



I do not think the Russians are personally committed or tied to Assad. I think they are tied to a government that preserves what they see as important strategic interests in Syria that are mostly dealing with military access to their bases

# Identity and Conflict, Permanent Deconfliction or Eventual Reset?

## A Conversation with U.S. Army Colonel Robert E. Hamilton

---

Interviewed by FSR Staff

Colonel Robert Hamilton spoke with *The Fletcher Security Review* in early November 2017 at Fletcher's Religion, Law and Diplomacy Conference. The following conversation is an excerpt from their extensive interview.

**Fletcher Security Review:** First and foremost, sir, I want to thank you for taking the time today to talk with *The Fletcher Security Review (FSR)*. It is a really unique opportunity for us to hear from someone like yourself who is not only a practitioner with decades of experience but also a highly accomplished scholar and researcher. Your perspective is extremely valuable and we have a lot to learn from your work. It is interesting to see Professor Elizabeth Prodromu mention today during the panel that in some circles people are calling for a Dayton Accord-like settlement in Syria. In many ways it is easy to see some of the parallels in terms of the complex identity terrain, a number of foreign powers who have intervened . . . I wonder what you, first, think about the parallel between Bosnia and Syria and then wonder what you see in terms of the identity terrain on the ground in Syria more generally?

**Colonel Robert Hamilton:** So I have actually drawn that parallel — a Dayton for Syria. Not because I think Dayton is perfect; I just spent five minutes telling you everything that is wrong with Dayton. But because I think - you are a former military officer, we have this saying in the military that perfect is the enemy of the good or the enemy of the good enough. What we need in Syria is a good enough outcome to where the interests of all the internal and external parties are represented at least to the point that no single party, either inside or outside of the country, feels like it is in their interest to escalate the conflict again.

I spent a month last summer in Geneva working as the Russia advisor on the U.S. delegation to the Syria Support Group and I then spent two months in Kuwait just recently doing the Russia Ground Deconfliction Cell at our task force that runs our operations in Syria

and Iraq. Of the possible outcomes to the Syrian conflict - the end of the military phase is approaching fairly rapidly. ISIS is collapsing very quickly, it will not be long, probably it will be weeks or maybe months before the Syrian regime and Russian-, Hezbollah-, and Iranian- partnered militias and all of their allies have fought their way down the west bank of the Euphrates and have made it to the Iraqi border; not long before the US partnered force, the Syrian Democratic Forces, have fought their way down the east bank; and at that point, ISIS will have been evicted or ISIS will have ended in Syria as a political-military entity capable of controlling territory in a standard political-military sense. Then ISIS probably reverts to a more normal terrorist organization that just carries out attacks like the attack we saw the other day in New York and is no longer capable of establishing or declaring a caliphate and controlling territory. That makes it a different threat. It does not end the threat it just makes it different.

At some point when we may get to this stage in Syria, then the question becomes: what does the political outcome look like? There are three variants that I have heard. The UN has a plan. The United States and Russia at least formally and officially support the plan and it calls for elections to be held 18 months or so after the establishment of a durable cease-fire. I can tell you the Russians, although they rhetorically and formally support that plan, are doing everything they can to undermine it. And the reason is because they believe, and I am not sure they are wrong, that "free and fair" elections in a country after a civil war that has been this brutal and has drawn in this many outside actors, has a low likelihood to deliver a government that is 1) representative and 2) stable. I think the Russian concern is that Syria is 74% Sunni and so that people will go to the ballot box in an election and vote their sectarian and ethnic identities, which means that Sunnis vote for Sunni parties and that means Shia, the Alawite Shia, who have been in power and who are allies of the Russians, will be ejected from power. Then Syria turns from an ally of Russia to an adversary. And then there is the



A hell cannon found after the battle of Aleppo  
(Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation / CC BY 4.0)

potential for renewed civil war because it is likely in a context like that, unless there is a lot of international supervision, that the government that is elected then turns the instruments of the state on the minorities who had oppressed them under the Assad regime and oppresses those minorities. I believe the Russians believe the UN plan is not a plan that can deliver long-term stability to Syria. So there is one plan.

The other plan is back to a Shia dictatorship, which frankly I think has no chance of succeeding either. I think that would be what the Russians prefer. I am not sure they are wedded to Assad personally and individually but I think they are wedded to the concept of an authoritarian, less than fully representative government, that preserves Russian strategic interests in Syria: access to Kheimim airbase and Tartus naval base. This is one the pillars of Russia's security strategy in the Middle East, the other being Iran. They want to preserve that. The only way they can conceive of preserving that is some sort of return to the status quo ante. The problem with that is the Sunnis and Kurds in the north and east of the country have fought too hard and lost a lot of people fighting the regime, but mostly fighting ISIS, and having fought that hard and having liberated really about half the county from ISIS, they are not going to be willing to go back under a minority dictatorship of Alawite Shia and others and so you have renewed civil war in that case.

