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**Russian Involvement in Syria:
What has Changed, and the Significance for Israel**
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Russia's involvement in the Syrian crisis constitutes a new strategic paradigm in the Middle East and the international arena. This will have significant implications for the balance of power and the rivalries in Syria's civil war, and for the struggle between the superpowers for global influence. Israel is also affected by these implications, given the change in the balance of power and in light of the risk of internal Syrian pressures spilling over into southern Syria and the Golan Heights.

The Russian military intervention in Syria was prepared carefully, apparently in coordination with Iran, but accompanied by an element of surprise. President Vladimir Putin still views the Assad regime as a vital component in the solution to the problem of radical Islam and in the end to the civil war in Syria, and claims that the world does not understand the importance of President Assad's role in the fight against jihadist terror. However, at this stage, only token Russian forces are involved, intended to defend Assad's stronghold in the Syrian coastal and Latakia regions, where the Alawite sect is concentrated, aid Assad's forces by attacking rebel strongholds from the air, and arm and train Syrian military forces loyal to Assad. Even though this activity is accompanied by Russian messages about the intention to fight the Islamic State, the first sorties by Russian air force jets intended to strike at other organizations opposed to Assad. In addition, the composition of Russian forces in Syria thus far does not suit the fighting – primarily ground fighting – necessary for combat against the Islamic State forces. Against this backdrop, Russia announced the establishment of a coalition against the Islamic State, parallel to the existing United States coalition with a similar objective.

This development creates a significant challenge for the United States and President Obama's Middle East policy, as well as for other nations in the region, including Israel. The Russian intervention in Syria follows Russia's intense political activity in the region, which has scored diplomatic achievements with most of the countries in the region. Russia has also positioned itself as a leader of internal reconciliation efforts in Syria.

Indeed, in recent months, two rounds of talks between the rival parties have been held under Russian auspices, and preparations have been made for an additional round of talks in collaboration with the UN.

It appears that beyond saving Assad's regime, the Russian move, executed under the guise of fighting the Islamic State, is intended to advance Russia's global aspirations and advance its effort for a senior role in the international arena. For good reason Putin compared the current circumstances to the World War II era and the need to reach understandings between the superpowers, similar to the Yalta Conference on the Crimean Peninsula that was designed to divide the spheres of influence between them after the war. Putin views his willingness to intervene directly in the Syrian quagmire by turning the crisis in that country into a lever of influence that will provide Russia with a position of strength vis-à-vis the West and aid it in easing the pressure leveled on it due to its policy in Ukraine.

The September 28, 2015 meeting between the Russian and American Presidents at the United Nations was intended to lay a foundation of new understandings between the superpowers, together with an attempt by Putin to achieve American and Western recognition for Russia's military involvement in Syria. The parties discussed cooperation in the fight against Islamic State, while for his part Putin strove to delineate agreed upon spheres of influence. Advancement of a reconciliation agreement in Syria, including agreement on Assad's future, is secondary piece in the chess game between Russia and the United States. In statements at the UN, President Obama had difficulty granting Assad the status "part of the solution" and stressed that the civil war erupted because of the regime's brutal response to nonviolent demonstrations that sought to advance a democratic process in the country. Therefore, Obama cannot agree to Putin's position, which contends that only a regime such as Assad's, which is not democratic, can preserve Syria as a political actor and maintain integrative sovereignty there. Thus in any case, even if Putin is far from getting everything he wants, the situation that has been created will nevertheless be regarded as an achievement for him. Russia has strengthened its position as a dominant actor in Syria, while President Obama and the West have exhibited helplessness vis-à-vis the situation. However, without including the international system, even Russia will find itself mired in the Syrian crisis, and thus Moscow is expected to promote understandings in this context with the West in general and the United States in particular.

Is there a sound Russian strategic concept on the Syrian crisis?

- a. *Future arrangement in Syria.* Will Russia support the division of Syria while leaving the coastal area under Russian control, or will it rather act to preserve Syria in cooperation with additional actors? Russian-Iranian cooperation and Iran's role in the

area are relevant in this context. While Iran does not necessarily view Russian interests in the region as matching its own, there is agreement between Russia and Iran regarding the importance of maintaining the core of "Little Syria" that includes Damascus; the artery northward– to Homs, Hama, and Haleb; the area surrounding Lebanon; and the Syrian coastal sector. Approximately 80 percent of the Syrian population is concentrated in this area, even though this constitutes only some 30 percent of the country's territory. Certainly the Russian-Iranian-Syrian coalition has no intention of relinquishing control of this area. On the other hand, the Russians do not want to wear themselves out in ground fighting in eastern Syria – controlled by Islamic State – but prefer to halt the group's westward expansion toward Syria's principal urban centers. Another question is: Will Russia insist on protecting Assad, or surrender him for the sake of an arrangement with the West and the opposition to his regime? The rapid move of Russian military intervention in Syria might also intend to torpedo a deal that was fashioned between the actors involved in Syria, whose purpose is to remove Assad from office.

