the region. With violent sectarian conflicts raging across the Muslim world, opportunities to mobilize and dispatch such a force abound.

Syria's complex, multisided war that mixes conventional and irregular forces exemplifies a gray zone conflict. Army Lieutenant General James M. Dubik and Nic Vincent see these conflicts escalating.⁴⁰ They define a *gray zone conflict* as "hostile or adversarial interactions among competing actors below the threshold of conventional war but above the threshold of peaceful competition."⁴¹ Gray zone conflicts in weak and failing states compromise the security interests of major powers, forcing their intervention. Such struggles, however, are not amenable to conventional military solutions. Major power disengagement from gray zone areas can be problematic. The U.S. departure from Iraq is seen as contributing to the rise of IS, forcing the American military back into Iraq and later forcing it to extend military operations into Syria.

Gray zone conflicts require complex strategies. Relying on a counterinsurgency strategy to quell a Sunni rebellion in Iraq proved challenging until America was able to coax Sunni tribes away from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Local proxies (the Anbar Awakening movement) and American Special Forces operations against AQI badly degraded the network and was an initial, if transitory, experience in applying hybrid warfare strategy to fight modern irregular forces.⁴²

This copied the success that the United States had in using Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) paramilitaries, Special Forces, and Afghan Northern Alliance by way of Tajik and Uzbek proxies to overthrow the Taliban–al-Qaeda terror state after the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks.⁴³ Though widely praised, the model had until now little staying power. As the United States moves from a counterinsurgency model to a counterterror approach, American use of proxy forces is likely to grow and it is not alone in effectively using proxy forces. The Russians, however, have spearheaded hybrid strategies in Ukraine.

Russian Hybrid Warfare in Ukraine

Used by Western experts, hybrid warfare is controversial when applied to Russian policy in Ukraine. Studies criticize its use because Russia has used conventional forces in its Ukrainian intervention.⁴⁴ Russian literature, moreover, does not mention hybrid warfare and only recognizes the concept's relevance in terms of Western perceptions.⁴⁵ Furthermore, regional analysts argue that Russia's Ukraine policy can be traced to the Communist era. Despite the controversy, Russian policy in Ukraine employs hybrid-warfare features.

General Valery Gerasimov, for example, is credited by Western experts with developing the Kremlin's hybrid-warfare strategy.⁴⁶ General Gerasimov's writings, however, do not use the term within a doctrine that mixes irregular and

conventional warfare techniques. He sketches a strategy that integrates coercive and noncoercive means, falling short of direct military confrontation when dealing with adversaries.

Gerasimov's doctrine also prioritizes information warfare to control the political narrative associated with Russian military policy. Since the Soviet era, Moscow has used reflexive control to condition adversary behavior to reinforce fear of confronting Moscow's actions.⁴⁷ Russian denial of direct military involvement in Ukraine is accordingly an effort to convince NATO to not provide military assistance to the Ukrainian government fighting Russian separatists. Moscow's propagandists assert that such a provocative action by NATO means war with Russia.

Russian disinformation has influenced Western perceptions of its actions in Ukraine. American and European strategists have, for example, overlooked the Kremlin's use of conventional military forces. By some estimates, Moscow deployed 6,000 troops in the country, which are augmented by mercenaries and paramilitaries.⁴⁸ Its army then annexed Crimea.⁴⁹

Russia's Ukrainian problem started with the weakening of the Ukrainian pro-Russian president, Viktor F. Yanukovich, and the strengthening of his Euromaidan parliamentary rivals.⁵⁰ By February 2014, Yanukovich had fled to Russia, resulting in a new government antagonistic to Moscow. Kiev's pro-European Union (EU) and NATO sentiments threatened the Kremlin's historic sphere of influence in Ukraine. Soon after, Moscow promulgated a *Novorossiia* (or New Russia) project to liberate and unite Russian minorities across the Baltics and Central Europe.⁵¹ This initiative was the justification to mount covert military operations in Ukraine.

Russia's presentation of the rebellion as a fight against Ukrainian persecution of Russian-speaking minorities is belied by Moscow's incubation and export of mercenary forces to the country's eastern provinces. Very few Russian Ukrainians are fighting in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.⁵² Disinformation techniques also masquerade Russia's use of conventional forces in breakaway provinces that have augmented its eastern rebels.

The Kremlin's Ukrainian policy employs conventional and irregular forces supported by a denial and disinformation media campaign. Moscow's media strategy, which fraudulently describes Ukraine's eastern revolt as an indigenous phenomenon, is pitched to international and domestic audiences.⁵³ It is designed to counter Western retaliation and stoke nationalistic sentiments at home.