The reason I think you are starting to hear people talk

about the Dayton or Bosnia scenario for Syria is that it may be the only outcome that will prevent those two outcomes I just described — either a democratic election in which the sectarian majority elects itself to power and uses the instruments of states to oppress and dispossess its enemies or return to a minority dictatorship in which case the groups that have been fighting, primarily the Kurds in the North and the Sunni Arabs east of the river, will continue to fight against the state — is some sort of internationally managed central government that preserves, and I know recently that Secretary Tillerson was in the region and he articulated very clearly, that U.S. objectives are a unitary state and no Assad. You cannot get much more clear than that. By unitary state I think we mean Syria continues to exist inside its internationally recognized border; we do not carve off pieces of it, we do not make a Syrian Kurdistan. A unitary state can also be a federal state. In other words, it can have constituent territories that have a relationship with the center. You know, the United States is a federal state; Russia is a federal state; there are a lot of federal states out there.

A federal system for Syria that preserves some sort of self-government or at least security for Kurds in the North for Sunni Arabs in the east and for all the minorities along with the Shia in the western spine and along the coast with a whole lot of international supervision and probably a large international peacekeeping force. I think that is where it becomes difficult because some country or countries are going to have to provide

those forces. And that is why the model, at least in my head, is far from perfect. Dayton was far from perfect for Bosnia and it would be far from perfect for Syria, but I cannot think of another outcome that would be better. That is why I think your starting to hear people talk about the Dayton model for Syria.

The other thing is the Dayton model brought the Russians in, brought the Russians on board. I think that you cannot get a sustainable solution to the Syria problem without engaging the Russians. You just cannot. They are there militarily. They have strategic interests there. They do not align with ours in a lot of ways, but if we can find enough common ground, as we did in Bosnia, then I think that may be the only sustainable solution I can see. But it is a long-term project and I am talking probably hundreds of thousands of peacekeepers and a huge international effort where UN organizations run the international presence for decades. That is a large mission; it is a big ask.

**FSR:** It is interesting you mention Secretary Tillerson's visit to the region recently and his call that "Assad must go." We continue to hear this rhetoric every couple of weeks or so, at least from the State Department. We also mentioned that the Russians, at least rhetorically, support the UN plan of democratic elections 14-18 months from now, but as you note, clearly they are doing what they can to undermine this. They have at least some interest in supporting Assad as far as bringing stability to Syria through an authoritarian regime. If Russian

policy is then to do what they can to keep Assad in power, what are the interests they have in Syria and why is Assad the vehicle to achieve them?

**CRH:** When it comes to Russia's involvement in Syria, like many major foreign policy or national security decisions, there are multiple reasons for it. One, certainly, was that Syria represents one of two pillars of their strategy in the Middle East — the other is Iran. They have aligned themselves with the Shia regimes in the region and to lose Syria would be to lose one of those two pillars. That was a major reason for the Russian military intervention back in the fall of 2015. Another reason is that there is a genuine Russian fear of what they call Sunni radicalism and extremism. Most of their experience in fighting terrorism has been Sunni-based terrorism emanating from Chechnya, but they saw the wars in the Balkans, long before we did I think, and the Russians believed there was a religious element to the wars, believing some of the Muslim groups fighting in the Balkans were tied to this international Sunni extremist network. They see all of these groups as somehow connected.

The second objective, I think, is fighting what they see as Sunni extremism and terrorism. And a third, I think, is stopping what they see, and they are incorrect but you are not going to convince them they are incorrect, but they believe that the color revolutions — the orange revolution in Ukraine; the rose revolution in Georgia; the second Ukrainian revolution, the Dignity Revolution;



Aleppo, Syria. A collection of improvised projectiles  
(Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation / CC BY 4.0)

and the Arab Spring revolutions — were all fomented by the United States’ intelligence services to overthrow pro-Russian regimes. They really believe that is the case. They saw Libya, when they allowed a UNSCR to pass on Libya, they will claim what they thought they were signing up for was prevention of a humanitarian catastrophe and what they got was a Western-sponsored regime change. I think they drew a line in Syria and said, “it stops here.” So I think that is the third reason they are in Syria.

What does Assad get them? I do not think the Russians are personally committed or tied to Assad. I think they are tied to a government that preserves what they see as important strategic interests in Syria that are mostly dealing with military access to their bases. Assad gets them that. I think if they could find another way to get that without Assad being in the picture they would do that. I think, and again this is just speculation, there is probably room to come to an agreement on some sort of transition period where Assad remains in power and then executive power is assumed by some sort of state council with international oversight where the interests of the minorities, like the Shia and the other minorities in the West, are preserved and that a government takes power that is not going to immediately kick the Russians out of their air and naval bases and switch Syria from a strategic partner to an adversary of Russia.

