

The United Nations Security Council as a Platform for War by Other Means

Prospects for US-Russian Rivalry and Cooperation on Syria

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Executive Summary

- Russian and US rhetoric on Syria in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) focuses on opposing narratives: state sovereignty vs. a state's responsibility to protect its population from mass atrocities.
- Respectively, both the United States and Russia try to advance their primary interests in the UNSC by drawing on these international norms.
- Russia and the United States share a common concern about the success stories that radical Islamist groups among the Syrian rebels have celebrated in the past year. Moscow fears the spread of Sunni Islamists especially due to possible spillover effects on the North Caucasus.
- Both the United States and Russia also have an interest in containing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in the region. Whereas Russia is particularly concerned about the threat of Sunni extremists gaining control of such weapons, the United States more generally fears the erosion of the norm against the use of chemical weapons in civil or international wars.
- Russia's interest in preventing the extension of US influence in its neighborhood is a reason for its attempt to keep Assad in power. One strategy applied to advance this goal is to veto any Resolution in the UNSC that puts real pressure on Assad.
- The United States aims at weakening the Shia alliance, which extends from Iran to Lebanon. Getting rid of Assad would seriously weaken both Iran and Hezbollah—the United States' two main adversaries in the region.
- Resolution 2043, which attempted to implement a ceasefire in 2012, and Resolution 2139, which demanded improved humanitarian access, have brought barely any positive results. The chemical weapons deal based on Resolution 2118, although not yet completed and likely to miss the upcoming deadline, is generally seen as the most promising achievement in an otherwise deadlocked UNSC.
- By initiating the chemical weapons deal, Moscow strengthened its position as an important mediator in this crisis. At the same time, Moscow helped to avert a US military strike on regime facilities by initiating the deal.
- US and Russian ties to their respective partners in the region must be utilized in order to kickstart a regional dialogue that can address sectarian tensions and lay the groundwork for a way out of the Syrian crisis. The US alliance with Saudi Arabia as well as Russia's good relationship with Iran can be of great value to bring both regional actors to the table.

Introduction

For more than three years, heated discussions of the Syrian conflict have taken place in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). With few exceptions, the UNSC has been deadlocked by a clash between Russian and US interests, which has prevented a more decisive stance on Syria from the international community. This paper identifies both US and Russian primary interests and aims to analyze to what extent they have been advanced respectively in the UNSC. On what issues could cooperation in the UNSC be achieved and at what point has the great power rivalry stalled potential progress? An overlap of US and Russian interests exists in particular with regard to a common concern about the rise of radical Islamist groups as well as a shared interest to counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the region. The argument will be made that without the serious engagement of regional powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, no sustainable peace process will be successful. Russia's long-standing relations with Iran and the United States' alliance with the Saudi monarchy provide them with the necessary leverage to engage their respective partners and initiate a regional dialogue that could lay the foundation for a way out of the Syrian crisis.

Rhetoric and Perception in the UNSC

During the past several decades, the UNSC has set the stage for the five permanent members (P5) to declare and convey to the international community their perception of international crises. States have used this platform to justify their actions by referring to a variety of international norms that have come to be widely accepted. Since its outset in 2011, the Syrian conflict has led both the United States and Russia to pursue opposing narratives aimed at reaching a particular outcome in their respective interests.

Vitaly Churkin, the Russian representative in the UNSC, has repeatedly condemned the violence originating from the Syrian opposition, emphasizing Syria's sovereignty and the need for a Syrian-led political dialogue. Particularly after NATO's operation Unified Protector in Libya, enforcing UNSC Resolution 1973, he stressed that the legitimization of regime change through Western military interference must be prevented at all costs.¹ Russia and China abstained from voting on the resolution, de facto allowing the resolution to pass, having expected a more restricted execution of the Western-led military intervention. The quick results of NATO's actions in Libya, leading to the removal of the Gaddafi regime, was met with discontent among both Chinese and Russian policy-makers.

