The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russia's Vested Interests in Supporting Assad

By Josh Cohen

October 23, 2014



As the Syrian civil war drags on and the situation in the Middle East continues to spiral out of control, Russia remains a steadfast supporter of Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime. On the political side, Russia has consistently provided Assad with support at the United Nations, and Russia is also the key arms conduit for the Syrian regime. From tanks to attack helicopters, the Syrian military is heavily dependent on Russian weaponry.

More recently, the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) revealed its capture of a secret Russian-Syrian spy facility in southern Syria. Videos and documents released by the FSA demonstrated a whole new level of Russian support for the Assad regime that was not previously known.

The base had been run by Russian special forces units from the Russian military's chief foreign intelligence unit (GRU) and a number of senior Russian military and Defense Ministry officials had previously visited the facility as well, thus demonstrating that Russia is actually directly supporting the regime on the ground against opposition fighters.

This support may be explained by the following factors.

Economics

From Mig-29 fighters to Yak-130 training jets, armored vehicles, drones and guided bombs, the total value of Syrian contracts with the Russian defense industry likely exceeds $4 billion as of 2013.

Likewise, Russian state-owned firm Soyuzneftegaz recently signed a $100 million exploration deal with Damascus to explore offshore drilling opportunities in the Levant basin. While a $100 million contract is small by oil and gas standards, the recent massive gas finds in the Israeli and Cypriot sections of the Eastern Mediterranean shelf hint at the potential that Russia wants to cash in on. Russia has long been keen to protect Gazprom's lucrative gas sales to the European market, and the Soyuzneftegaz-Syria deal is one way for Russia to hedge its bets regarding the sources of gas it can sell to Europe.

Military

Russia recently announced its intentions to implement a massive expansion of its Black Sea Fleet, procuring more than 80 new ships by 2020, as well as building a second naval base for this fleet at its Black Sea port of Novorossiisk.

To ensure that the presence of Russia's massive new fleet is able to project power beyond the Black Sea, Russia longtime naval base in the Syrian port city of Tartus will be critical. Since 1971, the Russians have used Tartus to provide refueling and maintenance when its warships visit the Mediterranean. Without the use of Tartus, Russian warships would need to return more frequently to the Black Sea via the narrow waters of the Bosporus — transiting through the waters of NATO member Turkey.

Geopolitics

Russia has made a substantial effort to re-engage in the Middle East. Most critically, the Russians have just signed a huge $3.5 billion arms sale with Egypt. This sale was particularly attractive to Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's regime in Egypt, given that the U.S. froze weapons deliveries to Egypt after the Egyptian military overthrew the democratically elected government of Mohammed Morsi and instituted a bloody crackdown on Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood supporters. Egyptian military officials have duly noted that the absence of Russian conditions on military sales, and by standing with Assad — Russia's closest Middle East ally during the Cold War — Putin's message to states like Egypt is that "unlike those fickle Americans, you can count on us."

Terrorism

Finally — and perhaps most importantly — Putin's fear of Islamic, specifically Sunni, fundamentalism drives his support for Assad. In the last 30 years, Russia has engaged in its own long-running battle against Islamic radicalism — first in Afghanistan and for the last 15 years in the Caucasus — and Putin has seen Islamist jihadists in Chechnya and the Caucasus committing terrorist attacks elsewhere in Russia. Since 2000, there have been 81 attacks by 124 suicide bombers in Russia, killing or wounding almost 4,500 people.

This concern of Islamic fundamentalism à la russe is an existential one for the Kremlin. Indeed, from Putin's perspective, the civil war in Syria looks similar to Chechnya, where a wide variety of Chechen opposition groups eventually came to include a strong component of Sunni jihadi fighters. From the Russian perspective, Putin is surely well aware that many Russian Muslims — including a large number of Chechens — are fighting in Syria.

Indeed, one of the Islamic State's most effective commanders, Abu Omar al-Shishani, known as "the Chechen," recently offered a $5 million reward for the assassination of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, a close Putin ally. The group has even threatened Putin directly, recently releasing a video stating: "This is a message to you, Vladimir Putin. ... We will liberate Chechnya and the entire Caucasus, God willing. Your throne has already teetered. It is under threat and will fall when we come to you because Allah is truly on our side."

As if on cue, shortly after the Islamic State released the video, a suicide bomber struck the Chechen capital of Grozny. In this context, the prospect of hundreds of radicalized and battle-hardened fighters from Chechnya and the North Caucasus returning from Syria to relaunch their jihad at home is surely deeply concerning for the Kremlin.

Given Russia's deep support for the Syrian regime, are there any factors that might make Putin withdraw his support for Assad? This is extremely unlikely to occur anytime soon, and Russia's interests would need to be taken into account in any final deal that eases Assad out of power in the future.

At a minimum, we can surmise that the given Putin's concerns about terrorism and "blowback" from Syria to the Caucasus, Russia would likely insist that Assad be replaced at least initially by an authoritarian "strongman" who is capable of continuing the fight against the jihadi groups — likely limiting any acceptable Assad replacement to an existing regime-ally, perhaps from the military.

Furthermore, Putin would likely insist that Assad's departure be somewhat voluntary. Putin would likely not want to be seen as throwing a close ally like Assad under the bus. Any post-Assad arrangement will almost likely need to take account of Russia's economic and military interests in Syria. While Syria is far from being Russia's largest trading partner, for symbolic reasons alone it is difficult to envision Putin accepting a new Sunni-dominated regime in Syria unless it demonstrated a commitment to respecting Russia's existing interests.

While Western policymakers may be frustrated by Putin's long-time support for Assad, for now, Putin's unswerving support for the regime seems set to continue indefinitely.

Josh Cohen is a former USAID project officer involved in managing economic reform projects in the former Soviet Union. He contributes to a number of foreign policy-focused media outlets and tweets at @jkc_in_dc

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