**FSR:** You mentioned this idea that Russia in Syria is drawing a line in the sand stopping what they perceive as Western attempts at regime change across the globe.

There is quite a bit of discussion about the role of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and an injection of traditional values and the effect this is having on the foreign policy of the Kremlin. Do you see this as well? We have seen President Putin and Patriarch Kirill more and more together in the public eye. Patriarch Kirill has made comments regarding Russian operations in Syria and promoting them to some extent. What kind of effect is the ROC having on Russian foreign policy?

**CRH:** I actually think the church-state causal relationship runs the opposite way in Russia. I think the church is the tool of the state and has been for a long time in Russia. In tsarist, imperial Russia it was subordinate to the state. Of course in the early Soviet period, the Orthodox Church, like all religions, was persecuted but it was interesting in the run-up to the Second World War when the Soviet government needed something to unite and rally the people around, the Russian Orthodox religion was rehabilitated as one of the pillars of Russian nationality and nationalism. Then it was persecuted throughout the rest of the Soviet period much less than other religions were. Orthodoxy is subordinate to the state, the church is subordinate to the state, and the church is a tool of foreign policy. However, I believe the Russians have hit upon a theme or a series of themes, and these themes are traditional values they know will resonate.

If you look at some of the Russian Internet propaganda, first it is very sophisticated. It is not your father’s Cold War ham-handed Soviet propaganda. It is very



President of the Syrian Arab Republic Bashar al-Assad meets with President of Russia Vladimir Putin (The Russian Presidential Press and Information Office / CC BY 4.0)



sophisticated and it speaks to not only certain audiences in the West but many audiences in what Russia calls their Near Aboard, those countries that surround them — Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova — that tend to be socially conservative and Orthodox Christian. And the message to those countries especially, Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, Moldova, even Belarus, the message is the West does not want you. If you are allowed into the Euro-Atlantic club, you will always be a second-class citizen. Moreover, their values are not your values. If you join that club and leave us, not only will you be a second-class citizen, you will be forced to submit to their decadent and degrading Western values like gay marriage. They paint this picture, this caricature, of the West. They have figured out that that narrative resonates not only with some people in their periphery but also some audiences in the West. The more we find out about Russian influence and information operations in the United States in 2016, the more we are seeing most of what they are doing aligns with a particular traditional values approach. Although they are cynical and instrumental enough in the way they use these values that they also fund it and appeal to the far left. They have reached out to both the far left and far right in the United States, predominantly the far right, and what they are trying to do is just sow divisions because it costs them very little and it keeps the West off balance. Long answer to a short question. The question was to what extent is the Church influenced Russian foreign policy and actually I think the church and its values are being

used as instruments by Russian foreign policy. There may well be some Russian policy makers who agree with and subscribe to those traditional values, but I think primarily they are using them in just an instrumental way because it works.

**FSR:** We see Russia crafting narratives to appeal to a domestic constituency as it pertains to their foreign policy. One that comes to mind, and whether it is crafted for the domestic audience or not, one narrative we see over and over again is the narrative that surrounds NATO enlargement. That of course the Russians are going to react the way that they are currently because NATO continues to arm itself right on the border of Russia. To what extent do military and civilian leadership in the US account for the Russian interpretation and are there efforts to address these narratives domestically, to NATO partners, or even more broadly?

**CRH:** It is a great question. I do not think NATO threatens Russia. I do not think NATO enlargement was a threat to Russia. Was Russia threatened by NATO enlargement? Yes. But those are two different propositions. Does NATO threaten Russian? No, absolutely. NATO has never done or said anything threatening to Russia. Is Russia threatened by the fact that NATO is moving towards its borders? Yes. Maybe it is because we see the world geopolitically and we see these security institutions in fundamentally different ways. The West, NATO, and Euro-Atlantic countries tend to see NATO



Foreign ministers meet before a four-way discussion regarding Syria  
(U.S. Department of State / Public Domain)

as an institution that builds stability and interoperability for coalition operations. It does not threaten any particular state. It is a force for conditionality. What countries are required to do to get into NATO make it a force for anticorruption, for democratization, for defense reform, for getting rid of bloated, corrupt defense bureaucracies, and all of these things. We look at it that way.

Maybe we did not appreciate the view from Moscow as well as we should have in the 90s and the early part of the 2000s. I mean I am a proponent of NATO enlargement. I do not see how you could tell the Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians in 1999 or the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians in 2004, you know, sorry we are going to consign you to some . . . because they all thought that as soon as Russia recovered its power it would threaten them. So anyway, NATO was confronted with a difficult choice. It made a choice. I think we maybe could have been clearer to Russia, and I know there were attempts to signal to Russia that NATO was not threatening it, the ironic thing is that the Russians have brought about the outcome they most feared. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia came into NATO in 2004. There were no NATO troops deployed there. There was no Baltic air-policing mission. There was nothing until the Russians started to make threats. And when the Russians started to threaten the security of NATO members — Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and others, but especially them — then what did NATO do? It started Baltic air policing. Now we have got battle groups

deployed to all three of those countries. So the Russians brought about a militarization of their boundary with NATO that did not exist before.

