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TRANSCRIPT

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"Syria in the Gray Zone"

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Melissa Dalton: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank for you for coming today on Halloween, no less, for our event on Syria in the Gray Zone. I'm Melissa Dalton. I direct the Cooperative Defense project here at CSIS. And I'm delighted to be joined by my distinguished colleagues who served alongside of me on the Syria Study Group that really led the effort, bipartisan effort mandated by Congress, to review U.S. strategy, including the diplomatic and military components of the U.S. efforts in Syria. Forward-looking, not retrospective.

But also, to put Syria in the broader context of an ongoing effort that we have been conducting here at CSIS over the last two years, looking at gray zone competition. That's the area between conventional warfare and day-to-day statecraft, whereby the United States, along with other significant actors across the globe, are using a range of coercive tools – from information operations, to economic levers, to the use of proxy forces, as well as in the cyber and space domains – to extend their influence and their interest.

So excited to be engaging on this two-part conversation today. The first part will focus on the findings of the Syria Study Group, and then we will transition to a panel discussion with some other distinguished colleagues to unpack some of the dimensions of the Syrian conflict, particularly as we've seen the developments unfold over the last few weeks.

Before we get started today, I want to share with you our building safety precautions. Overall, we feel secure in our building, but as a convener we have a duty to prepare for an emergency. I will serve as your responsible safety officer at this event. Please follow my instructions, should the need arise. Finally, please take a moment to familiarize yourself with the emergency exit pathways for this room, which are – yes, exactly. Mike has joined us for events before, so he knows where they are. Behind you and down the stairs. Or, if the need arises, we will exit out the doors behind us. Thank you, Mike, for your kind assistance.

Michael Singh: Happy to help.

Melissa Dalton: So to start today we are going to be unpacking the findings of the Syria Study Group with our two co-chairs. To my left is Dana Stroul, who serve as one of – who served as the Democratic co-chair of the Syria Study Group. And she is in her day job the Shelly and Michael Kassen Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Dana's previous experience includes serving as a staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, as well as many years in the Department of Defense, where I had the distinct privilege of working with her.

And to my right is the other distinguished co-chair of the Syria Study Group, the Republican appointee, Michael Singh. He serves as the managing director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Previously served as the senior director for Near East and North African affairs at the White House, as well as the director for several Middle Eastern countries on the NSC staff, and special assistant to two secretaries of state. So delighted to have you both joining us today.

So to open up, would like to ask – perhaps to start with Dana. Based on your work through the Syria Study Group, what are the most significant gray zone activities, in your estimation, that Russia and Iran are currently undertaking in Syria?

Dana Stroul:

That's a great question. And we spent a lot of time in our report talking about the natures of Russia and Iranian support to the Assad regime. And I should say at the top, one – since we're talking about Russia, and Iran, and gray zone activities, one question we worked to tackle in the deliberations of our group is about the alliance between Russia and Iran in Syria, and are there vulnerabilities, or factures, or tensions that could be exploited by the United States to divide them and then move forward with a better outcome for Syria?

And our conclusion was no, not at this time. That what unites Russia and Iran in their commitment to the survival of Assad regime and his commitment to retake Syrian territory is much stronger than any of the tensions that are dividing the two entities at this point in time.

In terms of gray zone activities, other than Russia's overt kinetic military support for the Assad regime, what it's doing in Syria is entirely in the gray zone. Two great examples are Russia, through its Security Council seat at the U.N. Security Council, consistently blocks efforts to have truth-telling commissions, fact-finding commissions on things, for example, like use of chemical weapons, commission of war crimes, et cetera. So Russia consistently at the U.N. Security Council and in deliberations across U.N. bodies – like the Organization for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons – OPCW – will block international bodies from undertaking those fact-finding missions, block international bodies from assigning complicity for the commission of war crimes, for the use of chemical weapons. So it's basically, no, this didn't happen; look over there – somewhere else.

And another great example of Russian operations in the gray zone are its use of mercenaries, like the Wagner organization. So basically, rather than have Russian military forces itself challenge us, there was a time where U.S. military forces at our outpost at the Tanf garrison were challenged not by the Russians themselves, but by mercenaries – Wagner – operating alongside Iran proxies.

So these are examples where the Russians maintain just enough distance to be able to deny, but it's clearly different elements of the Russian state challenging and testing the United States – both our commitment, our resolve, and then actually what we're doing in Syria, and where we're willing to draw that line.

And Iran is all about gray zone activities; not just in Syria, across the region. Mike, I'll leave it to you to talk more about Iran. Needless to say, one thing that we really try to emphasize in our report is that when we talk about Iranian entrenchment in Syria, we're not just talking about Iranian boots, military investment in Syria. We're also talking about all of the elements of Iran's soft power.

So whether it's buying up real estate in Syria that has been vacated by refugees who were forced to flee Syria for a variety of reasons; whether it's transitioning religious institutions to Shia Islam; whether it's paying off local tribes, these sorts of things are all elements of gray zone warfare to shift the conditions and the dynamics in Syria, but maintain just enough plausible deniability so it's unclear exactly what Iran is doing.

Melissa Dalton:

Thanks so much, Dana, for unpacking that.

Mike?

Michael Singh: Well, let me say first, thank you, Melissa, and thank you to CSIS and to all of you for having us here, for being here. Happy Halloween to everybody. This is my Halloween costume.

Dana Stroul: He's a think-tank nerd.

Michael Singh: It's – it is a real pleasure to be here although this isn't such a pleasurable topic to talk about.

I'm never sure when we talk about the gray zone – and last time I was here we were talking about –

Melissa Dalton: That's right.

Michael Singh: – Iranian gray zone activities elsewhere – what is and what isn't in the gray zone, but maybe that's part of the point, that it's hard to know exactly what falls into this category.

But I think we can say that, with respect to Iran – and I think this goes to a large extent for Russia, as well – but if you look at Iranian activities, there is obviously an overt conventional military aspect to what Iran is doing. Iran has sent its own military, in relatively small numbers, to Syria, IRGC officers – Revolution Guard, that is – officers, and it has tried – without great success – to establish a sort of forward military presence which it could use against, say, Israel or other U.S. allies in the area. And Israel has obviously engaged in an air campaign to try to stymie those Iranian activities.

But we also see Iran engaging in a host of proxy activities: sending – whether it's Pakistani or Afghan – militants there, sending Hezbollah, sending Iraqi Shia militants to Syria, and then also actually recruiting new militias in Syria. And one of our colleagues from the Washington Institute, Phillip Smyth, has a project where you can actually look at the map of all these different militias that Iran has created in Syria.

They are also engaged across the spectrum of economic activities as well as, I would say, social and political activities, so looking to purchase real estate, looking to gain contracts, looking to insinuate themselves into society in different ways. They've obviously been accused of trying to sort of convert people from Sunni Islam to Shia Islam, although lots of those reports are a bit murky I would say. And if we move into a political phase in Syria, which maybe is ahead of us, then I would expect Iran to try to do in Syria what it has done in, say, Iraq or Lebanon, which is to also insinuate itself into the political process. As Dana noted, I think we see some of the same activities with respect to Russia, where you see different Syrian commanders who may owe greater allegiance to the Russians than they actually owe to the Assad regime.

I think that one of the things which is interesting about Russian and Iranian gray zone activities in Syria is that they're not only directed at the other side, as it were. That's not only directed at the U.S. or the Syrian opposition or the SDF; they're directing them at one another as well. There is this competition among Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime which doesn't, as Dana said, rise to the level of, well,

there's this big gulf for us to exploit. But clearly on the ground there is this effort to sort of gain position against the other looking especially, I think, towards a kind of post-conflict Syria where maybe there will be some spoils to be had for these different parties.

And I think that if you look at the strategy of what they're trying to accomplish with this kind of suite of activities, I see two things, really. One is to, frankly, just get something out of this conflict in Syria – to sort of turn a profit, as it were, given the immense – maybe not immense – given the significant cost that each has borne trying to prop up the Assad regime. So they want contracts. They want their firms to be able to go in and do business in Syria and to receive whatever economic reconstruction funds are coming from Europe and the West in some future scenario.

