

## RUSSIA'S SYRIA WAR: A STRATEGIC TRAP?

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In fall 2015, following a formal request by the Bashar al-Assad government in Damascus, Russia intervened in Syria to support a friendly regime on the brink of collapse. Within three years of direct military involvement in the Syrian civil war, Russia — along with Iran and Iran-backed Shiite militia — has succeeded in stemming the tide of local insurgent groups, helping to bring under Assad's control most of the war-torn country. Yet parallel to tangible military successes, Russia has been increasingly dragged into “alien wars” that have adversely affected its capacity for political maneuvering. It is tainted by its commitment to a brutal regime that has even allegedly deployed chemical weapons against its own population, but it has to safeguard its hard-won positions in Syria. The result has been Moscow's isolation from the rest of the world.

Russia's risk of military confrontation with the United States, its NATO allies, and possibly Israel has reached unprecedented heights, with Moscow putting its global reputation on the line to support a cause that is far from vital to its inter-

ests. As the allied strike of April 2018 has shown, the rhetoric notwithstanding, Moscow has done nothing to protect its Syrian protégé. While Moscow has a lot to lose should the Syrian conflict escalate internationally, it has little to gain from its continued presence in a Middle Eastern country that is likely to go through a long period of low-intensity civil warfare. At the same time, given how much Russia has now invested in the war since the April strike, a withdrawal would lead to the failure of its initial goal and an even more dramatic loss of reputation, both domestically and internationally.

### **PHASE ONE (2015-16)**

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Russia has supplied weapons and ammunition to the Assad regime, becoming its main international patron.<sup>1</sup> By late 2012, Russian military personnel had manned Syria's sophisticated — Soviet and Russian-made — air-defense systems, making outside intervention risky.<sup>2</sup> In the early years of the civil war, dozens of Russian military instructors had been deployed in Damascus and elsewhere to support

Assad's war efforts. Nonetheless, while providing support to the regime as Syria's "legitimate government," Moscow had initially chosen to stay away from direct involvement, for which there had been little popular support in Russia.

Moscow's decision to intervene in Syria came a year after it had started its own "hybrid war" in eastern Ukraine. Having deployed some of its best-trained special forces on the battlefields of Ukraine's Donbass region, Russian strategists initially chose to confine their involvement in Syria to air strikes, mostly concentrated in areas key to the survival of the Assad regime, particularly in western and northwestern Syria.<sup>3</sup> The ground fighting was to be carried out mostly by Assad loyalists and their Iranian allies, apparently one of the major conditions on which Vladimir Putin decided to enter the war; it was a critical point, when the very survival of the regime was threatened.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Moscow had little vital interest at stake in the Syrian war, thousands of miles away from the Russian border, during a period of dramatically dropping oil prices and the imposition of tough Western sanctions following Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territory. While some observers have referred to strong Soviet-era ties between the Assad family and Moscow,<sup>5</sup> others have noted the paranoia Russian elites have cultivated since the early 2000s relating to alleged Western efforts to overthrow inconvenient governments, from Serbia and Ukraine to Georgia and Libya.<sup>6</sup> According to some observers, Moscow's efforts to settle scores with homegrown jihadists who migrated in large numbers to Syria also played a role.<sup>7</sup> Yet some commentators have pointed in a different direction, arguing that one of Moscow's key incentives for involvement in the Syrian

civil war was to divert international attention away from Russia's Ukraine venture.<sup>8</sup> For the sake of fighting a common enemy, the West had to accept as a *fait accompli* Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea in mid-2014, and turn a blind eye to the Moscow-backed expansion into eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin's view was not unreasonable. After 9/11, the prevalent view in the United States was that nonstate actors tended to pose the most immediate security threat to the country.<sup>9</sup> Russian leadership may have hoped to capitalize on this attitude once again, as it did during the second Chechen war in 1999-2009.

