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## An Emboldened Putin Challenges U.S. Led Western Powers in Syria



An economically weakened Russia, from low global oil prices, and sanctions of the Western countries over its annexation of Crimea and its incursions into eastern Ukraine, nevertheless throws down the gauntlet to the U.S. led Western opposition to the incumbent Syrian regime, as it is still confident in its residual military prowess as a former 'Super-power'.

This latest gambit fits perfectly President Putin's opportunistic power plays to reassert and rebuild Russia's position as a global power broker/player in international affairs, knowing the U.S. and its western allies have little stomach for additional involvement in long messy wars in the Middle East, and more importantly, even less appetite for direct military confrontation with an economically weakened but potentially lethal nuclear Russia.

Additionally, the U.S. and U.K., in particular, have been damaged and their resolve weakened, internally and externally, by their ill-conceived, ill-conducted, morally indefensible, destructive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan where the horrific toll on innocent civilian lives continues to mount (*including the recent bombing of the hospital in Afghanistan by U.S./Coalition forces*), and the lies upon which those wars were mounted by the Bush and Blair Governments in the first place.

It is Putin's bet that the Americans and their allies will do little more than protest Russia's direct military intervention on behalf of the Assad government and the escalation of the conflict, even though the Russia's intervention comes at a time when the Western powers were thinking that Bashar al-Assad ("Assad") was about to capitulate and step down as Syria's ruler through negotiations. Now those negotiations will come with the military strength of Russia weakening the West's bargaining power.

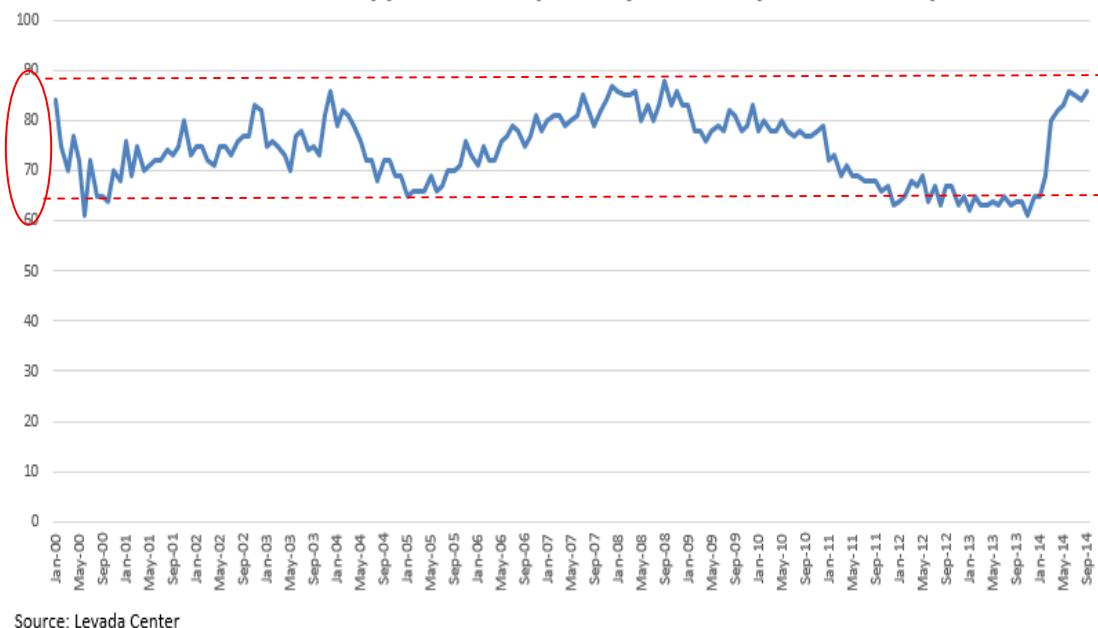
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Putin and his Russia have upped the stakes by strengthening Assad and his regime's, and Iran's and Hamas's hand in the war, at a critical time, and thereby assured the prolongation of a war that has killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions of civilians. Russia's direct military intervention at this time insures the strengthening of the anti-U.S./West factions, and creates for Russia a more powerful leadership role in the sectarian, religiously factitious, politically fractured, yet vitally important Middle East.

