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**International Society and Norms: Understandings and Differences in Russian and
Western Perspectives on Counterterrorism**

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1. International Norms

Norms, like peaceful conflict resolution or human rights, are defined as collective rules of appropriate behaviour.¹ State interests depend on the developed identity and corresponding world views in the state. Only this attaches meaning to political and economic activity, legitimacy of institutions as well as interdependence with others.²

However, it remains an open question how we recognise a norm when we see one. “We recognize norm-breaking behavior because it generates disapproval [...] either because it produces praise, or, in the case of a highly internalized norm, because it is so taken for granted that it provokes no reaction whatsoever”.³ Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) argue that the behaviour of states and norms require a separate operationalisation. The aim is to show whether norms have an influence on the behaviour of actors. The researchers claim that rationality and norms are directly connected with/to each other. In order to answer the posed question, they developed a norm cycle, separating domestic and international norms from each other. Domestic norms play an enormous role in building international norms. They compare this with Putnam’s two-level game and declare it in their paper as a two-level norm game. The authors illustrate the influence of norms with a three stage model which they call life cycle of norms.

The first stage is norm emergence, the second stage is norm cascade and the third stage is internalisation (see table 1). The first two stages are divided by a threshold (tipping point). Norms are not just coincidence but they “are actively built by agents having strong notions about appropriate or desirable behavior in their community.”⁴ Norm entrepreneurs⁵ are required in order to spread norms. Only after the persuasion of numerous actors it is possible to reach the threshold (tipping point). A critical mass has to emerge that is in favour of the norm. Thereby, it is possible to redefine appropriate behaviour. The last stage would be the acceptance of the norm at the international level. After internalisation, the international actors take the norm for granted.

¹ Finnemore, Martha and Sikkink, Kathryn (1998): International Norm Dynamics and Political Change, in: International Organization, Volume 52 (4), autumn 1998, pp. 887–917.
Katzenstein, Peter (ed.) (1996): The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics, New York, Columbia University Press.

² see Abdelal, Rawi (2009): *Constructivism as an approach to international political economy*, in: Blyth, Mark (ed.). *Routledge Handbook of International Political Economy (IPE)*, Routledge.

³ Finnemore and Sikkink (1998).

⁴ Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 896).

⁵ Norm entrepreneurs are “people interested in changing social norms” (Sunstein (1996): *Social Norms and Social Roles*, in: Columbia Law Review, Volume 96 (4), May 1996, pp. 903-968.

	<i>Stage 1</i> <i>Norm emergence</i>	<i>Stage 2</i> <i>Norm cascade</i>	<i>Stage 3</i> <i>Internalization</i>
<i>Actors</i>	Norm entrepreneurs with organizational platforms	States, international organizations, networks	Law, professions, bureaucracy
<i>Motives</i>	Altruism, empathy, ideational, commitment	Legitimacy, reputation, esteem	Conformity
<i>Dominant mechanisms</i>	Persuasion	Socialization, institutionalization, demonstration	Habit, institutionalization

Table 1: Stages of norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998:898).

2. The US Perspective on Counterterrorism

In 2014 US- President Barack Obama claimed in his speech concerning the counterterrorism strategy of the United States of America (USA) that he has “made it clear that we will hunt down terrorists who threaten our country, wherever they are [...] if you threaten America, you will find no safe haven.”⁶

“Who are the terrorists?”

Until now, there is still no legally accepted definition on the international level of who is a *terrorist* and what *terrorism* is. After 9/11 the USA has legitimated their counterterrorism strategy through the USA Patriot Act⁷ which defines what terrorism is on a national level. However, on the international level an efficient counterterrorism strategy can only be achieved by an internationally agreed definition. For example, former Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan claims that the “lack of agreement on a clear and well-known

⁶ BBC (2014): Islamic state crisis: Key quotes from Obama, 11/09/14 in: URL: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-29152590> (last access 05/09/16).

⁷ The USA Patriot Act defines international terrorism (Section 801; 18 U.S. Code (U.S.C.) § s2331) and domestic terrorism (Section 801; 18 U.S.C. § 2.2331) as “violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that violate federal or state law”. Terrorism has “to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping” (see *ibid.*). The Patriot Act points out that while international terrorism occurs primarily outside the territorial jurisdiction of the U.S, domestic terrorism occurs primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the U.S.” (see Federal Bureau of Investigation (2016): *Terrorism, Definition of Terrorism in U.S. code*, in: URL: <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/terrorism> (last access 05/09/16).

definition undermines the normative regulatory and moral stance against terrorism and has strained the image of the United Nations.”⁸

“How should the terrorists be fought?”

