DE RE MILITARI JOURNAL

CONFLICTS, MILITARY, ANALYSIS

De Re Militari

De Re Militari is a Bulgaria-based group of analysts, which follows the development of conflicts and political processes worldwide. Our purpose is to provide a broad audience in Bulgaria with an in-depth understanding of the processes that are shaping the conflict around the globe. All our work is freely available on the Internet and has been used by students of political science worldwide in the conduct of their academic research, as well as from specialists in the field, NGOs and government structures.

editorial

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experts 'panel

Levent Kemal* on Syria, Turkey and the regional geopolitics

De Re Militari (DRM): *Turkey entered the Syrian civil war on 24th August 2016. A lot of people have forgotten why. What was the specific set of causes which led to the Turkish military intervention?*

Levent Kemal (LK): The causes of Turkey's intervention in Syria were shared many times with the public. These reasons can be summarized as security threats. As of 2016, the primary threat as ISIS. The operation against ISIS has overcome a border threat. However, the struggle to control the district of Al-Bab has deciphered another situation. With this move, Turkey prevented YPG / PKK's westward progress. At the end of the Euphrates Shield operation, Turkey has expressed it clearly: We prevented a terror corridor from occurring along our borders.

DRM: *How has Turkey's goals in Syria evolved during the past three years? What has changed since the initial phase?*

LK: This is a very comprehensive subject because of Turkey's domestic and foreign policy seriously affect each other. Nevertheless, it is possible to summarize the subject as follows:

ISIS was the main threat for Turkey in 2016. The elimination of this threat also brought the YPG / PKK to the agenda. Following ISIS, the primary threat was the YPG / PKK. In the years 2016-2018, Turkey's main concern on Syria was security. The operation for Afrin was also carried out for security reasons. However, with the Astana process, Turkey was confronted with a new problem: Refugees.

Opposition parties in Turkey, as in Europe, the fear of a new wave of refugees, and have used it as a propaganda tool. This process covers the local election period and its results. This period also included economic criticism. (Such as expenses for refugees and the course of the economy) Thus, the issue of refugees was effective in the direction of change in Turkey's policy on Syria. Turkey is looking for diplomatic ways to solve the problem in Syria since last year. However, it has not overlooked the limited use of military force to solve the YPG / PKK and refugee problem as an alternative to these diplomatic means.

DRM: *Turkey has devoted substantial financial and military resources to its participation in the Syrian conflict. Is there any actual, reliable data on the number of troops involved and the expenditure?*

LK: Naturally, we do not have such information for the security and execution of a cross-border operation. There are various estimates, but a continuous rotation of convoys overrides all estimates.

DRM: *During the past year, Turkey withdrew from several "front lines" in the Idlib Governorate, allowing the expansion of the Assad forces and the dissolution of several rebel factions. Why has Turkey chosen to back from positions, which were considered "red line" and proclaimed as diplomatic achievements vis a vis Iran and Russia?*

LK: First, it is necessary to express: Turkey is not part of a military clash in Idlib. Therefore, despite Turkey's support to the Syrian opposition, Ankara is not the policymaker regarding the opposition's military operations. Turkey is providing communication between international diplomatic solution comities and the opposition parties.

On the other hand, Turkey is not part of the internal conflict between the Syrian opposition. Turkey is, due to the support of the Syrian opposition, often described as the part of internal conflict. However, the emergence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) showed that Turkey is not a party in this regard. If Ankara was a side, it would have had to protect Ahrar Al-Sham and help Bab Al Hawa hold it.

Work with Iran and Russia is not an option for Turkey, but a necessity. The group of Friends of Syria was shattered. Contention between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, as well as US cooperation with PKK, pushed Turkey to this obligation.

DRM: *Between May and August, over 570 000 refugees left their homes in Southern Idlib province due to the most recent gubernatorial campaign. Turkey's observation points were also shelled, and a number of soldiers were reported injured. What is the new red line in Idlib?*

LK: Turkey's stance on this issue is quite clear. Turkey wants the conflict and forced displacement of civilians stopped. From the beginning of the Astana process, Turkey's line is this.

DRM: *The TSK is setting new observation points along the M4 and M5 highways. What are the current goals of the TSK in Idlib? Will these new observation points follow the fate of the previous ones?*

LK: I don't think it will be like before. Turkey is looking for a compromise to end the conflict. There is an idea/claim in the field: new observation points are being established due to Russia's demand for the M4 and M5 motorways. We don't know how accurate this thought/claim is.

Turkey may be preparing to meet Russia's demand. Time will tell the fate of the new observation points. Such a situation can be described as Turkey's efforts for a political solution.

DRM: *Some observers warn that nearly 2 000 000 more refugees will flow into Turkey if Idlib falls to Assad. How is Ankara going to handle such a scenario?*

LK: President Erdogan in his statements on this issue said that Turkey does not have the possibility to host the new wave of refugees. He added that Europe should take responsibility. If the 2 million refugees come to Turkey, there is nothing much Ankara can do within the abilities of the state. The first possible solution is for Turkey to give refugees a controlled transit to Europe.

DRM: *Turkey is currently bidding for the higher stakes in Libya, Syria and Northern Iraq. It also aims at expanding its military presence in Somalia and Qatar. Is Ankara capable of acting decisively on so many fronts? Is there a prospect of overextension?*

LK: The Turkish presence in Libya supports the UN-recognized government. Ankara shares responsibilities with the UN in Libya. In Qatar and Somalia, both anti-terrorism and training activities are carried out. In this regard, unlike other countries in the field, Turkey is principally using military elements. Turkey is using a legitimate ground in this regard. From this point of view, I think it will continue to exist in these areas as much as necessary.

DRM: *Where is the balance between the US and Russia in Erdogan's foreign policy?*

LK: The politics of balance did not begin with Erdogan. But at a time of clashes and warm contacts, the politics of balance drew attention with Erdogan. In the period after the Second World War and along the Cold war Turkey, though a NATO member, pursued the balance. However, the parameters of balance policy have changed in the last two years. Turkey began to show the changing trends due to the preferences of allies and the nature of internal politics. Despite all this, YPG / PKK's case, the key point of Turkey's policy regarding the US and Russia is a balance.

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*** The views expressed in this interview do not necessarily reflect De Re Militari's editorial stance.*

Kyle Orton* on SDF and geopolitical balance between Russia, the US, and Turkey

De Re Militari (DRM): *Not long ago, Putin said he would support Turkey's interests in Northern Syria if Erdogan recognizes Syria's territorial integrity. What does this statement mean for the SDF and more specifically the Kurds?*

Kyle Orton (KO): The Russians have long played a double game when it comes to the "SDF", acknowledging Turkey's view of the situation yet on the ground providing support to the group. For the sake of simplicity, I shall simply call the SDF or PYD/YPG "the PKK" hereafter, since neither the ethnic composition of the SDF nor its claims to democracy alter the fact that the PKK military commanders run the show in "Rojava".

The PKK was an outright proxy of the Assad regime from the outset of its war against Turkey in 1984 until the group was expelled from Syria under pressure in 1998. The Assad regime under Hafez acted as a cutout for the Soviet Union in dealing with any number of terrorist groups and such was the case with the PKK, a valuable instrument for destabilizing a frontline NATO state. The Russian Federation retained links to the PKK throughout the 1990s at the height of the war—and Turkey responded by dabbling with the Chechen insurgency. In the late 1980s, the PKK established ties with the clerical regime in Iran, too. By 2003, at the latest, Damascus had re-established relations that it

scaled back, albeit with intermittent crackdowns—as Assad did with ISIS during the same period—up to 2011. After the outbreak of the rebellion, Assad and Iran moved to re-enlist the PKK in their column to sow chaos within the opposition and among its supporters like Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, both of whom regard the PKK as a mortal threat and diverted resources to containing the PKK rather than being able to focus solely on the anti-Assad cause.

All of this is a long way of saying Moscow's rhetoric about supporting Turkey's interests with respect to the PKK in northern Syria is designed to extract concessions where possible and to keep going the political relations established in 2016 because this helps keep NATO riven and off-balance. There is no way Moscow will surrender the point of leverage against Turkey the PKK supplies them, nor will the rest of the pro-Assad coalition.

DRM: *Turkey and the US reached an agreement over a de-escalation safe zone along the Syrian border. What are the final parameters of the agreement?*

KO: Nobody has any idea what the parameters of the proposed "safe zone" are and this is the problem. There can be no agreement since it is being approached from two opposing views. For Turkey, the PKK is the primary problem and the solution is a 30-km deep zone under Turkish control. For the Americans, ISIS is the sole focus—as ever—so stability, no matter how short-term in conception, takes precedent. The US proposals, such as they are, now they have more or less recognized that the Europeans are not going to step in to form this buffer, is a much narrower zone that Turkey can enter, where the PKK has supposedly been removed—likely replaced by Arab SDF contingents that are logistically, financially, and militarily dependent on the PKK—with joint US-Turkey patrols. These two visions are not reconcilable, properly speaking, so the status quo is likely to persist in the absence of a rash unilateral move by Turkey.

DRM: *How will this zone help ease Turkish-YPG tensions?*

KO: The short answer is that the "safe zone" will do little to solve the Turkey-YPG/PKK tensions. Turkey would see it as just the beginning, and the PKK would understand this and likely initiate guerilla operations to inflict a cost and deter further moves by Turkey. If the PKK starts undertaking these attacks on Turkey from behind the US tripwire in northern Syria, things then get very messy.

DRM: *Allegedly, the US has 16 bases and posts on the SDF held territories. What is the strategic and political value of this network at present?*

KO: Consciously, the US bases in northern Syria are just part of the anti-ISIS mission, and they have a lot of importance for intelligence gathering and rapid reaction in keeping ISIS down. Some US officials have wanted to use these bases as an anti-Iran instrument; that is not possible, for the reasons outlined above of the PKK's alignment, but while the "SDF" holds territory with US forces embedded as tripwires, Iran cannot enter that area. So that is something. The problem is that these bases are helping lay the groundwork for a PKK statelet in northern Syria.

DRM: *We have seen Turkey repeatedly back from its observation posts in Idlib. Will the US maintain its presence given the pressure from both the Assad government and Turkey?*

KO: My own view is that at some point Trump will get his wish and the US troops will withdraw from Syria. It is not clear what conditions happen. If it is under a deal with Turkey, then the PKK project is

finished in Syria. If not, it could well be that the pro-Assad coalition comes into that area, and the Turks might even welcome this. It would be short-sighted since the Assadists will repurpose, rather than dismantle the PKK, for use against Turkey, but states, including Turkey, have made stranger decisions over Syria.

DRM: *How can we describe the current relations between the Kurds in Syria and the Kurds in Iraq? There has been tension between the Barzani family and the YPG leadership in recent months.*

KO: The relations between the Barzani family and the YPG/PKK can be described only as limitless enmity. For political reasons, occasional statements to the contrary are needed by one side or other, but the reality has been consistent for decades.

DRM: *How does the YPG cause fit in the overall Kurdish question? What are the discrepancies between the Syrian Kurds and their brethren in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran?*

KO: The YPG is the name for the PKK when it operates on Syrian soil, as with PJAK in Iran. So, the PKK has, in theory, a fairly contiguous arc of power from Syrian Kurdistan through south-east Turkey and into the Kurdish area of Iran. In fact, at this moment, the PKK has been drastically weakened inside Turkey and sent most of the cadres that were in Iran to Syria under a deal with Tehran at the outset of the Syrian war. Syria is where the PKK has its current center of gravity while retaining its headquarters in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq and tightening its good relations with the PUK/Talabani clan. But the Barzani family remains dominant in Iraqi Kurdistan and will continue to work to limit the PKK's influence as best it can. There are Kurdish anti-PKK forces in all the other countries as well—quite strong in Turkey, virtually eliminated (driven into exile or killed) in Syria, and weak Iran.

DRM: *Russia (in its USSR version) has played a significant role in nurturing the Kurdish movement during the Cold War. What are the current dimensions of the Kremlin's involvement with the Kurds?*

KO: As mentioned above, Russia is essentially keeping what we might call the Kurdish Option in its back pocket for use against Turkey should the current entente go south.

DRM: *The US government has, on several occasions, chosen the established states' cause before the interests of the Kurds. What are Washington's actual plans for the Kurdish question - if any?*

KO: One sometimes speaks to U.S. government employees, especially on the military side, who have a rather romantic and emotional vision of the PKK cause in Syria and what the West should do to support it. But this doesn't have much weight on the policy. Some of the colder pro-Iran "realists" that surrounded the last President, Barack Obama, are quite content to hand over this vastly empowered PKK to the Assad/Iran system and the Russians. That view has more traction in the bureaucracy and the press. It's unclear what this means, though, since the person who matters in the U.S., namely Donald Trump, quite possibly still doesn't know the difference between Kurds and the Quds Force, and to the extent he has inclinations about Syria, let alone ideas, he is, like his predecessor, concerned only with ISIS, which means no serious long-term thought has gone into handling the PKK statelet that the U.S. has brought into being.

DRM: *Kurdish forces have generally stood by as Assad dismantles the opposition strongholds in the west of Syria. What happens with the YPG-Assad relations once the question of Idlib is solved?*

KO: It's not clear to me that Idlib will be "solved", even in the sense of reconquest by the pro-Assad coalition. If that course is taken, the PKK has signaled a willingness to participate alongside the Assad/Iran forces, just as Iran's Shi'a jihadists came to help the PKK (without much effect, as it happened) in Afrin. Idlib might well suffer alone, one way or the other, as matters unravel east of the Euphrates. The likeliest outcome seems to be a reconciliation of some kind between Assad and the PKK. This might well have happened before now if the PKK had been willing to accept Assad's terms. With the Americans still there, and their expanded wealth and weapons cache, the PKK has a sense of the balance of forces that has given it confidence, with seemingly little consideration of how abruptly the American commitment could end.

