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US-Russia Relations: Implications for Israel

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A planned meeting between the United States and Russian Presidents on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Buenos Aires was canceled at the last minute by President Donald Trump, ostensibly in response to Russian aggression toward Ukraine in the Azov Sea, close to the Crimean peninsula. Cancellation of the meeting highlighted a new low point in the ongoing crisis of relations between the US and Russia. In the days following the cancellation, a positive change was evident in Russia's tone regarding Israel, and it is not impossible that notwithstanding the deteriorating relations between the great powers, there is a possibility of improved relations between Russia and Israel. Yet since there is little chance that in the short term the United States and Russia will manage to resolve the disputes between them, Israel must prepare for the possibility that the tension between them will affect its room to maneuver as it promotes its own interests in the region, and in particular, its freedom of action to deal with the Iranian presence in Syria.

A planned meeting between the United States and Russian Presidents on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Buenos Aires (November 20–December 1, 2018) was canceled at the last minute by President Donald Trump. According to the official announcement, the cancelation was in response to Russian aggression toward Ukraine in the Sea of Azov – the Russian seizure just a few days earlier of three Ukrainian ships near the Kerch Strait, close to the Crimean peninsula. The American action left the Russians disappointed and embarrassed, and it appears that the cancelation will further dent the already strained relations between the two countries. Even before this development, the US administration had decided to postpone an invitation to President Vladimir Putin to visit Washington until an unknown date, to expand the sanctions imposed on Moscow, and to announce the intention to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) signed with the USSR in 1987.

Behind the recent events is the ongoing crisis of relations between the US and Russia, ever more noticeable since Trump entered office and the two leaders failed to launch a dialogue. Meetings between them, including the Helsinki summit in July 2018 and other encounters, have not led to any breakthroughs, in spite of Trump's wishes to repair relations with Russia and enjoy closer ties with Putin, and in spite of Russia's noted efforts over the past four years to maintain a dialogue with the West, and the US in

particular, specifically, to ease the pressures of the economic sanctions and its international isolation. It appears that Putin intended to use the meeting with Trump to try once again to promote an agenda that will help Russia deal with its problems.

In light of the West's refusal to engage in meaningful dialogue with it, Russia has exerted various levers of pressure, including the initiation of several crises. So far, however, these moves have failed to achieve the results that Moscow seeks:

- a. Notwithstanding its military achievements in Syria, Russia is sinking in the Syrian morass because it is unable to leverage this success to achieve a dialogue with the West. For more than three years Russia has sought a political process with the West, but as Moscow sees it, moves directed by the United States block the way to this dividend. Last year there were clear efforts by Russia to promote an end to the fighting in Syria, but for that purpose it must reach understandings with the United States. At the meeting between Trump and Putin in Helsinki, Russian proposals to remove Iranian forces from Syria were discussed, but no agreement was reached.
- b. Russia initiated a crisis with Israel following the downing of the Russian reconnaissance plane by Syrian air defense in Syrian air space on September 17, 2018, and blamed Israel for the incident. It appears that the purpose of this crisis, which is still intense, is to change the rules of the game with Israel in Syria and serve as leverage to pressure the United States to renew its dialogue with Moscow. This outcome has not yet been achieved.
- c. Moscow again sought to exploit the conference in Paris in November 2018 marking 100 years since the end of World War I to revive the dialogue with the United States and discuss a settlement in Syria. Apparently, at a short meeting between the two Presidents, a Russian proposal to remove Iranian forces from Syria in return for the lifting of sanctions on Iran yielded no agreement – apart from an intention to discuss the issue further at the G20 in Buenos Aires. In Paris there was also a short meeting between Putin and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and at that opportunity Russia raised this proposal (hoping to persuade Israel to promote the proposal with the US). Seeing that previous pressures have not borne fruit, the marine incident with Ukraine followed on November 25. This incident threatens Ukrainian sovereignty in the Azov Sea, and thus serves as leverage against Ukraine, and the West - and the United States in particular – as well.
- d. At the same time, Russia initiated a move on the Israel-Palestinian issue, when in late November it offered again to mediate in the conflict, and even invited Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh to Moscow. The date of the visit has not yet been finalized, but it marks a new Russian attempt to take part in regional processes and not leave them exclusively to American leadership.

Cancellation of the planned meeting in Buenos Aires highlighted the low point to which relations between the United States and Russia have sunk. Although President Trump explained the cancellation as a response to aggression, it was probably also due to the (further) embarrassing news published just before in the United States, regarding contacts between Trump's associates and Russian elements before the last presidential elections. Indeed, the US administration is hard pressed to maneuver between the President's basic interest in better relations with Moscow and the constraints on his freedom of action caused by the ongoing investigation in the US. Moreover, the report that Special Counsel Robert Mueller is due to publish in the first half of 2019 is expected to exacerbate the tension between the two countries. The sanctions imposed on Russia might even be intensified. Against this background, the difficulties preventing Russia and the United States from reaching agreement on Middle East-related matters, as well as the Eastern Europe issue, will probably increase.

Moscow is disappointed, challenged, and committed to a response that will rescue it from this dead end. Possible directions for a Russian reaction include:

- a. Initiation of a broad crisis in the international arena – in Eastern Europe or in the Middle East (or even in Africa) – with the goal of forcing the United States to start a dialogue with Russia on the issues disturbing Moscow.
- b. Quiet diplomatic work with the aim of promoting understandings, with some concessions to the United States, in order to encourage more discussion.
- c. Combination of measured pressure (such as the initiated crises in Ukraine and Syria), and quiet diplomatic efforts.

In the days following the cancellation of the meeting in Argentina, a positive change was evident in Russia's tone regarding Israel, namely, in the Russian reaction, which could be defined as positive, to the IDF's Operation Northern Shield against Hezbollah tunnels on the Israel-Lebanon border. Inter alia, the Russian Foreign Office spokeswoman mentioned Israel's right to self-defense and right to prevent incursions into its territory. In addition, it was reported that Putin and Netanyahu agreed in a telephone call to meet in the near future. Russia's reexamination of its relations with Israel may be due to the fact that Russia is not interested in a double crisis, with Israel and with the United States. It is therefore not impossible that notwithstanding the deteriorating relations between the great powers, there is a possibility of improved relations between Russia and Israel.

Yet since there is little chance that in the short term the United States and Russia will manage to resolve the disputes between them, Israel must prepare for the possibility that the tension between them will affect its room to maneuver as it promotes its own interests in the region – i.e., freedom of action to deal with the Iranian presence in Syria, and to

combat Iran's efforts to strengthen its military capabilities and those of its ally Hezbollah on Syrian soil.