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What Underlies Russia's Ongoing Support for Assad?

Zvi Magen

Although in recent weeks the end of the Assad regime has appeared increasingly imminent, Russia has continued to support the regime consistently and uncompromisingly. Together with support from China, this Russian backing, evident since the start of the uprising in Syria some eighteen months ago, provides life support for the shaky Assad regime. Sparking friction with the international community, this support ignores the damage it causes to Russia's relations with the West and with countries in the region that are working to overthrow the Assad regime. Even now and in the face of increasing pressure, it does not appear that Russia intends to withdraw its support.

What considerations underlie this Russian policy? Beyond the claim that Russia is defending a stable, friendly regime – which is surviving longer than predicted – against the Islamist alternative, there are other considerations, not all of them directly connected to the Assad regime itself. Among Russia's main considerations is that Syria, along with Iran, is the last Russian stronghold in the Middle East. This is one of the results of the Arab Spring, which found the Russians being pushed out of the region through increasing friction with the Sunnis, who are gaining strength and who, in Russia's opinion, enjoy cooperation with the West. Syria's fall, and conceivably, Iran's fall in the future, is expected to create a contiguous string of regimes hostile to Russia throughout the expanse between North Africa and China.

In defending the Assad regime, Russia is defending the principle of no outside intervention and the Syrian people's right to determine the country's future. Indeed, at this time, no foreign military intervention is expected in Syria, whether because of Russia's position or because of the impotence of the West or the regime's military strength. This leaves the field in the hands of local actors and to a limited extent, outside actors, which gives Russia a certain freedom both to aid the regime and prepare its desired alternatives.

Beyond the specific Middle East affairs, the main foreign relations issue occupying Russia is the conflict with the West, both globally and along its borders, where it is working to contain challenges by the United States and NATO. Indeed, there have been serious

developments connected to areas essential to Russia's national security in the Caucasus, where the West is challenging Russia by working to cut off Georgia and Azerbaijan from Russia's area of influence. Turkey is also involved in this activity, challenging Russia and Iran at the same time. In addition, there are further developments in central Asia that are of concern to Russia: Uzbekistan recently withdrew from a regional defense treaty led by Russia, which means that it is joining the West, while other countries in the region are considering following in its footsteps. To Russia, this is a result of subversive US action in this essential Russian area of interest. There has also been a series of other provocative American moves, including the ongoing crisis over deployment of US anti-ballistic missile interceptors, and Russia is waging a stubborn fight to neutralize the plan.

All these considerations indicate that Russian action on the Syrian issue, as well as the campaign against the Iranian nuclear program, is intended to exploit these issues as bargaining chips for promoting Russia's goals in its negotiations with the West. In recent months, and especially since Putin's return to the presidency, a tough, crisis-ridden Russian-American dialogue has been underway. The Americans have rejected the Russian list of demands by consistently promoting their strategic programs, some of which were mentioned above. Russia has been offered – in its opinion, inadequate – compensation for its cooperation in the Middle East. In any event, the last word has not yet been spoken.

At the same time, and in addition to Russia's global considerations, Syria was and remains a vital link, particularly in overall Russian interests, far beyond the question of the regime's survival. In this situation, with the sand in Assad's hourglass apparently running out, Russia is holding a parallel dialogue with all the parties involved, including the West, regional players, and Syrian opposition elements. The main objective from Russia's point of view is achieving an understanding that will allow it to maintain its position in Syria after Assad's ouster, and with less than that, it will not cooperate with the moves to change the Syrian regime.

In this evolving situation, it is reasonable to assume that Russia does not intend to step aside and will aspire to remain an active player in any possible change that takes place in Syria. Furthermore, it appears that in the absence of a solution that is acceptable to Russia, it will not be deterred by any scenario, including the most serious. The possibility that Syria will be dismantled, with or without Assad, has also been mentioned, with scenarios that include a total loss of governability in the country and its descent into total chaos. This does not necessarily mean initiating or preferring a scenario of chaos, rather aspiring to exploit it as a lever for pressure, as the Russians see relative advantages in fishing in troubled waters, which will allow them to challenge the West. In this way they hope to advance their goals, which include meeting their demands in other sectors and ensuring Russia's influential position in future arrangements in Syria.

In recent days, Russian naval units have been concentrated off the coast of Syria. Even if the goals of this force are not entirely clear, it may be intended for use if there is a loss of governability in order to deter outside intervention and protect and rescue any Syrian regime officials or Russian security officials and civilians stationed in Syria. The Russian naval force, which has been assembled over several weeks from three naval theaters, has some fourteen naval vessels, including warships and supply ships, as well as landing ships with over 1,000 marines. Some twenty vessels, including aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines, have visited the area during the past year.

To be sure, there is no absolute consensus in Russia on the issues discussed here. There are calls in the media to continue the current policy as the main lever for exploiting the situation to Russia's benefit, with the Iranian situation also being connected to this issue. On the other hand, there are those who warn against Russian entanglement and loss of face resulting from the descent into uncontrolled violence in Syria.

It is not inconceivable that these developments likewise constitute a dilemma for Israel, which for the time being is standing aside and avoiding action. However, it is increasingly concerned that in the future, it will not be able to avoid responding to some of the serious scenarios (such as the issue of chemical weapons, for example). It would appear that in these contexts as well, Russia's role as an influential player in Syrian affairs in the future should be taken into account.