DRM: *Is there an actual alternative to YPG/PKK among the Syrian Kurds?*

KO: There are anti-PKK Syrian Kurdish parties, and if the structure in Rojava was opened up they would be quite competitive, especially in places like Qamishli. If the question is for right at this moment, then no: the PKK has broken the Kurdish opposition in Syria and monopolizes power very effectively.

THE END OF THE AMERICAN DREAM ABROAD

Aleksandar Stoyanov & Mia Babikyan

Eighteen years ago, the course of history was dramatically changed with the coordinated crash of two passenger airliners into the World Trade Center. 9/11 marks the starting point of what the United States would dub the War on Terror, gathering a large coalition of partners. The War on Terror is still ongoing today, 18 years later, but by the looks of it, efforts are now in a cul-de-sac. To target and combat the scattered cells of a few jihadist groups, the War on Terror spread over vast portions of the Middle East and North Africa, and subsequently, escalated on a global scale. In 2003, the US waged a war on Iraq, grounded on the basis that former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein supposedly developed weapons of mass destruction (WMD), a claim never proved by the international expert committee. Just like in Afghanistan, the war in Iraq became a 'military swamp', bogging down people, equipment, and funds.

In 2006, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) branched off into an independent terrorist cell, better known today as The Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). A bumpy start and an initial defeat led to the restart of the organization in 2008, moving into the deserts of Anbar and Eastern Syria (the latter location came as a carte blanche from Damascus to impede the US actions in Iraq). The culmination was the development of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which quickly subjected over 30% of both Syria and Iraq.

In 2011, the death of Bin Laden was celebrated as a victory of the US-led coalition over Al Qaeda, but the pressing reality soon overshadowed the initial joy. The new leader – Ayman Al-Zawahiri managed to rebuild and re-brand Al-Qaeda, gathering allies in Asia and Africa. This was facilitated by the decentralized structure of Al Qaeda, allowing for greater effectiveness and cooperation with local organizations. As a result, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) developed a powerful network in Mali and spilled over to Burkina Faso, Niger, and Algeria, aligning itself with local radical groups.

While the US special forces were decapitating Al Qaeda in a special-ops now immortalized in a series of movies and documentaries, the Arab world was swept by a series of protests changing the face of the Middle East. The so-called 'Arab Spring' of 2011, in fact, started in the winter of 2010 to bring about new political, social, and economic realities. Foreign interventions, government violence, and spreading radicalization were all part of the means enabling the two global terrorist networks – Al Qaeda and ISIS to settle in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The deepening crisis in Somalia facilitated Al-Shabbab's resurrection and the appearance of the Islamic State in the Horn of Africa. The inception of global terrorism found roots in the burning ashes of what was the Arab Spring's dream.

Parallel to the ideological activities, the global networks of Al Qaeda and ISIS developed and strengthened a relationship with underground organizations, transforming themselves into a new generation of criminal groups, namely, jihadist cartels. Alongside the task to carry acts of terror to undermine established civil governments, the two groups started trading with heroin, cocaine, synthetic drugs, arms, people, antiques and oil. Drug empires in Mexico and Columbia and the smaller cartel structures elsewhere became valuable partners to the jihadists.

The road to where we stand today

In 2011, the US seemed to be at its peak. Bin Laden was no longer alive, authoritarian leaders, hostile to the US were under pressure from civil unrest, and the relationship with key strategic partners was flourishing. By the looks of it, the US was standing on top – the same place it was in 1991. But 2011 was no 1991. The global economic crisis brought about a drastic change on social and political levels. The turbulence in society influenced and reshaped political preferences, which, in turn, created a feasible ground for a new model of governing parties and leaders. Experts would rightfully find parallels in a crisis from the 1930s, called the Great Depression.

Like the effects of the Great Depression, our world after the financial and economic crisis of 2008-2009 saw authoritarian (on a different scale) governments consolidating power. Leaders like Vladimir Putin and Hugo Chavez who were already untroubled ruling their own states, cemented their positions by using rhetoric, carefully crafted on the weaknesses of unstable democracies.

China's new position was another major difference. Unlike 1991, in 2009 Beijing was already a balanced leading economic power, on the verge of being consolidated by a new, confident and ambitious leader, aiming to transform the PRC into the main economic and political power of Asia – Xi Jinping. This major change in the political atmosphere has altered the way in which many states, until recently loyal US partners, have started perceiving Washington.

The alienation of certain countries from the US is deepening year by year. Errors are made by both local governments and their societies, and equally the too inadequate and passive US policies. Another major difference is the fact that the US was facing too many challenges at the same time, but unlike the 40's of the last century, what was missing were the key global partners (the United Kingdom and France and their empires), as well as the global enemy, a bait that used to strengthen the pro-US camp. It turned out that neither Al-Qaeda nor ISIS was enough of a foreign political threat to compensate for the skepticism towards American actions. In addition to the challenges in foreign policy, the US made some serious mistakes regarding the fight against terror on the ground.

According to recent analyses, [over 480 000 people](#) have died as a result of US-led anti-terror operations since 2001. Aggressive air campaigns caused considerable human losses, as well as substantial yet hard to calculate material damage. The destruction of the somewhat established law of order in Iraq and Afghanistan has enabled the spillover effects of societal chaos which Washington was unable to tame. President Trump himself elaborated on an important reason why – the US army has attempted to be the conqueror, but also the policeman, and humanitarian work as well. That would be too much work for any armed power – a fact, recognized only 18 years later.

ISIS ATTACKS 2018 -2019

IS said it was behind 3,670 attacks worldwide last year - an average of 11 attacks per day - and 502 attacks in the first two months of 2019

The 2017 movie "War Machine" is a well-portrayed satire of the reality which different rank US soldiers face on their missions in Afghanistan. Corrupt politicians demoralized local military and a hostile society are a substantial part of the US soldiers' everyday life in Afghanistan.

Iraq is no different. American hubris is to blame, combined with a concept, deeply rooted in the US mindset - Manifest Destiny. According to this concept, the democratic form of government is the ideal political model and as its main champion, the US is destined to spread it all over the world. Like the Soviet ideology from the 1920s, the US tried to replicate its democratic structure over as many countries as possible. Problem is, the US sought to rewrite the social and political code of societies who were yet to, if at all, have a real touch to democratic governance, in the sense perceived across the Atlantic.

Despite the myriad political and Islamic religious experts, warnings and advice fell on deaf ears in the face of Washington's administration. The outcome is clear – the US has utterly failed in its social engineering experiment and has made poor decisions in picking loyal partners in the long-

run in Yemen, Syria, and Libya. Recent Foreign Policy analysis of Professor Stephen M. Walt tiled, "We Lost the War in Afghanistan. Get Over It" was published in the online edition. According to Walt, the Afghan debacle is not, strictly speaking, a military defeat. The Taliban never vanquished the U.S. military in a large-scale clash of arms or caused its forces there to collapse. Instead, it is a defeat in the Clausewitzian sense—18 years of war and "nation-building" did not produce the political aims that U.S. leaders (both Republicans and Democrats) had set for themselves.
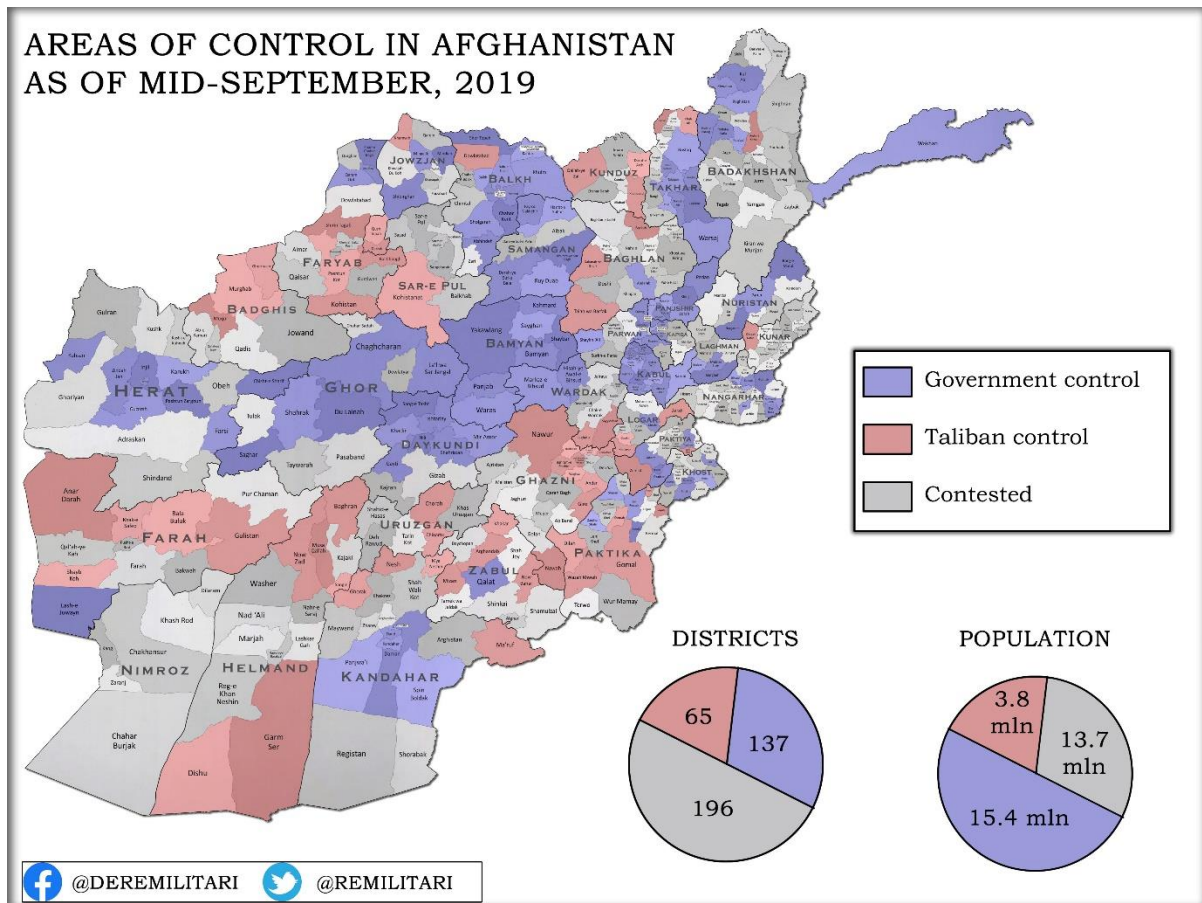
So, what now?

The sole question that remains is how the US plan to end their interference in Afghanistan. Clearly inviting the Taliban to the table for negotiations was no panacea out of the conflict. Luckily, for both Afghanistan and the US, Donald Trump decided to temporarily freeze diplomatic talks. This pause should be carefully used by the US to develop an adequate plan to realize the end of the conflict in Afghanistan with minimum losses – both material and in terms of US prestige.

And while the situation on the ground in Afghanistan is deteriorating on a monthly basis, things in Syria and Iraq are no better. A tangibly passive US policy made room for Iran's full-range military and political expansion in both states. Tehran-funded militia and structures filled the vacuum left behind by the collapse of the government forces in 2012-2014. Iran invested considerable resources in its so-called "Iranian road", reaching the Mediterranean Sea through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. At the same time, Tehran tried to make of their local protégés an indispensable military-political factor, with which Damascus and Baghdad must comply at every step. This is Hezbollah's trademark in Lebanon in the '80s and 90's – transforming military organizations into political ones and establishing them as an indispensable player in the state administration.

At the same time, the US made every possible mistake by leaving Bashar Assad in power unchecked and by allowing the empowerment of the Shia majority in Iraq. This, in turn, alienated the Sunni minority and shifted their support towards ISIS. Lack of political balance in the different Islamic denominations seriously alienated the US from both the Sunni and Shia, the latter subject to aggressive Iranian rhetoric.

US failure towards Islam brought about predictable, yet unpredicted social consequences in America itself and the world, namely the far-right extremism. The combination of Islamophobia and xenophobia culminated in a Renaissance of the chauvinistic and nationalistic waves across the world. In the US, the xenophobic wave targets both Muslims and Latin American migrants. Poorly crafted republican rhetoric since 2015 additionally aided the process. "America First" became a mantra for many, leading them to believe that overseas engagements are expensive and unnecessary.

AREAS OF CONTROL IN AFGHANISTAN
AS OF MID-SEPTEMBER, 2019

Government control
Taliban control
Contested

DISTRICTS
POPULATION

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In this debate, the myth that Donald Trump is responsible for the new US isolationism was born. This is a false perception. Former President Barack Obama was the one to start the process of US withdrawal, right after the financial crisis in 2009. Washington started decreasing its military units first in Iraq and afterward, in Afghanistan.

In 2011 the US declared a full withdrawal from Iraq and between 2011 and 2016, the military presence in Afghanistan was decreased from 100, 000 to approximately 10, 000 troops. Simultaneously, Obama's administration

withheld from active participation in several pressing conflict zones – Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Mali. In 2014, the US acted with hesitation to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. Back in 2009 Obama gave a clear sign that the US won't enter a conflict with Russia over Moscow's war in Abkhazia and Ossetia against Georgia. Focused, in Bernie Sanders' words, on the War on Terror, the US has missed out on key political processes developing around the world. The rise of China, the new hardliner Russian foreign policy, the growing tensions in the Indian Ocean, the expanding influence of Moscow and Beijing in Africa and Latin America, turbulence in Europe, the rise of local populist parties, the detachment of the Philippines and Pakistan from Washington's orbit – all processes which Obama's administration was too hesitant to address.

The policy of minimum engagement and US withdrawal continues in the new administration. Donald Trump speaks of a world in which deals are made and partnerships are preserved. In fact, the world is slowly heading back to is the multipolar model from before 1939, with all its upsides and drawbacks. The US continues missing on the problems of its allies, a good example is a tension between Japan and South Korea. Meanwhile, the rest of the global and regional players are looking for a way out of Washington's sanctions, namely the EU and Iran.

