

The Northern Arena at a Crossroads

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The Crisis in Syria: Key Developments

Each of the nearly eight years of civil war in Syria has been characterized by a central phenomenon or trend that influenced the development of the war and the future of the country. What began as a civil uprising in 2011 against the regime led by President Bashar al-Assad developed in 2012-2013 to a sectarian struggle of rebel organizations opposing the Assad regime, which is supported by Iran and Hezbollah. In 2014 the splits among the rebel factions continued along distinct sectarian and religious lines, with the dominance of Salafi jihadist organizations, in particular, the Islamic State. Thus separate fighting groups emerged in Syria, with different ideas as to the identity of Syria on the day after Assad. The fifth year of fighting was marked by Russian intervention alongside Iran in order to save the Assad regime from what appeared to be an imminent defeat. The sixth year was marked by the defeat of the rebels in Aleppo and a reversal of the trend seen in earlier phases: the pro-Assad coalition of Russia and Iran and its proxies was well on the way to recapture additional territories held by the rebels and to take over the “spine” of Syria, from Aleppo in the north, through Hama, Homs, and Damascus, and the Syrian-Lebanese border.¹

At the same time, political initiatives were conducted along two tracks: the international track, under the auspices of the UN in Geneva, which focused on the attempt to promote a long term settlement in Syria; and since January 2017, a track led by Russia, Iran, and Turkey, with discussions in Astana and Sochi on the management of the fighting. At first the Astana

process centered on promoting ceasefires and establishing de-escalation zones in Syria, and supervising them in areas where humanitarian crises had developed. Later it dealt with dividing influence in Syria among the three intervening countries – Russia, Iran, and Turkey. 2018 was characterized by the increasing dominance of the foreign political actors in Syria – Iran and Russia on Assad’s side, Turkey on the side of the “moderate” Sunni rebels in the north of the country, and against the Kurds – to prevent their achieving autonomy; and the United States on the side of the Kurds in northeast Syria, after they defeated the Islamic State but did not yet eradicate the organization. The decision by United States President Donald Trump to withdraw US forces from Syria leaves the Kurds with no choice but to align themselves with the Assad regime.

Turkey does not intend to withdraw its forces from Syria in the near future. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan persuaded President Trump that there was no need for continued US deployment in northeast Syria, and that Turkey would guarantee against the resurgence of the Islamic State. Turkey will no doubt use the withdrawal of the US forces as an opportunity to deepen its hold in northern Syria and create a buffer between its southern border and the Kurdish areas. Most important from its perspective is to prevent Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. For that reason it joined forces with Russia and Iran, in an attempt to increase its influence over the political process that will determine Syria’s future. Turkey strives for a political process that will bring about a constitution and elections in Syria, so that the Sunni majority that it supports will achieve significant political representation and increase its power. Turkey’s hold on territories in the north is intended to block the expansion of Kurdish influence and give it future bargaining chips in Syria. President Erdogan is highly suspicious of Assad, as well as of Russia and Iran, and also wishes to keep a close eye on the Kurds and prevent the flight of refugees from the Idlib region to Turkey; in the meantime, he continues to deport Syrian refugees back to their country (estimates are that Turkey has so far repatriated 150,000-250,000 Syrian refugees).²

President Trump decided to withdraw US forces from Syria – against the advice of his advisors (in the State Department, the Defense Department, and the National Security Council) and against the policy formulated a few months prior, which indicated the need to maintain a US military presence

in northeast and eastern Syria in order to continue fighting in the enclaves still in Islamic State hands, especially given the signs of the organization's recovery. In addition, the intention was to supply further support for the Kurds, and in particular, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that were established, trained, and equipped by the United States. They are based largely on Kurdish forces that bore the brunt of the ground fighting against the Islamic State in northern and eastern Syria. Moreover, Washington wants to influence the political resolution in Syria, and above all guarantee the withdrawal of Iranian forces, although it has no intention of using military power to this end. However, Trump's decision in effect deposits the "Syrian portfolio" in Russian hands – this too against the advice of his professional team, which argues that now is the time to harden the US position vis-à-vis Russia. If there is any logic to President Trump's decision, it rests on the assessment that it is useful to announce a victory over the Islamic State and exit Syria as soon as possible, without being drawn in to the conflicts between Turkey and the Kurds, between Israel and Iran, and between Assad and the rebels. Trump also agreed to sell Turkey a surface-to-air Patriot system, in place of the Russian S-400 system. This would help to bring Turkey closer to NATO and distance it from Russia.³