Unsurprisingly, Moscow then called for the establishment of an international coalition that would effectively back Assad — portrayed as the lesser evil — against an expanding Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), in the meantime appealing to all non-jihadists in the war to come to a negotiation table with Assad. On the one hand, accepting the Russian proposal would help legitimize the Assad government, Moscow's highly controversial ally, at a time when his very persistence in Damascus was considered unacceptable by most Western and regional actors. In fact, Assad's resignation was considered by Washington and its allies a necessary precondition for resuming peace talks. On the other hand, joining forces with the West would help Russia break the international isolation Moscow found itself in following its brazen occupation of Ukrainian territory. Indeed, it seems reasonable to assume, given Russian diplomacy's strong tradition of bilateral package deals, that Moscow's decision to get involved in the Syrian civil war was in part dictated by tit-for-tat considerations. As a Western analyst put it, "It may turn out that Putin's aim was never to kick-start negotiations between

the different Syrian parties, but instead to corner Washington — to force the Obama administration into genuine cooperation with Russia.”<sup>10</sup>

In line with this grand logic, the demolition of the Assad regime had to be prevented, if not forever, then at least until Moscow had accomplished its strategic goals. If the Assad regime were overthrown before Moscow struck a deal with the West, Russian diplomacy would have lost important geopolitical leverage. As Putin himself

asserted in late 2015, Moscow’s goal was merely to “stabilize the legitimate power in

Syria and create the conditions for a political compromise.”<sup>11</sup> Back then, winning the war for the Assad regime was not on Moscow’s agenda. As Yuri Fedorov has observed,

Having been dragged into the civil war in Syria, Putin reckoned to “exchange Syria for Ukraine,” possibly even forcing Assad to resign in return for a Western acceptance of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, turning the Kremlin into a center of power equal to the White House.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, Moscow was proved to have miscalculated; the United States and its allies sought to refrain from entering a pro-Assad “anti-terrorist” coalition alongside Russia. At the same time, Moscow did manage to resume diplomatic relations with Western powers, damaged after its annexation of the Crimea and expansion into

eastern Ukraine, breaking, to an extent, the mounting international isolation. With no grand bargain with the West in sight after 2016, Russia came to reconsider its strategic goals in Syria, increasingly investing in strengthening the Assad regime and cooperating with Iran.

### PHASE TWO (2016-17)

Indeed, having failed at the main task of improving Russia’s standing vis-à-vis the West, the Kremlin did not consider

withdrawing from Syria anytime soon. Moscow strengthened its military presence in the Arab country,

fortifying its air base in Hmeimim and its naval base in Tartus, and intensifying cooperation with Iran and Iran-backed Shiite ground troops in an attempt to cleanse Syria’s key areas of anti-Assad opposition. Its stronger presence in Syria would improve Assad’s negotiating position with rebel groups, while making Russia an honest broker, now with a boosted reputation as the main fighting force against ISIS and a player in regional affairs.

Yet, while Russian diplomacy and media spoke of fighting ISIS, they concentrated on targeting the secular or moderately religious rebel groups entrenched in the country’s fertile and heavily populated west, only occasionally striking ISIS in the arid inland territories. In the initial phase of Russia’s involvement in the Syrian civil war, 70-90 percent of Russian airstrikes almost exclusively targeted non-ISIS groups.<sup>13</sup> During these operations, highly controversial methods were used, such

as striking — often repeatedly — hospitals, markets and other civilian targets in besieged opposition-controlled areas.<sup>14</sup> The overreliance on less sophisticated and cheaper missiles only partially explains the excessive use of Russia's indiscriminate force in fighting anti-Assad groups. The methods resemble those of other Russian wars; the two in Chechnya inflicted over 100,000 civilian casualties.<sup>15</sup> The Russian military's standard barrage pattern known as "harassment and interdiction" purposely uses random artillery fire to instill fear among both rebel forces and civilians.<sup>16</sup> Thousands of Syrian civilians have reportedly died since 2015 from the Russian air strikes alone.<sup>17</sup>

Prolonged direct engagement in the Syrian civil war was not without its risks, though, and Putin must have understood this. First, the Russians soon came to comprehend that deploying some ground forces in Syria was inevitable, to provide security to the Russian military facilities for one thing. Second, they increased Russian tactical military capacity making it more mobile and less dependent on the critically weakened Assad forces and the use of the increasingly potent Iranian and Iran-backed troops. Instead of deploying the conventional army, Putin chose to rely on the regiments of *kadyrovtsy*, ethnic Chechen paramilitary troops experienced in irregular warfare, as well on the so-called Wagner Army, a group of former and current army officers who became private contractors.<sup>18</sup> Since military losses were inevitable and Moscow was not in a position to withdraw quickly from Syria, the Kremlin sought to maximally blunt the effect of political responsibility for military casualties (in the case of Wagner mercenaries). Chechen deaths were less likely to cause an uproar in Russian society.

