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**“Russia: Counterterrorism Partner
or Fanning the Flames”**

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Introduction

Chairman Poe, Chairman Rohrabacher, Ranking Member Keating, Ranking Member Meeks, and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak with you today about Russia's strategy for fighting terrorism and the implications of trying to forge a closer U.S.-Russia counterterrorism (CT) partnership.

President Putin and other top Russian officials have long suggested that Russia and the United States should work more closely on counterterrorism. On 9/11, Putin was the first international leader to call President Bush to discuss the attack and offer Russia's support for closer counterterrorism cooperation. More recently, following its September 2015 military intervention in Syria, the Kremlin proposed that the United States and Russia cooperate militarily to fight the so-called Islamic State, currently one of the chief instigators of terrorism around the world.

At first glance, it might seem natural that two nations that have suffered from numerous terrorist attacks should collaborate more closely in fighting terrorism. Some argue that closer collaboration on counterterrorism could also improve our bilateral relationship as a whole and lead Moscow to adopt a more cooperative approach on other issues, thereby advancing U.S. national security interests.

Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. The Kremlin is a state sponsor and ally of groups that use terrorist tactics against civilians, such as its separatist proxies in eastern Ukraine or the Shia militias with whom it cooperates in western Syria. Russia is also actively engaged in a covert struggle to undermine democratic institutions in the United States and among our Western allies. Under a different Kremlin leadership, therefore, it might make sense to work together on CT operations or countering violent extremism. But today, the Putin regime's geopolitical ambitions and CT strategy are antithetical to U.S. national security interests, contribute directly to the radicalization of extremist groups, and are contrary to our basic values.

Lest we forget, it is the current Russian regime that provided the missiles, the launcher, the software, the training, and perhaps even the triggerman to shoot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, killing all 298 people onboard. The Putin regime also deployed its military to Syria to annihilate Aleppo by indiscriminately bombing civilian areas and humanitarian convoys and reducing to rubble a city with a prewar population of 2.5 million people. And it is the Putin regime whose security forces are responsible for killings, torture, physical abuse, and politically motivated abductions across the Russian Federation. For these reasons, we should stay as far away from a CT partnership with Russia's current leadership as possible.

The Kremlin's Counterterrorism Strategy

Russia's counterterrorism strategy relies on overwhelming force to eliminate extremists. This strategy is not geared towards winning hearts and minds; its singular focus is physical liquidation of insurgents. During the Chechen wars of the 1990s, Russian federal authorities applied a scorched earth campaign that laid waste to entire villages that were perceived as fostering the insurgency. Russian military forces were notorious for carrying out human rights abuses such as abductions, summary executions, and torture. Both then and now, security forces in the North Caucasus republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria have applied the principle of collective retribution, often imprisoning, threatening, and sometimes even killing relatives of suspected militants. While some have described these tactics as brutal but effective, it has become clear that they are not just morally reprehensible but contribute to long-term radicalization of local communities. Such collective repression directly gives rise to the phenomenon of suicide bombings by "black widows" or other family members of slain or tortured insurgents who seek to avenge their kin.

Furthermore, Russian-led CT operations pay little regard to "collateral" civilian casualties among non-combatants. Russian security services' storming of the Dubrovka theater in Moscow in 2002 and their bungled attempt to free children and parents who were held hostage in a primary school in Beslan, North Ossetia in 2004 are both tragic examples of CT missions carried out with little regard for civilians, as evidenced by the more than 130 civilian casualties in Moscow and at least 385 (and possibly more) civilians killed in Beslan.

Equally disturbingly, Russian authorities have used the pretext of “fighting extremism” to crack down on Russia’s democratic political opposition and other dissidents. Extremism is so broadly defined under Russia’s current legal regime that it has been used to imprison an investigative journalist for exposing official embezzlement, and sentence a 46-year-old single mother for posting information on social media that was critical of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. The so-called Yarovaya law, named after Russian legislator Irina Yarovaya and enacted in July 2016, also amended Russian CT legislation to legalize mass surveillance by requiring telecommunications companies to retain all telephone and internet data for six months beginning in July 2018. Furthermore, the law bans preaching or praying outside of designated religious institutions and criminalizes the involvement of others in “mass unrest,” a euphemism for organizing political protests.

