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“CHINESE AND RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST”
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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Wilson, I bring you greetings from the great state of Texas, and specifically from the 32nd congressional district, which is ably represented by Colin Allred. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before your committee today. My name is Andrew Exum, and from May of 2015 until January of 2017, I served as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Middle East Policy. I had previously served in the Pentagon’s Middle East policy shop from 2012 until 2013, and I began my career as an Army officer, leading both light infantry and special operations units deployed to the Middle East.

For over half a century, U.S. interests in the Middle East have remained remarkably consistent, no matter who has happened to be living in the White House at any given time. The security of the state of Israel and preserving market access to the hydrocarbon resources in and around the Arabian Peninsula have been our top two stated priorities in the period following the world wars. Since the September 11th attacks in 2001, meanwhile, we have also placed a priority on counterproliferation and countering terrorism. That’s what animates us today, and that is why we continue to spend so much time and resources – roughly 59,000 troops, by the time I left the Pentagon – in the region.

The subject of my remarks meanwhile, is what animates Russia in the region. I am not, I must admit up front, a specialist on Russia. I do not speak Russian, and I have never even been to Russia. I have spent most of my professional life fighting in, working on, or otherwise studying the Middle East, and all of my own graduate study pertains to the politics, languages, and history of the region. But for much of 2016, the U.S. government engaged in a lengthy series of negotiations with the Russian military and intelligence services over the fate of Syria, and for

better or for worse, and excepting for a period of time in which I had other priorities (namely the birth of my second son), I was the Pentagon's primary representative at these talks. So my view on Russia in the Middle East is informed by those interactions with my Russian counterparts, and that perhaps gives me a unique but by no means sufficient perspective on Russia's designs in the region.

You might be questioning the wisdom of talking to Russia about Syria in the first place, and if you are, you would have found good company within certain departments and agencies in the U.S. government during the Obama Administration. Engaging in talks with Russia over Syria was not a universally popular thing to do at the time, was the subject of intense debate among both career professionals and political appointees such as myself, and it's fair to say that my own department was not completely supportive of the talks but – when directed by the president – supported them to our greatest ability. It's probably worth winding the clock back, then, to explain how and why we began talking to the Russians.

It all started in the summer of 2015, when my office – under the direction of my immensely capable Syria director, Dr. Leigh Nolan, and with the support of my boss at the time, Christine Wormuth – began coordinating interagency planning for a scenario in Syria we deemed “catastrophic success.” After years in which the Assad Regime had struggled to defeat a persistent insurgency and in which the Islamic State had assumed control of most of eastern Syria and had begun to also threaten Syria's main cities in the West, we worried that the Assad Regime might finally collapse – and do so quickly, in a way that would endanger U.S. interests, to include the security of the state of Israel.

It's fair to conclude that if we, sitting as we were in a five-sided concrete box in Washington, were worrying the Assad Regime might suddenly collapse, the Russians and Iranians – sitting much closer to the situation – were likewise worried. And that fear is what, I believe, led the Russian military to forcefully intervene in Syria in the early fall of 2015. The Russians had long supported the Assad Regime, and it valued the facility at Tartus which provides a warm water

port to Russia's Black Sea Fleet and allows Russia to project military power into the Mediterranean. Russia – along with Hizballah, and Iran – was now surging military resources into Syria in order to beat back rebel advances.

Russia framed its intervention as a counterterrorism operation and invited others to join Russia as it claimed to beat back the forces of Islamist extremism. Russia desperately sought, significantly, to enlist traditional U.S. partners and allies like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan in its efforts. This, we assessed, was Russia attempting to find its back into the international community following the isolation that accompanied the invasion of Crimea. It was Russia's way of saying to us, "You have your coalition, yes, but we have one as well. We are equal to you and deserve to be treated as a peer."

