



Question R4.7: What are the respective national interests of the US and Russia in the Middle East, and what are the options for alleviating US/Russian tensions to mutual satisfaction and improved regional stability?

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Executive Summary

Dr. Sabrina Pagano, NSI

Overview

The geopolitical foundation of the Middle East is undergoing a fundamental shift in paradigm, with both the US and Russia adapting their national interests to fit the current reality. As part of this shift, Bogdan Belei of the Carnegie Endowment contends that US national interests in the Middle East are diminishing due to a combination of affordable and abundant domestic energy sources as well as the end of the Cold War. Yet a calm and stable Middle East remains a critical US security objective that underpins other key US interests in the region (Lamoreaux). As Blago Tashev of the Marine Corps University notes (personal communication), “the US sees itself as a status-quo power, maintaining a particular rules-based international order that was created by the US and its allies after WWII and is based on values shared by America and those allies.”

Yet many of the SMA experts note that a driving Russian interest is to restore its image as a US-peer “Great Power” in part by expanding its economic, military, and diplomatic ties to the Middle East. Specifically, Belei, Tashev, and Marten argue that Russia’s goal is to end what it sees as two decades of American unilateralism in the Middle East. Tashev argues that Russia’s moves in the Middle East should ultimately not be viewed as aimed at eliminating US presence there rather, the goal is to achieve parity with the US in terms of Russia’s influence in the region. Marten emphasizes that Russian national interests are not necessarily the same as Putin’s own interests, and that Putin has and will put his own interests first. While “the US views the Middle East in terms of global interests and a global strategy, Russia by contrast looks at the region more in terms of the political legitimacy of the Putin government (validated by external successes) and in terms of regional tactics” (Braun, personal communication). Ultimately, according to Tashev (personal communication), Russia not only differs from the US and its allies in terms of values, but also uses different strategies and policies to attain outcomes consistent with its national interests.

US versus Russian Interests in the Middle East

US Interests

The collective input of the contributors identifies four categories of US national objectives in the Middle East: stability, security, economic, and democratization, with a strong emphasis on the former two.¹ Lamoreaux argues that while a stable Middle East—including a non-confrontational Israel—is important to the US, a stable Europe is an even more pressing interest, largely due to economic considerations. He suggests that the best way to encourage both Israeli calm and European stability is to ensure stability in the Middle East.² In service of this latter goal, Lamoreaux indicates that the US should continue present policy and interactions both with Saudi Arabia and with Egypt, given the current (relative) stability in those states. Similarly, Turkey must also be dealt with carefully, given the risk of destabilization to the EU posed by President Erdogan’s treatment of Syrian and Iraqi refugees (Lamoreaux).

US security interests³ include long-term partnerships with reliable allies within the region (Israel, Turkey, GCC, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt) (Belei). “These relationships center on stability within the confines of effective governance, yet do not require a uniform approach either towards ‘democracy,’ nor a standardized bilateral model for US engagement—variable interests and dynamic relationships remain the hallmark of the region” (Meredith, personal communication). Within that flexible approach, firm “red line” strategies include containing Iran (Belei); counter-terrorism/counter-ISIS activities (Belei, Lamoreaux, Tashev); and preventing the development, proliferation, or use of weapons of mass destruction (Tashev).

US economic interest centers around the free flow of energy from the Middle East to the world (Tashev), including freedom of navigation, as well as maintaining sufficient capacity to monitor and potentially offset Russian naval activities in the Mediterranean (Meredith, personal communication). As Tashev discusses (personal communication), protection of strategic assets, economic, and other interests give rise to the US need to provide security over the non-littoral sea lines in the Middle East; the region is especially important given the presence of three important naval choke points—the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Strait of Hormuz. Maritime traffic through these choke points has and will continue to face multiple threats, even though the US historically has maintained freedom of navigation. This freedom will decline should US capacity and willingness to provide security be reduced—thereby creating an opportunity for actors such as China or Russia to gain increased influence in the region (Tashev, personal communication). A forward naval deployment strategy to protect and control sea lines of communication (SLOCs) between Persian Gulf and Horn of Africa, as well as the greater Indian Ocean, would assist in protecting the US interest in energy security (Belei, personal communication).

Additional economic interests are “the dividend of stability and effective governance, namely the development of competitive, reliable markets for regional and global trade;⁴ employment growth to absorb

¹ Lamoreaux observes that the new Administration may not include democratization on this list, and argues that, “Turning a partially blind eye to regimes that, though not at all democratic or human-rights observing, are creating stability within their own states, is probably in the US best interest”—particularly if these regimes agree to tolerate Israel. Meredith (National Defense University) similarly suggests that the goals of democratization and stability may be in opposition to one another and suggests that the US must choose a side in the “stability versus democratization” debate.

² This broader interest in stability incorporates an interest in preventing further state collapse in the region (Belei, personal communication).

³ While there may appear to be some overlap in the broad and enduring US national interests and the strategies and policies established to pursue these interests, this may reflect how these concepts are now, de facto discussed in policy conversations (Tashev, personal communication).

⁴ Though according to Tashev (personal communication), economic exchange with economies in the region in fact accounts for only a small share of the US global exchange.

and redirect fighting age males who would otherwise not join violent organizations; and broader tax bases for partner nations to establish capable government services and develop more legitimate social contracts” (Meredith, personal communication). Ultimately, the US views stable economic growth in the region as contributing to overall stability in the region, thus serving another core US interest (Tashev, personal communication).

The US interest in democratization (Tashev; cf. Lamoreaux) includes an emphasis on human rights, but also a recognition that democratization destabilizes political and social relationships, which must be managed carefully by partner nations (Meredith, personal communication). However, there was some disagreement among contributors regarding the importance of democratization as a US interest. Lamoreaux argues that the US does not have a current interest in democratization, but instead is focused on stability, even if this stability comes at the expense of the former (personal communication).

Russia Interests

Russia shares with the US one primary interest: security in the Middle East, which at present centers on counter-terrorism/counter-ISIS (Belei, Braun, Lamoreaux), thereby diminishing the threat of its brand of Islamist extremism expanding into Russia and its neighbors (Tashev). To serve this security interest, Russia is motivated to build alliances in the region, especially with friendly states like Iran, Egypt and more recently Turkey; more broadly to also establish good bilateral relations with all states (Belei, Tashev).

