

The Trilateral Israel-US-Russia Meeting: Motives and Ramifications

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The meeting of the national security advisers of the United States, Russia, and Israel in late June is an achievement for Israel's policy, which navigates between the interests of Moscow and Washington and is a party to the superpowers' dialogue on the future of Syria and the Iranian intervention in that country. For the United States and Russia, this is another step in their efforts to create closer ties and to focus the dialogue between them on matters of dispute. The choice of Israel as the venue for the meeting was meant to emphasize its regional role, and it is also possible that both Washington and Moscow have an interest in voicing support for Israel in the context of Syria and of Iran. Israel has an interest in being involved in talks regarding regional issues, but in doing so, it might be inviting a measure of risk, too. The talks could lead to agreements that will relate mainly to a political accord and the shoring up of Syria's stability, without addressing any Israeli interests in that context.

The national security advisers of the United States, Russia, and Israel are due to meet in Israel in late June. This marks an achievement for Israel's policy, which has succeeded in navigating between Moscow and Washington's interests and in being a party to the superpowers' dialogue on the future of Syria and on Iranian intervention in that country. For the United States and Russia, this is another step in their efforts to create closer ties and to focus the dialogue between them on matters that are in dispute. This article aims to clear at least some of the fog clouding the meeting.

The agenda of this meeting, whose format is unusual, has yet to be made public. International media reports suggest that it aims to be a discussion of an arrangement on Syria. This framework would entail discussion of Iran's continued intervention in that country. But it can be assumed that, given the improved discourse between Russia and the United States, the meeting will have inherent diplomatic value in and of itself, and that it will also address global issues on the powers' respective agendas.

The intention (on the part of the United States and Israel, at least) seems to be to discuss the development of a shared policy on Syria and Iran. As for Syria specifically, it can be assumed that they will try to promote an arrangement on the basis of the UN-led talks in Geneva, contrary to the talks held in Astana in which Russia, Iran, and Turkey alone took

part. Here, the aim would be advancing political reform in Syria. Russia, for its part, would demand US agreement to President Bashar al-Assad's official role and to his candidacy in the coming presidential election in Syria. Given the worsening crisis between Iran and the United States in the Gulf region, the United States expects Russia to support its policy on the Iranian issue, especially for imposing sanctions aimed at returning Iran to negotiations designed to improve the nuclear deal and for bringing about a reduction in Iranian influence - in Syria specifically, and in the Middle East in general.

It should not be ruled out that the pivot in Russia's Middle East policy, expressed in its rapprochement and close cooperation with Israel after a discernibly cold spell, as well as in the rising tension with both Iran and the Assad regime, are mainly due to its bid to grow closer to the United States. The meeting slated to take place in Israel is apparently another manifestation of this.

The growing rapprochement between Washington and Moscow is evident recently by regular contacts between senior officials from both sides. A meeting between President Donald Trump and President Vladimir Putin is also slated on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Tokyo. Nevertheless, it is still too early to assess the success of this process, inter alia because of domestic pressure being applied on each president to eschew gestures that might improve relations.

President Trump may feel more free - in the wake of the publication of Special Counsel Mueller's report - at least, when it comes to pursuing dialogue with Russia. It also appears that the Trump administration is currently interested in trying to build on Russia's willingness to discuss removing Iranian forces from Syria, in cooperation with Israel, and even to take action vis-à-vis Iran in order to assuage tensions in the Gulf and encourage Iran to agree to new negotiations on the nuclear deal. A contributing factor to Russia's interest in improving ties with the United States is its desire to bring about a swift end to the Syrian crisis while cashing in the chips it garnered in the country, as well as to improve relations with the West - namely Europe - regarding the post-Soviet sphere, in hopes of having the sanctions removed, which were imposed on it after the crisis in Ukraine.

Still, it remains unclear whether the American hope of drafting understandings with Russia will come to pass. It should be recalled that Russia and Iran are partners in waging the Syrian war alongside the Assad regime, although, as already stated, the gaps in their positions on shaping Syria's future have gradually grown larger. Tensions have also risen between them recently, in light of the crisis between Iran and the United States.