During this period, Putin made bold and unexpected statements in March 2016 and December 2017 announcing a partial withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria. These moves were intended to show Moscow's lack of commitment to the Assad cause — and its readiness to leave Assad to his fate if a compromise deal with the United States were achieved. Such statements were also intended to exert pressure on Assad to be reasonable on striking a compromise deal with the opposition. As Paul Salem observed, following significant Russia- and Iran-backed advances on the battlefield, Russians became "hostage to his [Assad's] continued survival. He can withstand Russian displeasure and irritation. He feels under no compulsion to make major concessions."<sup>19</sup> This is to be expected in such situations, due to the well-known "principal-agent problem," whereby the "agent" gradually acquires its own will and starts acting in its own interests rather than those of the "principal."

Besides, Putin apparently sought to calm Russians back home fearful of long-term military engagement overseas. An important aspect of these announcements, as many observers agree, was to save face, withdrawing from Syria before a clear-cut victory is achieved or the Assad forces suffer a critical military blow. This, too, is indicative of the Kremlin's understanding of the risks involved in Russia's persistence in the Syrian civil war, absent any vital interests there.

### PHASE THREE (2018)

Russia's rapprochement with Turkey seemed to be a big win for Putin. After a freeze in bilateral relations following the shootdown of a Russian jet by Turkish forces in November 2015, they quickly and powerfully rebounded. Moscow celebrated

its ability to drive a wedge between NATO members, as Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan became increasingly defiant in his tense dialogue with the West, while the latter signaled its wariness about Erdogan's authoritarian tendencies.

Despite the external gloss of Putin and Erdogan's camaraderie, however, a number of observers have pointed to the tactical nature of their bond in Syria.<sup>20</sup> The year 2018 started off badly for the nascent Russian-Turkish alliance. Ankara's aggressive move against Kurdish forces in the Syrian city of Afrin in January caused the United States push back as supporters of Kurds in the area.<sup>21</sup> Ironically, Russia and Iran were also wary of Turkey's crack-down on the Kurdish enclave, especially as Ankara signaled that it was in no hurry to hand over the town to the Syrian government. To a remark by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, Erdogan bluntly responded: "When the time comes, we will give Afrin to the people of Afrin personally, but the timing of this is up to us; we will determine it, not Mr. Lavrov."<sup>22</sup> In April, when the scandal over the Assad regime's alleged use of chemical weapons against the opposition in Douma resulted in retaliation by the joint American, British and French force, Turkey called for caution rather than endorsing either the West or Russia. Ankara's reaction was in stark contrast to Moscow's view of the attack, which Putin personally condemned in a special statement as an "act of aggression": "Russia condemns in the strongest possible terms the attack against Syria, where Russian military personnel are assisting the legitimate government in its counterterrorism efforts."<sup>23</sup> Thus, deep-seated contradictions between Russia and Turkey quickly came to the fore when the Kurdish question started to bother Turkey, and the

West showed uncharacteristically muscular policy toward the Assad regime.

There does not seem to be an obvious way out of this quagmire for Russia. Even after Bashar al-Assad is gone, his replacement is likely to be influenced by Iran and, therefore, at best, only marginally acceptable to Turkey. So far, the Russia-sponsored Sochi peace talks appear to have yielded little progress, either for peace in Syria or for Russia's interests.<sup>24</sup> The policy toward the Kurds is likely to divide Ankara and Moscow, regardless of other changes. For Turkey, the Kurds pose a continuing separatist threat. Moscow cannot afford to give up supporting them; doing so would deprive them of a unique bargaining chip.

Until recently, Russia and Israel have had a remarkably good working relationship. As the presence of Russia in Syria continues, however, the likelihood of a falling out increases. Russia relies on Iranian ground forces in Syria, while Israel is fiercely opposed to having Iranian outposts in its vicinity. As the Israelis try to drive Iranians out of Syria, the Russians will be unable to avoid the fight indefinitely. Siding with Iran will alienate Israel, which goes against the long-term interests of Moscow. Israel has played many useful roles for Russia, including that of intermediary between Russia and the West, and providing access to modern technology, among other things. Yet, in navigating the unpredictable conflict in Syria, Moscow might easily find itself having to reject good relations with Israel for the questionable benefit of a closer alliance with an international outcast: Iran.