Lamoreaux points out that Russia’s interest in counter-terrorism may not be completely straightforward. He posits that Putin may not particularly want radical Islamic terrorism to be completely eliminated because some level of threat assists him in maintaining legitimacy and influence in the old Soviet sphere of influence (the Caucasus region and increasingly in the “Stans” as well), as the threat of terrorism increases across Central Asia. Russia’s interest in controlling terrorism is served by its continued involvement in Syria. Consistent with this claim, Marten notes that Putin’s primary goals in Syria are to support the Assad regime and eliminate Assad’s competitors; a pivot to defeating ISIS will occur after these goals have been achieved.

Russia also has economic interests in the Middle East, including expanding economic ties with the region through arms sales, nuclear technology, and the oil and gas markets (Belei, Marten, Tashev), as well as supporting energy prices by coordination with principal oil and gas producers in the Persian Gulf (Tashev).

Russia’s secondary interests in the Middle East otherwise focus on countering US and Western influence. This includes efforts to weaken the EU and West more generally, as well as a destabilized Syria, which is believed will contribute to a destabilized EU by fracturing it along multiple fronts (Lamoreaux).⁵ Putin also has an ongoing interest in undermining or complicating US diplomatic leadership in the Middle East and elsewhere in order to enhance domestic and regional perceptions of his strength and US weakness (Marten). Similarly, Putin is likely to use diplomatic overtures to further complicate and harm the US relationship with countries in the Middle East (Marten). Each of these actions serves Russia’s goal to regain global stature and contest US presence in the region (Serwer). Toward this goal, Russia aims to reestablish its influence in Libya, Egypt, Turkey, and Iran by filling the gaps left by the US (Serwer); Russia establishing a military presence in the Middle East will be a likely consequence of this objective (Belei).

⁵ A strong EU contributes to a strong Europe, and helps to reduce the vulnerability of Eastern Europe (in particular) to Russian influence (Lamoreaux, personal communication). ⁵ The EU as an institution can more effectively deal with Russia than can individual member states; as the EU and Russia diverge on interests and issues, Russia is thus motivated to weaken the EU.

Prognosis for Reducing US/Russian tensions and Improving Regional Stability

Several contributors indicated that the prospects for US-Russia cooperation in the Middle East are relatively poor (Belei, Braun, Marten, Serwer, Tashev). Braun (personal communication) notes, “In certain key areas, the differences between Putinite Russia and the US are more than tactical or even strategic; they are fundamental and cannot be bridged.” Meredith asserts that, while global competition has been tempered somewhat by US and Russian desires to control escalation to the point of outright conflict, the mutual restraint in US-Russian relations characteristic of the Cold War has not yet fully re-emerged. “This absence of mutual restraint is in part because the Russian paradigm remains zero-sum at its core—which leads to divergent interests vis-à-vis Iran, Syria, and Turkey as core actors in either the Western or Russian sphere of influence” (Meredith, personal communication). Belei argues that contrasting US and Russian interests also lead to opposing activities in the region that are fundamentally at odds. For example, in Syria and Libya, Russia opposes factions that the US supports; whereas in Afghanistan, Russia bolsters Taliban fighters who target US forces (Belei, Marten). According to Braun and Marten, as long as Putin relies on external events for internal political legitimation, a true resolution of tensions between the US and Russia will be difficult to achieve. This is underscored by Russian investment and military operations in Syria, warming relations with Iran (Braun), and intensification of relations, including with non-state actors, in the region (Tashev). Overall, Marten argues, Putin does not have much incentive to cooperate with the US in regards to defeating ISIS, unless he can portray the West as having capitulated to him and/or the US publicly acknowledges Russia’s leadership in resolving the conflict.

A more optimistic view of the situation suggests that it is possible that the US and Russia can converge on an interest in regional stability⁶ (Meredith, Tashev) “in the short term—seeking to contain and eventually diminish levels of violence—while recognizing stable governance can become an area for democratic development, itself a stabilizing force over the long term” (Meredith, personal communication). Neither the US nor Russia is interested in a protracted war and thus the tension might also reach a stalemate that would force both countries to engage in a political agreement (Belei). Barring these situations, prolonged conflict—or in the worst-case scenario, direct confrontation—is possible (Belei, personal communication).

Recommendations

The contributors offer a wide range of recommendations for reducing tension between the US and Russia in the Middle East. These are focused primarily on Syria and Russia itself, and include:

Syria

- “Cool off in Syria,” and conclude this conflict as soon as possible. Doing so includes abandoning the policy of regime change in Syria, instead focusing on eroding ISIS-held territory and ensuring that the cities are functional security environments (Belei, Lamoreaux, Meredith)
- Allow Assad to remain in Syria but insist that he work with primary opposition groups and agree to some sort of amnesty for rebel fighters (Lamoreaux)
- Institute more general checks on Assad so that he does not eliminate the competition once talks are done. Ensure that Assad surrenders the majority of his arms with the stipulation that others (Russia, possibly Turkey) enforce the agreement under UN auspices (Lamoreaux)

Russia

- The US and EU should ease sanctions on Russia as these do not seem to be effective, and no one will intervene militarily on behalf of the Ukrainian government (Lamoreaux)

⁶ However, it should be acknowledged that the policies being used to attain this goal are different (e.g., in Syria) (Tashev, personal communication).

- US policy toward Russia in the Middle East should not be compartmentalized. Take into account that Russia's activities in the Middle East are tied to its moves elsewhere, as well as its military posture toward the US—all intended to restore Russia's great power status (Tashev)
- The US should not explicitly include talk of human rights and democracy in its policy discussions with Russia, as the latter views these goals as destabilizing (Tashev)
- Minimize the emphasis on the use of force to achieve US goals in the Middle East as this prompts Russia to engage in asymmetrical response (Tashev)

Subject Matter Expert Contributions

Bogdan Belej, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The geopolitical foundation of the Middle East is experiencing a paradigm shift. With the United States bogged down in two wars and Russia doubling down on its global activism, both countries are shifting their national interests to suit today's reality.

U.S. National Interests

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter established what came to be known as the Carter Doctrine by proclaiming, "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." At the time, the United States had vital interests in securing foreign oil producing states and ideological allies against communism, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. With the Cold War over and new domestic sources of energy in abundance, the United States' national interest in the Middle East is decreasing.

Three remaining national interests for the United States are: (1) maintaining reliable allies within the region (GCC, Israel, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt); (2) containing Iranian power; and (3) counter-terrorism. Both of the latter issues have allowed the United States to maintain close relationships with allies with similar threat perceptions. While Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC oppose the Iran deal, these states share our interests in preventing Iran's nuclear development, ballistic missile testing and support for terrorism. Similarly, these states have played an important role in providing intelligence and basing to U.S./Coalition counter-terrorism missions across the region. These interests are likely to remain as a source of cohesion for the United States and its regional partners.

