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Has Kerry Opened the Door for Syria's Assad To Stay?

Aaron Mehta and Joe Gould

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On a trip to Moscow this week, Secretary of State John Kerry urged a focus not on removing Syrian President Bashar Assad but instead on developing greater cooperation in Syria — a change in tone which could represent a reversal of standing US policy and have dramatic repercussions for the fight against the Islamic State group.

However, analysts wonder whether Kerry is simply trying to find common ground with Russia at a time when the relations between the two nations are as strained as they have been since the end of the Cold War.

Speaking in Russia on Dec. 15 following meetings with high-level Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, Kerry reiterated that the US does not see Assad as part of a future Syrian government, but used terminology less stark than other members of the Obama administration when discussing the Syrian president.

"What we have said is that we don't believe that Assad himself has the ability to lead the future Syria," Kerry said. "But we focused today not on our differences about what can and can't be done immediately about Assad, we focused on the political process whereby Syrians will be making decisions about the future of Syria.

"The United States and our partners are not seeking so-called regime change," Kerry also said, according to the Associated Press.

On its face, that appears to be a weakening of the hard stance maintained by the United States that any political process in Syria must come with the removal of Assad from power.

Analysts have wondered if the US would eventually agree to allow Assad to stay, even temporarily, as a trade with Russia in order to gain better cooperation in strikes against the Islamic State group, commonly known as ISIL or ISIS.

Russian forces began arriving in Syria in September to bolster Assad, a longtime ally, and have since conducted regular airstrikes. The Pentagon claims those airstrikes are largely targeted at anti-Assad rebel groups rather than ISIS forces.

Kerry's comments were met with a strong rebuke from US Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

"That can only be matched by Neville Chamberlain's trip to Munich, to say that a butcher who has killed 240,000 of his own people, used chemical weapons and caused millions of refugees [might be allowed to remain in power] is a low point in American diplomatic history," McCain told Defense News.

The House Armed Services Committee's ranking Democrat, Adam Smith, said the Neville Chamberlain comparison was "over the top," but said he felt Syria "needs a different government."

"I don't think we're seeking violent regime change or anything like that, but part of what fuels ISIL is the illegitimacy of Assad's rule. So we are going to need a government in Syria that more people in Syria think is legitimate.

A new Human Rights Watch report claims the Assad regime tortured, starved and executed roughly 7,000 prisoners since 2011. The US has also maintained that Assad has used chemical weapons to terrorize his own people.

State Department spokesman John Kirby rejected the idea that Kerry had said anything substantively different from the existing administration policy.

"We can quibble over words and rhetoric, but nothing has changed about our view, our belief that Assad cannot be the future of Syria, and that if we're going to meet the Geneva communique and if we're all going to strive to get to unified, whole Syria through a transition that's Syrian-led and that includes the voice of the Syrian people. I don't think anybody rationally can think that, even in the minds of most Syrians, that Assad is the right leader for the country," Kirby said Wednesday. "So nothing's changed about our view that he has to go."

Pentagon spokesman Capt. Jeff Davis declined to comment specifically on Kerry's comments, but said the Defense Department's sole focus is on "fighting ISIL and we're doing that, we're doing it both in Iraq and Syria, and we're doing it throughout the entirety of Syria where ISIL is active."

Davis also said the removal of a dozen F-15 fighters from the Turkish airbase of Incirlik, announced today, was not related to any potential thaw in relations between Russia and the US.

Analysts React

Emma Ashford of the Washington-based CATO Institute said Kerry's comments fit into a larger sense that the "administration appears to be increasingly coming round to the view that Assad's status is not the most important thing in negotiations on Syria, or at least that it is something which can be sorted out later in the peace process."

She also said it fits into a trend with Kerry, where the secretary is willing to focus on areas of common ground during negotiations and leave more contentious issues until later.

"During the Iran deal process, Kerry chose to leave the most contentious issues till the end of negotiations, which gave all parties a stake in ensuring the talks didn't fall apart after a lot of effort was expended," Ashford said. "He seems to be doing something similar here, implying that the US is open to negotiation on the issue of Assad, but that other issues should be addressed first."

Frederic Hof, a former senior adviser on Syria for the Obama administration, now with the Atlantic Council, cautioned that Kerry's comments on "regime change" may have been meant in the specific way it was used in Iraq — i.e., a military intervention — and not the broader desire to remove Assad.

"Ever since President Obama told Bashar al-Assad to step aside in August 2011 the American objective has been to see a murderous Assad regime replaced by something inclusive and civilized," Hof told Defense News. "The administration dreams of a united Syrian front — army and rebels — providing the missing ground combat component against ISIL. The dream can't become reality with Assad — the barrel-bomber-in-chief — still in the saddle."

Like Ashford, Hof wonders if Kerry is trying to find common ground with his statements.

"Kerry may have been trying to make nice with his Russian hosts, who decry 'regime change' at every opportunity," Hof noted. "The [US government] wants Assad gone. It hopes Russia will help. That hope is, in my view, not very realistic. But John Kerry has a lot of confidence in his own charisma."

At the least, Kerry appears to have secured further talks on a political solution in Syria.

"We support the idea of convening in New York another meeting of the International Syria Support Group at the ministerial level this Friday, December 18," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said after the talks, which also touched on counterterrorism and Ukraine.

He and Kerry said the New York negotiations would lead to a UN Security Council resolution to underpin the process aimed at brokering a cease-fire and political talks between Assad's regime and Syria's armed opposition.

"We discussed today in great detail the need to accelerate the effort," Washington's top diplomat said.

"You can't defeat Daesh without also de-escalating the fight in Syria," he said, using another name to refer to the jihadist Islamic State group.