Past Efforts at Counterterrorism Cooperation

The United States has tried many times in the past to cooperate with Russia on counterterrorism, and we should look closely at these efforts when evaluating the potential for future CT cooperation.

During the first term of the Obama administration, the U.S. and Russia established a Bilateral Presidential Commission that included a CT Working Group (among many others). At the direction of Presidents Obama and Medvedev, the group developed an ambitious agenda that included law enforcement cooperation, transportation security, intelligence sharing, terrorism finance, collaboration on counterterrorism technology, and coordination of U.S. and Russian positions within multilateral CT-oriented fora. Unfortunately, however, the working group proved to be a huge disappointment.

From 2010 - 2013, I served as the Deputy Director of the State Department’s Office of Russian Affairs, where my role included overseeing the Commission’s working groups. Although the co-chairs of the CT Working Group did meet a number of times during this period, the group failed to institutionalize any enduring law enforcement cooperation, intelligence sharing, or joint action on

terrorism finance. From the start, it was clear that the Russian side was unwilling to discuss sensitive information and reluctant to speak about its own security vulnerabilities, which meant that working group sessions often devolved into an exchange of pleasantries and recitation of canned talking points. Joint events were held largely for show, such as a visit by Russian officials to Washington in May 2010 to learn about security measures on the U.S. rail system. As the U.S. coordinator of the CT Working Group, Daniel Benjamin, noted in an op-ed written earlier this year, “Russia’s sclerotic bureaucracy and general lack of interest (especially with issues like deradicalization) made progress [on CT] impossible.”

The terrorist bombing at Moscow’s Domodedovo airport in January 2011 did spur bilateral discussions that resulted in a May 2011 Memorandum of Understanding between the U.S. Transportation Security Administration and Russia’s Ministry of Transportation on security of civil aviation. In May 2011, the United States also formally designated the Caucasus Emirate – the primary terrorist group in Russia at the time – as a terrorist organization and included its leader, Doku Umarov, in the FBI’s Rewards for Justice program. These moves were viewed positively by the Russian government. However, with Mr. Putin’s return to the Kremlin in May 2012, bilateral relations began to deteriorate. In the fall of 2012, the Kremlin expelled the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) from Russia and informed the United States that it would be abrogating an agreement on law enforcement cooperation beginning in January 2013. This effectively put a stop to any real CT cooperation.

The exchange of information relating to the April 2013 Boston marathon bombing is often cited as an example of close CT cooperation during this period. Russia did indeed provide information to the FBI and CIA in 2011 informing the United States that suspected bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev and his mother held extremist views, but the information was general and lacked any incriminating specifics. When the FBI’s Legal Attaché in Moscow followed up in August 2011 with a written request for further information, the Russian government did not respond. After the bombing, however, Russia did grant access to U.S. law enforcement authorities to conduct interviews and gather additional information.

In mid-2013, U.S.-Russian relations deteriorated further as a result of Russia's decision to harbor former NSA contractor Edward Snowden. In spite of the Kremlin's increasingly adversarial approach during this period, however, the Sochi Olympics in February 2014 were simply too important for the United States not to make every effort to work collaboratively with Moscow to ensure the safety of the Games. In the fall of 2012, I traveled to Sochi at the invitation of the Russian government with a group of diplomatic, security, and intelligence officials from a select group of other countries to review Russia's security arrangements for the Games. We learned upon arriving in Sochi, however, that the senior Russian official who would be our chief interlocutor was not a CT expert, but rather the top counter-intelligence official in Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB). This was a telling indication of the Kremlin's primary focus as it prepared to host the Games. The following year, as an NSC Director for Russia, I also met bilaterally with counterparts from the Russian Security Council to discuss how we could expand information sharing on potential threats to the Olympics. Although the tone of these conversations was always cordial, the practical results were meager.

This is because Russia's strategy for protecting the Olympic Games from a terrorist attack rested on three basic pillars, none of which required cooperation with foreign partners. These included: (1) building an impenetrable security perimeter around the Olympic facilities and flooding the Olympic zone with Russian security agents; (2) employing massive force against insurgent communities in the neighboring North Caucasus federal republics; and (3) facilitating the movement of extremists from Russia to Syria. Particularly after the December 2013 Volgograd suicide bombing, which killed 32 civilians only months before the Opening Ceremonies, these efforts were accelerated. Although the Olympic Games themselves thankfully occurred without incident, Moscow's encouragement of insurgent travel to Syria will no doubt have lasting negative repercussions once the Islamic State collapses in Iraq and Syria and some of these fighters begin to return home.