Russian rhetoric regarding Syria during the past three years, therefore, must be considered against the background of Western-led interventions resulting

Russian rhetoric regarding Syria during the past three years must be considered against the background of Western-led interventions resulting in regime change

¹ In mid-2011, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expressed his concern about NATO's actions, arguing, "it is not in the interests of anyone to send messages to the opposition in Syria or elsewhere that if you reject all reasonable offers we will come and help you as we did in Libya." Henry Meyer, Brad Cook and Ilya Arkhipov. "Russia Warns U.S., NATO Against Military Aid to Syria Protests After Libya" Bloomberg News, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-06-01/russia-warns-u-s-nato-against-military-aid-to-syria-protests-after-libya.html> (accessed 6/12/2014).

in regime change (Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya). Past interventions have led to a concern among Russian policy makers that the toppling of anti-Western regimes through NATO will inevitably result in the installation of US friendly governments, thereby restricting Moscow's own regional influence.² Moscow's strategy to repeatedly veto any resolution that could apply genuine pressure on the Syrian regime draws on internationally accepted norms of state sovereignty and non-intervention. Especially in the conflict's early stage, this rhetoric gained the support among states such as Brazil and India, who are equally concerned about the legitimization of Western-led military interventions. Yet, the Russian narrative of preserving the international norms of state sovereignty and territorial integrity must be seriously questioned in light of the violation of these norms in Georgia in 2008, and most recently, by Moscow's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. With Russia's continuous meddling in Eastern Ukraine, it remains to be seen whether Russian arguments in future UNSC discussions will change as a result of these developments or whether Russia will continue to present itself as the protector of international law in spite of this clear violation.

Simultaneously, the United States has highlighted the opposition's legitimate aspirations for political participation and condemned the Assad regime's attacks on innocent civilians. In March 2012, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated: "We reject any equivalence between premeditated murders by a Government's military regime and the actions of civilians under siege who have been driven to self-defence."³ US attempts to invoke the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in 2011—an emerging norm that aims at preventing mass atrocities against civilian populations—failed due to Russia's and China's refusal to tolerate NATO's interpretation of R2P in Libya earlier that year.⁴ While Russia formally accepted R2P in the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, it is concerned about the negative effects R2P may have on the sovereignty of states.⁵

Conscious of the power of public diplomacy, both the United States and Russia have used strategic language to place their perspective on a moral high ground. The respective narratives are based on widely accepted international norms: state sovereignty on the one hand, and states' responsibility to protect their populations from mass atrocities on the other. To better understand the motives driving the two adversaries to adhere to this rhetoric, the following section will outline their respective interests in the Syrian conflict.

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2 Charap, Samuel. "Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention" *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 55, Iss. 1, 2013.

3 United Nations Security Council, 6734th Meeting, 12 March 2012, <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Syria%20S%20PV%206734.pdf> (accessed 06/09/2014).

4 United Nations Security Council, 6627th Meeting, 4 October 2011, <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10403.doc.htm> (accessed 6/12/2014).

5 International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect, <http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/index.php/component/content/article/35-r2pcs-topics/398-general-assembly-r2p-excerpt-from-outcome-document> (accessed 6/10/2014).

Russian Interests in Syria

Moscow's economic interests in Syria have often been cited as a crucial factor in its strategy to back the Assad regime. In reality, Russia's financial gains—for example through the sale of arms to the Syrian government—are limited.⁶ Three of Moscow's key interests driving Russian policy in Syria are: (1) maintaining Russian influence in the Middle East, thereby restricting Western influence in the region, (2) preventing the spread of Sunni extremists potentially sympathetic to Chechen rebels and (3) containing the proliferation of WMDs in the region.

Moscow aims to extend, or at least preserve, its own political influence in the region. If the Assad regime were to fall and be replaced by a US-friendly government—albeit a rather unrealistic scenario at present—this would be a major setback for Russia's geostrategic interests. As described by Russian Middle East analyst Aleksei Malashenko, “the relationship between Syria and Russia is the last remnant of Soviet politics in the Middle East.”⁷ Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is known for his nostalgic feelings towards Soviet politics not least because he famously described the demise of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century,” views this relationship with Syria as indispensable.⁸

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Moreover, Moscow has questioned Washington's motives for removing Assad for merely humanitarian reasons, as frequently portrayed by US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power. President Barack Obama's public statement in August 2011 of his goal to remove Assad from power hardened Russia's own position in the Syrian conflict. During a UNSC discussion on September 26, 2012, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov alluded to US military engagements in the Middle East by saying: “Our country has never had any colonial interests in the Middle East or North Africa and has never unleashed wars for resources in those areas or imposed its configuration of the political map of the region.”⁹ Preventing the spread of Western influence in a region where historically Moscow has invested heavily to shape the political dynamics is therefore likely to remain the core of Russia's strategy towards Syria.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Syrian conflict presents an opportunity for Moscow to stand up to the United States, thereby reminding the international community of its own importance as a crucial player in international crisis management while