Legitimacy

After 9/11 the reaction of the USA was characterised by an aggressive assertive behaviour of the executive power.⁹ According to President George W. Bush, 9/11 has “been an act of war declared upon America by terrorists and we will respond accordingly” (New York Times 2001). The Senate passed the Authorization of Use of Military Force Against Terrorists (AUMF) without a debate.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Congress passed the Patriot Act (2001) and the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (NSCT) in order to fight terrorists and terrorism. The Bush administration implemented its counterterrorism strategy largely overseas, notably Afghanistan and Iraq. The USA promoted their international counterterrorism efforts through the United Nations (UN) and the Group of Eight (G8) to have a legitimate foundation. For example, the NSCT quotes a part of the UN Security Council’s Resolution 1373 regarding the responsibilities of all member states.¹¹ These legislations were initiated under the umbrella campaign *Global War on Terror* which goals were twofold. First, the Bush administration envisioned to kill terrorists and prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Second, it was aspired to advance liberal democratic ideas and to establish effective democracies.¹² The idea that advancing liberal democracy results in peaceful international relations shaped the US administration’s assessment of the necessity and justification to pursue regime change in Iraq with military force.¹³

One of the US responses to 9/11 is the Guantánamo Bay prison. The US government disregarded the prisoners’ rights as prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention. The international community raised their critiques regarding Guantánamo Bay because it is violating the Geneva Convention (e.g. Human Rights). It can be assumed that the US acted in

⁸ Council on Foreign Relations (2013): *The Global Regime for Terrorism*, 11/06/13, in: URL <http://www.cfr.org/terrorism/global-regime-terrorism/p25729> (last access 05/09/16).

⁹ Roach, Kent (2012): *The 9/11 Effect: Comparative Counter-Terrorism*, Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ The AUMF provided the authorisation for the president to use force against state or non-state actors who were involved in the attacks of 9/11 (Roach 2012).

¹¹ The NSCT quotes the following part: There are „binding obligations on all states to suppress and prevent terrorist financing, improve their border controls, enhance information sharing and law enforcement cooperation, suppress the recruitment of terrorists, and deny them sanctuary“ (cited from Tembo 2014: 45).

¹² Tembo, Edgar B. (2014): *US-UK Counter-Terrorism after 9/11, A qualitative approach*, Contemporary Terrorism Studies, Routledge.

¹³ Flibbert, A. (2006): *The road to Baghdad: Ideas and intellectuals in explanations of the Iraq War*, Security Studies, 15(2), 310-352.

a securitised matter.¹⁴ This shows that in a securitised environment established democracies pass laws which go against democratic norms and established international law.

Efficiency

The US tries to push its own counterterrorism strategy on the international level, especially during the Bush administration by stating that either the world is with the USA or with the terrorists.¹⁵ After the invasion of the US troops in Iraq in 2003 they toppled the dictator Saddam Hussein and disbanded the military of Iraq. Many soldiers became unemployed and were left without any perspective. That provided a breeding ground for radical groups or organisations.

When President Obama took office in January 2009 he claimed to reassess the *Global War on Terror*. In contrast to the Bush administration Obama had a different view on how to fight terrorism. First, the Obama administration shifted focus from promoting *freedom* and *democracy* in autocratic systems to fighting against terror networks by using drones. This marks an ideational change in contrast to the Bush administration's efforts to promote freedom abroad with military interventions and fight the "axis of evil". Second, he aimed at extending international cooperation in order to combat the threat of transnational terrorism. Third, Goldberg argues that Obama did not believe that a „president should place American soldiers at great risk in order to prevent humanitarian disasters, unless those disaster pose a direct security threat to the United States.”¹⁶

This policy shift of the Obama administration can be exemplified by the Syria conflict. After the civil war outbreak in 2013 the Obama administration was pressured to act (e.g. military intervention). Obama decided not to use military force against the Assad regime and tried to accomplish a diplomatic solution in accordance with Russia. He stated that “if we can exhaust these diplomatic efforts and come up with a formula that gives the international community a verifiable, enforceable mechanism [...] I'm all for it”.¹⁷ International cooperation was more likely because Obama did not dismiss autocratic regimes as a legitimate partner for

¹⁴ Buzan (1997: 24f.) defines securitisation as a „political process through which an issue is presented as an existential threat requiring emergency measures and justify actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure.”

¹⁵ Stevenson, Jonathan (2002): *Pragmatic Counter-terrorism, Survival*, 43, Winter 2001-2002.

¹⁶ Goldberg, Jeffrey (2016): *The Obama Doctrine, The U.S. president talks through his hardest decisions about America's role in the world*, The Atlantic, URL: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> (last access 16.09.2016).

¹⁷ Garton, Timothy Ash (2013): This crisis resolves little in Syria but says a lot about the United States, in: The guardian, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/11/crisis-resolves-little-syria-says-much-about-us> (last access 16.09.2016).

cooperation. This different assessment of autocratic regimes shifted the policy response of the Obama administration from military interventions against states to more surgical attacks against terrorist networks.