Russia's Intervention in Syria: Fueling the Conflict

According to President Putin, the goal of Russia's intervention in Syria was to fight the Islamic State. This rationale has been belied, however, by Russia's

airstrikes, which have overwhelmingly targeted the country's opposition to President Asad rather than the Islamic State. Some estimates put the ratio of airstrikes against the opposition versus the Islamic State at 4-to-1.

Russia has also prioritized constraining U.S. forces in the region over its fight against the Islamic State. For example, Moscow deployed sophisticated air defense systems to Syria such as the S-400 surface-to-air missile system, which is located at the Hmeymim airbase, and its most capable air-to-air fighters like the Su-30 and Su-35, despite the fact that neither the Islamic State nor any other extremist group in the region has access to air power. Clearly, these assets are meant to keep aircraft from the United States and other members of the counter-ISIS Coalition away from Asad regime forces in western, central, and southern Syria.

Contrary to Putin's assertions, Russia's chief goal in Syria is to prop up the Asad regime. In addition to Syrian regime forces, its allies on the ground include Lebanese Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, or Quds Force. Partnering with Russia to fight the Islamic State in Syria would therefore be tantamount to partnering with Hezbollah or Iran. This dynamic has only gotten worse as Iran has expanded its influence in the region. The agreement between President Trump and President Putin announced at the G20 summit in Hamburg to create "safe zones" in southern Syria has predictably created a backdoor for Russia's ally Iran to expand a so-called "Shia crescent" of influence stretching from southern Iraq and southern Syria into Lebanon. Russia's stoking of sectarian tensions between the Asad regime, Hezbollah, and Quds Force on the one hand and Sunni Arab groups on the other, fuels the Syrian conflict and further radicalizes local Sunni communities.

Russia's fanning the flames of the Syrian conflict is made worse by its attacks on Syrian civilians. Russia's indiscriminate airstrikes using unguided "dumb bombs" and its blatant disregard for civilian casualties have radicalized many previous non-combatants. Moscow either fails to understand the consequences of its actions or chooses not to care. As a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, I participated as part of an interagency delegation in negotiations with senior Russian military officers in August 2016 to try to find a way to deliver humanitarian aid to the then-besieged city of Aleppo. It was clear to me during these negotiations that the

Russian generals were playing for time as their forces closed in on Aleppo and that Moscow had no intention of allowing humanitarian assistance to reach civilian areas. Nevertheless, we tried in good faith to reach an agreement. Our Russian counterparts insisted disingenuously that Aleppo's civilian areas had been infiltrated by extremist Sunni groups and that humanitarian relief could be used to support these extremists. After devising a careful plan to ensure that only UN-monitored supplies would be let into these areas, the Russian military finally agreed. The following day, however, when Foreign Minister Lavrov flew to Geneva to meet with Secretary Kerry, he reneged on the agreement.

Today, Russia and the Asad regime have nearly complete control over central and western Syria, save for the Idlib region, which remains squarely within their sites. Less fortunately for the Kremlin, however, the fall of the Islamic State stronghold of Raqqa will likely precipitate the return of some of the roughly 2,500 Russian citizen fighters who joined the Syrian conflict.

Russia's Support for the Taliban in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, Russia's provision of arms to the Taliban further testifies to its destabilizing role in the broader Middle East and Central Asia. Moscow's decision to support the Taliban aims to achieve four basic goals. First, the Kremlin is hedging its bets in case the Taliban comes back to power and breaks the current military stalemate with the Afghan government. Second, Moscow seeks to weaken the U.S.-led coalition and undermine the NATO-trained and equipped Afghan forces to accelerate the decline of U.S. power in the region. Third, by arming the Taliban, Moscow gains leverage and demonstrates it is a major regional actor that other powers like India and Pakistan must contend with. Finally, Moscow has an interest in empowering the Taliban to fight jihadist groups that Russia opposes, like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has long been a thorn in Russia's side. Unfortunately, Moscow's support for the Taliban only fuels conflict and destabilizes the region over the long run.