Externally, at the face of it, it is a 'win - win' proposition for Putin's Russia and therefore Putin was quick to launch into it. Internally, this latest geo-political military action, the flexing of its former power on the international stage, will bolster pride amongst the Russian people; make the hardships of a struggling economy easier to bear; and boost Putin's approval rating (*currently still well above 80%*) which is already far higher than most Western leaders would dare to hope for, in their entire tenures.

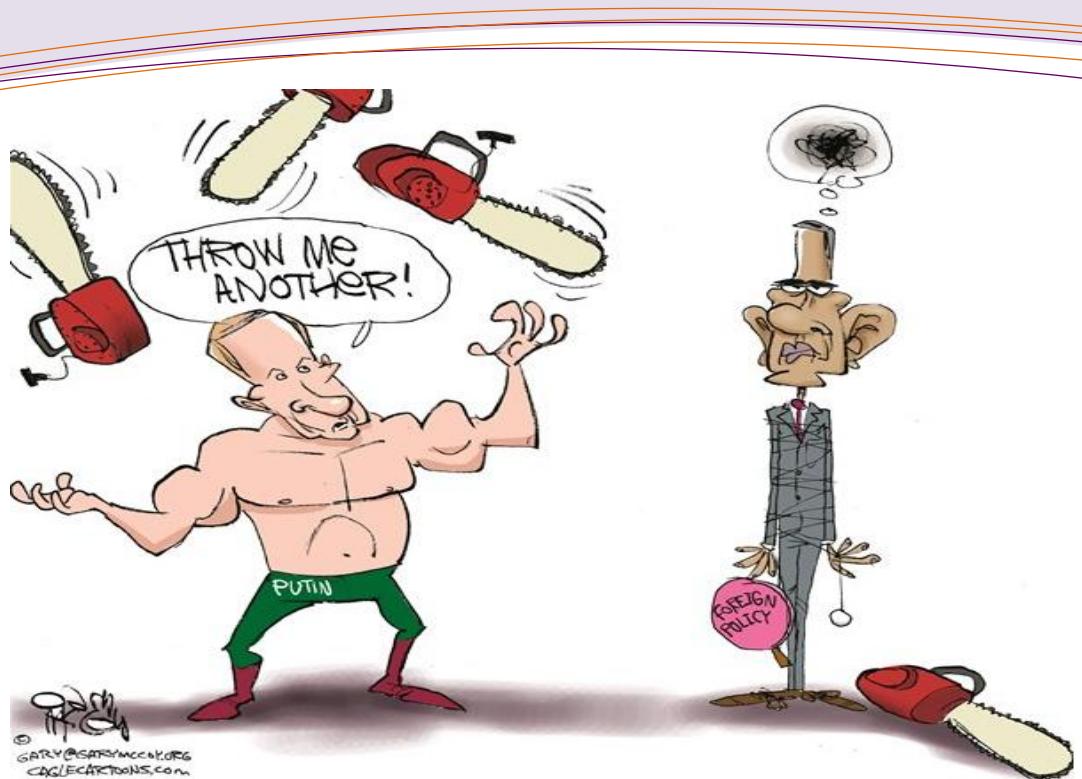
Vladimir Putin Approval Rate (January 2000 - September 2014)



In the meantime, the well meaning Barack Obama continues to slide in his abysmally low approval rating, as he continues to struggle with the impossibly deep wounds, and the permanent scars inflicted and left behind by the economic and foreign policy disasters of the George W. Bush administration. In addition he is encumbered with a perennially unapologetically, antagonistic and consistently obstructionist Republican Party that controls the Congress and Senate, making every policy decision of the incumbent government a messy public fight, and a nightmare to pass and carry out. Obama has been ruling with both his hands tied behind his back while Putin reigns supreme in Russia.

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President Obama, since he came to power in the depths of the financial crisis in 2008, and the tail end of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, has been trying to clean up the financial, economic and military mess that he inherited. The actions he took were marred from the very beginning by the Republican opposition, and the atrocious advice given by his financial and economic advisors (as *in blank cheques to the bankers and the financial community and endless QE*), and by the bare naked hatred and vitriol from all the right wing rednecks in his country, (*the joys of being the first black President in the U.S. left holding the bag by the most brazen, lying, callous cabal of crooks preceding him*).

