

**Testimony by Simon Saradzhyan<sup>1</sup> at hearing entitled “Russia: Counterterrorism Partner or Fanning the Flames” and held by the House Committee on Foreign Affairs on Nov. 7, 2017.**

Allow me to begin by saying that I am delivering this testimony in my personal capacity; it does not represent the views and positions of Harvard Kennedy School or its Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs or of the Russia Matters Project, and it is based solely on open sources. This testimony seeks to answer the following questions that I have been asked to address: (1) Can Russia be an effective counterterrorism partner for the United States? (2) What is Russia’s counterterrorism strategy? (3) What is Russia’s military engagement in the Middle East? (4) What are the current terrorist threats within Russia? (5) How do Russian counterterrorism and military operations impact the terror threat worldwide?

**Question 1. Can Russia be an effective counterterrorism partner for the United States?**

**Answer 1.** Theoretically, Russia can be an effective partner for the U.S. in countering non-state actors that espouse use of violence in their efforts to establish Islamist rule within and without the greater Middle East (GME) and the post-Soviet neighborhood and that are willing to use force against stakeholders that oppose their plans. The U.S. and Russia are both such stakeholders and they share a very important interest in preventing these non-state actors from overthrowing secular regimes in the GME and from targeting Washington, Moscow and their respective allies in violent campaigns using terrorist strategy. GME-based Islamist non-state actors that have targeted both the U.S. and Russia, as well as their allies, and continue to do so include al-Qaeda and Islamic State. The United States’ and Russia’s shared interest in minimizing and/or dismantling threats posed by AQ, IS and other violent non-state actors have made it possible to preserve some level of U.S.-Russian counterterrorism coordination and intelligence sharing despite the sharp deterioration in the bilateral relationship caused by the conflict in Ukraine and other factors. However, the current level of U.S.-Russian CT interaction appear to be a far cry from earlier periods—specifically, in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and then during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev when U.S. and Russian government agencies responsible for counterterrorism actively worked with each other in the framework of the bilateral presidential commission to tame the international challenges posed by groups employing terrorism to attain political goals.

I have access only to open sources, so I do not have the full picture, but judging by these sources, my supposition is that some of the U.S.-Russian dialogue on counterterrorism may have been revived since Donald Trump’s arrival at the White House. Three recent events and statements attest to this: the trip that CIA director Mike Pompeo reportedly made to Moscow in May<sup>2</sup>; the recent claim by the director of Russia’s Federal Security Service, Alexander Bortnikov, that the

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<sup>2</sup> Damien Sharkov, “Mike Pompeo’s Moscow Visit: What the CIA Director May Have Discussed In Russia,” Newsweek, August 25, 2017. Available at <http://www.newsweek.com/mike-pompeo-moscow-visit-what-cia-director-may-have-discussed-russia-655241>

FBI and CIA sent officials “at the level of department heads” to an annual gathering of security service chiefs in Russia in October<sup>3</sup>; and Russian President Vladimir Putin’s October 2017 statement that the U.S. and Russia “have a dialogue at the working level, at the level of special services, the Defense Ministry and the Foreign Ministry, almost on a weekly basis” on the Syrian issue.<sup>4</sup> Also, while U.S. laws prohibit the U.S. military from cooperating with the Russian military on Syria, the two sides are actively engaged in the so-called deconflicting of their respective campaigns in Syria, which is very important because it helps reduce the chances of Washington and Moscow stumbling into an accidental conflict.

Russia certainly has the capacity to become an effective counterterrorism partner to the U.S. in theory. It traditionally boasts formidable intelligence capabilities in the greater Middle East, as well as in the post-Soviet neighborhood, from which some of the international threats of terrorist attacks are currently emanating. Greater sharing of such intelligence by Russia would benefit the United States. Russia’s security and defense agencies also play an important role in deterring and targeting terrorist groups operating within the former Soviet Union, in such areas as Russia’s own North Caucasus, and in the Central Asian republics. As we know, natives of these regions have staged attacks against the U.S., Russia and their allies in the past and, unfortunately, there’s a significant possibility that such attacks will continue.