But I think there's another purpose, which is to use Syria in both cases, Russia and Iran, as a platform to project power. For Russia I think that means sort of into the Mediterranean. Obviously, Russia has put a premium on maintaining its naval facility as well as its airbase, which it's expanded and consolidated throughout this conflict. And for Iran I think that means, again, trying to sort of embed itself in a way which expands its front against Israel in particular.

You know, one of the things we did was travel to the region. And if you look across the border from Israel into Syria, in just one Syrian town you can see – literally see a Hezbollah presence, you can see IRGC a bit further away from the border, and you can see or at least hear about the local militias – which are not Lebanese, they're not Iranian; they're actually Syrians, residents of the village perhaps, who are beholden to Iran, on the Iranian payroll. And so there's this multilayered approach that the Iranians have taken, which is actually sort of playing out right in front of us.

- Melissa Dalton: Yeah. And is it – from both of you, is it your sense that this is a concerted effort on both these actors' parts to use, as Mike put it, the suite of tools to further their interests? Or are they trying as catch can, you know, to see in certain communities what sort of tactics might work? Is it a grand strategy or is it more at the tactical level?
- Dana Stroul: Well, in the case of Iran, certainly the Iranians have shown themselves adaptable to the local context. So what they're doing, for example, in the Deir ez-Zor area is different from how they have approached communities in southern Syria, which is different from how they have approached communities in the suburbs of Damascus. Different communities need different things, have experienced different levels of conflict as it relates to the broader conflict, and so the Iranians are adaptable.
- Melissa Dalton: Yeah.
- Dana Stroul: Over to you.
- Michael Singh: No, I think it's a good question, and I don't know that we know the answer. You know, it's easy to ascribe to any adversary – and I think Russia and Iran particularly get this – a sort of a strategic genius that may, in fact, not be there, right? I think that there is some element of planning, of intention, which sort of goes into these activities. I'm sure there's also some opportunism. I mean, I'm sure that there's in

some ways activities or sort of obligations that both Russia and Iran have sort of found themselves taking on that maybe they didn't want to or even intend to. So I – so I think it's a mix of these things.

And I should also say I think there's probably a lot we don't know about Russian and Iranian gray zone activities in Syria. One of the things we recommend in the Syria Study Group report – and I should note that Melissa was also an extremely valuable member of our Syria Study Group – is that really the U.S. government needs to focus a bit more on these things, on exposing what Russia and Iran is doing, which means you first have to know what they're doing, which means there's also an intelligence component to this. And I would personally like to see the State Department and others maybe sort of invest a little bit more in whether it's sort of internal resources or external resources trying to shine a light on this area because I think there's just too much that we don't know, frankly.

Dana Stroul: Right.

Melissa Dalton: Great. So we spent a concerted effort over the last few months producing this report, and then in early October a series of decisions have happened that have shaped the battlefield, at least, dramatically, introducing additional factors into the equation. Just leave it there.

But given recent U.S. decisions on Syria, what sources of leverage do we have going forward, given Russian and Iranian gray zone activities, the broader sweep of the conflict? What do you think still holds from our report or your reflections in light of recent decisions, in terms of the sources of U.S. leverage, next steps that we should be taking?

Dana Stroul: So first let – I'm just going to give you the one-minute spiel on what the report did recommend prior to last month's decisions and developments. We argued in our recommendation section that taken as a whole, even though in the United States that there's limited appetite domestically here or on the Hill to match the level of resources or even diplomatic investment of the Iranians and the Russians in Syria, that the United States still had compelling forms of leverage on the table to shape an outcome that was more conducive and protective of U.S. interests, and we identified four.

So the first one was the one-third of Syrian territory that was owned via the U.S. military with its local partner, the Syrian Democratic Forces. Now this was a light footprint on the U.S. military, only about a thousand troops over the course of the Syria Study Group's report; and then the tens of thousands of forces, both Kurdish and Arab, under the Syria Democratic Forces. And that one-third of Syria is the resource-rich – it's the economic powerhouse of Syria. So where the hydrocarbons are, which obviously is very much in the public debate here in Washington these days, as well as the agricultural powerhouse.

Well, we argued that it wasn't just about this one-third of Syrian territory that the U.S. military and our military presence owned, both to fight ISIS and also as leverage for affecting the overall political process for the broader Syria conflict. There were three other areas of leverage.

One is political and diplomatic isolation of the Assad regime. This is – in our assessment, one of Russia’s goals in the Middle East is the propaganda win for Russia of rehabilitating Assad on the international stage, of basically forcing the international community to normalize him and welcome him back in without any behavioral changes. So holding the line on diplomatic isolation, preventing embassies from going back into Damascus.

Two is the economic sanctions architecture. So some of this is part of the maximum pressure campaign of the Trump administration on Iran, but there is a whole suite of both executive and congressional sanctions on Syria and Bashar al-Assad, both for human rights abuses in Syria and to the backers of Assad for their activities on support – in support of him in Syria.

And three was reconstruction aid. So the United States remains the overall largest single donor of humanitarian aid to Syrians, both inside Syria and refugees outside of Syria, and there was some stabilization assistance in the part of Syria that was liberated from ISIS and controlled via the Syrian Democratic Forces in north and eastern Syria.

The rest of Syria, though, is rubble, and what the Russians want and what Assad wants is economic reconstruction, and that is something that the United States can basically hold a card on via the international financial institutions and our cooperation with the Europeans. So we argued that absent behavioral changes by the Assad regime, we should hold the line on preventing reconstruction aid and technical expertise from going back into Syria.

So now, in the past month, it looked like one of the most compelling forms of leverage, which was the U.S. military presence, was taken off the table quite fast. Now, as of this morning, the news suggests that maybe that military presence will stay for some period of time. And the problem with this is no matter what the U.S. military presence is or isn’t, at this point a lot of the PR damage is done. So if you’re trying to get allies and partners in Europe or otherwise to work with our U.S. military in completing the fight against ISIS, most countries are going to be unwilling or hesitant to contribute more than they already have because they can’t plan on the United States. Because this is like the third time that decisions have come out of Washington in a rather unplanned manner about whether or not the U.S. military is staying.

Mike and I have argued recently that the other forms of leverage remain compelling if resourced effectively and prioritized at the highest levels of the U.S. government. So if we’re going to hold the line on the diplomatic isolation, on moving forward with the economic sanctions architecture and holding the line on reconstruction aid, perhaps those things could still be compelling because in our view, what our assessment was of the conflict has not changed. The conflict is not over; it’s entering a new phase. ISIS is certainly not defeated, no matter what you hear from certain houses of a certain color here in Washington, D.C. The Russians very much remain committed to Bashar al-Assad, as do the Iranians. Refugees are not returning home, certainly not in a safe, voluntary or dignified manner. And international norms are still being smashed every day by the civilian protection issues taking place in Syria.

Melissa Dalton:

Great.

Mike, we're going to go to you and then a brief round of Q&A from the audience.

Michael Singh: Sure. I'll keep my answer brief because I largely agree with what Dana had to say.

I think, you know, if I could sum it up, I would say we still have a lot of leverage on paper. It seems like our military is still there, although you have to track this from day to day now, it seems. And I will say that I sort of – I've been critical of the decision to withdraw. I think it was the wrong decision. But – and I do think that, in a sense, it's a win for Russia and Iran and the Assad regime. But I think that case can be overstated. I don't think that Russia, the Assad regime, Iran now, have sort of an easy path to victory or even an easy path to consolidating control, whether northeast Syria or elsewhere.

I think the big problem is that, while we may still have leverage on paper, it's exactly what Dana said. Already, you know, after December 2018, when the president first indicated he wanted to remove troops, there was this sense you got in Europe especially of states saying, well, look, if the U.S. wants out, maybe it is time to change our policy, to deal with Russia, to end the sort of isolation of Assad, to start giving reconstruction money, not as – not so much for purely political reasons but because there was a worry that if Syria sort of remains in this kind of chaotic sort of devastated state, that that then creates conditions for all sorts of security threats to arise, whether it's ISIS, whether it's Iran, and so forth.