Should the US be worried about the consequences? Most likely not. After all, it was the multipolar world that gave birth to American dominance and power. The more the poles, the stronger the competition to stimulate the current hesitant US economic and political development. To find the right way, the US should experience a catharsis of sorts, to acknowledge the defeats and the victories, and to accept that at least for now, the American foreign policy dream has failed. The US needs a wake-up call to drag them out of the uncertainty. The new global order will soon make that call.

The Chinese String of Pearls or How Beijing is Conquering the Sea
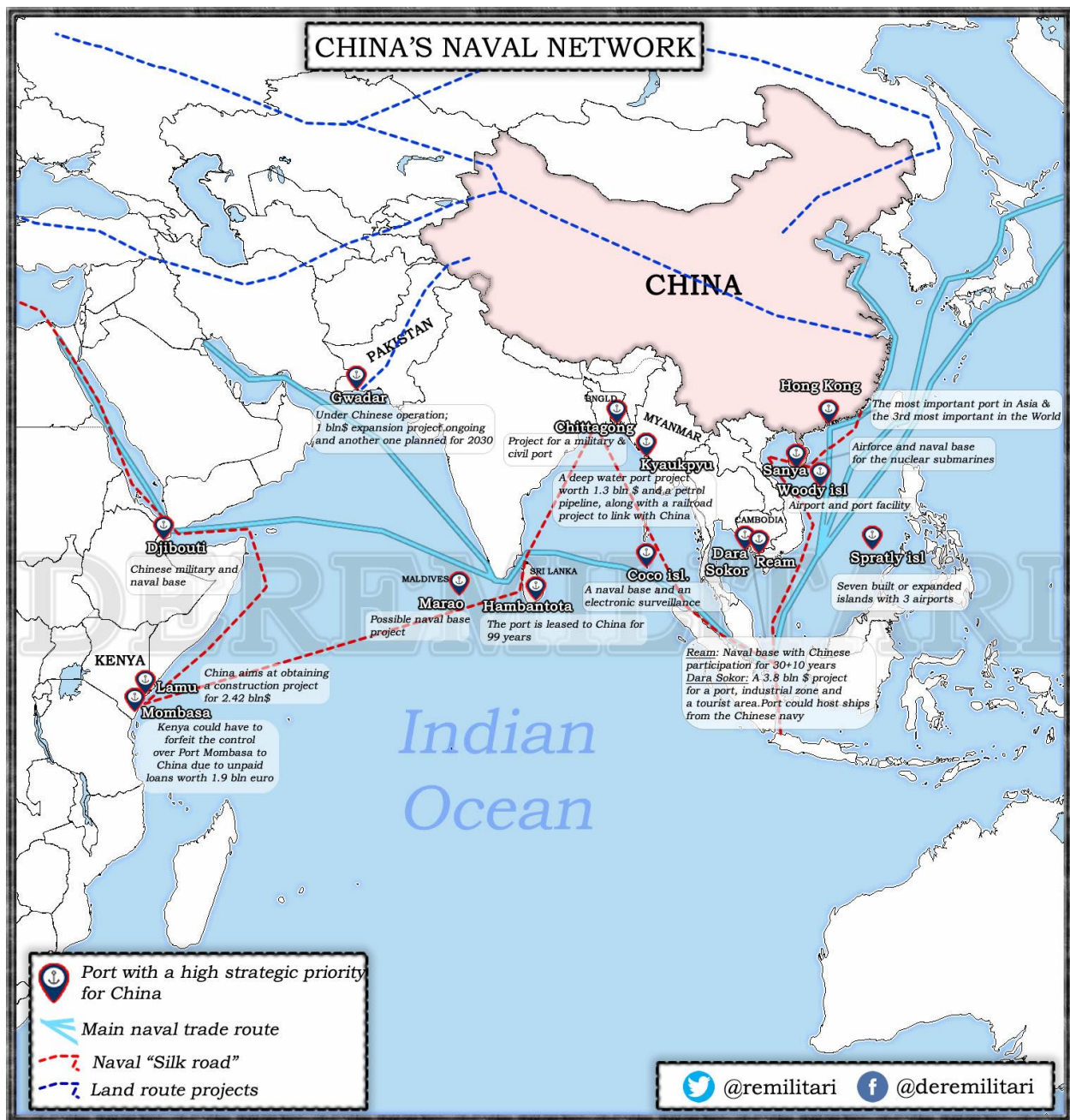
Ventsislav Bozhev

In October 2013 the Chinese president Xi Jinping revealed his new Global development strategy called "The Belt and Road Initiative" (The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road). That was the official launch of arguably the largest and most ambitious economic initiative in world history so far. It will build a sustainable connection between China and Afro-Eurasia through various infrastructure projects in 60 countries with nearly 60% of the world population and a GDP of $21 trillion.[1]

The strategy has been developed in two main directions - by land and by sea. The land route envisages the establishment of six economic corridors linking China with Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and South Asia. According to data from the Chinese government, in the four years between 2013 and 2017, 50 state-owned companies have invested in nearly 1700 different infrastructure projects.[2] For its part, the Maritime Silk Road seeks to promote cooperation through investments in sea routes stretching from Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean to the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean.

The ultimate long-term goal of this grandiose initiative would be making Beijing the dominant force in Eurasia, enabling China to surpass the European Union and the United States as leading economic and global powers.

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[1] Nadege, R, China's New Silk Road, 12.05.2015, http://www.nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=531

[2] Gang, W, SOEs Lead Infrastructure Push in 1,700 'Belt and Road' Projects, 09.05.2017, https://www.caixinglobal.com/2017-05-10/soes-lead-infrastructure-push-in-1700-belt-and-road-projects-101088332.html

CHINA'S NAVAL NETWORK

CHINA

PAKISTAN

Gwadar
Under Chinese operation;
1 bln$ expansion project ongoing
and another one planned for 2030

Hong Kong
The most important port in Asia &
the 3rd most important in the World

BNGLD

Chittagong
Project for a military &
civil port

MYANMAR

Kyaukpyu
A deep water port project
worth 1.3 bln $ and a petrol
pipeline, along with a railroad
project to link with China

Sanya
Woody isl
Airport and port facility

Airforce and naval base
for the nuclear submarines

CAMBODIA

Djibouti
Chinese military and
naval base

Coco isl.
A naval base and an
electronic surveillance

Dara
Sokor **Ream**

Spratly isl
Seven built or expanded
islands with 3 airports

MALDIVES
SRI LANKA

Marao
Possible naval base
project

Hambantota
The port is leased to China for
99 years

KENYA

Lamu
Mombasa
Kenya could have to
forfeit the control
over Port Mombasa to
China due to unpaid
loans worth 1.9 bln euro

China aims at obtaining
a construction project
for 2.42 bln$

Ream: Naval base with Chinese
participation for 30+10 years
Dara Sokor: A 3.8 bln $ project
for a port, industrial zone and
a tourist area.Port could host ships
from the Chinese navy

Indian

Ocean

Port with a high strategic priority
for China

Main naval trade route

Naval "Silk road"

Land route projects

🐦 @remilitari f @deremilitari

THE CHINESE STRING OF PEARLS

And this is exactly where the need to protect all these interests and investments emerges. The theory for the "Chinese string of pearls" has evolved in the last two decades and it is related to Beijing's vast economic and trade expansion and the resulting need for geostrategic security of the maritime routes and "choke points". Each "pearl" represents a specific port project on the Indian Ocean coastline. Connecting these ports would create a chain of hubs, serving as economic centers or military and surveillance outposts for the Chinese army.

According to Beijing, officially there is no such strategy at present and all their actions are driven entirely by peaceful intentions aiming to protect their own commercial interests as well as to develop the regional economies. The latter would help in enhancing the Chinese regional soft power. However, for close observers, it is impossible to miss the existence of a systematic and deliberate sequence of actions stretching far beyond such humble intentions.

Following the classical geopolitical theories of Nicholas Spykman and Alfred Mahon, China apparently tries to use the periphery (rimland), going through the Asian and African coastlines to gain a dominant foothold in Afro-Eurasia and from there - into the rest of the world. From its closest ally North Korea to Cambodia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Pakistan and 11 more African countries where China operates seaports, Beijing invests enormous amounts of resources in its efforts to project power. This happens through investments or direct control of key ports, airports or other infrastructure as well as through promoting stronger political and diplomatic relations. If all this is added to the vast expansion and modernization of the navy, one can put together a complex and multilayered strategy for maritime superiority.

THE PEARLS

- **Cambodia -** China reached an agreement with the local government for the rights over 1/3 from the Ream naval base. The deal is sealed

for the next 30 years with an automatic renewal clause every 10 years afterward. Beijing and Phnom Penh deny such agreement because it would be against the Cambodian constitution.[3] The project for Dara Sokor is also on the agenda. It covers 20 % of the Cambodian coastline and includes the construction of a resort, an airport, a deep-water port, and an industrial area. According to Japanese media, Dara Sokor has been leased to China for 99 years.[4]

- **Myanmar -** there is an ongoing project for the construction of a deep-water port in Kyaukpyu, which would help the supply of oil and gas for the two pipelines between Myanmar and China. The implementation of this project would diversify the routes for natural resource delivery and would shorten their transportation from the Middle East and Afrika to China.

  There are also speculations that in 1992 China established a surveillance outpost on Coco island to observe the maritime traffic in the Bay of Bengal and more specifically - the Indian navy.

- **Bangladesh -** China is trying to negotiate a project to expand and modernize port Chittagong. For now, at least, their attempts have been unsuccessful, because of the strategic Bangladesh - India partnership.
- **Sri Lanka** - Hambantota port was completed by Chinese companies in 2010. However, since then, the local government has indebted to such an extent, that now it is forced to lease the port to China for 99 years.
- **Maldives -** there is a possible project for a submarine base on the Marao atoll.
- **Pakistan -** Gwadar port was built, and it is now being operated by a Chinese dominated consortium of companies. It is strategically situated in direct proximity to the Strait of Hormuz and is critical to the

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[3] Page, J, Lubold, G, Taylor, R, Deal for Naval Outpost in Cambodia Furthers China's Quest for Military Network, 22.07.2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/secret-deal-for-chinese-naval-outpost-in-cambodia-raises-u-s-fears-of-beijings-ambitions-11563732482

[4] Hejmans, P, China-backed Dara Sakor project in Cambodia rings alarm bells in Washington, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2019/07/20/asia-pacific/china-backed-dara-sakor-project-cambodia-rings-alarm-bells-washington/#.XU_mDuMzaUk

establishment of the China - Pakistan economic corridor, which is an integral part of "The Belt and Road Initiative".

IN AFRICA

Although the expansion in Africa might not be considered as part of the "Chinese String of Pearls", it is still closely related to it and to the "Belt and Road Initiative". An assessment by the Center for Strategic and International Studies shows that there are currently 46 existing or planned ports in Africa, which are either funded, built or operated by Chinese companies.[5] Beijing's investments in African ports are crucial in order to develop its economic ties and political clout. At the same time, they also provide various opportunities for the establishment of bases for operations of the Chinese navy.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning the special relations that China maintains with three countries from East Africa, namely Djibouti, Kenya, and Sudan.

Djibouti is extremely important to Beijing because it is strategically situated on the entrance of the Bab el Mandeb strait, which links the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean. In this sense, Chinese companies have gained control over the port of Doraleh and in 2017 Beijing negotiated the rights over the naval base adjacent to Doraleh. The latter should serve as a logistic and support hub for humanitarian and peacekeeping missions. Of course, beyond the officially announced goals, there is much more, considering the presence of American, French and Japanese forces stationed nearby. In addition, China has also built a railway connecting Doraleh to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. For Beijing, Djibouti and the naval base there form a crossroads in the "string of pearls", which is stretching from the South China Sea, across the Indian Ocean, reaching East Africa and from there to the rest of the continent and the Mediterranean.

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[5] Devermont, J, Chiang, K, Assessing the Risks of Chinese Investments in Sub-Saharan African Ports, 4.06, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-risks-chinese-investments-sub-saharan-african-ports?fbclid=IwAR3ynGoIvvvDtazncuS3RmaMcjbaz3Kpdjm3RWOw1r2t65CRmIcNNdDZ7MU

The case of the Mombasa - Nairobi railway in Kenya is also very curious. At the end of 2018, it became clear that the Kenyan government had been having difficulties paying off its $ 2.3 billion loans from Chinese banks financing the project. The potential default on the loan would jeopardize the port of Mombasa, because according to the terms of the deal, its assets are collateral, and they are not protected by Kenya's sovereign immunity due to a waiver in the contract.[6]

Historically, Sudan has always been the traditional Chinese ally in this part of the word. Or at least for the last 60 years. Even after the partition in 2011, Beijing remains Khartoum's biggest trade partner. Chinese companies dominate the consortiums operating the oil pipelines "Greater Nile" and "PetroDar", supplying fuel to Port Sudan. Since 2011, Chinese energy interests have shifted to South Sudan. The government in Djouba has negotiated agreements for major infrastructure projects in exchange for 30 000 barrels of crude per day.[7] Thus, South Sudan and Sudan along with Iran and Russia become the major importers of fuel for the Chinese economy.

STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF SOUTH CHINA SEA

Control over the South China Sea is one of the milestones in the Chinese strategy for dominance. The sea itself is one of the busiest commercial routes and the shortest possible way connecting the West Pacific/East Asia with the Indian Ocean, Africa, and Europe. It also provides direct access to nine of the ten largest commercial ports in the world.[8]

The annual trade flow through the South China Sea is estimated at $5 trillion, which accounts for more than half of the world's total commercial trade volume, as well as 1/3 of the total maritime traffic worldwide. The oil transported through Malacca strait towards East Asia is three times the amount transiting the Suez Canal and 15 times the amount passing through

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[6] Report: Kenya Risks Losing Port of Mombasa to China, 20.12.2018, https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/kenya-risks-losing-port-of-mombasa-to-china

[7] South Sudan will provide a sixth of its oil output to China to fund road projects, 6.04.2019, https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3004962/south-sudan-will-provide-sixth-its-oil-output-china-fund-road

[8] Seven of them are Chinese, including Hong Kong and the other two are Busan in South Korea and Taiwan.

the Panama Canal. Approximately 90 % of the Chinese oil imports in 2016 were delivered from this route, coming from Africa and the Middle East.[9]

And in this context for the last 10 years, China has been trying aggressively to impose it is disproportionately large and unrecognized by the international community claims over 90 % of the South China Sea.[10] The expansion involves construction of entire islands, the building of airports and military outposts, as well as the imposition of economic and political pressure. In the end, all these efforts practically put China in a direct confrontation with the other regional powers and express Beijing's will and ambition for global leadership.

To this date, the Chinese territorial claims are most evidently expressed by the occupation of the Paracel Islands (also claimed by Taiwan and Vietnam) and part of the Spratly archipelago (also claimed by Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines). Woody Island is Paracel's main island and there China has built a fishing town, several minor ports and a small airport capable of maintaining fighter jets.[11] For its part, the Spratly archipelago is even more important, because of its strategic placement along the main maritime routes in the South China Sea, as well as its potential for the development of oil and gas fields. In the last three decades, the Chinese army has built and occupied at least seven artificial islands and islets, with three of them having airports and various military installations.

NAVY EXPANSION AND MODERNISATION

The vast expansion and modernization of the Chinese navy over the last decade have gone hand in hand with the development of the "Belt and Road"

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[9] [9] Strait of Malacca Key Chokepoint for Oil Trade, 27.08.2018, https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/strait-of-malacca-key-chokepoint-for-oil-trade

[10] Божев, В, Надпреварата за Южнокитайско море, https://remilitari.wordpress.com/2017/04/08/%d0%bd%d0%b0%d0%b4%d0%bf%d1%80%d0%b5%d0%b2%d0%b0%d1%80%d0%b0%d1%82%d0%b0-%d0%b7%d0%b0-%d1%8e%d0%b6%d0%bd%d0%be%d0%ba%d0%b8%d1%82%d0%b0%d0%b9%d1%81%d0%ba%d0%be-%d0%bc%d0%be%d1%80%d0%b5/

[11] Brunstrom, D, China fighter plane spotted on South China Sea island: think tank, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-southchinasea-idUSKBN1782LQ

initiative and the strategy for securing maritime domination. Navy ships have traditionally always been the physical embodiment of a certain naval strategy through which a given country would pursue its interests. And this is clearly true for China. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, China currently has the world's second-largest navy (by a total number of ships) and since 2015 it has been steadily grown even larger.[12] For the last five years alone, the Chinese army has launched vessels with a total tonnage bigger than the total tonnage of the entire Indian navy and according to The Diplomat's Joe Rick assessment by 2030 the Chinese navy would look approximately like this:

- 16-20 destroyers type 055
- 36-40 destroyers type 052
- 40-50 frigates type 054
- Approximately 60 diesel submarines
- At least 16 nuclear attack submarines
- At least 8 ballistic nuclear submarines
- 3 aircraft carriers
- At least 3 landing helicopter docks
- At least 8 landing platform docks[13]

The aircraft carrier program deserves special attention, with Beijing apparently relying on it for the implementation of its strategy. Aircraft carriers will significantly increase the options for the navy and its capabilities to project power. Now the only operational aircraft at service is the 65 000 t. "Liaoning", "Admiral Kuznetzov" class. By the end of 2019, it is expected Type 002 to be officially launched, which will be a significantly improved version of "Liaoning" with a catapult take-off system and greater capacity. There is also Type 003 in its early stages of construction, and for which there

[12] Childs, N, Waldwy, T, China's naval shipbuilding: delivering on its ambition in a big way, 1.05.2019, https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2018/05/china-naval-shipbuilding

[13] Rick, Joe, Predicting the Chinese Navy of 2030, 15.02, 2019, https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/predicting-the-chinese-navy-of-2030/

is still no reliable data about its size or whether it will have nuclear or conventional propulsion.

In any case, the expansion of the Chinese navy is more than impressive, and it is far beyond the capabilities of most of the traditional naval powers. However, the expansion in size does not always mean expansion in quality as well. Especially when it comes to high-tech modern warships. The operational capacity of the Chinese navy is highly questionable and particularly there are serious doubts regarding the experience of crews and command. It is difficult to assume at present whether the naval academy in Dalian has the potential to produce enough well-trained and educated crews at the same speed the Chinese industry produces ships. In addition, the Chinese navy has almost no experience in combat tasks except for some missions against Somalian pirates.

This trend, however, is unlikely to persist, and the potential remains enormous. The vast expansion of the navy not only allows China to change the balance of power regionally, but it is also very likely that it will allow Beijing to project influence far beyond its traditional sphere. Mostly through its strategic control over the major points along the line of the "Chinese String of Pearls" and the new opportunities for deployment of combat task forces, which this line will reveal.

CONCLUSION

The "Belt and Road" initiative is the visual evidence for the Chinese global ambitions to become a global superpower. For its part, the string of pearls is the strategy that should ensure the parament flow of natural resources for the economy and the industry, as well as to protect the commercial routes. But there is more. It is also a challenge for regional competitors like India. Historically, New Delhi has always considered the Indian Ocean as part of its sphere of influence, and Beijing's expansion there is seen as a direct threat. Blocking trade routes and Chinese control over strategic ports is something that India fears. A justified fear without any doubt. India is slowly losing its influence over the trade routes in the Indian Ocean, and Chinese companies are displacing their Indian competitors in undertaking strategic

infrastructure projects in the region. The good relations between China and Pakistan is another reason for concern. Especially regarding the economic corridor linking them and the Chinese support for the Pakistani cause in Kashmir.

Washington also shares similar fears. Because of the threatened interests of allies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia, and of course because of the challenge posed to the US dominance in international relations. In this sense, for the last few years, President Trump's administration has been pursuing a largely aggressive policy against China on all fronts. Including the trade war, the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the Taiwan conflict and the denuclearization of North Korea.

Beijing invests a huge amount of resources and political will for the implementation of its "String of Pearls" strategy. Although the future of the Chinese foreign policy looks bright, the success of this strategy still depends on many factors - mostly on the relations between China and the other powers in the Indian Ocean and of course on the relations between Beijing and America. The results from the presidential elections in 2020 might have a decisive importance in this regard. Whether it will be Donald Trump or someone else with a less hawkish stance. Whoever takes the important seat in the Oval Office will need to find a response to the Chinese challenge, which clearly shows its intentions to set the global agenda.

War in Eastern Ukraine and the New Heroes of 'Novorossiya' (New Russia) *

Kiril Avramov and Cody Wood**

The War in Donbas continues to affect life in Ukraine five years after pro-Russian separatists declared the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic independent in 2014. Estimated to have claimed the lives of approximately 12,800 to 13,000 people, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine has also displaced nearly two million people. Amid the fighting, larger-than-life individuals have arisen to strengthen "the cause". Every good myth needs its heroes and villains. The case of the new heroes of "Novorossiya" (New Russia) is no exception to this rule. OPINION piece by Dr. Kiril Avramov and Cody Wood.

People often need a *cause* to rally around. Such causes often need a personification, an *icon*. Only then can a cause become functionally cohesive and accomplish what it sets out to do. Political tacticians, as well as intelligence and military professionals, have been aware of this for centuries.

Such people are often tasked by their masters, be it Washington or Kremlin, with creating favorable conditions in an "area of interest". This often means engaging in what is referred to as state-building efforts, or possibly state-rebuilding efforts. To accomplish such a task, it helps to establish a rallying point. This is often the creation of a national myth around which the public can mobilize.

Heroes – figures larger than life – can inspire, unite and ultimately personify the spirit of the endeavor. These heroic characters can become instrumental

to the varied purposes of the national propaganda apparatus. Once deified and elevated to their respective pedestals, a new myth centered around a hero can embark upon a life of its own – even after the cessation of the hero's earthly existence.

The case of the new heroes of the so-called "Novorossiya" in occupied Eastern Ukraine is no exception to this rule. In our multi-year research dedicated to analyzing pro-Russian propaganda in war-torn Eastern Ukraine, we have encountered multiple cases of such heroic martyrs among the so-called "people's commanders".

These heroes represent an archetype within Novorossiya's national pantheon. They also play an indispensable role in propagating the discourse and meta-narratives of the pro-Russian forces and their grassroots supporters in Eastern Ukraine.

So-called "heroes", such as the late [Arsen Pavlov](#) and [Mikhail Tolstykh](#), were a perfect fit for the crafting of Novorossiya's national proto-epos. Their personal traits and carefully crafted public personas easily served the needs of the pro-Russian propagandists in the early stages of the conflict.

[Public commemoration of heroes in Donetsk, Ukraine, 2017]

They Loved the Cameras, and the Cameras Flattered Them

Among the cast of characters that make up Russia's propaganda effort and national myth establishment in Eastern Ukraine, two stand out – Arsen Pavlov and Mikhail Tolstykh, known colloquially by their combat call signs, or *nom de guerre*, Motorola (Моторо́ла)(Pavlov) and Givi (Ги́ви)(Tolstykh).

These men have been propped up by Russian propagandists as the archetype of volunteer fighters in the Donbas; an archetype intended to draw new volunteers and mobilize popular local and foreign support. The deaths of these Russian backed separatists are now being utilized as tools in Russia's propaganda campaign against Ukraine and the West, despite the very suspicious circumstances around their demise and they're less than savory character.

Their lives and deaths were and are used to communicate and offer, for internal and foreign consumption, the ideals of the modern Kremlin.

These ideals are tightly connected to what could be best described as orderism, *i.e.* an amalgamation of ultra-nationalism, the promotion of Orthodox conservative values, and the blatant display of hyper-masculinity. Essentially, these poster boys of the so-called "People's Republics" (the self-proclaimed proto-states *Donetsk People's Republic* and *Luhansk People's Republic* formed after Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014), were the ideal early prototypes for casting the massively orchestrated pro-Russian disinformation deluge.

As in every effective national meta-narrative, the main protagonists must possess certain traits that make them appeal to the masses. Every good myth needs its heroes and villains. The more the heroes can flirt with modern technology, the better the result.

In this case, Givi and Motorola loved the cameras and the cameras flattered them in order to elevate them to the status of local celebrities. That celebrity status could be later exploited and exported to the needs of the "Russkiy Mir" or Russian World. Through fake news articles and staged documentaries, a celebrity image status of these men, as the new "heroes of Novorossiya" has been very carefully cultivated.

Casting the Roles

[Billboard of Arsen 'Motorola' Pavlov on the streets of Donetsk.] Following the classic tenets of effective propaganda, both of the characters were cast to fit and be molded into predetermined roles.

Thus, Givi, a native of Ukraine, is portrayed as a homegrown defender heroically standing up for his homeland. For his part, Motorola, a native Russian, is portrayed as having sacrificed the comfort of his life in Russia to stand up for what he saw to be a noble cause in Eastern Ukraine. Their 'heroic' sacrifice is played against the backdrop of their family and personal lives.

Both protagonists are portrayed as going through the process of the evolution of "patriotic consciousness", coming from very different backgrounds and regions to ultimately forge the coveted unity of the so-called People's Republics.

[Billboard of Mikhail 'Givi' Tolstykh] In order to cast these essential rebel protagonists as patriotic celebrities with their own on and offline following, wherever there was action happening in occupied Eastern Ukraine, these two were central. They have been seen performing a variety of celebrity feats, such as capturing and emasculating Ukrainian soldiers during a great, heroic battle or gracing the troops of the "People's Republics" with their presence and a wad of cash. Despite hearing the call of the battlefield, they still make time to care for their families, as their mothers and brides have become celebrities in their own right.

Patriarchal Warriors

The aim of this post-mortem, person-centered propaganda is to create a new national myth for Novorossiya compatible with the Kremlin's new state quasi-ideology. Thus, the evolving pantheon of heroes needs to be populated by a specific type of what we refer to as "patriarchal warriors" – those that have made the ultimate sacrifice to defend their homeland against the "fascist" aggressors. As such they are elevated to almost "*Great Patriotic War*" (i.e. WW2) heroes' status and are thus in line with an already established pattern. They make up a new pantheon of conservative tradition based on rigid social hierarchy, inspired by religious Orthodoxy while resting on solid family values with well-defined gender roles.

The bitter irony of this narrative is that both men had ties to factional infighting, and they ultimately died under suspicious circumstances away from the battlefield.

Motorola was assassinated by a remote-controlled bomb in his apartment elevator. Givi was hit while in his office by a rocket that Ukrainian authorities claim was the result of factional rebel infighting. For its part, the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) claims the rocket was fired by Ukrainian forces. Yet, the narrative falls short when it comes to the culmination of "heroic death on the battlefield" and the carefully curated images of both commanders.

It also adversely affects the larger image projection of the DNR's leadership, which seeks to create a close symbolic association (and thus directly tie its "foundational myth") with that of the short-lived, self-declared Donetsk-Krivoy-Rog People's Soviet Republic of 1918. The carefully curated image projection of the Donetsk "People's Republic" is one of a "safe haven" for the Russian-speaking, Slavic and Orthodox majority of people in Southeast Ukraine; a community specifically designed as a sort of "shelter" from internal strife, factional division, corrosive corruption and rampant crime in Ukraine. A stark contrast to the Russian propagated the narrative of an "oppressive Kyiv" rule.