Russia as a Malign International Actor

In addition to its destabilizing activities in Syria and Afghanistan, which have directly undermined U.S. interests, we must also not lose sight of the fact that Russia has trampled international law by inciting violence and deploying its forces to eastern Ukraine. Russia's activities in Afghanistan and Syria have fueled violent jihadism in the region, but in Ukraine, Russia itself has carried out targeted assassinations, sabotage, and operations that are frankly difficult to distinguish from state-sponsored terrorism. Ukraine's security services have blamed the recent spate of vehicle-borne explosions in Kyiv squarely on Russia. In an unprecedented TV appearance this September, the head of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), Vasil Hrytsak, accused his Russian counterpart Aleksander Bortnikov, the head of the FSB, of not only standing behind prior bombings of civilians in Odessa, Kharkiv, and Kherson, but also of "breaking all rules" by planning to bomb Russian citizens in a series of false-flag operations intended to serve as a pretext for further violence against Ukraine.

Russia's Information War on the West

If Russia's activities elsewhere in the world were not enough to give one pause, we must ask ourselves what sort of CT partner Russia would make given its ongoing information war against the United States and our European partners and allies. In our own country, the Kremlin has sought to inflame racial tensions, deepen social divides, and set Americans against each other by spreading inflammatory rhetoric and lies. Russia has taken a particular interest in spreading propaganda on the topic of Muslim migrants, both in the United State and in Europe. Russian officials, for example, propagated the fake story that a Russian-German girl was raped by Muslim immigrants in Germany to stoke discord and set the public against German Chancellor Angela Merkel. In the United States, Russia trolls and social media accounts have also tried to fan the flames of anti-Muslim xenophobia. For example, the "Heart of Texas" Facebook account tried to stoke anti-Muslim feelings in Texas, while in Idaho the "SecuredBorders" site spread false allegations of rape that were used to incite anti-Muslim sentiments. Both accounts were tied to Russian trolls. Western cybersecurity companies have also revealed that the "CyberCaliphate" hacking group, which was believed to have been run by the Islamic State – and which hacked into one of the largest French television

networks, TV5 – was actually a false-flag operation run by Russia’s intelligence services.

How to Engage Russia on CT

Given Russia’s actions around the world directly promoting and contributing to the spread of terrorism, should we then avoid all discussions of counterterrorism with Moscow? I believe there is a role for limited but persistent dialogue with Russia on CT issues, as long as we remain clear-eyed about Russia’s aims and intentions.

First, given the proximity of Russian and Counter-ISIS Coalition forces in Syria, there is clearly a rationale for continuing the communications channel the Pentagon established with the Russian Ministry of Defense to deconflict operations in the air and on the ground. Both sides have an interest in avoiding an unintended escalation of the conflict, and despite Russia’s clear pattern of trying to box the U.S. out of regions in Syria that it considers strategically important, this channel has nevertheless served a useful purpose.

Second, the United States must continue to share information with Russia through intelligence and law enforcement channels about plots against Russian officials and civilians. This is not only the moral and right thing to do, but it also demonstrates to Russia’s security services that despite all their propaganda, the United States is willing to help protect Russian citizens.

Finally, though the chances of meaningful cooperation are slim, the United States should keep making extradition requests and using law enforcement channels to request information from Russia whenever there is a need. My experience of working with Russian officials shows that even if the Kremlin’s grand strategy is to weaken the United States, there are officials within Russia’s bureaucracy who genuinely want to cooperate or be helpful, and the more ties we cultivate with such officials, whether productive or not, the more channels of communication we have available in the event of a crisis.

Conclusion

Chairman Poe, Chairman Rohrabacher, Ranking Member Keating, Ranking Member Meeks, and members of the Committee, the United States government has no higher purpose than keeping its citizens safe and secure. That is why our CT policy has to be smart and leverage as many instruments of national power, hard and soft, as possible. In an ideal world, we would partner with Russia to keep our nations safe from the threat of terrorism and cooperate on issues like countering violent extremism or terrorism finance. However, the current Russian regime is misusing CT policy to suppress dissent, weaken the United States and NATO, and project Russia's global influence, often at our expense. Through the repression of its own citizens and alliances with hostile powers that foment terrorism, Moscow is fanning the flames of terrorism around the world. We should continue to communicate with Russia because we have no other choice, but we must do so with our eyes wide open, fully cognizant of the threat Moscow poses to our own security.