[Russia Looks to U.N. to Help It Profit From Syria Conquests](http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/25/russia-looks-to-u-n-to-help-it-profit-from-syria-conquests/)

July 25, 2017

By Colum Lynch

Foreign Policy

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/25/russia-looks-to-u-n-to-help-it-profit-from-syria-conquests/>

Russia has stepped up a campaign to get the United Nations to demine Syria’s majestic Roman ruins in Palmyra, but some Western diplomats fear the Kremlin is only seeking to get other countries to help it exploit the city’s rich natural resources.

The Russian government’s push to protect Syria’s ancient ruins, these diplomats note, coincides with reports of an effort by Russia to convince private security companies to secure territory around Palmyra from Islamic State militants in exchange for the rights to lucrative gas and mining rights.

“Palmyra is literally sown with mines and unexploded ordnance,” Russian diplomat Evgeniy Zagayanov told the Security Council back in March, noting that Russian demining efforts underway in Palmyra were insufficient to get the job done. He called it “vital” that the U.N. and other governments make a “significant financial investment” in ridding Palmyra of its explosives.

Humanitarian aid organizations say there is clearly a need to disarm deadly explosives, including in cities like Palmyra. But the most pressing challenge, they argue, is securing access to hundreds of thousands of Syrians enduring extreme hardships in cities and towns under siege primarily by Syrian forces and their allies but also by the Islamic State and other anti-government forces.

“Is there anything wrong with demining? Of course not,” said Joel Charny, the director of the Norwegian Refugee Council USA. “But are mines the fundamental obstacle to humanitarian access? The answer is clearly no.”

The main obstacle to reaching civilians in need of assistance is the Syrian government, according to Charny. “What we need from Russia,” he said, “is to put pressure on the Syrian authorities to allow people who need aid to be assisted.”

Critics charge that Moscow is pushing demining as part of a broader diplomatic gambit to reframe the international humanitarian debate on Syria, moving it away from a focus on pursuing war crimes prosecution against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s government for starving hundreds of thousands of civilians in besieged opposition-controlled towns. Instead, Russia is appealing to colleagues to view humanitarian assistance — including the clearance of land mines — to towns and cities captured by the Syrian government and its allies as a priority.

“The issue of humanitarian assistance to Syria cannot be reduced to the issue of blockages and hard-to-reach regions,” Vladimir Safronkov, a senior Russian diplomat, told the council on May 30. “The reality is that most of the people who need assistance live in areas that are controlled by the government.”

Moscow has urged the U.N. to test its proposition in Palmyra, a UNESCO World Heritage site that Syria, backed by Russia air power, seized last March from the Islamic State, which reportedly laid booby traps and mines around some of the city’s historic sites.

For Russia, the conquest of Palmyra serves as a powerful symbol of the civilizing nature of its military intervention in Syria. In May 2016, the Russian conductor Valery Gergiev led the Mariinsky Orchestra in a performance of Johann Sebastian Bach and Sergei Prokofiev at a Roman amphitheater that the Islamic State had used to execute prisoners.

But Palmyra is also a key gateway to the country’s most lucrative natural resources, including gas deposits and phosphate mines outside the city and oil farther east near Deir Ezzor. The Syrian government has signed contracts with Iranian and Russian firms to exploit those resources once the Islamic State is driven from the region. The New York Times [cited](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/05/world/middleeast/russia-syria-oil-isis.html?_r=0) reports indicating that private Russian security companies have been hired to drive Islamic State fighters out of the natural gas fields in exchange for lucrative exploitation contracts.

“All the phosphate mining is centered [on] Palmyra,” said Joshua Landis, a Syria scholar at the University of Oklahoma. “If you want the country to rebuild and be successful, you have to get the oil, gas, and mining industries going.”

While Russia stands to benefit economically in Palmyra, not everyone is convinced that natural resources alone are the driving force behind Kremlin policy there.

David Butter, an expert on Middle East energy and associate fellow at Chatham House, said there are Russian contractors that do have an interest in the region, particularly in gas and phosphates. “It’s broadly true that there are gas equipment contracts going on and some interest in the phosphate mines,” he said. But he doubted there were enough reserves to “shake the world market.”

“I wouldn’t think anyone is going to get rich in that area,” Butter said.