3. The EU Perspective on Counterterrorism

Counter-terrorism policy cooperation started in the 1970s within an ad hoc informal intergovernmental setting (the TREVI Group) focusing on combating terrorism and enhancing police cooperation among the European Union member states. In 1992, after the Treaty of Maastricht entered into force, counterterrorism policy was integrated into the Justice and Home Affairs pillar of the EU.¹⁸ Albeit, harmonisation on supranational level regarding both institutional framework and strategy to fight terrorism, emerged directly post-9/11. Whereas EU-U.S. law enforcement and intelligence cooperation has been established and significantly fostered, obstacle and challenges still persist on strategic and tactical level. In contrast to the U.S. perspective, military solutions are considered ultima ration. Further, the EU's concern on U.S. approach towards data privacy and protection issues stays on the agenda and impedes far-reaching negotiations on information-sharing agreements.¹⁹

“Who are the terrorists?”

The EU Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism, adopted in June 2002, presents a comprehensive definition of terrorism and terrorist acts comprising of 1) the context of the action; 2) the aim of the action; 3) the committed acts.

“They must be intentional acts . . . which given their nature or context, may serve to damage a country or an international organisation. These acts must be committed with the aim of either seriously intimidating a population or unduly compelling a Government or international organisation to act or fail to act, or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional economic or social structures of a country or international organisation.”²⁰

¹⁸ For a comprehensive account of the initial dynamics of EC/EU counter-terrorism cooperation, see: P. Chalk, “West European Terrorism and Counter-terrorism. The Evolving Dynamic” (1996)

¹⁹ K. Archick, “U.S.-EU Cooperation Against Terrorism” (March 2, 2016).

²⁰ European Council, Council Framework Decisions on Combating Terrorism of 13 June 2002, available at: http://www.eurlex.europa.eu/pri/en/oj/dat/2002/l_164/l_16420020622en00030007.pdf.

Against the backdrop of the two-fold danger as a launching port and target of terrorist acts, the EU definition covers behaviour which may contribute to terrorist acts in third countries. Therefore, the Framework Decision holds out the prospect of concrete comprehensive measures against terrorists in five areas: police and judicial cooperation, development of international legal instruments, countering terrorism funding, strengthening air security and coordinating EU global action.

“How should the terrorists be fought?”

Legitimacy

Regarding the question how terrorism should be fought a sharp distinction is drawn between an internal and external legitimacy approach.²¹ According to the former approach, EU member states, embedded in a set of interdependencies, institutions and structures, remain main actors in counter-terrorism policy. Following Katzenstein’s assumption, cultural and institutional state environment shape national security policies and interests. Interest formulation appears to be endogenous to institutionalised cooperation among member states and materialises over the course of the cooperation itself.²² For instance, the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA), linked to the Single Market at first, shifted to the foreign policy domain upon the entry into force of the Treaty of Amsterdam. This evolution led to a change of focus for the counter-terrorism strategy from EU-wide harmonisation towards international cooperation beyond the EU borders.²³

Based on the EU actorness assumption, the latter approach starts from the premise that the EU acts as a unified actor in the international arena despite the plethora of diverging national interests.²⁴ This hypothesis is confirmed in the case of EU-US “competitive cooperation.” Whereas NATO indeed plays a crucial role in the War on Terror, e.g. in Afghanistan, the EU member states have chosen the non-military platform in the framework EU-US counter-terrorism cooperation.²⁵

Further, counter-terrorism assistance and cooperation have been embedded in EU’s aid and neighbourhood conditionality. Although security considerations do not appear on the top of the EU agenda, a securitisation process of development policy and democratisation promotion

²¹ C. Kaunert, “The External Dimension of EU Counter-Terrorism Relations: Competences, Interests, and Institutions” (2009).

²² See P. Katzenstein, “The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics” (1999).

²³ Kaunert (2009).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ D. Keohane, “The Absent Friend: EU Foreign Policy and Counter-Terrorism” (2008).

is on the rise.²⁶ While EU officials are reluctant to refer to “securitization of development” or “security-development nexus”, the term “comprehensive approach” (covering conflict prevention, development and conflict resolution) is widely used to describe EU’s crisis management concept, inter alia in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Côte d’Ivoire and the Horn of Africa.²⁷

Efficiency

In the literature, opinions differ on how the EU counter-terrorism level of efficiency has to be assessed. The institutional architecture of EU counter-terrorism has been developing incrementally including the European Commission, Europol and Eurojust as main actors on the strategic level. On the tactical level, the European Counter-Terrorism Co-ordinator, the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders (FRONTEX) and the European Joint Situation Centre (SitCen) appear to be important stakeholders.²⁸

On the one hand, critics emphasise the difficult coordination on operational level and insufficient information sharing, coining the EU a “paper tiger”.²⁹ On the other hand, experts on European security argue in favour of major institutionalisation steps, e.g. the introduction of European Arrest Warrant; efforts into strengthening counter-terrorism financing (CFT) capacities through transportation of globally binding standards into EU legislation.³⁰ From a non-actor prior to 9/11 EU went through a phase of rapid institutionalisation, accelerated by the terrorist attacks in London and Madrid in 2004 and followed by an institutionalisation inertia.³¹ Although the EU could not assert herself as a main actor in the international coalition fighting terrorism in Syria³², legislative and operative measures were taken in

²⁶ For an introduction to the securitisation concept and the recent development in the field, see: B. Buzan et al., “Security—a new framework for analysis” (1998); B. Buzan/ L. Hansen, “The evolution of international security studies” (2009).

