

# Breaking Assad's Hold on Russia

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Brief Analysis

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## Turkey, the Syrian opposition, and Washington should encourage Moscow to reconsider its growing support for the regime's brutal repression.

As violence in Syria escalates, the UN Security Council may meet to discuss the bloody crisis again, with new Russian and Arab League diplomatic proposals to consider. The State Department now asserts that the United States is taking a two-track approach: "continuing to work on the [Russian draft] resolution in New York, and testing to see whether the Syrians are serious about implementing their commitments to the Arab League." Indeed, when Russia publicized its new draft Security Council resolution last Friday, U.S. officials politely praised Moscow's move as a positive step. But it is nothing of the sort.

## Diplomatic and Military Support

Russia is still trying to prevent rather than promote real international action to stop Bashar al-Assad's brutal suppression of the popular uprising against him -- and to inhibit anyone else from supporting the opposition. Who better than Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov to expound these points: "Our draft resolution is on the table," he told a Russian interviewer on December 13, "and those who refuse to exert pressure on the armed and extremist part of the opposition" are taking an "immoral" position. Russia, he asserted, "sticks to the opinion that...the right of nations to decide their destiny without outside interference should be respected." And in a December 20 phone conversation with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, according to the Russian account, Lavrov reiterated that "the key thing" is "exerting effective influence on the Syrian opposition," not on the Syrian regime. Russia's persistent backing for Syria's weakened strongman goes far beyond words. In just the past two weeks, Russian warships docked at the Syrian port of Tartus in an ostentatious signal of support. Beyond mere signaling, this flotilla also delivered advanced Yakhont antiship missiles to beef up Syrian coastal batteries. And yesterday, as if to underline the point, Syrian state media publicized new live-fire exercises by the regime's naval, air force, and air

defense forces, showing photographs of the latest Russian-supplied weapons in action.

Seen in this light, Moscow's current diplomatic initiative (supported by China and even Iran) is arguably worse than its veto (along with China) of a draft UN resolution censuring the regime in mid-October. The move simply gives Assad more time to continue his repression and remain in power. Syria's December 19 signature of the long-delayed Arab League plan to "monitor" an "end to the violence" is in exactly the same vein. In fact, Assad's real attitude toward this plan is revealed by the near absence of any reporting on it by Syria's official news agency, even on the very day that his deputy foreign minister signed it in Cairo. And today, the official mouthpiece *al-Thawrah* called the monitoring merely "a test" for the Arab League to "correct its position."

## Understanding Russia's Position

**W**hat accounts for Moscow's stubborn support of Assad? More important, how can Washington and its allies reverse it? Many motives are at work, some obvious but others much less so. Among the more generic factors, all closely connected, are Moscow's perennial desire to oppose U.S. and EU influence; its "principled" opposition to Western intervention in other countries' internal upheavals; and its intense distaste for popular democratic movements. Both Vladimir Putin's renewed presidential campaign and official U.S. and EU criticism of the recent Russian parliamentary elections clearly reinforce this obstructionist predisposition. So does the Libyan precedent, which Russia not unreasonably views as NATO military intervention and regime change under the cover of a humanitarian Security Council resolution.

Indeed, Lavrov told an Arab ministerial meeting in mid-November that Moscow is determined to avoid a repeat of the Libyan affair. And this time, at least so far, an internally divided Arab League is inclined to agree. As Russia's semiofficial news agency put it on December 21, "In an effort to avoid another contentious Libya-style military operation, Russia and others, including the Arab League, are calling for more measured actions to bring about peace in Syria."

Other factors more particular to the Syrian situation include what President Dmitry Medvedev recently called his country's "age-old friendship" with Syria, which could present Moscow with a major credibility problem should it abandon Assad now. More concretely, Russia fears the loss of Tartus (its lone Mediterranean port facility) and of an estimated \$2-3 billion annually in arms and other sales to Syria. For the time being, then, Moscow is clearly betting that its support will help Assad survive this intense challenge to his power.

## Underlying Regional Factors

**L**ess well known, but at least as powerful, are Russia's broader regional calculations. Moscow has been trying to coordinate its Syria policy with Tehran and even Hizballah, who both adamantly back Assad. In late summer, for example, just as the protests and massacres in Syria gained momentum, Moscow hosted an official Hizballah parliamentary delegation for the first time. Moreover, Russian arms sold to Iran are still making their way to Syria and Hizballah -- surely with Moscow's knowledge.

Russia's diehard support for Assad is also tied to its newfound suspicions of Ankara. Turkey recently edged back into NATO's good graces by accepting the U.S.-led antimissile system that is anathema to Moscow, at a time when senior Turkish officials also began hinting publicly that Assad should step down. In the past week alone, one Russian newspaper headline declared "Turkey Directly Involved in Terrorist Operations against Syria," while a semiofficial Russian analyst publicly accused "some Western countries" of "instigating Turkey to take anti-Syria stances, which is against the interests of the Turkish people."

Still more powerful is the deeply ingrained Russian loathing for the Islamist character of some leading Syrian dissidents. For example, on several recent Arabic-language talk shows with the author, influential Russian foreign policy advisor Vyacheslav Matuzov dwelt at length on the "anti-Russian" extremism and violence of the Syrian

Muslim Brotherhood, going back to the 1970s. (He did not dwell on the persistent Islamist challenge inside the Russian Federation, but that was surely on his mind as well.) As Moscow watches the ascent of Islamists in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and, most likely, Yemen, it must fear a similar outcome in the one Arab country where it retains a leading role.

Of these crucial regional players, Hizballah and Iran are intractable, but the others are not. Ankara's policy toward the Syrian meltdown is actually much more cautious than its rhetoric might suggest. Turkish statements and actions alike make clear that it will not support any form of military intervention without Security Council authorization -- which would require Russian acquiescence.

As for the Muslim Brotherhood, published statements, social media posts and conversations with Syrian opposition activists across the spectrum, both inside and outside Syria, demonstrate that even the many Islamists among them would accept "decent" relations with Russia once Assad is gone -- especially if Moscow switches sides in good time. Indeed, this is not a lost cause: Moscow quietly hosted a Syrian opposition delegation on September 9, and another in mid-November headed by Burhan Ghalioun, chairman of the exile Syrian National Council.

## Policy Recommendations

So, as the Russians once famously asked, what is to be done? The United States and its allies can take several steps to diminish the concerns driving Russia's support for Assad. First, Washington should encourage Turkey to reassure Moscow that it does not intend to prevent Russia from playing a role in post-Assad Syria. Second, Washington should encourage the Syrian opposition, including the Muslim Brotherhood, to do the same. Third, U.S. officials should quietly convey that message to Moscow themselves. Even Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman, who enjoys a rare credibility in Russia, might reinforce this positive message. As the Syrian regime teeters on the edge of the abyss, spurring such a recalculation of Moscow's long-term interests might be enough, as the old Russian joke goes, to make Assad take one last big step forward.

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