

# Russia's Response to the Massacres in Syria

by [Nikolay Kozhanov \(/experts/nikolay-kozhanov\)](/experts/nikolay-kozhanov)

Jun 13, 2012

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Nikolay Kozhanov \(/experts/nikolay-kozhanov\)](/experts/nikolay-kozhanov)

Nikolay Kozhanov, a former visiting fellow with The Washington Institute, is an Academy Associate at Chatham House.



Brief Analysis

---

**Although many Russian officials are unsure about who exactly committed the recent massacres, the incidents are nevertheless a serious stress test for Russian-Syrian relations.**

**T**he slaughter of civilians in Houla, Syria, followed by at least one other reported massacre, was a serious shock for Russia. Despite official statements that its position on Syria remains unchanged, Moscow is divided on how to treat the Assad regime after these atrocities. Alexander Pankin, deputy head of the Russian mission at the UN, argued that the incidents could be a provocation by forces interested in undermining Kofi Annan's peace efforts. Yet during a press conference with British foreign secretary William Hague, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov condemned the regime's use of tanks and artillery against unarmed civilians. Meanwhile, Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich has implied that the opposition and its foreign supporters could be the main initiators of the tragedy.

In light of these uncertainties, Moscow is playing for time, carefully considering the situation and working out its own strategy on how to stop the bloodshed while avoiding military intervention, immediate regime change, or perceptions that it is closely associated with the regime. In doing so, the government is to a certain extent haunted by the ghosts of both past civilian massacres and Russia's experience with other untrustworthy regimes.

## THE GHOSTS OF KRASUHA AND KHATYN

**V**ideos of civilian deaths in Syria remind many Russians of Nazi massacres in their own country during World War II -- specifically, in the villages of Krasuha and Khatyn, whose populations the Germans burnt alive. These wounds are still relatively fresh in the minds of Russian authorities, who are quite tough in their reactions to any proven war crimes against civilians. For example, Moscow has voiced its concerns about periodic Kosovo Albanian attempts to launch cleansing campaigns against Serbian enclaves, recognized Stalin's crimes against Poles in Khatyn, and condemned the 2008 Georgian atrocities in Tskhinval.

Therefore, despite Russian doubts regarding who exactly carried out the massacres in Syria, the fact that Damascus did nothing to prevent the incidents makes it at least partially responsible. Evidence of tank and artillery shelling in the Houla area will also probably toughen Moscow's position on the regime.

## THE GHOST OF SADAT

**M**oscow has never completely trusted Bashar al-Assad. Russian authorities cannot forget that after his election, Assad initially tried to bridge relations with Europe; only when this attempt failed did he turn his attention to Russia. This fact makes Moscow cautious about embracing Damascus its strategic partner. In one speech, for example, President Vladimir Putin stated that he did not want to repeat the Soviet mistake with Egypt by trusting a Syrian regime that could change its alliances as readily as Anwar Sadat did with Moscow in the 1970s. In addition, Russia has questions for Assad concerning the alleged al-Kibar nuclear facility destroyed by Israel in 2007, as well as the fact that Russian munitions sold to Syria periodically end up in Hizballah's hands.

## THE GHOSTS OF BESLAN AND KIZLYAR

**D**espite these concerns, Moscow does not want to take abrupt measures. Many aspects of the massacres raise questions among Russian politicians, analysts, and experts regarding who exactly carried out the shooting and stabbing of civilians. Based on their experience in Chechnya, Russians strongly believe that radical Islamists and outraged rebels are more capable of carrying out such atrocities than the regime's security services or the army. Unfortunately, even at the expert level, few Russians understand that Assad is supplementing these regular forces with paramilitary units (*shabbiha*), who are of course perfectly capable of committing such acts against opposition supporters. In any case, images of the massacres remind Russians of similar scenes in the villages of Beslan (in 2004) and Kizlyar (1996), where Islamist "freedom fighters" used children and pregnant women, respectively, as human shields. That is why Moscow has warned the international community to carefully investigate the Syrian incidents before acting.

Any proven extremist involvement in the tragedies would seriously harm Russia's attitude toward the Syrian opposition. Moscow is deeply concerned about the rise of Islamists in the Middle East, including Qatar and Saudi Arabia's efforts to support the most radical factions in Libya, Egypt, and Syria. Officials believe that the current situation in the region directly influences domestic stability by provoking Russian religious extremists to more aggressive antigovernment actions; in fact, Moscow's security services have noted increasing Qatari and Saudi financial help to Russian Islamists. Unsurprisingly, then, Moscow does not want Islamist influence in Syria to grow.

At the same time, Russia has been gradually changing its views on the opposition within Syria by acknowledging that many groups are quite critical of Islamists. Thus, Moscow looked favorably on the resignation of Syrian National Council head Burhan Ghalioun, whom Russian experts believe is closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. And over the past month, Russian diplomats have periodically stated that they are seeking contacts with more opposition groups inside Syria. Yet this nascent outreach could end quickly if Moscow becomes convinced that extremists were involved in the massacres.

## THE GHOSTS OF YUGOSLAVIA

**L**ast but not least, Russia fears a repeat of what happened with Yugoslavia in 1999, when NATO used the discovery of graves -- whose origins are still unclear -- in the village of Racak to justify bypassing the UN and taking military action. Therefore, immediately after the massacre in the Houla area, Lavrov stated that Russia will prevent other countries from making Taldou (the specific village where the killing occurred) another Racak. Moscow is not worried about further destabilization in Syria in the aftermath of military intervention, but rather the notion that the United

States and its partners can simply attack Syria without UN Security Council approval. Such a development would undermine the UN, which remains one of Russia's main vehicles for exercising influence and reminding others of its role in the world.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

As mentioned previously, Moscow is playing for time in order to persuade the international community not to take hasty steps such as military intervention. In the past two weeks alone, Russian officials have discussed the situation with their counterparts in Algeria, China, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United States, and Britain. The message they send is always the same: only a balanced and reasonable approach to the crisis can help bring peace and stability to Syria.

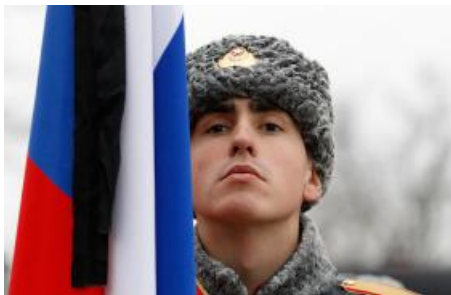
During a June 6 visit to Beijing, Lavrov called for a meeting involving all countries and international organizations capable of influencing the situation, with the aim of coordinating their efforts to implement the Annan plan. In his view, this group includes Iran, Turkey, the Security Council's permanent members, the European Union's higher authorities, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Arab League. It is no coincidence that a substantial part of Russia's ideas on Syria are similar to those mentioned in the recently revised version of the Annan plan.

*Nikolay Kozhanov is an expert with the Institute of the Middle East in Moscow. From 2006 to 2009, he served as an attache at the Russian embassy in Tehran.* ❖

---

## 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)