²⁷ S. Keukeleire/ K. Raube, “The security–development nexus and securitization in the EU's policies towards developing countries” (2013), p. 568.

²⁸ For a detailed analysis of the EU counter-terrorism architecture, see: D. Casale, “EU Institutional and Legal Counter-terrorism Framework” (2008).

²⁹ O. Bures, „EU counterterrorism policy: a paper tiger?“ (2006).

³⁰ See, C. Kaunert, “Without the Power of Purse or Sword: The European Arrest Warrant and the Role of the Commission” (2007), D. Zimmermann, 'The European Union and Post-9/11 Counterterrorism: A. Reappraisal' (2006).

³¹ J. Argomaniz, “Post-9/11 institutionalisation of European Union counter-terrorism: emergence, acceleration and inertia” (2009).

³² See, M. Pierini, “In Search of an EU Role in the Syrian War” (2016), available at:

response to the threat posed by foreign fighters as late as after the Paris attack in January 2015.³³

4. The Russian Perspective on Counterterrorism

In opposition to the above-outlined US and EU positions, an analysis of the Russian perspective on “who the terrorists are” and “how they should be fought” should start from deconstructing the Kremlin’s concern about a loss of ‘state order’ and stability in the Middle East, which has a security and a normative component to it: (1) perceived implications for the security of Russia itself, and (2) Russia’s principled opposition to perceived Western-led regime change under the banner of counterterrorism.

“Who are the terrorists?”

Russia believes that the recent so-called ‘Arab Spring’, which led to the removal of strong Middle Eastern leaders under the banner of ‘Western-style democratization’, has produced state collapse, chaos and the rise of terrorist groups across the region. Especially following Muammar Gaddafi’s overthrow in Libya in October 2011, Moscow’s view of the ‘Arab Spring’ as a phenomenon that primarily strengthens Islamist extremism solidified³⁴. Russia views *armed* opposition groups in these countries, militarily fighting the government rather than voicing their grievances through political channels, as ‘terrorists’ and typically accuses them of being sponsored and incited by external actors, who in turn pursue their own malicious agendas through regional destabilization. Moscow fears the collapse of state institutions and the concomitant spread of chaos in the Middle East, since it believes that instability will further strengthen radical Islamist factions and facilitate their spillover beyond regional borders. This would pose a real security threat to the Russian Federation itself, if extremists move to the North Caucasus, other Russian regions or Central Asia.

It is important to understand this Russian diagnosis of regional developments in broader historical perspective: After the collapse of the Soviet Union, unrest in Chechnya transformed the Middle East and Muslim transnational solidarity into a potentially dangerous source of destabilization. Chechen separatism and terrorist attacks in the early 2000s were perceived by

³³ RIGA JOINT STATEMENT following the informal meeting of Justice and Home Affairs Ministers in Riga on 29 and 30 January, available at: https://eu2015.lv/images/Kalendars/IeM/2015_01_29_jointstatement_JHA.pdf.

³⁴ The Russian narrative stands in stark contrast to Western scholarly accounts of the Arab Spring, which view authoritarian regimes in the Middle East as the primary cause for Islamist radicalization. For examples, see the work by Francois Burgat or John Esposito.

the government as a possible source of spillover to other Russian regions, threatening state collapse. In an interview in 2000, President Putin warned that “*the essence of the situation in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya ... is the continuation of the collapse of the USSR. If we did not quickly do something to stop it, Russia as a state in its current form would cease to exist.... we would be facing... the Yugoslavization of Russia*”³⁵. Following the terrorist attacks of “9/11” and the October 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, the Kremlin held weekly press conferences to support claims that Chechens had links to the Taliban and provided the largest contingent of al-Qaeda’s foreign legion in Afghanistan. Moscow rejected the West’s characterisation of Chechen rebels as ‘freedom fighters’, instead labeling them foreign mercenaries. It framed the Second Chechen War exclusively as a counterterrorist operation and was partially successful in winning the Bush administration over on this interpretation following 9/11.