Whether Russia’s theoretical ability to become an effective CT partner for the U.S. will become reality depends on a number of factors, most of which have little to do with terrorism per se, but a lot to do with shaping the general political relationship between the two countries. One such factor is the outcome of the multiple investigations into Russia’s alleged meddling in the U.S. elections pursued by special counsel Robert Mueller and Congressional committees. Another factor is the Ukraine conflict, which, if unresolved, will continue to limit America’s willingness to cooperate with Russia. Yet another factor is the resolution of the conflict in Syria, which the U.S. and Russia continue to disagree about, although these differences are not as stark as in the case of the Ukraine conflict. The U.S. has also introduced a number of punitive measures against Russia over its conduct in Ukraine and Syria, as well as its alleged interference in the U.S. presidential election, that reduce the possibilities for U.S.-Russian counterterrorism cooperation. These measures include:

- The [National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017](#) prohibits any U.S. funds “from being used for bilateral military-to-military cooperation between the governments of the United States and Russia until DOD certifies to Congress that Russia: (1) has ceased its occupation of Ukrainian territory and its aggressive activities that threaten the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; and (2) is abiding by the terms of and taking steps in support of the Minsk Protocols regarding a ceasefire in eastern Ukraine. Specifies exceptions and permits a waiver for national security.”
- The [Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act](#) of 2017 bars any “significant transaction with a person that is part of, or operates for or on behalf of, the

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<sup>3</sup> Russia in Review, Sept. 29-Oct. 6, 2017. Available at <https://www.russiamatters.org/news/russia-review/russia-review-sept-29-oct-6-2017>

<sup>4</sup> “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,” Kremlin.ru, October 18, 2017. Available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55882>

defense or intelligence sectors of the Government of the Russian Federation, including the Main Intelligence Agency of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation or the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation.”<sup>5</sup>

U.S. President Trump has repeatedly expressed interest in having the U.S. cooperate with Russia on countering terrorist threats and he may discuss this issue when he meets Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit that is to take place in Vietnam on November 8-10. However, given the aforementioned constraints, it is difficult to imagine a qualitative improvement in U.S.-Russian counterterrorism cooperation unless there’s significant progress on implementing the Minsk-2 accords and unless the ongoing investigations fail to produce any significant evidence of Russian attempts to influence the outcome of the 2016 elections.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, even if progress is achieved both on Ukraine and Syria, it remains unclear whether and which of the U.S. sanctions on Russian government agencies would be lifted.

### **Question 2. What is Russia’s counterterrorism strategy?**

**Answer 2:** The Russian government’s counterterrorism strategy employs violent and non-violent means both within Russia and abroad to attain the primary goal of reducing the threat of major and/or repeated terrorist attacks or the outbreak of insurgency targeting Russia or threatening regime change in countries allied with Russia.

Internally, Russian authorities have traditionally focused on using force to degrade various groups based in the North Caucasus and engaged in anti-state violence irrespective of whether these groups employ terrorist or guerilla strategies in their violent campaigns. More recently Russian authorities have also had to deal with the proliferation of militant Islamist networks to other Russian regions, including the Volga, the Urals and Siberia. Again, the response to this proliferation has a robust forceful component. At the same time, Russian authorities have been trying to apply non-forceful methods of countering political violence in individual provinces of Russia. For instance, Russian authorities have tried to lower disengagement costs for those engaged in political violence by promising amnesty or lesser charges to those who agree to disengage before a certain deadline. Such amnesty campaigns have taken place, with varying degree of success, in Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia and other provinces of Russia’s North Caucasus.<sup>7</sup> Russian authorities have also occasionally turned a blind eye to those domestic

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<sup>5</sup> Some of these punitive measures were originally [imposed](#) by President Obama in late 2016 in response to Russia’s alleged interference in the presidential election. Congress voted to approve the sanctions, as part of the larger Countering America’s Adversaries through Sanctions Act in July 2017 and President Trump then signed this act into law in August 2017. In compliance with this law the Trump administration unveiled a [list of Russian entities](#) with which significant transactions are prohibited. In addition to the Federal Security Service (FSB), Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces (GRU), the following three Russian entities are included in the list and identified as part of the Intelligence Sector of the Government of the Russian Federation: Autonomous Noncommercial Professional Organization/Professional Association of Designers of Data Processing (ANO PO KSI), Special Technology Center and Zorsecurity.

