

PREFACE

This special issue of the IMEMO's journal "Pathways to Peace and Security" (№ 1(52), May 2017) is an academic effort, involving nine Russian and eight U.S. researchers, to explore the substance, underlying drivers, dynamics, implications and ways to address, prevent and counter terrorism, violent extremism and radicalization. These issues are explored with a focus on the United States and Russia (where appropriate, in comparative context), with special attention to the overall level and types of threat that the two countries face at home, national antiterrorism strategies and ways to counter (violent) extremism and radicalization, and to antiterrorism aspects of the armed conflicts and conflict management in Syria (and the broader Middle East) and in Afghanistan (and the broader region).

In short, this collection of essays is an academic take on the specifics of addressing terrorism and violent extremism in the U.S.-Russia context (the term "context" is preferred over the term "relations", as our analysis goes beyond direct interaction to include a comparative angle, parallels, lessons learned etc.). While this is not a think tank or Track II take on the U.S.-Russia relations, lessons from and problems and prospects of the U.S.-Russia cooperation on antiterrorism are also analyzed. In this, as academics, we actually have the advantage or even the luxury of not becoming hostage to the present stage of bilateral relations and not being overtaken or overly distracted by the political imperatives of the day.

Major deterioration of the Russia-U.S. relations since 2014 resulted from sharp disagreements on policy and security matters *other than terrorism*, but it has severely constrained cooperation on countering terrorism. Most bilateral institutionalized mechanisms for such cooperation were cancelled or suspended, much as cooperation in the Russia-West multilateral security formats. Even dialogue on the more practical problem-solving has been difficult and on-and-off. For instance, two critical areas of major armed conflict that are also the world's main hotbeds of terrorism – Syria (Syria/Iraq) and Afghanistan – maybe of high concern to both Russia and the United States on counterterrorism grounds (in the first case, both are even engaged militarily), but that is easily superseded by major policy disagreements. It is also impossible to address these conflicts on counterterrorism grounds alone, as the latter overlaps with and, to a large extent, boils down to genuine conflict resolution. Countering terrorism and peacemaking may follow parallel tracks in Syria or Afghanistan, but it is the overlap between these two tracks that is critical for both.

Cooperation on these and other issues relevant to or critical for antiterrorism is complicated not only by the round of policy tensions and electoral pressures, but also by some fundamental disagreements on conflict management and post-conflict transitions. While the United States has emphasized democratic transitions, including from conflict to peace, regardless of the context, feasibility and security repercussions, Russia has been warning against uncontrolled state collapse that creates dangerous vacuum to be filled by militancy and terrorism and insists on the need to retain basic state functionality during transition, regardless of the type of political regime. In fact, the U.S. and Russia may never come to terms on these issues, due to differences not only in our respective national interests and roles in the world system, but also in the two states', nations' and societies' historical experiences, forms of governance, political, social, cultural and dominant normative and value systems.

All disagreements and gaps notwithstanding, addressing terrorism and violent extremism in the U.S.-Russia context *does have clear merit*. As some of the findings in this special issue show, there is not only basis for comparing the U.S. and Russia cases, but also growing parallels and even some similarities in terms of comparative threats and some of the strategies employed (see *Section 1*).

Of all sources and types of terrorist threat, the closest overlap between the U.S. and Russia, in terms of threat assessment, is not just on transnational terrorism more generally, but on transnational terrorism with a specific focus on Syria and the cross-border Syria-Iraq context. This genuine overlap partly explains why the imperative to interact and cooperate on Syria played a *key* role in helping restart political dialogue between senior U.S. and Russia officials, despite the deepest low in bilateral relations since the end of the Cold War. Both Russia and the United States share concern about the role of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

(ISIS) as a catalyst of destabilization in the Middle East and about transnational back-and-forth flows of militants catalyzed by the ISIS phenomenon.

In addition, both the U.S. and Russia are exposed to domestic effects of ISIS extremist propaganda and influence. The interface between homegrown radicalization and transnational extremist influences, links and propaganda is another critical area of mutual concern. Also, for both Russia and the United States, right-wing violent extremism is second only to the Islamist one. In fact, with the exception of Islamist-separatist terrorism linked to ongoing, but low-level conflict in the North Caucasus, the two other main types of homegrown violent extremism faced by Russia are similar in type to those faced by the United States at home: domestic, but transnationally-inspired cell-based Islamist terrorism and the far-right extremism (*Section 2*).

The paradox is that, while our bilateral relations have been getting worse and seem unlikely to significantly improve in the foreseeable future, our comparative terrorist threats and contexts for counterterrorism increasingly converge, for objective reasons, due to growing parallels in homegrown violent extremist threats combined with both the US' and Russia's direct militarily engagement in the Middle East against ISIS.

There are some other parallels, including in national strategies employed against terrorism. Both the US and Russia are prepared to take unilateral action on counterterrorism, if deemed necessary, and actively use military force for counterterrorist purposes. The US' and Russia's definitions of terrorism are not only compatible, but, in fact, quite close, implying politically motivated violence, perpetrated by "sub-national groups" (U.S.) / "individuals and groups" (Russia), with "non-combatants" (U.S.) / "population" (Russia) as immediate targets.