Russian National Interests

With Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war in September 2015, the country has reemerged to place a check on two decades of American unilateralism in the Middle East. Emboldened by American retrenchment, President Vladimir Putin aims to force the United States to acknowledge Russia's regional objectives. By restoring Russia's image as a "great power", Moscow believes Russia can achieve their national interests despite fielding a weak hand. In the spirit of opportunism, Russia will increasingly build economic, diplomatic and military ties in the Middle East.

Russia's national interests in the Middle East can be described as such: (1) building alliances with friendly states in the region (Iran, Egypt, and Turkey); (2) establishing a military presence in the Middle East; (3) expanding economic ties through arms sales, nuclear technology, oil and gas markets; and (4) counter-terrorism. Unlike the United States, Russia does not have a military presence in the Middle East beyond its close relationship with Syria, limited transactional relationship with Iran and long-standing arms sales connections with countries such as Egypt and Algeria. As such, Russia has increased military cooperation or arms transfer agreements with Syria, Egypt, and Iran, while building inroads for increased cooperation with Libya and Yemen. Likewise, Russia is better suited for economic engagement with the Middle East. As Iran recuperates from the effects of sanctions, Russia is seeking to enter a lucrative market open to foreign investment.

Alleviating Tensions

The United States and Russia are fundamentally at odds with each other's national security policies and interests. Future prospects for cooperation in any sphere are dim. Despite the United States and Russia sharing interests in eliminating the threat of terrorism and nuclear security, their core disagreements have broken down even the most fundamental areas for cooperation. In Syria and Libya, Russia is sponsoring opposing factions to those receiving support from the United States. In Afghanistan, Russia is engaged in directly advising and supplying Taliban fighters targeting U.S. forces. With confidence and trust at unprecedented lows since the Ukraine crisis in 2014, there are few options for alleviating tension.

In Syria, the United States should abandon its current policy of regime change. Given Assad's consolidation of territory and Russia's military backing, it is highly unlikely that the United States has the will power or resources to apply the necessary force for regime change. Neither does the United States government currently provide a viable alternative for Syria's governance. The campaign in Syria should focus on eroding ISIS-held territory and supplanting these cities with functional security environments. Eventually, there may be a moment where the United States and Russia arrive at a stalemate, forcing both countries to engage in a political agreement.

In Iran, the United States and Russia should continue monitoring Tehran's compliance with the JCPOA nuclear agreement. In another good faith foreign policy decision, which would serve U.S. national interests, Washington should cease its involvement in Saudi Arabia's campaign against the Houthi rebels in Yemen. In the past two years, foreign support from Iran to the Houthis has increased and Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) has expanded its safe haven, recruitment and capabilities. Both developments threaten U.S. interests, yet the United States has actively contributed to state collapse and sectarianism in Yemen.

When it comes to Islamist terrorism, the U.S. and Russia clearly have overlapping interests in the Middle East and globally. Fighting ISIS and Al Qaeda and its offshoots would very much benefit from U.S.-Russian cooperation and the two states certainly could find common ground where their national interests converge. The Middle East however is about much more than fighting terrorism. And when it comes to the other areas, the interests of the U.S. and Russia are often not congruent.

...the internal motivations for American and Russian involvement in the Middle East also differ...That is, for the U.S. there is an ideological component that sees a connection between domestic the political order and foreign policy behavior—an allusion at least to democratic peace theory...Russia’s current involvement in the Middle East, however, represents a very narrow interpretation of national interests, driven as it is by the premise that equates the survival of the Putin government and its legitimation with the well-being of the entire state.

First, (except in the nuclear forces realm), there is an enormous asymmetry in power and responsibilities between the U.S. and Russia. America is the only true global superpower with an economy that may be as much as eight times the size of Russia’s. Washington’s interests therefore are part of a larger global strategy, within which the Middle East is a key component. Russia, by contrast, is a regional power much closer with Turkey across the Black Sea and Iran across the Caspian one but not strategically invested the way a global power would be in the larger Middle East.

Second, the internal motivations for American and Russian involvement in the Middle East also differ. The United States has some key alliance commitments such as with Turkey via its membership in NATO, but also due to its desire to try to promote democracy (often unsuccessfully). That is, for the U.S. there is an ideological component that sees a connection between domestic the political order and foreign policy behavior - an allusion at least to democratic peace theory. Though this inclination may be more restrained during a Trump presidency it is unlikely that the national interest will be so radically redefined that the domestic political order of other states will become entirely irrelevant.

Russia’s current involvement in the Middle East, however, represents a very narrow interpretation of national interests, driven as it is by the premise that equates the survival of the Putin government and its legitimation with the well-being of the entire state. In other words, the Putin government, which has failed to make Russia into a modern, advanced, industrialized state that can compete economically internationally, despite the enormous talent of its people and its vast natural resources, uses foreign policy successes, particularly in the Middle East as a pivotal means of generating political legitimacy at home. Unable to fulfill the tacit social contract which would produce a steady economic improvement for the people of Russia in exchange for political acquiescence to the regime, foreign adventures and diversions have thus become a central source for legitimation for the Putin presidency.

The hopes of the current administration in Washington to improve relations with Russia thus run up against structural problems in the sense that as America increases its defense expenditures, enhances its nuclear might and becomes a large exporter of energy it presents a threat to Russia, which vainly seeks a magical formula for modernization without democratization, continues to stagnate economically in light of its utter dependence on energy exports (given its uni-dimensional economy), and needs foreign policy “successes” as a primary source of political legitimation.

Whereas it may well be possible to smooth over some of the sharper edges of the differences between Russia and the U.S. in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world, as long as the Kremlin looks to external sources for internal political legitimation, it will be extraordinarily difficult to truly *resolve* tensions between Washington and Moscow, particularly in the Middle East. Further, as Russia is likely to become more heavily invested in Syria and more closely tied to the Iranian regime, the room for mitigating differences between the U.S. and Russia will likely shrink. The hopes of the current administration in Washington to improve relations with Russia thus run up against structural problems in the sense that as America increases its defense expenditures, enhances its nuclear might and becomes a large exporter of energy it presents a threat to Russia, which vainly seeks a magical formula for modernization without democratization, continues to stagnate economically in light of its utter dependence on energy exports, (given its uni-dimensional economy), and needs foreign policy “successes” as a primary source of political legitimation.

Beyond measures to “deconflict” in the Middle East and certain limited types of functional cooperation, the prospects for U.S.-Russian resolution of conflicting interests in the Middle East thus remain dim, as are the prospects for truly improved regional stability.