By summer 2014, Russian forces launched military operations. The Kremlin's policy had three objectives.⁵⁴ Moscow first envisioned annexing Crimea. Hoping to gain permanent access to warm-water ports and use the territory as a springboard for future incursions, Moscow had secured Crimea by August

2014. Justifying its annexation of Crimea, the Kremlin organized a referendum where the region's Russian-speaking majority voted for union in the Russian Federation.

Second, the Kremlin manufactured a separatist rebellion in the Donbass and Luhansk provinces, hoping to create a contiguous area to maximize its influence. Armed and financially supported by Moscow-sponsored Russian mercenaries, they were unable to dislodge Ukrainian forces from most of the contested provinces. Hoping to strengthen its position in September 2014, the Kremlin launched a clandestine military incursion into eastern Ukraine that mixed Russian troops with irregular forces. The Kremlin's 6,000 little green men made more robust advances against the Ukrainian army.⁵⁵

Their existence is denied by Moscow, which has labeled such accusations as Western and Ukrainian lies. Despite some territorial gains, Moscow's hybrid army failed to link rail lines between Donbass and Luhansk provinces. The absence of a contiguous area of control weakened Moscow's hoped for third objective of overthrowing the new Ukrainian government.

Undaunted, Putin settled for preserving the Donbass and Luhansk People's Republics as a means for future destabilization. The Kremlin was, however, successful in derailing Ukraine's EU and NATO memberships and preserving its arc of influence. Though the Europeans imposed economic sanctions on Putin's regime, it failed to deter Putin or arm the Ukrainian government.

Russian violations of the 2014–15 Minsk ceasefire accords, moreover, have not spurred the European community and NATO into taking more aggressive actions against Moscow. Fearing being drawn into a land war over Putin's destabilizing policy, NATO has not effectively countered Russia's policy. With Russian-speaking minorities across Baltic Republics, Ukraine is a disturbing precedent. Further aggravating regional fears, Moscow has positioned its troops along the Russo-Ukraine border. Their presence is threatening, and some analysts envision a Russian invasion.⁵⁶ Based on its Ukraine hybrid warfare prototype, the Kremlin has experienced its greatest success in the Middle East.

Superpower Hybrid Warfare in Syria

Since 2011, the Syrian civil war has produced carnage and human suffering. With more than 350,000 dead and more than 11 million refugees, the conflict has spurred regional and international power intervention.⁵⁷ Russia, Turkey, Western powers (the United States, France, and the United Kingdom), and Iran have troops supporting different actors and their proxy forces. All are involved in a brutal, multisided struggle. The roots of the civil war are equally complicated.

The 2010–11 Arab Spring movement resulted in the downfall of governments in Tunisia, Yemen, and Egypt. The Arab Spring's political reverberations

were felt across the Middle East and North Africa. Libya degenerated into a civil war, triggering a NATO intervention and toppling Muammar Gaddafi's dictatorial regime. Libya's post-Gaddafi transition has featured continued civil war between three competing governments.

Despite the Arab Spring's upheaval, analysts predicted that Bashar al-Assad's regime would withstand mass protests.⁵⁸ Assad's repression, in effect, could surmount any popular resistance. Such assessments proved optimistic, underestimating the ethnosectarian fissures that have always threatened its existence. Syria's colonial-era borders created a multisectarian and ethnic society where Kurds, Arabs, Alawi, Shia, Druze, and Christians coexisted uneasily.

France's patronage of Christian, Alawite, and Druze minorities, furthermore, disempowered the Sunni Muslim majority, breeding sectarian resentment. Postcolonial developments exacerbated these confessional antagonisms. In power since 1970, the Alawite-dominated Assad dynasty reinforced these sectarian resentments. Only recently have analysts underscored the religious dimensions of the Syrian conflict that in microcosm reflect larger intra-Muslim regional divisions.⁵⁹

Bitter memories of Hafez al-Assad's brutal repression of the Sunni-supported Muslim Brotherhood revolt in the early 1980s persist. The 1980s conflict reached a terrifying conclusion when Hafez al-Assad's regime killed more than 10,000 Muslim Brotherhood supporters (mainly civilians) in the organization's Hama stronghold.⁶⁰ Many of the 2011 protesters evoked the memory of those supporters who died at Hama. It also made an indelible impression on the current regime, whose successor is the son of Hafez al-Assad—who, like his father, believes in the utility of brute force.