More recently, both states have also developed counter-extremist strategies that go beyond counterterrorism, with more attention to prevention/counter-radicalization agenda. The gaps between Russia's and the U.S.' conceptual approaches to countering violent extremism (CVE) are, however, especially wide. The Obama administration's shift to "countering violent extremism" in many ways replaced the "global war on terrorism" paradigm that had become increasingly controversial, reflected, among other things, the mixed record of the US interventions in both Iraq and Afghanistan and was also partly prompted by rising concerns about homegrown violent extremism. While a shift more in discourse than in substance, it did imply some change of accent, including more attention violent extremism at home, preventive aspects and addressing factors and conditions that lead to radicalization. In contrast to the United States, Russia did not need to shift from primarily external threats to discovering homegrown terrorism (a first-order threat to national and human security for years). Within Russia, antiterrorism agenda and discourse has not become as controversial domestically as it did under G.W.Bush in the United States – for the Russian government, strong stand on antiterrorism has become and remains one of the key political and public assets. All this did not actualize for Russia the need to replace terrorism-centered perspective with CVE, even as there is a growing interest in broader counter-extremist agenda. The paradox is that, while Russia has been more heavily targeted by terrorism at home, the United States has shown greater interest in homegrown CVE than Russia has. If the US emphasis in preventing and countering violent extremism and radicalization, also in terms of ideological counter-narrative, is on a local community-based, democratic civil society response, Russia's emphasis in countering extremism, both violent and non-violent, is on actively promoting ethnoconfessional tolerance and "spiritual, ethical and patriotic values" traditional to the Russian culture.

Still, these conceptual gaps and policy difference should not be absolutized, nor should the U.S. emphasis on CVE as less coercive or non-coercive practices to prevent radicalization be overestimated. This CVE focus is unlikely to be reproduced or prioritized by the Trump administration; in practice, it did not radically affect funding priorities for counterterrorism, nor did it change the U.S.' heavy reliance on military/security operations overseas as a way of reducing terrorist threats to the U.S. homeland. Nor should any conceptual gaps or even more fundamental policy differences prevent the United States and Russia from sharing good practices in preventing and countering violent extremism, including terrorism, learning from each other's comparative strengths and weaknesses (especially as our two cases are becoming more comparable, not less), and concentrating on solving concrete functional and regional problems of high mutual interest. In the U.S.–Russia context, these range in scale,

type and complexity from specific security cases and concerns that overlap, require support from one of the parties to another or necessitate mutual assistance, to major regional cases such as Syria and Afghanistan.

There are clear objective limitations for what any externally devised “grand deals” can in principle achieve in “resolving” today’s increasingly complex, fragmented and heavily regionalized and transnationalized conflicts, such as *Syria*. Still, any achievements in regional security in the Middle East, with implications beyond the region (the nuclear deal with Iran, the U.S./Russia-brokered deal on Syrian chemical disarmament), have come about only through active and sustained multilateral engagement by external powers and international organizations. On military-political-diplomatic issues related to Syria, Russia’s main extraregional counterpart will remain the United States, despite all constraints (see *Section 3*).

On Afghanistan (see *Section 4*), Russia still has less direct leverage than the United States and remains mostly concerned about implications of violence, extremism and instability in Afghanistan for its allies and partners in Central Asia. Moscow’s goal is not to complicate things to Washington, but to stimulate it to clarify its position on Afghanistan sooner rather than later. The U.S. has lacked strategic clarity about what it ultimately wants in Afghanistan. Is it to sustain and even expand an open-ended security presence there (for a combination of domestic drivers and geopolitical interests, such as having a military footprint in that part of the world, “keeping an eye” on Iran, Pakistan, and China right from the heart of the region)? That would imply sustaining the illusion of a centralized Afghan state, problematic or perhaps worsening relations with regional powers with strongest leverage in Afghanistan – Iran and Pakistan, and lack of progress towards political settlement. Or does the U.S. retain any genuine, long-term interest in stabilization that can only be achieved through intra-Afghan negotiated settlement and power-sharing and some form of a regional compact on the matter?

How does all that relate to and improve prospects for U.S.-Russia cooperation? Does it? Growing similarities or even shared interests are not enough to ensure direct cooperation that heavily depends on the overall climate in the broader relationship – and that may not significantly improve any time soon. This suggests a more incremental, step-by-step, building-block approach – keeping in mind what is desirable, but focusing on what is feasible. At this stage, it may be more productive and realistic to think of antiterrorism in the U.S.-Russia context not just in terms of limited direct interaction, but also in terms of parallel actions with similar goals, mutual relevance of each other’s experience, potential lessons to be learned – at least in relation to those threats of terrorism and violent extremism that are typologically similar. Once we refocus our angle in this way, it all becomes more practical and constructive. As applied to antiterrorism in the U.S.-Russia context, this means exploring three directions:

- Continuation and reactivation of dialogue and interaction, both at the bilateral level and as part of broader multilateral frameworks, on select regional issues of high mutual concern on antiterrorism grounds, such as Syria and Afghanistan;

- Highlighting and, where possible, building upon measures or initiatives undertaken separately, but as de facto parallel efforts directly or indirectly benefiting the other.

- The lessons learned and good practices approach, especially in relation to typologically similar types of terrorism. One of the potentially promising issue area to focus on could be the interface between homegrown radicalization and foreign fighter recruitment and return.

Such initiatives could not only contribute to retaining some positive impulse in bilateral relations and to their ultimate normalization and improvement (the imperative for the United States and Russia to negotiate on Syria, including on antiterrorism grounds, already helped restart bilateral dialogue following dramatic break-down in the Russian-American relations). Should the overall relationship improve, the U.S. and Russia could build upon limited dialogue and cooperation on select regional and functional issues and Track II exchanges to move from concrete problem-solving towards more institutionalized cooperative mechanisms.

Dr Ekaterina Stepanova

Lead researcher; Head, Peace and Conflict Studies Unit
Primakov National Research Institute of World Economy
and International Relations (IMEMO), Moscow