2019 is expected to be characterized by the Assad regime's expanded control over eastern Syria and victory in the civil war. Nonetheless, competition for influence will continue between the countries involved in Syria – Russia, Iran and Turkey. The arena is at a crossroads: the main fighting phase has ended, and most efforts are directed toward drafting future arrangements and plans for reconstruction. After Syria became the scene of the struggle between global and regional powers, and a battlefield for proxies (non-state actors), the question arises: how will the foreign presence affect Syria in the coming years, and is the departure of foreign forces expected, or is the deeper involvement of those forces under cover of participation in the reconstruction effort more likely? At this time, there is a considerable gap between the expectations for Syria and the reality on the ground. The pro-Assad coalition has announced the total defeat of the rebels, meaning that the regime is newly fortified and can turn its attention to the state's political, infrastructure, and economic reconstruction. Russian President Vladimir Putin has twice heralded the military victory of the regime forces, although

in fact Russian forces are still mired in the Syrian swamp – even more so with the departure of the US forces – and unable to impose a sustainable arrangement on the parties that will ensure the continuation of Assad’s rule and enable the end of the fighting and the start of the reconstruction.

With the United States departure from the Syrian arena, Israel is left alone in the campaign to distance Iran and its proxies from Syria. The worrying trend for Israel is that the superiority of the elements supporting Assad provides fertile ground for the further entrenchment of Iran in the country, on the way to its positioning itself – together with its proxies, led by Hezbollah in southern Syria and Lebanon – as a direct, severe, and intensifying threat to Israel.

The Next Battle: The Last Rebel Stronghold in the Idlib Province

The Idlib province in northern Syria remains the last rebel stronghold and a fortified target due to the dominance of the rebel group Hay’at Tahrir al-Shām (Levant Liberation Committee, HTS), which includes a number of Salafi jihadist organizations. Around Idlib there is a population of displaced refugees driven there from other regions, due to the surrender agreements signed between the regime and the rebels. Thus the region doubled its population and became home to some three million civilians and 50,000 jihadi fighters.⁴ The element that has so far succeeded in repelling the pro-Assad coalition attack on Idlib is Turkey, which is a guarantor for some of the Sunni rebel organizations. Through the Astana process it managed to arrange a demilitarized area round the Idlib enclave, a kind of buffer between the rebels and the Assad forces, and to set up observation points and checkpoints in coordination with Russia and Iran to supervise implementation of the ceasefire. The pro-Assad coalition is looking for an excuse to launch an attack on the region (for example, by spreading information – likely false – that the rebels are using chemical weapons). Presumably sooner or later there will be an attack against the rebels there, and as in other areas of Syria in recent years, the pro-Assad coalition is expected to adopt a cruel, brutal policy that will claim many civilian lives.

Issues Central to Israeli Interests

The Iranian Entrenchment in Syria

The desire that Iran remove its capabilities and proxies from Syria, whether voluntarily or due to Russian pressure, once the Assad regime regains control over essential territories is now seen as a pipe dream. In fact, Iran is entrenching itself in Syria even more deeply, and for the long term. In late August 2018, Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami came to Damascus for a visit in order to promote and extend Syrian-Iranian cooperation. At the end of the visit, Hatami announced that Iran would maintain its presence in Syria, would not allow any third party to affect the presence of military advisors in the country, and would take an active part in the reconstruction process. Syria and Iran signed a joint defense and cooperation agreement, including understandings regarding rebuilding the Syrian army and developing the Syrian military industry. About a month earlier, the Assad regime completed its takeover of the Syrian side of the border on the Golan Heights, and Russia announced that it had agreed with Iran that its forces would pull back to a range of 85 kilometers from the Israeli border.⁵

Iran is investing simultaneously on three levels:

- a. Building military attack capabilities against Israel in Syria and in Lebanon by means of an array of precision surface-to-surface missiles and rockets, coast to sea missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) with attack capabilities. Against the background of Israel's attempts to thwart Iranian military entrenchment in Syria, Iran is also working to achieve the same objective in Lebanon, by supplying Hezbollah with advanced weaponry – precision missiles, attack drones, and tunnels along the Lebanon-Israel border (and in Iraq, where it recently sent short range ballistic missiles that threaten Israeli territory).
- b. Helping the Assad regime build its internal security forces array, based on local and national militias (like the popular Shiite militias in Iraq), subject simultaneously to the Assad regime and Iranian control, and preparing the infrastructure to deploy Shiite militias in Syria as an intervention force and for long term deployment.⁶
- c. Working to strengthen the Shiite axis, in part by expanding the Shiite influence in Syria. Iran is trying to change the demographic composition of the country, in part by assisting millions of Sunni refugees to flee.