I think that will be even stronger now. So I think that even though we may have that leverage on paper, a lot of our friends will say, look, you know, you have, for example, this Astana process with Russia and Turkey and Iran. We're going to engage with that process. We're going to try to find the best kind of diplomatic way forward with Moscow, with Ankara, and so forth. And sorry, United States, we're not going to sort of go along with what you want to do.

Stemming that tide is going to be really hard. And so inside the Trump administration they're going to need to decide whether they want to try or whether they want to shift policy and go that direction themselves. And I imagine there's a debate about that right now.

Melissa Dalton: We will see how that plays out in the coming days, I'm sure.

We're going to do some brief Q&A with Mike and Dana before we shift to the second part of our discussion. We have CSIS staff members on hand with microphones. So if you could please raise your hand. When I call on you, please state your name and affiliation, and keep your question to an actual question.

Sir, right over here.

Alexey Khlebnikov: Alexey Khlebnikov, Russian International Affairs Council. Thank you for insightful and very detailed presentations. And I was really surprised to learn that Iran actually has soft power in Syria. It's very encouraging for Iranians to do that.

But my question is about the entire methodology which you used about gray zones in Syria. So you largely focused on Russian and Iranian activities. What about Turkish and U.S. activities in the same zones? I think we also cannot neglect that

part because, you know, every one of those actors are part of this conflict and equation, so – and we need also to look in more details on what those activities are and where could they lead.

And the second question, just very brief: What do you think are conditions at which U.S. military could finally withdraw, not only from northeast but also the south al-Tanf area, where currently also quite substantial presence? Thank you.

Melissa Dalton: Great. And we're going to have a broader conversation on the other gray-zone actors in the second part of our discussion, but if you guys want to jump in with some initial thoughts.

Dana Stroul: So we talk about the conditions in our report under which we should consider withdrawing U.S. forces, and one of them is the sustainable defeat of ISIS. And we spent a lot of time talking about and deliberating on what that looks like. And what we say is that it's when communities liberated from ISIS are resilient enough to deter or push away ISIS attempting to reinvest in those communities.

So a perfect example or a perfect storm is what's happening right now. Most of those communities are not stable and did not receive stabilization assistance effectively. So we called, for example, for the U.S. administration to turn that stabilization assistance back on. It was frozen in 2017; so explosive ordnances not being collected. Local councils have not had the space to return services, or those sorts of things, or protect themselves.

And now, as the SDF has focused on moving north into northern Syria to protect their own communities from Turkish military operations, a lot of those communities are uncovered, number one. And two, there's not a lot of talk about the Arab elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Arab communities in eastern Syria. And right now if we don't think also about what that means for the areas that were liberated from ISIS – and their choices are basically ISIS or the Assad regime – well, they know what life was like under the Assad regime and it's not something that they desire. Or, at least that's what the reports are that we understand. And that means that ISIS is going to have a new opportunity to re-trench itself in those communities.

Michael Singh: As Melissa said, there will be more discussion about other gray zone actors. I'll only say by the United States, I wish we were better at these types of activities, that sort of activity short of conventional warfare. Part of our difficulties in Syria have been that we haven't really been willing to put resources in. Even the resources that Congress has appropriated over the past several years haven't been spent. And so I think that has actually undermined our ability to have influence in different areas of Syria. We had, for example, in the past more influence in southwestern Syria, but that was largely withdrawn. So this is not, I think, a sort of arena in which we have competed well with those we're theoretically trying to compete against.

On the troops the only thing I'll add is that there's going to be a domestic political component to this as well. We have an election next year. Our military presence in the Middle East is, I think, not one of the 10 most popular things on the list of foreign policy matters for the Democratic candidates. And there'll be questions that arise about our continued presence there, as to whether the mission is one

which is properly authorized, whether it's one which is worthwhile. And I think we'll see that play out here in Washington as well.

Melissa Dalton: Yeah. And I think it's important to note that the gray zone tools that we're talking about are typically nonmilitary in nature. There's been a very conscious effort to focus on the military dimension, but there's clearly a wider sweep of activities that are taking place and where there are clear gaps from some of these actors.

Take a question perhaps from this side of the room, and then we're going to shift to – unless there aren't any? There's – sir, in the front row.

Steve Winters: Thank you. Steve Winters, independent consultant.

I wonder – so the question is, how do you all assess Putin's ability to influence or tell Iran what to do in Syria? And a couple of weeks ago at this Valdai discussion group in Sochi, this question was asked to Putin. You know, why don't you suggest to the Iranians that they just get out of there and that they aren't being very helpful. And I don't go along with his answer, but what he said was: Hey, look, why are you asking me this? They're a sovereign state. I don't tell them what to do. They make their own decisions. That's – and yet, at the same time, he was – Putin was the one who brokered this with – you know, a stand back from the Golan of the Iranian troops. So what's your assessment of this?

Michael Singh: So I don't think that the Russians can tell the Iranians what to do. I mean, I think they have a partnership. I think that partnership is mutually beneficial. The Iranians provide – help to provide sort the ground forces. The Russians have largely provided the air power, plus. I mean, that's an oversimplification, but maybe a useful a one. And so they have needed each other. They don't have the same political aims necessarily, but their aims are close enough that they are compatible, I would say. And when it comes to things like the Golan agreement, I assume that when Iran agrees to these things – if, in fact, it has; I have my doubts as to whether this is actually the case – it's because Iran sort of finds it to be advantageous for itself.

So I don't think that we – if our – if our idea is we'll conduct diplomacy with the Russians, the Russians will force the Iranians out, I think that's a pipedream. It's not going to happen. The Russians don't have that capability. And we would – we will need to find other ways to try to put pressure on the Iranian presence in Syria other than just the diplomatic route with Russia.

Melissa Dalton: Do you want to add to that?

Dana Stroul: The Russians have attempted over and over to commit the Iranians to agreements that the Iranians have consistently violated. Over and over you've seen the Israelis hope that the Russians could deliver certain actions by the Iranians, and they have never held up.

Melissa Dalton: Great. So on that note we are going to – thank you so much to Dana and Mike for sharing your thoughts and insights. And the findings I think still, sadly, ring true in terms of the Syria Study Group report. There are copies of the report available today at the front check-in desk. So encourage you to pick up a copy if you haven't already.

At this stage, we're going to transition to the second part of our conversation. So forgive us while we do a quick set change, and we will get started in a couple of minutes. Thank you.

(Break.)

Melissa Dalton: All right, everyone. Thank you so much for your attention for the first part of our conversation. We're now going to shift to the second part of our conversation to broaden this discussion of the gray zone activities in Syria. Dana and Mike I think framed up quite nicely some of the Russia and Iran dynamics, some of the recent developments – thank you very much – some of the recent developments related to U.S. policy decisions and the impacts on northeastern Syria, and how Russian, Iranian, and U.S. activities are intersecting in that particular part of the country. But this is a complex and continually evolving conflict, and so delighted to have – be flanked on both sides by experts who are coming to this issue from different junctures.

To my left is Ibrahim al-Assil, who's a nonresident scholar at the Middle East Institute. He's also a founding member of the Syrian Nonviolence Movement. Ibrahim previously led an initiative to train Syrian activists about strategic planning and project management, conducted studies in northern Syria on civil society in the region, and served as a fellow at the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard Kennedy School. Ibrahim, thanks so much for joining us.

To my right is Soner Çağaptay, who is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. A historian by training, he has taught courses at Yale, Princeton, Georgetown, and Smith. He has previously served as professor at Princeton University's Department of Near Eastern Studies and chair of the Turkey Advanced Area Studies Program at the State Department's Foreign Service Institute. Great to have you, Soner.

And to my far right is my colleague here at CSIS, Jon Alterman, who is a senior vice president and the Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and director of the Middle East Program. He previously served as a member of the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department, special assistant to the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, and as an expert advisor to the congressionally mandated Iraq Study Group, on which the model for the Syria Study Group was based.

Jon B. Alterman: We fixed that problem.

Melissa Dalton: Yes, clearly, and now it's on to Syria, sadly. So thanks to you all for joining us.

