



Putin's "Sacred Mission" in Syria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Russia's intervention in Syria cannot be fully explained by strategic or economic factors. Russian political culture, which has been permeated since the fifteenth century by a messianic vision of apocalyptic redemption, has long been a significant guiding factor in the decision-making of Russia's leaders.

On September 30, 2015, Vladimir Putin ordered Russian warplanes into Syria to begin regular aerial bombardments of targets that Moscow defined as sources of "jihadi terror." The intervention followed an official invitation from the embattled regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who had asked his Russian ally for help against the "jihadists." The Kremlin's official statements described jihadists as forces that threatened stability within and beyond Syria's borders. Hence, many observers initially assumed that Putin's main ambition was to destroy the Islamic State, Al-Nusra, and other terrorist organizations.

Yet from the outset, Russian warplanes primarily targeted the Free Syrian Army and other armed organizations considered by most to be moderate, but that constituted a threat to the Alawite regime's strategic centers. Not until November 2015, weeks after the Syrian campaign had begun, did the Russians shift their military focus to the Islamic State.

Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev was unequivocal about Russia's intentions. "Russia has no plans to stop its bombing campaign against rebel positions in Syria until Moscow's allies in Damascus can achieve peace on favorable terms," he said in an interview. According to Medvedev, Russia would continue to target any of Assad's opponents, for "they are all bandits and

terrorists.” Putin wishes to present himself as a loyal friend to Assad, his only Middle Eastern ally, whose regime Moscow hopes to preserve.

Some contend that Putin decided to intervene primarily to distract the West from his aggression in the Ukraine. Still others maintain that Putin’s central aim was to offset the humiliation of having lost extensive territory following the breakdown of the USSR, a calamity Putin considers “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.” According to this premise, Russia is striving in Syria to convey the image of a superpower after two decades of “submissive” foreign policy vis-à-vis the US. If we are to trust Medvedev’s most recent statements, Russia has revived the Cold War during its president’s third term in office.

Traditionally, Western scholars have explained Russia’s aggressive Middle Eastern policy initiatives by its wish to access warm water ports. While access to the Syrian port Tartus is certainly important, it is not critical, because the Crimea’s Sevastopol does not freeze in winter. Thus, it appears that even key geopolitical factors are insufficient to validate the new Russian adventure.

Russia’s urgent need for access to the Mediterranean, which borders on obsession, may not be explicable solely by strategic or economic factors. The tendency to intervene in foreign conflicts might have to do with patterns of Russian historical development, and might reveal more profound and essential, if unappreciated, patterns in Russian political culture. These patterns may in fact have become integral parts of the national identity, guiding its leaders and determining policy. The origins of these patterns are traceable to the fifteenth century.

In 1453, the Byzantine Empire was defeated by the Turks. In Russia, the fall of Constantinople was seen as a divine punishment to the Greeks for straying from true Orthodoxy. In 1492, Metropolitan Zosimus called Moscow “the new city of Constantine,” the original capital of Christianity. In the first quarter of the sixteenth century, Philotheus, a monk in the Pskov monastery, wrote a memorandum to Tsar Vasili III in which he developed this idea further.

The “first Rome” and the “second Rome” (Constantinople), Philotheus claimed, had lapsed into heresy and ceased to be the centers of the Christian world, and should be replaced by Moscow. Because of their great sins, the “two Romes have fallen, a third stands, and a fourth there will not be.” Until the day of final redemption, Philotheus wrote, Moscow would be the spiritual center of the whole Christian world. This idea became known as “Moscow — the Third Rome.”

Russia's role was to be properly messianic, with Moscow taking upon itself no less than the "special responsibility ... [for] the salvation of all humanity." For centuries, this doctrine remained an integral part of the Russian national mythology and the "fundamental principle of the official ideology" of the Russian state. The dogma justified Russian imperial ambitions, insofar as it legitimized the idea that it was Russia's destiny to be a "light unto the nations" and to lead the world, which had lost true faith, to its final salvation.

