'There Must Be Order': How Russia's Internal Muslim Issues Affect Its Syria Policy

by Peter Eltsov **(/experts/peter-eltsov)**

Jun 14, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Peter Eltsov (/experts/peter-eltsov)

Brief Analysis

A firmer combination of pressure and incentives, with appropriate attention to Moscow's domestic concerns, could tip the balance toward greater U.S.-Russian cooperation in Syria.

At this year's G-8 summit, scheduled to begin June 17 in Northern Ireland, the United States and European Union will once again try to persuade Russia to soften its support for Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. As before, however, this latest attempt is almost certain to fail unless Western officials do a better job of understanding and addressing the motives behind Moscow's policy.

During a recent visit to Germany and the Netherlands, President Vladimir Putin gave an interview to ARD, the main German broadcasting consortium. When asked about the right of opposition parties to hold public protests, he quoted the German expression "Ordnung muss sein" (There must be order). The comment reflected Moscow's policy toward not only domestic critics, but also the Middle East. In today's Russia, the ruling elite and a significant portion of the electorate value political order, the state's integrity, and resistance to foreign interference more than they do democracy, individual freedoms, and the right of peoples to self-determination.

This attitude -- along with Moscow's strategic/economic interests and growing rivalry with the United States -- plays an important part in explaining Russian behavior in the Syria crisis. Such views derive not just from Putin's personal preferences, but also from the government's broader experiences with Russia's own Muslim population, which have aroused extreme antipathy toward any development that could conceivably spread jihad into Russian territory. Acknowledging this factor is a necessary if not sufficient condition for realistic engagement with Moscow on regional hotspots, starting with the Syrian civil war.

RUSSIA'S INTERNAL MUSLIM ISSUES

The Boston Marathon bombing reminded the world of the complexity of Russia's Muslim population. Islam is the country's second-largest religion, with most Muslims (about 15-20 million people, or 10 percent of the population) living in the Northern Caucasus and the middle of the Volga Basin. Meanwhile, Moscow has a Muslim population of approximately 2 million, the second-largest such urban concentration in Europe after Istanbul.

Maintaining a good rapport with Muslims at home has been one of the Russian government's biggest challenges since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Some Russian Muslims are strong supporters of the state. For example, many Avars -- the largest ethnicity in Dagestan -- support Putin due to his role in the 1999 war, when a self-proclaimed "Islamic International Brigade" under the command of Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev and Jordanian-born Ibn al-Khattab invaded Dagestan from Chechnya. The Avars are also unhappy about Chechen guerillas seeking to appropriate the fame of Imam Shamil, an Avar hero who led resistance against the tsar's army in the Russian-Caucasian War of 1817-1864. Likewise, some migrant workers from Central Asia support Putin despite their hardship. At times, this support is tinged with ultranationalist, even racist fervor. As Karomat Sharipov, head of the Tajik Labor Migrants Movement in Moscow, recently put it, "I want Russian Putin in the Kremlin, and let him be in command. I don't want some uncertain and powerful Jews, Dagestanis, and others in the Kremlin."

At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb al-Tahrir, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and several other Islamist movements are banned by law in the Russian Federation. On February 14, 2003, the country's Supreme Court prohibited their activities on charges of fomenting global jihad and attempting to reestablish the Caliphate. Yet their ideas continue to infiltrate Russia through the Caucasus and Central Asia.

In August 2008, for instance, after Moscow proclaimed independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia, a new "Coordinating Council for the Peoples of Idel-Ural" was established in Kazan, the capital of Tatarstan. It included the representatives of two Turkic, predominantly Sunni Muslim peoples: the Bashkirs and Tatars. The council passed a declaration calling for the preservation of indigenous cultures, with one member (history professor Marat Kulsharipov) raising the prospect of Bashkortostan and Tatarstan seeking political independence from Russia: "All peoples have a right to self-determination...This was referred to by our President Medvedev when he signed the document recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia."

Such calls hinting at Muslim separatism are anathema to Moscow, since they entail de facto recognition of the right to self-determination for the country's many regions and peoples. Putin and his circle may even fear that letting this genie out of the bottle could shrink Russia back to the borders of Muscovy in the sixteenth century, prior to Ivan IV's conquest of Kazan and Astrakhan. The ongoing low-level violence in Chechnya, Dagestan, and elsewhere serves as a continual reminder of this issue's explosive potential.