You know, Olga Oliker is a Russia scholar at CSIS and has said a couple of things that have remained in my head and I have used these in several talks and papers. She said, “Russia will always have a definition of its minimal security requirements that is out of balance for what a normal 21<sup>st</sup> century European state would insist upon.” In other words, what another country would accept as its minimal security requirements, Russia will not accept. It is got a higher standard for what constitutes minimal physical or territorial security. That fact, Olga has said, makes Russia hard to reassure and easy to escalate with. And I think that is exactly right. Our relationship with Russia has been cyclical really since the end of Cold War. There is another colleague of mine, Keir Giles — he is in the U.K. — he says there are predictable phases to U.S.-Russia relations and they are: euphoria, pragmatism, disillusionment, crisis, and reset. And if you think about that, we have gone through at least three of those stages, full stages, since the end of the Cold War. The euphoria was the early 90s with Boris Yeltsin, the democrat. Then you had this degradation where by the mid-90s the Russians were really questioning whether we could be strategic partners. The disillusionment and crisis probably came with the Kosovo campaign — Allied Force in 1999. At least on the Russian side, that was a crisis for them. And then the reset in that phase was post-9/11. This was George

Bush saying, “I looked into his eyes and got a sense for his soul” and “we can work with this man.” So you had the post-9/11 reset and then things started to degrade and degrade and degrade. In 2008, Georgia was the crisis. And then you had the 2009 Obama reset. And, you know, things degraded and degraded and degraded. In 2014 was the crisis for that one: Ukraine. I really think the only reason we have not had another reset is because the new administration is completely paralyzed with Russia policy because everything with Russia has now become so politicized. So were in this phase where we have had the crisis and we are waiting on the reset but I am not sure the new administration will be able politically to sell a reset. And of course Russia has continued to act in ways that make it even harder for them to do that. I think we are in this suspended animation phase where we are in the crisis but there is no prospect of a reset at least in the near term. All we can try to do is maybe manage the relationship, manage the crisis, so that it does not degrade into something even worse.

**FSR:** Where can we cooperate? Geographically or maybe functionally?

**CRH:** We certainly cannot cooperate in Europe. I am not sure there is much space for cooperation over Ukraine. In Syria we are constrained by law from cooperating, we can only deconflict. The National Defense Authorization Act says that the DoD is prevented or prohibited from cooperating or coordinating our operations in Syria. So what we do with the Russians in Syria is deconflict. And what we do is make sure we have air and ground deconfliction measures to make sure that our forces and theirs do not accidentally bump into each other on the ground or in the air. So when the military phase of the conflict in Syria is over, I think there

might be space, as we talked about earlier, for some sort of political settlement in which our minimally acceptable outcomes can both be met.

Of course those are political discussions and there is a political channel, right. We each have special presidential envoys. Ours is Bret McGurk and theirs is a guy named [Alexander] Lavrentiev, and they meet often. There is the UN channel in Geneva so there are political channels but that then becomes a political discussion. I think there are a thousand ways it go wrong between now and the end of the conflict and the start of serious political discussions over the future of Syria. But I think that is a space where we could come to an outcome acceptable to both sides. I do not claim to know enough about North Korea to really to give you an opinion on whether there is space for cooperation there. That is a problem that is going to take broad international cooperation to solve. We need China on board, we need Russia on board, we need the Japanese and South Koreans so there are a lot of stakeholders in that problem. I just do not know. That is certainly one that I know our government is focused on, concerned about, and working hard to make progress on and I think that progress would require some sort of outreach, or discussion, or cooperation with both the Russians and the Chinese because it has in the past. All the major steps in dealing with North Korea in the past have required at least that trilateral cooperation. There is not much common ground. There is not much space.

**FSR:** Sir, thank you for your time. It was an incredibly informative and thought provoking conversation.

**CRH:** My pleasure.

## U.S. Army Colonel Robert E. Hamilton

U.S. Army Colonel Robert E. Hamilton is a Black Sea Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and is a professor in the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College. He has served as a strategic war planner and country desk officer at U.S. Central Command, as the Chief of Regional Engagement for Combined Forces Command-Afghanistan, and as the Chief of the Office of Defense Cooperation at the U.S. Embassy in Georgia and as the Deputy Chief of the Security Assistance Office at the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan. Colonel Hamilton was a U.S. Army War College fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC, where he authored several articles on the war between Russia and Georgia and the security situation in the former Soviet Union. Colonel Hamilton holds a PhD in International Relations from the University of Virginia.