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Hearing on “Syria After the Missile Strikes: Policy Options”

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Members of the Committee:

First, thank you for providing me with this opportunity to speak to you today, and to address the situation in Syria and what policy options the United States might consider going forward.

Three weeks ago, the United States military fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at Syria’s Al-Shayrat airbase as a punitive response for the Syrian government’s use of a Sarin-like nerve agent against a residential area of the town of Khan Sheikhoun three days earlier. This was a justified, proportionate and necessary response to a flagrant war crime, committed in full view of the world. Images and video footage showing men, women and children losing control of their muscles, succumbing to uncontrollable convulsions and then foaming from the mouth and nose shocked the world.

Whereas the United States’ decision not to act in response to a similar attack in August 2013 that killed fifteen times as many people drew ire amongst allies and adversaries, the decision to act this time around was widely praised by U.S. partners near and far. Whereas the U.S. decision not to act in August 2013 was justified at the time by a Russian-facilitated deal to remove and destroy Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile, events in Khan Sheikhoun demonstrated starkly that that deal had been a ruse. Israeli intelligence now assesses that Bashar al-Assad has secretly retained at least three tons of Sarin nerve agent, enough to kill many thousands more people, should he choose to do so. This was not much of a secret. Officials in the U.S. government and all of our principal allies have known as much for years.

For six years, U.S. policy on Syria has been characterized by lots of talk and very little action. For six years, U.S. policy on Syria has sought to convince our adversaries to behave through dialogue, hoping to facilitate some semblance of stability in Syria based on trust, when no such trust has existed. The results of pursuing dialogue with no muscle behind it are clear and horrifying: half a million Syrians dead and 11.5 million more either internally displaced or refugees. Syria’s collapse into chaos assisted ISIS in its dramatic recovery, out of which it has declared a Caliphate and forced the international community to form one of the broadest military coalitions in history. Meanwhile, a globally weakened Al-Qaeda has used Syria to adapt and evolve its self-presentation and strategic objectives, so much so that many people in the region now see it as a credible resistance movement fighting the ‘good fight.’ As a result, America and its allies now face an Al-Qaeda with sources of genuine popularity, something ISIS never acquired.

The consistent deterioration of the situation in Syria has also brought us a huge refugee crisis, which itself is the result of the Assad regime's scorched earth tactics. The unprecedented refugee flows out of Syria witnessed in recent years have crippled America's strategic partners in the region and sparked countless social, economic and political crises throughout European NATO allies. Iran is also now more powerful than ever; its Revolutionary Guard Corps has evolved into a professional and capable expeditionary force exerting influence across all corners of the Middle East; Hezbollah is now more powerful than some small Eastern European militaries; and dozens of transnational Shia militias now roam across established state borders, acting expressly against our own interests.

The Syrian crisis is immensely complicated – I have spent virtually every single day since March 2011 trying my best to understand it. Despite this very clear complexity, one thing ought to be simple: the continued presence of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus as Syria's self-proclaimed President does *not* promise any semblance of hope for the country's future. In fact, his stalwart refusal to consider even basic political reform in 2011 and his embracing of an escalatory set of military measures to, in his words, "cleanse" his population of the enemy, now represents *the* root cause of virtually every terrible consequence of the conflict in Syria. Considering our preeminent fixation on the threat of terrorism since 9/11, we must acknowledge that the single biggest push and pull factor for both Al-Qaeda and ISIS in Syria, is the Assad regime's continued survival and the brutal violence it unleashes upon its people.

At no point in the last six years has the United States truly sought to address this root cause. Instead, we have switched from all talk and no action, to lots of talk and action to address symptoms. This is a containment strategy, not a solution. Nothing at all has got better in Syria through our pursuit of this approach and it is not unreasonable to suggest that nothing is likely to get better if we continue. Widespread perceptions of U.S. weakness and risk aversion have borne out clear consequences. But it is not too late.

Today, we meet in the seventh year of the conflict in Syria. Much has changed, particularly since Russia's military intervention in September 2015 – an act itself that was only possible because nobody believed the United States would prevent it. In April 2017, the Assad regime finds itself sat more comfortably in Damascus than at any point since the start of the crisis in the Spring of 2011. Its use of banned chemical weapons a few weeks ago is almost certainly a result of that confidence.

