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**Russia as Restraining Factor in the Iranian-Israeli
Confrontation in Syria**

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Thus far, May has been a celebratory month for President Putin: on May 7, he was sworn in for a fourth term in office; two days later, on May 9, the country celebrated the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany; and on May 15, Putin inaugurated a bridge connecting Russia and the Crimean Peninsula. Nonetheless, reality is more complicated for the Kremlin both in the international arena and in the Middle East. Within the Kremlin, there is visible disappointment that President Trump cannot help improve US-Russian relations, and international pressure on Russia has increased. In April, the most severe US sanctions ever were imposed on Russia. Kremlin officials are also concerned about the investigation of Russia's involvement in the US presidential elections of 2016, which could also result in increased pressure. In addition, in recent months, Russia, to its consternation, has been absent from two important political processes in the international arena: the crisis with North Korea and the discourse between the United States and Europe regarding the termination of the nuclear agreement with Iran (although Russia has recently resumed playing a role in this context).

Also, the process of implementing Russian policy in Syria continues (on May 15, another meeting was held in Astana with the aim of establishing the de-escalation zones), in addition to a growing concern that Russia will be unable to decrease its involvement in the Syrian arena within the anticipated timeframe. Despite its successes in stabilizing Assad's rule, Russia has not succeeded in bringing about a process of political settlement that would end the civil war and proxies war and provide Russia with remuneration for its role in promoting a solution to the conflict and for its return to the international arena, notably the lifting of the sanctions imposed upon it. This was especially due to Russia's need for assistance from the international community—particularly the United States and Europe—in an effort to formulate a political settlement in Syria. In the absence of an effective process toward reaching a settlement, Russia will need to continue supporting Assad's forces in conquering territory from rebel control and in moving Sunni populations out of areas that are of interest to the Assad regime, especially to the north to Idlib region, and in helping the Assad regime achieve control over most of the populated areas of Syria. Within this process, given Iran's independent policy in Syria, tensions in the Iranian-Russian relations have mounted in regards to shaping a future settlement in Syria. Iran, for its part, is working to promote its own interests in Syria—even at the expense of Russian interests—and is consolidating its military position through its

proxies and is conducting itself in a manner that is liable to result in escalation with Israel. Iran's actions could be detrimental to the Russian "project," which focuses on preserving the Assad regime and enforcing a political settlement—referred to by the Russians as a "non-centralized structure"—that also takes into account the balance of power on the ground. Iran views such a settlement as unsatisfactory, due to its goal of achieving a centralized government functioning under its influence.

Nonetheless, in the Syrian arena and around the tensions between Israel and Iran, Russia recently seems to have found an opening for starting a political process under its leadership. Following the recent escalation between Iran and Israel in Syria and the development of a direct conflict between them, the question of Russia's position rises with all its force: Is Russia trapped between hawkish factors and being forced, against its will, to position itself as a restraining force? Or, can it actually reap the benefits of an Israel-Iran confrontation, particularly at a stage when the conflict is still controllable and limited? In this context, Russia strives to find a response to the challenges it faces vis-à-vis the United States, Iran, and Israel. It does so by taking advantage of the crises that emerge among the parties, while its aims remain to defend the Assad regime, establish its ability to exploit levers of influence and its senior status in any settlement in Syria, and to end its international isolation. The Russian advantage, which is now prominent, is its ability to negotiate with all the parties involved, as well as its ability to serve as a mechanism for preventing an escalation of the war, which is in the common interest of Iran and Israel.

Choosing a side in the Iran-Israel confrontation is not a Russian interest. Russia is in need of Iran in the short term, despite its differences with Tehran on the question of Syria's future, due to Iran's central role in the ground fighting of the pro-Assad coalition. In addition, Iran remains Russia's ally in the anti-Western camp in the global arena. At the same time, Russia does not have any interest in clashing with Israel, certainly given Israel's ability to do damage to the Assad regime, should it be unable to thwart Iran's aspiration to establish itself militarily in Syria and create a direct threat to Israel.

Beyond Israel's status as a leading regional power with the ability to disrupt any hostile activity in the region, Russia also regards Israel as a possible bridge between Moscow and Washington, in light of the special relationship between Israel and the United States. During the same week that the American embassy was inaugurated in Jerusalem, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attended a ceremony held in Moscow, alongside Vladimir Putin, marking the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany. Russian foreign affairs and security figures that support Iran, have no sympathy toward Israel, and are hostile to the West were critical of Netanyahu's appearance beside Putin in the victory parade and the playing of Israel's national anthem, Hatikva, in Red Square. President Putin, with his demonstrated friendship with Israel, is signaling Iran that Moscow's relations with Tehran should not be understood as a clear choice on the Iranian side. The question is for how long will Russia succeed in maneuvering between Iran and

Israel and controlling events in a manner that keeps them from spinning out of control? The answer is that as long as the civil war and proxy war in Syria continues, Russia will apparently enjoy a high level of freedom and flexibility in its maneuvering between the sides.

Russian policy found expression in the results of the Putin-Netanyahu meeting during the events marking the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany. First, on the issue of Israeli freedom of action in Syrian airspace, Israel will apparently continue to be given consideration and continued aerial coordination with Russia. Also relevant is Israel's request to not provide the Syrians with S-300 missile systems, to which the Russians have acceded for the time being. As for the extremely sensitive issue of Iran's presence in Syria, Moscow aspires to reach a compromise in its mediation between the two sides. It intends to restrain Iran and reassure Israel, out of fear of the confrontation erupting and the potential of the Israeli threat to damage the Assad regime as well as the position of Russia as an international mediator. The compromise for which the Russians seek includes limitations on the deployment of Iranian forces and the forces of Iranian proxies in Syria, especially their being sufficiently distanced away from the Syrian-Israeli border as to not pose a direct threat to Israel (it is not clear if the Russian proposal also pertains to the deployment of Iranian weapons systems in Syria, particularly surface-to-surface missiles and air defense systems). As another element regarding the future, during Assad's recent visit to Sochi (on May 17), Putin, his host, emphasized the need to remove foreign forces from Syria, and the following day Putin's emissary clarified that this was in reference to all foreign forces in Syria, including those of Iran, Hezbollah, Turkey, and the United States (this statement was originally formulated at the Sochi Conference, which was held at the beginning of 2018, and from the Russian perspective does not include Russian forces, which were deployed at the invitation of Syria's legitimate ruler and legally have leased their bases).

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also emphasized the issue of the Iranian presence in Syria in a speech delivered on May 21, in which he called on Iran to remove its forces from the country. Moreover, Pompeo threatened that the United States would "crush" Iran's proxies, promising that "Iran will never again have carte blanche to dominate the Middle East." In practice, the Trump administration provides Israel with broad backing to prevent Iran from consolidation in Syria. However, this does not mean that the United States will act to achieve this goal in Israel's stead. In this state of affairs, and following Israel's extensive strikes against sites and facilities serving the Quds Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards in Syria in response its launching of rockets at the Golan Heights, it is difficult to imagine Israel agreeing to a Russian compromise that includes an Iranian military presence in Syria, which poses a threat to Israel and is not required for the pro-Assad coalition's efforts against the rebel forces. However, since neither Israel nor Iran are interested in their confrontation escalating into war, they can allow Russia to play the role of a mediating and restraining force in order to control the level of escalation and

stop the conflicting parties when the events spin out of control. Better than those demonstrated by Iran and Hezbollah in recent years.