US interests in the Middle East

The US has two main interests in the Middle East. First, we want a calm, stable Israel. Second, we want a stable, successful Europe. With that in mind, the best way to achieve both is to have a stable calm Middle East. Though it's a sticky game we play, here's how we accomplish these three goals.

We need to continue lending nearly unconditional support to Israel. As long as Israel is strong enough to seriously threaten the rest of the Middle East, we'll have a bit of a détente: they won't attack Israel, Israel won't obliterate them. We don't actually benefit much from supporting Israel, but if we don't support Israel, we run the risk of allowing Israel to go ballistic on everyone else, which they could easily do. If push comes to shove, I suspect Israel would shoot first and ask questions later. If this is the case, the US will be pulled in, either to fight alongside Israel, or to clean up after Israel has demolished the Middle East.

I'm not convinced that we truly want to see democracy spread across the Middle East anymore (at least, not under the Trump administration). Rather, stability is the new goal. This involves supporting the government in Iraq, and trying to stabilize them enough so that they can address their own IS/insurgent problems. I believe the current administration would consider supporting a considerably-less-than-democratic regime if they could keep the Islamic State in check. As for Iran, as long as they hold to their nuclear agreements, I don't think the US will become more aggressive toward them. At least, not in practice (vocally, we may just continue to lambast them). It is in our interest to continue with Saudi Arabia as we have for the past few decades. Granted, they are making some headway as regards societal liberalization, but what we really want is stability and, at present, Saudi Arabia is stable. Same for Egypt: as long as the military has control, it's in our best interest to let them be. I'd go so far as to say it's in the US best interest to even cool off in Syria for the sake of stability. I believe the US military did the right thing blasting the chemical weapons to smithereens, but barring a recurrence, I believe the US ought to try to bring this conflict to a conclusion as soon as possible. If that means Assad is still in power, and that he agrees to some sort of domestic checks on his power, or some sort of other agreement so the rebels can receive amnesty, the US should agree to that. So, turning a partially blind eye to regimes that, though not at all democratic or human-rights observing, are creating stability within their own states, is probably in the US best interest. And, if they are not likely to attack Israel, into the bargain, all the better. In other words, it wouldn't hurt to support more regimes in the same way we support Saudi Arabia and (prior to 2011) Egypt, with the agreement that they tolerate Israel.

Turkey is a touchy situation. It is the only country in the Middle East that is a member of NATO. They're also increasingly unstable. The recent referendum gave Erdogan even more power, and the attempted coup a few months ago has raised domestic tensions. The Syrian situation means that Turkey is housing, or is a key transit route for hundreds of thousands of refugees, also raising tensions. Prior to the Syrian refugee crisis, Turkey's desire to join the EU could (to an extent) keep Turkey in check. As a member in NATO, the US could also wield a bit of influence in Turkey. Things, however, are changing. For the moment, Russia has an (apparently) positive relationship with Turkey. The EU is increasingly unappealing to Turkey and, keeping so many refugees from fleeing into Europe, Turkey has the EU over a bit of a barrel. They're also a significant player in Syria in keeping IS in check. What is the US interest vis-à-vis Turkey? It is in our best interest to continue to support Erdogan almost unconditionally. This is because if Erdogan decides to allow all of those refugees to go into Europe (or, to pull an Austria and simply shuttle them across the border) it risks destabilizing the EU in a massive way. And, while it's in the US best interest to have a stable Middle East, it's arguably even more important (if for no more than economic reasons) to have a stable EU. Turkey helps

provide a stable EU...ironically. So, frankly, a stable Middle East is important because it a) means we don't have to come to Israel's aid, or clean up after they're done, and b) it means a stable EU.

Russia Interests in the Middle East

A few things to bear in mind about Russia which help to understand their decision-making. First, Russia has a very strong and relatively enduring national identity. And, while they don't want to recognize it, part of that identity is as an underdog, a nation and state that has tried for nearly three centuries to gain respect from the "West", but to no avail. Despite being a great power as an empire, and as the Soviet Union, they feel like the West has never taken them seriously. It's sort of like the younger sibling that, regardless of what they do, will always be in the shadow of their older sibling. For example, Russia was a major factor in the defeat of the Nazi's during World War II, but in the West we don't really talk about it. We only talk about what we did.

This is reflected not only in their attitude toward the West, but in how they view what (they believe) belongs to them, especially as regards land and people. If land belonged to them at any time, it still should. If people are Russian, even mildly, they are still Russian and deserve the "protection" of the homeland, especially because, just as other great powers (especially the West) have always looked down on Russia, Russia believes that the other people will always look down on Russians. Russian's need protection from Russia. All of this is key to understanding Russian interests in the Middle East.

Russia's interests in the Middle East differ from ours on one hand, and coincide with our on the other (at least, on the surface). They differ in the sense that our end goals are a stable Israel and stable EU, while one of Russia's end goals is the destabilization of the EU and the West more generally. One of the very reasons they continue their involvement in the Middle East, and especially their un-bending support for Assad, is that they want a destabilized and chaotic Syria. They want people to continue to flee from Syria to Europe as it serves to destabilize the EU. So far, it's working. As nationalism increases across the West in response to the chaos in Syria and its subsequent results (terrorism, migration), and as Western leaders indicate that they're willing to engage Russia as "equals", Russia becomes the winner. They believe they'll be considered great powers along with the rest of the West.

Now, Russia's interests coincide with ours in the sense that we both want to stop terrorism. We both want to stop IS and to significantly cripple terrorism in general, especially radical Islamic terrorism. For that reason, they have a legitimate interest in staying involved in Syria. However, I'm not convinced that Russia actually wants to completely stop terrorism. I'll grant that they don't want it to increase, but if there is always some threat of radical Islamic terrorism, it lends Putin (and his cronies) the mirage of legitimacy in maintaining a strong central state. It also allows them to maintain influence in the Caucasus region and (as the threat of terrorism increases across Central Asia) in the "Stans".

So, Russia wants to destabilize the EU, and keeping Syria unstable suits that purpose very well. They also want to control (not stop) terrorism, and involvement in Syria helps achieve that goal as well.

Alleviating tensions/regional stability

The US wants a stable Middle East because of the chaos that could ensue because of Israel, and because it could seriously destabilize Europe.

