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Issues

RUSSIA MOVES TO
BOOST ASSAD, SEND
SIGNAL TO WEST

By Sara Hussein and Marina Lapenkova

Russia's recent military build-up in Syria aims not only to boost the embattled regime of crucial ally Bashar al-Assad but also to send a strong signal to the West, experts say. With President Vladimir Putin set to make Syria a key issue of his address to the UN General Assembly in New York later this month, Moscow is making it clear that it will not be ignored in the Middle East. The build-up has underscored deep international divisions on Assad, has complicated efforts to tackle the jihadist Islamic State group and left Washington scrambling to respond. For Daragh McDowell, an analyst with the Verisk Maplecroft consultancy, there is little doubt the move is "aimed at forcing the US and the West to re-engage with Moscow. "This is an attempt to ensure Russian views on the future of Syria and the fight against (IS) cannot be dismissed," he said. Russia's alliance with Syria goes back half a century, with many Syrian military officers receiving training there and Moscow maintaining a naval base in the port of Tartus. US officials and sources on the ground say in recent weeks Russia has bolstered its presence, including in Latakia province, a stronghold of the regime and Assad's traditional heartland. Russia has reportedly moved artillery units and tanks to an airport in Latakia province, along with dozens of personnel and temporary housing for hundreds more.

Assad Military 'Fatigue'

Residents of the province describe an influx of Russians in local shops and restaurants and a Britain-based monitoring group reported Russia was building a runway at an airport in Latakia. The build-up comes at a difficult time for Assad in the civil war that has ravaged Syria for more than four years, leaving more than 240,000 dead. The regime has suffered a series of setbacks in recent months - including the recent loss of Idlib province to a rebel coalition - prompting an unusual admission from Assad in July that his forces are suffering "fatigue". Military experts say Syria's army has been roughly halved from its pre-war size of 300,000 by deaths, defections and increased draft dodging. The government has sought to fill the gaps by organising local pro-regime militias and leaning on Lebanon's Shiite militant group Hezbollah, as well as Iranian military advisers. Bassam Abu Abdullah, director of the Damascus Centre for Strategic Studies, said Russia was not yet dispatching ground troops but rather advisers to train Syrian troops on new materiel, including "sophisticated short-range air defence systems and tanks." The Russians say they are ready to give direct support, they're not ashamed to admit it, they consider the Syrian army and Assad to be legitimate," he said.

Concerns in Washington

The build-up has prompted deep concern in Washington, with US Secretary of State John Kerry calling Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov this week to warn that Moscow's continued support for Assad "risks exacerbating and extending the conflict." Kerry said it was also "undermining our shared goal of fighting extremism" - highlighting the central role of the fight against IS in Syria. Moscow has been chafing at the lukewarm reception given to its recent proposals to expand the US-led coalition fighting IS to include Assad - who Western governments have insisted must go - and his ally Iran.

A Syrian politician close to the regime told AFP that Moscow's decision to ramp up its forces in Syria was in part prompted by its frustration over this rejection. Alexander Golts, an independent Russian military analyst, said Moscow's move was "showing its determination and pushing its idea of a coalition." "They are hoping to escape international isolation thanks to this coalition idea," he said. "Lavrov has already said that this proposal will be the main subject of Putin's speech at the UN."

US media reports have said President Barack Obama is considering whether to meet with Putin at the UN General Assembly, which the Russian leader is to address on Sept 28. The two have rarely met in recent years as Russia has been increasingly isolated over the conflict in Ukraine. Behind all of Russia's moves in Syria, analysts said, is its determination to ensure a future for Assad, who has allowed Moscow to maintain a crucial foothold in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean.