This group comprises about 80 percent of all the war refugees in Syria, most of whom will probably not return home. At the same time, Iran is encouraging the migration of Shiites to Syria (mainly the families of fighters in Shiite militias who were sent to fight in Syria), settling them in areas that are essential to Iran, particularly close to the Iraq-Syria and the Syria-Lebanon borders, and in the region around Damascus, and granting new immigrants Syrian citizenship. Iran is also establishing Persian cultural centers to promote Shiite studies and rituals and grant scholarships for studies in Tehran. Persian-language schools, which follow the Iranian curriculum, have been established as well.

Iran does not want to demonstrate prominent control in Syria, but to exert influence behind the scenes, while working on the assimilation of the forces under its authority into the Syrian government's civilian and military frameworks. According to many reports in the Syrian media, and particularly on opposition websites and social media, Iranian forces, Hezbollah, and the Shiite militias, wearing Syrian army uniforms, participate in the fighting that continues against rebel positions. Shiite militias under Iranian command in southern Syria are also disguised as part of the regime's forces, in spite of Russia's promise to Israel to remove Iranian forces from the Golan Heights border. Obviously Russia is aware that the pro-Iranian Shiite militias are not only failing to withdraw from southern Syria, but are even reinforcing their presence and preparations there. In the final months of 2018, there were several reports about the consolidation of Hezbollah units near the Golan Heights in the drive to expand its potential operations against Israel. This trend is expected to increase.⁷

Israel, which enjoys intelligence superiority in Syria, is currently playing down the exposure of Iranian proxies and other forces under its authority and command in southern Syria – apparently based on an estimate that these forces do not represent a real threat to its security, at least in the short term. Rather, it is focusing on preventing further Iranian entrenchment in Syria based on advanced military attack capabilities – missiles, rockets, UAVs, air defense systems, and advanced weapons. It appears that Israel is putting its hopes on Russia and the Assad regime to distance Iranian forces and proxies from proximity to its border, once they have realized that growing Iranian involvement and penetration of the Syrian army ranks will actually

undermine stability and damage the regime's sovereignty. However, it is highly doubtful if Russia and Assad have the practical ability to thin out the Iranian presence or pull it back, particularly following the integration of Iranian commanders and Shiite fighters into local forces. In any event, it seems likely that Israel will continue to retain the option of attacking the Iranian proxies.

Turning Point in Israel-Russia Relations?

Israel has maintained military channels of coordination with Russia since the start of Russia's involvement in Syria, in order to avoid clashes between IDF and Russian air forces, as well as channels of communication at the highest level, including between President Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu. The honeymoon ended on the night of September 17, 2018, which saw an Israeli aerial attack on Iranian facilities in the Syrian coastal sector, following which a Russian Ilyushin 20 intelligence surveillance aircraft was shot down by Syrian air defense system (an S-200 surface-to-air missile), killing all 15 people on board. This was one of the most sensitive incidents in the framework of Israel-Russia relations since the start of the Russian intervention in Syria.⁸

Although it was the Syrian air defense that shot down the Russian plane, Russia decided to blame Israel for the outcome. Russia took advantage of the incident to limit the freedom of action that it had allowed Israel in Syrian airspace for the purpose of furthering its interests regarding Iran and Hezbollah. A few days later, President Putin yielded to the pressure from military personnel and permitted the immediate supply of advanced S-300 surface-to-air missile batteries to Syrian air defense. The declared Russian aim is to reinforce Syria's air defense forces and limit Israel's aerial freedom of action, mainly in northern Syria and in areas where Russia does not want Israel to operate, specifically close to its own military bases in Syria. Indeed, since the incident, Israel has reduced the frequency and visibility of its actions against Iranian entrenchment in Syria, and chosen to avoid friction with Russia in the short term, to allow renewal of the understandings regarding action in Syria, and recovery of relations between Jerusalem and Moscow.⁹

Israel wants to make clear to Moscow that delivering advanced air defense systems to the Assad regime will also increase the danger to Russia's

own forces, since the September incident actually illustrated the defective performance of Syrian air defenses. If an attempt is made to shoot down Israeli planes, Israel would have to destroy the batteries, even at the risk of hitting Russian personnel supporting the Syrian teams to operate the systems. In addition, Jerusalem is sending messages to Moscow that Israel cannot allow Iran to continue sending precision missiles or rockets to Hezbollah, or to continue its entrenchment efforts in Syria, which endangers Israel's most basic interests.