Ever since this dogma crystallized in the sixteenth century, Russians have been persistently taught that their political history is "suffused with sacred significance," representing "the culminating chapter of a sequence of historical events *leading up to and including the apocalypse*." Many experts regarded the "reality of the apocalypse as an historical event . . . [that] can be seen with great frequency through the records of Russian history."

The key here is that Russia's messianic role is assumed, regardless of the nature of the political regime—be it tsarist, Soviet, or post-Soviet. Historians have underscored "various parallels between this conception of Russia's special historical responsibilities as the head of the true Christian church and the Soviet Union's special historical responsibilities as the guardian of one true (Marxist-Leninist) doctrine of communism." Putin adapted the idea for the post-Soviet reality.

Following the 2008 economic crisis and the 2011 public protests against election fraud, Putin realized that he could not sustain his regime's legitimacy or maintain mass support without a tradition-based messianic mission. He did not invent a new ideology but simply reformulated and popularized the vital concept of Russia's "greatness." That the Russian state is "great," according to the time-honored meaning of the word, means that it directs the world along a visionary path towards a redemptive goal.

Since 2012, Putin has insisted that Western societies "have moved away from their roots" and forsaken their "Christian values," which has led to "degradation and . . . a profound demographic and moral crisis." Unlike those societies, Russia has returned to the path of true faith, which, according to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, has triggered Western hostility—presumably because Russia's Orthodox Christian goals are at odds with those of the apostates.

Putin's nationalist supporters emphasize the sacred aspirations that supposedly guide Moscow's policies in faraway lands. The ever-popular stage star Zhanna Bichevskaia, for example, sang in a hit performance in May 2014 that "[we] will recapture Russia's Sevastopol. The Crimean peninsula

will be Russian again [as well as] our sovereign Bosphorus, our Constantinople, and Jerusalem, the shrine of humanity."

Putin is clearly counting on the fact that over the centuries, the Russian people have absorbed the idea that expansion is spiritually justified. To be a good (and popular) leader in their eyes means to be a messianic leader pursuing a messianic foreign policy. This, in turn, means becoming actively involved in unsettling ventures that have the potential to lead to a spectacular, apocalypse-like development.

The Syrian conflict undoubtedly contains this potential. It is an opportunity a traditional Russian leader must seize. He is, after all, the one representing the "light unto the nations." The culture he embodies must, by virtue of its visionary mission, take up its obligation to lead human history toward its apotheosis. Viewed in those terms, the Middle East is a special attraction.

According to a national survey, conducted a few days after the beginning of Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war, more than two-thirds, or 68% of respondents, were following the developments in Syria. Of that total, 62% thought that Russia should not remain neutral in the conflict. Significantly, 56% of respondents blamed not the Syrian rebels or the Assad regime in the prolonged and bloody conflict, but the US and its allies. Sixty-six percent supported Putin's decision to begin air raids. About a month later, "Putin's approval rating...reached an all-time high of nearly 90 percent largely thanks to his military moves in Syria, according to a new nationwide poll."

Modern-day Russians are oppressed politically and economically, and their government's policies at home and abroad are highly unlikely to alleviate that oppression. Yet Russians support Putin's Middle Eastern adventures. That is because they impart the clear message that Putin's guiding principles in Syria are in line with Russia's traditional messianic aspirations, as outlined by the time-honored doctrine of "Moscow the Third Rome."

Putin's sudden statements of a few days ago about partly disengaging from the Syrian conflict caused much commotion in the press and a great deal of speculation as to what the Russians might be up to now. But a partial military disentanglement does not by any means imply that Putin is about to give up on the Middle East.

As former US Naval Intelligence officer J.E. Dyer notes, Russia has already "punched a military air route to Syria through Iran and northern Iraq"—an option it has tried in vain to secure for itself since the end of WWII, and in which it was consistently thwarted by the US. Furthermore, "by *not* settling

Syria through force of arms,” Putin is netting all the numerous advantages of fishing in the muddy waters of the Mediterranean crisis. Like the leaders of Iran, Putin sees the entire region as part of a worldwide “theater of war and influence,” and acts with long-term and visionary goals in mind.

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