

Are Putin and Assad Playing Good Cop, Bad Cop?

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Feb 21, 2016

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Some analysts have voiced disagreement with the view that Damascus and Moscow are truly at odds.

An opinion is beginning to emerge in the Russian press: Syrian President Bashar Assad is increasingly getting out of Moscow's control. According to this view, Moscow asks Assad for peace under the Geneva process while he demands military and political support instead. For example, when the Russian Foreign Affairs Ministry called on "all partners" to uphold the cessation of hostilities agreement reached in Munich earlier this month, Assad instead announced he will continue to fight until he reclaims all of Syria's territory. Several headlines such as "Assad Doesn't Want to Adhere to the Russia-Announced Truce" have emerged in recent days.

Yet some Russian analysts have also voiced disagreement with this view. Alexander Shumilin, Center for the Analysis of Middle East Conflicts director at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute for U.S. and Canadian Studies, feels that Russia and Syria are playing a game with the West. "To say that [Assad] is bogging poor Moscow down [in Syria] -- is naive. Of course he can't do anything without Moscow's regulations. Russia is mostly bombing [in Syria], not Assad," he said in an interview with *Novaya Gazeta*, one of the few remaining independent newspapers in Russia.

Contrary to Moscow's position that all rebels in Syria are terrorists, Shumilin also wrote in October 2015 that moderate Syrian opposition exists. He highlighted that the majority of Russian airstrikes have not been against the Islamic State: "A bleak picture is forming: [the] moderate anti-Assad front is being pushed on the ground from both sides -- the government's army with the support of the Russian Air Force in the West and...ISIS terrorists from the East."

Political analyst Andrei Piontkovsky described Russia's behavior in Syria as "absurd cruelty" that will "poison for centuries" Russia's relations with the Muslim world. "Today it has become impossible to hide the war crimes of the Russian Air Force in northern Syria," he wrote in his blog on Echo Moskvy. "Even the Kremlin people no longer hide it. They...adopted completely Assad's definition of a terrorist -- terrorists are all who are fighting against the

legitimate President Assad, who legitimately killed hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens as well as their family members, neighbors, hospital patients, students, and random passers-by."

Last month, former Ukrainian foreign minister Vladimir Ogryzko wrote that Moscow's periodic hints about willingness to give up Assad are ultimately aimed to show the West, "You see, I'm good, I asked Assad to leave, but he had not agreed." He added that the Kremlin had acted similarly in Ukraine, promoting the view of "We are striving towards a settlement, but the rebels interfere."

It would be useful to watch in the coming weeks whether Assad is really out of Moscow's control, or if Putin and Assad are simply playing good cop, bad cop.

Anna Borshchevskaya is the Ira Weiner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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