However, following the violent deaths of Motorola and Givi, Russian state propagandists have been able to spin the media attention to pin the blame on sinister Ukrainian forces, diverting attention from the malfunctioning, criminal and corrupt republics. The Kremlin invested considerable amounts of disinformation in advancing multiple theories regarding their deaths, a move consistent with the well-established Soviet art of military and intelligence deception known as "maskirovka", whose modern updates are an integral part of the arsenal of Russia's modern "gray zone" modus operandi.

All was a diversion away from the fact that both men had become a nuisance for Kremlin strategists once they outlived their tactical utility. Thus, to no surprise, if it was not Ukrainian secret services and not Latvian hitmen, then perhaps it was Ukrainian Neo-Nazis who perpetrated the killing of these men.
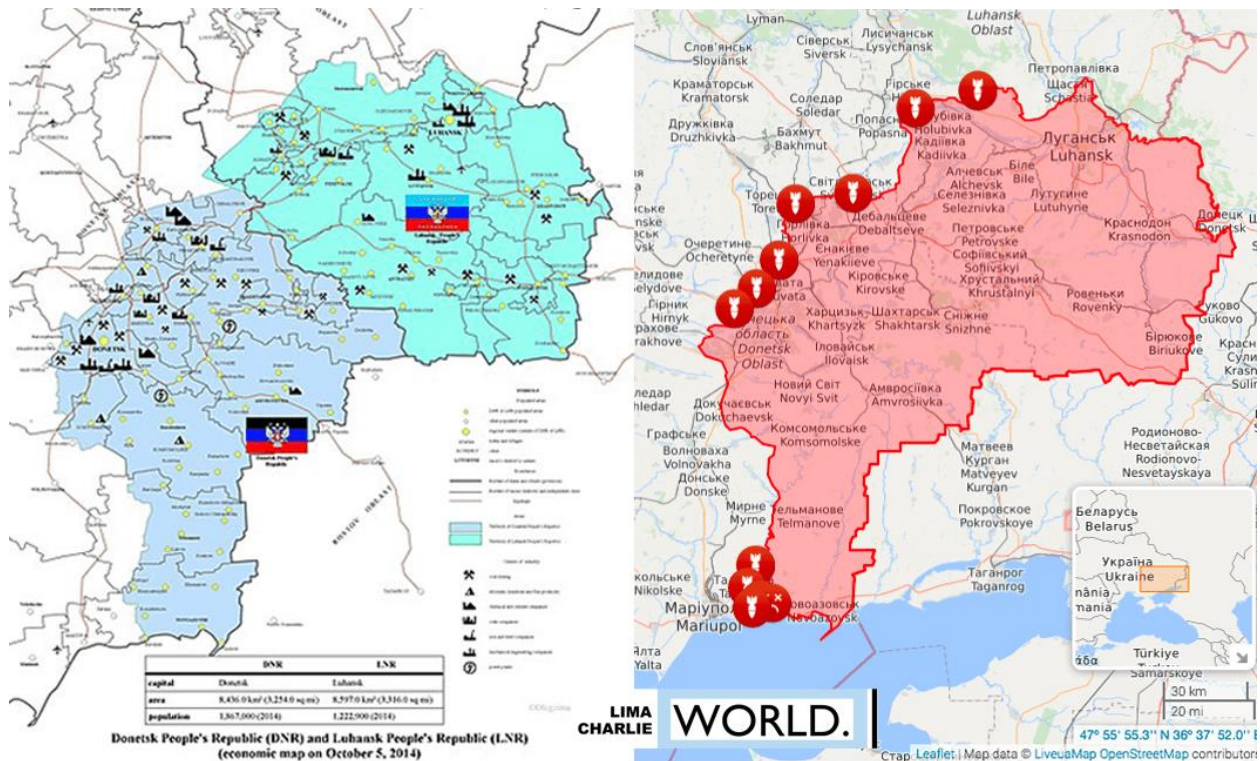
[Eastern Ukraine – Left: Donbass as of Oct. 5, 2014 (via Olegzima); Right: Donbass as of April 20, 2019 (via https://liveuamap.com/)]

Martyrdom as Cultural Exploit

Beyond diverting attention away from the infighting within the malfunctioning DNR, Russian propaganda surrounding the deaths of Motorola and Givi served to glorify these men as martyrs and thereby produce elements of "Novorossiya's" perceived legitimacy. These men can, even beyond the grave, serve as potent information warfare implements in the Kremlin's arsenal.

It certainly was no coincidence that when the Immortal Regiment March was held on May 2017, the then-leader of the DNR, Alexander Zakharchenko marched holding a portrait of Motorola. Zakharchenko was accompanied by the leader of Putin's favorite biker gang, "The Night Wolves" — symbolism intended.

[The traditional "Immortal Regiment March", Donbas, 2017. The event was held under the motto "Legends never die". Note the presence of the leader of "The Night Wolves" – Alexander Zaldostanov (i.e. "The Surgeon") behind the late leader of the DNR Alexander Zaharchenko)]

Beyond the Kremlin's desire to show support for the DNR there is an extra layer of manipulation added to the showmanship. The annual Immortal Regiment is a march billed as an event to honor the fallen of the Second World War. By holding up the portrait of Motorola, Zakharchenko is equating his death with the sacrifices made by those who fought against the *fascists,* i.e. Nazi Germany. Just as the Soviet Union fought against fascist invaders in WW2, the audience is intended to equate Russia's current enemies, Ukraine, with fascist aggressors.

For targeted foreign audiences, such as the ones in the "near abroad", these characters are portrayed as the prototypes of the proverbial everyman who have elevated themselves to offer the ultimate sacrifice in the face of the imminent perennial Western-plotted invasion and dismemberment of Mother Russia. In essence, they are the human faces of the "besieged fortress" heroic defenders.

Today, the faces of Motorola and Givi adorn billboards across the occupied territories of the Donbas, young children sing songs about their sacrifices,

and stories that both glorify their deeds and drum up conspiracies about their deaths are proliferated online by Kremlin information handlers.

All of this is intended to personify and deify the martyrs of "Novorossiya", to brand its enemies as contemporary fascists, and to recruit new volunteers for the cause, all whilst diverting from the not-so-glorious battlefront reality of the lives and deaths of the Russian backed separatists in the Donbas.

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BESIEGING SYRIA

Aleksandar Stoyanov

The past three years of the Syrian Civil war have been concentrated on surrounding, besieging and capturing cities, towns, and villages of various sizes and strategic importance. The main forces to conduct these activities have been the forces loyal to President Bashar al Assad. They have executed several protracted sieges across the country - from the battle for Aleppo in late 2016 to the capture of Khan Sheikhoun in 2019. While the tactical and strategic circumstances in between these battles changed dramatically, the government forces have been building upon their experience and have gradually developed a predictable modus operandi, which has been applied throughout the series of operations against rebel/Islamist strongholds. The pattern of siege-craft, demonstrated by the Pro-Assad forces can be traced and systematized in a few basic points, presented below.

WHO ARE THE PRO-ASSAD FORCES?

The Assad Regime began the Civil war with what seemed to be one of the most substantial forces in the Middle East, possessing a great number of armored vehicles and tanks, a substantial air force and a considerable number of troops. In a matter of two years, the Syrian Arab Army disintegrated into a fading shadow of its former self. A considerable number of troops deserted, joined the so-called Free Syrian Army or left the country to avoid combat. Many tanks and vesicles were destroyed and the SyAF was the only element that was left more or less intact, According to Russian officials, prior to Russia's involvement in the Civil War, starting 1st September 2015, the SAA was on the brink of collapse. Since then, Russia has put a lot of effort into reorganizing, re-arming and re-training the government forces. From the existing 4 army corpses, three were basically dissolved and the Kremlin urged the creation of a new Fifth Corps, maned by recruits, drafted en mass, often unwillingly from the depleted local manpower base.

In the meantime, the main burden of the fighting had to be carried out by self-established or foreign-backed militias, most of which directly funded by Iran. Tehran also provided training and armament for these groups via its Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Over 130 different militias have been counted in the Assad camp in a study conducted by Ruslan Trad for his book "A Murder of a Revolution".

After 2014, the Assad government sought to reign in these militias by grouping them in the so-called National Defense Forces (NDF) under the overall seniority of the Syrian Arab Army. Even so, most of the NDF militias continued to act as virtually independent units, often combining military duties with governing and extorting captured territories. Between 2012 and 2016, a specific mercenary milieu formed in Syria, which much resembled the Age of Contractors that dominated European warfare in the XVII century. Local militias were governing settlements, their larger brigade-like overlords dominated areas, and brigade groupings formed private armies, ruling over many regions. The warlords, nominally serving under Assad became virtual masters of their regions of command, much like the old divisional commanders during the reign of Hafez al Assad.

Muhammad Jaber, leader of the now-dissolved Desert Hawk brigades, at the height of his power; Credits: Spiegel

Under Russia's guidance, [the SAA began to slowly regain influence](#) and leverage over the warlords and some of the militias were disbanded, while others were more strictly incorporated into the NDF under a series of new laws and regulations. Still, the foreign brigades and private armies like Hezbollah, [Fatemayoun brigade](#) and the "Tigers" continued to act under the only nominal control of Damascus' behalf. The process of reforming and reintegrating the armed forces has continued in 2019. The "Tigers" have been [re-branded](#) as the 25 Special Operations division. Still, new militias may develop from dissatisfied fighters, who refuse to leave their well-paid brigades in order to subject themselves to the regulations of the Syrian military [which have now increasingly moved under the command of Russian officers](#) in both the higher and the middle ranks.
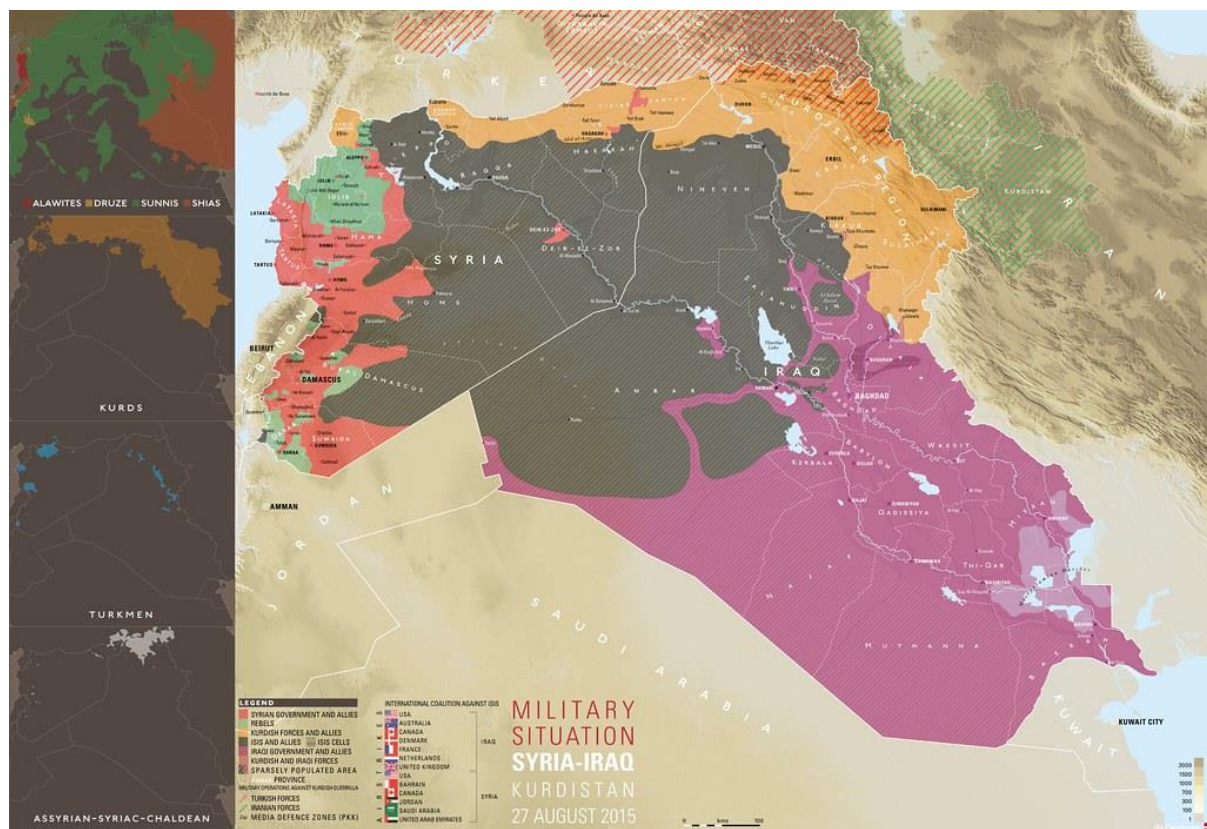
The situation in the Middle East prior to Russia's involvement; Map Credit: @LCarabinier