However, if anyone believes that Bashar al-Assad is now the key to stabilizing Syria, they have learned nothing from the country's recent history. Assad cannot and will never be capable of putting Syria back together again. Six years of mass murder, sectarian massacres, the industrialized use of torture and execution, the repeated use of chemical weapons, barrel bombs, ballistic missiles and more does not just represent extremist radicalization gold-dust, it is also clear and incontrovertible evidence that Bashar al-Assad has little to offer in terms of popular credibility or a promise of stability in Syria.

It is also important not to forget history. To claim that Bashar al-Assad was never our enemy would be to brush over his extraordinary and widely documented role in empowering ISIS's predecessor movements in Iraq, who fought against and killed American soldiers for years on end. As U.S. troops entered Iraq in March 2003, Assad's personally appointed Grand Mufti issued a fatwa declaring it religiously obligatory for all Muslims – male and female – to resist the invasion using any available means, including suicide bombing. Iraq's then foreign minister claimed 5,000 foreign fighters crossed into the country from Syria in the first 11 days of the invasion. Most of these were driven to the border on Syrian government buses, as Syrian border guards waved them across unchecked. According to captured Islamic State documents, more than 700 foreign jihadists crossed into Iraq from Syria through one town alone in a 12-month period between 2006-2007. Later in 2007, U.S. intelligence estimated that as much as 90% of Islamic State suicide bombers in Iraq had come through Syria – many flying into Aleppo or Damascus airports and then given free access to the Iraqi border. In mid-2009, the Syrian government's military intelligence service convened a meeting in the Syrian mountain town of Zabadani, in which Assad regime officials sat alongside leaders from the Islamic State and from Iraq's deposed Baath Party and planned a series of debilitating bombings aimed at crippling Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's standing in Baghdad. We know about this meeting only because Iraqi intelligence had a mole in the room, wearing a wire. Those attacks took place in August 2009 and left over 700 killed and wounded. It is quite possible that hundreds of American troops would still be alive today had it not been for Assad's explicit support for what was then known as the Islamic State in Iraq.

That tacit support for jihadists as a means of furthering Assad regime interests did not end in 2010, however. As men, women and children were taking to the streets in protest against Assad's dictatorial rule in the first half of 2011, Assad ordered the release of hundreds of imprisoned jihadists from jail. This was a cynical move to justify Assad's description of the opposition as radicals from Day One. While pro-democracy activists were being disappeared at night and arrested in the day, Al-Qaeda jihadists were being let out on amnesty. Two of the al-Nusra Front's seven founding members were amongst those released, as were at least 10 of its other senior leaders. Three of ISIS's most important leaders in Syria were also released, including the Emirs of Aleppo and Raqqa, the de facto capital of the Caliphate. As Syria's opposition movement gained steam later in 2011, Assad's personally appointed Grand Mufti threatened to unleash "martyrdom seekers" to Europe, should external powers intervene. Two Congress people have since met with this Grand Mufti.

In short, Bashar al-Assad – in both everything he has done and everything he represents – does not and should never represent what we consider to be an acceptable future for Syria and its people. It should also go without saying that the choice we face today is not and has never been a binary one between Assad and ISIS, as some have tried to claim. Syria remains a country of many communities and many perspectives. Of a population of roughly 23 million people, no more than 20,000 (0.09 percent) have chosen today to be members of Al Qaeda or ISIS. Therefore, U.S. policy is best served by securing a future for the remaining 99.91 percent. This is also not merely a matter of attending to resident Syrians inside Syria. Over 5 million Syrian citizens (roughly 22% of the population) are currently registered as refugees, residing outside of

Syria, while a further 6.3 million (roughly 27% of the population) are homeless and displaced inside the country. Those people require a voice too, in determining their country's future.

So what now? Clearly the status quo is not working. To call for a continuation of existing policy is to accept that Syria will be unstable for a decade or more, and the terrorist threat regionally and internationally will undoubtedly grow. Major foreign intervention in search of regime change, however, carries far too many risks and promises only further chaos. What is needed is a policy that sits in-between. Determined U.S. leadership backed up by the credible and now proven threat of force presents the best opportunity in years to strong-arm actors on the ground into a phase of meaningful de-escalation, out of which eventually, a durable negotiation process may result. This is, sadly, something the previous administration refused to accept. Repeated, well-meaning efforts to broker peace failed because that administration refused even to consider threatening the use of force. Every rhetorical threat given from an Obama podium effectively amounted to a further emboldening of the Assad regime's sense of impunity and its free hand to murder its people en masse.