Boost to Morale

"Putin's goal is to save Assad and every step (Russia) takes is aimed at realising this goal," said Alexander Shumilin, the head of the Moscow-based Centre for Analysis of Mideast Conflicts. "Because if Assad falls, Russia will be excluded from the political process in the Middle East, where it has real weight as long as Assad survives," he said. For Assad himself, Russia's increasing support will provide more than just military advantages. Joshua Landis, a Syria expert at the University of Oklahoma, said it is likely to also boost public morale among Assad supporters in Latakia and Tartus. The traditional homeland of Assad's Alawite sect has been under increasing pressure in recent weeks as rebels have advanced towards Latakia. —AFP



AS CRISIS GROWS, UNHCR FACES QUESTIONS

By Tom Miles

It took a photograph of a drowned toddler washed up on a Turkish beach to achieve what a United Nations agency with 9,300 staff and a budget of \$4 billion could not: Soften European views on the refugee crisis. The chief of the UN High Commission for Refugees Antonio Guterres conceded as much on Sept. 4 when he described a fundamental shift in European attitudes that enabled him to push for the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of refugees across the European Union. "Thanks to the actions of the media, the public is getting mobilised in a way that I would say is unique in recent times in solidarity with the victims," he told reporters.

But even as Guterres welcomed the change, he faced criticism that he and his agency had not done enough to tackle the crisis. Critics, who include former UNHCR staffers and humanitarian policy experts, said the refugee agency should have been more assertive in opening doors in Europe, as it has done in past crises, such as the exodus from Hungary in 1956 and the plight of Vietnamese boat people in the 1970s and 1980s. "If that could be done in the past, it can be done again for the Syrians," said Karen Koning AbuZayd, a member of the UN Commission of Inquiry into human rights in Syria and a chief of staff to Sadako Ogata when she ran UNHCR in the 1990s.

'What the European Crisis Shows'

Sylvana Foa, who was recruited by Ogata in 1991 to overhaul UNHCR's image, thinks Guterres has been too weak. Governments have been telling the UN "suck your thumb, and we're going to find a nice negotiated diplomatic solution," said Foa, who also served as a spokeswoman for UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in the 1990s. The heads of UN agencies with "well-nourished careers" prefer to "put out cutesy heart-warming videos" about individual refugees rather than criticise governments, she said. "They want another UN job ... And they won't get it if they piss governments off. You have to start shaming governments. That's how things get done." UNHCR rejected criticism of its part in the European crisis, saying Guterres has been pressing European governments to take more refugees for years. "Frankly we've been making these very similar proposals in the last two or three years," said UNHCR chief spokeswoman Melissa Fleming. "We have been constantly calling for strong reception and registration capabilities to be introduced in these countries. It's not new that people have been arriving. It's just become so dramatic."

Under Guterres, a former prime minister of Portugal who took over as head of UNHCR in 2005, the agency looks after a global refugee population of almost 20 million and speaks out on behalf of 40 million displaced within their own countries. Those figures include 4 million Syrians now registered in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq and 7.6 million displaced within Syria. Despite a trend of increasing government donations, all the UN's humanitarian work remains underfunded because of a series of crises in recent years, and the \$5.8 billion the UNHCR has raised for its Syria appeal is thinly stretched.

The agency has moved with the times - commissioning flat-pack refugee shelters from furniture chain IKEA, for example - but has lost some of its political clout, UN insiders and critics said. While it has added lawyers and humanitarian experts, it has failed to develop new, more creative ways of "unlocking political solutions," said Alexander Betts, professor in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies at Oxford University.

A March 2015 evaluation by the UN's internal audit arm said the agency was hampered by being too focused "around an emergency response model" and was failing to get governments to see the benefits of integrating refugees into their own economies - the only option for long-term refugees who aren't resettled or repatriated. Norah Niland, a former senior UN human rights official and a lead author of a recent review of humanitarian protection for the United Nations, said that UNHCR has "too little forward thinking, and that's what the European crisis shows."

Failed Miserably?

But UNHCR spokesman William Spindler said the crisis in Europe was caused by "the chaotic way Europe has responded," not a failure to foresee the numbers making the trip. "We are not in the forecasting business," he said. UNHCR said last week it believed 400,000 refugees would cross the Mediterranean this year - a figure which has already been eclipsed - and 450,000 next year. The agency refuses to warn of greater numbers coming to Europe. "What that can create is panic and apprehension that millions of people are on their way. We don't believe that millions of people are on their way," said Spindler.