We also assessed at the time that Russia's intervention in Syria was a response to UN Security Council Resolution 1973 and the way in which the United States and its NATO allies used that resolution in 2011 to bring about regime change in Libya. This was Russia's way of saying "enough." The idea that the international community can band together and replace a regime is an idea that frankly scares Putin's Russia – especially following the Arab Spring and the so-called "color revolutions" in the first decade of this century, which are both viewed in Russia as having been encouraged if not engineered by the West, and specifically by the United States.

Russia's surge in Syria coincided with U.S. and coalition military success against the Islamic State. Over the course of 2015, we had figured out that a combination of coalition air power and motivated proxies on the ground was more than sufficient, when applied from multiple directions at the same time, to roll back the Islamic State's territorial gains. Our own military gains put us in close proximity to the Russian military and its partners, and we quickly determined that we needed to establish channels to prevent any conflicts between our two forces. At the Pentagon, my immediate supervisor at the time, Elissa Slotkin (who is now a member of this House from Michigan), led those efforts along with our uniformed military

counterparts, who included the newly confirmed commander of U.S. Central Command, Frank McKenzie.

A diverse group within the administration, including both diplomats and some uniformed military officers, wanted to go farther, and given the daily horrors we were witnessing in Syria, they asked whether or not we should engage with Russia on ways we might be able to bring the conflict to a close. I did not feel at the time, and I do not feel now, that was a wise course of action: Russia was operating in a coalition with the Assad Regime, Iran, and Hizballah, and among the four of them, Russia was arguably the least influential member of its coalition. I was not sure that Russia, even if it reached an accord with us, could bring along its coalition partners. (This was in contrast to our own position, where we could very much speak for the other nations in our coalition.)

It was also clear that Russia, although it professed to be engaged in a fight against terrorism, was very much concentrating its military efforts on destroying what remained of the secular and moderate Islamist opposition to the Assad Regime. We all knew where the real Islamist extremists were in early 2016: eastern Syria, primarily, and those parts of northwest Syria where the Nusra Front was particularly strong. Russia, by contrast, was focused on winning back those large urban areas like Aleppo and Damascus that were the home to more moderate opposition groups. (This was all the more striking to us since it was understood even at the time that many of those active in both the Nusra Front and the Islamic State were Russian-speakers from either Russia or other states in the former Soviet Union.)

It was a smart strategy, in some ways: If the Assad Regime and its allies could kill off any secular or moderate opposition, the world would be left with a binary choice between the Regime and groups like the Nusra Front and the Islamic State. Russia, to my observation, was fully supportive of this strategy.

Nonetheless, we gamely met with our Russian counterparts for months of negotiations over the course of 2016. My colleagues in the Office of the Secretary and in the Joint Staff attended each round of the negotiations to both advise our colleagues from the rest of the government and to ensure that no step we proposed violated the very prudent restrictions the Congress had put on military coordination with Russia following the invasion of Crimea.

Over the past several years, I had seen Russia play a larger and larger role in the Middle East. As a graduate student studying the region in the first decade of this century, Russia's role in the region was something I read about in history books. By the time I returned to the Pentagon, by contrast, Russia was playing a more aggressive role in the region, courting our traditional allies with promises of unrestricted arms sales – our own arms sales to the region, governed in part by the Naval Vessel Transfer Act of 2008, cannot endanger Israel's qualitative military edge – and fewer moral concerns than we might voice. I was particularly worried about Russia's courtship of the Sisi government in Egypt as well as its relationships with our Gulf partners, with whom we share much intelligence and hardware. (I did not have responsibility for North Africa beyond Egypt, but in Algeria and Libya too, we also saw a more engaged Russia.)