Apart from the number of military units and militias, the forces loyal to Assad have been [supported by several Private Military Companies](#) (PMC), provided by Russia. The most popular is "[Wagner](#)", but it is certainly not the only one. [E.N.O.T.](#) forces and the so-called "ISIS hunters" have also bolstered front-line operations against the rebel forces and the jihadist units under the black flags of the IS. There are talks of other Russian mercenary units in Syria as

well, with boots on the ground present since the establishment of the so-called Slavonic corps in 2013. Apart from these private units, which might number some 5 000 men, the Kremlin has deployed over 7 000 troops and military police units on the ground. In addition, recent reports claim Russian spec-ops might have participated in the latest offensive against Khan Sheikhoun. The main form of Russian support, however, remains the RuAF which has proven to be the most decisive factor in the turning of the tide in the Civil war. Since its deployment in 2015, the RuAF has been a major game-changer that has both accelerated the expansion of the Assad-controlled area and has deterred the growth of rebel-held territories. The relentless and merciless campaign by the RuAF and the SyAF has decimated the civilian population but has achieved the necessary military superiority, which has brought roughly 2/3 of Syria back under Assad's rule.
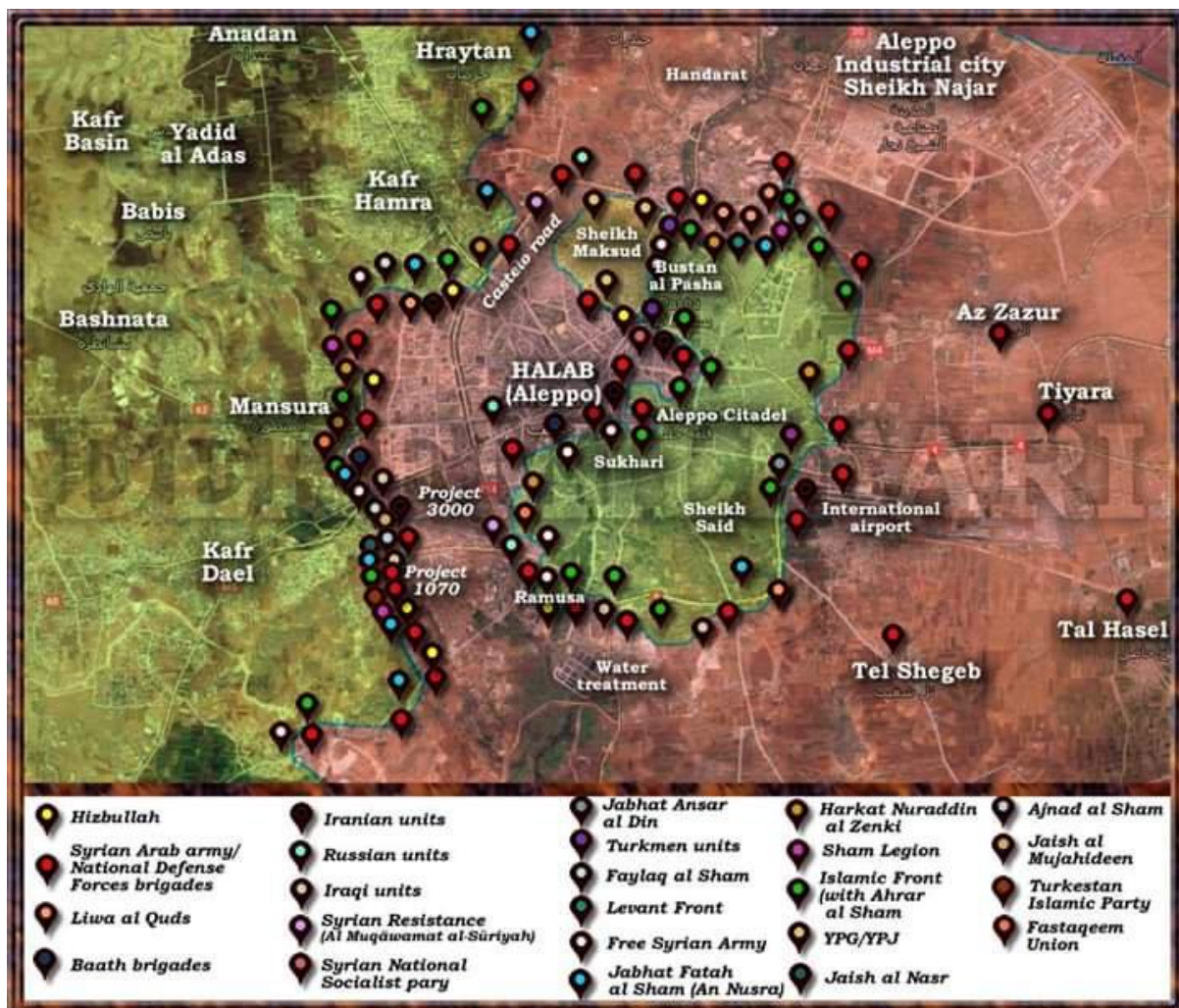
Presence of pro-Assad and Rebel/Islamist factions in the siege of Aleppo in December 2016 demonstrates the variety of units, deployed by both sides.

All in all, pro-Assad field armies, conducting offensives and sieges are a rag-tag of different army units, militias, foreign mercenaries, and allied forces, that form a multi-layered substance, which is held together by the Russian and Iranian military leadership. The usage of air forces and big-caliber artillery has greatly decreased the burden on the rank and file, a trend which has been paid by an increased number of civilian casualties.

THE STRATEGY

Under its military intervention, Russia began to develop an overall strategy in order to save, secure and resurrect the Assad regime. The implementation of this strategy began in 2015 but has its roots in 2012-13 when Russia first began to deliver military aid to the Assad Regime. The strategy has been closely coordinated with the Iranian forces, supervised by gen. Qasem Suleimani. Certain elements in the field tactics also bear resemblance to the operation against the Chechen during the Second Chechen war. It's worth noting that people responsible for taking Grozny were the same who planned the sieges of Aleppo and East Ghouta.

The first phase of the strategic plan aimed at stabilizing and securing the large cities and industrial centers under the control of the Regime - Damascus, Hama, Aleppo, and Homs. But first, Russia took care to secure its own strategic assets in Tartus and Latakia. Once the main cities have been saved from immediate danger, the Regime and its advisers took care to capture as much from the main roads and highways as possible in order to consolidate control and strengthen the links between their main enclaves of influence.

Third came the securing of the major provincial capitals and the control over the key natural resources such as oil, gas and phosphate deposits. Finally came the rounding up of rebel enclaves and picking them out one by one, starting with the ones closest to the main administrative and industrial centers.

Parallel to the Russo-Assad effort, Iran played its own game, aiming at establishing maximum control over the Syria-Iraq border. This was done to ensure the opening of the long-awaited "Iranian road", linking Tehran with Beirut and allowing the IRGC to transfer military material to its main proxy - Hezbollah.
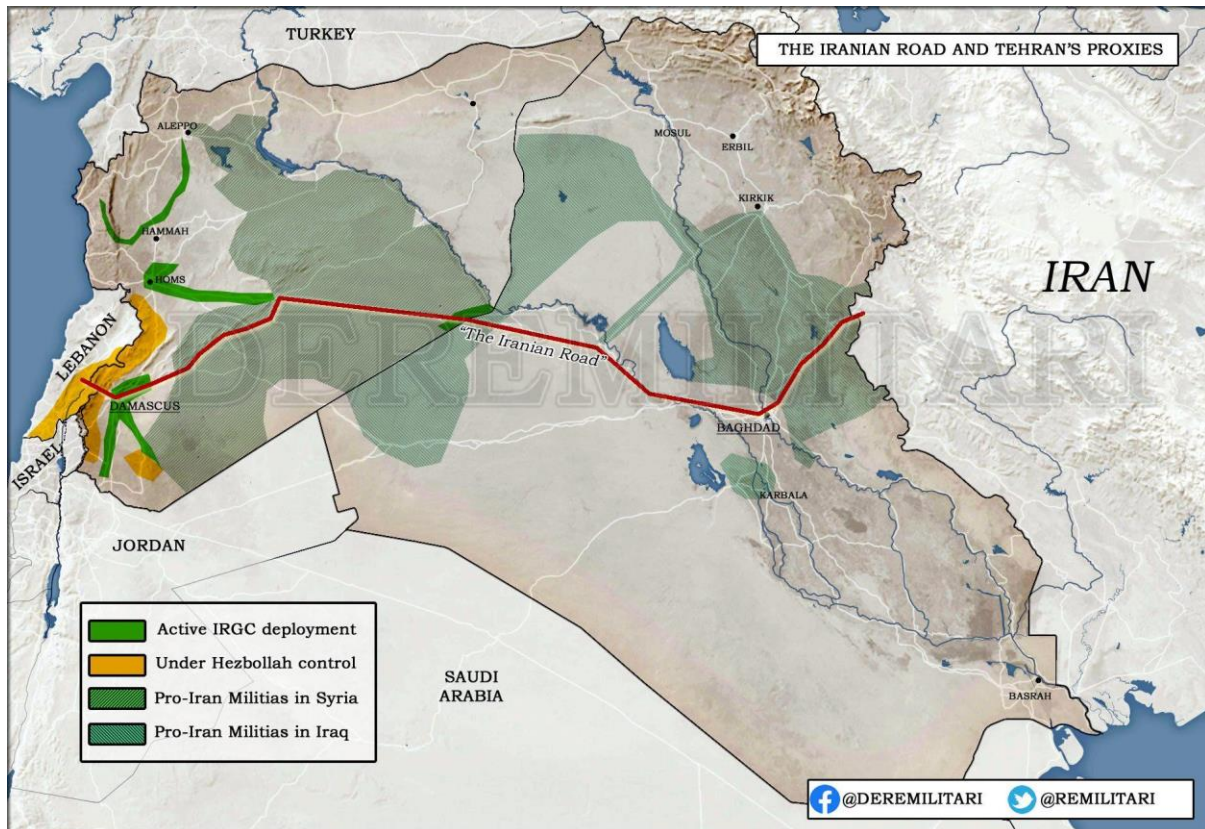
So far, the overall military effort has led to the completion of the first three steps of the Russian plan and has also allowed Iran to open an uninterrupted route to Lebanon. The pace of the military operations was a clear compromise between Russia and Iran. For instance, while the Rebels and the Islamic State-held position a few kilometers from downtown Damascus, Russian forces and their Iranian allies were rushed to save Deir ez Zor in order to secure the control over the Euphrates and counter the pro-US Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from taking control of the entire Syria-Iraq border.

THE STAGES

Working with an evolving military force of different units and under a variety of commanders, the pro-Assad military leaders began to form a distinctive pattern, which has been followed during the process of capturing enemy settlements.

- *Step One* - Preparatory operations

Before beginning the actual siege, the forces loyal to Assad tend to conduct several preparatory steps, in order to secure their flanks and make sure no

relief operations can be carried by the rebel/Islamist forces. The first step is to separate and put down any ongoing active engagements on secondary fronts along the operation zone. The idea is to achieve uninterrupted, maximum focus on the targeted settlement, without having to dispatch forces for additional combat tasks. This step was further developed in 2017/18 with the introduction of the so-called de-escalation zones. These safe areas have been fixated in a series of negotiations between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Essentially, the remaining rebel enclaves were partitioned in several sectors, each assigned for pacification by one of the guaranteeing foreign powers.

For the de-escalation zones to work, Russia mediated a series of cease-fire agreements with separate rebel factions across Syria. After the guns fell silent, the Russians began to rebuild and reorganize local government forces in order to buff them up for the upcoming offensives. The cease-fire gave Russia and its subjected Syrian forces the chance to attack rebels one at a time. For example. While a ceasefire was in effect in Idlib, pro-Assad forces were fighting in Daraa. Thus, the SAA and its allies could be certain that no other major campaigns are going to take place while the main forces were busy fighting a rebel/Islamist faction.

With Turkey backing the agreements and the rest of former rebel supporters standing by, Russia cherry-picked its battles, giving it enough time to consolidate the rag-tag of government units and militias. The ceasefire also allowed for the Pro-Assad camp to transfer a specific set of elite units - the 4th armored division, the Tigers, Hezbollah, 'Wagner', IRGC, Fatemayoun, and a few other units and use them as a battering ram for each of the operations. The Russian military planners were well aware that even with the provided breathing space, most of the SAA and the NDF were more a [liability](#) rather than an asset in terms of combat effectiveness. In addition to planning and pacifying the secondary fronts, this stage also includes the first preparatory airstrikes, carried out by the RuAf and SyAF.

- ***Step Two*** - Concentration of main forces

After the flanks have been secured and the other major front lines have been pacified by terms of agreements of a ceasefire, the Pro-Assad forces begin to concentrate on the upcoming siege. The main proportion of the operating army is composed of regular units of the SAA, usually from the Fifth Corps, as well as militias from the National Defense Forces. If necessary, apart from local militias, additional units are mobilized and transferred from other

provinces in which no current operations are being carried out. Apart from the rank and file militias and army units, the Regime also 'brings in the cavalry' by allocating its elite forces - the 4th division under Assad's brother Maher, the Russian mercenaries from Wagner, the battle-hardened Hezbollah forces, the Afghan Fatemayoun brigade, as well as, when necessary, Iranian forces and Russian military units. The latter tend to get involved only in case the rebel/Islamist resistance remains too prolonged and stiff.

SAA and NDF units serve as the mass to cover the flanks and carry out reconnaissance attacks and later to infiltrate and broaden the gaps in the enemy defenses. The elite forces are the ones carrying out the main part of the fighting. Their task is to break the enemy lines and strike as deep as possible in the adversaries' positions.

- ***Step Three*** - Initial offensive

Depending on the size and durability of rebel/Islamist defenses, the initial stage of action can vary. Sometimes, an SAA/NDF preparatory assault is carried out in order to test the enemy strength - both in the targeted settlement and its surroundings. Sometimes this assault is preceded by an initial bombarded via airstrikes and artillery in case of stronger enemy fortifications and positions. Weaker points can be subdued after the initial stage of operations. In some cases, rebels choose to abandon certain positions, in which case, the SAA/NDF forces quickly capture the empty settlements.

This was mostly the case with the Pro-Assad offensive against ISIS in the Raqqah governorate in 2017. During the offensives in the last 12 months, Government forces tend to skip reconnaissance assaults and simply use air forces and artillery in order to minimize their casualties. Once the defenders' potential is assessed, the RuAF and SyAF come in place, carrying out a series of airstrikes, targeted not only against the settlement intended for capture, but also on any rebel/Islamist neighboring sites in order to prevent the sending of reinforcements and if possible to hide the actual target of the upcoming offensive. Since 2015 the air campaign has considerably intensified. In a recent [interview](), Russian MD gen. Sergey Shoigu has claimed, that 90% of the entire RuAF has gone on rotation in Syria and that certain pilots have gained up to 200 hours of combat flight experience. Given that Russia encounters no enemy air forces, these figures

regard only the bombardment of rebel/Islamist positions. To give some idea of the number of bombs being dropped, Shoigu stated that in certain days, over 2 000 tons of cargo per day had to be sent to Syria in order to keep the army supplied. In addition to the air raids, the Government loyalist also used a variety of siege guns and mortars, their number growing with each following campaign.