While the bitter experience of the Chechen wars remains without doubt formative in shaping the Kremlin’s definition of terrorists, domestically and in the Middle East, its security concern today is more with other North Caucasus republics (especially Dagestan) and potentially Central Asia. Consider a few points here: by June 2016, around 3,500 Russians were officially reported to have joined a terrorist formation in the Middle East, the largest number from Dagestan³⁶. People pledging allegiance to ISIL have carried out a number of deadly strikes in Dagestan over the past year, and most recently in Moscow, though these have gone largely unnoticed in the Western press. In light of the perceived growing threat, counterterrorism exercises remain a frequent occurrence in Dagestan. And according to a Levada poll earlier this year, fears amongst Russia’s population about growing unrest in that region are again on the rise, after cautious optimism last year³⁷.

Further, Russia has also long been worried about an ISIL infiltration across the Afghan-Tajik border. Throughout the past year, Russia has continued to pledge help to Tajikistan’s military to counter terrorism, for instance in reinforcing Dushanbe’s military base by one hundred armored personnel carriers and battle tanks³⁸. Warnings about ISIL’s intention to build its

³⁵ Quoted in: Gevorkyan, Timakova, and Kolesnikov, *Ot pervogo litsa* (2000), p.133-135.

³⁶ The Moscow Times, ‘Prosecutor General: 3,500 Russians Have Joined Middle East Terror Groups’ (June 8, 2016), available at: <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/article/571515.html>.

³⁷ Levada Center, ‘Vosprijatie Situacii Na Severnom Kavkaze; Opros Proveden 22-25 Janvarja 2016 Goda’ (February 2016), available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2016/02/16/vosprijatie-situatsii-na-severnom-kavkaze/>.

³⁸ Tass, ‘Some 100 military units delivered to Russian military base in Tajikistan’ (June 24, 2016), available at: <http://tass.ru/en/defense/881741>. Some Western experts on Central Asia have criticised Moscow for using the

“Khorasan Province”, which includes Central Asia, have been voiced not only by the Tajik leadership, but also other regional heads, for instance Kyrgyzstan’s Almazbek Atambaev³⁹.

Then, there is the daunting challenge of managing a big Central Asian migrant population at home, in Russia’s industrial cities, such as Moscow, Vladivostok or Tyumen. Many Central Asians are reportedly radicalized and lured into terrorist formations abroad while working in Russia, rather than in their home countries⁴⁰. Recruitment processes amongst those communities are difficult to study empirically, but there is evidence that people are approached on work sites, in gyms and unofficial mosques, which are often attended by migrants, given the shortage of official places for worship. Without local imams who speak their native language to turn to for guidance, many migrants participate in online devotional communities, where they often end up being targeted by extremist recruiters. Russian fears about the repercussions of radical Islam are real. They are central to Russia’s own perceived vulnerability as a country located in a non-benign regional environment close to instability in the Middle East, with its own large Sunni Muslim population and history of terrorist attacks.

“How should the terrorists be fought?”

In Russia’s view, not only is supporting what it views as ‘state order’ and ‘stable regimes’ – whether in the Middle East, Central Asia or the post-Soviet space generally – the most *effective* response to terrorism, while their erosion gives rise to extremism and terrorism. It is also the only *legitimate* response. Moscow rejects calls for regime change in the Middle East as a matter of principle, criticising what it views as repeated Western attempts of imposing standards of political legitimacy on sovereign Middle Eastern states under the pretense of counterterrorism. Moscow’s grievances with the West integrating “democracy promotion” efforts into its counterterrorism strategy have been a consistent theme throughout the post-“9/11” Global War on Terror: Viewing the Taliban as a threat to its own national security, Russia supported the October 2001 US-led campaign in Afghanistan, but as Washington progressively adopted a narrative of state-building in the country, Russia became increasingly

ISIL threat narrative in Central Asia to increase its leverage over the republics and justify why they need to militarily and politically work closely with Russia, for instance: Noah Tucker, ‘[Islamic State messaging to Central Asians Migrant Workers in Russia](#)’, *CERIA Brief*, No. 6 (March 2015); Edward Lemon, ‘Russia Sees IS as Reason to Boost Control in Central Asia’, *Eurasianet* (November 11, 2014).

³⁹ Lenta, ‘Ne grozi juzhnomu frontu: Kak Rossiya namerena borot'sja s IG eshe i v Srednej Azii’ (October 20, 2015), available at: <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/10/20/khorasan/>.

⁴⁰ Noah Tucker, ‘Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses’.

critical⁴¹. Russia was angered at President Bush's January 2002 'axis of evil' speech, which declared Iran and Syria terrorist threats, and was then opposed to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Once claims of weapons of mass destruction inside Iraq proved unfounded and the language of 'regime change' figured more prominently in the US' discourse on the war, Russia's criticism grew even more intense. Further, it observed with dismay how the 2011 intervention in Libya eventually led to regime change. Given the more recent political instability and strengthening of the terrorist group ISIL in the country, references to the "Libyan experience" feature prominently in the Russian discourse on Syria and counterterrorism today.

