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Russia in Syria: Between Iran and Israel

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There are conflicting reports, mostly speculative, regarding the August 23, 2017 meeting between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Vladimir Putin in Sochi. The central issue discussed was growing Iranian involvement in Syria and the role that Russia is assigning to Iran in shaping the future political arrangement in the war-torn state. Already before the meeting, Israel sent strong messages relaying that the continued Iranian presence in Syria constituted a concrete threat to it. At the same time, there was an Israeli effort to persuade the United States to refrain from completely abandoning the Syrian arena to Russia, and indirectly to Iran. Indeed, most areas controlled by the Islamic State that were freed by the United States have been seized by Iran and its proxies.

The main question is whether the meeting between Netanyahu and Putin yielded any agreement or practical decisions that could help limit Iranian involvement in Syria. For its part Russia is looking for the best balance between Iran's important contribution to the pro-Assad coalition that it leads and consideration for Israeli interests that are threatened by the expansion of Iran's influence in Syria. Moscow estimates that the current opposing trends – Iranian conduct in Syria and the resulting Israeli concerns – may ultimately lead to Israeli military action, which could change the entire picture and undermine the shaky foundations of the Assad regime, which is the basis of the political settlement that Russia seeks in Syria.

The overall Russian calculation, which considers the implications of a settlement in Syria for Moscow's international standing, is to exploit the military and political advantage it has accumulated there – to a large degree at the expense of the United States. The current arrangement in Syria, including a ceasefire and de-escalation zones, was dictated by Russia, while the United States played only a secondary role (the only case of successful coordination between the Trump administration and Russia). The contribution of the United States to the arrangement amounted largely to the attempt to guard the interests of

its two main allies – Israel and Jordan - by launching implementation of the ceasefire and the establishment of a de-escalation zone in southern Syria.

Jordan, whose immediate aim is to achieve stability and calm in southern Syria, was pleased with the arrangement, partly as a preliminary step to the repatriation of the Syrian refugees in its territory. Israel, however, which is not satisfied with overall Russian promises to keep Iranian troops more than 30 km from the Golan Heights border, did not get what it wants. In spite of American backing, the arrangement does not meet Israeli demands regarding the removal of Iranian forces and Tehran's allies from Syria.

Israel challenges the interests of both powers: Russia – regarding its dependence on the ground fighting of Iranian troops and proxies alongside President Assad; and the United States – by stressing the necessity of increasing its involvement in Syria, although it has essentially handed the "Syrian file" to Russia, in the name of its responsibility to consider Israeli and regional interests, even at the cost of increasing the potential for conflict with Russia.

Russian interests in Syria see Iranian involvement in this arena as entirely legitimate, just as Russia's own involvement is legitimate. The justification is the call from the legitimate regime in Syria, led by President Assad, for help from its strategic partners, Iran and Russia, to contain its opponents and keep it in power. Significantly, the United States was not asked to intervene. Consequently, as Russia sees it, Iran has a role to play in shaping the Syria of "the day after" the civil war. Iran's willingness to do the "dirty" work on the ground and provide significant support toward rehabilitation of the status of the Assad regime makes it an asset for Russia. At the Astana talks led by Moscow, Russia defined Iran, with Turkey, as an element that can secure the Syrian arrangement.

At the same time, as the situation in Syria stabilizes, and certainly if the federal structure proposed by Russia crystallizes, Iran could become a rival of Russia for dominance and influence in the country. Iran is expected to work against the establishment of a federal structure, as it prefers a strong and stable central Alawite regime that will be under its influence.

When formulating its response to the Iranian threat in Syria, Israel premises its policy on two assumptions. The most important is the centrality of Russia to the shaping of Syria. The second is that Russia, at present, is friendly toward Israel. Russia, for its part, also considers Israel a friendly country, and more importantly – a significant regional player, with political and economic standing that must be taken into account. In Moscow's estimate, Israel can put its achievements in Syria at risk with its proven military capabilities, in addition to its potential to play a role in the regional camp working to

counter Iran's growing influence in the area. So far these assumptions have been translated into cooperation, which both Israel and Russia see as successful military coordination, particularly since it involves taking the interests of both parties into account.

It is unlikely that Israel's concerns, as presented to the President of Russia, who is well aware of the situation, fell on deaf ears. In the complex Syrian arena there is currently no element, including Iran, that wants escalation that could lead to war with Israel, something that could severely damage the Iranian project (and indirectly the Russian effort) in Syria. Iran itself is careful of its partnership with Russia, and for its own reasons, at this stage at least, is not looking for direct conflict with Israel and will therefore presumably take the Israeli threats into account. This means a restriction of its overt military activity, particularly in southern Syria – even if this contradicts the consistent rhetoric of the Iranian leadership and Hezbollah General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah. At the same time, Tehran continues to stress that it does not intend to establish bases in Syria and that its activity there is conducted from Syrian army bases, i.e., stemming from the Syrian request for assistance.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Israel must consider three main constraints as it formulates its policy. First, it must not allow the consolidation of Iranian influence in Syria for the long term, turning Syria into an Iranian client state and expanding the area of friction between Israel and Iran and its proxies. Second, relations with Russia are a strategic asset, and therefore Israel must find a way to maneuver between a credible threat of its determination to damage essential Russian interests in Syria, and its desire to continue the fruitful strategic coordination with Moscow. Third, the United States, Israel's central ally, will not do the job for it. In addition, the Trump administration sees the Syrian arena as a place to promote cooperation with Moscow, which it wishes to extend to other arenas (above all, North Korea). Therefore, and based on the failed models in Afghanistan and Iraq, there is no American desire to wallow in the Syrian swamp. In any case, Washington will give political backing to any Israeli course of action, including large scale military action, but no more than that.

Consequently, Israel's struggle against Iran's growing influence in Syria will be determined by the ability of both Iran and Israel to exercise effective levers of influence on Russia. Russia for its part will try to maneuver between Israeli demands and the need for cooperation with Iran, partly by making conflicting promises to each side. Therefore, Israel should treat Russia's promises in this context with caution, and improve its readiness to use force wisely and with a low signature, against Iran's objectives for establishing itself in Syria, according to a number of principles:

- a. Agreement with Russia regarding monitored Iranian presence north of Damascus, at least 40 km away from the Golan Heights, until all foreign forces are removed from Syria. This must stress the need for Russian supervision of the area, alongside Israel's freedom of action in the Syrian-Lebanon space in order to protect its essential security interests.
- b. Israeli involvement in the discussions and decisions affecting the future of Syria and its regime.
- c. Israeli intervention in southern Syria, for example, by helping the Free Syrian Army (FSA) that has recently been abandoned by the CIA, directly or through Jordan, and perhaps even by persuading the United States to resume its support for this force. It could constitute a factor that would block the establishment of Iranian forces and the pro-Assad coalition in the south of the country.
- d. Smart use of Israel's ability to cause damage in the Syrian and Lebanese arena as a means of establishing deterrence and to persuade Russia to enforce the red lines set by Israel with regard to Iran. As a response to challenging moves by Iran, Israel's operational steps must include surprises that will break the expectations of its rivals and send a message about its determination to prevent Iranian dominance and the long term establishment of Iranian forces and infrastructure in Syria.
- e. Informed action to increase the points of friction between Russia and Iran, in the context of the competition for dominance in Syria and influence over shaping its future.