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**After a Decade of War in Syria, Israel Should Change its Policy**

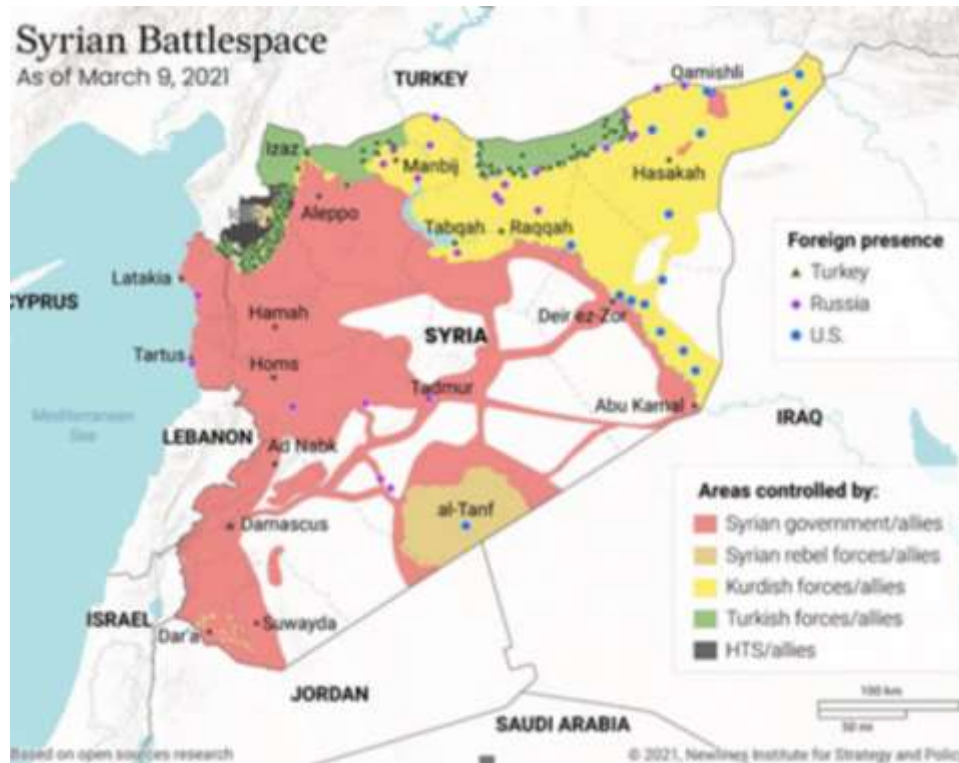
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**With the help of military aid from Russia and Iran, the regime of Bashar al-Assad has been able to survive and overcome the military setbacks it experienced in the early years of the civil war. Still, after a decade of warfare, the regime is unable to gain control over the entire country, which remains divided and unable to function effectively. As long as Assad controls Syria, no stabilization or recovery seems a viable possibility. Nonetheless, political and military elements in Israel continue to adhere to the idea that Assad, who opened the door to Iran and Hezbollah in Syria and is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of his countrymen, is preferable to any other governmental option in Syria. Just as Syria has changed in the past decade, however, the Israel's strategic preference for the Syrian leader should also change. It is recommended that Israel change its policy on Syria from sitting on the fence to increased involvement in three strategic areas of critical importance to Israel: southern Syria, northeastern Syria (the border with Iraq), and the Syrian-Lebanese border.**

Following a decade of civil war in Syria, it is clear that Syria as it was in 1963-2011 has ceased to exist. The civil rebellion, which was cruelly suppressed by a dictatorial regime with military and diplomatic backing from Russia and Iran, left Syria divided into spheres of influence and control with support from foreign countries. This reality renders the slogan "preserving the unity and integrity of the Syrian state," sounded frequently by Syrian officials and some Western countries, utterly meaningless. It appears that for the foreseeable future, Syria will remain a split and dismembered theater.

