



Assessing the Impact of Russia's Support for Authoritarian State Sponsors of Terrorism in the Middle East and North Africa

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Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss Russia's strategic objectives in the Middle East and North Africa. I have structured my testimony today around three main points:

1. An overview of the current strategic landscape in the Middle East and North Africa
2. An assessment of Russia's objectives in the Middle East and North Africa
3. An initial analysis of the new U.S. administration's emerging strategic posture in the Middle East and North Africa and how it is likely to impact Russian policies in the region.

My bottom line assessment is that Russia's increased engagement in the Middle East has accelerated the ongoing trends towards state fragmentation, heightened terrorism, and ongoing displacement in key parts of the region, while also reinforcing autocratic tendencies of key powers in the region. In particular, Russia's support for the Assad regime in Syria and cooperation with Iran undercuts U.S. strategic objectives.

Strategic Landscape in the Middle East and North Africa in Early 2017

The starting point for analyzing Russia's objectives in the Middle East and North Africa is an examination of the current landscape in the region.

The broader Middle East and North Africa remains embroiled in an uncertain and fluid period of change. This change is largely driven by factors within the region. It involves a heightened competition for influence among key countries such as Saudi Arabia and

Iran, the fragility of states such as Yemen and Syria produced by a crisis of political legitimacy, and the growing power of non-state actors – especially terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and Hezbollah. Outside actors such as the United States, Russia, European countries, and China have demonstrated a capacity to shape and influence trends, but the main drivers come from within the region.

The leading state powers within the region are engaged in a complicated, multidimensional, and multipolar struggle for influence and power. This struggle is multidimensional because key actors in the region use a wide range of tools to assert their interests. In some instances, the countries of the region engage in proxy wars, such as Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and Iran have offered support to different forces inside the country. Regional powers also use traditional forms of power projection – military aid and economic assistance – to expand their influence.

But increasingly, governments and non-state actors in the region use new tools of power to advance their agendas, including direct investments in media and disinformation campaigns that target other countries and political actors and work to alter domestic power balances within them. The ongoing tension within the Gulf Cooperation Council countries involving Qatar is the latest episode in a larger battle for influence involving many countries in the region. This unresolved situation risks a strategic shift that draws countries such as Qatar and Turkey closer to Iran.

This competition for power and influence in the Middle East today is multipolar and unlikely to produce a single hegemon or dominant power within the region. Sunni-Shia sectarian divisions offer only a partial description of what is happening inside of the Middle East. Recent tensions between the different countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Turkey, and Egypt, for instance, involve countries with Sunni Muslim majority populations. Moreover, Israel has for the most part worked to preserve its own security by seeking quiet, tactical cooperation with as many Sunni-majority countries in the Middle East to counter Iran. All in all, this broader landscape presents few opportunities for sustainable security.

The multipolar and multidimensional struggle for influence is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, and it will likely continue to strain the overall state system of the Middle East. Like balls in a game of billiards, countries in the Middle East crash into each other and veer off in unexpected directions. In this game of billiards, though, some of the balls are weak and fracture on contact. Military actions against terrorist groups such as ISIS will continue to inflict damage on these groups. But without an overall strategy that integrates all aspects of power these actions may not lead to their lasting defeat – and in fact could produce even more conflict, state fragmentation, and a next generation of terrorist networks.

Within this context, Russia has stepped up its engagement in the Middle East since 2015 in a manner that boosted authoritarian state sponsors of terrorism in the region. These moves have benefited Russia to a degree – in particular, arresting its slide towards broader geostrategic isolation, - but they have yet to yield major strategic gains. How the

United States responds to Russia's actions in the Middle East and North Africa can help shape the trends towards authoritarianism in the region and the continued fight against the evolving terrorist threats from within the region.

Assessment of Russia's Objectives in the Middle East and North Africa

Overall, the Middle East and North Africa is a lower priority for Russia's national security strategy compared with its relations with the United States, Europe, China, and Asia. For more than two decades starting in the early 1990s, Russia had not heavily invested in building relationships across the Middle East and North Africa.

But in 2015, Russia's entry into Syria's civil war and its increased diplomatic outreach to several authoritarian state sponsors and incubators of terrorism such as Iran, Syria, and Turkey made it a more relevant force in the Middle East and North Africa. Despite its internal political, economic, and social weaknesses (as witnessed by its recent and continued domestic unrest), Russia has been able to have greater impact in the Middle East and North Africa than many analysts would have predicted two years ago.

Russia's objectives in the Middle East and North Africa include:

1. To safeguard against attempts to isolate Russia geopolitically for its destabilizing actions in Ukraine, Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world.
2. To check and undermine the influence of the United States and its NATO allies across the region.
3. To support regimes in the Middle East that are willing to cooperate with Russia.
4. To maintain a degree of Russian military presence at strategic locations across the Middle East and North Africa.
5. To contain Islamist terrorism and prevent its expansion into Russia and its immediate neighborhood.
6. To expand Russian commercial ties and build markets for Russian arms, nuclear power, and other products;
7. To coordinate energy policy with oil and gas producers in the Gulf region.