6 Arms contracts between both countries only amount to about 5 percent of Russia's entire arms contracts and, according to the Russian think tank CAST (Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies), Syria has not been able to pay for half of the arms it has acquired from Russia. Howard Gethin and Alexander Stelliferovsky. “Russia Picks Politics Over Syria Arms Exports” RIA Novosti, <http://en.ria.ru/analysis/20120710/174530767.html> (accessed 5/1/2014); Allison, Roy. “Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis” Chatham House, p. 805, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/International%20Affairs/2013/89_4/89_4_01_Allison.pdf (accessed 4/27/2014); Hill, Fiona. “The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad” Foreign Affairs, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139079/fiona-hill/the-real-reason-putin-supports-assad>, (accessed 4/27/2014).

7 Quoted after Allison, Roy. “Russia and Syria” p. 803.

8 Hill, Fiona. “The Real Reason”.

9 United Nations Security Council, 6841st Meeting, 26 September 2012, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.6841 (accessed 4/27/2014).

10 Charap, Samuel. “Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention”.

safely referring to the rules and norms of the international system.

Secondly, Moscow's support of the Syrian regime derives from President Putin's view of the conflict in the context of the Chechnya crisis, which has influenced his terms as Prime Minister and President. The rebellion in Chechnya between 1991 and 2009 led to his deep animosity towards Sunni Islamist groups.¹¹ Whereas the moderate opposition dominated the Syrian rebellion in the early stage of the conflict, an influx of Sunni extremists fighting in Syria has since changed the dynamics of the civil war. Putin's concern about these Islamist groups—who, just like in Chechnya, now dominate the rebellion in Syria—runs like a thread through his career as Russia's leader. A development in which Assad is replaced by a Sunni-Islamist-dominated regime is equally unfavorable to him as a US-friendly Syrian government.

Putin's fear of a "spill-over" first and foremost relates to the North Caucasus, comprised amongst others of Dagestan and Ingushetia. This largely Sunni populated, politically instable region, in which a rebellion has challenged the Russian state over the past two decades, could be severely affected by a shift in the balance of power in Syria. A triumphant extremist Sunni opposition can be expected to be sympathetic to the Chechen cause, whereas Assad has always been an ardent supporter of Moscow's fight against the Chechen insurgency. This was publicly demonstrated most recently in 2010, when Razman Kadyrov, Putin's appointee as leader of Chechnya, made an official visit to Syria.¹² With groups such as the al-Nusra front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) spreading in Northern Syria, a change in Russia's position cannot be anticipated. Moscow will continue to argue that Islamist groups present a threat not only to Russia but to international security as a whole.¹³

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Lastly, Russia is concerned about the threat of WMDs and fears that, as a result of the heavy fighting, their adequate safeguard and control by the regime cannot be guaranteed. The risk of non-state actors, most notably radical Islamists, gaining control of these weapons was one important factor for Russia to initiate the chemical weapons deal in September 2013. Granted, the Obama administration's threat to engage militarily was another major incentive for Moscow to find an agreement on the chemical weapons issue. Yet, Moscow's discomfort with the rise of extremist groups in its immediate neighborhood as well as the fact that WMDs are exceedingly difficult to properly safeguard in a civil war contributed to Russia's pressure on Assad to give up his chemical weapons stockpile.

What is at stake for the US in Syria?

Whereas Russia has stressed the need to respect Syria's sovereignty, the US narrative predominantly focuses on the need to find a solution for the humanitarian crisis in Syria. In August 2011, President Obama declared a regime change as the inevitable result of the conflict. Washington, however, also has

11 Hill, Fiona. "The Real Reason".

12 Allison, Roy. "Russia and Syria" p. 805.

13 Hill, Fiona. "The Real Reason".

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a number of underlying interests aside from putting an end to Assad's grave human rights violations, some of which it publicly promotes more than others. Not necessarily ranked in order of priority, these are (1) the concern about chemical weapons in Syria and their continued use against the civil population, (2) the fear of Sunni Islamist extremists spreading throughout Syria¹⁴ and (3) the opportunity to weaken the Shia alliance, which extends from Iran through Syria to Lebanon. Another key US interest relates to the geographical containment of the conflict and the stabilization and protection of US allies from a "regionalization" of the civil war.

