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Remaking Syria:

A Military Update, the Diplomatic Situation, and the Israeli Angle

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A Military Assessment

After more than six blood-soaked years, some half a million dead (mostly civilians), and millions of displaced people and refugees, there are signs that the military stage in the Syrian civil war is approaching an end. The war, which began as a civilian uprising, evolved into a war among jihadist organizations and then into a war among entities vying for regional dominance, bolstered by respective regional and international powers.

The turning point in the war began in September 2015, when Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to intervene militarily in Syria to save Bashar al-Assad's regime. The battlefield successes by the pro-Assad coalition, headed by Russia and assisted by Iran and its various proxies, including Hezbollah, peaked with the fall of the northern city of Aleppo in December 2016. This completed the principal effort to preserve Assad's rule along Syria's central spine where most of the population and governing centers are located. Russia subsequently launched a political campaign to reach an agreement that would include a stable ceasefire and the establishment of principles for an interim period that would determine the future of Syria and its regime.

In tandem, the change in the internal balance of power and the relative influence of the external actors involved in the fighting continues. Covered by the ceasefire and the talks among the sides in Astana and Geneva, Russia and Iran are helping Assad's forces expand his control of several sectors in Syria – east of Aleppo, around Damascus, and in the Homs area (where an arrangement was made to evacuate rebel groups). There is also evidence that under Iran's auspices, Hezbollah is working toward a demographic change, especially along the Lebanese-Syrian border area, to shape a more comfortable demographic environment for the day after.

At the same time, victory against the Islamic State in eastern Syria is approaching, and with it the liberation of the territories currently controlled by the organization. Since Donald Trump took office, the United States has worked hard to defeat the Islamic State. The US Central Command is promoting an attack to liberate Raqqa, the Islamic State capital in Syria. US forces operating in Syria's northeast have been beefed up with hundreds of marines, joining some 500 special forces

personnel already operating on the ground. The Syrian Democratic Forces are closing in on Raqqa. The SDF was established with US support and consists of fighters from YPG, the Kurdish militia, as well as Sunni Arab fighters – the key US allies in the ground offensive against the Islamic State in Syria. At the same time, forces of the Syrian military subordinate to Assad are bearing down on Raqqa from the west.

A Diplomatic Assessment

Since its military intervention, Russia has become the senior actor in the Syrian arena, and has likewise increased its general influence over the Middle East. Trump's entrance into the White House has created expectations for cooperation between Russia and the United States, but signs of a change in US Middle East policy are emerging; such a change would be motivated by a desire to hold back Iranian influence and rebuild relations with the Sunni Arab states. Therefore, despite its achievements in Syria and in its improved status in the region, it seems that Moscow will above all want to reach understandings with Washington and increase coordination with it to preserve the Alawite regime in Syria.

The Trump administration's policy on Russia is still unclear. The President's overt desire to forge closer relations with Moscow is hindered by the revelations of the contacts between his associates with the Russians during the election campaign and the stance of the professional echelons in the administration that support using pressure and an assertive policy against Russia. The Middle East and especially the question of a settlement in Syria are thus, in practice, becoming the Trump administration's first test in terms of relations with Russia. The administration is concentrating first and foremost on defeating the Islamic State and the al-Qaeda-like rebel Salafist jihadist outfits with aerial strikes, while giving Russia the reins to lead the process to achieve a settlement in Syria.

After seizing control of territories in northern Syria, Turkey, which supports rebel groups identified with the Muslim Brotherhood and the Free Syrian Army, has assumed a senior position in the discussions about Syria's future. Ankara is very worried about growing Kurdish influence there and is taking action to drive Kurdish forces eastwards across the Euphrates. In this context, Turkey is eager to participate in the military effort to seize control of Raqqa to keep the achievement out of Kurdish hands en route to establishing a security zone south of the Turkish-Russian border.

For its part, Iran still wants to see an undivided Syria under Alawite rule, and is therefore unhappy with what seems to be Russia's policy in practice, i.e., the unofficial establishment of a type of federation in Syria that recognizes the country's internal balance of power and grants a form of autonomy in regions having a dominant local power (e.g., the Kurdish province in the north or the Sunni enclave around Idlib). Iran is also displeased by the central role Russia has given Turkey in representing the Sunni rebels in the talks, and by the recognition of Turkey's zone of influence in northern Syria. At this point, Iran is cooperating with Russia, but at the same

time is helping Assad expand his control of other regions; it also continues to provide arms to its key executive branch, i.e., Hezbollah.