The Assad dynasty's efforts to promote pan-ethnic nationalism, furthermore, angered the Kurds, who form 10–15 percent of the population. Kurdish autonomy in Iraq rekindled ethnic separatism in Syria.⁶¹ The Kurds and Damascus have had an ambiguous relationship characterized by mutual and divergent interests.⁶² These sectarian and ethnic antagonisms have persisted over time, aggravating the civil war.

Samuel P. Huntington's maligned clash of civilization thesis has resurfaced with a vengeance across the Middle East.⁶³ Regional confessional conflicts also have been fueled by external developments that have been building. Forty years of Iranian patronage and support for Shia and affiliated minorities in Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and Iraq has run up against its sectarian antithesis of Saudi-financed Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's Sunni extremism. Today, the two nations fight a shadow war across the region.⁶⁴

Sectarian conflicts have contributed to governmental instability across the Middle East. The fall of regimes in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring

movement created extreme anxiety among regional leaders. Violent sectarian cleavages and a weakened regime have converged in Syria's political upheaval.

Faced with regime change, Bashar al-Assad responded with a brutal 2011 crackdown, converting a nonviolent protest movement into a virulent insurgency. The regime's murder of four young graffiti artists in March 2012 resulted in a mass oppositional movement. Hundreds of protesters were arrested.⁶⁵ Many were tortured and killed. Faced with little prospect of peaceful change, the rebellion became increasingly violent. Syria's fragile ethnosectarian tinderbox and Damascus's repression has triggered a violent Sunni insurgent movement. By late 2012, armed rebellion against the Assad regime spread across the country. Many Sunni-dominated regions fell to rebel forces.

By 2013, Damascus was reeling under the strain of fighting a rebel movement supported by the Sunni majority. Assaults by secular and Islamist rebel groups supported by the Western powers (including the United States, France, and the United Kingdom), Turkey, and Arab Gulf States were beginning to take their toll. Without outside assistance, the regime was unlikely to survive.

With the exception of a few strategic military bases, Syria's eastern frontier with Iraq was abandoned, allowing rebel forces to capitalize on the resulting power vacuum. Having captured territory in northwestern Iraq in 2013, ISIS forces surged across the border and displaced other rebel groups. The caliphate's forces came to govern the region with the Euphrates town of ar-Raqqa serving as its administrative capital.⁶⁶ Damascus ceded control over Kurdish-dominated areas of Syria, contributing to the rise of the Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its YPG military branch.

Iran and Hezbollah's historic alignment with the Assad regime as an axis of resistance against Israel convinced them to intervene in the conflict. Hundreds of IRGC trainers and thousands of Lebanese Hezbollah militiamen defended the regime, reversing rebel gains and stabilizing Assad's position in major cities and in coastal Latakia.

Tehran recruited and armed approximately 40,000 Iraqi, Pakistani, and Afghan Shia volunteer militia members to defend the regime.⁶⁷ Combined with Hezbollah, this Shia expeditionary force strengthened the regime army and militia units. Augmented militarily, the regime secured key regions. The Syrian army and Hezbollah's summer 2013 offensive dislodged rebel forces from Qusayr and secured supply lines linking Damascus, Aleppo, and coastal Latakia.⁶⁸

Russian Hybrid Warfare in Syria

Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia supplied Assad's regime with critical weapons, supplies, and manpower to bolster its military position.⁶⁹ Despite Iranian and

Hezbollah assistance, the regime security forces experienced severe manpower shortages. By summer 2015, rebel groups were making advances in Latakia, Idlib, and Hama provinces.

In September 2015, Russia dramatically increased its military involvement by launching air strikes against Syrian rebels fighting Assad's regime. Hoping to prevent the regime's deterioration, Russia deployed its armed forces in Syria. With 2,000 support personnel, Moscow became an active participant in Syria's civil war.⁷⁰ Though Putin justified his military intervention as part of the international anti-IS military campaign, his strategic goals in Syria lay elsewhere.⁷¹

The Kremlin hoped to reinforce the Assad regime's military position and fortify the Russian-Iranian-Shiite regional sphere of influence to blunt Western interests. Its Syrian policy was part of a strategy of reinvigorating Russia's presence in the Mediterranean and weakening America's historic regional dominance.⁷² Even more pressing was the need to keep thousands of Russian-born Islamic terrorists in Syria from returning to their homeland and preserving Russia's naval base in Tartus.