<sup>6</sup> In my view, while the recent discussion of introducing international peacekeepers into the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine is a welcome development, the implementation of Minsk-2 remains unlikely in the near to medium term. In contrast, I am slightly more optimistic about the possibility of a political resolution of the Syrian conflict.

<sup>7</sup> One of the [larger amnesties](#) for rebels was introduced by the State Duma, Russia’s lower house of parliament, in July 2006 and it applied to those who committed minor crimes as members of so-called “illegal armed formations”

terrorists and guerillas who have expressed interest in relocating to Syria and Iraq in hopes of joining the ranks of those fighting for the Islamic State or al-Qaeda or other terrorist and guerilla groups operating in these countries, according to reports in Russia's investigative *Novaya Gazeta* weekly<sup>8</sup> and other Russian media. Russian authorities have denied these reports.

It should be noted that Russian leaders publicly profess an understanding that at least some political violence is partially driven by the ills of a given society. President Vladimir Putin, for instance, recently claimed that a lack of education is among the factors that fuel terrorism. Hence, when assessing the prospects of an end to the Syrian conflict, Putin noted in his October remarks at the Valdai Club: "There is every reason to believe—I will put it cautiously—that we will finish off the terrorists in the short term, but that is no cause for joy, [or] for saying that terrorism is over and done with. Because, first, terrorism as a phenomenon is deeply rooted—it is rooted in the injustice of today's world, the raw deal that many nations and ethnic and religious groups get, and the lack of comprehensive education in entire countries across the world. The lack of a normal, proper, basic education is fertile soil for terrorism."<sup>9</sup>

However, there are other, more influential factors that, in my view, are not always fully addressed in Russia's counterterrorism approach, although they have been identified by scholars of political violence as either directly causing "men to rebel" or facilitating such rebellions. These factors include abuses committed by individual representatives of the Russian authorities. There is no shortage of scholars studying the North Caucasus who believe that serious abuses of local residents by certain representatives of the authorities in the region have played an important role in fuelling political violence in Russia; these include: Domitilla Sagramoso,<sup>10</sup> John O'Loughlin,<sup>11</sup> Brian Taylor,<sup>12</sup> Neil Bowie,<sup>13</sup> Emil Souleimanov, Huseyn Aliyev,<sup>14</sup> Jean-François Ratelle,<sup>15</sup> Robert Ware and Enver Kisriev.<sup>16</sup>

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in Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, North Ossetia, Chechnya and Stavropolsky Krai in 1999-2006.

<sup>8</sup> Elena Milashina, "Khalifat? Primanka dlya Durakov!" *Novaya Gazeta* July 28, 2015. Available at <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/07/29/65056-171-halifat-primanka-dlya-durakov-187>

<sup>9</sup> "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club," Kremlin.ru, October 18, 2017. Available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55882>

<sup>10</sup> Sagramoso, Domitilla. "The Radicalisation of Islamic Salafi Jamaats in the North Caucasus: Moving Closer to the Global Jihadist Movement?." *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 3 (2012): 561-595.

<sup>11</sup> O'Loughlin, John, Edward C. Holland, and Frank Witmer. "The Changing Geography of Violence in Russia's North Caucasus, 1999-2011: Regional Trends and Local Dynamics in Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria." *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 52.5 (2011): 596-630.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, Brian D. "Putin's 'Historic Mission': State-Building and the Power Ministries in the North Caucasus." *Problems of Post-Communism* 54, no. 6 (2007): 3-16.