We had also expected to have Lieutenant General Charlie Cleveland joining us today from West Point. He is, unfortunately, under the weather, but I'm sure will be engaging on these issues going forward. He was also a member of the Syria Study Group.

So to kick things off, Ibrahim, perhaps I'll turn to you first. As Dana and Mike laid out some of the dynamics related to Russia and Iran's coercive activities in Syria, given your experience working on the ground there and closely with local

governance and advocacy groups, how have these Russian and Iranian activities that have been described at more of a policy level affected the trajectory of the conflict?

Ibrahim al-Assil: Thank you, Melissa. So Iran and Russia, they intervened at different stages of the conflict to achieve – sometimes, like, their goals converged, and sometimes diverged.

For Iran, first of all, when Iran started its intervention in Syria, whether directly through the IRGC or through Hezbollah, it took the conflict from the local level to the regional level, and it certainly catalyzed the sectarian factor and dimension of the conflict. I remember in 2013 and '14, when I used to visit eastern Aleppo and talk to people and activists there, how the discourse of people there started to change, especially after al-Qusayr battle, when Hezbollah intervened in Syria. And people started to identify more as Sunnis more than anything else in those areas.

And when I was working with some young guys there and I told them, like, you never said you are a Sunni. Like, since when you say, I am Sunni you don't – it was Ramadan and they don't even practice. They were not fasting. They were smoking, and they said – because that's how they look at us. They are here to fight us because they are Shi'a, we are Sunni, and then started to perceive the conflict through that lens even though it wasn't how they perceived it in 2011.

And, of course, Iran provided the manpower in the regime. Where Russia intervened and it provided the airpower to the regime, it also provided the sense of impunity to the regime and to the forces loyal to the regime inside Syria, and we started also to feel that in the level of violence because Russia, at that point in 2015, moved from being what you could call an accomplice to being a partner in the fight and to kill people inside Syria by Russian air power, people – civilians – inside Syria on the ground and, of course, it also took the conflict from the regional level to the global or the international level.

And I think Dana mentioned the propaganda – the Russian propaganda. We absolutely feel it. Syrian civil society, as people who work on Syria and supported the Syrian uprising since 2011, it was totally different when you are facing the regime or the Iranian propaganda and when you move to the Russian propaganda. It's much more powerful. It's stronger. It's deeper. Try to write sometimes anything on Twitter. Even if you are secular, even if you are peaceful, you'll get, you're al-Qaida, you are a terrorist. Even they went after the white helmet. They tried to deprive the Syrian uprising from any civil narrative and that was very – like, the damage was very deep on Syria – on the Syrian movement.

So Iran and Russia, they needed each other. They need each other, and why they both probably achieved a lot in the propping up of the regime. Their strategic goal of limiting the U.S. influence and presence in Syria and in the region hasn't been achieved yet. So they still need each other to achieve that in the future.

Melissa Dalton: That's incredibly dynamic. Thank you so much for unpacking that for us.

Jon, I'd like to turn to you in terms of, you know, pulling back and, you know, the question that we started to tackle earlier with Dana and Mike in terms of is this

actually a strategy that Iran and Russia are pursuing – you know, the effects that Ibrahim has described? Or is it – is it just a bunch of tactics?

Jon B. Alterman:

First, I want to congratulate you and Dana and Mike for a really excellent report, and thank you for having me.

I think – I just want to start by underlining one of the things Ibrahim said that I think is really important. This didn't start off as a sectarian conflict and it was partly a willful effort by the Assad government to turn it into a sectarian conflict to try to build international support. So it's an instrumentalization of sectarianism, which is a choice that was meant to preserve the Assad government, which, in fact, has been, largely, successful. So let's keep that in mind.

I think the other piece of this is it's easy to assume that we have goals in Syria and the Russians have goals and the Iranians have goals and they're sort of all on a par. The Iranians started off with a pretty basic goal. They want to preserve a government in Syria that's friendly to them for a whole bunch of reasons, partly because Syria helps them access Hezbollah. Syria gives them a presence in the Levant. Syria means we can fight them there so we don't have to fight them at home. It gives Syria – it gives Iran a way to deter Israel. In some ways, gives them something to bargain with with Israel.

So they weren't actually, I think, trying to achieve any particular outcome in Syria. They were trying to prevent a very particular outcome, which was the collapse of this government and the rise of some government that's hostile to them.

I think the Russians, similarly, came in. It looked like the regime was going to topple, and the Russians came in and with a very modest military force – maybe 5,000 soldiers and a couple dozen fixed-wing aircraft – were able to save the Assad regime, for a whole series of their own particular reasons. We come in. We have our 80-country coalition. We're not really sure exactly what we're trying to do. In some ways, we want to talk about big stuff – we're going to rebuild Syria, we're trying to sort of move toward a model of Syria that actually works and doesn't breed radicalism, but it's a lot more ambitious than what either the Russians or the Iranians are trying to do. And in point of fact, we never resourced that – if we could even do it – we don't resource it enough to do it.

Where it leaves us is we had a policy that, late in the Obama administration – friends in the administration looked – or in the Defense Department looked at me and say, I don't know what our desired end state in Syria is. I can tell you the Russians and the Iranians had a pretty particular low-bar end state, which they have achieved. We had a sort of fuzzy high-bar end state, which I think gets us into this space where the president says not only are we not going to do reconstruction, we're not going to do stabilization. And I don't know anybody who has been involved in counterterrorism in any serious way who thinks that if you have a terrorism problem, if you don't do stabilization, you're not going to have a bigger terrorism problem.

I mean, you can have an argument about reconstruction. You can't have an argument, in my mind, honestly, about not doing stabilization, and we're not doing stabilization.

There is as bigger problem – and then I'll shut up. There is a bigger problem about U.S. policy, that nobody – nobody is beginning to talk about what reconstruction of Syria will look like, and when, and who is going to pay for it. And if we don't begin to have that conversation, and if we can't begin to influence the way in which it goes, we're not toward the end of the Syria problem. We're at the end of the initial phase of the Syria problem, and we're going to have decades of Syria problems that affect us and our allies for years and years to come.

Melissa Dalton: Yeah, and it's the current policy of the United States not to promote reconstruction in Syria right now.

Jon B. Alterman: Or stabilization.

Melissa Dalton: Right, right.

I'd like to bring Soner into the conversation – a lot of attention on Turkey, particularly from Capitol Hill, over the last few weeks – but to take a step back, you know, to look at what are Syria's strategic aims in the Syrian conflict, and through what lenses do they look at Syria.

Soner Çağaptay: Turkey's aims, right?

Melissa Dalton: I'm sorry, Turkey, yes. Thank you.

Soner Çağaptay: Absolutely, and thank you again, to you, Melissa, and to CSIS and everybody for having us here. And congratulations also to you, and Mike, and Dana on the report, and others who have contributed to it. I read it and I found it very useful. I recommend it to everybody here.

So I think that Turkey's objectives in Syria, taking into account nearly eight years of engagement since the beginning of the uprising. I would say, except for the very beginning part of Turkey's involvement in which Turkey did the right things – supported pro-democracy movements – it failed to – it was ill-conceived and ill-executed – Turkish policy, that is. It failed to take into account that this pro-democracy movement morphed into a pro-democracy rebellion, and from then on Syrian went into a civil war – a sectarian civil war; a sectarian civil war that involved the regional and global powers; a sectarian civil war that involved regional and global powers and jihadists.

Ankara's policy was frozen sort of back in 2002, aiming to oust Assad as if none of this was happening at the same time, and I think that's a failure to adjust or adapt objectives to the realities on the ground after 2012 – left Turkey in the unenviable position of being hated by basically all sides by 2016. Ankara was hated by ISIS, by YPG, and by the Assad regime, so that made it necessary for some adjustments, so after firing then his foreign minister turned prime minister, Davutoğlu, Turkish president Erdoğan adjusted policy, and I think Turkey switched from just aiming to oust Assad to undermining YPG.