Any path forward in Syria will be a long one. There are no quick fixes and there are unlikely to be quick interim results either. Setting Syria on a path towards stability will undoubtedly necessitate a further strengthening of the U.S. posture. More punitive military strikes and other assertive acts of diplomacy will be inevitable, but if anything is now clear, it is that the U.S. has more freedom of action in Syria than the Obama administration was ever willing to admit. Opponents of limited U.S. intervention who have long and confidently pronounced the inevitability of conflict with Russia are now faced with the reality that Moscow failed to lift a finger when American missiles careered toward Assad regime targets.

This is not to suggest that Russia plans to sit back and watch the United States threaten or undermine its proxy, Assad. Russia's seat on the U.N. Security Council and its conventional military assets make it appear to be the key *obstacle* to progress, but it may well end up being the key to moving *forward* in a better direction. For Russia, the Syrian issue remains something to be negotiated, though naturally it wants such negotiations to occur within a dynamic that better suits its negotiating position. In the past, we have come to the table with little leverage, because we refused to seek any. That is reversible, to an extent.

Beyond Russia though, Iran is arguably a far greater challenge and obstacle to progress. For Iran, the fate of Assad appears to be non-negotiable, at least within today's dynamics. Sustaining a friendly regime in Damascus is of existential importance to Tehran's regional strategy, particularly considering Hezbollah's near-total reliance on Iranian arms supplies through Syria, and Damascus in particular. Keeping Assad in place also secures Iranian hegemony through Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut and into the Palestinian Territories. Beyond being a great victory for Iran, that also represents a major defeat to American interests and influence in the region. It also risks inflaming further, existing great power competition involving Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Russia's intervention in Syria saved Assad from possible defeat, that is clear. However, the more secure Assad feels, the less he appears restrained by Russian instruction. In other words, Russia's leverage over Assad may be declining. This is also an issue of manpower. Russians closely acquainted with Syria decision-making and assessments in Moscow assess that Russia's key partner in Syria, the national Army, retains no more than 20,000 personnel who it believes to be sufficiently trained, offensively deployable and loyal for use in key operations. Iran on the other hand has key hands in Syrian paramilitary and foreign Shia militia forces that may now number 150,000 men at arms. Some of those groups are designated terrorist organizations, legally no different from al Qaeda or ISIS; others have become intrinsic components of the Assad regime's state apparatus. As one prominent Russian in Moscow recently told me in Europe, even Russia's own Spetsnaz special forces have come to respect one such Iran-backed terrorist group — Hezbollah — more than the Syrian Army itself.

Given this force imbalance, Russia has taken to deploying what it calls "military police" units to Syria, to hold important territory and to train new Syrian army conscripts. These "military police" forces have come from across Russia's North Caucasus region and reliable Russian sources inform me they are elite, counter-terrorism specialists. Russia is also coordinating the formation of new Syrian volunteer auxiliary forces, known as the 4th and 5th Legions. Gathering from recent publicity photographs, a sizeable majority of these volunteers are aged men, far from their fighting prime. Combined, these efforts and others appear to be Russian attempts at force multiplication, to shore up additional sources of leverage in Damascus.

As things stand today, Syria can be divided up into dozens of semi-contained conflicts, every one of which is individually unique. Assad may be more secure than ever, but he is a very long way from a full territorial re-conquest of his country. That objective may take a decade, or not even be possible at all. Despite this dissolution into multiple conflicts, the solution to Syria is not to be found in partition. In fact, that is one of the only issues that the opposition and the regime currently agree on. Despite the intensity and complexity of conflict, Syrians on both sides of the conflict still share a shared sense of Syrian identity. Although hard to see through the bullets and gas, this is a crucially important realization. Syria's non-jihadist opposition, as varied, complicated and imperfect as it is, remains a force of 80,000-100,000 heavily-armed men. A substantial majority of these men, and their sons, are not considering giving up their struggle anytime soon. That is also a crucially important realization. It will only be by addressing these kinds of realities that we will begin to define a meaningful policy.

