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Russian, Syrian Officials Meet Amid Growing Consensus on Islamic State

By Matthew Bodner

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Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin

At Thursday evening's high-level meeting in Russia's resort town of Sochi, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin meet Syrian Finance Minister Ismail Ismail against a profoundly different international backdrop than the previous sessions of their intergovernmental commission.

When President Vladimir Putin stuck his neck out last fall in defense of Syrian President Bashar Assad in the face of a potential U.S.-led intervention in the Syrian civil war — a possibility prompted by the Syrian government's alleged use of chemical weapons against civilians — Russia was roundly criticized by Washington and its allies.

Now the West appears to be coming around, recognizing Assad as less of a threat than the Islamic State — a radical Islamist group that has fought the Syrian regime, but that now pushes up against the borders of Turkey, a NATO member.

As such, Russia's controversial support for the Assad regime has, by some accounts, been vindicated. With Russia and the U.S. agreeing to share intelligence on the Islamic State, Moscow's ties to Damascus — a key source of information on the Islamist group — has become an asset, rather than a liability to Russia's diplomatic standing. In this context, Rogozin's meeting may result in greater Russian support for the embattled regime in Damascus.

Yury Barmin, a Russian Middle East expert based in the United Arab Emirates, told The Moscow Times that such commissions between Russia and other nations are typically just ordinary discussion forums, but sometimes they are used to negotiate new defense contracts.

"In the case of Syria, the commission plays a very importation role. For Russians, maintaining routine contact with Syria is becoming extremely difficult now because of the civil war in the country," Barmin said.

As for the meeting's official agenda, the Russian daily newspaper Kommersant reported Thursday that the Syrian delegation will request from Moscow a $1 billion loan in a debt-for-financial-aid transaction. The report cited an unidentified source close to the commission.

According to Kommersant's source, Damascus wants the money to continue funding social services, but also to stabilize the Syrian pound — which has fallen from 45 per U.S. dollar to 164 over the course of the civil war, which began in 2011.

But the source said Moscow was not prepared to dish out such a large sum of money. Assad's regime remains under strong Western financial sanctions, precluding the possibility of a formal money transfer — not to mention the fact that Russia has no reasonable guarantee that Assad's Syria will be able to pay the money back.

Confirmation is unlikely to be forthcoming, however, as the results of the intergovernmental commission's meetings are never publicized.

But Barmin suspects that these commissions are used for far more that discussing aid packages, financial or otherwise. They may also be used to coordinate policies vis-a-vis the West and possible international efforts against the Islamic State, Barmin says.

Officially, Moscow has only committed to financial and humanitarian aide for Assad's regime. In May, Moscow agreed to a loan of 240 million euros ($305 million) to finance Syrian social programs, which have taken hit hard by the long lasting civil war.

However, behind the scenes, media reports suggest that Russia's involvement in Syria has extended beyond token aide packages. Last December, Russia's Soyuzneftegaz signed a $90 million deal with Syria's oil ministry for oil exploration rights off the coast of Syria between Tartus and Banias.

Reuters reported in January that Moscow had dispatched several large Antonov cargo planes packed with military hardware ranging from armored vehicles to guided bombs. Additionally, though unconfirmed, Reuters reported that Russian intelligence advisers were on the ground in Syria helping Assad's forces operate drones to scout and analyze rebel movements.

Speculation that Russia is providing intelligence support to Assad was bolstered earlier this

month when photos taken by the Syrian Free Army — an anti-Assad rebel group — of an abandoned Russian electronic surveillance outpost in Syria were circulated online.

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