Russia and Israel may already be falling out over Israeli air strikes at Iranian outposts in Syria. The tacit agreement between Moscow and Tel Aviv appears to be under strain, as Israel has launched

numerous air strikes at Iranian targets in Syria. Russia would usually turn a blind eye, but in April, things changed. "Israel has become concerned that Russia is not fulfilling the bargain to control Iran and its military proxies," reported some news outlets, while the Russian foreign minister suddenly called the strike "a very dangerous development."<sup>25</sup>

The battleground in Syria presents the United States with a risk-free opportunity to humiliate Putin both internationally and domestically. By attempting to project power in the Middle East, Russia has made itself vulnerable to counteractions by the United States. This was most vividly demonstrated during missile launches and airstrikes in April, when some Russian officials signaled that Russia would shoot down U.S. missiles but eventually gave up on protecting its ally Bashar.

Some Russian government officials went so far as to say that Russia would not hesitate to raise the stakes in a possible military encounter with the United States, even to the level of attacking American forces.<sup>26</sup> Nothing of the kind took place on the night of the strikes in Syria, for two main reasons: (1) credible signaling of the U.S. resolve to take tough military and non-military actions against Moscow, and (2) low Russian motivation for the fight in Syria.

In February, Russian mercenaries from the paramilitary Wagner Army suffered a devastating defeat in a U.S. strike. The exact details remain unknown, but multiple reports suggest that at least 100 Russian fighters were killed and about twice as many wounded.<sup>27</sup> In April, President Trump's nominee to serve as secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, confirmed that "a couple hundred Russians were killed" by U.S. forces in Syria earlier this year. No

more specific reference was made, but it is highly likely that Pompeo was referring to the armed encounter between United States and Russian troops in February. The clash did not bode well for the Russian mercenaries, while the U.S. forces seemed to leave the battle scene unscathed. The defeat may have had a profound impact on the calculus of Russian generals when they were considering an action against the air strike by the United States, Britain and France later in April.

The military might of the West was complemented by economic muscle flexing. At the beginning of April, when the U.S. Treasury announced sanctions against scores of Russian oligarchs, officials and companies in "response to worldwide malign activity," Russian stocks tumbled along with its currency.<sup>28</sup> The move signaled that Russia's overt hostility toward Western forces in Syria would have severe repercussions for Russian stock markets and the economy in general.

The well-known paradox "Why Die for Danzig?" can be applied not only to democracies, but also to non-democracies, at least those that depend on popular support. Russia's motivation for fighting in Syria was never very high. Sending private military companies and contract personnel instead of conscripts helped to alleviate criticism back home. Even then, however, Moscow has been careful to hide its casualties in Syria, apparently fearing a backlash. The Levada Center polling organization reported in summer 2017 that half of all Russians (49 percent) were in favor of concluding the Syrian military campaign, while 32 percent supported continuing the war.<sup>29</sup>

The Russian-Iranian alliance in Syria is heavily skewed toward the benefit of Iran. As the weaker partner, it can man the

military operations in Syria, while leaving practically all political dealing with the West to Russia. Given the increasingly tough policies the West is employing to contain Russian adventurism, Moscow has to do costly maneuvering, suffer Western sanctions and bear related losses. Iranian forces provide ground support to Russian operations in Syria, but they are in no way obligated to do the bidding of Moscow in the long term. So, while Russian generals think they are using Iranian manpower to Moscow's advantage, Iranian generals may well regard Russian air support as a shield of convenience, allowing them to dig in. Since the Iranians are geographically and culturally closer to the war zone and hence more motivated to stay, they are also likely to reap more benefits from the alliance than Russia.

Russia cannot reject the help of Iranians; that would require a significant boost in its ground forces in Syria, with unclear consequences both internationally and domestically. At the same time, the benefits Russia receives from allying itself with Iran in Syria are only related to the self-perpetuation of the war — the supply of Iranian manpower. From the Iranian perspective, a favorable outcome would entail an increase in its influence over areas in Syria and changing where possible the ethnic/religious balance in favor of its coreligionists and coethnics. Russia hardly has an independent view of what a desirable end to the conflict in Syria would be. Moscow is unlikely to harbor ideas of populating the land with Russians; it will have to ally itself with the local populations and their leaders.

Pulling out of Syria in exchange for an understanding with the West may have been possible at the beginning of Russian involvement in 2015, but now it is nearly unthinkable. A bargain can always be reached if it is unavoidable. However, under present conditions, the mutual distrust between Moscow and Western capitals is so high that negotiations would be hard to conclude. By overstretching its forces and playing many of its high cards, Russia has weakened its position.

