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RUSSIA AND SYRIA

THE REASONS BEHIND PUTIN'S SUPPORT FOR BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S REGIME

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Introduction

Despite persistent denials from Moscow it has become obvious in the eyes of most objective observers that Russian foreign policy had made a strategic decision to protect and preserve the rule of Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad. The brazen dismissal of pleas for cooperation by important actors in Europe, the Middle East and, of course, the United States suggested that Russia considered Syria a crucial battleground and was yet another manifestation of a confident new Russia under President Vladimir Putin. Less clear for many analysts however has been determining whether Russia's stance was motivated by a special historic relationship between the two countries or that there were more complicated geo-strategic factors involved that were less to do with Syria per se. Both of the above considerations offer enough evidence for a partially credible explanation but they do not suffice. The key lies in recognizing that Russia's position has been misinterpreted as a reflection of strength when in fact it highlights major weakness and insecurity that characterizes Putin's third term as President.

Russia's continued insistence to defend the Syrian regime following a series of alleged horrific massacres, most recently in Tremseh, only served to further embarrass Moscow. The head of the UN monitor mission in Syria, General Robert Mood, confirmed that regime forces used helicopters and tanks to attack civilian populations in Tremseh. The UN findings were significant in light of continued Russian delivery to Syria of attack

helicopters as well as air defense equipment. The slaughter in Tremseh followed a pattern of other recorded massacres, including at Houla, in which regular troops subdued an area with heavy weapons before pro-government militias entered to liquidate, sometimes in brutal fashion, remaining survivors. Such events not only undermined Moscow's claim to be able to play a positive mediator role in the crisis but actually showed how little influence it had over events on the ground in Syria.

The behavior of the Assad regime led to earnest questions about how far was Moscow willing to go before relinquishing its support for a government that clearly lost national and international legitimacy. Al-Assad's position at the time of writing was looking increasingly untenable and there were signs that Moscow was looking for an honorable exit from its poorly judged association with the Syrian regime. The question is how and why did Russia get itself into this internationally awkward situation?

Masking a Creaking System in Moscow?

Russia's confrontational stance over Syria can best be explained by identifying emerging features of the Putin era. The Russian president rules in different circumstances today from twenty years ago, after the demise of the Soviet Union, when Moscow sought after a strategic partnership with the West. While ostensibly Russia in 2012 is stronger, richer and more stable under Putin, there are signs that Putin is masking a creaking system that is held together by prevalent authoritarianism and superficial propaganda, projecting an image of strength and power. At times this reached the point of the ridiculous such as photographs of a bare-chested Putin riding through the wilderness but at other times, such as the reaction to the Syrian crisis, this has revealed a dangerous trend.

When Putin assumed the third term of his presidency in 2012, which in reality was a position reserved for him, he spared little time to take further measures to assert his

authority. Within months he pushed through a law that allowed the state to fine protestors up to \$9,000, a yearly wage for some. In early summer 2012 the wheels were put in motion for a law that would class all non-Russian funded NGOs as 'foreign agents.' Putin had good reason for such defensive and restrictive laws: Anti-Putin protests increased noticeably as more Russians became disillusioned or were simply unwilling to accept a return to the Soviet era practice of lifetime rule. There were systematic failures which resurfaced and were exemplified by the floods in southern Russia in July 2012, killing over 170 people and leaving thousands homeless as a result of lack of an adequate emergency plan, despite the fact that such floods were not uncommon in Russia. Putin quickly visited the disaster area in which he publicly castigated local officials, but popular anger was difficult to contain.

Ordinary Russians have also become tired of widespread corruption and a lack of obvious improvements in living standards for many Russians. Indeed, despite the boasting of pro-Putin figures that the overall size of the Russian economy had grown to match the size of major European powers, the average household income of Russia's middle class remains half of that of the equivalent in Greece during its economic crisis. The rise of ostentatious wealth among Putin loyalists has not gone unnoticed. This is significant when considering that Putin's soaring support a decade ago was in part due to his tuning-in to popular rejection of the all-powerful oligarchs that emerged in the Yeltsin era.

