

# What to Expect from Russia at the G8 Summit

by [Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Anna Borshchevskaya \(/experts/anna-borshchevskaya\)](/experts/anna-borshchevskaya)

Anna Borshchevskaya is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Russia's policy toward the Middle East.



Brief Analysis

## Serious progress is unlikely given Moscow's intransigence on Syria, Iran, and missile defense.

When the thirty-ninth G-8 Summit opens in Northern Ireland on June 17, Syria will likely dominate the discussion. As British prime minister and summit chair David Cameron told Parliament earlier this week, "We should use the G-8 to try and bring pressure on all sides to bring about...a peace conference, a peace process, and a move towards a transitional government in Syria." Other key topics will likely include Iran's nuclear program and Turkey-based European missile defense. Yet making serious progress on any of these crucial issues will be difficult because Russia continues to embrace positions that diverge from the rest of the G-8.

## DIVERGENCE ON SYRIA, IRAN, AND MISSILE DEFENSE

Last year, President Vladimir Putin did not attend the G-8 Summit at Camp David. Using the excuse of having to "finalize cabinet appointments in the new Russian government," he sent Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in his place. Putin's absence was all the more insulting because President Obama had reportedly moved the meeting from Chicago to Camp David specifically for the Russian leader's benefit.

Although Putin will attend this year's summit, he still stands apart from the rest of the G-8. In broad terms, he represents the only nondemocratic state in a club that, since its creation in 1975, has aimed to bring together the world's largest industrial democracies. And more to the point, Russia is the only member that has proven intransigent on some of the most salient issues on the current G-8 agenda.

On the Syrian conflict, Moscow continues to stick to the principle of noninterference in what it calls Syria's "internal affairs," a position it has held since the beginning of the uprising. During a June 11 broadcast on the Kremlin-funded Russia Today network, Putin acknowledged that Bashar al-Assad -- rather than "foreign terrorists" -- was responsible for the latest developments in Syria. Yet he still refused to support a Western intervention; in fact, he has increasingly and more openly sought an Assad victory.

On Iran, Moscow sees the nuclear program as less of a threat than does the West. When asked about Tehran's international commitments on nonproliferation, he told Russia Today, "I have no doubt that Iran is adhering to the rules." Beyond that, Moscow and Tehran have formed strategic partnerships on a number of issues:

- in Afghanistan, shared concerns about narcotrafficking as coalition forces prepare for withdrawal in 2014, and shared antipathy toward the Taliban
- mutual suspicion of Western intervention in Syria
- cooperation in Central Asia and the Caucasus
- a shared anti-Western ideology

Perhaps because Moscow sees little danger from Iran's nuclear program, it continues to oppose European missile defense efforts in Turkey. In the perceived absence of a serious North Korean or Iranian threat, Putin can easily make the argument that new Western missile defense initiatives are aimed at Russia. Indeed, Moscow has already taken military steps based on this argument -- on June 6, Russian forces reportedly completed a successful launch of a next-generation ICBM. According to the country's Defense Ministry, the new weapon can pierce any anti-ballistic missile system. Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's fiercely nationalist deputy prime minister and former NATO ambassador, described the ICBM a "missile defense killer...Neither current nor future American missile defense systems will be able to prevent that missile from hitting a target dead on."

## **RUSSIA'S AIMS IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

In this context, it is difficult to see how Russia would agree to intervention in Syria or dramatically increased pressure on Iran over the nuclear issue. To be sure, the Kremlin sees both countries as bargaining chips with the West and has therefore stopped short of forming a true alliance with them. In 2010, for example, Viktor Simakov -- the Russian Foreign Ministry's counselor for Israel and Palestine -- agreed to freeze export of the S-300 anti-aircraft system to Iran if Washington made concessions on Europe-based missile defense. And if Moscow begins to believe that further concessions are not forthcoming, it may reverse the freeze and push ahead with the sale.

Yet other factors outweigh these bargaining considerations and make deeper Russian regional cooperation with the G-8 unlikely in the near term. For example, Iran has significant leverage over the Kremlin -- even if Moscow were inclined to pressure the regime, Tehran could easily use its deep connections with Muslim communities in Central Asia to create major unrest in Russia. Moscow has no similar leverage over Iran.

Similarly, Russia has too much vested in the current Syrian regime to let it go. Moscow still views Assad as perhaps its closest Arab ally in the Middle East, with deep cultural, historical, and business connections between the two. In addition, Russia's geostrategic interests include cementing influence in the Middle East, and Syria -- which borders the Mediterranean Sea, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq -- is ideal for this purpose. And given that Syrian rebels have turned fiercely anti-Russian due to Moscow's support for Assad, the Kremlin would have much to fear if they came to power.

More broadly, Putin hopes to restore Russia to superpower status, making it a respected player that wields global influence. Therefore, a quid pro quo involving Western concessions will not be enough to secure Moscow's cooperation on Syria and Iran. During his annual state of the union address in April 2005, Putin famously argued that the Soviet Union's dissolution was "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century," and his rhetoric has not softened since then. In this context, Moscow will continue to publicly state that European missile defense efforts threaten Russian security.

## **LOW EXPECTATIONS FOR THE SUMMIT**

The April 11 meeting of G-8 foreign ministers in London was meant to set the stage for the June summit, but it achieved few concrete results. In effect, the foreign ministers kicked the can down the road on the more difficult agenda items. Russia's liberal-leaning business daily *Kommersant* reported on April 12 that "only a few topics proposed by Britain...raise no objections on Russia's part. The ministers are unlikely to come up with as much as a single paragraph of approved text on the more acute issues -- above all Syria."

There is little reason to believe that next week's summit will be very different. One possible outcome is a document reiterating areas of agreement and divergence, with vague, noncommittal pledges on issues such as holding "Geneva II" talks on Syria, cooperating on Iran within the framework of the International Atomic Energy Agency, increasing counterterrorism cooperation, and other issues. Alternatively, Putin may openly disagree with the West and urge restraint. Whatever the case, Russia's divergent interpretations make the prospects for G-8 breakthroughs bleak.

*Anna Borshchevskaya is a fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy.* ❖

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