

Chechen Extremists Force Putin's Syria Stance

By [Gordon Hahn](#)

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President Vladimir Putin's motives for intervening in the Syrian crisis and giving U.S. President Barack Obama a "do over" in his mishandling of the Syrian civil war have been the subject of great suspicion. Observers attribute Putin's move to various subversive ulterior motives: trying to embarrass the U.S., reviving Russian influence in the Middle East at the U.S.'s expense and supporting its Syrian "ally."

In fact, Putin's Syria gambit seeks to address two national security problems that U.S. policies create for Russia. First is the problem that Western-backed colored revolutions and "humanitarian intervention" pose. These issues have been commented on ad infinitum. In short, by reducing Western ability and will to intervene in other countries, Russia limits the risk of instability both near and within its own borders.

The second, more important problem that Putin is addressing is Russia's growing Sunni jihadi threat. Russia is saddled by its support of Shiite-ruled Iran and Syria as opposed to the numerically superior Sunnis. By preventing the demise of Syrian President Bashar Assad,

Moscow hopes to avoid strengthening the Sunni "Caucasus Emirate", or CE, with fighters who have gained experience in Syria. If a U.S. air campaign against Assad was too rough then Western and Arab arms supplies to the jihadi-dominated rebels could topple Assad and bring Islamists to power in Syria as a whole or in a smaller rump state. This would undermine stability further in the North Caucasus region, strengthening the CE and offering it new opportunities.

Several hundred fighters from Russia and the CE are fighting in Syria. Most are under the al-Qaida-tied group Islamic State Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), fighting in a subunit of some 1,000 foreign forces called the Jeish Mujahirin va Ansar (The Army of the Emigre Jihadists and Helpers) or JMA.

The JMA's emir, Abu Umar al-Shishani, is an ethnic Chechen from Chechnya. His top "naib," or deputy, is also a Chechen. Moreover, Shishani is the commander of the ISIL's northern front, making him and his Caucasian mujahedeen major players among the Syrian rebels. Thus, the CE and associated Russian-speaking jihadi from the North Caucasus, the rest of Russia, the South Caucasus and Central Asia are playing the leading role among the foreign mujahedeen. The fighters hail from across the world, and the Chechen faction is playing a prominent part among the jihadi forces in Syria, now the central front in the global jihadi revolutionary movement.

Syria's failing state is thus incubating a new jihadi force centered around the CE that is bound to turn on Russia and the rest of Eurasia. CE-tied mujahedeen are already garnering greater combat readiness and stronger ties to jihadi from across the globe. A jihadist victory in Syria's civil war will yield it various weapons and a more emboldened global jihadi movement centered closer to the front in the Caucasus.

Initially, CE emir Doku Umarov was ambivalent about CE mujahedeen fighting in Syria since they are draining the CE's capacity at home. However, he blessed their role this summer and even appointed a CE envoy to the JMA. The Caucasian mujahedeen in the JMA now openly declare their CE affiliation. Umarov came to understand that while in the short-term the drain of CE fighters to Syria would damage jihad in the Caucasus, in the long-term the CE could benefit greatly in terms of more battle-hardened cadres, new recruits, new supply channels and perhaps some of Assad's chemical or biological weapons.

It is very likely that all of the groups who help the jihadi come to power in Syria would ask for a share of Assad's weapons of mass destruction. This could enable Umarov and the CE to carry out chemical weapons attacks before or during the February 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi or elsewhere in Russia proper. CE mujahedeen have been promising to attack the Sochi Games since 2010, when its most powerful Dagestani network issued such a threat. In February 2011, the CE's Kabardino-Balkaria branch, consisting in part of ethnic Circassian Kabardins, carried out what looked like a practice run for an attack on the Olympics that included attacks on multiple targets at an area ski resort. Russian intelligence claimed earlier this year to have foiled one CE plot being hatched in Abkhazia that targeted the Olympics. This summer, Umarov called on the mujahedeen to attack Sochi in order to prevent the Games from being held in February and to attack the Games if they begin.

Thus, the jihadi threat emanating from Syria makes undermining Assad and stirring up

the hornets' nest there any further an extremely dangerous proposition for Russia. This threat is especially grave for Russia geostrategically, given the unfolding history of Western actions along Russia's Muslim southern periphery. The U.S. has intervened and then withdrawn, leaving states in the region in the lurch to deal with the jihadi threat from South and Central Asia and to the Persian Gulf region. In sum, there are many reasons for Putin to act as he has.

Unfortunately, Putin has not been able to articulate Russia's jihadi threat in connection with Syria in such specific terms. Such a statement would be an acknowledgement of vulnerability uncharacteristic for a Russian leader and could affect attendance at the Games. Both Russia and Putin personally are invested in the Olympic's success.

The Syrian jihadi danger threatens U.S. allies in Europe and the Middle East as well, given the large numbers of fighters from those regions among the groups fighting in Syria. The CE threat would also reverberate further afield, as the group has been involved in several operations beyond Russia's borders since 2010. CE operatives have planned and participated in three ultimately interdicted terrorist plots in Belgium, 2010, the Czech Republic, 2011, and Azerbaijan, 2012. Closer to home, the CE definitely inspired the successful Boston Marathon bombings that killed four and wounded 260. Moreover, in 2010 and 2011 the CE thrice published a fatwa supporting the use of WMDs in order to kill 30 million Americans.

In the long-term, Assad and his forces are a lesser threat than the Sunni jihadi threat in Syria.

All this makes it imperative that the U.S., Europe and Russia work together to fight this grave threat. While Putin may be trying to defeat the principles of "humanitarian intervention" outside of UN auspices and perhaps protect limited Russian interests in Syria, he is most interested in containing Russia's jihadi threat.

To be sure, Putin's weapon extraction plan for Syria is fraught with technical, political and military difficulties. But for both Russia and the West, the alternatives are almost certain to be catastrophe.

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