Across the negotiating table, meanwhile, we found the Russians to be professional and relatively scrupulous. (It's a quirk of Russian bureaucracy that parts of it often lie to other parts, so it's quite possible to have a conversation with a Russian who is defending, in good faith, actions taken by a military command without knowing the actual truth about what that military command did or did not do.) At the same time, though, we were very aware that those on the other side of the table were often intelligence officers – members of the GRU, or Main Intelligence Directorate – who were as interested in knowing what we knew, and knowing how we knew what we knew, as they were in negotiating toward a mutually agreeable political end. We thus spent a lot of time being careful about what we said so as to protect sources and methods, and the Russians spent a lot of time pressing us for more information – an effort to no doubt compromise those same sources and methods. At one point, we were even pressed by our leadership to create a means to jointly target suspected terrorist cells with the Russians,

which gave everyone in my own leadership serious heartburn, and for good reason: The idea that certain intelligence might be classified “SECRET // REL RUSSIA” was like something out of a bizarre alternate universe for those of us who, like me, still remember sheltering under our school desks during atomic bomb drills in the 1980s.

We also suspected that the Russians were using the negotiations as a stalling tactic to buy time for its coalition to complete its military operations to re-take Aleppo and other key terrain. We labored, along with our Arab and European partners, to establish temporary ceasefires to allow for the evacuation of non-combatants and the delivery of humanitarian aid to those living under siege. Russia and its partners would agree to those ceasefires when they were militarily convenient, and when they themselves needed time to rest and refit before launching another major assault. The Russians correctly assessed that we and our partners were negotiating in good faith, and they also correctly assessed that we had strong enough relationships with elements of the Syrian opposition that would allow us to bring them along on any agreement. They also correctly assessed that some within the administration, and some of our international partners, so badly wanted to maintain a diplomatic channel that we would likely overlook many violations of ceasefire agreements so long as the Russians continued to return to the negotiating table.

Strategically, I think the Russians were looking for something similar to what they were looking for tactically, which is to say they were looking for access: Access to the region, access to our partners, and access to us. Russia wanted to be taken seriously by us and by our traditional partners, and here again I have to give them some credit: We all laughed when Russia’s only aircraft carrier, the Kuznetsov, belched its way across the Mediterranean in late 2016, but overall, one has to conclude that by operating with limited resources but no holds barred, Russia has been successful in Syria. The Assad Regime won the war. Russia may have been captive to the whims of its coalition partners at times, but Russia and its coalition partners also won, so Russia can share in that victory. We cared about our own priorities, and as a consequence, we both helped secure Israel and defeated the Islamic State. Russia, meanwhile,

cared about protecting its tactical interests and then, once those were secured, announcing itself as a new power to be reckoned with in the region writ large.

The United States spent the years between 2003 and 2016 demonstrating our tactical and technological excellence in the region but also demonstrating our strategic inability to secure our interests at a reasonable cost. Russia spent the years between 2015 and 2017 demonstrating its own technological advances to the region but also its ability to secure its interests at a reasonable cost if using the most ruthless of means. It's little wonder, then, why U.S. partners such as Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia now feel the need to also have close ties to Moscow. Russia's message to these traditional U.S. partners is, essentially, "The United States cannot be counted upon to back you in weather both fair and foul. We can, and Syria is the proof."

Today, then, we arguably feel Russia's presence in the region more acutely than we have since the 1970s. Although today's global epicenter of the oil and gas sector is as much five hours west of me in the Permian Basin of Texas and New Mexico as it is in the Persian Gulf, Russia's relationship with OPEC is the most important relationship from the perspective of oil production. Our president complains on Twitter about the price of oil, but to the degree that anyone can actually sets the price, it's Russia and OPEC.

But this might lead us to a final question: How much should we care, really? In part due to the resurgence of our own energy sector, in part due to the astronomical cost of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in part due to the increasing politicization of our relationships with Saudi Arabia and Israel, more and more Americans – with this president, perhaps, among them – believe we no longer have enduring interests in the Middle East beyond preventing terrorists to strike the homeland.

I myself can make a strong our argument that our traditional interests remain our interests going forward. But I cannot make an argument that we have secured those interests at a cost that I can defend to friends and family back home in Tennessee and Texas.

Russia doesn't have that problem. And that's the source of its own strength in the region going forward.