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The Trump-Putin Summit:

The Emphasis is the Dialogue, Not the Outcome

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The Trump-Putin summit was marked by attempts by President Trump to minimize American allegations that Russia interfered in the presidential elections. The meeting also reflected the efforts of the two leaders to forge a close relationship, toward a renewed dialogue between their two countries. In practice, it is doubtful if the meeting saw agreement on the long list of matters on the agenda. Regarding Syria, Putin stated that he and Trump agreed to ensure Israel's security and borders, according to the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement. However, there is much doubt whether the summit will promote any meaningful change in the balance of developments in Syria, which could guarantee the realization of Israel's strategic objective – the removal of the Iranian presence from Syria. The challenge facing Israel derives from the fact that its interests are now at the center of the dialogue between the powers, whose successful conclusion on its terms are still in doubt.

US President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin met in Helsinki on July 15, 2018 for their first official summit. This meeting was preceded by two unofficial encounters between them, which occurred on the sidelines of international conferences (Hamburg, July 2017; and Vietnam, November 2017). Since the start of Trump's presidency, relations between the two countries have faced an ongoing crisis, against a background of policy disputes (which began during the previous administration), with the emphasis on the international sanctions imposed on Russia following its annexation of Crimea, and the accusations of Russian interference in the US presidential elections. In the background are the upheavals that have undermined traditional foundations in the international arena since President Trump took office. These join his decision to withdraw from many international commitments assumed by previous administrations, the trade wars that he is conducting, and his struggles against traditional US allies in Europe, whom he has called "the enemy." In turn, Trump was accused of weakening the West against the Russian enemy.

On the other hand, Trump, who has already admitted that it is comfortable for him to talk to Putin, has for a long time sought, so far without success, to develop more intimate relations, because, as he puts it, they are both "strong" and "determined" leaders, and together they can promote a new order in the international arena, over the heads of other

leaders. The administration, and Trump personally, had an interest in showing that the summit achieved objectives that will serve him against those, primarily at home, who still argue that the shadow of the investigations of Russian meddling in the elections underway in the United States prevents improved bilateral relations with Russia. However, it appears that when Trump accepted President Putin's denials regarding involvement in the US elections, contrary to the findings of American intelligence, he strengthened the opposition – including among Republican elements – to improve relations with Russia, and thus limited the administration's room to maneuver.

In any event, even before the summit the administration knew what President Putin would demand as the price for a positive response to US demands. It appears that Putin wished to exploit the summit to start a process that would lead to understandings on several matters – including non-intervention in Russia's internal affairs; restrictions on the deployment of forces and NATO exercises in Eastern Europe; a settlement in Syria that recognizes growing Russian influence in that country and leaves the Assad regime in place – and thus bring about the “grand bargain” between the two powers. Some of President Trump's declarations before the summit on the issue of relations with Europe and NATO were received positively by Moscow, particularly his references to the possible withdrawal of US forces from Europe, a reduction in joint exercises, and more. These came with hints about “creative solutions” to the Crimean issue (“de facto” recognition) and the gradual easing of sanctions. In actuality, however, at this stage it is hard to point to clear achievements by Russia following the summit, particularly with respect to its interests in Eastern Europe.

No official agenda was published before the summit, and it appears that the meeting was largely shaped by the ability of both leaders to navigate the challenges they face, so that in the end each could stress the importance of continued contact and its contribution to domestic national interests. Apparently, several bilateral and international issues were raised at the meeting, including some relating to the Middle East. At the same time, in their statements at the joint press conference following the meeting, the leaders did not say whether they had reached agreements, and the emphasis was mainly on the importance of the meeting itself.

On Syria, President Putin stated that he and President Trump agreed to ensure the security of Israel, while insisting on implementation of the 1974 Agreement on Disengagement regarding the Israel-Syria border. However, so far there has been no concrete agreement or understanding on the removal of Iranian forces and military capabilities from Syria. Before the summit, it was reported that the US administration was mainly interested in obtaining assurances that the Russians would work to limit the Iranian presence in Syria, and in return it was prepared to give de facto recognition of the

continuation of the Assad regime, and possibly also promote the withdrawal of American forces from Syria. Russia for its part did indeed express greater willingness to promote understandings on many of the issues important to the United States, including the Iranian question. This is because Putin understands that without achieving understandings on this issue, Russia, mired in Syria for three years, is likely to sink more deeply into the mud, without managing to leverage its involvement in Syria to score achievements in the international arena.

In spite of Russian interest in principle in the removal of Iranian forces from Syria, this objective must be weighed against the Russian interest, and certainly also that of President Assad and the Iranians in the short term, of continuing to consolidate the regime's control throughout the country, including in the south, and in the long term to preserve Russia's growing influence in Syria. Against this background, it is hard at the moment to identify a substantive Russian desire or ability to prevent the deployment of Iran and its proxies in southern Syria. Iran, aware of Israel's campaign against it and the gaps between Jerusalem and Moscow on the issue, presumably does not intend to abandon its effort to expand its military entrenchment in Syria. In this context, there are reports of the integration of Shiite militias into Syrian army forces, and of Syrian militias subordinate to the Assad regime returning to the Golan Heights. Possible agreements regarding southern Syria do not in any event provide a sufficient response to Iran's ongoing efforts to deploy forces deep inside Syria and position advanced weapon systems there. Moreover, taking a broad view of American efforts against Iran, President Putin stressed that Russia would continue to uphold the JCPOA and work together with Europe and China to maintain the nuclear agreement. However, here too Russia would likely be flexible, in return for American concessions on the sanctions and recognition of its status in Crimea.

Significance for Israel

The likelihood that the Trump-Putin summit will succeed in promoting meaningful change in the balance of developments in Syria is not great, and it is highly doubtful whether it has helped to advance Israel's strategic objective – removal of the Iranian presence from Syria. Israel must continue to maneuver with Russia, but perhaps also with the United States, particularly with respect to its interest of delaying the rapid withdrawal of American forces from Syria without guarantees for the removal of the Iranians. Time after time, Russia has failed to honor its commitments in Syria, and it would therefore be a mistake for the United States to evacuate its forces and rely on Russia before the elimination of all the Islamic State outposts in Syria and clear evidence that the Iranian forces and proxies have left the country and dismantled their military infrastructures as well as their rocket and air defense systems.

The Agreement on Disengagement between Israel and Syria, mentioned by President Putin and by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, defines restrictions on military personnel, tanks, artillery and ground to air missile batteries within 10, 20, and 25 km of the Golan Heights border. These ranges are small in relation to the range mentioned in some of the demands by Israel and the United States regarding Iranian forces and proxies – 60-80 km from the Israeli border, and the weapons they contain do not include some of the main weapon systems that worry Israel. In any event, attacks from the air, with which Israel can at the most delay and interfere with the process of Iranian consolidation in Syria, plus pressure from Russia is not enough to bring about the full removal of Iranian presence and capabilities from Syria.

All the understandings between the United States and Russia on the Iranian presence in Syria and a future settlement in Syria, including the implications for Israel, will now be at the center of a far reaching attempt by Moscow to achieve a “grand bargain” between the powers. If the deal should fail, the Russians can claim that their commitments made in this framework are not binding.