Firstly, US officials have repeatedly stressed the importance of the Syrian regime surrendering all of its chemical weapons. The US administration considers the global non-proliferation of chemical weapons as a critical national interest. In his testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel warned of the risks that ignoring Assad's use of chemical weapons would pose to the international community.¹⁵ The chemical weapons deal, negotiated in September 2013 after the credible US threat to use military action, forced the Syrian government to agree to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)—an international treaty banning the use of such arms—and dispose of its stockpile under the supervision of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). The deal was commended by many in the US as a vital step towards cleansing the region of chemical weapons without engaging militarily.

The radical extremist forces that have come to dominate the Syrian opposition in the last year present the second major concern for the Obama administration. Islamist groups among the rebels, such as ISIS, continue to prevent a more decisive US strategy to support the opposition forces due to the risk of providing arms that may end up in the hands of terrorists. Reports by American counterterrorism officials about the relocation of Islamist militant fighters from Pakistan and other parts of the world to Syria give cause for concern that the country may become the new safe-haven for radical Islamist groups.

Lastly, the United States aims to weaken the Shia alliance spreading from Iran to Lebanon. Assad belongs to the Alawite community, a Shia sect, and has close relations with both Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹⁶ Therefore, many in the US see the removal of Assad as a critical national interest because it would weaken Iran's position in the region. Through Assad, Iran has been able to safeguard its interests not only in Syria but also in Lebanon by sponsoring Hezbollah. Hezbollah, designated a terrorist organization by the Unit-

14 Next to the Syrian National Coalition, a coalition of various opposition groups, there has been an influx of more radical Islamist groups in the past three years. Whereas for example the al-Nusra front, an al-Qaeda linked group, is one of the most successful anti-Assad groups in Syria, it now also competes with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), which aims at establishing a caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

15 "Full Transcript: Kerry, Hagel and Dempsey testify at Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on Syria" The Washington Post, 3 September 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/running-transcript-senate-foreign-services-committee-hearing-on-syria/2013/09/03/35ae1048-14ca-11e3-b182-1b3bb2eb474c_story.html (accessed 6/12/2014).

16 Encyclopædia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/12399/Alawite> (accessed 6/10/2014).

ed States, has conducted major fighting operations in Syria and has played a decisive role in keeping Assad in power. From a US perspective, the Syrian uprising has presented the opportunity to accomplish the strategic goal of weakening the Shia alliance, which has not only emboldened the long term US adversary—Iran—but has also alarmed traditional US allies such as Saudi Arabia and Israel.

US regional interests more generally focus on maintaining as much political stability as possible, particularly in Lebanon and Jordan. The enormous number of refugees has already destabilized Syria's neighboring countries, with detrimental effects on their economies, domestic political tensions, and the livelihood of their local population. Furthermore, the national security of traditional US allies in the region—Istrael and Saudi Arabia—is another priority factoring into US policy towards Syria.

Past Agreements in the UNSC

The UNSC's first agreement on Syria was Resolution 2043 in April 2012, authorizing the dispatch of up to 300 unarmed military observers in order to oversee the implementation of the six-point peace plan of then-UN envoy Kofi Annan. This plan, which outlined an inclusive Syrian-led political process, the withdrawal of heavy weaponry and troops from population centers and increased humanitarian assistance for the affected areas, generated the hope that, after one year of fighting, the Assad regime and the opposition would comply with this initiative.¹⁷ However, when violence erupted again and the Assad regime failed to abide by the ceasefire plan, Kofi Annan resigned and the plan fell through.

Based on Resolution 2118, the chemical weapons deal, negotiated after the United States threatened to intervene militarily in September 2013, is probably the most substantive agreement on Syria achieved in the UNSC so far. The threat of Syria's chemical weapons has loomed like a dangerous cloud over the conflict, which is why the OPCW's recent announcement that 92.5% of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile had been moved to the northern port of Tartous came as good news. Nevertheless, according to Sigrid Kaag, the head of the Joint Mission of the OPCW and the United Nations, it is also clear that Syria will not meet the 30 June 2014 deadline to destroy all of its chemical weapons.¹⁸ The Assad regime has repeatedly been accused of intentionally delaying the transportation of the material. There has also been evidence that Syrian forces used chlorine against the civilian population, a dual-use substance that is also used in various commercial products and therefore not covered in the CWC.¹⁹

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17 Six-Point Proposal of the Joint Special Envoy of the United Nations and the League of Arab States, http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/documents/six_point_proposal.pdf (accessed 6/10/2014).

