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Russia's Many Interests in Syria

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Given its deep, multifaceted ties to Syria and its strategic posture toward the West, Moscow seems bent on supporting Assad to the bitter end.

On January 20, the Russian Emergency Situations Ministry announced that it will evacuate approximately one hundred Russian citizens from Syria, mostly women and children. However, the ministry downplayed the importance of the evacuation, with those leaving representing a mere fraction of the many thousands of Russian citizens residing in Syria. Indeed, the hopes that President Vladimir Putin will finally budge on his support for the Syrian regime are unwarranted. Russia is unlikely to change its position given that its interests in Syria are not only military and strategic, but also commercial and cultural.

CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Moscow has counted an Assad-led Syria as its closest ally in the Arab world for more than forty years. During the Cold War, many Russians moved to Syria and, in turn, many Syrian elites studied at top Russian schools such as Moscow State University and the Peoples' Friendship University. Inter-marriage occurred in both countries. The Soviet leadership, for its part, sought to groom top students from allied countries whom it could later rely on for support. Because Syria was key to the Soviet position in the Middle East, Syrians were referred to as "allies" and "friends" in public broadcasts and statements.

When the Syrian uprising began in March 2011, perhaps 100,000 Russian citizens were living there. As the Kremlin's support for Bashar al-Assad continued, some Syrian rebels began to target these Russians, making statements that they were legitimate targets. On December 17, 2012, rebels captured two Russian citizens near Latakia, along with an Italian; all three were working for the steel company Hmisho near Homs. The Russian Foreign Ministry stated that unidentified individuals had demanded payment from Hmisho for the captives' release, but no reports on their status have arrived since late December. These events only increased popular disdain in Russia toward anti-Assad forces.

COMMERCIAL INTERESTS

The fall of Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi has also contributed to Putin's obstinacy on Syria. According to Russian sources such as RIA Novosti and Utro.ru, the Kremlin lost about \$4 billion worth of weapons contracts when the Libyan regime fell, and it wants to avoid a repeat in Syria.

Syria has long been a consumer of Russian weaponry, and the arms trade only intensified after Assad and Putin came to power in 2000. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Russia accounted for 78 percent of Syria's weapons purchases between 2007 and 2012. And from 2007 to 2010, Russian arms sales to Syria reached \$4.7 billion, more than twice the figure for the previous four years, according to the Congressional Research Service. More broadly, Russia is now the world's second-largest arms exporter after the United States.

Beyond weaponry, Russian companies have invested \$20 billion in Syria since 2009, according to the *Moscow Times*. If Assad loses power, these contracts would be forfeited.

Also at stake are large Russian loans to Assad. According to flight manifests obtained by ProPublica, Moscow flew more than two hundred tons of "banknotes" to the Syrian regime in summer 2011, during periods when the fighting escalated. Such shipments may be the only reason Assad has managed to avoid bankruptcy and keep paying his forces as the country's foreign reserves have dwindled.

THE MILITARY ALLIANCE

Putin has made expansion of Russian sea power a pillar of his third presidential term. "I would like to reiterate again that the development of a powerful, effective navy is one of Russia's chief priorities," he stated on January 10, at the inauguration of Russia's first new class of submarines since 1991. Assad's fall would mean losing Russia's only military base outside the former Soviet Union -- a naval resupply center in Syria's port of Tartus.

The same week as Putin's comment, the Russian Defense Ministry announced upcoming naval exercises in the

Mediterranean Sea, which officials described as "the biggest in Russian history." Moscow gave no indications that the exercises were linked to the Syrian conflict, but Western analysts should interpret their timing as a signal that Russia does not intend to back down from its support for the regime.

THE STRATEGIC ROLE

Since 2000, Putin has sought to restore Russia as a Great Power, shaping its policy as an anti-American zero-sum game in order to position the country as a counterweight to the West in the Middle East. Syria is Russia's most important foothold in the region and a key to Putin's calculus. Syria's location -- bordering the Mediterranean, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Iraq -- makes it too important to lose.

Another reason for Putin to support Assad involves developments within Russia. The spark behind the Arab Spring -- frustration with corruption and a seeming lack of accountability for the political class -- flickers through some portions of Russian society. In December 2011, the country experienced its largest protests since the Soviet Union's fall. For Putin, more accustomed to a historically complacent population, these events must have been frightening, and he likely fears meeting the same fate as the deposed Arab leaders.

In response, Putin has sought an external enemy to rally the population around a nationalist flag. By using Syria to promote anti-Americanism, he can derive immediate political benefit -- supporting Assad means resisting the West. Just as Assad transformed his rejectionism against Israel into Syrian importance on the international stage, Russian "rejectionism" on Syria makes Moscow an important player without which decisions cannot be made.

POOR PROSPECTS FOR A RESET

Since the Syrian uprising began two years ago, Putin has supported Assad unequivocally, despite statements to the contrary. He has armed Assad, shielded him at the UN Security Council, agreed to take Syria's crude oil in exchange for refined oil products to sustain the country's military and economy, and provided loans to stave off Syrian bankruptcy.

The Obama administration has hoped to leverage the president's "reset" policy toward Russia into concessions on Syria. Despite continued overtures, however, Russian intransigence continues. After the latest trilateral meeting on Syria, held in Geneva on January 11 between UN Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi and senior U.S. and Russian diplomats, Moscow stood by its earlier position -- Assad's departure could not be a precondition for peace talks. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told Syrian opposition leaders to seek dialogue with Assad instead. This posturing followed the breakdown of a previous meeting in Istanbul, at which Putin refused to change his position despite Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's lobbying.

Perhaps Putin might consider a deal in which he lays low on Syria in return for U.S. concessions on other fronts. But such an outcome is by no means clear, nor is there any indication Washington would make such an offer.

But what will happen if Assad loses? On December 13, Russian deputy foreign minister Mikhail Bagdanov acknowledged this possibility for the first time publicly. "The opposition's victory, regrettably, cannot be ruled out," he said. The Kremlin quickly backtracked, claiming that Bagdanov was expressing the Syrian opposition's point of view. This retraction reinforces the Russian embrace of Assad, even as the military situation around Damascus becomes dire.

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