The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Putin Is Angling for a Quick Exit From Syria

By Vladimir Frolov

October 25, 2015

Russian President Vladimir Putin is pivoting to diplomacy on Syria to capitalize on the perception of Russia's military success after four weeks of air strikes. He is in a rush to switch gears before the Syrian army's offensive stalls and Russia's key ally is exposed as a spent force.

Having achieved his primary objective of positioning Russia as an indispensable global power on a par with the United States, Putin is angling for a quick exit before the going gets tough.

Putin's diplomatic plan, borrowing heavily from his Chechen template, centers on the need to split the anti-Assad opposition and co-opt those of its elements who would agree to hold the transition talks with Syrian President Bashar Assad and stop fighting the regime, while turning their arms against the Islamic State.

During Assad's clandestine visit to Moscow last week, he was told to agree to share power and Russia's military support with those moderate opposition groups that Russia would be

able to incite and co-opt into a "counter-terrorist coalition" to fight the Islamic State. Those opposition groups who did not join the "coalition" would be labeled Islamic State and bombed into dust.

It's a cynically clever plan to create a new reality in Syria by turning its civil war into a counter-terrorist operation. Moscow, however, needs assistance from the United States, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, who back moderate opposition groups, to bring at least some of them to the negotiating table with Assad, while cutting off military support to those who refuse. The task is all the more difficult since Russia now bombs all those groups.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called upon the Free Syrian Army to accept Russian air support to fight the Islamic State and join talks with Assad to prepare for early presidential and parliamentary elections.

The presidential elections are a cover for transitioning Assad out. Putin would personally guarantee that Assad would not run, but someone from his family or clan might.
The parliamentary elections would usher in the constitutional reform and elect a powerful prime minister with full executive powers. The prime minister would be a Sunni.

Russia would guarantee amnesty to every opposition member, while the opposition would not prosecute Assad for his crimes. Russia would keep a military presence in Syria to guarantee the implementation of the peace plan.

As always with Putin, it's a recklessly daring plan, but it may just work.

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Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/10/25/putin-is-angling-for-a-quick-exit-from-syria-a50459