The first step to developing a more effective Syria policy is to acknowledge that countering terrorism is not enough to protect our interests in the short or long-term. A holistic strategy is required that treats all the various symptoms as inter-linked components of a very big problem. The United States can choose to make big decisions and spend substantial amounts of resources now, or we can continue today's strategy and face virtual certainty of having to come back and do even more to try to fix an even greater problem several years from now. The word "unprecedented" is frequently used to describe problems emanating from Syria today. That is for a reason. We cannot hope to fix such issues by dipping our toes in the quagmire.

Counter-Terrorism: ISIS

The fight against ISIS in Syria has made significant progress, but it is important to acknowledge the challenges ahead and the disadvantageous knock-on effects of certain aspects of our strategy. The big challenge looming ahead is the fight for Raqqa and the major issue at hand is who our local partners are for that battle. Until now, the United States has demonstrated a clear preference for the Kurdish People's Protection Units (the YPG) and allied militias and tribes, collectively known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The favored status given to the YPG and its political wing, the Democratic Union Party (the PYD) has created serious issues with NATO ally Turkey, as it claims the PYD and YPG are affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers Party (the PKK), with whom it has fought a sustained war since the late-1970s. The United States has recognized the PKK as a designated terrorist organization since 1997. Turkey does have a point here. After all, the YPG was established by the brother of the PKK's God-like leader, Abdullah Ocalan, and the majority of the YPG's most senior and impactful leaders in Syria today owe their allegiance to the PKK's transnational leadership structure, known as the KCK. In fact, the United States government's very own National Counter-Terrorism Center accepted this much in its annual profiles of designated terrorist organizations, stating clearly in 2014 that the PYD was the "Syrian affiliate" of the PKK. Upon beginning our relationship with the PYD and YPG, however, that paragraph was removed from the NCTC profile in 2015 and 2016.

The United States needs Turkey to be a constructive partner on Syria's northern border, if we are to ever successfully defeat the terrorist threats emanating from there. As such, laudable efforts have been undertaken to recruit Arab tribes into the SDF, but contrary to much of the reporting on the issue, the YPG retains overwhelming influence over the SDF's tactics, strategy and outcomes. Moreover, for Arabs to join the SDF, the YPG precludes their inclusion by providing them with ideological training, in which certain revolutionary Marxist ideals are fused with the unique ideology developed by PKK leader Ocalan himself. Those who insufficiently buy into the PKK's ideology are said to receive little responsibility on the battlefield. The YPG does nothing to hide its hostility to Turkey either, including in the presence of American soldiers. The YPG also maintains ambiguous relations with the Assad regime. One strategically important town, Manbij, which was captured with U.S. military support, has since been effectively handed over to the Assad regime by the YPG. A YPG-led victory in Raqqa would almost certainly lead to a similar result, which itself would embolden ISIS and Al-Qaeda in a very big way and create the conditions for a further zone of complex conflict.

The United States does not need to rush our push to Raqqa. Doing so risks achieving the short-term objective – the city's capture – but securing groups like ISIS with an invaluable narrative victory. The United States should use its significant diplomatic leverage with Turkey to push for consideration of a ceasefire with the PKK inside Turkey, which may help ease tensions with the YPG across the border in Syria. As part of a package deal with Turkey, the United States could offer to include a select portion of its anti-Assad forces – the majority of which have already been vetted either by the CIA or by CENTCOM – into a broader offensive on Raqqa. This would

be a similar arrangement to that worked out for Mosul, where zones of responsibility were pre-arranged between rival or competing factions.

Counter-Terrorism: Al-Qaeda

While our eyes have been fixed firmly on the threat posed by ISIS, Al-Qaeda's presence in Syria has thrived. Whereas ISIS has consistently sought to act alone and has aggressively avoided working with others, Al-Qaeda has sought to deeply embed itself into Syria's broad, opposition movement. It has constantly adapted its narrative to fit those of much of the opposition and it has studiously avoided many of the extremist practices typically associated with Al-Qaeda. This use of what I call "controlled pragmatism" has allowed it to methodically socialize more and more people into first accepting its presence within their midst, and then to supporting it. That many opposition Syrians – and indeed many people across the Middle East – see it in a different way than Al-Qaeda of the past, means that it has attracted a significant number of Syrian recruits who do not yet buy into the transnational jihadist ideal. Instead, they have merely chosen to join a popular group with a very successful track record on the battlefield.