Such a commitment is not surprising. Syria and Russia have had a strategic relationship dating back to the Cold War. Since its entry into the civil war, hundreds of Russian air strikes have targeted anti-Assad rebels, helping the regime retake towns and villages near Aleppo and Latakia. The majority of the Russian bombs dropped have been against Western-backed moderate rebels. The Institute for the Study of War reports that 90 percent of Russia's air strikes are concentrated in northwestern Syria outside areas controlled by IS.⁷³ Government forces in 2016 encircled rebels in Aleppo, forcing a negotiated withdraw of their remaining forces.

The recapture of rebel-held Aleppo in 2017 proved to be a critical turning point in the civil war.⁷⁴ The government's offensive to create a corridor linking Damascus, Aleppo, and Alawite northern coastal bastions has succeeded. Assistance from Hezbollah and IRGC units and Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani Shiite militias helped strengthen Assad's regime. Damascus ensured its survival through merciless brutality. Government forces eviscerated rebel-supported neighborhoods in Aleppo, killing thousands of civilians by dropping barrel bombs packed with gasoline and nails. The war has featured the use of chemical weapons that have killed thousands.⁷⁵ By 2018, close to a half a million people have died and 11 million have been displaced.⁷⁶ Remaining rebel positions in Idlib Province and southern Syria are under extreme military pressure.

Russia's hybrid warfare has been perfected in Syria and may be a prototype for future use. The Kremlin's overall investment and commitment have been modest. Though cloaked in secrecy, its casualties have been low, with Russian mercenaries and regime/allied forces experiencing the greatest losses.⁷⁷ Russia's

Syrian military gambit has ensured that the Assad regime remains a viable strategic partner. The Kremlin is well positioned to benefit from oil and gas development and reconstruction projects in post-civil war Syria.

Its Tartus naval base allows it access to warm-water ports and strategic depth in the Mediterranean. Based on its success in Syria, Russia appears interested in forging economic and military relationships with the Egyptian government and has been actively exploring access to deep-water ports in Libya and gaining a foothold on the country's oil and gas development. Russia's hybrid warfare combines a disinformation campaign with brutality. Packaged as a counterterrorism policy against IS, the Kremlin has pursued its overriding strategic interests with savage precision and strategic logic.⁷⁸ Though it supported the Assad regime's efforts to dislodge IS from the Deir ez-Zor region, the bulk of its bombs have been dropped on secular and Islamist rebels not affiliated with IS.

Describing Assad's opponents as terrorists, Russian air strikes have targeted civilian populations and destroyed hospitals, food storage sites, and water infrastructure. It has supported regime efforts to starve, bomb, and bludgeon opposition forces into submission. The Kremlin disinformation campaign denies that civilians have been killed, labeling the allegations as rebel propaganda.⁷⁹

Putin's regime has refined the art of talking peace while practicing war.⁸⁰ Central to the Kremlin's disingenuous campaign have been the diplomatic efforts of Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov. He has promoted various peace initiatives at Geneva, signed cease-fire accords, sponsored humanitarian evacuation agreements, and endorsed the demarcation of deescalation zones separating combatants. Russia has honored none of these agreements.⁸¹

Lavrov forged a Russian, Turkish, and Iranian alliance to end the civil war and has brokered conferences hosted by the capital city of Astana, Kazakhstan, that have eclipsed the efforts of Geneva negotiators more attuned to Western interests. Lavrov's diplomatic posturing provides Russia with sufficient cover to relentlessly bomb Assad's opponents and support regime ground operations against rebel forces.⁸²

Faced with air strikes against the civilian population, rebels cannot effectively use human shields. The destruction of health, water, and food systems makes life untenable in rebel-controlled areas. Regime brutality is designed to bludgeon the population into submission and undermine their support for rebels. Increasingly, rebel presence is resented in areas hit by mass bombardment. Hard-core jihadist groups like al-Qaeda associate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) are forced to sign humiliating evacuation agreements because their guerrilla warfare strategy has failed to effectively combat the advanced weaponry of regime forces and their allies.⁸³ Jihadists are flummoxed and powerless to combat such tactics. Faced with the nonutility of civilian shields, Islamist rebels have little opportunity to effectively resist and are forced into ignominious retreat.