During his first term as President between 2000 and 2004 Putin managed to attain major accomplishments including cementing good relations with the United States; reasserting control over Chechnya; and developing ties with China, India and other major world powers. Internally, Russian economic growth that began in the late Yeltsin era continued; the middle class expanded and rampant criminality, particularly in the major cities, was contained. On the surface Putin presented himself as a reformer. He

was a popular leader who began giving ordinary Russian citizens what most world citizens crave: security, order, better financial prospects and more consumer choice.

Opposing Regime Change

Over and above this Putin promised to defend the dignity of ordinary Russians by safeguarding basic social and political freedoms and to slay Russia's arguably biggest dragon: bureaucratic corruption. Failure to deliver on these promises provide a fundamental explanation of Russia's foreign policy shift that placed emphasis on Russian pride and asserting its great power status in the world as way of compensation. Putin's transformation from a fairly Western friendly statesman from 2000 to 2002 to one with an outright hostile posture, particularly from 2005 until today, was also driven by developments on the international stage and specifically in neighboring former Soviet countries and the Middle East. The pro-democracy uprisings or so-called colored revolutions from 2003 to 2005 in Georgia, Ukraine, Tajikistan, and Lebanon all had pro-Western leanings. Concurrently, in 2003 US-led forces entered Iraq and toppled the Saddam Hussein regime. These developments helped sharpen the knives of anti-Western forces in Russia who are behind Moscow's current official position on the crisis in Syria.

In the context of other equally unwelcome Western maneuvers since the end of the Soviet Union, Putin found it relatively easy to build a case before his public. Unpopular Western actions included the bombing of Serbia and support of Kosovo, tacit Nato ambitions to incorporate Georgia, Ukraine, and even Jordan and differences over the proposal to extend a US defense shield system over Eastern European Nato allies. Last year further US-Russian tensions emerged over Libya when Moscow accused Nato of violating the March 2011 UN mandate to protect civilians by riding roughshod over Russian concerns and diverting the justification of military action to force regime change.

Russia's main objection to the military action that aided Libyan rebels against the forces of Muammar Qaddafi was based on the legal acceptability of regime change by international intervention. This recurring point of contention has been Moscow's justification for its rejection of similar action in Syria and Russia's position on the issue of the inviolability of national sovereignty can be attributed to concerns that are closer to home. Accepting the principle of military action for regime change against repressive and undemocratic regimes would make Russian allies – if not Russia itself - and neighbors in the former Soviet space vulnerable to international interference. There is however a degree of disingenuousness in Moscow's claim to defend the principle of sovereignty in international law. Russia in the Putin era, which includes the stop-gap Medvedev presidency, did not hesitate to interfere in the affairs of its neighbors with Ukraine and Georgia being two obvious examples. Putin also did not raise such a storm over this principle when the United States led a coalition against the Taliban in Afghanistan when he calculated a Russian interest in the objectives of the war. Russia's criticisms of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 were noticeably less severe than those of France and Germany because Putin was then keen on establishing himself on the international stage.

Seeking Confrontation with the West?

Russia's behavior over the Syrian crisis hints at a foreign policy approach based on an evolving mindset in Moscow of prejudice and confrontation vis-à-vis the West. A more disturbing interpretation, that is arguably the more plausible, suggests that political divisions within Russia have led to a rudderless foreign policy. On one side there are the powerful military-security cliques who have become the real powerbase for Putin: they represent the drive towards authoritarianism, which requires a Russia that is introverted and more hostile towards the West. They are opposed by a shrinking group around

Putin who are lobbying for a focus on Russia's economic and financial growth: this lobby wants to diminish the power of the bureaucracy and the security forces and to promote a Russia that is better integrated in the international community.

During the early months of the Syrian uprising Putin and the Russian leadership seemed to genuinely believe that the regime would be able to crush the uprising. In part this was based on feedback from Al-Assad sympathizers among the ranks of Russian intelligence. Rather intriguingly in July 2012, as Al-Assad's position faltered, segments of the Russian media began spinning the argument that Putin and the foreign policy leadership had been provided with false information from the ground on Syria. While it remains unclear if such reports were sanctioned by the Kremlin to justify Russia's failure to support the popular opposition from early on or if the sources were critics of pro-Putin intelligence and security agencies, it further reveals inconsistency and fragility in the handling of the Syria crisis. Singularly blaming poor intelligence on the scale of the Syrian revolution was by no means wholly convincing. Moscow had calculated at the outbreak of the Syrian uprising that President Barack Obama did not have the heart nor will to become embroiled in a military conflict in the run-up to his presidential campaign for re-election, so it safely assumed that international action would be lethargic. To some extent this was a correct assessment as it took several months for Obama to call on Assad to step down.

