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September 30, 2015
The Threat of Islamist Extremism in Russia

U.S. and Russia Share a Vital Interest in Countering Terrorism

By Simon Saradzhyan

Can the United States and Russia cooperate against the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and other international terrorist organizations, even though the bilateral relationship has deteriorated in the wake of the crisis in Ukraine? My answer is they can and they will if they act in their best interest.

When trying to underscore the difficulty of predicting the Kremlin's next steps, many Russia watchers in the West in general and in the U.S. in particular habitually cite Winston Churchill's famous description of Russia as "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." Few however, recall the remainder of that 1939 adage by one of Great Britain's greatest statesmen: "But perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest."

When explaining what drives their policies, Russian president Vladimir Putin and his advisors routinely make general references about the need to protect or advance Russia's national interests. Occasionally they also reveal what interests they think Russia shares with other countries. For instance, in an April 2015 interview, Vladimir Putin said Russia shares key interests with the United States and that the countries need to work together. Putin mentioned countering proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, fighting international organized crime and terrorism, eradicating poverty in the world, making global economy "more democratic and balanced," as well as "making global order more democratic" among these common interests.

But while weighing common interests with specific countries, neither Russian authorities nor the country's think-tanks have offered a comprehensive of list what constitutes Russia's national interests or what their order of importance is. I have taken the liberty of constructing a hierarchy of Russia's vital national interests, distilling from Russian leaders' statements and national strategies. I then squared that hierarchy against the list of U.S. vital national interests -- as formulated in two U.S. reports on the subject¹-- to identify areas of convergence and divergence. The result of my effort is represented in the table below.

Russia's vital national interests (in order of importance):	U.S. vital national interests:	Converge (C)/ Diverge(D)/ No equivalent (NE):
Prevent, deter and reduce threats of secession from Russia; insurgency within Russia or in areas adjacent to Russia; and armed conflicts	Not available;	No equivalent;

¹ Ellsworth, Robert, Andrew Goodpaster, and Rita Hauser, Co-Chairs. *America's National Interests: A Report from The Commission on America's National Interests, 2000*. Washington, D.C.: Report for Commission on America's National Interests, July 2000; Allison, Graham, Robert D. Blackwill, Dimitri K. Simes, and Paul J. Saunders. *Russia and U.S. National Interests: Why Should Americans Care?*. Washington, D.C. and Cambridge, Mass: Report for Center for the National Interest and Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, October 2011;

waged against Russia, its allies or in vicinity of Russian frontiers;		
Prevent emergence of hostile individual or collective regional hegemonies or failed states on Russian borders, ensure Russia is surrounded by friendly states among which Russia can play a lead role and cooperation with which it can thrive;	Maintain a balance of power in Europe and Asia that promotes peace and stability with a continuing U.S. leadership role;	Russian and U.S. interests more diverge than converge;
Establish and maintain productive relations, upon which Russian national interests hinge to a significant extent, with core European Union members, the United States and China;	Establish and maintain productive relations, consistent with American national interests, with nations that could become strategic adversaries, China and Russia;	Converge (partially);
Ensure the viability and stability of major markets for major flows of Russian exports and imports;	Ensure the viability and stability of major global systems (trade, financial markets, supplies of energy, and the environment);	Converge;
Ensure steady development and diversification of the Russian economy and its integration into global markets;	Not available;	No equivalent;
Prevent neighboring nations from acquiring nuclear arms and their long-range delivery systems on Russian borders; secure nuclear weapons and materials;	Prevent the use and slow the spread of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, secure nuclear weapons and materials, and prevent proliferation of intermediate and long-range delivery systems for nuclear weapons;	Converge, but differ in methods of advancing this interest;
Prevent large-scale or sustained terrorist attacks on Russia;	Prevent large-scale or sustained terrorist attacks on the American Homeland;	Converge;
Ensure Russian allies' survival and their active cooperation with Russia;	Ensure U.S. allies' survival and their active cooperation with the U.S. in shaping an international system in which U.S. can thrive;	No equivalent;
Not available;	Prevent the emergence of	No equivalent.

	hostile major powers or failed states on US borders;	
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As clear from the list above, Russian vital interests partially diverge with those of the U.S. only in the post-Soviet neighborhood, while either converging in other areas or having no equivalent on the U.S. side. The two countries' interests now clearly converge when it comes to preventing the use and slowing the spread of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction and to reducing the threat of large-scale terrorist attacks on themselves and their allies.