I think that is also linked to Assad's own tactics. We heard from my co-panelists about how Assad was able to masterfully sectarianize the conflict, bring outside actors in, but also he used the YPG, knowing that that PKK is Turkey's Achilles' heel, very successfully against Ankara.

Assad regime vacated Kurdish majority areas of Syria on 2012. I made a trip to Syria in 2008, solely for sightseeing purposes. At that time, following 1998 Adana protocol between Turkey and Syria, Assad regime had promised to shut down PKK and ban its activities, but in 2008, I saw openly Öcalan posters, PYD and YPG banners all over the country. So to me it was a sign that this organization was very much tolerated. The regime allowed the YPG to surface in 2012, to distract Turkey from its primary goal of ousting Assad. Erdoğan ignored the YPG because there were peace talks with the PKK, the YPG's mother organization at that time. These talks collapsed in 2015, and that raised the YPG's role or threat level to Turkey.

After firing Davutoğlu, I think Erdoğan adjusted his Syria objectives and it now became ousting Assad and undermining YPG. And I would say, recognizing the writing on the wall, that the Assad regime, if not Assad himself, is permanently staying, at least for the time being. But, you know, U.S. increasingly disengaging itself from Syria, Erdoğan has now completely focused on YPG.

I would also add that – I've used the word Erdoğan a lot. I think he's – of course, he's a very powerful leader. He's Turkey's most consequential president in nearly a hundred years, since Atatürk established Turkey out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. But I think it's simplistic, even when you use shorthand, to describe what happened in Syria a few weeks ago as Erdoğan's war.

I think Erdoğan clearly has some domestic objectives I can highlight in the next round, but this is a war that is – in which Erdoğan has pretty broad support from wide constituencies, although Turkey is very polarized, divided into two blocs. Nearly half of the country loves Erdoğan. The other half loathes him.

Hatred for the PKK and its outfits, including YPG, is quite a unifying concern, with the exception of People's Democracy Party, which is a Kurdish nationalist-liberal alliance in the Turkish parliament, currently polling about 10 percent. All other parties in the parliament supported the war. So I would say this was a – this has coalesced, this being the determination to undermine YPG and its political gains in Syria, and also to force the United States to consider its relationship with the YPG was an objective.

I would say Erdoğan has achieved the second, meaning he has forced the U.S. to consider – at least he's done this in terms of his ability to convince President Trump to reconsider that relationship. I don't think this is necessarily – you know, we can't say there's a rupture necessarily between the U.S. and SDF, but many signs suggest that maybe we're heading there.

But I think his first objective of undercutting and undermining YPG's political gains, that is all going to happen in the next weeks and months as he now negotiates with the Assad regime through Russia. And I think this kind of requires – maybe we can do another round, but it's kind of a global handshake between Assad and Ankara, where Assad – Ankara has to recognize Assad as Syria's government if Assad promises to take YPG under his control.

Melissa Dalton:

I'm sure Russia would love to broker that, yeah. And, I mean, the tragedy that – of all this is that I think, at least in what I have observed from experts like Soner, who have been, you know, tracking this quite closely over the last few years, is that this

was completely foreseeable, that Erdoğan and Turkey have been quite transparent in terms of their intentions for northeastern and northern Syria; so just in terms of the U.S. government's calculus over the last few years.

Ibrahim, I'd like to turn back to you in terms of the impacts of the Turkish intervention, and also reflecting on what we have seen in Afrin in prior years, the reports that we're starting to see coming out of northeastern Syria following the intervention. What are we seeing on the ground vis-à-vis Turkey's intervention, its reliance on certain actors, and what sort of effects that's having in the Syrian population?

Ibrahim al-Assil:

It certainly does not serve the interests of the Syrian people for the future. Displacement – we've seen a lot of displacement, forced displacement, throughout the Syrian conflict. It started in early – actually, in February 2012 in Homs. One of the neighborhoods were displaced by the Syrian regime, and they were never allowed to go back; and then in areas around Damascus, also by Iran and the regime, and then in the north in Afrin by the Turks. And that's definitely – we're, like, planting the seeds for conflicts in the future when we put communities against each other.

When it comes to Turkey, I believe that Turkey could and should play a constructive role in northern Syria, between Idlib and the areas, the other areas, the Euphrates Shield. We have around 4 (million), 4.5 million Syrians. In Turkey we have around 3.5 (million). That brings us up to 8 million Syrians. That's almost equal to the number of Syrians under – in the areas under the regime control.

So there is a lot of responsibility on Turkey for that matter. However, I do think the intervention that just happened serves – it certainly serves President Erdoğan's interest, but not the Syrian interest. The conflict between Arabs and Kurds started in early-mid-'60s, when the Ba'ath regime started to displace Kurds and created what's known as the Arab Belt in northern Syria to separate the Kurds in southern Turkey from the Kurds in northern Syria. And that created part of the conflict that we see today.

So we can imagine what's happening now, how long – as Jon just said, how – this is just the initial phase of the Syrian conflict. And when we talk also about areas under the regime control, the Iranian – the regime, with support from the Iranians, they wanted to displace big communities around Damascus and in other areas in southern Syria to make sure that even if they lose their military presence in Syria, they won't lose the social depth inside Syria to maintain their influence in the – in the future. And of course, also that was supported by the Russians.

And even actually with the supervision from the United Nations, when we witnessed the – what's called the reconciliation. So we have the forced displacement. And then part of the displacement was under the reconciliation deals, where we've seen Shia villages in the north being displaced by Ahrar al-Sham in the – in the opposition and also Sunni towns in Zabadani and Madaya displaced by the Iranians, Hezbollah and the Syrian regime.

And the third way of displacing people by the regime and also support from the Iranians is real estate development project in the Damascus and around it, where – so you have a lot of communities that they were under privileged and they revolted

against the regime and were displaced. So to make sure that they won't be able to come back, many of the development projects there were given to businessmen related to – connected to the regime. And they are developing luxurious real estate projects there with part of – some of the units in the project around Mezzeh is quarter to half a million dollar to start with. And that was a very poor area. So that way they will make sure even through that, the redevelopment, they use development projects that those communities won't be able to come back even if in the future under any deal they decide they want to go back to the areas under the regime control.

Melissa Dalton: Yeah. So it's not just the forcible displacement of people, but it's these coercive measures – the development, the reconstruction, to push people out of certain areas and make it disadvantageous for them to continue to exist in these areas.

Ibrahim al-Assil: Right. Done by different regional players. We've seen it by Turkey in Afrin. We've seen it in Iran, across the country.

Melissa Dalton: Right. And to connect –

Ibrahim al-Assil: But different scale. Just to be honest. I mean, to be accurate.

Melissa Dalton: No, and that's a good analytical point. Thank you for that.

And to connect to Jon's earlier comments about stabilization and reconstruction, you know, clearly these projects are being taken out by Assad, by other backers in Syrian controlled territory in a very deliberate way. And, you know, Jon, to turn to you in terms of how Assad, Russia are trying to court regional players to make investments or normalize relationships with the Assad regime to bring some legitimacy to some of these projects—how do you see those trendlines evolving? How successful is that outreach to the region? And how is the region viewing some of these recent development?

Jon B. Alterman: The region concluded about a year ago that Assad had won. And the real debate is not over whether Syria will be readmitted to the – to the Arab community, but under what conditions and at what speed. You know, even the Israelis didn't really have a problem with Assad. They felt that they had deterred – they know how to deter Assad. Assad is clearly deterred by the Israelis. They would much rather deal with Assad than a bunch of Salafi jihadis who want to march on Jerusalem. Because they know a lot of things about Bashar al-Assad, one of which is he doesn't think he's ever going to march on Jerusalem.

So, yeah, I think there's a way in which we've had a discussion about Syria which is divorced from the discussion of people in the region who live with it, who say Assad is there. And so, you know, the Emiratis opened a consulate. And there's a sense that over time Assad will come back into the fold. How, when, whatever. They'd like the Iranians to have less of a footprint, and that's one of the things they'll push for. There's a sort of dictum that I hear a lot, especially when I go to the Gulf, that the Iranians control four Arab capitals, and that's Beirut, Damascus, Sanaa in Yemen, and Baghdad. They, of course, don't control any of those capitals; they have influence in all of those capitals. And the Gulf Arabs are going to try to push for ways to reduce Iranian influence. They think the way to reduce Iranian influence is to have more Arab influence.