5. Case study : the Syrian civil war (2011-present)

As pointed out, while 'counterterrorism' is an internationally accepted norm, since all states are unanimous in their condemnation of 'terrorism', concrete designations of terrorist groups and views on legitimate means to fight them remain fundamentally contested among Russia, the US and Europe. The ongoing civil war in Syria epitomizes this contestation particularly starkly⁴².

Diagnoses of the Syrian crisis

At a fundamental level, Russia and the West view the root causes and drivers of the Syrian conflict differently: Moscow looks at the war partially through the 'Chechnya prism', believing that it is fuelled to a significant extent by external players, who support the armed opposition in order to pursue their own objectives in destabilising Syria⁴³. As was the case during the Second Chechen War (1999-2000), Russia has rejected the West's distinction between supposedly 'good' and 'bad' armed opponents, viewing the conflict as a binary struggle between the Syrian regime and 'terrorists'. The latter, in Russia's view, raise not only

⁴¹ For an excellent discussion of Russian objections to perceived Western-orchestrated regime change and democracy promotion objectives, in Afghanistan, Iraq and beyond, see: Roy Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention* (2013).

⁴² This paper will focus predominantly on the US' and Russia's approaches to counterterrorism in Syria, since the EU as a unitary actor has played a minimal role, not having engaged in any meaningful diplomatic initiatives since 2011. The limited counterterrorism efforts of Europe as a bloc have a systemic origin in the EU's structure, as addressed in the previous passage of this paper, see also: Marc Pierni, 'In search of an EU role in the Syrian war', *Carnegie Europe*, August 2016.

⁴³ For one exemplary Russian account which, in line with the official view, argues that the Syrian crisis has been predominantly fuelled by external actors, see: Boris Dolgov, 'The Syrian Conflict: Russian and GCC Perspectives', *Russian International Affairs Council* (November 19, 2015), available at: http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=6866#top-content.

the spectre of state disintegration, but pose a transnational, a civilizational, threat. In line with its broader view on the 'Arab Spring' as a phenomenon that has raised false hopes of Western-style democratization, but has then led to disorder and the rise of extremism, Russia has perceived the armed opposition as undermining stability and state order in Syria.

The US and EU, in contrast, see the Syrian rebellion's struggle over perceived grievances with the regime as legitimate. Rather than viewing regional democratization processes as harbingers of chaos and extremism, Washington believes terrorism thrives in conditions characterised by a lack of freedom and the rule of law: According to this narrative, local populations' anger about corruption, a lack of representation and the unfair distribution of wealth and power have engendered deep dissatisfaction with regional rulers and engendered conflicts among subnational groups, often conceived along ethnic or sectarian lines. These conflicts, in turn, have produced chaos, led to the expansion of ungoverned territories, sectarian polarization, and fuelled the rise of terrorist groups⁴⁴.

“Who are the terrorists?”

These differing diagnoses of the causes of the Syrian war have informed the sides' views on terrorism in Syria. Russia has consistently argued that any opposition taking up arms, as opposed to voicing its grievances peacefully, is 'terrorist'. There are important parallels here to the Second Chechen War, when Moscow rejected the West's characterisation of Chechen rebels as 'freedom fighters'. It should be noted, though, that especially following 9/11, the Bush administration did accept the Russian narrative that the challenge in Chechnya was essentially about terrorism not separatism, while EU leaders remained more critical of Russia.

Moscow has long argued that there is no such thing as a “moderate” *armed* rebellion in Syria, yet it does not reject all Syrian opposition as illegitimate, but maintains intensive contacts with political opposition groups, for instance in Damascus and in exile.

The US and EU, in turn, have differentiated between ISIL and Jabhat Fatah Al-Sham (JFS) on the one hand, classifying them as terrorist groups given their stated ideology and objectives, and other armed opposition groups. At the outset of the Syrian uprising in early 2011,

⁴⁴ A Miller, 'A Defense of Obama's Middle East 'Balancing Act' - From the Iraq drawdown to chemical weapons red lines to Russia's war in Syria, a conversation with Robert Malley, the president's top Middle East policy official', *Foreign Policy* (August 2016).

Samantha Power argued that the rebels deserved America's enthusiastic support⁴⁵. As the Syrian war became more internationalized and the armed opposition characterised by increasing fragmentation on the fringes⁴⁶, it became more challenging for the US to differentiate between "soft" Islamist groups it considered acceptable to support and hardliner, jihadi parts of the insurgency. Some groups supported by the US have been accused of human rights violations⁴⁷, but Washington continues to maintain it carefully vets those it works with⁴⁸. Ahrar Al-Sham represents an incisive example of a group that the US and Russia view very differently: while committed to establishing Syria as a Sunni theocracy, it is an indigenously Syrian group, renounces foreign attacks, courts US support and has reaffirmed its ties to the mainstream rebels grouped under the Free Syrian Army banner⁴⁹. The US views Ahrar Al-Sham in more favourable terms than does Russia⁵⁰. Generally, the UK, French and EU analysis of the counterterrorist challenge has not been far from that of the US.