It is not entirely clear to what degree Russia is willing is to take Iranian wishes into account, and there are conflicting interests between them. Nonetheless, Moscow finds it difficult to meet the US demand to reduce Tehran's influence in Syria, with Iran having provided the boots on the ground by mobilizing the main order of battle that allowed the pro-Assad coalition's victories. Moreover, Russia has a broader range of interests tying it to Iran (energy, arms sales, trade, and more).

Increased Israeli Involvement?

In light of Israel's understanding that the military stage in the Syrian civil war is over – a war it watched from the standoff position while shedding few tears over the blood-letting among its enemies – and that a new campaign to shape the politics of Syria has begun, Prime Minister Netanyahu went to meet President Putin. Israel stressed its displeasure with Iran's dominance in Syria and the fact that Iranian forces and proxies seem destined to remain in Syria in any future arrangement. Moreover, Israel reiterated its red lines, to prevent deployment of Iranian forces and the forces of its proxies in southern Syria near the Israeli border. This would seem to be the background for the March 16-17, 2017 aerial attack deep in Syria on a storage site serving Hezbollah and/or forces subordinate to Iran. The Syrian attempt to intercept attack planes using SA-5 surface-to-air missiles is indicative of the quality of the targets attacked as well as a possible change in the rules of the game: Syria is no longer willing to take Israeli attacks without responding. The summoning of Israel's ambassador to Moscow for clarifications subsequent to the attack was meant to signal Russia's displeasure with any expansion of Israeli military activity in the depth of Syria.

Russia views Israel as a regional power capable of affecting developments in the Syrian arena. It has proven interests in coordinating its moves with Israel while avoiding military friction, and the two are maintaining successful de-confliction measures in the Syrian sphere. There is also Russian awareness of Israel's interest in preventing forces subordinate to Iran from entrenching themselves near Israel's border, as well as Israel's sensitivity to any Iranian presence in Syria, and Russia is not opposed to strategic coordination with Israel about the future of the Syrian sphere.

Iran has signaled that it is not concerned about Israel's demand to prevent forces associated with Iran from deploying into the area on the Israeli-Syrian border, and it has moved forces of the Shiite militias and Hezbollah to Daraa for fighting alongside Assad's forces in a renewed effort to seize control of the southern city. Also, the Iranians declared the establishment of a new force as part of the Iraqi Shiite militia Hezbollah al-Nujba, which is fighting in Syria under Iran's command. The militia's spokesman said it would not leave Syria until the last of the terrorists

had been ousted, and that in addition to the fighting force in Syria a special unit for liberating the Golan Heights is currently in formation.

Israel, which has largely been distanced from the Syrian quagmire, senses its lack of influence over arrangements currently underway in Moscow, Tehran, Ankara, Astana, and Geneva. To present its concerns and red lines more emphatically, Prime Minister Netanyahu needed a fourth meeting with President Putin since 2015. Just before his visit, Turkish President Erdogan also called on Moscow, presumably to discuss the same issues. In the near future, Iranian President Rouhani too is expected to embark for Russia, which is undoubtedly trying to calm the fears of all these actors and transmit messages among them as a go-between. In this system, the United States is playing a secondary role. It is not taking center stage and is, for now, holding its cards close to its chest.

The fact that Israel finds itself in a new act with a more active and less covert role than before was manifested in a statement by Prime Minister Netanyahu after the most recent Israeli attack: “Our policy is very consistent. When we identify attempts to transfer advanced weapons to Hezbollah, and we have the intelligence and the operational feasibility, we act to prevent it. This is how it’s been and how it will be. I can speak of our resolve. It is rock solid, and the proof is that we are taking action. Everyone should take that into account. Everyone.” This reflects an Israeli decision to intensify its involvement in what is shaping up in Syria, given the understanding that the balance of power is changing to its detriment. The big question now is to what extent Israel can remain determined to maintain its red lines and prevent the buildup of Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies in Syria and the deployment of these forces near the border in the Golan Heights, without destabilizing its special relations with Moscow and without causing wider escalation in the northern arena.