This is not the first time Islamic extremists have failed to effectively respond to a superpower's use of hybrid warfare techniques. Jihadist theoretician Abu Musab al-Suri, for example, recognized al-Qaeda's incapacity to effectively counter the U.S. military's post-9/11 military campaign in Afghanistan.⁸⁴

Moscow's effective military strategy could force rethinking the utility of a counterinsurgency strategy based on protecting the civilian population popular in American counterinsurgency manuals. These lessons have not been lost on U.S. strategic planners in Iraq and Syria, especially when fighting a brutal opponent like IS. Increasingly, American military policy in Syria is showing less concern for the loss of civilian life, and its use of Kurdish and Arab proxies provide sufficient cover to deflect criticism of collateral damage.⁸⁵

U.S. Hybrid Warfare Policy in Syria

The development of a U.S. hybrid warfare policy in Syria reflects fortuitous circumstances and past bitter experiences. The approach effectively balances fear of another Middle East quagmire while recognizing the region's strategic importance. The strategy, moreover, is a response to the costs of past counterinsurgency policy in Iraq and Afghanistan and the need to have a more sustainable regional military policy. American hybrid war policy in Iraq and Syria came after America's failed bid to militarily disengage from the region.⁸⁶ The Obama administration in 2011 harbored fantasies that the United States could pivot out of the region toward Asia. It did so at the very worst time, for its pivot coincided with the Arab Spring's turmoil.

Nascent democracies in Tunisia and Egypt, far from disempowering extremist groups, weakened security services, and their mass prisoner releases fueled jihadi ranks. Civil wars in Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Iraq unleashed Islamist organizations committed to violent jihad and the upending of regional political order. Having withdrawn from Iraq in 2011, the American administration was overly optimistic that Baghdad's security services could repress the jihadist threat. Faced with the emergence of a reinvigorated Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) that steadily captured territory in Iraq and Syria, the administration hoped to rely on a containment strategy. ISI's caliphate proclamation in June 2014, however, sent shock waves across the region.

Self-proclaimed as the Islamic State, the caliphate's forces reached Erbil and Baghdad's outskirts, threatening the collapse of the Iraqi state. President Barack H. Obama's efforts at maintaining a minimalist regional policy were dashed by the caliphate's military advances and its ethnic cleansing of the Yazidi population.⁸⁷ Massive population flows caused by IS's capture of much of northwestern Iraq, moreover, threatened neighboring states and Europe.

Confronted with an immense strategic and humanitarian disaster, the administration reluctantly intervened by marrying U.S. air power with local part-

ners who would confront IS in Iraq and eventually in Syria.⁸⁸ By avoiding a mass commitment of American ground troops, the administration hoped to develop a more sustainable counterterrorism policy. Its past success with drone warfare and special operations actions against al-Qaeda and its regional branches were seen by administration planners as a viable precursor.

By barring the U.S. military from ground combat against IS militants, the U.S. administration hoped to manage the political fallout of being drawn into another regional conflict. After some initial confusion, by 2015, the administration pursued a policy of degrading and destroying IS's state-building project. American air strikes targeted the caliphate's troop concentrations and its strategic logistical nodes. Assisting local forces with air operations, the United States hit the caliphate's transport and energy infrastructure.

The Americans hoped to eviscerate the caliphate's finances by bombing IS's oil and gas operations.⁸⁹ Since 2014, the U.S. Air Force has dropped thousands of bombs on IS positions, which depleted its manpower and support structure. Four years of Coalition attacks left approximately 40,000 IS foot soldiers dead.⁹⁰

Relentless aerial bombardment was supplemented by training and equipping local actors to take the fight to the caliphate across the Iraqi-Syrian territorial divide. By 2015, close to 5,000 American trainers and Special Forces in Iraq were committed to reconstituting Baghdad's beleaguered army units.⁹¹ Despite the collapse of entire Iraqi divisions to numerically inferior IS forces, the Americans managed to strengthen Iraqi army forces and their Sunni and Kurdish allies. Washington put emphasis on reinvigorating Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service to lead the fight against IS militants.⁹² A preexisting Iraqi government made the choice of local partner easy.

Syria, however, was a different matter. Though the Obama administration was forced into cooperation with Damascus's ally, Russia, formally assisting the Syrian government was not a viable option. Having called for Assad's removal, the administration assisted the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA). It also tasked the CIA and Pentagon to train and equip vetted anti-Assad brigades and find a credible Arab partner. Throughout 2014–15, the U.S. government failed to empower such "brigades" that were either easily defeated in combat or co-opted by jihadist groups.⁹³

Finding a capable Arab force to fight IS in Syria was similarly illusive. Under military pressure from IS, the YPG became America's logical ally to fight the caliphate's forces.⁹⁴ The YPG's political branch, the PYD, envisioned a Kurdish autonomous area named Rojava, whose territory would stretch across Syria's border with Turkey. The caliphate's military advances in northeastern Syria threatened the SDF's political project to create a contiguous Kurdish area.