<sup>13</sup> Bowie, Neil G., "Trends in the Use of Terror by States since the End of the Cold War," in *State Terrorism and Human Rights: International Responses since the End of the Cold War*, ed. Duncan, Gullian, Orla Lynch, Gilbert Ramsay, Alison M.S. Watson, (London, UK: Routledge, 2013), 47.

<sup>14</sup> Souleimanov, Emil, and Huseyn Aliyev. *The Individual Disengagement of Avengers, Nationalists, and Jihadists: Why Ex-militants Choose to Abandon Violence in the North Caucasus*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 57.

<sup>15</sup> Ratelle, Jean-François, and Emil Aslan Souleimanov. "Retaliation in Rebellion: The Missing Link to Explaining Insurgent Violence in Dagestan." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2015): 1-20.

<sup>16</sup> Ware, Robert Bruce, and Enver Kisriev. *Dagestan: Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus: Russian Hegemony and Islamic Resistance in the North Caucasus* (p. 190). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

Externally, Russia has also focused its counterterrorism strategy on the employment of both violent and non-violent means to attain the following ends: (1) assisting friendly regimes in preventing the emergence of safe havens for groups that are hostile to Russia and eliminating established safe havens; (2) preventing the overthrow of these regimes by such groups or organizations; (3) eliminating nationals of post-Soviet states that have joined such groups; (4) eliminating leading figures in Russia's domestic insurgency and terrorism who have left Russia but continued to support political violence in Russia. As the Syrian conflict demonstrates, Russia uses mostly military means to attain these and other goals, but Russian leaders also maintain that they realize that a lasting solution can be attained only if (a) political compromise is reached and (b) factors that either directly cause or facilitate political violence in Syria are addressed.<sup>17</sup>

### **Question 3: What is Russia's military engagement in the Middle East?**

**Answer 3:** Russia's military engagement in the Middle East is first and foremost focused on Syria. In my view, which I outlined in November 2015,<sup>18</sup> the initial minimal objectives of Russia's military engagement in Syria were: (1) to prevent Assad's government from losing control over the remaining part of Syria and from being ousted from power; (2) to bleed Islamic State, al-Qaeda and other non-state actors that have nationals of post-Soviet republics in their ranks and/or which are a threat to security for Russia and its allies; (3) to maintain control of Russia's military facilities in Syria; (4) to prevent Syria from becoming a failed, "terrorist" state that would be run by the likes of IS and play host to non-state actors hostile to Russia; and (5) to gain leverage vis-à-vis the West that can be used in resolving the Ukraine crisis. One could say today that all of these objectives, except for the last one, have been accomplished. The medium- and longer-term objectives of Russia's military engagement in Syria included: (6) to complete roll-back of IS, AQ, etc. in Syria including the "neutralization" of Russian nationals in their ranks, and achieve political resolution of the conflict; (7) to preserve access of Russian companies to Syria's market to ensure that the country continues to buy Russian-made arms and machinery; (8) to ensure that Russia's reputation as a reliable protector of its allies (in the eyes of the latter) is maintained; and (9) to ensure that the example of Syria reaffirms Russia's claim to having a say in major decisions on the global scene in places where Russia plays what its foreign policy doctrine defines as a "balancing role," including the Middle East. One could say that Russia has made significant progress in achieving these four longer-term goals, which advance a number of Russia's national interests that are at stake in Syria (see chart below).

<b>Russia's vital national interests at stake in Syria</b>	
<b>Interest</b>	<b>Factors that can impact Russia's interest</b>

<sup>17</sup>In his remarks at last month's Valdai Club meeting, Putin praised international efforts to encourage moderate opposition groups and Assad's government to reach a political resolution of the conflict in Syria that would involve drafting a new constitution. He also spoke in favor of addressing some of the factors that he thinks had fueled the surge in political violence there, such as lack of education. "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club," Kremlin.ru, October 18, 2017. Available at <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55882>

