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Russia's Counterproductive Counter-Terrorism

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Congressman Hudson and Members of the Helsinki Commission, thank you for this opportunity to testify before you today on Russia's approach to counterterrorism (CT) and its implications for U.S. national security.

Every so often, politicians or pundits suggest that the United States cooperate more actively with Russia to fight terrorism. These advocates typically argue that regardless of our various disagreements, we should work together to address a critical threat affecting both our countries. This is also a common refrain of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has suggested that the United States and Russia set aside their differences over Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, and other matters, and get down to the business of fighting terrorism together.

However fine this may sound in the abstract, cooperation with Russia to fight terrorism would run contrary to both our values and national security interests. Russia's chief geopolitical objectives are to weaken the United States, fragment the transatlantic community, and delegitimize international norms of human rights and democracy.

To accomplish these aims, Russia has supported neo-Nazi hate groups to sow discord in European societies. It has spread fake conspiracy theories to radicalize Americans against their immigrant neighbors and coworkers. In Syria, it has partnered with Iran and Hezbollah to eliminate all elements of the population who actively oppose the Asad regime. In Ukraine, it provided the missiles, the launcher, the software, the training, and likely the triggerman to shoot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, killing all 298 people onboard. And in the United Kingdom, Russian intelligence officers brazenly tried to poison a former Russian spy using a large dose of a deadly chemical toxin.

Simply put, Russia's actions to undermine the United States and its allies, and its direct sponsorship and cooperation with groups that conduct terror should preclude all efforts at counterterrorism cooperation. No one would suggest the United States partner with Hezbollah or Iran to fight terrorism, and so there is no reason we should do so with Russia.

The Kremlin's Counterterrorism Strategy

Russia's counterterrorism strategy is based almost entirely on the physical liquidation of extremists. This approach does not concern itself with winning hearts and minds, de-radicalization, or social integration. During the Chechen wars in the 1990s, the Russian military applied a scorched earth campaign that laid waste to entire villages that were suspected of fostering the anti-Russian insurgency. Russian military forces were notorious for carrying out abductions, summary executions, and torture. Both then and now, Russian security forces in the North Caucasus republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria apply the principle of collective retribution, often imprisoning, threatening, and sometimes even killing relatives of suspected militants. These tactics are not just morally reprehensible, they also perpetuate a long-term cycle of extremist radicalization.

Russian-led counterterrorism operations also pay little regard to civilian or "collateral" casualties. In 2002, when Russian security services stormed the Dubrovka theater in Moscow, more than 130 civilians died from the fentanyl gas used to subdue the hostage-takers. In 2004, during a raid to free hostages being held at a primary school in Beslan, North Ossetia, at least 385 (and possibly more) civilians, mostly children, were killed in a firefight with the hostage takers.

Perhaps even more troublingly, Russian authorities have used the pretext of fighting extremism to crack down on Russia's political opposition and dissidents. Extremism is so broadly defined under Russia's current legal regime that an investigative journalist who exposed official embezzlement and a 46-year-old single mother who posted information critical of Russia's annexation of Crimea were both charged and sentenced for "extremism." Under the so-called Yarovaya law, "mass unrest" – a euphemism for anti-government protests – is also criminalized under the pretext of counterterrorism.

Russia's Terrorist Activities in Ukraine

In Ukraine, Russia has directly armed and trained proxies that perpetrate terrorism on a wide scale. In January 2017 Ukraine filed a suit with the International Court of Justice accusing Russia of violating the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism because of the Kremlin's financing of terrorist activities in eastern Ukraine. Even outside the regions occupied by Russia, Russian security services regularly carry out targeted assassinations and sabotage operations designed to spread terror. On April 17 of this year, the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) announced it had arrested seven individuals who were part of "a sabotage and reconnaissance terrorist group of the Russian special services." According to the SBU, Russia's intelligence services have also carried out a number of car bombings in government-controlled territory in an attempt to kill Ukrainian military officers, including one car bombing that took place in downtown Kyiv. Moreover, the SBU has accused Russia of orchestrating bombings of cafes and public venues in Odessa, Kharkiv, and Kherson as part of a series of false-flag operations.

Russia's Radicalizing Presence in Syria

Although President Putin's stated goal in Syria was to fight ISIS, Russia's actions on the ground have belied this. In close military coordination with Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Force, Russia has sought to eliminate any form of opposition to the Assad regime, whether radical or moderate, armed or civilian.

As a DOD official, I participated in direct negotiations in Geneva with senior Russian military and intelligence officials in 2016 to try to agree on a modality for delivering humanitarian aid into the besieged city of Aleppo. What was striking about these discussions was that the Russian officials were acutely aware that their bombing campaign was driving moderate opposition fighters to join extremist groups like Al Nusrah. But in spite of this, Russia reneged on the agreement to deliver humanitarian aid to Aleppo and continued its bombing campaign until the city was reduced to rubble. Russia was not ignorant of the consequences; it simply had other priorities.

The Idlib region of Syria is now set to become the next Aleppo, and we should be under no illusion that Russia will deter the Asad regime from decimating Idlib's civilian population the same way it did in Aleppo. If the Trump administration thinks it can partner with Russia to stop such atrocities, it should study closely the agreement President Trump and President Putin announced at the G20 summit in Hamburg to create "safe zones" in southern Syria. Rather than preventing opposition groups from being targeted by the regime, this agreement – predictably – allowed Iran to expand its influence in southern Syria and concentrated Syrian opposition groups farther north, in Idlib, so that they could more easily be crushed at a time of Asad's and the Kremlin's choosing.