During the course of the past two years, Russia has taken actions to advance these objectives in a way that has enhanced the power and position of authoritarian governments, particularly Syria and Iran. Although Russia's strategic communications regularly highlights that it seeks to counter terrorist groups, the reality is that Russia has cooperated closely with leading state sponsors and incubators of terrorism, worsening Middle East stability.

Russia's most dramatic move was its military entry into Syria's civil war in September 2015. This intervention prolonged the fighting inside of the country, aided and abetted the killings of thousands of civilians, increased refugee flows, and contributed to a worsening humanitarian situation. Recent diplomatic efforts between Russia, Turkey, and Iran to produce a cessation of hostilities are unlikely to result in a sustainable peace due to the fragmented nature of the conflict and their reliance on terrorist organizations and state sponsors of terrorism to produce stability.

Russia's enduring cooperation with Iran, a top state sponsor and incubator of terrorism, is also serious cause for concern to the United States. Moscow's economic interests in Iran have included helping Iran develop nuclear power reactors and supplying passenger airplanes, among other industries. Russia has also provided considerable arms to Iran, including air defense systems, combat aircraft, submarines, T-72 tanks, armored personnel carriers, and other combat vehicles. Talk of Russia making a strategic break from Iran appears unrealistic.

More broadly in the Middle East and North Africa, Russia has moved to create a network of partners in Egypt, Libya, and parts of the Arab Gulf. It has also sought to coordinate policy with Israel as Israel works to secure its territory from the cauldron of threats along its borders.

The sum total of Russia's efforts since 2015 has been to reinforce the two negative trends harmful long-term U.S. strategic interests across the region: the evolution of terrorist threats and increased authoritarianism. Russia's alignment with Iran and Syria is exhibit one. But Russia's growing ties with Turkey and Egypt also show the trend towards offering support to authoritarian governments that may incubate terrorism through their actions and have not exhibited a capacity to effectively deal with the evolving terrorist threat in the region.

Assessment of the New U.S. Administration's Emerging Middle East Strategy

Compared to the recent footholds Russia has been able to establish across the region, the United States has a broader and deeper network of relationships with a wider array of regional actors than Russia. Moreover, the United States possesses greater capacities to influence these actors than Russia. Accordingly, the United States remains the main strategic partner of choice for many countries in the region.

What the United States possesses in the traditional military and economic measures of power is hampered by the lack of a coherent strategic approach to the broader Middle East and North Africa. For more than a decade and a half, the United States has lacked a coherent strategic approach to the broader region in the wake of the invasion of Iraq and the end of the policy of dual containment of both Iraq and Iran in 2003. The Bush administration's global war on terrorism and freedom agenda led to the 2003 Iraq war, and this contributed to the strategic disarray of U.S. policy in the Middle East. The Obama administration reacted by seeking to limit America's overall exposure to the

Middle East and its complicated internal dynamics, but this repositioning did not produce substantial gains in the fight against terrorists and the struggle for stability in the Middle East and North Africa.

It is too soon to assess the trajectory of the Trump administration's nascent strategy for the Middle East and North Africa. In just under five months, the Trump administration has sought to reassure partners in the region and address the trust deficit that had emerged over the past two U.S. administrations between the United States and key regional partners such as Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. However, these overtures have forsaken – if not outright disavowed – the long-standing U.S. concerns over human rights, political repression, and economic reform that past administrations viewed as drivers of instability and even extremism.

It is also premature to assess how the Trump administration's Middle East and North Africa policy will respond to Russia's renewed assertiveness in the region. The administration's emerging overall strategic approach of the Trump administration appears to lead the United States towards an overdependence on military tools while proposing drastic diminution of U.S. diplomacy through budget cuts and key diplomatic and national security posts left unfilled. But how the Trump administration will seek to work with Russia in places like Syria remains unclear and will be determined in large part by ongoing discussions on ending Syria's conflict.

In this context, the United States should take three steps to more effectively advance its interests. First, it would be prudent for the United States to add more tools to its foreign policy and national security toolbox in order to counter Russia's coordination with key state sponsors and incubators of terrorism in the Middle East. It would also be wise for the United States to invest in the complete arsenal of national security tools, particularly diplomacy and economic engagement tools aimed at influencing behaviors of countries like Russia, Syria and Iran.

Second, Congress should examine any proposed weapons sales like additional arms to Saudi Arabia and military assistance to countries like Egypt very carefully and ask tough questions to the Trump administration and America's partners in the region. The central question is how this security cooperation will produce greater stability and result in de-escalation, rather than the continued fragmentation of the state system in the Middle East. Another key question is determining what impact these weapons have on Russia's strategy in the Middle East and North Africa.

Lastly, Congress should renew the debate on a new authorization for the use of military force and raise questions about the creeping U.S. military escalation in key parts of the Middle East and North Africa. The number of U.S. troops operating closer to the frontlines of key conflicts including Syria has increased over the past year, and it essential that the new U.S. administration clarify its overall strategy for the region.