## CONCLUSION

It is a well-known phenomenon in international-relations theory that rulers are likely to face domestic revolt after a lost war abroad. On their own, Iran and Syria are unlikely to be able to withstand the pressure from the West and Sunni-majority countries if Russia pulls out of Syria. "Losing" Syria, therefore, would be a "lost war" for Vladimir Putin that would adversely affect his chances to remain in power. Staying in Syria also contains an array of hazards for Russia. Moscow might get caught in a crossfire between Israel and Iran. It might be dragged into a protracted conflict to defend its interests against its own ambitious and situational allies, Iran and Turkey. The vision for the end of the conflict that would suit Russia's interests in the area is at best undefined. Even though Russia is the most powerful state among its allies in the Middle East in absolute terms, geographic and cultural conditions make its weaker allies strong contenders for a postwar role in Syria.

<sup>1</sup> Roy Allison, "Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis," *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 795-823.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Borger, "Russian military presence in Syria poses challenge to US-led intervention," *The Guardian*, December 23, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/dec/23/syria-crisis-russian-military-presence>.

<sup>3</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, "Russia Is Following a Clear Strategy in Syria," *Financial Times*, March 20, 2016, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/e5917508-ecf5-11e5-888e-2eadd5fbc4a4.html#axzz43uTowtTS>.

<sup>4</sup> Laila Bassam, "How Iranian general plotted out Syrian assault in Moscow," Reuters, October 6, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-soleimani-insigh/how-iranian-general-plotted-out-syrian-assault-in-moscow-idUSKCN0S02BV20151006>. See also Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Katarina Petrylova, "Russia's Policy toward the Islamic State," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 3 (2015): 66-78.

<sup>5</sup> Following Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008, Bashar al-Assad was among the few foreign leaders to openly support Russia, calling for a prospective installation of Russian anti-aircraft missile systems in Syria should the United States improve its military presence in Eastern Europe. See, for instance, Roland Danneurether, "Russia and the Middle East: a Cold War paradigm?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 3 (May 2012): 555.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Charap, "Russia, Syria and the doctrine of intervention," *Survival* 55, no. 1 (2013): 35-41; Abel Polese, and Donnacha Ó. Beacháin, "The Color Revolution virus and authoritarian antidotes: political protest and regime counterattacks in Post-Communist spaces," *Demokratizatsiya* 19, no. 2 (2011): 111-132.

<sup>7</sup> Emil Aslan Souleimanov, "Globalizing Jihad? North Caucasians in the Syrian Civil War," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 3 (2014): 154-162. According to some reports, Russian secret services went as far as to allow (prospective) jihadists to travel to Syria in order to deplete the North Caucasus insurgency of its human resources. See Maria Tsvetkova, "How Russia allowed homegrown radicals to go and fight in Syria," Reuters, May 13, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/russia-militants/>; and Emil Aslan Souleimanov, "A Failed Revolt? Assessing the Viability of the North Caucasus Insurgency," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 30, no. 2 (2017): 210-231.

<sup>8</sup> Vladimir Frolov, "Mission Incomplete: Syria Has Not Achieved Bipolar War for Russia," *Moscow Times*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/mission-incomplete-syria-has-not-achieved-bipolar-world-for-russia/562798.htm>; and Emil Aslan Souleimanov, "Mission Accomplished? Russia's Withdrawal from Syria," *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 2 (2016): 108-118.

<sup>9</sup> Paul R. Pillar, *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Alastair Crooke, "Russia isn't really withdrawing from Syria," *Huffington Post*, March 17, 2016, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/russia-withdraw-syria\\_b\\_9487262.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/alastair-crooke/russia-withdraw-syria_b_9487262.html).

<sup>11</sup> "Putin nazval osnovnyu zadachu rossiyskikh voyennykh v Syrii" [Putin defined the main tasks of Russian military in Syria], Interfax, October 11, 2018, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/472593>.

<sup>12</sup> Yuriy Fedorov, "Zalp po Kremlyu" [Strike on Kremlin], *RFE/RL Commentary*, April 15, 2018, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29168480.html>.

<sup>13</sup> "'More than 90%' of Russian Airstrikes in Syria Have Not Targeted ISIS, U.S. Says," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targeting-isi>; and Andrew Dunn, "Obama Envoy: 70 Percent of Russian Strikes Don't Hit ISIS," *The Hill*, February 10, 2016, <http://the-hill.com/policy/defense/268964-obama-envoy-70-percent-of-russian-strikes-dont-target-isis>.

