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**Russia and Iran: Is the Syrian Honeymoon Over?**

**Udi Dekel and Carmit Valensi**

**The rescue of Bashar al-Assad's regime by the pro-Assad coalition, comprising Russia, Iran, and Iranian proxies, led to the victory of the regime over the rebels; the coalition's achievements stem primarily from the effective cooperation between Iran and Russia since 2015 in fighting the rebels. Now, with the battles over, despite shared interests in consolidating the Assad regime, inherent tensions between Russia and Iran regarding influence in Syria have emerged in greater relief. Yet despite the disagreements, this it is not a zero-sum game between Russia and Iran. Both continue to cooperate on a range of issues in the Syrian arena and beyond. Iran for its part continues to see its consolidation in Syria as a strategic objective, and despite difficulties that have emerged, it seems that Tehran remains determined to continue, even if to a lesser extent than originally planned. After the success of Israel's military actions to halt Iran's military consolidation in Syria, Jerusalem should maximize the political potential and the shared interest of Russia and the United States to stabilize the situation in Syria, and to reduce Iran's influence and capabilities in the country.**

The rescue of Bashar al-Assad's regime by the pro-Assad coalition, comprising Russia, Iran, and Iranian proxies, led to the victory of the regime over the rebels, aside from two areas that are not under regime control – the area controlled by Kurdish forces in the northeast, and the Sunni rebel enclave in Idlib. The coalition's achievements stem primarily from the effective cooperation between Iran and Russia since 2015 in fighting the rebels. Now, with the battles over, despite shared interests in consolidating the Assad regime, inherent tensions between Russia and Iran regarding influence in Syria have emerged in greater relief. Russia believes that Iran's efforts to establish permanent military and civilian outposts in Syria undermine the fragile stability in the country and the ability to attract external investments that are critical for Syria's reconstruction. In contrast, Iran feels that a Russian-Saudi-American-Israeli coalition is forming, designed to eject it from Syria. This is compounded by a series of steps taken by President Assad in the wake of Russian pressure that restrict Tehran's military and economic involvement in Syria. This has recently led to the contention that there is a gap between Iran and Russia regarding their interests in Syria.

**The Principal Sources of Tension**

*On the international level:* Russia, eager to translate its investment in Syria into achievements in the international arena, has tried to convince the United States that it is indispensable to efforts to establish stability in the country, and that it holds the key to removing Iran's influence in Syria. Russia is intent on leading the process of reconstruction in Syria, with an emphasis on realizing the potential of the energy sources, and to this end it aims to recruit the wealthy Sunni Arab states, especially those in the Persian Gulf; they in turn are making their assistance conditional upon limiting Iran's activities in Syria. In return for removing some of Iran's military capabilities from Syria (especially surface-to-surface missile systems), Moscow hopes for relief from the Western sanctions imposed on it. However, it knows that it does not have sufficient leverage to remove Iran's military capabilities, and ties this step to lighter or rescinded American sanctions on Iran.

For its part, Iran seeks to mediate between Syria and Turkey in order to create a new three-way regional alliance under its auspices – perhaps in competition with Russia – that would lead the mediation efforts in Syria. Tehran aims to convince Damascus that it is able to restore stability within Syria's borders, by establishing reasonable relations with its Iraqi, Turkish, and Lebanese neighbors. In Iran's view, relations with Turkey are critical in advance of the departure of American forces from northeast Syria. Indeed, Assad announced recently that he is ready for dialogue with Turkey.

While Iran hopes to delay international decisions regarding the future of Syria in order to continue its entrenchment there, Russia is working to implement UN Security Council Resolution 2254 (which was adopted unanimously in December 2015 and which outlined a roadmap for a political settlement to the civil war) and to convince the regime and opposition groups to draft a constitution for Syria. Moscow believes that these processes will strengthen its influence in Syria and enable closer relations between Syria and the Arab states – a development that would pave the way for Syria's return to the Arab League and the end of the economic sanctions imposed on it, which were approved by the European Union on May 17, 2019. To Iran's dismay, Russian-American coordination is possible in this context, with the purpose of forcing the Assad regime to participate in the peace process supported by the UN. This topic was raised in a meeting between US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on May 14.

That the Assad regime will abide by Resolution 2254 is a tenuous hope, as the resolution includes demands for establishing a non-community-based transitional government, holding presidential elections, abiding by international laws and norms, and ensuring the safe voluntary return of refugees. It seems that Russia is the only party that has the power

to influence the implementation of the resolution, and Assad thus understands that the survival of his regime and the channels of economic and infrastructure assistance for Syria depend on Russia. For example, Russia can guarantee Assad's continued rule by advancing presidential elections to 2020, presuming that there is no viable alternative candidate (while it is expected that Assad will force his reelection on the population). Iran, in contrast, cannot provide the necessary economic and international support, mainly due to its problematic standing in the international arena and in view of the sanctions imposed on it. Therefore, it is trying to convince Assad that based on its experience, it is possible to survive under economic sanctions, and he would do well to refrain from concessions that would weaken his standing.