- ***Step Four*** - The main siege

Once the ground was prepared and the main enemy defenses were battered, the pro-Assad forces commenced the main siege. It was carried out in several stages. First, the elite forces attacked the main enemy positions. In the meantime, SAA/NDF militias were used to capture surrounding strong points - checkpoints, hills, smaller villages, and hovels, etc. With regard to important rebel/Islamist strongholds, these offensive actions usually continue for days, after initial offensives get repulsed by entrenched enemy fighters, supplied with anti-tank rockets (TOW), artillery and snipers. Assaults are repeated on a daily basis with more bombardment, more airstrikes on strong points and new waves of attacks. Basically, this vicious cycle continues for days and weeks, resulting in massive combat and civilian casualties.

The harder the resistance, the stronger the raids and bombardment become. When certain settlements turn out to be hard to subdue, RuAF and SyAF began to target not only front-line fortifications, but also important civil centers - hospitals, schools, and markets, in order to destroy the morale of the population and break the will of the defenders. In extreme cases, in which neither artillery nor troops and planes are able to achieve a break-through, the regimes bring in chemical weapons and incendiaries, in order to decimate the resisting enemy. Cases of chemical warfare in Syria are multiple, with several being [proven](#)by the UN, and others only acknowledged by [media and researchers](#). Even though Assad officially has handed in his chemical weapons arsenal, new weapons are being produced with parts and materials, [smuggled](#)in by North Korea. In the meantime, additional offensives are carried out on the flanks of the main siege. Their aim is to cut off the besieged rebel/Islamist stronghold from its allies and to limit or cut the supplies of munition, food, and medicine. This extreme form of full encirclement has been evident during the sieges of Aleppo and East Ghouta and resulted in massive civilian casualties over prolonged periods of time.

- ***Step Five*** - Divide and conquer

Sooner or later, a breakthrough is achieved. This is done either by piercing through enemy lines or by arranging the surrender of a section of or the entire enemy enclave. The battle of Aleppo and the siege of Ghouta and Douma provide ample examples for both scenarios.
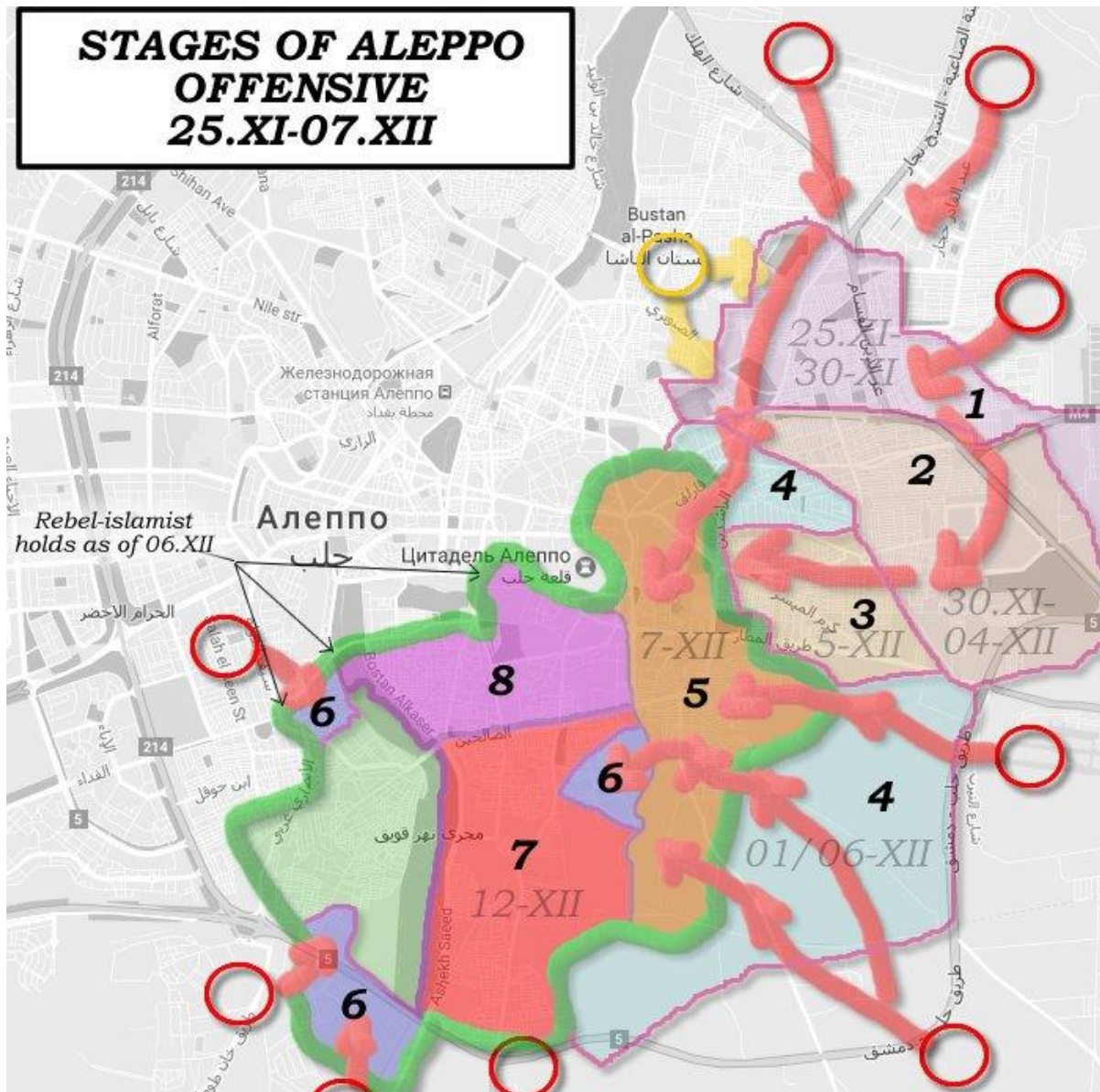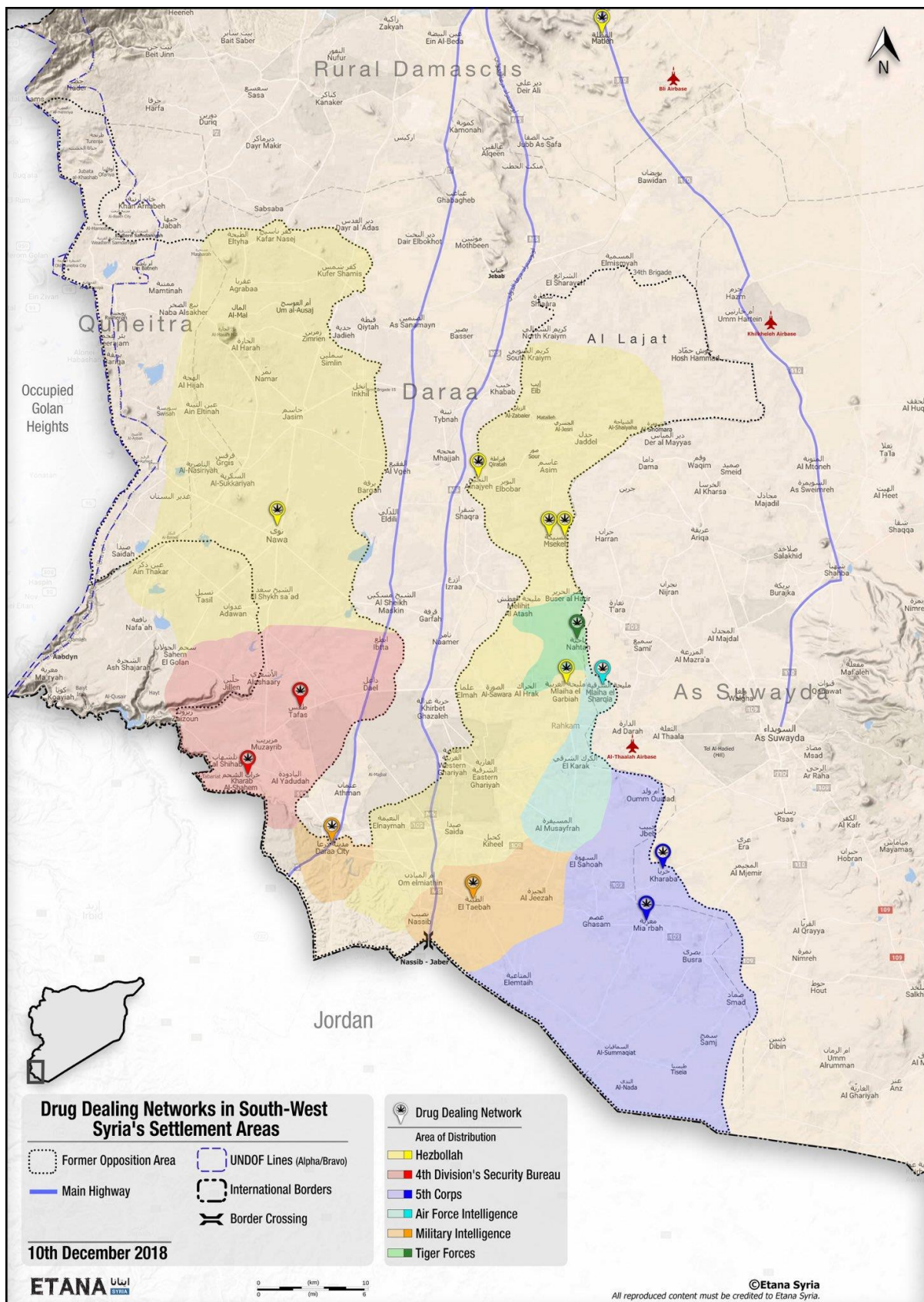

The collapse of the Aleppo rebel enclave 25.11-12.12, 2016. Numbers from 1 to 8 indicate the phase in which a certain neighborhood had fallen to the pro-Assad forces.

Initially, government forces cut off enemy positions into smaller enclaves and encircle all of them by using their superior manpower and the continuous air raids and artillery bombardments. These smaller sections are then subjected to the same pattern of assaults as described above until each of them breaks and surrenders or collapses.

In some cases, rebels tend to fight to the last man, in other cases some enclaves surrender, while others fight on. In most cases, government forces have tried to minimize their own casualties by allowing rebel units and their families to surrender and allocate from the captured settlement. Most of these displaced fighters and civilians were transferred to the Idlib de-escalation zone - the only one that has not been placed under Russian/Iranian supervision. As a result, over 2 000 000 internally displaced Syrians have now added up to the local population, putting additional pressure on Turkey to compromise with the policies of Tehran and Moscow.

- ***Step Six*** - Pacification

Following the surrender of the last enemy elements, the captured settlement, or what's left of it, is being proclaimed liberated and occupied by government forces. In order to save face, Russia has tried to prevent most pro-Assad militias in entering territories, for which it had reached an agreement with rebels. However, the lack of manpower and the need to secure certain areas has quickly overruled earlier commitments.

Drug Dealing Networks in South-West Syria's Settlement Areas

Former Opposition Area
Main Highway
UNDOF Lines (Alpha/Bravo)
International Borders
Border Crossing

Drug Dealing Network
Area of Distribution
Hezbollah
4th Division's Security Bureau
5th Corps
Air Force Intelligence
Military Intelligence
Tiger Forces

10th December 2018

ETANA

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The post-conquest situation in Daraa province on December 2018. Credit: @ETANA_Syria

In strategic centers, such as Aleppo, Russia has introduced detachments of its military police units. These forces were tasked with protecting the civilian population, countering any rebel activities and keeping an eye on the unruly pro-Government militias. The task has been certainly [hard to achieve](#), especially outside the strictly controlled Damascus.

In addition to the Russian forces, Government army units were stationed and, in their wake, came the Intelligence services of the Army and the Air force. Their job was to root out any remaining supporters of the rebel/Islamist factions and to make sure that the remaining civilian populations are being obedient and in line with the Assad regime.

As part of the strengthening mechanisms, in many places in South-eastern Syria, the government has begun to [settle in Shia militiamen and their families](#), providing them with housing and lands, taken from the refugees and the internally displaced. The debt-ridden regime had to pay in kind in order to compensate for the lack of funds, necessary to cover its expenditure regarding the militias. Further pressure came from Tehran since Iran had promised homes to the thousands of Fatemayoun troops, gathered from Afghan refugees.

In many places, even though military victory has been achieved, the Regime is still facing popular [unrest](#) and [insurgency](#). The [inability](#) of Damascus to rebuild the captured territories and its [lack of flexibility](#) regarding the local population has created a new set of problems, with which the Regime will have to handle sooner rather than later.

CONCLUSION

The human and material cost has been deemed irrelevant regarding the modus operandi of the Pro-Assad forces in their conduct of sieges. Most of the settlements that have witnessed Government offensives have been decimated and destroyed. Some have even been turned into ghost towns. The cost of rebuilding these places is staggering and hard to calculate. Whatever the amount, the way in which the Government has chosen to subdue its rebel opponents has left Syria in ruins. The civilian death toll and the human rights violations have stirred up the situation in a manner, which will enable the re-emergence of radical Islamist and Jihadi groups soon. Over the piling debt to Iran and Russia, Assad has gained nothing but dust and ashes upon which to rule. For now.

