

How Russia Can Salvage Its Reputation Over Syria

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After more than a year of supporting Syrian President Bashar Assad during his brutal crackdown against an uprising, Russia has a big problem on its hands.

Despite the Kremlin's steadfast support, it is clear that Assad's days are numbered. Even if he held onto power by massacring his own people, Syria would become a totalitarian state that would lose its lifeblood through the exodus of its young and its elites. But Moscow may be able to prevent that and help engineer a return to political sanity.

Without another government ready to step in when Assad falls, chaos will likely erupt since no one can be sure that the Free Syria Army would be able to maintain control over other factions that fought against the Assad regime.

Western calls for intervention to re-establish order and security may be compelling, but it would result in a foreign military intervention with the political process becoming hostage

to foreign-imposed order. It would be the tragedy of Iraq all over again.

The opposition needs its own government to level the political and diplomatic playing fields. Only with its own government can it organize itself and win the international legitimacy battle. The Kremlin can cut some of its losses by claiming the democratic higher ground and throwing its weight behind a transparent political process to create a democratic transitional government.

A post-Assad transition must be carried out transparently with the global media invited as witnesses. Open negotiation is the price of global public trust and the best guarantee that the decisions taken about democracy, human rights and pluralism will be kept. ☒ ☒

Negotiations over a post-Assad government should be in Syria itself, at a place most symbolic of what the government seeks to embody: reconciliation and democracy. ☒

As a back-up, however, negotiations could be held in a neutral place such as Strasbourg, which personifies peace and reconciliation after 2,000 years of war. ☒ It is the seat of the Council of Europe, the European Court of Human Rights and the European Parliament, three institutions that represent reconciliation and democracy worldwide.

By pushing for an open process in a neutral place to create a democratic transitional government for Syria, Russia can best align its own interests and the interests of the Syrian people.

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