Both of these threats have been emanating from the instability and violence in the Middle East, where such terrorist organizations as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda operate with the former controlling parts of Syria and Iraq. Both ISIS and al-Qaeda have displayed strong interest in acquiring weapons of mass destruction and ISIS has also allegedly used crude chemical weapons. If either of these organizations were to acquire nuclear weapons², neither would hesitate to use them against Russia and the U.S. and their allies if such use would advance them toward their goal of building a caliphate. Both of these organizations have also recruited citizens of America, European Union countries and Russia to fight in their ranks as well as encouraged them to conduct attacks at home.

Russia and its allies are more exposed to the terrorist threat emanating from the Middle East, particularly as ISIS contemplates expanding the territory it controls as it pursues the goal of building a caliphate. Russia's First Deputy Director of Federal Security Sergei Smirnov estimated in September 2015 that there about 2,400 Russian nationals fighting on the side of the Islamic State. IS' commander in Syria is Tarkhan Batirashvili, an ethnic Chechen who hails from the Republic of Georgia's Pankisi Gorge and who goes by the nom de guerre Abu Omar al-Shishani. There are also 3,000 nationals of Central Asian republics, of which three are members of the Russian-led Collective Security Allies, fighting in ISIS ranks, according to Smirnov.³

In addition to IS, nationals of Russia and other former Soviet republics are also fighting in structures affiliated with al-Qaeda in Levant. One of such structures, Jaish al-Muhajireen wal-Ansar, reportedly employs 1,500 Chechen, Uzbek and Tajik fighters and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda's Syria wing Nusra Front in September 2015, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.⁴ This unit, led by ethnic Chechen Salahuddin al Shishani, is formally a part of the so-called Emirate Caucasus terrorist organization, which is based in Russia's North Caucasus. It should be noted that Salahuddin al Shishani's real name was originally Giorgi Kushtanashvili, but he then changed into Feizullah Margoshvili, which indicates that he also hails from Georgia's Pankisi Gorge.⁵

² See the following two publications for summary of al-Qaeda and ISIS' interest in nuclear weapons: Bunn, Matthew, and Yuri Morozov, Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, Simon Saradzhyan, William Tobey, Viktor I. Yesin, and Pavel S. Zolotarev. *The U.S.-Russia Joint Threat Assessment of Nuclear Terrorism*. Cambridge, Mass., : Report for Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies, June 6, 2011; and Simon Saradzhyan. *The U.S.-Russia Initiative to Prevent Nuclear Terrorism Newsletter: May – June 2015*. Harvard University, July 14, 2015.

³ "Moscow says about 2,400 Russians fighting with Islamic State: RIA," *Reuters*, September 18, 2015.

⁴ "Insurgent group pledges allegiance to al-Qaeda's Syria wing," *Reuters*, September 23, 2015.

⁵ Joanna Paraszczuk, "Who is Salahuddin al Shishani?" *From Chechnya to Syria*, April 2015.

As it is known, Al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri declared war on ISIS in September 2015. The rivalry between these two organizations has trickled down to Russia's North Caucasus, where the leadership of Emirate Caucasus has essentially sided with al-Qaeda only to see a group of local field commanders branch out to establish an Islamic State *vilayat* in the North Caucasus in June 2015. But while fighting for supremacy, both leaders of ISIS and al-Qaeda and their supporters in the North Caucasus are firmly aligned with the vision of caliphate, which they hope to build in the Middle East and expand to the North Caucasus and other regions of Russia with significant Muslim populations.

Now imagine what would happen if ISIS succeeds in maintaining a quasi-state in parts of Syria and Iraq, and these nationals try to repeat this success at their homes as ISIS will seek to expand the 'caliphate' to post-Soviet space. Given these risks, it should come as no surprise that Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Security Council secretary Nikolai Patrushev describe ISIS as Russia's main enemy and main threat to global security respectively. Washington is also concerned about ISIS' rise. The FBI's director James Comey has recently been quoted as saying that ISIS poses the greatest danger to U.S. homeland, though there is no consensus in the U.S. leadership on whether and what terrorist organization represents the top threat to U.S. national security. According to Comey, ISIS has developed a "chaotic spider web" in the United States. "Those people exist in every state," Comey said in February 2015. Some of these individuals have allegedly planned terrorist attacks in the continental U.S. homeland, including plans to blow up Coney Island and kill U.S. law-enforcers and soldiers.⁶ According to Representative Michael McCaul, chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives' homeland security committee, the U.S. foiled over 60 terrorist attacks by "ISIS followers" in 2014 alone.⁷ ISIS has also been reported to plan attacks in Europe and some of its followers, such as Amedy Coulibaly, have unfortunately succeeded in their plans. Overall, however, in spite of all the threats, ISIS appears to have refrained from attempting to launch large-scale terrorist campaigns in either U.S., EU or Russia.

