Despite Efforts to Remain in Syria, Russia Is Losing Its Status as an Important Security Actor in the Middle East

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Russia emerged as the most dominant political and military force in Syria when it sent its troops to support the Assad regime at the height of the civil war in September 2015. However, with the downfall of the Assad regime, Russia now finds itself in a weakened position vis-à-vis the rebel forces. Until recently, Russia had launched airstrikes against them and classified them as terrorists; now it is dependent on the same rebels to ensure the security of its soldiers and its remaining military assets in Syria, while hoping that the new regime will allow it to retain at least some presence in the country. Under these conditions, Russia has lost most of its ability to influence Israel's security interests in the northern arena, whether positively or negatively. As a result, Israel should reassess the Russian factor in its strategic decision-making.

Since the downfall of the Assad regime on December 8, the Russian forces deployed in Syria have gathered at three permanent military bases—the Khmeimim Air Base, the Tartus Naval Base, and Qamishli in the Kurdish region in northern Syria—having withdrawn their personnel and posts from across the country. These include positions in the south, north, and northeast, as well as the Syrian desert and cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Deir al-Zur. This withdrawal has been carried out in coordination with, and under the protection of, the rebels who have seized power.

At the same time, Russia is removing significant amounts of military equipment from Syria, evidenced by a marked increase in the number of large cargo flights at the Khmeimim Air Base and the movement of various military and civilian maritime vessels capable of carrying heavy loads that departed from Russian ports in northern Europe and headed toward Tartus. Reports suggest that even the strategic S-400 aerial defense systems—a critical element of Russia's presence in Syria and a key consideration whenever the IDF conducted operations in the region—may have been removed and redeployed to Libya.

Diplomatically, Moscow has made a sudden shift in its approach to the rebels. As Assad's downfall became imminent, Russia stopped referring to the rebels as "terrorists"—a term it consistently used while backing Assad—and instead began referring to them as the "armed opposition" and "the new authorities." Senior Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, have acknowledged engaging in official dialogue with Syria's new leadership. Moscow has even proposed that Syria should be invited to join the BRICS+ forum, signaling a willingness

to recognize the "new Syria" as a friendly nation with which Russia should develop diplomatic relations. It should be noted that the new leader of Syria, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has hinted that he would be willing to reach agreements with the Kremlin, although the terms of any such potential understanding have yet to be drawn up.

Russia seeks to engage in dialogue with the new Syrian regime to mitigate the extensive losses it incurred following the downfall of its main ally in the Middle East. Moscow had heavily invested in the Assad regime, both on the political and diplomatic stage as well as the military and logistical front. Assad's collapse can be partly attributed to Russia's shifting focus to the war in Ukraine, which diverted attention away from Syria, leaving Assad's regime without the military and political support from Moscow that it needed to maintain power.

Politically, Russia still seeks to maintain its image as a global superpower, which translates into potential influence over regional issues, especially in the Middle East. Its support for Assad was intended, in part, to send a message to other regimes in the region that Moscow does not abandon its allies and can be relied upon. Now Russia is attempting to justify its failure to ensure the stability of Assad's regime by arguing that both the regime and the Syrian military failed to defend themselves. In addition, Russia has also claimed that its military objective in Syria—defeating ISIS—was achieved. At the same time, Moscow has adopted its narrative to developments on the ground, embracing the notion of the "legitimate authority on the ground." In its statement on the fall of the regime, the Russian Foreign Ministry carefully stressed that President Assad had transferred his powers and effectively resigned before leaving the country, making any contact between Moscow and the rebels perfectly legitimate.

On the military and logistical levels, Russia's leasing of the Khmeimim Air Base and the Tartus Naval Base in 2017 provided a strategic foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean basin and a logistical hub for operations in more distant regions, particularly in Africa. In recent years, Russia has made significant efforts to expand its influence in Africa by offering consulting services, diplomatic and political assistance, security packages, and military training. It has also supported African countries seeking to reduce or even eliminate Western military presence on the continent. In return, Moscow has gained access to their natural resources and diplomatic loyalty from these countries. In the past, these efforts were led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, the leader of the Wagner Group, a private military company. However, after Prigozhin staged a coup against Putin, Russia turned to semi-official organizations led by the Africa Corps, which operates under the GRU, Russia's military intelligence unit within its Defense Ministry.