"How should the terrorists be fought?"

Coming to Russian and Western views on how counterterrorism should be conducted in the context of the Syrian war, a distinction between the *tactical and strategic level* is useful:

On the tactical level, which refers to how actors approach the immediate fight against terrorists on the ground, Russian airstrikes since September 2015 have been a game-changer. Russia views the targeting of all armed groups, including those that fail to dissociate themselves from JFS, as legitimate⁵¹. It has repeatedly called on the US to facilitate such dissociation and views the US' failure in doing so as evidence of either unwillingness or inability to fight the terrorist threat in Syria effectively. Further, Moscow sees the Syrian regime as a legitimate counterterrorist partner and continuously calls on the US-led coalition

⁴⁵ J. Goldberg, 'The Obama Doctrine', *The Atlantic* (April 2016).

⁴⁶ For an incisive account of the evolution of the Syrian armed opposition, see: Charles Lister, *The Syrian Jihad* (2015).

⁴⁷ 'Syria: Abductions, torture and summary killings at the hands of armed groups', *Amnesty International* (July 2016). Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/07/syria-abductions-torture-and-summary-killings-at-the-hands-of-armed-groups/>.

⁴⁸ "Syrian rebel group investigates beheading of child seen in video", *Reuters* (July 20, 2016), available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-beheading-idUSKCN1000TZ>.

⁴⁹ A. Lund, 'Truce Tests Relations Between Islamist Giants', *Syria Deeply* (March 9, 2016), available at: <https://www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2016/03/09/truce-tests-relations-between-islamist-giants/> ;

⁵⁰ 'Lavrov: "Dzhejsh al-Islam" i "Ahrar ash-Sham" razdeljajut vzgljady IG', *Ria* (April 22, 2016), available at: https://ria.ru/syria_chronicle/20160422/1417028675.html.

⁵¹ M. Boghdanov, *Interview with the BBC's Sarah Rainsford*, (September 16, 2016).

to ask permission from the Assad regime to operate on Syrian territory⁵². The EU, in contrast, has stated that “the Assad regime cannot be a partner in the fight against ISIL”⁵³. Moscow has been accused of focusing its counterterrorism campaign in Syria not so much on ISIL, but rather on whichever armed opposition groups present the greatest threat to the survival of the regime at any given point in time. Western media, NGOs and governments have also admonished Russia for using indiscriminate force in what Moscow claims are counterterrorist strikes, as well as for dropping incendiary and cluster bombs⁵⁴.

The US’ tactical approach to counterterrorism in Syria has evolved through stages. Initially, the US supplied the moderate rebels with non-lethal aid, but quickly provided training, cash, and intelligence to selected rebel commanders. In 2013, it started running a train-and-equip initiative for Syrian rebels (which it abandoned in October 2015) and started conducting airstrikes against ISIL in September 2014, in an effort to build a broad international coalition⁵⁵. Throughout the war, the Obama administration has both aimed and claimed to be more restrained and precise in its use of military force than its predecessor, the Bush administration⁵⁶, as well as to make counterterrorism a truly multilateral effort. While most EU member states involved in anti-ISIL operations have focused on Iraq, counterterrorist support in Syria has come mostly from France, but also Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and Belgium⁵⁷. Public and political support for direct UK military action in Syria had long been lukewarm; the UK parliamentary vote in 2013 was against, which would have left the US alone had it attacked over the “red line” of chemical weapons usage. Only in 2015, after the Paris attacks and a further UNSC resolution calling on states to take all necessary means against ISIS, did the UK follow the French lead and began proper strikes.

On the strategic level, which entails actors’ views on how the root causes of terrorism should be addressed in the long run, Russia and the West also adhere to different playbooks, given

⁵² V. Churkin, *Interview with RT «SophieCo»* (September 14, 2016), available at: http://russiaun.ru/en/news/intv_rt#!.

⁵³ European Council, ‘Council conclusions on Syria’ (October 12, 2015), available at: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/10/12-fac-conclusions-syria/>.

⁵⁴ ‘Images suggest that Russia cluster-bombed U.S.-backed Syrian fighters’, *The Washington Post* (June 18, 2016), available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/06/18/images-suggest-that-russia-cluster-bombed-u-s-backed-syrian-fighters/>; ‘Russia/Syria: Extensive Recent Use of Cluster Munitions’, *Human Rights Watch* (December 20, 2015), available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/20/russia/syria-extensive-recent-use-cluster-munitions>.

⁵⁵ ‘Statement by the President on ISIL’, *The White House Office of the Press Secretary* (September 10, 2014) available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

⁵⁶ Goldberg (2016).

