What Vladimir Putin Is Really Up To in Syria

by Dennis Ross **(/experts/dennis-ross)**

Feb 9, 2016

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The last thing Putin wants is a U.S.-led safe haven inside Syria, since it would erode his leverage over Europe and raise the military costs of fighting on Assad's behalf.

Secretary of State John F. Kerry has for years been trying to produce a diplomatic process that could not just alleviate the suffering in Syria but, in time, end the conflict there. Not long ago, he was optimistic that his efforts were bearing fruit. So much so that after the November talks in Vienna, when Russia and others agreed that negotiations should begin in January, be accompanied by a cease-fire and culminate in elections after an 18-month transition process, the secretary declared: "We're weeks away conceivably from the possibility of a big transition in Syria."

Unfortunately, there has been no big transition in Syria -- and now, with Staffan de Mistura, the United Nations envoy, calling for a pause in his indirect talks, there is no negotiating process. The reason is quite simply that Russia agreed to the so-called Vienna principles without having any intention of implementing them. Indeed, at the very moment the negotiations were to start, the Russians intensified their bombing and even used "Spetsnaz" special forces to back regime and Iranian/Hezbollah offensives around the country.

If Russian President Vladimir Putin's priority had been the diplomatic process, he would have acted to promote the cease-fire, not increased the tempo of Russian military operations. He would have conveyed to us that he would stop Syrian President Bashar Assad from using barrel bombs and force him to open humanitarian corridors for food and medicine.

Moreover, if the Russians had actually been willing to stop Assad from using starvation as a tactic, the opposition might have believed that a transition from the Assad clique was possible. Instead, even as Kerry pressured the non-Islamic State opposition to come to the talks or lose American assistance, the Russians were increasing their operations in support of Syrian military and Iranian/Hezbollah offensives. These operations were designed to

strengthen the Assad regime and weaken the non-Islamic State Sunni opposition in different parts of the country: in the Alawite heartland around Latakia, in the south around Dara, and in the north by cutting Sunni supply lines across the Turkish border to Aleppo -- attacks that are triggering a new mass exodus of civilian refugees.

The nature of the Russian strikes makes clear that Putin was not just trying to improve Assad's leverage before negotiations. No, he was intent on changing the balance of power fundamentally on the ground and sending a message to Arab leaders. Namely: You may not like our support for Assad, but unlike the Americans we stand by our friends. If you want to deal with problems in Syria or in the region, you deal with us.

Putin aims to demonstrate that Russia, and not America, is the main power broker in the region and increasingly elsewhere. And he is leaving no doubt that his priority is to use the Syrian conflict for his purposes -- not to pave the way for an end of the war. Certainly, were Russia's costs to increase, Putin might look for a way out. But for now, he's convinced that we will not -- directly or indirectly -- provide the types of arms to the opposition that would significantly raise the military costs to the Russians.

Leaving aside the prospects for continued warfare in Syria, Putin is also undercutting our aim of isolating the Islamic State and having Sunnis lead the fight against it. (The Islamic State is a Sunni group.) Sunni-led governments in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan won't seriously join the fight against the Islamic State so long as there appears to be a war against their coreligionists in Syria. And that is what they perceive today as Russia hits non-Islamic State Sunni opposition targets and the U.S. strikes ever harder against the Sunni Islamic State.

Rather than being opposed to the Russian efforts, we look to be in league with them. We press for the diplomatic process even as Russian military strikes undercut the prospects for diplomacy. If we want the Sunnis to join the fight against the Islamic State, it is time we make it clear to the Russians that unless they impose a cease-fire on Assad and Hezbollah and insist that humanitarian corridors are open, we will have no choice but to act with our partners to create a haven in Syria -- for refugees and for the organization of the Syrian opposition.

The last thing Putin wants is a haven. Staunching the refugee flow would give the Europeans less reason to look to Putin to solve the Syrian crisis and their refugee problem -- and, thus, reduce his leverage on them to drop sanctions over Ukraine. Organizing a less fractured opposition on Syrian territory could, meanwhile, raise the costs of supporting Assad militarily.

So a haven could be a lever on Putin to change course and would show Sunnis we were acting to protect the Sunni population in Syria. It is, however, not risk free, and we cannot threaten to create a haven without following through if Putin refused to alter his course. But we also have to be honest about our strategy toward Syria today: Unless we are prepared to use more leverage against what the Russians are doing, we will not have Sunni partners, and there will be little prospect of diplomacy working.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, and author of the book Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/doomed-to-succeed)** . ❖

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