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The Syrian Crisis: Russian Policy Risks Wider Conflict

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Synopsis

Russian support of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's crackdown on anti-government insurgents bodes ill for Moscow's ability to prevent chaos and anarchy in Syria and risks wider conflict in the Fertile Crescent and beyond.

Commentary

Russian policy towards the Syrian crisis is seen internationally as supporting president Bashar al Assad's brutal crackdown on anti-government insurgents and opposition protestors. In Syria, where intense fighting has spread from Damascus to Aleppo, many believe the international community has abandoned them and left to fend for themselves against the superior firepower of the Syrian military.

Russia's pro-Assad policy bodes ill for Moscow's ability to contribute to preventing a descent into chaos and anarchy by a post-Assad Syria. It also holds out little promise for Russia's ability to help prevent the Syrian crisis from spilling across borders into Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey. The risk for Russia is that its pro-Assad policy will produce the very situation it is seeking to avoid: increased volatility and conflict across the Fertile Crescent that could reinforce already restive population groups and Islamic militants in its own Muslim republics. It also risks troubling its relations with post-revolt states in the Middle East and North Africa where public opinion has little sympathy for the Assad regime and its perceived backers.

Russia's Islamist militants

Recent attacks on two prominent Muslim clerics in the Russian autonomous oil-rich republic of Tartarstan on the Volga River, may help explain Russian support for the Assad regime. Within minutes of each other in July, Tartarstan's deputy mufti was assassinated and the mufti wounded in two separate but carefully timed attacks.

The two men, Valilulla Yakupov and Idius Faizov, were known for their criticism of militant Islam, and their support for Russian federal government efforts to isolate the militants and their commercial interest in the lucrative business of pilgrimages to the holy city of Mecca. To counter the militants, who are spreading out from their base in Chechnya and the Caucasus, the two muftis had fired extremist clerics and banned the use of religious textbooks from ultra-conservative Saudi Arabia.

The influx of radical clerics was in response to a call by Chechen separatist leader Doku Umarov, the self-

described emir of an Islamic emirate in the Caucasus, for militants to extend their area of operations from the Caucasus to lands that once were part of the Golden Horde, a medieval Muslim state ruled by a Tartar-Mongol dynasty. Tartarstan, with its oil wealth and 4 million residents of which half are Muslim, is for Umarov, a logical target. He has claimed responsibility for last year's attack on a Moscow airport and a 2010 bombing in the city's metro system that together killed 75 people.

A small price to pay

Umarov's ideological and geographical ambitions go a long way in explaining Russia's otherwise incomprehensible support for a brutal regime in Syria that has proved incapable of defeating an increasingly well-armed and effective insurgency. Russian support has earned it the scorn of the West and the Arab world and bodes ill for the future of Russian relations with a post-Assad Syria and others in the Arab world. Chambers of commerce in Saudi Arabia have already refused to meet with Russian trade delegations and a Saudi contractor has broken its commercial ties to its Russian counterparts in protest against Russian policy.

That may be a relatively small price to pay from Russia's perspective which views the Middle East much like the United States did prior to the 9/11 attacks. Like pre-9/11 Washington, Moscow sees autocratic regimes in the region as pillars of stability, in a world that otherwise would produce Islamists, as the only buffer against chaos and anarchy.

The civil war in Syria where Islamists dominate the insurgency, the Islamist electoral victories in Egypt and Tunisia, and the political uncertainty in Libya and Yemen reinforce a view of the popular revolts sweeping the region as a development that is too close for comfort to Russia's soft underbelly in the Caucasus. It also strengthens Russian perceptions of US and European support of the revolts as cynical hypocrisy that ultimately could target autocratic rule in Russia itself.

Then president George W. Bush, in a rare recognition of the pitfalls of decades of US policy in the Middle East and North Africa, acknowledged within weeks of the 9/11 attacks, that support for autocratic regimes that squashed all expressions of dissent, had created the feeding ground for jihadist groups focused on striking at Western targets. It is a lesson that appears to have bypassed Russian decision and policy makers as they stubbornly support a Syrian regime whose downfall is no longer a question of if but when.

Russian suspicions of Western sanctions against Syria and non-military support for the rebels may not be totally unfounded, but Moscow has done little to give substance to its calls for an end to the fighting and a political solution that would incorporate elements of the Assad regime. In failing to do so, it has allowed the situation in Syria to go beyond the point of no return and risks paying a heavy price in the longer term. As a result, the lessons of 9/11 could yet come to haunt Moscow.

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