US, Russia in talks on Syria following Assad's trip to Moscow

Bill Van Auken
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In the wake of President Bashar al-Assad's trip to Moscow Tuesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin has initiated a series of diplomatic feelers indicating that the Kremlin is prepared to seek a negotiated "political transition" in Syria.

Assad spent several hours in talks with Putin and other high-ranking Russian officials following a secret flight to Moscow that was announced only after his return to Syria. It marked the first known foreign visit by Syria's president since the country became engulfed in a sectarian civil war orchestrated by the CIA and Washington's regional allies Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey.

In public statements broadcast by the Russian media, Assad praised the Russian government for the bombing campaign it began on September 30, saying that it had prevented "terrorism" from becoming "more widespread and harmful" in Syria.

Putin replied that Moscow hoped its introduction of a "positive dynamic in the fighting" would lead to a situation in which a "long-term resolution can be achieved on the basis of a political process with the participation of all political forces, ethnic and religious groups."

The Russian military claims to have flown 669 combat missions over Syria. In addition, Russian warships in the Caspian Sea fired 26 cruise missiles at targets in the country.

The air war has been coordinated with a counter-offensive by government troops in Western Syria against Islamist militias backed by the US and its allies. Syrian government forces have also advanced on "rebel" positions around Aleppo, Syria's second city, where intensified fighting has reportedly driven tens of thousands of people from their homes.

In his publicly broadcast statements, Putin allowed that one of the concerns motivating Russia's intervention in Syria is the participation of "a minimum of around 4,000 people from the republics of the former Soviet Union" in Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias fighting against the Assad government.

The Russian government, which has fueled extremism in the Caucasus with its brutal suppression of separatist movements in Chechnya and neighboring Dagestan, justifiably fears that these forces, armed and covertly supported by the CIA, will be sent back into Russia in a bid to dismember its territory, cutting off Moscow's access to key energy pipeline routes and resources to its south.

Putin followed up his talks with Assad by phoning both Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Saudi King Salman, two of the key supporters of the Islamist militias fighting in Syria, including the al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate.

Tomorrow, Russian Foreign Secretary Sergei Lavrov and US Secretary of State John Kerry are to meet in Vienna with their Turkish and Saudi counterparts to discuss the crisis in Syria.

Prior to the talks in Moscow, the US and Russia reached a joint "memorandum of understanding" on their respective bombing campaigns in Syria aimed at forestalling an unintended clash that could spin out of control. Under the agreement, US and Russian warplanes will operate on common radio frequencies to enable communication between them. The deal also sets up a separate "hot line" connecting military commanders of the two countries.

While Washington claims to be operating as part of a "coalition" in Syria, more than 90 percent of the air strikes being carried out against ISIS positions are the work of the US Air Force, with a handful of strikes being conducted by warplanes from France, Canada,

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Australia, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Russian officials said they had proposed closer collaboration, including the sharing of intelligence and targeting information, but were rebuffed by Washington. “We don’t agree with what they’re doing,” Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook said of the Russian intervention. “And that has not changed. We can agree, on this limited basis, to try and promote the safety of our air crews over Syria.”

Washington has charged the Putin government with directing its air strikes not at the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, but at “non-ISIS” forces opposed to the Assad government. US officials never identify these forces, which they sometimes refer to as “moderates.” However, the main “non-ISIS” forces fighting the Syrian government consist of al-Nusra and other al-Qaeda linked militias with which Washington and its allies are in a tacit alliance.

The Russian Defense Ministry answered the US charges with a denunciation of its own. It said that while Russian military forces in Syria are “operating at the request of the legitimate authorities of that country,” Washington’s own intervention is being carried out “without the consent of Damascus and, in the absence of any relevant UN Security Council resolution, represents negligence of international law.”

The memorandum on air operations notwithstanding, the military actions in Syria raise the threat of an armed conflict between the two nuclear-armed powers, precisely because Washington and Moscow are pursuing diametrically opposed aims.

Under the cover of combating “terrorism,” the US is seeking to bring about regime-change and the installation of a pliant puppet in Damascus who will facilitate Washington’s drive for hegemony throughout the Middle East. Russia, on the other hand, is seeking to keep in power its one Arab ally in the Middle East and preserve its sole military base outside of the former USSR, the naval station at Syria’s Mediterranean port of Tartus.

There is little doubt that Putin and the Russian oligarchy he represents would be willing to see Assad deposed in return for some guarantee of Russian interests in the region. The US has shifted its own position in recent weeks, indicating that Assad could remain in power for a period of up to six months as part of a political transition that would involve his removal.

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