It appears that Israel has lost part of its major leverage over Russia, which is its ability to inflict damage that could bring down the Assad regime. Assad has emerged as the victor in the civil war and there is no element in Syria, apart from Iran, that can provide an alternative to his regime. Israel's restraint regarding the nullified de-escalation agreement in southern Syria, along with Assad's control over the Golan Heights unhindered by Israeli constraints or conditions, amounts to Israel's tacit acceptance of Assad's rule. Therefore, Moscow understands that Israel no longer retains a viable bargaining chip based on potential damage power against the existence of the Assad regime. At the same time, Russia is still worried that escalation between Israel and Iran in Syria could cause serious damage to the Russian project of reinforcing the Assad regime, so it is expected to continue seeking ways to limit the room for friction between Israel and Iran, and for this it has to restrict Israel's freedom of operation in Syrian air space.

Assad's Control of Southern Syria and the Golan Heights

During 2018 the Assad regime managed to regain control of southern Syria and the Syrian Golan Heights, with hardly any resistance from the rebels, who chose the option of surrender agreements following the failure of their hopes to obtain external aid against the pro-Assad coalition, and their realization they were alone in the battlefield. (They were apparently offered the chance to join the Syrian forces, in what later proved to be a trick played by the regime on the local population.) Israel therefore faces a new/old situation, where the Assad regime – through its allies – is deployed on the other side of the border. This follows a period in which Israel managed to stabilize the situation in the Golan Heights and enjoy a calm border, based on understandings with local communities on the Syrian side, for which they

received humanitarian and civilian aid from Israel, in return for preventing terror attacks from their territory on the Golan.

Israel has come to terms with Assad's victory in the civil war and the continued presidency of someone who is responsible for the murder of almost half a million Syrian citizens, in order to prevent a crisis with Russia following its intervention in the war, and to persuade Moscow to pay attention to its interests, particularly the opposition to Iranian entrenchment in the country. True, before the outbreak of the civil war Israel had a positive experience with the Assad regime regarding the rules of the game, but the regime today is materially different from what it was before the war. It is under growing Iranian and Hezbollah influence, and therefore Israel can only hope that Russian influence will overcome that of Iran and Hezbollah.¹⁰

Expansion of the Northern Arena to the Lebanese Front

Alongside the Iranian and Hezbollah military buildup in Syria, toward late 2018 an infrastructure of attack tunnels excavated by Hezbollah under the Lebanon-Israel border was revealed. The tunnels are a central element in Hezbollah's "Conquest of Galilee" plans (referring to Israeli towns and villages in Galilee), in the framework of a future conflict with Israel. Infiltration of Israeli territory was intended to be carried out by the elite Hezbollah force al-Radwan, and perhaps also by fighters from Iraqi Shiite militias, operated by the Iranian Quds force.¹¹ The tunnels system joins a series of Hezbollah moves under Iranian auspices, including the expansion of its precision attack capabilities from Lebanon, as well as the renewed seepage of Hezbollah forces toward the Israel-Lebanon border, under the nose of the UN peacekeeping force, UNIFIL. This activity complements Iran's other efforts to achieve influence in the northern arena and thereby expand the area of friction with Israel: building the land bridge from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the Mediterranean; increasing the weight of the military investment in Lebanon by means of Hezbollah, in case its military consolidation in Syria is delayed, and to ensure superfluous capabilities and perhaps to distract observers from its entrenchment activity in Syria; and enlisting all Iranian capabilities – political, military, technological, and engineering – in building the military infrastructure in the northern arena. Lebanon, as a sovereign state, is not fulfilling its responsibilities and is in fact

a prisoner of Hezbollah. Meanwhile the international community prefers to ignore Iran's moves, and the UNIFIL force along the Israel-Lebanon border fails to perform its mission and turns a blind eye to what is happening.