18 "As Syria deadline nears, OPCW-UN mission focuses on swift removal of remaining chemicals" UN News Center, 4 June 2014, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47959#.U5hvZje7264> (accessed 6/11/2014).

19 Chulov, Martin. "Chemical weapons body to investigate claims of chlorine gas use in Syria" The Guardian, 29 April 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/29/syria-chemical-weapons-chlorine-gas> (accessed 5/28/2014); Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons,

Both Iran and Hezbollah have become increasingly emboldened through the Assad regime's military successes and Assad's recent staged re-election as Syrian president.

The UNSC's most recent agreement was on Resolution 2139, which it unanimously adopted in February 2014, calling "all parties, in particular the Syrian authorities," to permit free access to humanitarian aid and cease all attacks against civilians.²⁰ Aside from condemning Assad's brutal tactics of waging war through "indiscriminate employment of weapons in populated areas," Resolution 2139 also condemns brutalities committed by "al-Qaeda, its affiliates and other terrorist groups."²¹ As a veto by Russia and China could only be avoided by not including an enforcement mechanism, the text merely mentions the vague necessity for "further steps" in the event of non-compliance.²² Meanwhile, the Resolution has not brought the success many had hoped for as the Assad regime continues to use hunger as an effective strategy to subdue the rebels and enforce local truces.²³

These Resolutions mentioned above are, however, the few exceptions to an otherwise deadlocked UNSC. To mention only the most recent disagreement between the P5, the French proposal to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC) was vetoed by China and Russia. Because Syria is not a signatory to the ICC, only the UNSC can refer this case to the court. However, Churkin denounced the proposal as an "attempt to use the ICC to further inflame political passions and lay the ultimate groundwork for eventual foreign military intervention."²⁴

Comparing US and Russian Headway

The objective to rid the Assad regime of its chemical weapons—a process that has not yet been finalized—is generally commended as the most substantive agreement in the UNSC. In an otherwise daunting crisis for the Obama administration, the chemical weapons deal served as a face-saving achievement after the US Congress had threatened to not approve any US military engagement in the fall of 2013. Beyond that, the US has neither been able to effectively combat radical groups such as ISIS nor has it managed to weaken the Shia alliance in the Middle East. On the contrary, both Iran and Hezbollah have become increasingly emboldened through the Assad regime's military successes and Assad's recent staged re-election as Syrian president for another seven-year term.

"Brief Description of Chemical Weapons" <http://www.opcw.org/about-chemical-weapons/what-is-a-chemical-weapon/> (accessed 6/10/2014); Gordon, Michael R. and Sengupta, Somini. "U.N. Mediator on Syria Quits; French Envoy Says Chemicals Were Used" The New York Times, 13 May 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/14/world/middleeast/Syria-war-abuses.html?_r=0 (accessed 5/28/2014).

²⁰ "Unanimously approved, Security Council resolution demands aid access in Syria" UN News Center, 22 February 2014, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=47204&Cr=syria&Cr1=#.Uy8odxbQamc> (accessed 6/10/2014).

²¹ Hof, Frederic C. "Syria: Resolution 2139 (2014)" The Atlantic Council, 24 February 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-resolution-2139-2014> (accessed 6/10/2014).

²² Ibid.

²³ Lund, Aaron. "The Failure to Stop Starvation Tactics in Syria" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 31 March 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55172> (accessed 6/12/2014).

²⁴ United Nations Security Council, 7180th Meeting, 22 May 2014, http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/PV.7180 (accessed 6/10/2014).

Forced to work outside the UNSC, the US has tried to work through the “Friends of Syria” group.²⁵ Support for the Syrian National Council and a number of rebel groups, however, has not led to a significant shift in power in the Syrian civil war, and has also failed to unify the opposition.²⁶ Although US support for the opposition increased following the failed Geneva II talks in February 2014, the spending of 26 million dollars since 2012 and the training of 1,000 to 3,000 opposition fighters by the CIA in Jordan have been insufficient to achieve even the basic goal of bringing Assad back to the negotiating table.²⁷

Whereas Moscow has been equally unsuccessful in containing radical Sunni groups in northern Syria—a goal it shares with Washington—it has been successful in negotiating the chemical weapons deal in September 2013. Russia positioned itself as an important mediator preventing an American attack while continuing to arm Assad with conventional weapons. With widespread discomfort among Western societies regarding any military engagement in Syria, it seems that a Western-led military intervention is off the table for the near future.