But the regional head of another UN agency said it made sense to think in such terms. "It certainly stands to reason that there could be millions and millions of more refugees leaving Syria to surrounding countries and ultimately to Europe and beyond," said UNICEF's Middle East director Peter Salama.

One reason for the lack of bold early action in Syria may

have been a belief that the conflict would be over quickly. Joel Charny, Vice President for Humanitarian Policy and Practice at InterAction, an alliance of US-based relief and development organisations, said too much faith was placed in the peace effort led by former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. "Complacency might be a little bit too strong, but until mid-2012 there was a sense that clear heads would prevail (in Syria)," he said. In 2015, nobody in the UN is "sitting on their hands," said UN spokesman Ahmad Fawzi. Annan's successor as UN Syria envoy, Staffan de Mistura, is "underlining to all member states how vital it is that they unite and come together to find a way out of this mess," Fawzi said.

Even so, UNHCR should have done more to turn the crisis into a development opportunity, said Betts, the Oxford professor. Just 15 minutes from Jordan's huge Zaatari refugee camp, Betts said, is a special economic zone operating at 10 percent capacity that could be "an incubating space for Syrian businesses that could no longer operate in Syria." Get it right, and such a project could help both Jordan and the refugees, who could receive training and "be empowered so that when they return they haven't been impassive for years or decades."

UNHCR has tried such projects in Lebanon, but struggled to win the financial support it needs from other institutions such as the World Bank. An independent evaluation of UNHCR's response to the refugee influx in Jordan and Lebanon published in January said such ideas had not yet succeeded. "We have talked about humanitarian reform since 2005. We have failed miserably in bringing the financial institutions closer to the humanitarian system," said one former senior UNHCR official.

UNHCR rejected that criticism, saying the World Bank had been involved very early in the Syrian civil war, although its engagement was constrained because the countries involved were not eligible for concessional lending. Guterres had been "very active" in pushing for changes in the World Bank's lending criteria, said UNHCR spokeswoman Ariane Rummary.

Who's to Blame?

Others said Guterres should have spoken more loudly, and stood up to donors and to Syria. Formerly a frequent visitor to Damascus to promote the interests of Iraqi refugees, Guterres has not visited Syria since the war started more than four years ago. Ogata, who was UNHCR head as Yugoslavia disintegrated, would visit every six weeks or so and did not mince words in criticising governments, one former colleague said. —Reuters

FROM EXILE, DAHLAN RATTLES PALESTINIAN POLITICS

By Luke Baker and Noah Browning

He is in the view of some Palestinians, and perhaps his own mind, the man who would be king. From his roots in a Gaza refugee camp, Mohammed Dahlan scrambled to the top of Palestinian politics by his early 40s, backed by a reputation as a charismatic enforcer, someone who commanded loyalty and got things done. The Americans and British liked his style. But he fell out with Yasser Arafat, and then bitterly with President Mahmoud Abbas, and has been in exile in the United Arab Emirates for much of the past five years, spending time building business ties and expanding his wealth and influence.

Now, with talk rife that Abbas, 80 and still smoking, could step down after 10 years as president, Dahlan is watching the chessboard of Palestinian affairs with a seasoned eye and contemplating his next move, from the safety of his Gulf villa. "Abu Mazen has passed 10 years," the 53-year-old told Reuters by phone when asked how he sees his homeland's politics playing out, referring to Abbas by his familiar name. "According to the law, President Abu Mazen has ended his legal term and the parliament has ended its term. The only means that the law presents is that every four years there should be elections," he said, adding that he did not expect a vote to be called any time soon since Abbas had little to gain from it.

Pressed about the possibility of a return home and his long-term ambitions, he chose his words carefully: "I will return to Palestine at a time when my presence is needed. I think elections, when they happen, and when there is a need for me to stay, I will return. Geography does not rule me."