This very marked difference from how ISIS has operated means that countering Al-Qaeda in Syria necessitates the use of a very different tool kit. In a sense, this is a struggle defined by a competition for narrative victory. Six years of brutal violence in Syria, paired with a total lack of determined international action to put a stop to it, has provided Al-Qaeda with an increasingly pliable population seemingly devoid of alternatives. Sustained levels of conflict have also given Al-Qaeda the opportunity to consistently exploit its principal advantage: its power in battle. Stronger international action aimed at protecting civilians and punishing regime war crimes, paired with a substantial reduction in conflict represents a very serious threat to Al-Qaeda. It was not a coincidence that the entirety of Syria's opposition welcomed and praised the recent cruise missile strikes and only Al-Qaeda issued a rebuke.

Taking away Al-Qaeda's narrative dominance can help deal with its popularity, which by extension, may give many desperate Syrians the confidence to embrace alternatives other than Al-Qaeda. Pursuing the abovementioned actions will also set into motion a chain of events that would likely lead to Al-Qaeda isolating itself as it acted in ways to protect its base. We have seen this happen before, on a much smaller scale.

Greater pressure, however, is needed on its most powerful area of operations: the province of Idlib. This is a problem that only Turkey is well placed to tackle, though it would require substantial U.S. support and protection. In August 2016, the Turkish military crossed into northern Aleppo's countryside alongside allied opposition groups to seek two objectives: the localized defeat of ISIS and the establishment of a buffer zone, preventing the YPG from sealing a contiguous swathe of territory. In so doing, Turkey catalyzed a total withdrawal of Al-Qaeda forces from northern Aleppo, as the group openly refused to cooperate with any foreign government or to align itself with U.S.-backed opposition forces, which Turkey was using.

As that zone of territory steadily expanded, it also grew into a de facto safe zone, as neither Russia nor the Assad regime dared fly over it and risk targeting Turkish troops. In the time since, this swathe of territory that now measures 110km by 60km, has received substantial sums of financial support for re-development and re-building. Tens of thousands of refugees have crossed from Turkey back into Syria and with Turkish pressure, populated areas are now being vacated by armed opposition groups and law and order is being assumed by Turkish trained Syrian civilian police forces. The area has also become home to at least 14 separate opposition military facilities, in which Turkish special forces are training Free Syrian Army affiliated groups for future operations. The U.S. recognized Syrian opposition Interim Government now plans to establish in-country offices in this area.

The evacuation of Al-Qaeda from northern Aleppo has since proven permanent and I believe it could be replicated on a smaller scale in Idlib territory positioned along Turkey's border. With U.S. assistance and a resumption of military support to U.S. vetted opposition groups active in the area, we have an opportunity to create a reality on the ground that is both safe and moderate. This would be an ink spot strategy with risks, but the potential benefits could be significant. This too would set into motion a chain of events that would likely lead to Al-Qaeda further isolating itself, as it acted in ways to protect its base. Only then would the United States have a clearer idea of who the genuinely committed transnational jihadists were, and where to target them.

Counter-Terrorism: Shia militants

Finally, the United States must also more clearly acknowledge the presence of other, non-Sunni terrorist organizations in Syria, and to work more determinedly to constrain their freedom of operation. Hezbollah is the most notable terrorist group in this case, but there are others too. Throughout the last administration's diplomatic attempts alongside Russia to introduce cessations of hostilities in Syria, Hezbollah and other designated organizations like Kataib Hezbollah were treated as legitimate actors, while Al-Qaeda and ISIS were excluded. Beyond the issue of the PKK, this inconsistency in policy weakens our hand enormously.

Enforced Zones of Calm

There is no perceivable opening for a grand, nationwide settlement to the conflict in Syria. As such, the best available interim solution is to introduce calm to geographically distinct zones in Syria, in which local Syrian actors and external actors with influence in the area can agree to freeze existing lines of conflict. This would be pursued alongside the above detailed counter-terrorism actions and would mean aiming to establish, and most importantly, to *enforce*, multiple zones of calm across Syria, in which conflict effectively ends, frontlines are frozen, and minimal reconstruction can begin.