Russia has argued that the world needs to come together to preserve one of the world’s great archaeological treasures. The prospect of inviting U.N. mine experts to Syria has surfaced on the sidelines of ongoing talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, among Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

During closed-door negotiations, Moscow brokered a provisional deal with Tehran and Ankara to issue a joint statement calling on Syria to work with the U.N. to establish an international demining coalition to help fund and coordinate efforts to eliminate “unexplored hazards planted by terrorist organizations,” according to a confidential draft statement by Russia, Iran, and Turkey obtained by Foreign Policy. “There exists a large-scale threat of deliberate destruction and mining of world historical monuments and UNESCO cultural heritage sites in Syria by terrorist organizations.”

The draft, which has not yet been agreed upon, calls on governments to “take urgent and necessary measures to preserve historical heritage for future generations.”

So far, that effort remains stalled.

Still, the development has provided a fresh opportunity for the U.N., which has been seeking for years to play a broader role in demining Syrian war zones. In 2015, the U.N. Mine Action Service (UNMAS) set up a program to support mine education and training of deminers in Syria, but the agency has been forced to run it out of Turkey.

Throughout the civil war, Syria has made extensive use of cluster bombs and has vigorously opposed efforts by the United Nations to help clear land mines. Syrian government forces have systematically mined opposition-controlled towns, placing some 6,000 mines alone around the besieged town of Madaya, according to a [July 2016 report](https://s3.amazonaws.com/PHR_Reports/madaya-portrait-of-a-syrian-town-under-siege.pdf) by Physicians for Human Rights and the Syrian American Medical Society.

In 2016, the Syrian government bluntly rejected a U.N. proposal to spend $20 million on demining operations, according to a well-placed diplomatic source. Syrian authorities warned the U.N. that they would consider the deployment of deminers as an “act of war” and that they would respond militarily, according to the source.

A Security Council diplomat said Syria has long been “paranoid” that deminers — who are generally recruited from the ranks of Western ex-military personnel — are really serving as spies or bringing explosive materials into opposition-controlled areas. They also feared that foreign munitions experts might collect evidence that could be used to prove the Syrian government committed war crimes.

But with Russian and Syrian forces taking cities in the west from the rebels, and seizing territory in the east from the Islamic State, Moscow and Damascus have come to see the benefits of demining.

Last month, the U.N. dispatched Agnès Marcaillou, the UNMAS director, to Astana to participate in cease-fire talks sponsored by Russia, Turkey, and Iran. She has also traveled to Moscow and Damascus to discuss a possible role for the U.N. in clearing mines in Syria and educating locals on how to steer clear of deadly explosives, an ambitious program that could require more than $300 million in funding.

Marcaillou’s outreach has unnerved some of her diplomatic colleagues, who fear she may conclude a deal that primarily serves Russia and Syria’s commercial and military goals while doing little to relieve civilians in territory controlled by the opposition. There are a far more urgent needs for humanitarian demining in heavily populated areas in western Syria, these officials said.

“Our view is that demining is a good thing, but it should be prioritized according to humanitarian needs,” said one council diplomat.

Marcaillou countered that any program would be scrupulously tailored to address the country’s most pressing humanitarian needs and would not, she said, be used to help enrich any government.

“I am not promoting Russian commercial interests,” Marcaillou said. “If I’m called to go to [Syria], it is not because there is oil or whatever it is, [but] because people are dying. The people of Syria are facing a level of contamination that is pretty much unprecedented.”

Still, it remains unclear whether the United States and other key donors will underwrite the program. While U.S. President Donald Trump has been looking for ways to work with Russia in the fight against terrorists in Syria, American and allied diplomats say it is unlikely that they would help fund a U.N. demining operation limited to Palmyra and other government-controlled towns.

“Who is going to pay for it?” said a second council diplomat. “I hope no one is going to pay until there is a clear humanitarian plan” with the list of population centers most in need. “There’s no way Palmyra would be high on that list because it’s a bunch of rocks — very historic rocks.”

Marcaillou said that in her private talks with Russian officials, they did not state which locations in Syria they would like her to work. But if there is a need to come to the aid of civilians in Palmyra, then “why not?”

But she said her office has never agreed to “demine old stones.”