⁵⁷ Pierni (2016).

their incompatible diagnoses of the Syrian crisis. From the Kremlin's perspective, only strong governments can suppress and combat terrorism. As a result, it is dangerous for outside players to undermine existing regimes in the region, even if they are authoritarian. Moscow views large-scale and abrupt political transformations as risky and believes recent developments in Iraq, Libya or Syria to have validated this diagnosis. Consequently, Russia's foreign policy establishment assesses US or European statements about intentions to support democracy in Syria as either naive and rooted in ignorance, or as betraying ulterior motives, such as a desire to enhance the West's own position in the Middle East at Russia's expense.

US policymakers argue that poor and unrepresentative governance, a lack of accountability and human rights violations, the lack of freedom and democracy, are conditions in which terrorism thrives, and that one has to address those underlying conditions in order to root out terrorism in the long run. Yet importantly, unlike its neoconservative predecessor that promulgated the 'freedom agenda', the Obama administration has been far more cautious in claiming, how much the US can do to elicit and encourage those fundamental changes in Middle Eastern societies. The US has consistently supported the idea of a "political transition" in Syria in rhetoric, but has been reluctant to deploy decisive military force towards that end, aware of the limits of American power⁵⁸. Importantly, a "political transition" is not the same as "regime change". Already by 2013, Western states had come round towards the Russian view that the essential structures of the Syrian state should be retained in any political transition, to avoid any risk of repeating mistakes made in Iraq. On the issue of regime change, Russia and the West have thus in fact been closer than is often conveyed in official rhetoric and the media.

Prospects for counterterrorism cooperation

What else do Russia and the West agree on in the counterterrorist fight in Syria? They both see ISIL and JFS as terrorist threats. Also, both have been supporting the Syrian Kurds, Russia as group that could develop a modus vivendi with the regime, the US as an effective fighting force against ISIL. Further, whenever Russia or the US saw it as conducive towards their political objectives in Syria, they have indeed shown some flexibility in their counterterrorist positions. For instance, Sergey Lavrov agreed in February that Jaish al-Islam

⁵⁸ Miller (2016).

and Ahrar al-Sham could participate in Syria peace talks on an individual basis, even though he made clear this did not mean that they were legitimate interlocutors⁵⁹.

Still, there is more disagreement than common ground. The most recent US-Russian deal, adopted on September 10, which reinstated a cessation of hostilities in Syria and envisioned coordinated airstrikes against ISIL and JFS, appears to have collapsed. It was clear from the outset that this deal would face great operational and psychological obstacles in its implementation. First and foremost, even with good intelligence, it was going to be difficult to disentangle JFS and other rebel groups, whose military interdependence is particularly pronounced in Idlib and parts of Aleppo province. Russia has made it clear that armed groups failing to dissociate themselves from JFS remain legitimate targets, a view that is anathema to Washington⁶⁰. Further, the cooperation plan envisioned a significant amount of intelligence exchange, if not joint action, which presupposes a level of trust between American and Russian defense officials that hardly exists and will be difficult to instill overnight, even if there is the political will shared by Kerry and Lavrov at the top.

Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the ‘US-Russia Working Group on Counterterrorism’ served as the primary mechanism for facilitating counterterrorist collaboration. While officials judged the level of cooperation at the time as unprecedented, both sides still felt, that their respective partner was somewhat guarded in exchanging intelligence given mutual mistrust. Today, when US-Russian relations are a far cry from where they were in 2001 and 2002, expecting both sides to be open to real cooperation thus appears overly optimistic. Aware of these current realities in the bilateral relationship, Kerry has kept insisting that cooperation with Russia should be built “*not* on trust, but sequential measurable steps”⁶¹. He has also repeatedly recalled last year’s “P5+1” deal on the Iranian nuclear program, as well as joint efforts to destroy Syria’s declared chemical weapons, to make the point that cooperation with Russia is possible. Yet, these were issues on which the US’ and Russia’s objectives were far more aligned than they are today on counterterrorism in Syria, and which involved cooperation through established bodies like the UN, P5+1 or OPCW, rather than direct military-to-military cooperation between the Pentagon and Russian MoD.

⁵⁹ ‘Islamist groups in Syria talks on individual basis: Russia’, *Reuters* (February 2, 2016), available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-lavrov-idUSKCN0VB110>.

⁶⁰ M. Boghdanov, Interview with the BBC’s Sarah Rainsford, September 16, 2016.

⁶¹ J. Kerry, ‘Joint Press Availability With Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’, July 15 2016, available at: <http://m.state.gov/md260134.htm>.

As long as Russia and the West's perspectives on the civil war and the nature of terrorism in Syria remain at odds, as well as their broader bilateral relationship afflicted with deep mutual mistrust about the respective other side's intentions vis-a-vis each other, prospects for counterterrorist cooperation will remain inherently limited. Instead, its pursuit will - at best - raise unrealistic expectations on both sides and - at worst - lead to adverse consequences on the ground. With the latest attempt at cooperation having failed, it is unclear whether the departing Obama will give diplomacy another try and we might have to wait for the next administration.