In spite of some basic disagreements on Syria, the United States and Russia also share some fundamental security interests that could lay the base for future cooperation. Especially regarding the fight against Sunni extremists, as well as on the risk of a proliferation of WMDs, Moscow and Washington have similar interests. Such issues require the cooperation of regional actors such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, which both Russia and the United States must encourage.

Expanding the Dialogue

With Lakhdar Brahimi’s resignation as UN Special Envoy to Syria and the failure of the Geneva II process, it is apparent that there is a dire need for a reorientation of diplomatic efforts on Syria. This requires both Russia and the United States to utilize their respective relations to powerful regional actors who fuel the conflict by providing a steady flow of sophisticated weapons and cash to opposing conflict parties. Whereas the United States has fostered a close alliance with Saudi Arabia, Russia has tried to maintain a stable relationship with Iran in spite of participating in the international community’s enforcement of sanctions regime in response Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Capitalizing on the respective relationship, both the United States and Russia

Both the United States and Russia should make an effort to engage Saudi Arabia and Iran in opening up a regional dialogue about the pressing issues of sectarian tensions and the danger of an escalating, spill-over war.

25 The core group of the “Group of Friends of the Syrian People,” often referred to as the “London 11,” includes Egypt, France, Germany, Italy, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE, United Kingdom and the United States.

26 As of late 2013 four moderate Islamist insurgent groups (Jabhat Thowar Suriyya, Jaish al-Mujahideen, Harakat Hazm, and Faylaq al-Sham) must be particularly mentioned as they have played an increasingly important role due to external, mainly US and Saudi support. Lister, Charles. “Reading Between the Lines: Syria’s Shifting Dynamics or More of the Same?” Brookings, 29 May 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/05/29-syria-developments-lister> (accessed 6/10/2014); White, Jeffrey. “Rebels Worth Supporting: Syria’s Harakat Hazm” The Washington Institute, 28 April 2014 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rebels-worth-supporting-syrias-harakat-hazm> (accessed 6/10/2014).

27 Lubold, Gordon. “U.S. Readies New Syria Aid” Foreign Policy, 24 March 2014, http://complex.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/03/24/us_readies_new_syria_aid (accessed 4/27/2014).

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should make an effort to engage Saudi Arabia and Iran in order to open up a regional dialogue about the pressing issues of sectarian tensions and the danger of an escalating spill-over war. Mona Yacoubian, senior advisor for the Stimson Center's Middle East program, argues that this would provide some "much-needed strategic depth" that could give more legitimacy to the process by "addressing the proxy dimensions" of the current crisis.²⁸

Bringing Iran to the table

As an important supplier of manpower, weapons and finances to the Assad regime, Iran in particular could play a decisive role for future developments in Syria. Geographic proximity, a positioning as a counterweight to the United States, and shared security concerns about the rise of Sunni Islamists in the region have induced a positive relationship between Russia and Iran. Recent developments regarding an oil-for-goods deal, valued at \$20 billion according to Iranian sources, indicates that both Russia and Iran are also keen on further extending their economic ties.²⁹ The Syrian opposition and the United States have thus far prevented Iran's engagement in international deliberations on Syria due to its refusal to recognize the Geneva Communiqué, which states that "a transitional governing body, [...] formed on the basis of mutual consent," must be established.³⁰ After UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon invited Iran to the Geneva II talks in Montreux in late January 2014—causing the Syrian opposition to immediately threaten to boycott the talks—the US promptly rescinded the invitation to Iran.

Meanwhile, the Rouhani government has attempted to shape developments in Syria according to its own ambitions. With its recent four-point peace plan—calling for a general ceasefire and a national unity government headed by Assad—Iran has aimed at gradually turning Syria back into the stable protégé it was before the outset of the civil war.³¹ Because this proposal only sees the internal opposition as part of such a transitional government, it is impossible for the moderate opposition, with its headquarters in Turkey, to accept. The international community's current rigid position with which it responds to Iran's strategic moves, and the failure to include Iran into a dialogue, only seems to encourage Tehran to make further strides towards Assad's full res-

28 Yacoubian, Monica. "A strategy to rescue diplomacy on Syria" Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, February 2014, p. 2.