First, the US and Russia should cooperate in Syria in allowing Assad to remain, but insisting that he comes to the table with the primary opposition groups and agrees to some sort of amnesty for rebel fighters. Also,

some checks on Assad so he can't just eliminate former opponents once the talks are done. These agreements should involve Assad surrendering the majority of his arms on the agreement that others (Russia, probably, but also perhaps Turkey) enforce the agreement under the auspices of the UN. However, if the Assad regime again turns to chemical weapons, or mass murder, and Russia and Turkey don't uphold the peace, the US should reserve the right to take protective strikes similar to those recently carried out on the chemical weapons base. Basically, give Russia and Turkey the chance to prove that they can maintain an acceptable peace, but be prepared to take action if that doesn't work.

Second, the US and the EU should ease sanctions on Russia. They're not working, and no one is actually going to intervene militarily on the side of the Ukrainian government. So, feel free to continue condemning Russian support of the LNR and DNR, and their support of a corrupt and brutal Assad regime, but drop the sanctions and get back to keeping your friends close, but keeping your enemies closer.

Third, and finally, they should continue to support both Turkey and Israel. Israel because it could seriously destabilize the Middle East, and Turkey because they can still wield considerable power in Syria and play a major part in keeping Europe stable.

Kimberly Marten, Barnard College, Columbia University

1. Russian “national interests” are not necessarily the same as President Vladimir Putin’s interests—and he puts his own interests first. We cannot understand Russia’s external policies today without understanding the role of Putin and his close circle in directing things. There simply is no debate in Russian media, political circles, or academic institutes about how to define the Russian national interest, and there is no check on Putin’s decisions. This matters because if Putin dies, all bets are off.
2. Putin’s aims and directions have changed over time, so his definition of the “national interest” today is not what it was when he first entered office in 2000. The change toward confrontation with the West began with his infamous Munich security speech in 2007, and has gone very quickly downhill since his return to the office of the presidency in 2012.
3. Putin’s original bargain with the Russian population was based on two things: he would provide stability and order (in contrast to Yeltsin’s “Wild East” criminal Russia of the 1990s), and he would give Russians the opportunity to make money and have a middle-class lifestyle, in exchange for his unquestioned authoritarian leadership. Part 1 of that bargain is still maintained: the country is orderly, and the security services largely control criminal activity and violence (as well as protests). But Part 2 of that bargain has frayed since the 2014 collapse of oil prices. Even as the Russian economy recovers somewhat, the poverty rate in Russia is relatively high (especially outside the big city centers), and the level of economic hope has not recovered to pre-2014 levels. This means that Putin has to find something else to give the population in return for their continuing support.
4. It has seemed for the past 5 years that Putin’s choice to maintain public support has increasingly been to turn to a form of ideology, blaming economic problems on Western sanctions (even though experts agree that the sanctions have explained at most 15-20% of the Russian economic downturn), and Russia’s other issues on internal enemies (including “undesirable organizations” and “foreign agents”) who are supported or directed by the West. Domestic protest is portrayed as Western-driven, and even terrorist attacks originating in the Russian North Caucasus have been implied to be Western-supported. Meanwhile, Putin also portrays the US and the West as weakened powers lashing out to try to maintain their position in the face of growing multipolarity and Russian assertiveness. This means that unless Putin can find something to replace ideology in his new bargain with the population, it is very unlikely that his regime will seek real cooperation with the West, including in Syria. For example, it has been striking how quickly the Russian regime turned from its initial support of the Trump presidency, to a more traditionally dismissive and even somewhat hostile approach.

It has seemed for the past 5 years that Putin’s choice to maintain public support has increasingly been to turn to a form of ideology, blaming economic problems on Western sanctions... and Russia’s other issues on internal enemies (including “undesirable organizations” and “foreign agents”) who are supported or directed by the West. ...Meanwhile, Putin also portrays the US and the West as weakened powers lashing out to try to maintain their position in the face of growing multipolarity and Russian assertiveness. This means that unless Putin can find something to replace ideology in his new bargain with the population, it is very unlikely that his regime will seek real cooperation with the West, including in Syria.

5. Even though a rational analyst might think that it would truly serve Russian interests to join with the West in defeating ISIS (and whatever follows it) in Syria, Putin doesn't have much incentive to take that direction—unless the West could be portrayed as capitulating to his wise and strong leadership in Syria.
6. Furthermore, Putin seems to have a paranoid fear of Western attempts at “regime change.” It is not clear how much this theme reflects Putin's real concerns (since he seems very much in control of Russia with no threat of regime change on his horizon)—versus how much it plays well to the Russian public, since every Russian representative can do the rant about Kosovo-Iraq-Libya-Egypt-Ukraine instability all being the fault of the US. And it's obviously one-sided, since Putin has had no apparent compunction about engaging in his own “regime change” efforts on the ground in Ukraine, or about interfering in the US, French, and other European elections.
7. Beyond this “regime change” theme, Putin has a domestic reason for continuing to be the patron of the Bashar Assad regime in Syria: he must demonstrate to his domestic political clients that he is loyal, and will not throw them under the bus. Putin cannot afford to be seen as wavering in his commitment to Assad, or everyone at home who matters to his regime will start doubting his commitment to them.
8. Meanwhile, Putin's own military goals in Syria seem to be to support the regime above all, to get rid of the strongest opposition to Assad (namely the various rebel factions) first, and then turn to ISIS after Assad's continuing power is assured. He is happy to have the US take on ISIS as long as that doesn't get in the way of his primary goals.
9. Indeed it remains unclear how strong the Russian armed forces really are, beyond the small-scale cream-of-the-crop deployment of special operations forces, airstrikes, and (potentially) air defense systems. Putin does not have an incentive to make a large-scale deployment for a regular ground war, given the problems of the Russian economy and continuing concerns about the quality of the Russian army regular forces.
10. Putting this altogether in Syria: the only way with current oil prices that we could foreseeably see a truly cooperative outcome between the US and Russia in Syria is if the US publicly recognized Russia's outstanding leadership role in solving the conflict, with Assad at the helm. I personally hope we do not do this, both because Assad is a horrendous murderer of his own population, and because to do so would be to give Putin license to do the same thing elsewhere, including in Libya and perhaps even Afghanistan.
11. If oil prices once again rise to incredible heights, Putin could consider cooperating with the West without sacrificing his domestic standing, because he would take credit for stabilizing the Russian economy and could then turn magnanimously toward stabilizing Russia's relationship with the outside world.