Russia's intention to change the pattern of its cooperation with Iran while drawing closer to the West and to Israel seems to have been already decided upon a year ago. For example, the Russian proposed to the United States and Israel at both the Helsinki summit of July 2018 and the ensuing Paris conference later in November that it would compel Iran to leave Syria. Yet it seems that implementing the plan encountered resistance among influential players within Russia, who feared a rapprochement with the United States and an abandonment of Iran and thus preferred an ongoing confrontation between the superpowers, with Iran as an anti-Western partner. Nonetheless, it seems that President Putin recently managed to progress with this, despite the fact that embers of oppositional recalcitrance still smolder. It is therefore too early to assess how serious the Russian leadership is about the plan. Its implementation is still a ways off also due to opposition from Iran and the Syrian regime.

The Russian leadership has also made efforts to upgrade relations with Israel. This effort has been especially remarkable given opposition within Russia to changing its policy in the Middle East. The crisis between the countries following the incident in which a Russian reconnaissance plane was shot down over Syria in September 2018 was fanned by the opposition. It ended in late February 2019, when - during a meeting between President Putin and Prime Minister Netanyahu - Russia offered Israel a new framework for cooperating in creating an arrangement in Syria that would entail the removal of foreign forces - mainly Iran - from the country's territory. It is possible that this move is meant to help advance understandings between Moscow and Washington. It is also reasonable that Israel may have played a real role in promoting Russia's interest of closer communication with the United States and that Israel enjoys Russia's gratitude for that.

It appears that Russia will also try to encourage the departure of American forces from Syria, although it will also demand that they coordinate their exit with Moscow so it can make arrangements to fill the vacuum that the Americans will leave in the northeastern area of the country. Control and influence in this area is sought by the Assad regime; the Iranians, who want to control the Iraq-Syria border and mineral fields in eastern Syria; Kurdish fighters under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF); and Turkey, which will do anything to prevent Kurdish autonomy in the north.

In summary, it seems that the slated Russian-American-Israeli meeting will constitute another stage in the renewal of US-Russia dialogue, whose core purpose is to address matters that are crucial for both sides in the international spheres. Within the framework of the meeting, a discussion is planned for drafting a common policy regarding Syria and Iranian influence in it, the removal of foreign forces from the country's territory, as well as an attempt to muster willingness for joint action to resolve the region's challenges. As for Syria specifically, talks will center on stabilization and a political arrangement for the

country, but is it doubtful that the United States would be willing to cooperate with Russia in exchange for recognizing the Assad regime or helping to fund Syria's reconstruction. As for Iran, the sides will strive to agree on a common understanding for ending the crisis with it.

The choice of Israel as the venue for the meeting was meant to emphasize its regional role, especially given the fact that the Russian-American rapprochement has not yet won widespread support in the United States nor in Russia, for that matter. It is possible that both Washington and Moscow have an interest in voicing support for Israel in the context of Syria and of Iran. Israel, which has a role in this dialogue, has an interest in being involved in talks regarding regional issues that relate to Syria and Iran. Yet by doing so, Israel might be inviting a measure of risk, too, as the talks could lead to agreements that will relate mainly to a political accord and the shoring up of Syria's stability, without addressing any Israeli interests in that context.

Either way, the meeting in Israel of the national security advisers represents a diplomatic achievement for Israel. Even if the participants do not reach practical agreements regarding the future of Syria and the removal of Iranian forces from the country, the very fact of the event upgrades Israel's status and the chance that it will be able to wield influence over a future accommodation in Syria. Russia has already promised to limit Iranian activity and occasionally takes noticeable steps to prove that it is acting upon its promise, including by redeploying Iran's forces and proxies away from the border with Israel.

During the meeting, the Russian adviser will try to gain legitimacy for continued Assad rule in Syria and acknowledgment that he won the civil war and is irreplaceable, at least for the coming years. It is thus advisable for Israel to demand, in return for a recognition of Assad's rule, the establishment of a military liaison channel with the Syrian regime, in order to coordinate expectations: to prevent misunderstandings; to ensure that the regime prevents action by terrorist groups and Iranian proxies on the Golan Heights; and to prevent escalation due to either side wrongly reading the intentions and actions of the other.