

Russia Strong-Arms UN to Bolster Assad and Putin's Mideast Clout

By [Bloomberg](#)

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Xinhua / TASS

It was after midnight in a windowless basement room at the United Nations headquarters in New York, and Russian diplomats were holding the organization's \$3 billion budget hostage.

Just days from the start of the new year, disheveled envoys from several countries were struggling to broker a deal that covers everything from the number of translators posted to Geneva to who gets to fly first class. Talks were paralyzed around a line item representing a sliver of the budget proposal, but one with geopolitical implications — \$17 million to investigate human rights violations in the nine-year-old Syrian conflict.

That's when a Russian official entered the conference room and told more than two dozen diplomats that their agreement wasn't good enough yet, dragging negotiations past Christmas, according to three people who were involved in the talks.

While last-minute [budget talks](#) aren't unusual at the UN, Moscow's hard-edged diplomacy over Syria is part of an increasingly assertive campaign the permanent Security Council member is waging at the global body as it expands its influence in the Middle East. It's an effort aimed at fending off threats to its influence in Syria, where Russian airpower has allowed President Bashar al-Assad to consolidate control over nearly all but the oil-rich northeastern part of Syria.

"Russia is doing everything it can to undermine the UN's work in Syria, and they know one key way to do this is by going after budgets," [Louis Charbonneau](#), UN director at Human Rights Watch, said in an interview. "Russia knows how to take advantage of the UN system to further its goals. What's not clear is whether the UN has a strategy to deal with Russia."

A spokesman for the Russian mission to the UN didn't respond to requests for comment.

The Syria measure survived in a tense Dec. 27 vote — though diplomats warned that Russia would keep challenging it in future negotiations. A veto-wielding member of the Security Council, Russia increasingly has used its influence to counter efforts to undermine its Syria campaign. It has used its veto power 14 times on Syria-related issues since the conflict began, more than any other country over that period by far.

Related article: [Turkey's Erdogan Says Russia Not Abiding by Syria Agreements](#)

The moves are part of President Vladimir Putin's broader efforts to shape events in the Middle East as the U.S. seeks to scale back. Putin's decision to enter the Syria war in 2015 saved the Assad regime and forced other regional powers to coordinate with Moscow over the future of Syria, sidelining a UN-brokered series of peace talks that struggled to get traction.

Russia also widened a breach in U.S.-Turkey relations by convincing President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to buy a Russian missile defense system, prompting the Pentagon to kick Ankara out of the F-35 jet program. And Moscow has deployed mercenaries to back General Khalifa Haftar in Libya against the UN-backed government.

While President Donald Trump has sent additional forces to the Middle East to confront Iran, he's also escalated demands on other countries and the NATO alliance to do more for regional security, with the goal of winding down American troop commitments in "endless wars" from Syria to Afghanistan.

UN diplomats say that Russia is increasingly confident about exercising its power and is pressing back strongly in response to Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' decision last year to begin a separate inquiry into attacks on civilian sites — including hospitals and schools — in Syria. The attacks occurred even though those facilities had shared their GPS coordinates with the Russian and Syrian militaries to avoid being accidentally hit.

Just days after the budget battle over the human rights investigation that would gather evidence for possible war crimes tribunals, Russia stared down Western powers in marathon negotiations over humanitarian aid corridors into Syria. The U.S. and its allies wanted the UN to be granted at least three access points for aid to be delivered over the following 12 months. The Russians set a limit at two corridors and six months.

'Playing dice'

Faced with all access being cut if they failed to strike an agreement, Security Council members backed down in January. But the final result left the civilians struggling in one of the world's worst humanitarian disaster zones even more cut off from the outside world.

The decision over aid corridors led to finger-pointing among Western allies, who couldn't agree on a strategy to confront the Russians. U.K. Ambassador Karen Pierce called it "one of the saddest" days for Syria, accusing Russia of "playing dice with the lives of the Syrian people in the northeast." U.S. Ambassador Kelly Craft said, "Russia has been tireless in efforts to support the Assad regime and starve the regime's opponents."

Russia's UN Ambassador Vasily Nebenzya says conditions on the ground in Syria have changed and that humanitarian assistance is now coming from within Syria. During a meeting in late January with UN Syria envoy Geir Pedersen, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused Western countries of applying "double standards" in their attempts to avoid sending "aid to territories controlled by the government."

'Staged' attacks

Russia initially pressured Guterres to narrow the scope of the inquiry into the targeting of civilian sites so that fewer locations were included, and, diplomats say, has also been trying to keep him from releasing the findings. In response, the U.K. Mission to the UN circulated a draft letter in December to allies that would urge the secretary-general to make the findings public.

In his latest remarks, Guterres' spokesman Stephane Dujarric said the report's submission has been further delayed until March 13 and that the secretary-general would decide what to do with it only once he's reviewed the findings.

Russia has also clashed with Western nations at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, a UN agency. In January, Russian officials held a presentation in which they claimed evidence from a chemical weapons attack in Syria in 2018 was "staged." U.S. Ambassador [Cherith Norman Chalet](#) called the effort "a brazen disinformation campaign, waged in advance of the anticipated release" of an OPCW report.

Russian role model

"When Russia and Syria dislike the findings of the UN or the OPCW, they use meetings like this one to undercut those organizations and the facts they provide," she said.

The U.S., U.K. and Netherlands also say Russia has carried out cyberattacks against the Hague-based chemical weapons agency, which is also examining evidence of a nerve-agent attack in the U.K. in 2018 that British officials have blamed on the Kremlin.

Countering criticism of their tactics, Russian diplomats in January convened UN agency leaders in New York for an event focusing on the nation's positive contributions to development projects. Ambassador Nebenzya used the event to highlight Russia's commitment to the development of post-conflict Syria, and criticized countries that tie

development funds to political conditions.

Syrian Ambassador Bashar Ja'afari, sitting across the table, nodded approvingly. "Russia," Ja'afari said, "has always been the role model."

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