29 Saul, Jonathan and Hafezi, Parisa. "Iran, Russia working to seal \$20 billion oil-for-goods deal: sources" Reuters, 2 April 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/02/us-iran-russia-oil-idUSBREA311K520140402> (accessed 9/10/2014); Khajepour, Bijan. "Iran opens new chapter in relations with Russia" Al Monitor, 7 February 2014, translated by Sibel Utku Bila, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/iran-russia-relations-new-chapter.html> (accessed 6/10/2014).

30 Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué, <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/Final-CommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf> (accessed 6/9/2014).

31 At the time of the Syrian elections, Iran dispatched a team of election monitors to Syria. This attempt to claim ownership of the Syrian crisis as well as Iranian officials' condescending remarks about the Gulf states' and Western failed attempts to overthrow Assad can also be seen as serving Iran's greater strategy of gaining control over developments in its immediate neighborhood. Sly, Liz. "Iran claims victory with Assad's anticipated win in Syrian election" The Washington Post, 3 June 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/iran-claims-victory-with-assads-anticipated-win-in-syrian-election/2014/06/02/314f43a3-164a-4817-94bb-3b4483fa9dc6_story.html (accessed 6/10/2014).

toration. Instead, with the help of Russia, Iran must be co-opted to recognize the Geneva Communiqué, which will eventually allow it to become a legitimate participant in the Geneva process. This necessitates the willingness for compromise on both sides, as Iran needs to realize that a permanent solution for Syria requires Assad to step down, whereas the West needs to recognize that its policy of alienating Iran is counterproductive.

Utilizing the US-Saudi alliance

The participation of Iran's counterpart and main adversary in the region, Saudi Arabia, is equally important for a regional dialogue on Syria. Saudi Arabia continues to provide extensive support for the Syrian rebels, in particular the Islamic Front, which accounts for about 50,000 fighters in Syria.³² On the one hand, this commitment originates from a fundamental security concern the Saudi monarchy bears towards Iranian regional ambitions. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia considers Syria as the heart of the Arab world and aspires to extend its influence in the Levant by financing Sunni rebels.

The solidity of US-Saudi relations has been questioned in recent months due to the Americans' decreasing dependence on oil imports and a potentially successful dialogue with Iran regarding its nuclear program. The Saudis have become increasingly irritated with US policy towards Syria, especially when Obama pulled back from his threat of conducting air strikes against the Assad regime in September 2013. In spite of these divergences, there is no reason for alarm about an imminent deterioration of the relationship. Both the United States and the Saudis are aware of the benefits of their cooperation on counterterrorism and the significance of Saudi oil for the global market.³³ Capitalizing on this alliance, the United States must try to persuade the Saudi monarchy that a regional dialogue can address important security concerns and will, eventually, play out to its benefit.

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Conclusion

In spite of US and Russia's diverging objectives in Syria, there is also an unexpected alignment of interests. Both states share a concern for the rise of radical extremist groups. Furthermore, both Russia and the United States are alarmed about a potential spread of WMDs, which would further destabilize the region. These common concerns need to be addressed in a regional dialogue. Both Russia and the United States have the necessary leverage to bring their respective ally—Iran and Saudi Arabia—to the table.

With regards to shaping developments in the Levant, the US-Russian rivalry is bound to continue as both states aspire to maintain their regional influence in Syria. Moscow has thus far successfully prevented the United States from extending its influence in the region. A rather tentative US approach has led to the Assad regime's consolidation of power and has emboldened Iran and

32 Lister, Charles. "Reading Between the Lines: Syria's Shifting Dynamics or More of the Same?" Brookings, 29 May 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2014/05/29-syria-developments-lister> (accessed 6/10/2014);

33 Crowley, Michael. "The King And O" Time, Vol.183, No. 13, 7 April 2014, p. 34.

Hezbollah to increase their regional influence. Cooperation in the UNSC has been scarce, and Resolution 2118 unfortunately represents the only agreement that has brought any viable results.

In a crisis, which is likely to drag on for quite some time, incessant endeavors are essential to further push for the implementation of past agreements and to build on common interests in the UNSC. With no foreseeable, drastic shift in the balance of power, an expanded dialogue through the co-option of regional key actors must address the proxy dimensions and hopefully lead to a way out of the Syrian crisis.