Russia is gradually losing its ability to freely use the infrastructure of Tartus Port. Vessels sent to evacuate Russian equipment were forced to wait for weeks outside the port. At the end of January, it was revealed that an investment agreement between Syria and the Russian company managing the civilian port had been canceled. Without full control over the landing and docking positions on Syria's Mediterranean coast, Russia will struggle to maintain the vital cargo routes needed to support its operations in Africa. This challenge is further exacerbated by the ongoing logistical crisis caused by the war in Ukraine, Western sanctions, the closure

of airspace by Western countries, and restrictions on maritime traffic through the Turkish Straits. Therefore, Russia is seeking alternatives to its presence on Syria's coast by bolstering its military and logistical foothold in eastern Libya, where it has long cooperated with the head of its military regime, Khalifa Haftar. This effort includes cargo flights from the Khmeimim Air Base, with the ultimate goal of relocating some of the capabilities that Russia had deployed in Syria to Libya.

Within Syria, Russia still has several leverage points to use in its dealings with the new regime, despite Moscow's relatively weakened position following Assad's ouster. Having been Syria's main supplier of wheat, Russia has now halted exports to a country already suffering from a widespread economic crisis caused by years of civil war. Renewing wheat supplies could serve as an important bargaining chip in negotiations over the future of Russia's military bases in Syria. Indeed, Putin has already proposed using these bases for the distribution of humanitarian aid. In addition, Russia could exploit Syria's acute oil shortage by offering assistance to the transitional Syrian government on this critical issue.

Diplomatically, the new regime in Syria has yet to gain official recognition from the international community, despite visits to Damascus by several overseas delegations, including some from Western nations. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the group at the heart of the new regime, has long been designated as a terrorist organization by Russia, many other countries, and the UN. The Kremlin has recent experience in developing ties with terrorist organizations, as seen in the case of the Taliban. Putin has described the Taliban as "an ally in the fight against terrorism." The secretary of Russia's National Security Council has visited Kabul, while Taliban representatives regularly participate in social, economic, and political forums in Russia. Moreover, at the end of December, Russia approved a law that will facilitate the removal of organizations from the list of terrorist groups. This law is primarily intended for the Taliban, but it may also enable the Russian Foreign Ministry to apply a similar process to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. In turn, this could allow Russia to present itself to the new regime in Damascus as the key driver behind its international legitimacy.

Nonetheless, the new regime in Damascus has many reasons to reconsider its cooperation with Russia and reject Moscow's request to maintain its military forces in the country. For the rebel forces, memories of Russian airstrikes are still fresh, and they may find it difficult to justify to themselves and to the Syrian people why those same Russian forces are allowed to remain on Syrian soil. In addition, the new Syrian leader and his temporary government are making every effort to portray themselves as moderate actors, thereby gaining the trust and support of the West. In this context, cooperation with Russia could be seen as counterproductive and detrimental to these efforts.

While it seems likely that Russia and the new Syrian regime will eventually negotiate an agreement for some kind of presence on the coast, the terms of this presence will be very different from those established under the Assad regime. Syria is no longer an active combat zone where Russian military capabilities directly support the army's efforts, and the new regime no longer sees itself as dependent on or committed to Moscow. Therefore, it is likely that Russia's military presence—air power, air defense, and maritime forces—will be reduced

to mere self-defense functions. Moreover, it is possible that the bases will remain purely logistical facilities without any active military components.

Russia's political and diplomatic influence in Syria has diminished significantly compared to the Assad era. Without widespread military deployment, operational coordination with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and close cooperation with the Syrian security and military establishment, Russia is unlikely to play a dominant role in shaping Syria's future—except as a balancing factor against the excessive influence of other actors on the new regime in Damascus.

For Israel, the key development is that Russia can no longer be considered "our neighbor to the north," and accordingly, the operational and strategic leverage that resulted from this status is no longer valid. Israel, which has meticulously taken the Russian component into account when formulating its policy regarding the northern front, now has significantly less reason to do so.

Even in November of last year, when it was proposed to involve the Russians in plans to implement an arrangement on the Syria–Lebanon border to prevent Hezbollah from rearming in exchange for the lifting of sanctions imposed on Russian companies, there was considerable doubt about the feasibility of doing so. The Russians themselves admitted that they would not be able to ensure that Israel's demands would be met. Moreover, the harsh international criticism leveled against Russia over its aggression in Ukraine has diminished Russia's ability to contribute positively to any future potential security agreement involving Syria and Lebanon, at least from Israel's perspective. Despite US President Trump's eagerness to advance a cease-fire in Ukraine and possibly even normalize relations between the United States and Russia, Israel should be wary of "whitewashing" Russia's return to the status of an accepted international actor, at least until Trump's efforts on that front yield results in the primary conflict zone—Ukraine.

From an Israeli standpoint, there are still issues where maintaining a dialogue with the Kremlin is essential, particularly regarding Iran. Israel wants strategic clarity and influence over cooperation between Iran and Russia and aims to relay critical messages to Tehran. However, any Russian initiative should be assessed through the lens of risks rather than opportunities.

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