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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Syrian Civil War: Russia Forges Risky Ties with Islamists**

By James M. Dorsey

### **Synopsis**

*In a strategy fraught with risk, Russian President Vladimir Putin is exploiting deep-seated domestic anger at the United States and fundamentalist Russian Orthodoxy to justify his support for embattled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and forge an alliance with Islamist forces.*

### **Commentary**

RUSSIAN PRESIDENT Vladimir Putin is countering foreign criticism of his pro-Assad policy and Russia's declining credibility in sections of Arab public opinion by forging ties with Islamist detractors.

In a move that serves both Putin's domestic and Russia's foreign interests, a cross section of Islamist and secular political opinion in the Middle East and North Africa recently attended a Vaidal Discussion Club conference organised by the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the RIA Novosti news agency and Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, Moscow, with the backing of the Russian Foreign Ministry.

### **Forging commonalities**

Officially intended as a brainstorming on rising Islamist political forces in the region stretching from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the Gulf that is wracked by popular protest and discontent, the conference offered Russian officials, academics and journalists an opportunity to drive home the notion that conservative Russian Orthodox Christians and Islamists share a common value system.

Reduced international credibility for backing Al-Assad is a small price to pay, particularly at a time when Putin has been travelling inside the country to regain some of his lost popularity. If all foreign policy is domestic, President Putin should be a popular man. He is standing up to the United States and the West, which in the eyes of many Russians were the reasons for their country's decline as a super power and economic hardship. A significant slice of Russian public opinion believes that Russia's current problems stem from the US imposing neo-liberal policies on it in the 1990s.

### **Catching several flies in one swoop**

In reaching out to the Islamists, Russia hopes to catch several flies in one fell swoop. It aligns itself, despite

differences over Syria, with a political force that is on the rise and demonstrates that it can still wield influence in the Middle East and North Africa. Islamists have won post-revolt elections in Egypt and Tunisia and are a major force in Libya and Yemen – the four countries that witnessed the toppling of their autocratic leaders in the last two years – and are an important segment in the armed resistance to the Al-Assad regime in Syria. It also serves Russia in its confrontation with Islamist insurgents in the Caucasus.

To achieve its goal, Russia deliberately included arch conservative Russian Orthodox officials and journalists among the participants in Marrakech who represent an important segment of Russian society. According to a prominent Russian analyst: “The Soviet era is over. The post-Soviet era is over. There is nothing to fill the vacuum. Logically something pre-Soviet will fill the vacuum. It is likely to fail, but for now that is an ultra-conservative streak of Russian Orthodoxy”.

In exchanges with Islamists from Egypt, Iran, Lebanese group Hezbollah and Palestine’s Hamas, among others, Russian Orthodox conservatives left more liberal Arabs and Westerners aghast at the length to which they were willing to go in their wooing of the Islamists. Conservative Russian Orthodox journalists and officials asserted that Western culture was in decline while Oriental culture was on the rise, that gays and gender equality threaten a woman’s right to remain at home and serve her family and that Iran should be the model for women’s rights.

A senior Russian official told the conference that people understood the manipulation employed by Western democracies. However, he said, religious values offered a moral and ethical guideline that guarded against speculation and economic bubbles while traditional Islamic concepts coincided with their guidelines.

### **A strategy that could backfire**

Russia’s deployment of conservative Russian Orthodoxy could well help Putin and Moscow further their interests, but it is also a strategy that could backfire. It could associate Russia with a force that ultimately proves incapable of leading reform. Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood are under fire for failing to make good on the goals of the popular revolt that overthrew President Hosni Mubarak, including greater freedom, dismantling of the Mubarak-era repressive machinery, corruption and economic reform. Similarly, Tunisia’s Islamist-led government has yet to demonstrate that it can manage the country’s post-revolt transition.

The difficulties Egyptian and Tunisian Islamists are experiencing in making the move from clandestine groups to inclusive administrations has prompted Islamists elsewhere to rethink a too early acceptance of responsibility and power. Jordanian Muslim Brothers boycotted elections earlier this year officially in protest against gerrymandering, but also with an eye on what was happening elsewhere in the region.

Similarly, Russia’s position on Syria is likely to become ever more unpalatable as the violence in Syria on both sides of the divide becomes ever more brutal. If and when Al-Assad is forced out of office, Russia’s alliance with the Islamists could identify it with one faction rather than as an independent player in what is likely to be a prolonged, ugly and bloody struggle for power.

Finally, Islamists are likely to maintain their support for their brethren in the Caucasus irrespective of their relations with Moscow. That would render Russian foreign policy in the perceptions of many as purely opportunistic and undermine Moscow’s claim that its policies, including its support of Al-Assad, are based on principles such as non-interference in the domestic affairs of others.

Said a prominent Russian analyst: “It’s a brilliant strategy if it works. The problem is that if we end up with egg in our face, we will be further from home than we are now”.

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