<sup>18</sup> Saradzhyan, Simon. "Russia's Actions in Syria: Underlying Interests and Policy Objectives." Presentation at Harvard University's [Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies](#), November 16, 2015. Available at <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/russias-actions-syria-underlying-interests-and-policy-objectives>

1. Prevent, deter and reduce threats of secession from Russia, insurgency within Russia or in areas adjacent to Russia and armed conflicts waged against Russia, its allies or in the vicinity of Russian frontiers;	Threat of “export” of insurgency from Syria to Russia: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-time ties between al-Qaeda and North Caucasus insurgency;</li> <li>• IS has established a “vilayat” in Russia;</li> <li>• Thousands of nationals of post-Soviet states fighting in ranks of IS, AQ and other groups in Iraq and Syria.</li> </ul>
2. 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 can lead it to thrive;	Syria as failed state with Central Asian republics among the potential next targets for emboldened architects of the “Islamic State.”
3. 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;	Russia’s military campaign in Syria was for some time seen as an opportunity for Moscow to repair relations with the West, but that opportunity failed to materialize.
4. Ensure the viability and stability of major markets/flows of Russian exports and imports;	Plans for Iran-Iraq-Syria and Qatar-Turkey pipelines?
5. Ensure steady development and diversification of the Russian economy and its integration into global markets;	Syria is a traditional buyer of Russian arms; not too many countries buy Russian machinery, but Syria does.
6. Prevent neighboring nations from acquiring nuclear arms and their long-range delivery systems on Russian borders; secure nuclear weapons and materials;	Both IS and al-Qaeda have displayed practical interest in acquiring nuclear weapons.
7. Prevent large-scale or sustained terrorist attacks on Russia;	Both IS and al-Qaeda have urged their supporters to carry out terrorist attacks against Russia and some have heeded these calls.
8. Ensure Russian allies' survival and their active cooperation with Russia.	Assad’s Syria is one of the allies Russia has preserved after disintegration of the Soviet Union. <sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Saradzhyan, Simon. “Russia’s Actions in Syria: Underlying Interests and Policy Objectives.” Presentation at Harvard University’s [Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies](https://www.daviscenter.org/), November 16, 2015. Available at <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/russias-actions-syria-underlying-interests-and-policy-objectives>

As of last year, Russian Defense Ministry sources estimated the number of Russian soldiers deployed in Syria at the time at 1,600, while then-Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov (now Russia's ambassador to the U.S.) put the total number of personnel of all of Russia's so-called power agencies that would be rotated in and out of Syria at 25,000.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the latest edition of *The Military Balance*, produced by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, put the number of Russian servicemen in Syria at 4,000. This authoritative publication also counted seven tanks, 20 APCs, 25 warplanes, 24 helicopters and two S-400 air defense batteries deployed at various locations, including the air base at Latakia and naval facility at Tartus.<sup>21</sup> While mostly focused on conducting air strikes, providing strategic advice to Syrian commanders and policing lines of separation, Russia's official military grouping there has also reportedly participated in combat, mostly when carrying out reconnaissance, air targeting and special forces missions or defending their positions. In addition to these servicemen, there were also about 2,500 members of Russia's so-called Wagner private military company deployed in Syria as of October 2017, according to Russia's *Novaya Gazeta*.<sup>22</sup>

Russian leaders have asserted that the official Russian military grouping played a decisive role in the Assad regime's effort, backed by its allies, in rolling back the territorial gains initially made by the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and some of the more moderate foes of the regime. More than 90 percent of Syrian territory has been "liberated from terrorists," according to Putin's October 2017 estimate.<sup>23</sup> According to the Russian Defense Ministry's October 2017 estimate, Russia's armed forces had lost a total of 39 killed in action in Syria and one more serviceman had committed suicide.<sup>24</sup> According to an October 2017 report by Reuters, however, while Russia's official count of KIAs in Syria for 2017 was 16, in reality at least 131 Russian citizens had died in Syria in the first nine months of 2017 alone, including 26 Russian private contractors.<sup>25</sup> The Russian military operations in Syria, which Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu claimed in October to be nearing an end<sup>26</sup> have proved at times to be brutal and indiscriminate, causing many civilian deaths—nearly 4,000 in the first year of the campaign,<sup>27</sup> according to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which continues to blame Russia for scores of civilian deaths with grim regularity.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>20</sup> "Ministerstvo Oborony Otsenilo Maksimalnoye Chislo Uchasnikov Operatsii v Sirii," RBC, June 15, 2016.