It should be noted that governments of U.S. and Russia have not always seen eye-to-eye on what counter-terrorism cooperation of the two countries should entail. As Thomas Graham and I note in a recent article, the United States was interested in intelligence sharing on Al Qaeda in the 2000s; while Russia at that time wanted information on exiled Chechens that they suspected of supporting violent separatism.⁸ But the rise of the Islamic State should begin to close the gap in the U.S. and Russian governments' perception of the nature of the terrorist threat emanating from parts of the Middle East. For perhaps the first time in the counterterrorist struggle, the United States and Russia share a common concrete enemy in the form of ISIS.⁹ Neither the U.S. nor Russia can afford to tolerate the existence of a terrorist quasi-state, which is actively training nationals of their countries and interested in acquiring weapons of mass destruction. Nor can leaders of the U.S., Russia, and their allies sit and wait for ISIS to decide if it should escalate from executing citizens of Western and post-Soviet states to launching large-scale terrorist campaigns against them. Many common Russians would support Russia's participation in

⁶ "ISIS present in all 50 states, FBI director say," ABC7 Chicago, February 25, 2015.

⁷ "U.S. missed Chattanooga attack but foiled 'over 60' Isis-linked plots: security chair," the Guardian, July 19, 2015.

⁸ Graham, Thomas and Simon Saradzhyan. "ISIS' Worst Nightmare: The U.S. and Russia Teaming Up on Terrorism." *The National Interest*, Tuesday, February 10, 2015.

⁹ Graham, Thomas and Simon Saradzhyan. "ISIS' Worst Nightmare: The U.S. and Russia Teaming Up on Terrorism." *The National Interest*, Tuesday, February 10, 2015.

international efforts to rout ISIS. The share of Russians who think Russia should fight ISIS is more than twice as large (36%) as the share of those who hold the opposite view (15%). Moreover, two-thirds of those who believe Russia should fight ISIS also think their countries should do so in cooperation with Western countries, according to a recent poll by Russia's Public Opinion Foundation.

The governments of Russia, the United States, and their allies could utilize the positive momentum, which their cooperation in securing an agreement between P5+1 and Iran has created, to coordinate their actions against ISIS. While such coordination in Syria is impeded by disagreements over whether and how Bashir al-Assad should depart from power, there is an opportunity for Washington and Moscow to cooperate against ISIS in Iraq. The United States and Russia could begin to cooperate against ISIS by taking small, concrete, pragmatic steps, mirroring their cooperation in the initial phases of the U.S.-led campaign in Afghanistan. These steps could include sharing intelligence on ISIS and cooperating in joint special operations against key targets. The two countries have acquired limited, but valuable experience in such joint operations in Afghanistan where officers of Russia's Federal Drug Police reportedly participated in ISAF raids on drug laboratories. Russia could also supply advisors, training programs and more arms to the Iraqi forces and Kurdish forces, in coordination with the West. Unfreezing military-to-military contacts between the U.S. and its NATO allies, and Russia, and reviving work of such elements of the bilateral U.S.-Russian presidential commission, as working groups on counter-terrorism, defense relations, military cooperation, and nuclear security, would facilitate such cooperation.

Of course, use of force is just one component of a successful comprehensive approach toward countering such strategies of political violence, as terrorism and insurgency. Both countries suffering from political violence and international coalitions built to assist them would also need to address factors behind such violence, which scholars of this phenomenon¹⁰ classify as:

1. Deep-rooted or structural causes, which affect people's lives at a "rather abstract level," and which include relative socio-economic deprivation; historical grievances; poor quality of governance; and political instability.
2. Facilitator (or accelerator) causes which facilitate political violence, making it more attractive without being prime movers, and which include spread of violent ideologies; support; availability of capable leaders; youth bulge; scientific-technological progress; traditions of violence; difficulty of disengagement from violence; complex terrain.
3. Motivational causes that could be also defined as grievances that people actually experience, motivating them to act, including abuses at hands of authorities

Cooperation between U.S. and Russia against terrorism in general and ISIS and al-Qaeda in particular can not only significantly advance international efforts to first contain ISIS's expansion within and without Iraq and defeat this terrorist organization. Such cooperation can also help to stop the slide towards a new Cold War between the West and Russia in the wake of the Ukraine crisis.

¹⁰ For classification of causes behind political violence, see, for example, Sagramoso, Domitilla. "Violence and conflict in the Russian North Caucasus." *International Affairs* 83, no. 4 (2007): 681-705, and Bjorgo, Tore, "Introduction", in Bjorgo, Tore, ed. *Root Causes of Terrorism: Myths, reality and ways forward*. Routledge, 2004, 3-4.