Exposure of the tunnels project increases the security challenge whereby Israel must deal with several fronts simultaneously – Syria, Lebanon, and the Gaza Strip. In all three areas Iran supports the military buildup of Israel's enemies. This increases the risk of escalation to the point of war in the northern arena, although at this stage neither side wants it. Hezbollah, which is aware of the mutual deterrence with Israel, is not focusing on the front with Israel and is still called upon to fight alongside Assad in Syria; it is also busy with political activity in Lebanon. While it does not worry about the ongoing buildup of a range of attack capabilities under the cover of mutual deterrence, it will try to avoid war in the near future, because it does not want to risk the loss of its achievements in the Syrian project – the rescue of the Assad regime, and the establishment of its own strongholds in Syrian territory, in which it has invested seven years of fighting, with the loss of 3,000 fighters.

Implications for Israel

It is unlikely that all the issues on the agenda in the complex Syrian arena will be resolved over the coming year – the end of fighting, stability, and a political settlement are still not visible on the horizon. However, the nature of the arena may be redefined, as the conflict stabilizes and new facts are determined by all the relevant parties, and efforts to launch political, economic, and infrastructure reconstruction in Syria may begin.

Syria's military, economic, and political strength is not expected to increase sufficiently over the coming years to a level that will make it a significant threat or strategic competitor to Israel. However, Syria will serve as a platform for strategic threats, largely due to Iranian consolidation there, including moves such as the deployment of surface-to-surface precision missile systems and the presence of Iranian proxies – the Quds force, Shiite militias, and Hezbollah – that could increase friction along the border with Israel. Iran, which exploits the Assad regime's weakness and dependence on it, has an interest in building its own capabilities to cause severe damage deep in Israel, and maintaining an independent front against it – without

depending on Hezbollah, which is sometimes restrained by internal Lebanese considerations.

The more Iran perseveres in its entrenchment efforts in Syria, by building an independent military infrastructure and expanding the array of precision missiles there, as in Lebanon, the greater the probability of military hostilities between Iran and Israel. Israel cannot hold back and allow Iran in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon to achieve a critical mass of precision missiles, which will threaten its population centers and strategic sites. At most, Israel's dialogue with Russia can help to distance Iran and its proxies from the Golan Heights front, but this is not expected to lead to their complete withdrawal from Syria. True, Russia will try to reduce friction between Israel and Iran, and restrict Israeli action in Syria to the south, in order to avoid aerial conflict with Israel. However, if Israel tries to attack Iranian strongholds in the north and west of Syria, it will probably have to deal with an enhanced Syrian air defense system, operated with Russian help.

Until 2018, Israel was largely focused on the Iranian land bridge through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon to the Mediterranean, and its importance to Iran as "the Shiite axis," not only for the supply of weapons, but also as the backbone of its political influence, in which Tehran is prepared to invest blood and treasure, while exploiting all opportunities. After Iraq, Iran sought to exploit Syria's weakness, and made preparations to reproduce the Iraqi model there, with local popular militias under Iranian command and based on Hezbollah capabilities in Lebanon and alongside the Golan Heights. Therefore, this year Israel is stressing "the independent, Iranian precision war machine" in Syria.

In May 2018 Israel responded to a barrage of Iranian rockets over the Golan Heights with an attack on dozens of Iranian targets in Syria.¹² The Iranians were surprised by the immediacy and extent of the Israeli attack and by the accurate intelligence on which it was based, and since then have kept their military presence in Syria on a much lower profile. At that time Russia was clearly not bothered, and used the incident as leverage to pressure Iran lest it seek to escalate hostilities with Israel, and thereby risk the achievements against the rebels and the restoration of Assad's regime. For Russia, stability is the supreme goal in Syria, and it seeks to avoid any Israeli-Iranian flare-up that would hamper the realization of this objective.

As a result, and based on an assessment that there is mutual deterrence between Israel and Hezbollah, which restricts Israel's ability to operate in Lebanon, Iran is moving the effort to improve missile accuracy to Lebanon. If Israel decides to act against the missile enhancement infrastructures in Lebanon, it could lead to military escalation, whereby Hezbollah could fire missiles and rockets at targets deep in Israel. If Israel succeeds in blocking this entrenchment, Iran will presumably increase the attack infrastructures – missiles, UAVs, and attack tunnels penetrating Israeli territory in Lebanon, and short range ballistic missiles in Iraq.

