



RUSSIA AND SYRIA

By David Satter



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<http://www.fpri.org/byauthor.html#satter>

The failure of Presidents Obama and Putin to reach agreement over Syria at the G20 summit meeting in Mexico should not have come as a surprise. The Western world has been appalled by the Assad regime's atrocities but this reaction is not shared in Russia. Among those who shape Russian foreign policy there is a widespread belief that it pays to be seen as the leader of resistance to the West, particularly if Western intervention in a given situation proves to be unsuccessful.

After the Houla massacre on May 25, in which 108 persons were killed, a third of them children, the State department said that it hoped that it would be a "turning point" in Russia's reluctance to act against Syria.

In fact, Russia supported a UN Security Council resolution condemning Syria for using artillery in the massacre in Houla but this was almost certainly because Russia, for public relations reasons, did not want to be seen as defending a specific, identifiable atrocity. Having, along with China, already vetoed two previous UN Security Council resolutions that involved sanctions, Russia, on May 30, said it was "premature" for the Council to consider new actions in the wake of Houla.

Russia has called for talks "without preconditions" between the Syrian authorities and the opposition and suggested Moscow as a venue. But this is a veiled invitation to the opposition to surrender. The presently outgunned opposition demands a cease-fire and end to repression before there can be talks.

There are several reasons why Syria can count on Russia's support. First, Russia is determined to play a role in world politics and if the only role available to it is a negative role, it prefers to play that role than remain out of the game. Russia also wants to maintain its position as an arms supplier and the Putin regime uses resistance to supposed Western pressure to shore up support at home.

Syria is the only Russian client state in the Middle East and Russia is anxious to demonstrate that it is still a force in the region. On January 8, a Russian aircraft carrier group led by the Admiral Kuznetsov made a visit to the Russian naval supply base in the Syrian city of Tartus, which has existed since the Cold War. Russian naval officers said that the carrier group visit was not connected with the "internal Syrian crisis." However, Russian state television said the voyage was a demonstration of solidarity with the Assad regime and the Assad regime also depicted the visit as a gesture of solidarity. A Syrian military delegation led by the defense minister General Dawood Rajiha boarded the Kuznetsov.

Commentaries in the Russian press have depicted Russia as defending Syria against Western imperialism.

Alexander Samsonov, writing in the Kremlin connected web site, km.ru, said that a major regional war was now inevitable and Syria and Iran will find it impossible to resist without external aid. “At the present time, Syria and Iran for Russia and China—this is the line of the front and to retreat is impossible. The next candidates for ‘modernization’ are we.”

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said that Russia is upholding “international law” in the Syrian crisis. He said that the question is “whether [the world] will operate on the charter of the UN or whether it will be a place where all that matters is the will of the stronger.”

Besides national vanity, Russia supports Syria to defend its position as an international arms supplier. According to some estimates, some 10 per cent of Russia’s global arms sales go to Syria, with current contracts estimated to be worth \$1.5 billion. The Syrian arsenal contains hundreds of Soviet built jets and attack helicopters and thousands of tanks and combat vehicles. Russia also has advisers in Syria training the Syrians to use Russian weapons.

Russia has said that it is only sending Syria weapons, such as air defense systems, that could not be used in civil conflicts. A cargo ship off the coast of Scotland, however, was reported June 19 to be carrying 12-15 refurbished attack helicopters to Syria. Although these helicopters are not new, they are heavily armored and equipped with machine guns, rockets, and missiles that can be used as weapons against civilians.

At the same time, the air defense systems that Russia acknowledges supplying to Syria could be used to combat international intervention in the conflict. Anatoly Isaykin, the general director of Rosoboronexport, the Russian arms selling agency, said, in an interview with The New York Times, “These mechanisms are really a good means of defense, a reliable defense against attacks from the air or sea. This is not a threat, but whoever is planning an attack should think about this.”

When pressed over shipments, Russian officials have responded in the language of arms dealers. They have insisted that Russia has not agreed to Western sanctions and has contracts that must be honored.

Finally, Russia is likely to continue its support for Syria because the regime is insecure and defying the West plays well domestically. The August 2008 war with Georgia, for example, was extremely popular in Russia. It was interpreted as an act of defiance of NATO which Georgia aspires to join.

The Putin regime has a broader base of support than many Arab regimes but its base is dwindling rapidly. Putin could find himself in a situation where force is the only defense of him and his entourage against a restive population, and his attitude toward Syria is also shaped by his desire to make clear his views in advance toward any future Western meddling in the affairs of authoritarian regimes.

In a statement last week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned that as a result of Russian arms deliveries to Syria, the conflict is likely to escalate dramatically. The warning was meant for Russia but it was resonant only for Westerners. In 1995, Russia under Yeltsin carried out the carpet bombing of Grozny. Nearly 20,000 persons are believed to have died in the rubble. In 2004, Russian troops opened fire with flame throwers and grenade launchers on a gymnasium filled with hostages, including hundreds of children during the Beslan school siege. Hundreds of hostages were burned alive. What is even more horrifying is the fact that the attack took place an hour after an agreement was reached for negotiations to end the standoff.

Hopes for Russian cooperation in Syria are a product of the misconceived “reset” policy. But barring a complete change in Russian attitudes, the West should not put any faith in the prospect of Russian cooperation over Syria. As long as Assad has a chance to survive, Russian support for him will continue.

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