Supporting the Kurdish fight against IS in Syria, however, ran the risk of

Turkish opposition, for Ankara believes the YPG is an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party terror network whom it has fought for decades. Faced with the collapse of YPG forces defending the border city of Kobane, the Obama administration launched air strikes against the caliphate's soldiers. The Americans supplemented their airborne operation with arms supplies to the endangered YPG units.

The fight for Kobane left the city in ruins but resulted in the caliphate's first major defeat. Thousands of IS militants were killed by U.S. airstrikes. The Kobane operation began a strategic relationship with the YPG leading to a joint 2015–18 offensive that drove the caliphate's forces from Syria's border with Turkey.⁹⁵ Aided by approximately 3,000 U.S. Special Forces troops, an American Marine Corps artillery brigade, and air strikes, the YPG supported U.S. policy to degrade and destroy the Islamic State's geomilitary position in Syria.

The Obama administration attempted to put a panethnic veneer on its Kurdish proxy force by creating the SDF that incorporated Arab brigades within the YPG's military structure.⁹⁶ Such an initiative was driven by many factors. First, the destruction of the caliphate's forces necessitated the projection of force beyond Kurdish-dominated areas and into the Arab heartland. Without Arab allies, the YPG may have encountered fierce resistance by Sunni tribes. Second, the SDF's creation hoped to placate Turkish and Arab concerns about Kurdish ethnic cleansing in the areas that the YPG occupied.

The SDF became a convenient pretext to justify the YPG's presence in Arab-majority areas.⁹⁷ Given the military dominance of the Kurds and the SDF's small numbers of Arab fighters, few were convinced by Washington's characterization of the SDF as a panethnic force. Eager to finalize military operations against the caliphate, the Trump administration relaxed Obama-era restrictions on bombing and brazenly airlifted Kurdish forces to facilitate anti-IS operations.⁹⁸

Though more focused than Russia's bombing campaign, civilian casualties due to U.S. air strikes increased rapidly. The military was given more freedom in targeting IS's crumbling geomilitary position. Air strikes increased in frequency and scale, facilitating the YPG's march on IS's capital in ar-Raqqa. By October 2017, U.S.-YPG forces besieged ar-Raqqa, and after a four-month battle, remaining IS forces and their families withdrew under a negotiated agreement.⁹⁹ The city was devastated, leaving UN and human rights agencies criticizing the Trump administration's indiscriminate bombing campaign.¹⁰⁰ Unmoved by the denunciations, the American military continued the pace of its air operations by targeting IS's remaining positions around Deir ez-Zor and the Euphrates River Valley. The caliphate headquarters in al-Mayadin fell rapidly as IS die-hard militants increasingly turned to guerrilla operations against YPG units.¹⁰¹

Success against the caliphate, however, aggravated American-Turkish rela-

tions. Kurdish territorial advances west of the Euphrates River Valley stretched into Arab-speaking areas that violated Ankara's stated opposition. By late 2017, Turkey threatened to intercede into the Syrian conflict to stem Kurdish advances.¹⁰² The Obama administration had walked a fine line, illusively trying to harmonize its desire to militarily degrade the caliphate in Syria while appeasing Turkish concerns. The Trump administration's later proposal for a Kurdish security zone along the Turkish border angered Ankara.

By March 2018, YPG advances into Manbij threatened to link Kurdish areas between Afrin and Jarabulus. Shortly thereafter, Turkish forces and their FSA allies stormed across the border to drive the YPG from Afrin. Since the operation, Ankara has threatened further incursions into Kurdish-speaking areas. Given the intermixing of American and Kurdish military units, Turkish incursion into Manbij endangers U.S. troops. Cognizant of the dangers, the Trump administration in June 2018 reached a power-sharing arrangement in Manbij between Arab and Kurdish interests to placate Ankara's concerns.¹⁰³

Turkey's seizure of Afrin was unopposed by the Americans, who did not defend Kurdish positions. The YPG was forced to redeploy troops to resist further Turkish and FSA operations. Faced with Ankara's opposition to its Syrian policy and the YPG's need to deprioritize the fight against IS in the Euphrates River Valley, Washington has struggled to find a solution. President Trump's inconsistency on withdrawing American troops in Syria has furthered exacerbated Turkish and Kurdish anxieties.