So I think this is going in that direction. How fast it'll go, you know, partly it depends on where they think the United States is going to be. I mean, they would love to understand where American policy is so they could mostly be helpful and then sometimes, you know, cut a corner or play off against it. But frankly, a lot of our allies – and it doesn't just apply to the Middle East – they can't figure out what we're trying to do, so they can't figure out how to help us, and they can't figure out how to coordinate their policy because they don't have a U.S. policy to orient around. So I sense, I mean, a really unusual amount of handwringing, not about eventually what will happen to Assad but how they can figure out how to do it without some sense of how and when the United States is going to move so they can move in concert, because they certainly don't want to move without us.

Melissa Dalton: And with that lack of clarity on what the U.S. position is, how is that advantaging Russia? And how has Russia attempted to reach out to some of these regional players, if at all?

Jon B. Alterman: So, I mean, sometimes when it's really quiet and you listen really carefully I think I can hear Vladimir Putin laughing here in Washington because he's – I mean, he's not put forward a lot of resources, and everybody assumes that Russia is ascendant in the Middle East. He just showed up in Saudi Arabia, signed billions of dollars' worth of deals. He was feted. He went to the UAE. He was feted. There is this sense that Russia is on the rise. They just got themselves two bases in Syria which they never had before. You know, Syria's long-term leases on these bases – they have an airbase now. There is this – they're deepening their ties in Egypt. Everybody wants to talk to the Russians and nobody can figure out the U.S.

And I say what's remarkable is when you think how little the Russians have spent to get that degree of influence and how much we are continuing to spend and get so much less influence. I think there's a sense, to my mind, the Russians have the advantage of knowing what they're trying to do, and it's very limited. And we have the disadvantage of wanting to do everything and not even resourcing basic things. And the region looks and says, well, we should talk to the Russians. We should talk to the Chinese. We should figure some of this out. But there's a sense that you can't build around a relationship with the United States.

And the most damaging thing from an Arab perspective – and I was in Cairo a couple weeks ago – the most damaging thing from an Arab perspective about what the president said about withdrawing from Syria had nothing to do with what he said about the Kurds. It was all the gratuitous talk about nothing but blood and sand, and we put \$8 trillion into the region, got nothing from it. And every Arab government that thought it had put decades and decades into building a cooperative relationship with the United States was put on notice that they better hedge against the United States walking away fast and never coming back, and that has a real cost.

Melissa Dalton: Thanks, Jon. And so one of the actors that is trying to make this calculation is, of course, Tukey, Soner. You know, and I think it's – there are some lessons to be drawn just not only about the bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Turkey, which we will see how that evolves – or devolves, rather – in the next several months with the congressional action and choices the administration might make. So there's lessons about the bilateral relationship, but I think there are also lessons

about – in these competitions that the United States is going to be engaged in with Russia, Iran, potentially further afield with China, how does the U.S. navigate its relationships with allies and partners, and what are the choices that our allies and partners are going to have to be confronted with, particularly with a lack of clarity around U.S. policy?

Soner Çağaptay:

So I would say this has been an unusually tension-filled period in U.S.-Turkish relationship and I think this is basically how the relationship is going to be for a while. That's because I think the confidence between institutions in both capitals has eroded, and not just because of the events of the last few weeks, but if you take into account what has transpired between Turkey and the U.S. since Turkish President, previously Prime Minister, Erdoğan came to power, U.S. and Turkey had sharply differing strategic objectives in wars in two of Turkey's neighbors.

In Iraq 2003, the U.S. wanted to do a lot and Turkey wanted to do a little. And in Syria, Turkey wanted to do a lot and U.S. little. And on top of it, of course, U.S. allying with YPG, an offshoot of PKK, which is not only a terror-designated entity but Turkey's sworn enemy, and Turkey making alliance with radicals to fight the Assad regime, which is a sworn enemy of the United States, has only I think left behind a really bitter taste.

And specifically I think a lot of people are angry at Ankara because of the fact the Turkish incursion upset U.S. plans to work with Turkey to set up a safe zone that would have brought forward the YPG moving away from the Turkish border without bringing the Assad regime and Russians in. So that plan has collapsed.

So clearly not an easy period coming up, but I would also add that Turkish President Erdoğan is scheduled to come here for a meeting with President Trump and I think, notwithstanding the other problem areas in their relationship, the Erdoğan-Trump relationship is one that works. I think they have quite good rapport, they get along, they have affinity for each other as strongman presidents.

I always argued that Turkish President Erdoğan is the Rorschach test of every U.S. president. I've tracked Erdoğan's career for over two decades now. I know President Bush saw in Erdoğan a faithful like himself with whom he could do business. President Obama saw in Erdoğan a window to the Muslim world, and Trump sees in Erdoğan a fellow strong president. So I think that will really continue to be the bedrock on which crises we hope can be managed, upon which they can be managed.

But of course the spoiler here is Russia, which has significantly changed its Turkey policy; I would say almost an historic change. I have recently published a new book called "Erdoğan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East," if I can make a shameless plug.

Melissa Dalton:

Congratulations. Absolutely.

Soner Çağaptay:

Thank you so much. So one of the arguments I make in this new book, "Erdoğan's Empire," is looking at the historic –

Jon B. Alterman:

Do you have free copies in the lobby for us all?

Soner Çağaptay: I will sign them, yes.

The historic Turkish-Russian relationship, and that Russia is unique among Turkey's dozen neighbors, including maritime neighbors across the Black Sea, in the sense that it's the only neighbor that Turkey's afraid of. Because it's the only neighbor that has consecutively and conclusively defeated the Turks, or Turks' Ottoman ancestors, for over half a millennium in nearly a dozen and a half wars, by my count. And that was Russian policy. Russia was Turkey's nemesis that bullied Turkey.

So when Russia deployed to Syria with Turkey supporting rebels and Russia supporting Assad regime, it was the closest, in my view, they came to their 18th historic war in which it was clear that Turkey was going to lose if this war started. And when Turkey shot down a Russian plane that had violated its airspace from Syria, it looked like – in November 2015 it looked like this war was going to start. I think that six-month period after that was incredibly tense. Russia threatened to shoot down all Turkish-backed forces and auxiliaries in Syria. It was almost as if Turkey was forcefully exiting the Syrian war.

And then the coup plot happened against Erdoğan, the failed coup plot, a nefarious affair. But I think the Russian takeaway from it was masterful for Putin, with – Russia went from being the nemesis that bullied Turkey, from Catherine the Great to Putin the Great, to becoming the nemesis that courts Turkey after July 2016. Putin reached out to Erdoğan the next day. A Turkish friend tweeted and said he even offered to send Russian special ops from a Greek island nearby. I don't know that Russia has special ops on a Greek island nearby, but you get the idea. And Putin also started to give Erdoğan what he wants in Syria. He said come in; take whatever you want from YPG. You can have Jarablus before the YPG takes over from ISIS. You can have Afrin from YPG. So I think Russian policy is now using Syria to peel Turkey and, of course, and Erdoğan further and further away, and so we will have –

Jon B. Alterman: Peel them away from NATO, right?

Soner Çağaptay: NATO, right. I think that's – for Russia, sometimes I think that Russia is – Putin prioritizes taking all of Syria back under Assad regime control. But that's more long term. Short term is using Syria to peel Turkey away from NATO because that's a big – Turkey's a bigger prize, believe it or not, than Syria is. It's about NATO cohesion, the alliance, the trans-Atlantic order.

So I would say, you know, I have faith in the long-term durability of the U.S.-Turkish relationship, and I think in the short term Erdoğan-Trump relationship is quite important. But Russia will always play a spoiler because it will offer to Turkey more than what the U.S. is willing to offer, whatever that is, in Syria.

It will always up the ante and I think Erdoğan has learned to leverage Putin and Trump against each other. He goes to one and says, this is what the other side gives me; what can I get. So he got northwest Syria from Russia and he got northeast Syria from the U.S., and I think he'll try to do more of that on this visit. But, of course, I would always look at Putin's next moves if this is a chessboard, going forward.