**Map of Control:** Syria is divided de facto into a number of enclaves. Bashar al-Assad, with military aid from Russian and Iran and its proxies, ostensibly controls two thirds of the country, mainly the backbone connecting the major cities of Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus, and to a lesser extent, the south. The Idlib area in northwestern Syria is an enclave of rebels under Turkish auspices. Along the Syrian-Turkish border are territories under Turkish control. Most of northeastern Syria, which contains a majority of the country's natural resources, is under Kurdish control, with US backing. Islamic State (ISIS) cells are active in central and eastern Syria. Control over the borders of Syria is also an indication of "hollow sovereignty": (1) The Syrian army, which is subject to the

Assad regime, controls approximately 15 percent of the country's international land borders; (2) The Syrian-Lebanese border is under the control of Hezbollah; (3) The Iraqi-Syrian border is controlled on both sides by Shiite militias that are Iranian proxies; (4) The Syrian-Turkish border is controlled by elements that do not include the Assad regime and its patron, Iran.



**Humanitarian Situation:** Over 500,000 people lost their lives during the ten years of war (at a certain stage, UN agencies stopped counting the victims). Approximately 12 million people lost their homes and are now displaced persons or refugees, and 90 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. Assad controls 12 million of Syria's estimated population of 17 million, the country is on the verge of a hunger crisis, and the shortage of basic goods, especially bread and fuel, is increasing. It is estimated that 11 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance.

**Infrastructure:** More than a third of the state's infrastructure has been destroyed or severely damaged. In their war against the armed opposition, both the regime and its allies, Russia and Iran, attacked urban centers, including with chemical weapons and barrel bombs, as part of a strategy of destruction to eliminate areas held by the rebels. The cost of reconstruction in Syria is estimated at \$250-350 billion, and at this stage, there is no party capable of financing such reconstruction, or willing to do so.

**Regional and International Status:** The Assad regime is boycotted by the West. The Biden administration is apparently continuing the tough American policy toward Assad, including sanctions against him and his close associates. The administration does not recognize Assad as a legitimate ruler; the results of the presidential elections scheduled for April-May will likewise be discounted as long as no political reforms or signs of stabilization and reconstruction of Syria according to the UN roadmap – Security Council Resolution 2254 – are on the horizon. Assad has few friends in the Middle East, although a number of countries have ostensibly normalized their relations with him, such as Oman, Bahrain, and United Arab Emirates, while Egypt and Jordan have accepted Assad's continued rule and recently called for easing the sanctions on the Syrian people. Syria has nevertheless been left outside the Arab League. Russia, which recognizes that governmental and economic reforms in Syria are necessary in order for the regime to attain recognition as a legitimate sovereign, has had no success in promoting a political settlement. For Russia, putting an end to Assad's government would exact a heavy political cost, because it sees no stable player capable of replacing him. Against this background, Moscow is trying to market Assad's murderous regime to the international community as a legitimate government.

### **"The Devil We Know": Why Must this Stance Change?**

Since Russia began its involvement in the war in Syria in late 2015, Israel has accepted the Assad regime's continued rule, in line with its preference for "the devil we know." Other than an ongoing effort to disrupt the construction of the Iranian "war machine" on Syrian territory, Israel has elected to sit on the fence and avoid taking part in the struggle between the rival Syrian groups. The current situation, however, requires a reassessment of Israeli policy, and especially realization that a policy of non-intervention is no longer valid, for the following reasons:

First, Bashar al-Assad has given Iran an opportunity to expand and consolidate its influence in Syria on various levels for the long term, thereby posing a very significant security challenge to Israel on its northern border. Tehran supported Assad mainly through Hezbollah, its Lebanese proxy, and combat militias recruited among the Shiite population in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. In the past two years, Iran has focused on the recruitment of Syrian fighters and their integration in local defense militias, which it trains and arms; Iran is deepening its influence in the Syrian army by training senior commanders and aiding in force buildup. Hezbollah controls the Syrian-Lebanese border and is establishing terrorist cells in the Golan Heights, and Iran is preparing bases in northern Syria for the al-Quds force of the Revolutionary Guards, which facilitate emergency rapid deployment of forces and launching facilities for missiles, rockets, and drones aimed at Israel. Israeli air attacks are not preventing growing Iranian consolidation

and influence in Syria; they are merely disrupting the Iranian plans slightly for building an offensive front against Israel in Syrian territory. As long as Assad is in power, this security challenge facing Israel will only continue to mount.