In today's dynamics, five such zones come to mind: (1) the existing zone under Turkish influence in northern Aleppo; (2) a new zone under Turkish influence in northern Idlib; (3) the formalization of a zone of stability under SDF influence in northeastern Syria; (4) a new zone of

stability in southern and southwestern Syria, under the influence of Jordan and Israel; and (5) a new, future zone of stability in eastern Syria, divided between the Assad regime and newly formed, local U.S.-backed anti-ISIS forces.

Creating these zones of calm along Syria's borders will assist in an eventual managed process of refugee resettlement, easing the burden placed on Syria's neighbors. It would also help slow or even stop the flow of weapons and money intended for armed activities from flowing across these border areas, while the stability itself will give opposition territories the opportunity to demonstrate their latent capabilities in local governance and service provision. Until now, those latent capabilities have been sharply limited by sustained aerial bombing, a challenge that neither the Assad regime nor the YPG have faced.

Creating multiple facts on the ground in this case would make it impossible for Bashar al-Assad to credibly claim an intent to recapture every inch of his territory. It would in and of itself represent a considerable source of pressure on Assad's claim of unending leadership in Syria and may eventually allow for conditions in which a determined move by the international community to initiate meaningful negotiations could actually make progress. For this reason, the United States would need to pursue an intensive track of bilateral negotiations with Russia throughout the lead-up to, and during the formative stage of these zones of stability. That dialogue would be exclusively focused on determining a shared understanding of what kind of political future in Syria was acceptable to both parties.

These zones of calm would face multiple determined spoilers, particularly Assad himself. This is why the United States and allied countries must be prepared to enforce these zones of stability through a credible threat of punitive action for violators. Al-Qaeda, ISIS and other militant actors would pose similarly significant spoiling threats, and should face similar punitive actions.

Regarding the enforcement aspect specifically, the threat of force can create meaningful diplomatic leverage, but only when it is credible and part of a clearly defined strategy. The recent cruise missile strikes on Syria did have an effect on the behavior of certain states, but the lack of a strategic foundation meant that our adversaries have now returned to business as usual. While it is indeed important, even necessary, to enforce established international norms such as that that forbids the use of chemical weapons, it is also important to establish moral equivalency and to recognize that other conventional means of killing are often far more effective and used with impunity. For example, monitoring data suggests that chemical weapons have been responsible for under 1% of all civilian casualties in Syria, while the Assad regime's use of air-dropped bombs has been responsible for 57% of all civilian fatalities. It should not be a matter of the murder weapon that defines whether murder is acceptable or not.

Pursuing this 'zones of stability' strategy would be far from easy and success may seem hard to come by at first. But treating Syria as a multitude of different mini conflict zones makes more sense than treating it as one whole. Moreover, the power of calm and the threat of serious consequences for violating that calm has a good chance of eventually establishing a deterrence

dynamic. The additional pressure that it would place upon terrorist groups and on Assad himself, should provide the United States with more options and more leverage than exist today.

Iran

The United States must urgently acknowledge and act to confront the malign activities of Iran in exploiting pre-existing instability in the Middle East to undermine its rivals and to establish hegemonic influence for itself. While constructive relations with Iran are arguably in the interest of all members of the international community, the revolutionary nature of its regional policy and its impressive success in utilizing unconventional means to assert strong levels of influence against the United States represents a sustained threat to the United States' position of influence in the Middle East. It also represents a serious threat to Israel. Increased Iranian confidence in Syria has recently transitioned into increasingly bold threats against Israel – from the creation of Shia militia groups with the proclaimed objective of liberating territory controlled by Israel, stationing Shia militants in Syria near Israeli territory with anti-aircraft weapons, or in providing further strategic weaponry to Hezbollah.

The United States' best method of pressure on Iran and its use of militant groups in Syria is the use of targeted sanctions, especially against airlines used to fly weaponry and militiamen daily from Iran to Damascus. The United States may also choose to further strengthen economic sanctions and other measures against Hezbollah and to seek some extent of an understanding with Russia, in order to test the theory that Russia may diverge from Iran in terms of their respective visions for Syria's future.