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Why would Putin be happy with or without a U.S. war in Syria?

by *Ahmed E. Souaiaia**

Talking to reporters after the conclusion of the G20 meeting, the president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, declared that any military intervention in Syria without UNSC authorization is an illegal act of aggression. He also said that his country will supply (sell, that is) the Syrian government with weapons to defend itself. This statement, in a sense, clarifies an earlier declaration by his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, when he said that if the U.S. starts a war in Syria, Russia will not be part of it. Some analysts thought that Lavrov's statement signaled Russia's readiness to abandon Assad. The increased number of Russia warships near Syria and Putin's statement reveal a different strategy.

When the U.S. provided weapons and training to the 1970-80's Afghan rebels who exhausted the Soviet Union to the point of collapse, Putin was a KGB officer then. Now a president, he is well aware of how the U.S. exhausted the Soviet Union using proxy fighters and without committing American troops to the decade and a half long war in Afghanistan. The Soviet Union on the other hand, bled money and troops in a war of attrition. Putin, publicly, likes to compare the possible war on Syria to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Privately, however, he might be thinking of the 1980's conflict in Afghanistan. By refusing to send troops to support the Syrian government and providing it with sophisticated weapons instead, he is adopting the American strategy of the 1980's. He might be hoping that the U.S. will be dragged into a protracted war of attrition similar to the one that, in addition to other factors, caused the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The similarities are striking. In the 1980's, the U.S. worked with its ally, Saudi Arabia to sharpen the propaganda campaign against the regime in Afghanistan and its backer, the Soviet Union. Consequently, tens of thousands of religious Wahhabis ([using Secretary Clinton words](#)) from the Arab world gathered in military training camps in Pakistan to begin their holy war against the secular Afghan regime and its Soviet backers. The outcome is well known.

Today, again, with U.S. consent, Saudi Arabia and Qatar launched a propaganda war painting Assad as a brutal dictator and an agent of Russia and Iran. They facilitated the transfer of religious zealots from Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, the Gulf States, and even Europe to Turkey where they received training and weapons. They were then helped to sneak into Syria. Today, it is estimated that 10,000 foreigners fighting on the side of the Free Syrian Army in Syria for a single purpose: overthrowing the Syrian government. But what would happen after the fall of the government is anyone's guess because each group of rebels has a different agenda. The engineers of this civil war reckoned that Assad would fall in months, if not weeks. Three years later, it appears that Assad is actually reversing the rebels' earlier gains. Saudi Arabia decided to pressure its ally, the U.S. to do more to hasten the fall of the Syrian regime. Hence Obama's decision to launch military strikes to degrade Assad's military capabilities.

Obama faces strong resistance at home and abroad. While attending the meeting of the G20, he hoped that he can drum some support and build a coalition. Only Canada, France, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey supported a military strike with or without UNSC consent. He returns to Washington to build support at home for his war of choice despite a low 20% public support--a 20% of Americans unlikely to be from among the people who actually voted for him.

Putin does not need to prevent the attack and he does not seem interested in doing so. He seems interested in providing the Syrian government with the means to absorb the first strikes and react in a protracted way, forcing the U.S. administration and its allies to do more over a long time, just like what happened in Afghanistan in the 1980's. In other words, Putin is equally happy with or without a war that would cost his country nothing (Assad is paying for the weapons). As this deadly game between giants unfold, more Syrians will be killed, more civilians will be forced out of their homes, and more physical damage will be inflicted on an already devastated country, transforming Syria into another failed state due to acts of others.

The U.S., too, will bleed money and credibility because of another purposeless war. The way out for President Obama is to realize that he is being goaded into war by Saudi Arabia and an imaginary red line, to resist the sense of grandeur and hubris that comes with the privilege of commanding the most powerful army in the world today, and to launch a new diplomatic strategy initiative that will transform the Middle East and end the war in Syria by forcing all parties to reach a political settlement. Geneva-2 remains the only path on which all (responsible) regional and global powers agree, it may not be an option if he attacks the Syrian government.