Available at <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/15/06/2016/576158899a7947653f16516b>

<sup>21</sup> "The Military Balance 2017," International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> "Ikh Prosto Net," *Novaya Gazeta*, October 8, 2017. Available at <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/10/09/74125-ih-prosto-net>

<sup>23</sup> "Vladimir Putin: Ot terroristov svobodno uzhe 90 protsentov Sirii," *Kosmomolskaya Pravda*, October 26, 2017. Available at <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26749/3778421/>

<sup>24</sup> "Geroi voyny: poteri Vooruzhennykh sil RF v khode siriyskoy operatsii," TASS, October 10, 2017. Available at <http://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/3445013>

<sup>25</sup> "Exclusive: Death certificate offers clues on Russian casualties in Syria," Reuters, October 27, 2017. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-syria-casualtie/exclusive-death-certificate-offers-clues-on-russian-casualties-in-syria-idUSKBN1CWILP>

<sup>26</sup> "Rsossiyskoy gruppirovke v Sirii nashli novogo komanduyushchego," RBC, November 2, 2017. Available at <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/02/11/2017/59faf43e9a7947fe3ef01c99>

<sup>27</sup> Max Rosenthal. "Russia Has Killed Almost 10,000 Syrians in the Past Year, Says a New Report. That includes nearly 4,000 civilians," *Mother Jones*, September 20, 2016. Available at <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/09/russia-has-killed-almost-10000-syrians-year-says-new-report/>

<sup>28</sup> "How much territory have Russia and Syria recaptured from IS?" BBC, October 27, 2017. Available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41766353>

Russia has no military groupings in other countries of the Middle East, although it does have five observers serving for the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in the Middle East and three observers in the U.N. mission in South Sudan, according to *The Military Balance 2017*.<sup>29</sup> There have also been reports of Russian forces deployed in Egypt to support Libyan military commander Khalifa Haftar, but Russia has denied these.<sup>30</sup> Russia also has successfully negotiated deals to supply arms to such countries in the region as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Algeria—and some of these supplies should be assumed to be accompanied by the deployment of military trainers. The Middle East has been recently estimated to account for anywhere between 8 percent and 37.5 percent of Russia’s annual arms exports.<sup>31</sup>

**Question 4: What are the current terrorist threats within Russia?**

**Answer 4:** Russia saw a total of 1,286 terrorism incidents in 2006-2016, according to the University of Maryland’s Global Terrorism Database.<sup>32</sup> Of these, Russia’s Federal North Caucasus District accounted for 1,093 or 85 percent of all incidents (if counted by location of targets). Of the district’s constituent territories, Dagestan saw the greatest number of attacks: 531. Chechnya accounted for 84, Ingushetia for 278, Kabardino-Balkaria for 155, Karachaevo-Cherkessia for 11, North Ossetia for 19, Stavropolsky Krai for 15. It should also be noted that North Caucasus-based groups are likewise responsible for many of the 54 terrorist incidents that occurred in Moscow (47) and St. Petersburg (7) in the 2006-2016 period, though some of those

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<sup>29</sup> “The Military Balance 2017,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017.

