

Kremlin's Shift On Syria Is Too Little and Late

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December 16, 2012

The  Moscow Times

Russia is shifting its position on Syria toward more cooperation with the West to secure a settlement in the 21-month civil war. Unfortunately, it may be too late to save Syria as a state.

Moscow has secured its main objective: not to allow a change of regime in a sovereign state through a UN-sanctioned international intervention. It was driven primarily by domestic policy concerns and President Vladimir Putin's fears of the Arab Spring spilling into Russia and the former Soviet Union.

It is now clear there will be no outside intervention in Syria. U.S. President Barack Obama's re-election has closed the door on the strategy advocated by some influential Republicans. There are no cheerleaders for a military option in crisis-stricken Europe.

Putin secured Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan's assurances two weeks ago in Istanbul

that Ankara would not cross into Syria to establish a security zone and would not enforce a no-fly zone over Syria. In return, Putin sent a letter to Syrian President Bashar Assad demanding that he stop using airpower against the rebels.

Moscow sees the war shifting in the rebels' favor. They have largely managed to ground the Syrian air force and now control over 60 percent of the territory. Last week, Russia's top envoy for Syria, Mikhail Bogdanov, said Assad's regime has only 1 year left to survive.

Withdrawing its support for Assad, Moscow now seeks to preserve the multi-confessional and largely secular Syrian state. Russia aims to secure the rights of the Alawite minority and prevent Islamic fundamentalists from gaining power. Moscow demands that the future Syrian army be multi-confessional, not predominantly Sunni.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton agreed on Dec. 6 in Dublin to a series of U.S.-Russia meetings on a plan to form an interim Syrian government composed of pro- and anti-Assad groups with UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi's mediation.

It won't matter. Even with Assad gone, Alawite and their paramilitary units will fight till they secure a safe haven for themselves. The rebels know they can defeat the government forces. Brahimi's initial plan calling for early elections at all levels was dead in the water.

The irony, of course, is that saving the multi-confessional Syrian state would have required the insertion of an international military force about a year ago, when Russia and China vetoed the UN Security Council resolution. Now Syria will explode.

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