

Opening Statement of the Honorable Ted Poe (R-TX), Chairman
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade Hearing:
“Russia: Counterterrorism Partner or Fanning the Flames?”
November 7, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

The purpose of this hearing is to unmask Putin’s two-faced game in the fight against terrorism. In 2015 Russia began a military intervention in Syria, claiming it was waging war on ISIS and international terrorism. To some this was welcome news. It seemed that there may be a rare moment of cooperation between former Cold War foes. Moscow and Washington would work together to combat terrorism.

This was a fantasy. Moscow’s actions in Syria have shown it is more interested in saving the brutal Assad regime than truly fighting ISIS. To accomplish this goal, the Kremlin partnered with Iran and its terrorist proxies to suppress Syrians calling for democracy. While Moscow certainly has killed some known terrorists and helped reduce territory controlled by ISIS, it also strengthened other terrorists. Its reckless methods and support for Assad the butcher destroyed any chance of Russia being an effective counterterrorism partner. Russia’s indiscriminate bombing has targeted hospitals, schools, aid convoys, and rescue crews like the heroic White Helmets. Its campaign of terror drove once moderate Syrians to embrace extremist groups that also fight Assad and his backers.

Despite our success in retaking key ISIS strongholds, Russia officials claim the US supports ISIS and consistently threaten our forces in Syria. Meanwhile, new Russian-made military equipment is increasingly showing up in the hands of Iranian-backed terrorist groups like Hezbollah. Even more dangerous, Russia is effectively carving an Iranian-controlled corridor that stretches from Tehran to the borders of Israel, threatening our valued ally. Putin is laying the foundation for chronic instability in this vital part of the world.

Moscow can never be our partner so long as it continues to enable Iran, prop-up Assad, arms Israel’s foes, and contributes to the slaughter and misery of millions of Syrians. But it isn’t only in Syria that the Kremlin is backing terrorism. Senior US military officials have claimed that Russia is now arming its former enemies in the Afghan Taliban, providing them with machine guns and other medium weight weaponry.

We also know that Putin is backing violent separatists in Ukraine and Georgia in his bloody quest to bully and conquer his neighbors. By arming thugs, enflaming ethnic tensions, and secretly sending his soldiers across the border, Putin is destabilizing countries that aspire to have closer ties with the West. Let’s not be fooled: these separatists are not noble freedom fighters. Pro-Russian rebels in Ukraine have been accused by the U.N. of murder, kidnap, and torture. In the last 16 months, these separatists have used car bombs to target Ukrainian security officials, journalists, and Kremlin critics and continue to ignore ceasefire agreements. They are terrorists of a different stripe, but like jihadist they believe they can achieve their political goals through violence.

This should be no surprise, since their patron in the Kremlin uses terror to maintain his own grip on power. The Napoleon of Siberia routinely orders the assassination of his political opponents and journalists exposing his corruption. According US intelligence officials, at least 14 deaths are suspected to be linked to the Kremlin in the UK alone.

Russia's terrorism has even struck this city, our nation's capital, Washington, DC. In 2015, Putin's former media czar came here to meet with our Justice Department to share the inner workings of the Kremlin's propaganda machine. He never made the meeting. Instead he was found dead from blunt force injuries. Investigators ruled it an accident but members of the FBI have claimed otherwise.

This is unacceptable. The pattern of prominent Russians and Kremlin critics who end up dead under shady circumstances is impossible to ignore. The fact that Putin's terror has reached our shores must be taken seriously.

But make no mistake: Russia does have a serious Islamic terrorist problem. Since 1970, more than 3,500 Russians are believed to have been killed in over 800 terrorist attacks. Islamic radicals from Chechnya [Chech-ne-a] have conducted horrific attacks across Russia, including the 2004 Beslan [Bes-lon] school massacre that murdered 300 people – most of them children. ISIS has also struck at Russia, blowing-up a Russian charter plane over the Sinai in 2015 that killed all 224 people onboard. According to a recent report, Russia is the largest source of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq.

With this shared threat, the U.S. and Russia should be natural allies against terrorism. But Putin's brutal conduct and persistent ambition to rival the U.S. has made Russia a state sponsor of terrorism. Putin arms terrorist like the Taliban, Hezbollah, and thugs around the world so long as they advance his goals of undermining democracy and challenging America.

It is time we see Putin for what he is: an international terrorist. And that's just the way it is.