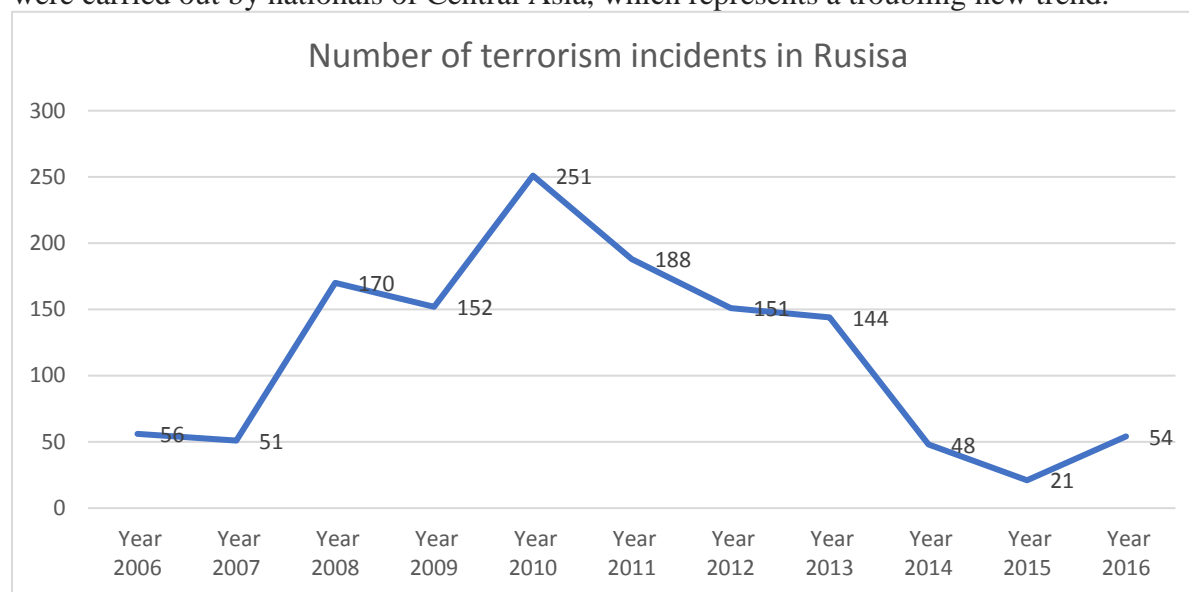
<sup>30</sup> “Exclusive: Russia appears to deploy forces in Egypt, eyes on Libya role – sources,” Reuters, March 13, 2017. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-libya-exclusive/exclusive-russia-appears-to-deploy-forces-in-egypt-eyes-on-libya-role-sources-idUSKBN16K2RY>

<sup>31</sup> Nikolai Kozhanov, “Arms Exports Add to Russia’s Tools of Influence in Middle East,” Chatham House, July 20, 2016. Available at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/arms-exports-add-russia-s-tools-influence-middle-east>

<sup>32</sup> The GTD defines terrorism as the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation. Available at <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/>



were carried out by nationals of Central Asia, which represents a troubling new trend.



The number of terrorism incidents in Russia began to climb in 2008. This surge peaked in 2010 at 251 and then started to peter out, declining to 21 in 2015, according to GTD. While the reasons for the surge remain to be ascertained, I believe two factors have contributed to the subsequent decline in attacks: Russian government agencies managed to decapitate most of the groups, and some of the fighters chose to leave for the Middle East to join the ranks of local terrorist and insurgency groups in Syria and Iraq, as they believed those groups had a greater chance of creating an independent Sharia state for themselves than did North Caucasus-based groups.

Groups based in the North Caucasus have been most active in employing a strategy of terrorism and guerilla warfare in Russia. Of these groups, those professing a violent interpretation of Salafism and affiliated with the so-called Caucasus Emirate, which has pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, have recently waned, while groups associated with the so-called Islamic State have gained relative prominence in the past few years. In addition to Islamist insurgents, the North Caucasus has also been home to individual avengers and secular separatists, although the share of the latter in the overall violence has decreased considerably. As stated above, militant Islamist networks have recently proliferated to other Russian regions, including the Volga, the Urals and Siberia, though their share in terrorist attacks remains dwarfed by the attacks that occur in the North Caucasus. For instance, Tatarstan accounted for six attacks in 2006-2016 and Tyumen accounted for two, according to the Global Terrorism Database. In addition to Islamists, separatists and avengers for the abused hailing from Russia's North Caucasus, Russia has also seen a number of terrorist attacks staged by ethnic Russian ultranationalists and avengers (for abuses by law-enforcers), including attacks in which explosives have been employed, but their share in overall terrorist violence has been far smaller than that of North Caucasus-based groups.