The American military presence in Manbij, however, is a potent message to Ankara that further incursions into Kurdish areas risks confrontation with U.S. military forces. Convinced that Washington is committed to defending Kurdish interests, the YPG is ready to renew the fight against remaining IS forces. After an operational pause, the YPG in May 2018 renewed its attack on the caliphate's forces close to the Iraqi border. Whether this moves Ankara toward additional military advances into YPG-held areas is difficult to discern. Syria has become an arena for regional and superpower competition that could presage a wider military confrontation. Managing this rivalry will prove challenging.

Nations in Syria are pursuing a classic *realpolitik* strategy, empowering allies and weakening enemies. This rivalry harkens back to philosophical conceptions of realism that diverge sharply from its conventional meaning. Regional and international use of *realpolitik* in Syria respects the utility of brute military force to advance strategic geopolitical interests.

Under its hybrid form, nation-state competition in Syria employs hard and soft measures. It furthermore mixes conventional and proxy forces coupled with information/disinformation strategies. With Turkish, American, French, British, Iranian, and Russian troops and their allies supporting contending factions in Syria's multipolar civil war, the danger of escalation is omnipresent.

Superpower Competition and Deconfliction in Syria

Despite supporting opposing sides in the civil war, the Americans and Russians do have common interests in defeating jihadist groups. Combating Islamist extremism serves as a rationale for their military interventions. Russian and American air power was mobilized to destroy terror sanctuaries in Syria and deny jihadi groups a major safe haven. The Kremlin further justified its intervention to fight approximately 3,000 Russian jihadists in Syria to ensure they never return home.¹⁰⁴

Beyond the stated mission of destroying the Islamic State, the Americans have targeted former al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra's (or al-Nusra Front) Khorasan group, fearing that the unit was contemplating using Syria as a launching pad for terrorist actions against the West.¹⁰⁵ The Americans and Russians have bombed and assassinated high-level commanders in IS- and al-Qaeda-affiliated groups.¹⁰⁶

The use of Syrian airspace by American and Russian aircraft to attack jihadi groups necessitated joint communication structures to coordinate military actions. Such cooperation was viewed by the Obama administration as a means to reset the American relationship with Russia, which was strained by the Kremlin's Ukraine policy. Additionally, Washington and Moscow spearheaded the Geneva-based peace process designed to end the Syrian civil war. The Obama administration hoped that Moscow could use its influence with the Syrian regime to convince Bashar al-Assad to agree to a democratic transition and end the conflict.¹⁰⁷ Assad's intransigence and Russia's disingenuous diplomacy soon dashed such hopes. Neither Moscow nor Damascus took the Geneva negotiations seriously and used the forum as a convenient cover to bomb the opposition into submission.¹⁰⁸

Negotiated cease-fires were repeatedly broken by Syrian forces and their allies. Throughout the Obama administration, Putin's regime played their American antagonists masterfully.¹⁰⁹ The Assad regime's use of chemical weapons in August 2013—killing more than a thousand people in eastern Damascus—violated the Obama administration's "red line" forbidding the use of such arms.¹¹⁰ As the administration prepared retaliatory military strikes against Assad's chemical weapons infrastructure, Moscow convinced Washington to agree to an internationally supervised plan to disinvest Assad of his weapons of mass destruction stockpiles.¹¹¹ Under the proposal, the regime's declared stockpiles would be guaranteed by Moscow and shipped out of the country and destroyed.

Seeing Moscow's initiative as a means to avoid being drawn militarily into another Middle East quagmire, the U.S. administration called off its planned airstrikes. During a journalist's interview, Barack Obama indicated that backing down from the planned strikes was his finest moment.¹¹² Given the regime's subsequent use of chemical weapons, the 2013 agreement clearly failed.

Assad's fraudulent stockpile declarations and the 2013 chemical weapons disarmament plan were good examples of the Kremlin's use of reflexive control to shape opponents' actions toward a desired end state.¹¹³ Moscow's proposal ensured the Assad regime was protected from debilitating military strikes and demonstrated to the world that Washington lacked resolve. By not enforcing its own red line, the American administration lost all credibility. Not surprisingly, the Russians, Iranians, and Hezbollah increased their intervention in the Syrian conflict.¹¹⁴ The crisis in American resolve also was exacerbated by the Obama administration's call to remove the Assad regime from power and its inability to enforce this objective.

Russia's targeting of Western-backed rebels undermined Washington's policy of pressuring Assad to step down. Having failed to secure a larger resolution of the civil war, the Obama administration narrowed its Syrian policy to weakening IS- and al-Qaeda-affiliated networks. Despite the Trump administration's critique of Obama's Syrian policy, it has retained its limited counterterrorism strategy.