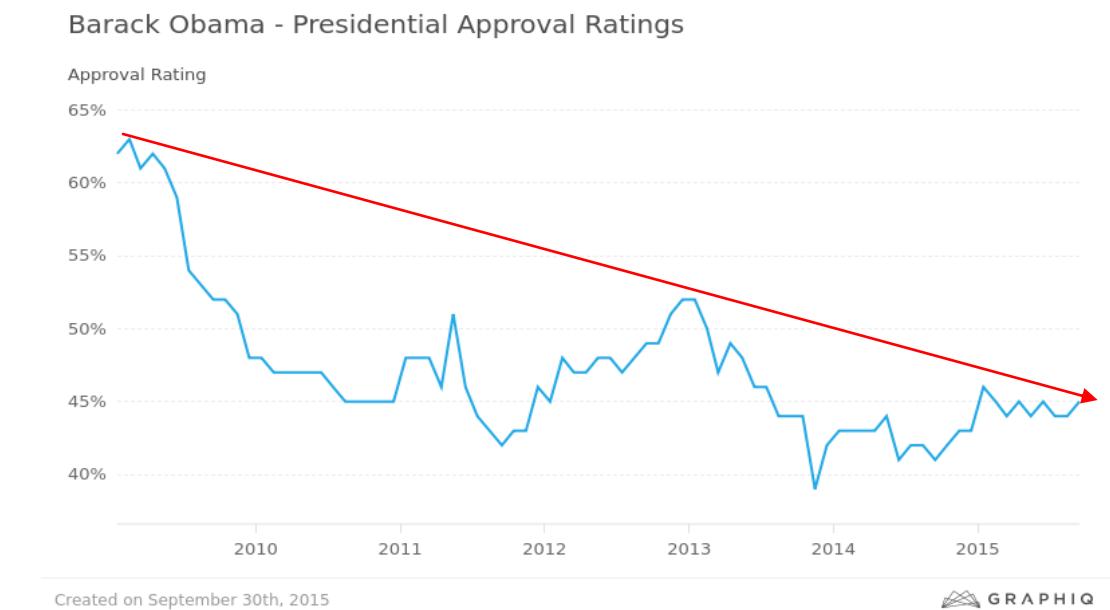
Vladimir Putin has no such political and racial baggage to deal with, nor the pesky problematic democratic process of having to actually listen to his opposition rather than simply eliminating them if they become too troublesome. Or having to get approvals, and needing to build internal consensus before being able to act. On top of all that, externally, he does not have to build a “coalition of the willing” of mostly ambivalent countries, to seem to be acting with global consensus rather than unilaterally in Russia’s interest, as the U.S. feels impelled to do to keep up appearances.

Largely unencumbered by politics, opposition, independent and critical media, the need to be truthful to his own people, or caring about global consensus, Putin can set strategy and take decisive action, as and when it suits him. Not so with beleaguered Barack Obama, who in trying to please everyone, always seems to end up pleasing very few. Not many have the appreciation nor do they care about the challenges he faces every day, being hamstrung as he has been from day one, except for perhaps Putin.

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Now President Obama has another complicated foreign policy crisis in the making, in which he is going to be damned if he acts forcefully, and damned if he tries to be diplomatic, while Russia and Putin steal centre stage and direct the possible outcomes in a crucial region. The line on the Chart will probably dip lower for Obama as the U.S. and the West flounders in its response.

The opportunity for Putin opened up now because America and its allies did not act decisively to remove Assad when he used increasing force and chemical weapons on his people a number of times, crossing with relative impunity the 'red line' imposed by Barack Obama, thereby showing America's reluctance to increase involvement in the conflict, and a general lack of will. Then, and numerous times since then, the West failed to act at crucial times and dithered. The civil war became protracted and spread, destroying Syria, killing an estimated quarter million, and displacing over seven million people from their homes, cities, and country. The growing chaos amid the West's tepid responses, has given Putin the opportunity to step in boldly at a moment of his choosing, preserve Russia's long term Middle East ally, and make a statement as a relevant global power broker, strong enough to defy the U.S. and the West.