12. Meanwhile, as long as the Russian military is engaged in what amount to two small conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, I do not think Putin has an incentive to get directly military involved elsewhere in the Middle East. However, he does have continuing strong incentives to increase arms sales in the region, and perhaps to insert Russia as a diplomatic player to be reckoned with.
13. On arms sales: these benefit the Russian economy, Russian export earnings, and the Russian state budget at a time of weakness; they also benefit Putin's personal network. He has inserted his friends from the KGB/FSB to leadership positions in Russian defense industry, where they can control contract decisions (and hence have the opportunity to take a little off the top of each contract for themselves). Putin seems to be sacrificing long-term strategy here for short-term gains. For example, there is a history of China stealing Russian weapons technology and intellectual property from its Russian arms imports. Yet Putin is selling very advanced weaponry to China (including the S-400 missile defense system and Su-35 fighter aircraft) in spite of having good reasons to distrust Chinese use of these imports to replace and even compete against Russian arms sales in the future.
14. Putin has a continuing interest in undermining or complicating US or other Western diplomatic leadership efforts in the Middle East, and anywhere else he can do so, simply in order to make himself look stronger and the US weaker (i.e., to make the world seem more "multipolar").
15. Putting this all together: it is unlikely that given the continuing problems with the Russian economy, and continuing unknowns about the deep real quality of the Russian armed forces, that Putin will have an interest in direct military intervention elsewhere in the Middle East as long as he remains engaged in Syria. But it is very likely that he will try to sell arms wherever he can, without concern about blowback. It is also likely that he will use diplomatic overtures (which can include, for example, military training or other forms of small-scale assistance) to complicate and harm the US relationship with these countries wherever possible.
16. In Afghanistan, a rational observer might think that Russia would have an interest in a strong and stable regime with effective security forces. But Putin does not have that interest; he instead has an interest in undermining US diplomatic successes and selling arms where he can (including, apparently, to the Taliban). He also has old Soviet clients like Dostum to work with; helping those clients helps his reputation at home for loyalty, and probably makes his friends in the KGB/FSB happy because their skills and knowledge are needed.
17. In sum: Putin is an untrustworthy KGB officer who puts the domestic standing of his regime and personal cronies above all else, and will do anything to maintain his personal power and wealth, even if Russia's long-term interests are sacrificed as a result. Unless global oil prices recover their previous heights, it is very unlikely that cooperating with the West in Syria or elsewhere in the Middle East is in Putin's personal interests, given his turn to anti-Western ideology at home, unless the West gives him center stage and supports "his" victories there.

Spencer B. Meredith III, National Defense University

Global competition binds the US and Russia together with shared responsibilities to prevent uncontrolled escalation, whether in Syria's current "war of all against all" or in the Mediterranean with the potential for increasing Russian naval presence. However, that Cold War-esque mutual recognition (and resulting restraint) has not yet fully re-emerged in US-Russian relations, partly because the strategic positions and battlefields are still being identified and defined, and Russia maintains a zero-sum paradigm of conflict with the US; this affects how Russia courts and seeks to isolate Iran, Syria, and Turkey from Western spheres of influence. The resulting opportunistic "poking" / seam-exploiting / asymmetric approaches pursued by Russia have been met in the past decade with reactionary, responsive US policies and actions. In their place, the US can regain the strategic initiative vis-à-vis Russia by presenting an alternative narrative for the Middle East.

Russia's current message is one of stability, and itself as the protector of order and preventer of US-led chaos. The narrative has ample evidence from US actions over the past two decades. In addition, recent US missile strikes in Syria fed into that narrative as Russian actions to date have the support of the still-legally recognized (and therefore apparently "legitimate") Syrian government. The US has no such imprimatur other than more indirect "human rights, maintenance of international prohibitions, etc.", but the key is that US unilateral strikes did so contrary to the established international procedures for such actions by, with, and through the UN Security Council. Thus, regardless of how false the Russian message is, the "truth" of it lies in the inherent potential to manipulate international norms for state interests. The US has massaged those norms to fit its message at times in the past as well, in part because the legal terminology has fundamental paradoxes – the sovereignty of borders and the responsibility to violate them for human rights reasons.

Therefore, instead of trading counter narratives and tit-for-tat mudslinging, the US must identify core interests in the region. This should first center on picking a side in the "stability vs. democratization" conundrum, because they are mutually exclusive. Building democracy (democratization as opposed to democracy) is a very challenging and disruptive process, hence so many quasi and pseudo democracies today. Democracies can become stable in terms of the rules of the game and policy orientations, but that stability has also been temporary as the enduring democratic orders of today show in their histories.

To "square the circle" then, the overlap between the US and Russia can hinge on the short-term goal of stability and reducing the level of violence, while also pushing the "democracy football" down the field through the use of alternative narratives, a strategy that recognizes the long-term stabilizing effects of democracy. That alternative relies on clear evidence that established democratic countries are more prosperous, stable, and better neighbors than rival systems. Living in them yields higher life expectancies, more sustainable employment, and greater opportunities for personal and communal development. These are good goals for US partner nations and should include assistance to develop competitive, reliable markets for regional and global trade; employment growth to absorb and redirect fighting age males who would otherwise not join violent organizations; and broader tax bases for partner nations to establish capable government services and develop more legitimate social contracts. However, those are not one-and-done features; they are part of a process that takes time to emerge, time to adapt, and time to preserve. With such a pragmatic approach, the "city on a hill" can be an effective model to use against Russia's vision and message to the region, as it has been in other contested areas in the past.

Daniel Serwer, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

Russia is trying to restore its position in the Middle East, from which it has been largely absent since 1990 or even earlier, and to contest American influence there. It has doubled and quadrupled its bet on Bashar al Assad, whom it will now support until the day before he is gone. I don't see room for mutual accommodation between Moscow and Washington in Syria, much as I might have hoped that their common enmity to the Islamic State would bring them closer together. That just hasn't happened, and things will get worse after the defeat of the Islamic State.

The situation isn't much better in Libya, Egypt, Turkey, or Iran. In all those countries, Moscow is trying to fill gaps left by the U.S. and reestablish its influence. Putin is playing what he regards as a zero-sum game and will neglect no opportunity to counter the U.S. How long his declining oil and gas based economy will support this aggressive foreign policy is uncertain, but domestic resistance has not yet emerged to any significant degree.

Blago Tashev, Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, Marine Corps University

U.S. and Russian interests in the Middle East can be found in both countries' official documents and in statements by policy-makers.

U.S. national interests in the Middle East include: maintain peace and stability in the region; support democracy and human rights; dismantle terrorist networks threatening the U.S. and its allies; ensure the free flow of energy from the region to the world; prevent the development, proliferation, or use of weapons of mass destruction.

Russia's national interests in the Middle East include: maintain Russia's role in the affairs of the region; contain and diminish Islamist extremism that might expand into Russia and its neighborhood; maintain lasting alliances in the region and good bilateral relations with all states; expand Russia's presence in the regional market, including arms trade; attract investments into Russia; support energy prices by coordination with principal oil and gas producers in the Persian Gulf.