<sup>14</sup> David Sim, "War crimes? Syrian and Russian air strikes 'target markets and hospitals,'" *International Business Times*, February 15, 2018, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/war-crimes-syrian-russian-air-strikes-target-markets-hospitals-1661682>.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-François Ratelle and Emil Aslan Souleimanov, "A Perfect Counterinsurgency? Making Sense of Moscow's Policy of Chechenisation," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 8 (2016): 1287-1314; and Emil Aslan Souleimanov and David S. Siroky, "Random or retributive?: Indiscriminate violence in the Chechen wars," *World Politics* 68, no. 4 (2016): 677-712.

<sup>16</sup> Jason Lyall, "Does indiscriminate violence incite insurgent attacks? Evidence from Chechnya," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53, no. 3 (2009): 331-362. On the social fabric of Russia's counterinsurgency in Chechnya, see Tomáš Šmíd and Miroslav Mareš, "'Kadyrovtsy': Russia's Counterinsurgency Strategy and the Wars of Paramilitary Clans," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (2015): 650-677; Emil Aslan Souleimanov, "An ethnography of counterinsurgency: kadyrovtsy and Russia's policy of Chechenization," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2015): 91-114; Emil Aslan Souleimanov, Huseyn Aliyev, and Jean-François Ratelle, "Defected and

loyal? A case study of counter-defection mechanisms inside Chechen paramilitaries,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2016): published July 11, 2016, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2016.1194270.

<sup>17</sup> Louise Loveluck, “Russian air strikes ‘kill more civilians than Isil fighters’,” *Telegraph*, January 21, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/12113905/Russian-air-strikes-kill-more-civilians-than-Isil-fighters.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Laurence Peter, “Who are Russia’s shadowy Wagner mercenaries?” BBC, February 23, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43167697>.

<sup>19</sup> Sam Dagher, “Syria Defies Russia in Bid to Keep Assad,” *Wall Street Journal*, April 11, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/syria-defies-russia-in-bid-to-keep-assad-1460332538>.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, “Russia and Turkey’s Rapprochement: Don’t Expect an Equal Partnership,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 20, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2016-07-20/russia-and-turkeys-rapprochement>.

<sup>21</sup> Gardiner Harris, “Trump Sharply Warns Turkey Against Military Strikes in Syria,” *New York Times*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/24/world/middleeast/trump-turkey-strikes-syria.html>.

<sup>22</sup> “Turkey refutes Russian call for Syria’s Afrin,” *Hurriyet*, April 10, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-refutes-russian-call-for-syrias-afrin-130097>.

<sup>23</sup> Statement by President of Russia Vladimir Putin, Official Website of the Kremlin, April 14, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57257>.

<sup>24</sup> Oliver Carroll, “Russian Syria peace talks achieve little beyond further division as fighting continues in Afrin,” *The Independent*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/syria-civil-war-russia-sochi-talks-assad-lavrov-protests-boycott-a8186371.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Patrick Wintour, “Israel has launched countless strikes in Syria. What’s new is Russia’s response,” *The Guardian*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/09/israel-has-launched-countless-strikes-in-syria-whats-new-is-russias-response>.

<sup>26</sup> Julian Borger, et al., “US-Russia tensions build as Moscow hits back at Trump’s Twitter threat,” *The Guardian*, April 11, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/11/kremlin-us-strike-against-syria-heighten-instability>.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example; Maria Tsvetkova, “Russian toll in Syria battle was 300 killed and wounded: sources,” Reuters, February 15, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-casualtie/russian-toll-in-syria-battle-was-300-killed-and-wounded-sources-idUSKCN1FZ2DZ>.

<sup>28</sup> Angel Au-Yeung, “Russians Sanctioned By U.S. Treasury Department Are Now Billions Of Dollars Poorer After Stocks Fall,” *Forbes*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/angelaueyung/2018/04/09/treasury-department-sanctions-russian-billionaires-lose-billions-deripaska-vekselberg-putin/#1c6806eb2a04>.

<sup>29</sup> Aleksei Gorbachev, “Sredniy telezritel protiv uchastiya RF v voine” [An average TV watcher is against Russia’s participation in war], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, September 5, 2017, [http://www.ng.ru/politics/2017-09-05/1\\_7066\\_interview.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/2017-09-05/1_7066_interview.html).