Russia also calculated that the fall of Syria's regime could leave Iran weakened and isolated, making it more vulnerable to an attack from either Israel or the United States. Syria would then seem to be another setback in a domino effect that would next lead to Iran and possibly continue towards Russia's southern rim. In the Russian mindset Syria was thus a means of stonewalling Western influence in southwest Asia. The sense of fragility to Russia's south became magnified with the empowerment of Sunni Islamist movements in the Egyptian and Turkish models that could influence the Caucasus and Central Asia. Significantly Russia's two major friends in the region, Iran and Syria are

ruled by non-Sunni Muslims. Supporting the regime in Damascus in the face of international action thus seemed an easy choice, particularly in consideration of some noteworthy strategic factors including the safeguarding of Russia's only Mediterranean naval facility in Tartus. Syria was also a significant arms buyer although the importance of this relationship was symbolic and political rather than in terms of revenue generated.

Terminating a Unique Intelligence-Security Relationship

A rarely mentioned feature that heightened Russian fears of regime change in Syria was the potential termination of the historic intelligence-security relationship between Moscow and Damascus. In Soviet times the KGB, alongside the Romanian equivalents at the time, largely helped to train, structure and equip the dreaded Syrian Mukhabarat, or secret police. Soviet security agencies often cooperated with Syrian counterparts regionally, particularly in Lebanon during the civil war years. After a brief lull in the early 1990s relations between Russian and Syrian secret services were revived at the end of the Yeltsin era and became more active in the build up to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Allegations persist to this day that Russian intelligence oversaw the illicit transportation of evidence from Iraq to Syria before the downfall of Saddam Hussein to cover up Moscow's role in helping to develop the Iraqi dictator's Weapons of Mass Destruction program. Putin personally assigned the highly influential Evgenii Primakov, former head of the now defunct Foreign Intelligence Service and former Prime Minister to oversee this secret mission. Most recently, when Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was dispatched on a peace mission to Damascus in February in the midst of the Syrian crisis many were baffled as to why he was accompanied by the head of Russia's intelligence service Mikhail Fradkov. Discussions would have undoubtedly revolved around Syria's chemical weapons stockpiles, which emerged as a leading international concern in 2012 in the setting of the crumbling authority of the Syrian state over its territories and military.

Putin's Choice

The outlook for which direction Russia will take in the future with regard to Syria depends very much on the assessment of Putin we choose to adopt. If we consider that Putin has staked his political future with the security elite and on popular support based on anti-Western paranoia that rejects internal liberal reforms, then the Syrian crisis could fester on for many years yet. One very possible scenario then could be that Russia would tacitly support the division of Syria and the creation of an Alawite state in the northern mountains and on the Mediterranean Sea. This would leave Russia's naval facilities secured and also maintain a foothold in the region by protecting a very loyal and convenient ally in Al-Assad and his Alawite clan. Indeed, the Syrian military focus since early spring 2012 appears to be ethnically cleansing parts of north-west Syria and trying, with little success so far, to create a geographic entity. The fragmentation of Syria could also lead to a sympathetic Kurdish region, especially as the Kurdish opposition has seen little eye-to-eye with the influential anti-regime Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.

A more hopeful scenario is one based on the view of Moscow's foreign policy as being divided by competing interests and that Putin will correct the errors of his ways but only after finding a face-saving resolution. Here Putin would be turning a new page with the West, much of the Muslim world and the Syrian opposition. Yet, even if we are to believe that Putin has recognized the need to adjust his position on Syria, it seems that he has driven himself and Russian foreign policy into a cul-de-sac without the ability to reverse. The Russian leader's personal and political authority would be severely undermined by appearing to backtrack in front of his supporters and the powerful military-security lobbies. Neither assessment of Putin bodes well for the future of Syria and for overall global security.

Talal Nizameddin's last book publication is *Putin's New Order in the Middle East*, (London: Hurst), 2012.

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