In Russia's strategic outlook, although an important region, the Middle East ranks behind the United States, Europe, and Asia. In the early 1990s Russia withdrew from the Middle East and ceased to be a significant factor in the region's affairs. This withdrawal was consistent with Russia's diminishing role in other parts of the world, including in its own neighborhood. As a result, Russia lost its status as a world power. By the early 2000s, Russia enjoyed a growing economy and political stability which translated into a growing confidence when looking abroad. Russia gradually began to increase its political, economic, and military engagements abroad. Thus, the recent Russian foray into the Middle East must be seen in the context of Kremlin's desire to regain a world-power status. In other words, Moscow's move is geopolitical. It is part of a long-term strategy of creating a multipolar world.

Unlike the Soviet Union's policy in the Middle East, the current Russian move must not be seen as ultimately seeking to dislodge American presence in the region. While Soviet leaders saw Soviet-American interaction in the Middle East as a zero-sum game, a part of the global confrontation between the two super-powers, the current interaction is seen by Moscow as a non-ideological, balance of power relationship which Russia hopes to turn into one that makes Moscow a co-equal partner of Washington in the region and gives Russia an equal say in the affairs of the region. If anything, Russia sees the U.S. as an ideological power trying to spread democracy and human rights, and in the process undermining the stability of the region and fostering extremist networks that threaten Russian interests and security. Instead, Russia sees itself as balancing American presence and bringing stability to the region.

Russia's non-ideological policy in the Middle East is not without risks for confrontation with the United States, however. If Russia calculates that regaining its status as a significant player in the region requires a confrontation with the U.S. over certain issues, there is a risk of worsening of the entire U.S.-Russian relationship which in turn might affect stability in the region. Russia is already intensifying relations with numerous countries in the region, including Syria, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, the Palestinian Authority, North African states and others, and thus increases the range of possible friction points with the United States. In addition, Russia is cultivating ties with non-state actors, including Hamas, Hezbollah, Kurdish factions, warlords in Libya, and others, some of whom are considered by the U.S. to be involved in terrorism. It must also be pointed out that Russia is increasingly using soft power as means to gain influence in the region including through political and social contacts, tourism, education, etc. For example, in 2015, nearly 70 percent of foreign tourists visiting Egypt came from Russia.

Recommendations for alleviating U.S. / Russian tensions to mutual satisfaction and improved stability

Sorting out U.S. – Russia relations in the Middle East is an issue that can be addressed only after the new U.S. administration prioritizes its interests in the region and the strategy to achieve them in the context of its global foreign policy. Only after the interests and the strategy are defined can the U.S. craft a strategy toward Russia in the region. This is important because there is a difference between an American strategy that accepts Russian presence in the region versus a strategy that seeks to squeeze out Russia from the region. These two very different strategies require two very different sets of American policies.

Only after the interests and the strategy are defined can the U.S. craft a strategy toward Russia in the region. This is important because there is a difference between an American strategy that accepts Russian presence in the region versus a strategy that seeks to squeeze out Russia from the region. These two very different strategies require two very different sets of American policies.

Russian involvement in the Middle East must be seen as part of Moscow's attempt to restore the country's great power status. It should not be taken in isolation from Russia's moves elsewhere, including in Europe, Ukraine, the Trans-Caucasus, Asia, Latin America, and its military posture versus the U.S. In other words, U.S. policy toward Russia in the Middle East should not be compartmentalized.

It is logical to expect that Russia's involvement in the Middle East will continue to expand in line with Moscow's quest to regain great power status. In order to gain leverage over Moscow's policy in the region, the U.S. needs to develop more comprehensive policies toward countries and areas in the region that are the most likely subjects of Moscow's future attention. In other words, the U.S. needs to be proactive, instead of responding to Moscow's moves in the region.

Forays abroad overextend Russia's resources and commitments and thus create vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities can be exploited by the U.S. and can be used to compel Russia to accept American policies in the region.

Without abandoning the commitment to supporting democracy and human rights in the region, the U.S. should not include them in policy discussions with Russia. The promotion of human rights and democracy (not only in the Middle East) are seen by Russia as promoting instability.

Without abandoning the utility of military force, rhetoric about America's Middle East policy must place less emphasis on the use of force to achieve goals as it prompts Russia to seek asymmetrical responses to counter American policies in the region, which Moscow sees as overly militarized.

It can be argued that both the U.S. and Russia seek to create stability in the Middle East (although by using very different policies; for example, in Syria). Therefore, there can possibly be room for compromise if the two states truly want to create stability in the region. For example, both the U.S. and Russia are committed to the policy of countering the proliferation and use of weapons of mass destruction (although one should always question how strong Russia's commitment is). The U.S. and Russia already have the precedent of working together toward curtailing Iran's nuclear weapons program. Similar cooperation can be attempted in other parts of the Middle East, including in Syria. Both states also see ISIS and other terrorist organizations as a threat to their security. Defeating these organizations and curtailing their appeal is yet another possible area of cooperation between the two states.

BIOGRAPHIES

Bogdan Belei



Bogdan Belei is a James C. Gaither Junior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His research focuses on political, economic, and security trends in Russia and former Soviet states, as well as U.S. policy toward the region. More broadly, his research interests include national security and defense strategy, with a focus on strengthening and modernizing the U.S. national security toolkit. Prior to joining Carnegie, Belei worked at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) and the Council on Foreign Relations. He graduated with high honors from the University of Michigan with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and History.

Aurel Braun

Aurel Braun is currently a Professor of International Relations and Political Science, and Fellow of Trinity College at the University of Toronto. He is also an Associate of the Davis Center at Harvard. Between July 2012 and June 2015 he was a Visiting Professor teaching in the Department of Government, Harvard University. Professor Braun has twice been appointed a Visiting Scholar at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. In March 2009, the Federal Cabinet via a Governor-in-Council appointment made Professor Braun the Chairman of the Board of Directors of the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development for a three-year term.



In 2012, Professor Braun was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal for services to Canada and for academic distinction by the Governor-General of Canada. Professor Braun has published extensively on international relations and strategic studies and is a specialist in international law. He is the author and/or editor of several books. His latest book is *NATO-Russia Relations in the 21st Century*. His forthcoming book is on *Russia, the West and Arctic Security*.