Power Politics

There have been many false dawns in Palestinian politics - times when it seemed Abbas was gearing up for a handover of power only to confound expectations, finding new ways to hang on even as he lamented the frustrations of his post. That said, the last few months have been more tumultuous than usual, hardening speculation that change is afoot. In July, Abbas removed the secretary general of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the umbrella independence movement, and put Saeb Erekat, the chief negotiator with the Israelis for the past 20 years, in his place.

He then resigned as chairman of the PLO's executive committee, its top decision-making body, forcing a meeting of the Palestinian National Council, or parliament, to elect a new committee. That meeting is yet to take place and could well decide to reelect Abbas as chairman, tightening his grip. But some analysts see it as an indication of Abbas' determination to move aside this time, and there have been consistent reports in Arab media that Abbas has told confidants, including the king of Jordan, that he is preparing to step down.

Dahlan is in a group of around six people who are seen as potential successors, although all of them are too wise and too weathered by the backbiting of Palestinian affairs to talk openly about any plans to challenge for the leadership. While some, like Erekat, are well-known commodities, and others, like Jibril Rajoub, the former security chief and head of the Palestine football association, can count on grassroots support, Dahlan poses perhaps the biggest threat: He's popular in some circles, he has money, he has regional backers and he's not afraid to act.

His reputation within the Fatah party is

stained, with opponents casting him as a stooge of Western intelligence and an ally of Israel, but his outsider status may now be an advantage as popular discontent with the Fatah old guard mounts. "If no figure among the (Palestinian) aristocracy separates him or herself as the clear front-runner, a free-for-all may ensue," Grant Rumley, an expert on the Palestinians at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in Washington, DC, wrote in a paper this month, analysing the succession question. "In such a scenario, several figures may emerge. Chief among these challengers would be Mohammed Dahlan."

Hamas Ties

Palestinian opinion polls are fickle, but they broadly show that support for Abbas and his Fatah party is down, support for the Islamist group Hamas is rising and that Dahlan is regarded as one potential successor, with particular support in Gaza. His image is bolstered by the charitable support he funnels to Palestinian refugee camps, backed by funds from the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, with whose rulers Dahlan is close and for whom he has acted as a diplomatic go-between.

As a former security chief and national security adviser, Dahlan has military-type credentials that lend him credibility on the street. The roles also put him close to the Americans, who helped train a paramilitary force that Dahlan led against Hamas militants in Gaza in 2007, a quasi civil war. Hamas easily won that showdown and Dahlan quickly rebased to the West Bank, where he continued to receive vocal support from the Americans and Europeans and was eventually elected to Fatah's central committee. At that stage, he was poised to challenge Abbas and spoke out against his style of leadership.

Sensing the threat, and not ready to be shoved aside, Abbas moved against his rival. Fatah accused Dahlan of having played a part in Arafat's death. Abbas set up a new anti-corruption body, with Dahlan an early target, and in 2011 Dahlan was exiled. Once abroad, he did not sit quietly. As well as cultivating his political ties in the Gulf, Dahlan extended his business interests in London and the Balkans. In 2013 he was granted Serbian citizenship, and he holds a Montenegrin passport too.

He has also been reaching out to Hamas, whose political leadership is based in Qatar. In the last Palestinian elections held in 2006, Hamas came out on top. Dahlan appears to see the Islamists as a lynchpin to the future. "Remember that the Palestinian people voted down Fatah and elected Hamas, and in the next elections we'll defer to the Palestinians' judgment," he told Reuters. "Part of my initiative is to have a unified leadership for the PLO, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad," he said, referring to another Gaza-based Islamist group at odds with Fatah.

Abbas is a wily politician who not only managed to emerge from Arafat's shadow into leadership, but has stayed at the top for a decade, despite little progress on the ground and a defunct peace process with the Israelis. He may not move aside. But if change is in the air, and it brings with it an overhaul of Fatah, its ties to Hamas and how the 1960s-era PLO is managed, Dahlan could prove a volatile force. The key will be elections, which Abbas has so far resolutely refused to call, fearing his own demise and the further rise of Hamas. "In the end, the people will judge those who have done wrong and reward those who helped, provided and stood with them," said Dahlan, underlining the need for a popular vote to be held. —Reuters

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