Melissa Dalton:

Yeah. No, thanks for that. I'm going to come back to you just with a quick follow-up. But we're going to move to questions and answers from the audience in just a moment. So please prepare your thoughts.

Soner, just as a quick follow-up on that, if you could take a step back in terms of what are the lessons that we can draw from this dynamic with the U.S., Turkey, Russia, that might be applicable, going forward, for U.S. competitions with Russia, with China, with Iran?

Soner Çağaptay:

So I would say one kind of immediate take away, especially from the events of the last few weeks, is that Ankara was never going to accept and will never accept in the future, in my view – in the absence of peace talks between Turkey and PKK it will never accept a political entity aligned with PKK and Syria.

And so that's why I think Turkey prioritized undermining that entity, and all other Turkish goals in Syria – ousting Assad – became subservient to that. That's the immediate takeaway, and I think – but it will remain a Turkish objective in the absence of Turkish-PKK peace talks. And I think the fig leaf that the YPG is not the same as PKK I think clouded decision-making in Washington because people started to believe the fig leaf, that it was true, and they started getting upset if – that Turkey was not accepting the PKK's offshoot in Syria because the offshoot was not PKK. But so that's, I think, important for us to not let the legal differences between these two organizations cloud our decision-making because the way that Turkey sees a threat from the PKK means that it's transferred to the YPG in Syria, as far as Ankara is concerned.

And then another take away, I would say, is that whatever in Syria – whatever – the doctrine that what happens in Syria stays in Syria completely failed, with so many ramifications. The war in Syria has destabilized our allies, starting with Turkey. Turkey's war with – I think peace talks with PKK, I can explain, collapsed predominantly because of the success of the PKK Syrian outfit, YPG. It did so well in Syria – it took over towns in 2014, including Kobane – that the PKK thought it could repeat this model in Turkey – take over towns and declare autonomy. Very short sighted, in my view, for them to think they could defeat NATO's second largest military. But it also meant the end of peace talks.

So, clearly, I think there's – and there's a relationship between the way peace talks collapsed and the war in Syria have been refugee flows not only to Europe but across Europe – to Turkey but across Europe has played a big role in the rise of far-right parties. I think a big generational impact of the war in Syria we'll all have to suffer its consequences across Europe and the U.S. I think the rise of nativist populist leaders globally is linked – is not birthed by but is linked to the 2015 refugee crisis.

And so I always think that, you know, there are secondary effects of Syria – Russia's engagement in Syria. If the first effect was, you know, prop up the Assad regime and make sure that he survived – because even Assad himself will say in 2014 he wasn't sure he was going to be holding on to Syria. That changed after Russian deployment.

But, you know, as Ibrahim mentioned, the Russian bombing of civilians, which increasingly – which significantly increased the regime’s ability to incur – you know, to do horrible things to a civilian population is the reason why you had a sudden outpouring of refugees in 2015 – people who lived in Syria, knew that until that moment because the Assad regime air force was not completely capable, they were safe if the weather was bad, at night, because their planes could not fly under bad weather, at dark. Russians can do 24/7 flights and bombing. And I think that triggered the refugee movement. So clearly that was not Putin’s goal, but he got it. And, you know, refugees went from Turkey to Greece. Greeks and Turks fought. That happens. They went into Macedonia. Macedonians fought Greeks. That also happens. They went to Serbia, then Austria. Germans fought Austrians. Danes fought Germans. Swedes fought Danes. When you can get Swedes and Danes arguing, you’ve achieved something. (Laughter.)

Melissa Dalton: Jon, you wanted to –

Jon B. Alterman: I just – I just wanted – I think it’s an important point, that what we’ve heard, right, is that the Russians and the Turks and the Iranians care a lot about Syria and have very limited goals. The United States cares a little bit about Syria and tends to have very expansive goals. How is that going to come out?

Melissa Dalton: Yeah. And if I may also, you know, to build upon your takeaway, Soner, the importance of understanding our allies’ priorities and interests clearly, and then calibrating our actions in areas of convergence with them in our strategic approaches. Clearly, there’s been a significant disconnect, but I think that’s a clear objective that we need to strive for going forward in these types of competitions.

We’re going to turn to Q&A with the audience, starting here in the front. If you could please wait for a microphone and then stand and state your name and affiliation and form your question in the form of a question. Thank you.

Angelina: Hi. My name is Angelina. I’m a writer.

I have question with regards to the Shiites and the Sunnis, because I think any peacemaking effort has to do with how people identify themselves because, I mean, even – and the thing is, it’s a historical rivalry, actually, based on who is the legal heir to Mohammad, or something.

Jon B. Alterman: Leadership of the Muslim community.

Angelina: I’m sorry?

Jon B. Alterman: The leadership of the Muslim community.

Angelina: Yes. The leadership of the Muslim. So I mean, even with the U.S. foreign policies, I think if people – I mean, across the Middle East, that’s the problem everywhere – I mean, the Shiites versus the Sunni identity. And unless I think people understand that very basic core conflict among Middle Easterns, I don’t know how peace is possible.

And then the other thing is – I have a question with regards to the U.S. foreign policy. I think the shortcoming too is that the administration is not seeing the

bigger picture in terms of what the U.S. really has to play. Right now, Putin is becoming the power broker in the Middle East. So I mean, he can easily extend that reputation or that identity across. And U.S. is competing for global supremacy. So it's kind of like Putin inching, inching, inching himself into competing with the U.S. So what's your perspective on that? Thank you.

Melissa Dalton: A gray zone approach, absolutely. So we'll start Ibrahim.

Ibrahim al-Assil: Sure. So for the Sunni-Shia conflict, or disagreement, or differences, it certainly goes back like around 14th century. But I'm sure the Catholic and the Protestant conflict goes back probably also for centuries, and also there is a lot of blood that was spilled. However, religious differences, that is not, and should not, be translated into military violence. I come from a family that has Sunni background. And in Damascus there is only one Shia school that takes the money for tuitions and gives that money to poor Shia. I went to that school in Damascus. And I studied there for five years. It wasn't a problem.

And especially, by the way, in Syria, which is different than Iraq and Lebanon, that the Sunni-Shia split in Syria wasn't dominant in the political history. There is a lot with the Alawites, which is also different. But we don't have time to go into that. But again, as I mentioned in my initial remarks, sectarianism in the Middle East is a tool, is not the root cause. The root cause is all the – the root cause is all the grievances and the governance issues, and different regional player trying to build a vacuum that was left by also U.S. withdrawal, and how they are trying to do it in the future. But it's not the sectarian differences between Shia and Sunni.

Jon B. Alterman: Just to underline Ibrahim's point, which I think is 100 percent correct, 10 or 15 years ago I was talking to a senior royal in the Gulf and tried to raise this issue of Sunni-Shia conflict. And he looked at me sort of like I was a slightly dim four-year-old and shook his head and said, you don't understand. The Iranians have only been Shia for 500 years. They've been Persians for millennia.

People use the Sunni-Shia conflict. Iraq used to be a majority Sunni state until the late 19th century, when a large number of Iraqi Sunnis converted, if you want to say it, to Shia Islam. These boundaries are not fixed. I mean, Iran was a Sunni state until, to fight the Ottomans, they converted to Shia Islam. These categories move, and people use the categories to advance their own political agendas.

Now, in terms of what Putin is doing, I think Putin has the advantage of starting from a relatively low base. So you can say Putin is doubling Russian spending, and it's still relatively modest. There is a sense that the U.S. is on its way out, and so people are looking for how they're going to hedge and what's on its way in. And so your options are the Chinese and the Russians. And so there's an openness to exploring things with Putin. I think, because Putin has very narrow targets of what he's trying to do, that he's able to accomplish a lot of it because we have very expansive targets and not a lot of commitment and not a lot of resources we're putting into it.

So I don't know how this sorts out in 10, 15, 20 years. My guess is Russia is not going to experience an economic miracle and that Russia will run out of gas; I mean metaphorically, not in terms of petroleum and hydrocarbons. But, you know, what are we going to want and what are we going to do?