By spring 2018, the IS's military position in Syria had collapsed and its presence was confined to the Euphrates River Valley. While America's policy of hybrid warfare did significantly erode the caliphate forces, success brought other problems. The mixing of U.S. Special Forces with the YPG units augurs the possibility that they could be attacked by Russian, Turkish, or Iranian-backed proxy forces. National armies and their proxies are competing to partition Syria into rival spheres of territorial control. Cognizant that this competition could portend major armed conflict, the parties have constructed ad hoc agreements designed to separate the antagonists. These informal arrangements have at times broken down.

Faced with Shia militia attacks on YPG positions, the United States in June 2017 launched air strikes killing dozens of Hezbollah militants. That military response, however, did not deter Iranian and Russian forces in February 2018 from violating preapproved Kurdish positions in Deir ez-Zor. The American retaliatory assault killed hundreds of Russian mercenaries and IRGC members.¹¹⁵ Both attacks reinforced Washington's determination to preserve its Kurdish proxy force as a counterweight to Iranian-Hezbollah-Russian influence in the area.

With Turkish troops' seizure of Afrin in 2018, Washington faces the prospect that it may have to punish Ankara if it deepens its military campaign. Given the incorporation of American Special Forces in the YPG's ranks, further Turkish incursions threaten Washington's interests. How Ankara may respond if the Americans bomb Turkish troops is anyone's guess.

The Trump administration's commitment to maintain America's deterrent capability recovers U.S. credibility lost after his predecessor failed to enforce

the red line over the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons. Damascus's later employment of chemical weapons was met with American determination. U.S., French, and British jets bombed Assad's chemical weapons facilities in April 2018 in retaliation for Damascus's use of chemical weapons against rebels.¹¹⁶

Trump has built a Western coalition committed to a policy of gradual escalation to deter the regime's future use of chemical weapons. The limited scale of the American air campaign to degrade Assad's weapons of mass destruction capabilities has sent a message to Damascus that the United States is uninterested in regime change.

It is also a signal to Moscow that Washington does not want to risk confronting Russian forces, as wider strikes could endanger hitting Russian troops embedded in regime forces. West Point's *CTC Sentinel* once described the Syrian civil war as wicked problem for all and the intervention of Iranian, Turkish, Russian, and American forces risk a regional war.¹¹⁷ Israel's air campaign to degrade Hezbollah and Iranian missile capabilities adds further complexity to the conflict. So far, the parties involved in the Syria conflict have managed to avoid a wider conflagration. Their luck may run out.

Beyond the defeat of IS and the preservation of its Kurdish proxy force as a counterweight to Iran, the Trump administration has little strategic interest in Syria.¹¹⁸ Its ambiguous statements of withdrawing American troops from the country underscore its restricted counterterrorism focus. Aided by Russian airpower, the Assad regime's assault on rebel positions in Idlib Province threatens al-Qaeda associate HTS. Within this context, U.S.-Russian cooperation to uproot jihadist infrastructures facilitates mutual strategic interests.

Moscow's interests in Syria, however, are considerable. Putin had secured the Assad regime's survival and brought Turkey into its sphere of influence by capitalizing on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's anti-Western resentments. Russian-Iranian-Turkish patronage of negotiations at the Kazakh city of Astana in 2017 excluded the United States as a major power broker over Syria's future.¹¹⁹ The Astana initiative has provided convenient diplomatic cover for the parties to ruthlessly pursue their strategic interests. With its air and naval installations in Syria, Moscow has achieved greater strategic depth in the Middle East. Not since Soviet forces were expelled from Egypt in 1971 has Russia achieved such regional geopolitical prominence.

In stark contrast, the Trump administration has pursued a minimalist strategy in Syria. Focused on denying jihadist groups a terror safe haven and deterring the use of chemical weapons, Washington has indicated to major actors in Syria its limited ambitions. It has, however, demonstrated its willingness to employ military force against the Assad regime and Russian and Iranian interests to enforce this limited policy.

Opposing interests and competing zones of influence in Syria require mul-

tiparty communication to prevent escalation. Washington and Moscow in Syria are entering uncharted territory. Navigating the inherent tensions of superpower involvement in Syria will require nimbleness and resolve. Thus far, the Trump and Putin administrations have managed to reconcile their competing interests. Whether they can contain the ambitions and antagonistic agendas of their allies is another matter.

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