INFLUENCE ON RUSSIA'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

The same mentality applies to Russia's policies in Syria and other Middle Eastern states. Moscow tends to believe that dictatorships are better than democracies at maintaining national unity, territorial integrity, and order in multiethnic and multicultural regions that lack democratic traditions.

Russian leaders are most worried about the region's widespread political instability and Islamic radicalization. During a May 7 meeting with Secretary of State John Kerry, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov noted that Syria could turn into an Islamic extremist state despite its multi-ethnic/religious past. As he and other Russian policymakers repeatedly point out, U.S. interventions to topple the governments of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya all provoked a jihadist reaction that encroached on many other countries.

Because this view reflects Russia's deeply rooted domestic Muslim issues, it is unlikely to change soon, especially not during Putin's presidency, which could last for another eleven years. Thus, the plan that Lavrov and Kerry agreed upon -- to convene another Syria conference in Geneva with all sides of the conflict invited to the negotiating table -- is unlikely to succeed. So long as Moscow continues to support Assad, it is hard to imagine how the Syrian regime and opposition will be able to work together toward a transitional government. Recent Russian weapons sales to Assad, along with increased Russian naval maneuvers in the Mediterranean Sea and aerial maneuvers over the

Black Sea, render the prospects of a peaceful solution even more remote. From this perspective, Kerry's visit to Moscow was a Russian diplomatic success: Assad will remain in power at least through the next rounds of negotiations, while Russia will continue to sell him weapons.

In short, Putin is unlikely to abandon Assad without guarantees of political continuity (i.e., Syria's territorial integrity and political secularism) and consideration for Russia's geopolitical and economic interests. At present, no country can provide such guarantees, including the United States. This is why Lavrov continues to say that "the future of Syria must be decided by the Syrian people."

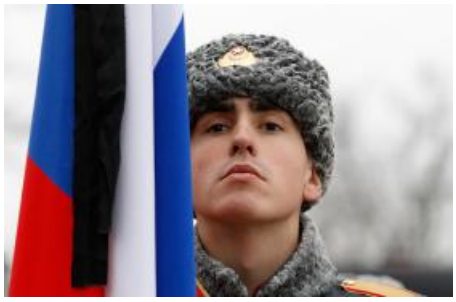
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Going forward, U.S. officials should publicly acknowledge the domestic Muslim issues that help drive Russia's policy toward Syria. Washington should also offer to discuss further assurances that it will unequivocally oppose jihadist influences, whether inside Syria or Russia. But Moscow's acute sensitivities on this issue mean that it will abandon Assad only under great pressure from events on the ground. The implication is that only greater U.S. support for the Syrian opposition has any hope of convincing Moscow to change course.

Importantly, the U.S. redline for such expanded support should not be limited to Assad's use of chemical weapons. Unconditional Russian military support for the regime is another key line to draw; Moscow has already raised the stakes, and that should raise the alarm. Negotiations are viable only when both sides are ready to compromise, and Putin does not appear to be a particularly promising partner at the moment. Washington will therefore need to convince the Kremlin that Assad might lose the war, and that a stable, unified, antijihadist government is plausible in his wake. A firmer combination of pressure and incentives, with appropriate attention to the internal Muslim dimension of Moscow's policy, could tip the balance toward greater U.S.-Russian cooperation in Syria, at Assad's expense.

Peter Eltsov, a Washington-based political analyst, has conducted research in Russia, the Caucasus, South and Central Asia, and the Middle East. His teaching and research positions include time at Harvard University, Free University in Berlin, the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress, and Wellesley College. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

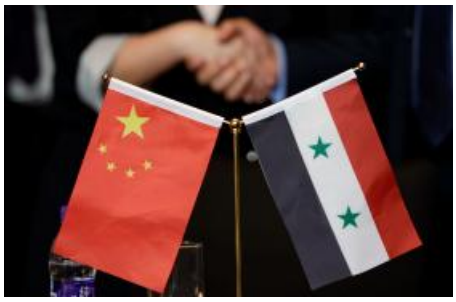
The Ukraine Crisis Isn't Over: Russia Has Lied About Troop Withdrawals Before

Feb 16, 2022

◆

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/ukraine-crisis-isnt-over-russia-has-lied-about-troop-withdrawals)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

As China Thrives in the Post-9/11 Middle East, the US Must Counter

Feb 16, 2022

◆

Jay Solomon

(/policy-analysis/china-thrives-post-911-middle-east-us-must-counter)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations

Feb 15, 2022

◆

Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)