And there's another – there's a serious question. How much should we be caring about the Middle East in 10, 15, 20, 30 years, which I think we should actually be having a discussion about instead of assuming, because it relates not only to how we relate to the Middle East. It relates to how we relate to Asia and Europe and what our role in the world is.

You know, I'm hoping that this presidential campaign is going to distill some of the really serious policy discussions that we haven't had and really need to have.

Melissa Dalton: We're going to go to somebody else next. But also, just to underscore Ibrahim's point about really the drivers of these grievances, I think these protests, that are quite dramatic, breaking out in Lebanon and Iraq, are a clear reflection of these grievances that are not sectarian in nature.

I worry about the counterrevolutionary forces that might use this opportunistically. But for now it's a clear expression of what you're –

Soner Çağaptay: If I could just quickly tag-along?

Melissa Dalton: Yeah.

Soner Çağaptay: Thirty seconds.

I agree with Jon. I think it's reductionist but also escapist to suggest that these conflicts are driven by old hatreds and we can do nothing about it.

Jon B. Alterman: Three thousand years.

Soner Çağaptay: Right. It reminds me of explanations of the war in Bosnia in the 1980s, when people would write about how Orthodox and Catholic Christians hated each other since the division of the Roman Empire into two. So you can always find something in history that divides, but there's also that unites.

As an historian, I can't but comment on Jon's point about how Iran became officially Shia in 16th century, because it's the way the dynasty, which was Turkic in nature, could define itself against the Ottoman dynasty, also Turkic in nature. So the shahs and sultans would write to each other in Turkish, calling each other dog, while, you know, trying to have claims of legitimacy using sectarian identity. So I think these are manipulatable, but they're not at the core of the conflict, nor are they historic.

Melissa Dalton: Great. We're going to bundle a few questions together as we're running a bit short on time. We'll take this gentleman over here; if you could please wait for a microphone. And then there's a gentleman in the back with the glasses.

Soner Çağaptay: Keep the glasses on.

Melissa Dalton: Yes. That's your distinguishing feature.

Barrett Alexander: Hi. Thank you for the discussion today. My name is Barrett Alexander and I work at World Vision.

As a humanitarian actor working inside Syria – several of the recommendations from the report are humanitarian in nature, but given sort of the high-level statecraft discussion we’ve had, how do we boil down U.S. policy, traditionally seen as a soft power, giving humanitarian aid abroad as a way of increasing leverage inside Syria while also helping not only international NGOs but local NGOs adhere to humanitarian imperatives?

Melissa Dalton: And then, sir?

Phil Oldham: Yeah. I’m Phil Oldham with the Near East Foundation.

And a lot has been spoken about Russia’s goals, their objectives, and their strategies, but it seems like their primary motivator is just to poke a finger in the eye of the West. Is that not the underlying long-term goal, is just to thwart Western policy in the region? Or are they really motivated by their own self-interest to achieve something that is for the good of Russia itself?

Melissa Dalton: Would anybody like to tackle the humanitarian question first?

Jon B. Alterman: I’m happy to take both.

Melissa Dalton: Yep.

Jon B. Alterman: I mean, look, I think, to your question, the most important starting point is the word you used, of leverage. I think Americans come into negotiations assuming that we have leverage because we’re the United States and we don’t have to think about developing leverage. And what I’ve seen consistently since the conflict broke out in Syria is the U.S. hasn’t thought about how to we develop leverage. We assume we have it. We assume we don’t have to husband it. We assume we don’t have to direct it. And other people actually are developing leverage, and it turns out that they have more say than we do. We built an 80-country coalition and couldn’t figure out how to use that to promote the outcomes we wanted, except to say we have an 80-country coalition. So, to me, the core – the beginning point is to assume we have to look for ways to build our leverage as the starting point and then build out from there.

In terms of the question about Russia, in some ways Russia sees itself very much engaged in a zero-sum game with the United States in the Middle East. They think the United States is trying to hamper Russia’s rightful global role, that we’re trying to hem them in. And to the extent they can peel away NATO allies, to the extent they can become a genuinely global power – I mean, if you think – we have a serious blue-water navy. The Russians have a single aircraft carrier that spews smoke everywhere it goes. It’s a disaster, right? I mean, they’re not a near-peer power, but they’d like to be considered a near-peer power. And they consider themselves to be in a zero-sum game with us.

I think, as I said, their magic bullet is they often have very limited goals in a place like Syria, and they’re able to accomplish limited goals with limited costs. And that’s what they can afford to do. And we’re not being thoughtful enough about what we need to do and how to accomplish what we need, and I think that gives the Russians opportunities to make inroads in a very small number of countries.

If you think about it, Russia is not trying to expand throughout the Middle East. They're trying to make strategic investments, which is what they can afford to do. And they're being relatively successful, especially starting from a low base. So the percentage gain seems high.

Melissa Dalton: Soner, you wanted –

Soner Çağaptay: So in terms of what Putin is trying to accomplish, I mean, the list is quite long: prop up the Assad regime, you know, peel Turkey away from the U.S., maintain a foothold in the Eastern Med and Middle East. But also I think Putin's decisions early on to support Assad were informed, as were President Obama's in my view, by what happened to Qadhafi in Libya. You know, Qadhafi's fall with limited U.N. mandate given to those countries backing his opponents I think told Putin that he had to be steadfast with Assad and not allow any kind of international action or sanctions. As I think was the case for President Obama, Qadhafi's fall and how Libya splintered into a hundred pieces worried him that Assad's fall could bring forward the same outcome. But I think the outcome we had is worse than Syria splintering into a hundred pieces. It splintered into a thousand pieces.

But to go back to Putin, you know, how many of us thought five years ago that Assad was going to be physically safe when car bombs were going off in Damascus? I mean, how many of us thought four years ago that Assad would survive politically? I think he's surviving and he's taking a lot of Syria under his control. So by standing firm behind Assad, Putin's message to all dictators, global bad leaders, bad guy leaders, is that it doesn't matter what you do; if you have my support, you'll survive. So I think it is also building allies among leaders across the world, and it's working. Of course, I think that's the message he's giving to populist leaders and autocratic leaders around the world.

And then, finally, to Jon's point about confusion in U.S. policy, I agree. And sometimes I think President Trump runs three twitter accounts under one handle. So I will call them A, B, C. I think A is for his base. B is for foreign leaders – because this is how he negotiates with foreign leaders. And C is to policymakers, including many of us in the room and those who are watching online. And I wish he tagged his tweets and said A, and B, and C, and we would know which is for who. But it doesn't work like that, of course, so.

Melissa Dalton: Ibrahim, did you want to weigh in on this?

Ibrahim al-Assil: Yeah, absolutely. For the quick comment on the humanitarian aid. It's absolutely very important as a leverage, but also as a tool to help the local communities to be on their feet again to prevent the resurgence of ISIS. I don't think if this is still possible at this point, but it's very important to stabilize the communities in the areas where ISIS was before. And whenever we talk about reconstruction – and I'm totally against giving money to regime for reconstruction, because that money will be weaponized against local communities as a reward for the loyal communities and a punishment for disloyal communities. However, if we want to help Syria, there are areas outside the regime control that could at least be stabilized so that refugees can go back to those areas. So we can start in those areas outside the regime control.

Melissa Dalton:

And just as a point of clarification, because I do think these terms are somewhat conflated at time, there is a distinction between humanitarian assistance – which should be apolitical and serving humanitarian purposes – and then stabilization and reconstruction, which are inherently politically in nature. It may sound like semantics, but it matters in terms of being – having access to vulnerable populations and servicing those basic needs, versus empowering local elites and furthering the Assad regime.

So on that note I want to thank you all for joining us today and helping us better understand an incredibly complex conflict with the overlay of gray zone competition. Many lessons to be learned, not only in the Syrian context and what it portends for U.S. choices going forward. What happens in Syria doesn't stay in Syria. So further discussions to be had certainly in Washington. And thank you all for joining us today, and for the terrific discussion. Please join me in thanking our panel.

(END)