

Russia on the situation in Syria

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The actions Russia has taken during the political crisis in and around Syria, and the rhetoric of Russian politicians, have by no means been unanimous. On one hand, Russia is actively supporting Bashar Assad's regime. In October 2011, it vetoed the UN Security Council resolution to impose sanctions on Syria; and in January 2012 it sent Damascus a consignment of arms, and Russian warships made a goodwill visit to the Syrian port of Tartus. Moreover, reports have appeared in the Russian press that a new contract to supply Syria with training combat aircraft will be signed. Russian politicians have warned that Western countries are preparing to intervene in Syria.

On the other hand, Russia has established quasi-official contacts with representatives of the Syrian opposition and urged the authorities in Damascus to hold talks with them. Russia put forward its own proposal for a resolution in the UNSC forum, which criticised both Assad and the opposition, but did not gain support for it among other members of the Security Council. There was also press speculation about a Russian-prepared peace plan for Syria, which would have provided for a power-sharing between the regime and the opposition.

Commentary

- The development of the Arab revolutions over the last twelve months has weakened Russia's position in the Middle East, and Damascus is Moscow's last remaining close partner among the Arab countries. Any change of government in Syria would deprive Russia of its influence there, and seriously weaken its position in the region. Syria is a key customer for the Russian military-industrial complex (especially after the loss of its contracts in Libya). The logistical base in the port of Tartus is the only Russian base outside the CIS. Moscow's close relationship with the Assad regime has also served as a tool to put pressure on the United States (and, to a limited extent, Israel).
- Russia's behaviour demonstrates its lack of decisiveness and its uncertainty on how to respond to the growing political crisis in Syria, which is slowly transforming into a civil war. Moscow is caught between maintaining its support for the Assad regime and declaring itself in favour of the opposition, if the latter gets a chance to take power. Russia has made some ineffective attempts at playing a mediating role in the political conflict in Syria. Moscow also faces the dilemma of how to address the peace plan put forward by the Arab League, and has avoided taking a clear position on it. Russia did support the extension of the Arab League's observer mission in Syria, but has not in any

way referred to the plan which the Arab League announced on 22 January, to resolve the conflict through power-sharing and Assad's resignation.

- Russia has limited possibilities for mediation, and if Assad's regime falls, Russia's position in the region would be seriously weakened. It therefore seems that any further action by Moscow will focus on support for Assad, both by supporting it in international forums and on a bilateral basis. We cannot rule out a change of attitude by Russia if an opposition victory becomes more likely, but it is doubtful that Russia would be allowed to maintain its influence in Syria if Assad's regime does eventually collapse.