Russia's Support for the Taliban in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, Russia has provided arms to the Taliban to undermine U.S. interests and as a hedge in case the Taliban comes back to power. This should give every American pause about the logic of cooperating with Russia on counterterrorism since Russia's weapons and night-vision equipment enable the Taliban and its extremist allies to directly target U.S. and NATO servicemembers on the ground. Russia often supplies these weapons covertly when conducting large-scale counterterrorism exercises in Tajikistan near the Afghan border by later smuggling some of the left-behind supplies into Afghanistan. Because Russia bypasses OSCE Vienna Document notification requirements, Western observers have very little transparency about these exercises and the means by which these weapons flow into Afghanistan.

Russia's Incitement of Hatred in the West

Russia's information war against the United States and our European partners and allies should be seen as an attempt to radicalize Western societies and incite hatred. In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the Kremlin sought to inflame racial tensions, deepen social divides, and set Americans against each other by spreading inflammatory rhetoric and lies. In Hungary, Russia's intelligence services were

caught providing weapons training and support for a neo-Nazi hate group. In Sweden, allegedly independent Russian “patriotic” organizations provided weapons training for members of a far-right group who later bombed a refugee center in Gothenburg in January 2017. Such “patriotic” groups are also used to recruit foreigners, especially neo-Nazi sympathizers, to fight on Russia’s behalf in eastern Ukraine.

Russia has taken a particular interest in spreading propaganda to incite hatred against Muslim immigrants. Russian government officials, propagated the fake story that a Russian-German girl was raped by Muslim immigrants in Germany to stoke discord and foment opposition to German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s migration policies. In the United States, Russia trolls and social media accounts have similarly tried to fan the flames of anti-Muslim xenophobia. For example, the Russian-made “Heart of Texas” Facebook page stoked anti-Muslim feelings in Texas, while the fake “SecuredBorders” site spread false allegations of rape to incite anti-Muslim hatred in Idaho. Both accounts were created by Russia’s Internet Research Agency, which is financed by one of President Putin’s cronies. Russia’s intelligence services were also discovered to be behind the “CyberCaliphate” group, which hacked into France’s TV5 television network in 2015 as part of a false-flag operation to incite hatred against Muslims while simultaneously testing French cybersecurity measures.

Past Efforts at Counterterrorism Cooperation with Russia

It is worth noting that the United States has tried in the past to cooperate with Russia on counterterrorism with little to show for it. During the first term of the Obama administration, the U.S. and Russia established a Bilateral Presidential Commission that included a Counterterrorism Working Group, among various others. The agenda for the working group included law enforcement cooperation, transportation security, intelligence sharing, terrorism finance, collaboration on counterterrorism technology, and coordination of U.S. and Russian positions within multilateral fora, such as the UN and the OSCE. This effort failed to institutionalize any enduring law enforcement cooperation, intelligence sharing, or joint action on countering terrorist finance. As the U.S. coordinator of the Working

Group, Daniel Benjamin, noted in an op-ed, “Russia’s...general lack of interest (especially with issues like deradicalization) made progress impossible.”

The terrorist bombing at Moscow’s Domodedovo airport in January 2011 did spur the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the U.S. Transportation Security Administration and Russia’s Ministry of Transportation on security of civil aviation in May 2011. That same month, the United States also formally designated the Caucasus Emirate – the primary extremist group in Russia at the time – as a terrorist organization and included its leader, Doku Umarov, in the FBI’s Rewards for Justice program. Though viewed positively by the Russian government, these moves were not reciprocated.

The April 2013 Boston marathon bombing did result in information sharing and visits by FBI agents to Russia. However, the quality of the information shared was poor. Prior to the bombing, Russian law enforcement authorities had informed U.S. counterparts that the suspected bomber, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, and his mother held extremist views, but the information was too general for the FBI to take action. When the FBI’s Legal Attaché in Moscow followed up with a request for more information, the Russian government did not respond. After the bombing, however, Russia did grant access to U.S. law enforcement authorities to conduct interviews and gather additional information in Chechnya.

The 2014 Sochi Olympics provided another opportunity for counterterrorism cooperation that yielded very little in terms of substance. In the fall of 2012, I traveled to Sochi as a State Department official at the invitation of the Russian government with a group of diplomatic, security, and intelligence officials from a select group of countries as part of an effort to review Russia’s security arrangements for the Games. Upon arriving, however, we discovered that our chief interlocutor was not a counterterrorism expert but rather a counter-intelligence official, bluntly demonstrating Moscow’s chief priority lay in collecting intelligence on foreigners rather than sharing information on terrorist threats.

More ominously, the Sochi Olympics also served as an excuse for Russian authorities to facilitate the movement of extremists from the Russian Federation to Syria. Following the December 2013 Volgograd suicide bombing, which killed 32

civilians just a few months before the Sochi Opening Ceremonies, Russia facilitated the movement of hundreds of suspect extremists out of the country, likely with the knowledge they were going to Syria to fight together with ISIS.

Conclusion

To conclude, there are no compelling grounds in my view for pursuing proactive counterterrorism cooperation with Russia. Russia's intelligence services have perpetrated acts of terrorism in Ukraine and the United Kingdom; Russia has partnered with Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards to target civilian populations in Syria; and Russia's counterterrorism operations at home have shown an utter disregard for basic human rights. But most importantly, we should not be partnering with Russia because the Kremlin sees the United States as its chief geopolitical foe and seeks to undermine our interests whenever an opportunity affords itself. Although I support providing Russia with actionable intelligence to prevent terrorist incidents affecting Russian citizens, we should never fool ourselves into thinking the Kremlin will have our best interests in mind.