The Alliances of Criminal and Terrorists Groups in Europe

Ruslan Trad

"Arms trade here is easier than in other parts of the world. We can rely on problematic borders and corruption — you have no idea how many doors can open with a few thousand euros." The man who said this* is referring to the arms trade in the Balkans and southern Europe. His past is proof of what he says, a long career of undetected criminality. The reason why such criminal networks are not under the magnifying glass is the fact that for local authorities the issue of arms trafficking to Europe is a more special and difficult issue.

In recent years, much has been said and written about the smuggling of arms from Europe to the Middle East and Africa. The rise and activity of the Islamic State (ISIS) caused an explosion of reports, articles, and investigations into how weapons fall into the hands of one or another group. Croatian, Bulgarian, Russian, and Western weapons could be found on black markets in the Middle East, as weapons officially sold from different countries easily fall into the grey sector because of corruption or military offensives with a bad end. But what can we say about the trafficking of weapons to Europe?

The number of articles and research on this issue is significantly lower. Contact with numerous sources on this subject shows that criminal networks in Europe are constantly developing. These groups enter alliances and unions with criminal groups outside the European Union (EU) and sometimes through mediators communicate with terrorist organizations in the Sahel, Central Asia, and West Africa. Globalization in today's modern version is no different than the Medieval or Antique version. Now as then, international groups are taking joint action in the name of profit. Today's communications and new tools of exchanging information make creating such unions much more profitable and more difficult to stop. There is today

what one might call a "criminal international", in which groups from different parts of the world create links with each other to circumvent the various obstacle, particularly laws, to business.

Such international criminal alliances are aggressive in pressing their interests, trying to conquer territory, control cities, and impose taxes where they deem it necessary. This is particularly visible in South America and the Middle East, but similar examples exist even in southern and eastern Europe, where mafia structures impose their policies, forcing local authorities into a collaborative, corrupt relationship. These criminal alliances, in turn, are one of the sources of income for terrorist groups, and key nodes in their logistical infrastructure to move operatives and money. "I do not care if someone is an Arab, a Kurd or a Flemish. We have worked with all groups," says a Bulgarian former member of the mafia structure. "The only thing that is important is to keep the rules. Perhaps some suspicious people have crossed our paths, but this is not our problem."

European institutions have periodically reported on possible contacts between terrorist groups and European mafia groups since the 1990s. After 2004, when the Madrid bombing took place, it was clear that it was precisely thanks to an alliance of this kind, between the Mafia and terrorist cells, nearly 50,000 euros had been channeled to the organizers of the attack. Again, because of these alliances, organized crime contributes to finding weapons, providing logistics and travel opportunities. In this way, terrorist groups rely on local criminal structures in Europe to operate freely on the continent. Counterfeit documents, weapons, and logistics were also provided by these criminals to the ISIS cells responsible for attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015 and 2016.

The mingling of terrorist and mafia structures in Europe dates to at least the 1990s. These structures include Leftist extremists, such as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which gathered resources through criminal networks in Europe for its war on Turkey, and far-Right groups such as the Orthodox militias in Bosnia; all of them benefited from access to the black market. In many cases, communication between organized crime and terrorist groups is strict and has its own rules. After September 11, these rules are being respected much more in order to avoid detection by government departments. One of the most important aspects of this co-operation is the creation of traffic channels, which are a major item in the budget of all these groups, and therefore serious attention is paid to channel protection.

For example, Al-Qaeda has been [seriously involved](#) in securing Colombian cartel channels that transfer cocaine from South America through West Africa to the Balkans and Europe. European reports show that Al-Qaeda is involved with trafficking drugs, weapons, and gems, with contacts in Balkan and Italian mafia groups. Operational workers of the terrorist group are noticed from Albania and Bosnia to Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. Al-Shabab, Somalia's Al-Qaeda branch, maintains a broad network in Scandinavia, where there is a large Somali diaspora, and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has contacts in Spain because of its proximity to the territories where the group operates. From the Italian mafia through Greek anarchist and Communist extremist groups and the PKK, groups from all over the world have allegiances and supranational alliances that provide trafficking channels and funding opportunities. These channels most often include drug and weapon trafficking, whether they are for contract killings or for committing a terrorist act.

The fact that political or ethnic affiliation does not matter in this sphere means the fact strange bedfellows result. In the 1980s, it meant there were serious ties between Camorra, a Sicilian crime syndicate-cum-secret society, and the Communist terrorists of the Italian Red Brigades, while at the same time the Sicilian mafia worked alongside fascist groups. The Leftish separatists of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) maintained connections with Ndrangheta, an organized crime group in southern Italy, which also served as a guarantor of the arms trafficking for Lebanon, a state dominated by the Shi'a jihadists of Iran's Hezbollah militia. Camorra supplied the ETA, the Basque separatists in northern Spain, with ammunition, and in 2002 the Italian authorities uncovered links between North African terrorist groups with Italian criminal organizations that trafficked drugs. There is also evidence of links with Balkan groups.

"Politicians benefit from our business. We have been giving gifts many times," said another former Mafia member in Serbia. His group has operated in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, and Italy. He himself often avoids arrest because of administrative problems. In fact, it is the administration that is one of the problems that hinders investigations. Errors in documents, or even a lack of information exchange between European countries, make it possible for such groups to develop their activities without problems.

In this context, two types of alliances must be identified which have a direct impact on the EU. The first type is alliances created within the European

borders and has an impact on the security of the member states, including plots of terrorist acts. The second type of alliances is created outside the EU or on the periphery — the Balkans, Greece, Sicily, Spain — which also pose a threat to stability in the EU. And if we talk more about Western Europe, it is good to pay attention to a region that has a very important role to play in security, but it is out of the media interest: the Balkans.

According to reports by FRONTEX and Europol, the countries of the former Yugoslavia and Bulgaria are the major arteries through which a large quantity of drugs and weapons passes to Scandinavia. The Greek-Turkish border and the Serbian border with Romania are among the most sensitive points. On these roads, established by local criminal groups, Islamists from the Middle East also pass. The main problem is that once they have entered the Schengen zone — which has dismantled the borders between the EU states — these people can reach any area in Europe without even having to worry about showing a fake passport. In order to bypass obstacles, terrorist groups are building contacts with criminal groups in Southeast Europe. These roads have no connection with migratory flows or with the trafficking of refugees — criminal groups use their own methods, including bribery of border officers.

These alliances are bearing fruit. European reports show a growing problem and increasing links to criminal structures among third-generation diasporas from the Balkans, especially in Scandinavia. In 2013, Bulgarian police revealed a channel for arms trafficking from Bulgaria to Sweden and Germany. Kalashnikov automatic guns and ammunition had traveled from the Stara Zagora province in central Bulgaria through the Kalotina border-crossing on the western border with Serbia. The criminals had not been afraid to use a passenger bus. While there is no evidence that these weapons were intended for terrorist groups, the police operation demonstrated how extensive is the weapons trafficking network, which, as demonstrated in Paris and Brussels recently, and in Madrid fifteen years ago, are easily exploited by terrorists.

Further evidence of the scale of the problem was furnished in 2017 by police action in Spain that broke up a channel for arms trafficking to eleven European countries. 664 weapons were seized; more than 240 people were arrested. Some of the detainees were citizens of Romania and Bulgaria, who had bought imitation weapons and transformed them into firearms in factories located in Spain. Once they were ready, the weapons were placed

in Europe through the black market. Over 34,000 bullets, grenades, and silencers were seized during the campaign.

Another example comes from Malmö, a city in northern Sweden that is more afflicted with violent crime than any other area in Sweden, [according to a June survey](#) from the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention. One of the main reasons for this is the importation of increasing numbers of Balkan criminal groups. Swedish police say that in recent years the [explosives](#) used in the city have become more powerful. From 2015 to 2017, the blasts were primarily caused by hand grenades left over from the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. In 2018, the blasts were primarily caused by Cobra 8 bangers manufactured by the Italian company Di Blasio. One of the bloodiest attacks that were carried by Balkan group members used AK-47 smuggled from Southeastern Europe. For the police in Malmö, the connections between crime groups are clear and these weapons are all illegal in Sweden, but they can still be bought easily online and smuggled in through these networks based among the newcomers.

The problem of arms trafficking had become such a worry that in April 2018 a meeting between representatives of European police services was convened in the Bulgarian capital, Sofia, to discuss options for deterring the trafficking of small arms and ammunition to Europe.

The rise of ISIS has somewhat focused European officials on the nexus of organized crime and terrorism. ISIS took important steps to diversify its financial resources. In addition to modest oil trade in collaboration with the Syrian government, ISIS increased its role in the sale of drugs and weapons. The jihadists established a network through channels from Africa with their units in Libya and Nigeria, through to Asia with their Afghan division via their units Yemen. These ISIS networks on the Eurasian landmass established links to the wider international drug distribution system, with their agents operating as far afield as the Western Hemisphere, in Trinidad and Tobago, in Mexico, and with the cartels in Colombia, to get drug products across the Atlantic to Western Sahara. Apart from dirty dealings with cocaine and heroin, ISIS continues to participate actively in the export of antiquities from all countries where it has an active presence, whether acknowledged or not — Afghanistan Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, Nigeria, Philippines, and India.

We must add a new trend to this list of economic activities. Since 2017, ISIS exported from Iraq and Syria financial assets amounting to at least 400 million dollars. About half of this money was returned in the form of legal business investment through the group's intermediaries that are not formally part of the organization itself. In return for a serious profit, the relevant individuals and companies commit to spending a large percentage of their sales revenue to fill the coffers of ISIS. The most common aspect is the exchange bureaus and fast-food restaurants that receive the lion's share of the jihadists' investments. This tactic, of course, has long been known to the terrorist organizations that have been implementing it since the Cold War in both the Eastern and Western countries. This activity has been deployed since 1990 and is part of the funding of all major organizations, including Hezbollah and Al-Qaeda.

The conclusion of so-called "grey deals" is not only occurring in the Middle East. Between 2015 and 2017, a series of reports from the European security services show that both ISIS and Al-Qaeda have greatly strengthened their links with the local mafia and illegal structures in Europe, attracting them to their global economic network. While drug and weapons import for Europe are a far more complex and dangerous venture than in the Middle East, ISIS can at this option as a proportionate risk, and it has done so. The EU, particularly the border countries — Italy, Greece, France, Spain, and Bulgaria — must strengthen the monitoring of their internal criminal structures, and any international links they have, to minimize the jihadists' success in this realm.

The EU *has* urged the member-states to watch out for Hezbollah's involvement on the Continent in its organized crime milieu. "I watch TV and read the news — I see the measures against the activity of the organization. I can tell you that putting the organization on a terrorist list will not stop the activity and traffic channels — the organization is even more active in South America and the Balkans," says a Hezbollah-connected contact in Bulgaria, which in the past has helped the organization to establish local networks in the Balkans. Recently, Britain and Argentina have joined the states that have added Hezbollah's military wing to the list of terrorist groups, but there is no indication that members of the organization have become less effective.

Though the jihadists take up most of the conversation about the domestic terror threat in Europe, and for good reason, the nativist militias that are beginning to spring up are a problem of their own. In July, Italian authorities uncovered "a massive arms cache — including '26 guns, 20

bayonets, 306 gun parts [such as] silencers and rifle scopes, and more than 800 bullets' — belonging to neo-Nazi militants … Among the weapons discovered in the possession of the far-Right militants was a French-made Matra air-to-air missile that had belonged to Qatar's armed forces, raising questions about Doha's responsibility in its handling of weapons supplied to it and its practices with arms sales. … Experts tend to agree that it is unlikely Qatar directly supplied the missile to the neo-Nazis. The missile probably ended on the black market where the group managed to get hold of it." Be that as it may, the case underlines the possibilities available to groups with lots of money; rockets and even toxic materials are within their grasp.

The possibility for local extremist groups in Europe to develop arms delivery networks is growing. An investigation published in Bellingcat, and conducted by myself and my colleague Kiril Avramov in May, showed that there are certainties between far-Right groups in Western Europe, nationalists in the Balkans, and pro-Russian militias in Bulgaria. These groups maintain active correspondence and even conduct joint military training. One of the results of this collaboration is the terrorist act in Christchurch, New Zealand, where an extreme Right-winger killed fifty people in two local mosques. The weapon used in the attack can be seen on promotional videos of the Bulgarian nationalistic group BNO Shipka. Using AR-15s, which are also produced in Bulgaria, military training takes place in the Strandzha Mountain on the border between Bulgaria and Turkey. All this speaks of a big activity and a much wider network than local authorities have imagined.

All which points towards a sinister trend. Today, any organization or oligarch with enough money can afford the purchase of weapons, including heavy weapons and military ammunition. This would not be possible without the existence of international alliances between organized crime, terrorist groups, and oligarchs in authoritarian countries. Cartels in South America used Soviet submarines sold by Caucasian and Russian mobsters. Al-Qaeda safeguards the flow of cocaine from Brazil and Colombia to West Africa. Balkan groups help terrorists move to Western Europe. ISIS uses Belgian mobsters to deliver money and weapons to its sympathizers. The Italian far-Right is supplied with arms from criminal networks operating from the Middle East and Russia across Europe. Albanian and Serb mobs kill rivals in Sweden with Balkan-made AK-47s. The examples of this kind of thing are legion.

Countering this threat is difficult. A prerequisite for the EU Member States is to improve the exchange of data between their intelligence services in order to have better visibility on the organized crime networks that make the terrorist operations possible. The cascade of challenges is only increasing, however, with technological advances. Cyber capabilities available to non-state actors have been used to disable government and financial institutions. Drones purchased over the internet are in the hands of nearly every cartel and terrorist group giving them surveillance (and eventually) attack capacities that some armies lack. It is obvious that the EU's security and intelligence forces need to rethink the ways they work to prevent these threats from gathering. For now, organized crime shows more innovation and a broader horizon, while experts and intelligence services seem stuck in the 1990s.

* The identity of sources is concealed at their request.

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