

# Putin Seeks Center Stage at UN Gathering

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When Russian President Vladimir Putin takes the podium at the United Nations General Assembly on Monday for the first time in a decade, he is expected to put Syria and the fight against the Islamic State at the heart of his speech — and be looking to turn heads.

An increased Russian military presence in Syria and a steady flow of Middle Eastern leaders flying into Moscow have fueled speculation the Kremlin is seeking a new, enhanced role in the region.

Putin has stepped up warnings about Islamic State — with whom over 2,000 Russians are estimated to be fighting — in recent weeks and called for a new coalition against the terrorist group in a move that experts suggest could give Russia a global leadership role and distract attention from the Ukraine crisis.

“Russia is returning to the Middle East,” said Yelena Suponina, an adviser to the Institute of Strategic Studies, a Moscow-based think tank that works closely with the government.

## **Russian Delegation**

In a televised interview earlier this month, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Putin would touch on the most pressing questions facing the world in his speech to the General Assembly, focusing on terrorism and Syria as well as global economic conditions and alleged attempts by the U.S. and its European partners to impose their values and policies on other countries.

On Sept. 16, Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov said that Russia would not raise the issue of the Ukraine conflict, the RIA Novosti news agency reported.

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In another major leadership moment for Russia, Lavrov is scheduled to chair a UN Security Council meeting on counterterrorism. Obama and Putin are also expected to meet on the sidelines of the event.

This year is the 70th anniversary of the founding of the UN, and a record number of heads of state are expected to attend the gathering. Putin spoke to the General Assembly in 2000, 2003 and 2005, while then-president Dmitry Medvedev addressed the body in 2009.

## **Syria, Not Ukraine**

The focus on Syria is a deliberate Kremlin tactic to divert attention away from Ukraine where troops loyal to Kiev are locked in a stalemate with Russian-backed rebels in the east, according to some analysts.

“The conversation about Ukraine is going around in circles,” said Fyodor Lukyanov, the editor of the Russia in Global Affairs journal. “No breakthrough can be expected but [on Syria] the conversation offers opportunities for participating in world affairs.”

Russia has long backed the Syrian government of Bashar Assad, which is opposed by the U.S. that says Assad is responsible for tens of thousands of civilian deaths. A civil war, in which about 250,000 people are believed to have been killed, erupted in Syria in 2011, triggering the rise of the Islamic State.

In recent weeks, Russia has boosted its military presence in the Assad-controlled areas of Syria around Russia’s Mediterranean naval base of Tartus.

Moscow denies that its military deployments are anything unusual, but U.S. officials claim Russia has moved a significant force into the war-torn country in recent weeks, including fighter jets, tanks, armored personnel carriers and air-defense systems.

Last week, Putin’s spokesman said that Russia would consider any request from Damascus to deploy ground forces in support of Assad’s army.

## **'Russian Trick'**

Some experts have predicted that Russia will propose the creation of an anti-IS coalition that will shore up Assad followed by a new Syrian government which brings in more moderate elements, but say that any proposals from the Kremlin are just a smokescreen calculated to play well inside Russia.

While Washington's position on the immediate removal of Assad has appeared to be softening, a Russia-brokered deal looks unlikely to be acceptable.

Moves in Syria distract attention from Ukraine and give Putin the opportunity to burnish his image inside Russia as a global heavyweight, Andrei Kolesnikov, an expert on Russian politics at the Carnegie Moscow Center think tank, told reporters on a conference call Thursday.

"We can see a trick from Putin," said Kolesnikov. "This is one more step that Putin has made for a domestic audience. ... Russia is not ready to fight 1,000 miles from its borders."

## **Power Rebalance**

But the Russian moves are not seen by all sides as hot air.

A series of Middle Eastern leaders have flown into Moscow in recent days, with discussions about Syria high on the agenda. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and top Israeli generals visited last Monday, followed by Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas on Tuesday and Turkish President Recep Erdogan on Wednesday.

Moscow also hosted some minor Syrian opposition groups last week and has been increasing diplomatic contacts with other Middle Eastern power brokers during the last month.

Alexander Krylov, a former Russian diplomat in Israel and an expert at the Center for Middle East Research, part of Moscow's State Institute of International Relations, told The Moscow Times that U.S. dominance had led to heightened bloodshed and that a Russian resurgence in the region could promote a Cold War-style stability.

"Gradually this is turning from a local war into something beyond the borders of Syria," said Krylov. "A balance of forces is justified by history."

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