*On the military level:* The changes to Syria's top echelon made in early April with Russian encouragement, including the appointment of the pro-Russian Salim Harba as chief of staff, were meant to weaken the power of the commanders connected to Iran and to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Force. For its part, Iran has for some time sought to integrate militias that it established, which include Iranian commanders and even Shiite volunteers, within the Syrian military. There are an estimated 30,000 fighters in Iranian-backed Shiite militias present in Syria. The competition between Iran and Russia, also expressed with regard to influence over Syria's security forces and the forces fighting in the field and even control over them, has on more than one occasion led to confrontations (most recently in April in the Aleppo region) between militias loyal to each side, which have led to fatalities on both sides. Arrests of pro-Iranian Syrian activists by Syrian security forces, ordered by Russia and sometimes with the participation of the Russian military policy, have also been reported. Iran even claims that Russia enables Israel's air strikes against Iranian targets in Syria.

*On the economic level:* The frequency of visits by senior Russian and Iranian officials in Damascus, in addition to the efforts to influence a political settlement, reflect the race for influence through the promotion of economic and infrastructure projects. The competition translates into a series of bilateral agreements signed recently, mainly between Russia and Syria but also between Iran and Syria, regarding investments in economic, infrastructure, and technology projects. In January 2019, the Iranian parliamentary delegation expressed its dissatisfaction to Assad that Iran has not received significant contracts as part of reconstruction plans. Assad rejected Iran's requests to establish its own maritime base in Syria, but permitted Iran's use of its ports, and also rejected a request to sign a strategic contract that would guarantee Iran's presence in Syria for the next 50 years, similar to the agreement that it signed with Russia. In April, the Syrian regime announced that it intends to lease the port of Tartus to Russia for economic and commercial purposes, while Iran has been waiting since February for a Syrian response to its request to lease the port in Latakia.

Another source of economic tension between the countries concerns the current oil crisis in Syria. After Iran provided Damascus in recent years with credit to support the economy, and so that it could purchase oil from it, it is once again subject to American sanctions and must contend with the US administration's cancelation of the waivers regarding the purchase of Iranian oil. Against this backdrop, Russia identified an opportunity to become Syria's main oil supplier, at Iran's expense. However, Iran will not easily give up this responsibility. In May, it transferred one million barrels of crude oil to Syria via Turkey. In addition, Iran has signed agreements with the regime that consolidate its role in rebuilding the electricity infrastructure, the phosphate mine, and cellular communications companies – and is seeking to expand them.

### **Implications**

Despite the disagreements, this is not a zero-sum game between Russia and Iran. Both continue to cooperate on a range of issues in the Syrian arena and beyond. Iran for its part continues to see its consolidation in Syria as a strategic objective, and despite difficulties that have emerged, it seems that its leadership remains determined to continue, even if to a lesser extent than originally planned (due to the Israeli strikes and the limitations by Russia and the Assad regime, as well as budgetary difficulties following the American sanctions). For example, after Iran evacuated its outpost at the international airport in Damascus due to the tension with Russia and the Assad regime in the wake of the Israeli strikes, its activity was transferred to the Syrian T-4 base, which is located in the center of Syria.

As for the role of the United States, despite President Trump's decision to reduce and later end the US military presence in northeastern Syria, some in the administration are trying to convince the President to postpone this step, based on an assessment that withdrawing the forces will strengthen the Assad regime and Iran's influence in Syria, and even lead to Turkey taking control of a security region along its shared border with Syria. This would indicate the collapse of the American model for stabilizing the territories before leaving them, which relies on its Kurdish allies and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). These would then be subject to double military pressure, Turkish on the one hand and Syrian-Iranian on the other. Iran is expected to exploit this in order to consolidate its influence on both sides of the Syria-Iraq border, and there are already signs of the preparation of Iranian infrastructure for deploying militias in this area. This situation is also anathema to Russia, which would not only lose critical points in its struggle for influence in Syria, but would even be forced to accept Iranian control over the energy fields in the country's east. Thus, in contrast with Russia's public calls for the departure of the American forces, it is very possible that it prefers that steps in this

direction be taken in full coordination between Moscow and Washington, in order to reduce damage and constrain Iran.

Over the past few weeks Israel has reduced the rate of its strikes against Iranian outposts in Syria, apparently in order to make the most of the “Russian card” to reduce the Iranian presence in Syria. At present, there is a window of opportunity that allows Israel to try to implement the dynamic with Russia and the United States, while attempting to formulate and achieve shared interests that it has with the two superpowers, most importantly increasing stability in Syria and instituting governmental reforms in Syria, along with reducing Iranian influence there. Israel has two strategic mechanisms: one is the coordination with Russia regarding the deployment and departure of foreign forces in Syria, as agreed upon between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; the other is the Jerusalem-Washington channel, which is focused on dealing with the greater Iranian challenge. The United States and Israel can try to recruit the Gulf states to assist in Syrian reconstruction, in return for pushing Iran out of Syria. This path, if it is even possible, will need to be bolstered by some kind of compensation – with American and European agreement – for Russia, and prompt consideration of easing the sanctions imposed on it, and even those imposed on the Assad regime. An attempt should be made to advance such a process even if its prospects of success are slim.

After the success of its military actions to halt Iran’s military consolidation in Syria, Israel should maximize the political potential and the shared interest of Russia and the United States to stabilize the situation in Syria, and to reduce Iran’s influence and capabilities in the country. Apart from continuing to prevent the transfer of advanced weapons to Hezbollah, Israel can take a step back from its military pressure against Iranian military outposts and infrastructure in Syria, and allow the superpowers to constrain Iran’s activity there. In any case, Israel can renew its strikes if the diplomatic process to push Iran out does not yield positive results.