Jeremy Lamoreaux



Jeremy W. Lamoreaux is an associate professor of Political Science and International Studies at Brigham Young University – Idaho. He completed his PhD at the University of Aberdeen, MA from the University of Reading, and his BA from Brigham Young University. His research interest include traditional and non-traditional security, foreign policy analysis, international organizations (NATO and the EU), and relations between Russia and the Euro-Atlantic community. His research is published in *European Security*, *European Politics and Society*, the *Journal of Baltic Studies*, *Geopolitics*, and with *Routledge* and *Rodopi*.

Kimberly Marten

Kimberly Marten is the Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Political Science at Barnard College, Columbia University, and the Director of the Program on U.S.-Russia Relations at Columbia's Harriman Institute. In March 2017 the Council on Foreign Relations published her special report, *Reducing Tensions between Russia and NATO*. She has written four books, most recently *Warlords: Strong-Arm Brokers in Weak States* (Cornell, 2012). Her first book, *Engaging the Enemy: Organization Theory and Soviet Military Innovation!* (Princeton, 1993) won the Marshall Shulman Prize.



She has written academic articles for the *Armed Forces and Society*, *International Peacekeeping*, *International Security*, the *Journal of Intervention and State-Building*, the *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, and *Problems of Post-Communism*, and her policy articles have appeared in *Fortune*, *The Washington Quarterly*, *ForeignAffairs.com*, the *Washington Post's* Monkey Cage blog, and the *Huffington Post*, among others. She is a frequent media commentator, and appeared on "The Daily Show" with Jon Stewart. She earned her undergraduate degree at Harvard and Ph.D. at Stanford. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Spencer B. Meredith III



Dr. Spencer B. Meredith III, PhD is an Associate Professor of National Security Strategy in the Joint Special Operations Master of Arts (JSOMA) program for the College of International Security Affairs (CISA) at the National Defense University (NDU). After completing his doctorate in Government and Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia in 2003, he served as a Fulbright Scholar in the Caucasus in 2007 working on democratic development and conflict resolution, and has focused on related issues in Eastern Europe for several years. He has also served as a subject matter expert for US Department of State public diplomacy programs in South and East Asia dealing with the role of religion and democracy in US foreign policy.

Dr. Meredith has areas of expertise that address "4+1" challenges in the Gray Zone through the frameworks of democratization and conflict resolution. His regional focus has been on Russian, Eastern European and Middle Eastern politics. Accordingly, he has supported US Special Operations Command projects on countering Russian influence operations in Ukraine and the Baltics, US Central Command programs analyzing and supporting effective governance in Iraq and Syria, and other US Army Special Operations efforts in analyzing narratives, deterrence, and a range of violent and non-violent conflicts. He has also worked with partner nations to establish effective governance in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East.

Dr. Meredith's publications include his first book on democratic development and international nuclear safety agreements (*Nuclear Energy and International Cooperation: Closing the World's Most Dangerous*

Reactors), as well as articles in scholarly journals ranging from *Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, *Peace and Conflict Studies*, to *Central European Political Science Review*. He has also published in professional journals related to unconventional warfare and the future operating environment, with articles in *Small Wars Journal*, *Inter-Agency Journal*, *Special Warfare*, *Foreign Policy Journal*, and the peer-reviewed *Special Operations Journal*.

Daniel Serwer

Daniel Serwer is a Professor of the Practice of Conflict Management, director of the Conflict Management Program and a Senior Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Also a scholar at the Middle East Institute, Daniel Serwer is the author of *Righting the Balance* (Potomac Books, November 2013), editor (with David Smock) of *Facilitating Dialogue* (USIP, 2012) and supervised preparation of *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction* (USIP, 2009). *Righting the Balance* focuses on how to strengthen the civilian instruments of American foreign policy to match its strong military arm. *Facilitating Dialogue* analyzes specific cases and best practices in getting people to talk to each other in conflict zones. *Guiding Principles* is the leading compilation of best practices for civilians and military in post-war state-building.



As vice president of the Centers of Innovation at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Serwer led teams working on rule of law, peacebuilding, religion, economics, media, technology, security sector governance and gender. He was also vice president for peace and stability operations at USIP, overseeing its peacebuilding work in Afghanistan, the Balkans, Iraq and Sudan and serving as executive director of the Hamilton/Baker Iraq Study Group. As a minister-counselor at the U.S. Department of State, Serwer directed the European office of intelligence and research and served as U.S. special envoy and coordinator for the Bosnian Federation, mediating between Croats and Muslims and negotiating the first agreement reached at the Dayton Peace Talks; from 1990 to 1993, he was deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Rome, leading a major diplomatic mission through the end of the Cold War and the first Gulf War. Serwer is a graduate of Haverford College and earned Masters degrees at the University of Chicago and Princeton, where he also did his PhD in history.

Blago Tashev

Blago Tashev is a EUCOM researcher in CAOCL's Regional, Culture, and Language Familiarization (RCLF) program. He has also supported the work of CAOCL's Translational Research Group and the EURASIA desk. He is responsible for RCLF curricula for the Balkans, Trans-Caucasus, and Central Asia. He has worked on methods of studying foreign military cultures and the operationalization of strategic culture for the purposes of the Marine Corps. He has researched and published in the areas of: Euro-Atlantic relations, Eastern Europe, security sector reform, Black Sea security issues, military culture, democratization, and international security. He has Ph.D. and M.A. in International Studies and M.A. in Turkic Studies.

Sabrina Pagano



Dr. Sabrina Pagano is an experienced project leader and principal investigator, with 15 years of experience leading teams and projects both in academia and industry. She earned her Ph.D. in Social Psychology (minor in Statistics) from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a dual BA with highest honors in Psychology and Political Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She has led and been an active contributor to work in both the government and commercial domains. Though supporting a wide variety of projects and proposals, her work at NSI has focused in four main areas, including providing support to DoD's Strategic Multilayer Analysis (SMA) projects, including rapid applied analysis for CENTCOM; serving as the Principal Investigator and Project Manager for a multi-year contract investigating progress in conflict environments; providing project oversight as the project manager for two AAA titles at a top gaming company, and as one of two developers of a corporate offering focused on enhancing dignity in interactions with customers and employees.

Prior to NSI, she served as the Director (Acting) of a growing behavioral sciences program, as well as a Faculty Fellow Researcher and Lecturer at UCLA. Dr. Pagano's work has spanned a wide variety of topics, with particular depth in intergroup relations, injustice, basic and moral emotions (e.g., empathy, moral outrage), and prosocial/antisocial behavior. She maintains an active knowledge base in the broad field of social psychology, and knowledge that spans multiple fields given over a decade of experience and leadership specifically on multidisciplinary projects.