Second, no political solution to the crisis in Syria can be expected as long as Assad remains in power. A large portion of the Syrian population does not regard him as a legitimate ruler. Signs of protest are already visible, even in the Alawite community, which is also suffering shortages and hunger. Assad's retention of power will therefore ensure more years of instability and worsen the conditions that led to the outbreak of war in the first place. Assad's stubborn opposition to governmental reforms and political concessions is an obstacle to any effort to achieve progress toward a settlement with UN mediation or led by Russia. Even though the United States is refraining from an explicit call for regime change, its demands indicate that this is its objective. The Biden administration is continuing the line advocated by the Trump administration by blocking any economic aid for Syrian reconstruction in the absence of political concessions and a return to the UN roadmap. Furthermore, retention of power by Assad guarantees that most of the refugees will not return to Syria, because they fear arrest or forcible conscription into the regime's armed forces. They are also afraid to return to a country in which their property was stolen, and where the economy is in ruins and there are no prospects of employment.

Third, where the Assad regime is involved, the argument that there is a responsible actor at the helm with whom rules of the game can be established has lost its value. Assad does not even exercise effective control of the territories over which he regained military control. Southern Syria is a significant test case. When the regime's forces regained control of the area in the summer of 2018, chaos prevailed there, with a mixed multitude of armed factions fighting each other and the regime unable to restrain them. These include opposition groups, militias under Iranian or Russian influence, and local groups enjoying a certain degree of autonomy from the central government.

Finally, beyond the strategic assessments of the situation, the moral aspect should be considered by decision makers in Israel and the international community. Recognition of the legitimacy of a leader who has perpetrated war crimes for years and continues to abuse civilians – some of these cases were revealed to the world only recently – is nothing less than a disgrace and a moral stain on those seeking to accept him into the regional and international order.

### **Recommendations**

Three of Israel's assumptions have been disproved: one, that attacks will prevent Iranian military consolidation in Syria; two, that Russia will assist in the effort to drive Iranian

proxies out of Syria and reduce Tehran's influence in the country; three, that a central government in a united country, even under Assad's leadership, is preferable to a division of authority. It is best for Israel to realize that Syria will remain divided, and that as long as Assad remains in power, Iran and its proxies cannot be driven out of the country. Israel should therefore encourage a broad-based initiative to remove Assad from power in return for an international effort at reconstruction in Syria with participation by the Arab Gulf states.

Until Syria is reshaped, Israel should take risks in the short term in order to prevent Iran and its proxies from taking over Syria. Israel should step up its activity in three strategic spheres of critical importance:

**In southern Syria:** In order to prevent Iran from using its proxies to create a terrorist and high-friction border in the Golan Heights, Israel should exploit the Assad regime's weakness and the competition for influence between Iran and Russia as an opportunity to adopt a proactive policy in the area. Coordinating activity with Moscow, Israel should attack the Iranian proxies, including Hezbollah forces, while strengthening both Sunni and Druze local forces. Ties can be formed with local population groups opposed to the regime, while granting them humanitarian aid – food, fuel, and health services – that will help generate "islands of Israeli influence," thereby thwarting the Iranian plan to consolidate its presence in the area.

**In northeastern Syria:** With an emphasis on the Iraqi-Syrian border, Israel should prepare for a potential withdrawal of United States forces. Iran is preparing to exploit the resulting vacuum to take over the area in order to establish a land bridge from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon. It is recommended that Israel develop low-profile cooperation channels with the Kurdish forces and provide them with military and economic aid, while at the same time build a platform for ongoing operational activity in the theater in order to prevent an Iranian takeover of this strategic area, which is rich in energy and agricultural resources.

**The Syrian-Lebanese border:** The mutual deterrence between Hezbollah and Israel resulting from concern about escalation on the Israeli-Lebanese border has expanded to Syrian territory in the area around the Syrian-Lebanese border. This area, which is controlled by Hezbollah, enables the organization, with Iranian assistance, to transfer arms to Lebanon, maintain a smuggling industry of critical importance to the organization, and deploy weapons for use against Israel when the time comes. Hezbollah's control of the wide-open border between Syria and Lebanon, a reflection of Israel's strategic weakness, enabled the organization to build up its forces following the Second Lebanon War (in contravention of UN Security Council Resolution 1701). It

functions as Hezbollah's lever for exerting political, military, economic, and social influence in Syria. It is recommended that Israel step up its operational activity in the area in the framework of the “campaign between wars,” while at the same time encourage international involvement to obstruct the border between Syria and Lebanon, based on the assessment that this measure is essential for both reconstruction in Lebanon and any weakening of the radical groups in the entire region.