It is difficult to project future levels of anti-state violence in Russia. A lot will depend on (a) where the several thousand nationals of Russia and the Central Asian republics believed to be fighting in the ranks of IS, AQ and other groups in Syria and Iraq choose to go next as IS

continues to lose territory, (b) what they would choose to do upon relocation and (c) governments' response to their arrival or return. In February 2017 Putin put the number of nationals of post-Soviet states fighting on the rebels' side at 9,000, including 5,000 nationals of Russia.<sup>33</sup> The Soufan Center<sup>34</sup> put the number of Russians who had gone to fight in Syria and Iraq at 3,417, with 400 of them having returned as of March 2016. The center's October 2017 report claimed that the number of Russian nationals who had gone to fight in Syria and Iraq reached 5,000 in July 2017, citing anonymous "informal estimates by security sources." A Kremlin spokesman said Moscow doubts the Soufan Center's estimates.<sup>35</sup>

### **Question 5: How do Russian counterterrorism and military operations impact the terror threat worldwide?**

**Answer 5:** At least some of the Russian nationals who have left Russia to join the ranks of terrorist and insurgency groups in Syria and Iraq have done so because they thought they stood a greater chance of building a Sharia-ruled state in either of these Arab countries than in Russia where they were actively pursued for either suspected involvement in political violence or association with Salafi groups or both. Therefore, one could say that Russia's ongoing domestic counterterrorism and counter-insurgency campaign has indirectly led to reinforcement of the ranks of jihadists in Syria and Iraq, while reducing the threat in Russia itself. That Syria has not become a permanent haven for IS and AQ groups is in part due to Russia's military campaign there. At the same time, while Russia's military campaign in Syria has helped to degrade both IS and al-Qaeda, the indiscriminate use of non-smart ammunition by Russian aircraft, as asserted by local NGOs<sup>36</sup>, has resulted in civilian casualties, quite possibly radicalizing some of the civilians in ways that made them more susceptible to recruitment into terrorist networks.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, let me recall Winston Churchill's famous observation: "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma; but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest." Today's Russia's leadership continues to be guided by Russia's national interests in their policies and the sphere of counterterrorism is no exception. My reading of the hierarchy of Russia's national interests and America's national interests remains the same, as in my 2015 testimony: Both countries share a vital interest in warding off terrorist threats posed by Islamist groups seeking to build a global caliphate. Whether the existing irritants in the bilateral relationship will continue to constrain cooperation on this vital common interest remains to be seen, but I doubt there will be a change for the better in the short-term future, at least not until investigations into the alleged meddling by Russia are completed. In my view, one development that could make the U.S. and Russia ignore the existing constraints

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<sup>33</sup>"Putin otsenil chislennost' boyevikov iz byvshego SSSR v Sirii v 9 tysyach." RBC, February 23, 2017. Available at <http://www.rbc.ru/politics/23/02/2017/58aee7b79a7947ee4af00978>

<sup>34</sup> Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees," Soufan Group, October 2017. Available at <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> "Kremlin doubts report about 3,500 Russians fighting for Islamic State," TASS, October 26, 2017. Available at <http://tass.com/politics/972644>

<sup>36</sup> See for instance, Max Rosental. "Russia Has Killed Almost 10,000 Syrians in the Past Year, Says a New Report. That includes nearly 4,000 civilians," Mother Jones, September 20, 2016. Available at

and resume effective CT cooperation would be the one that we all would like to prevent the most—an act of nuclear terrorism. Should a terrorist-detonated mushroom cloud emerge anywhere in the world, it would become a game changer. In such a scenario I would imagine the U.S., Russia and their allies would jointly scramble together to prevent more attacks, as well as to find and punish not only the perpetrators but also the suppliers of the bomb and/or its components.

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