Russia and Turkey are currently allowing Iran to entrench itself in Syria, and this trend will likely increase with the United States withdrawal from the area. Even before, the United States refrained from using military force against Iran and its proxies in Syria, due to fear of revenge on American forces stationed in Iraq. The US withdrawal, however, has several additional key implications for the arena. First, the eradication of the remaining Islamic State cells is far from over, and with tens of thousands of fighters reportedly operating in Syria, it is not clear who is responsible for their elimination. Given that the US is once again abandoning local allies – in this case, the Kurds and the SDF, which were the key ground forces fighting against the Islamic State – it is likely that the US will have to return to fight against the Islamic State, at least from the air, but now without support of ground forces. Second, the Syria-Iraq border will remain open. Third, the element that deterred Iran from using its land bridge is now gone, and it is likely that the Assad regime will gain control of eastern Syria, including the oil fields. Russia and Iran, which were eager for the United States to leave northeast Syria, got their wish with little effort. Thus, Israel remains alone in the campaign against Iranian entrenchment in Syria.

Israel is not interfering with initiatives for the formidable reconstruction challenge, which are coming mainly from Russia, Iran, and even China. The European countries and the United States will not invest in Syria as long as Assad is in power and there is no constitutional and political reform of this weakened country to enable Syrian citizens to participate in the political process. However, Israel has an interest in the reconstruction process, particularly in southern Syria, in order to focus Syrian and external input on rebuilding the area and creating a stable and responsible area for the

civilian population. The only possible way is to apply indirect influence to the process, based on an international coalition, even of the Sunni Gulf states, while restricting Iranian influence. Before Assad's forces took control of southern Syria and the Golan Heights, Israel erred by failing to make its non-intervention in the fighting conditional on its incorporation into the political contacts, and in the creation of liaison channels to the Syrian army on the Golan Heights to maintain a stable border regime. Yet even now, Israel's potential influence in Syria is not restricted to military-operational matters; it could also occur through involvement in political processes and reconstruction. With the assistance of foreign companies, Israel can support infrastructure projects in southern Syria – an area that could be economically neglected by the regime – mainly by setting up employment centers, civilian technology, water purification, and advanced agriculture.

In the Lebanese arena Israel finds itself alone as well, facing Iranian entrenchment and the reinforcement of Hezbollah's attack capabilities. Thus, it must formulate a new strategy for the northern arena, and particularly the Lebanese front. This strategy must include both hard and soft efforts, with the aim of disrupting Iranian and Hezbollah activities in Lebanon, even if this involves increased risks of escalation. At the same time, it must promote an international operation in order to expose Iranian involvement in Lebanon, improve the effectiveness of UNIFIL in the exposure of Hezbollah activity along the border, demand that Lebanon as a sovereign state and the Lebanese army implement their commitments to international resolutions about distancing Hezbollah elements far from the border, and build international legitimacy for Israel's use of force against infrastructures in Lebanon, if Hezbollah escalates the situation and launches missiles, rockets, drones and ground forces into Israeli territory.

In conclusion, in 2019 Israel will probably be asked to address, or at least to consider seven central challenges in Syria and the greater northern arena. First, Syria will not revert to what it was, and the governance model will probably be more difficult for Sunni inhabitants and regimes opponents, perhaps even more extreme than in the past. There is a slim possibility of governmental reform, with Assad retaining the presidency as an impotent ruler dependent on his external allies. Second, Russia will not succeed in installing a stable and effective regime throughout Syria and tackle all the

country's problems. Third, the United States departure from the arena is a tacit acceptance of the Assad regime and Iranian influence in the area; it transfers the "Syrian portfolio" to Russia, and leaves Israel alone in the campaign against Iran's military entrenchment in Syria. Fourth, Iran and Hezbollah will continue to consolidate militarily in Syria and Lebanon. Nobody can drive Iran out of Syria, even if Israel manages to delay and disrupt the process of entrenchment with the use of military force. Fifth, Israel's room to operate in Syria will be more limited, and if it decides to redirect efforts toward thwarting Hezbollah's surface-to-surface precision missiles project in Lebanon and its other attack capabilities, this will increase the risk of escalation on the Lebanese front, which could expand throughout the entire northern arena – Lebanon and Syria. Sixth, there are no sources or resources, whether internal or external, necessary for Syrian reconstruction. Seventh, the political channels, mainly Astana and Geneva, will not succeed in bridging the huge gaps among all the hawkish parties, or between the regional and global powers involved in Syria.

Notes

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