- b. *The battle against the Islamic State.* Will Russia deploy its army in ground fighting against the Islamic State (which is considered the only effective course of action in this battle)? At this stage, Russia presumably will choose to refrain from ground activity and prefer to deploy Syrian and Iranian ground forces, as well as Hizbollah and Shiite militia forces, with Russian air support, in addition to military guidance and vital combat materiel for the Syrian army. Russia aims to consolidate a new international coalition and has already presented Iran, Iraq, and Syria as its partners in the battle, and subsequently perhaps, from a position of strength, it might even join a coalition against the Islamic State led by the United States. However, in any scenario, Russia is not expected to relinquish dominance in the Syrian arena and in processes designed to shape the country once the civil war is over, nor is it expected to forfeit its foothold in the Middle East.
- c. *Russia's international standing.* Russian intervention is in essence intended to challenge Western interests in the area, with emphasis on those of the United States. President Putin is attempting to build an image of the one who volunteered to save the Middle East after the United States brought about regional chaos. In this way, Russia is open to dialogue with the West in order to advance Moscow's global interests.

Implications for Israel

Unlike other regional players and the international system in general, Israel has not voiced any position in relation to a future arrangement in Syria. The government of Israel, in adopting a policy of remaining on the sidelines, assesses that any proactive move on its part, except for thwarting acts of terror and transfers of advanced weapons to

Hizbollah, will entangle Israel in Syria at a time when it has no effective leverage there. Up to now, Israel has "enjoyed" a situation of "almost no spillover" of events from Syria into its territory. The Israeli threat assessment views Iran and Iranian influence in Syria and Lebanon as the principal threat, which is more serious than the threat inherent in the Islamic State or other Salafi jihadi parties. The question is, will the Russian intervention change the situation from Israel's standpoint? Beyond insuring damage control, how can Israel benefit from this development? Prime Minister Netanyahu, accompanied by Chief of Staff Eisenkot, visited Moscow, with the objective of enhancing operational coordination between the nations and preventing friction and erroneous assessments, as well as obtaining a Russian commitment to prevent transfer of advanced weaponry, intended for the Syrian army, to Hizbollah forces in Lebanon and Syria. Russia has a clear interest in avoiding a clash with Israel, certainly on the military level. Therefore, it appears that Russia will adhere at least to the military coordination agreed upon during Netanyahu's visit.

Netanyahu's hurried visit to Moscow, however, precluded the possibility of an in-depth assessment of the situation, which examines the broad ramifications of Russian involvement in Syria. This assessment is supposed to test whether there has been a change in the rules of the game in the deep crisis that seemingly has no way out. Thus, should Israel consider what new scenarios it must prepare for? Can the increasing Iranian influence in Syria and Lebanon be reduced through the Russian involvement, even though Moscow and Tehran have coordinated between them? Should Israel indicate a preferred solution for Syria? Is this the time to amplify Israel's influence in southern Syria and the Golan Heights in order to prevent a spillover of extremist Salafi jihadi elements into this region? In addition, the nature of the fighting against the Islamic State that Russia is planning should be ascertained; is it Moscow's intention to operate in collaboration or at least in coordination with the regional-Western coalition led by the United States? What is Israel's role in these coalitions? Clearly there is no place for Israel in a Russian-Iranian coalition.

The situation assessment should have provided a recommendation for the Prime Minister to demand that Russia share with the Israeli government plans and initiatives for the future arrangement in Syria, in regard to a change in the internal balance of forces in the country, as well as plans to prevent Iranian dominance in Syria and close to Israel's border with the aid of Hizbollah. The Prime Minister must now strive for Russian recognition of Israel's additional interests, among them the need to prevent the establishment of Salafi jihadi terrorist elements in the Golan Heights border region. In spite of Russian promises that it is not Moscow's intention to challenge Israel militarily, time will tell whether Russia will maintain the understanding to refrain from stationing weapons systems that undermine Israeli military superiority on Syrian soil, such as S-300

surface to air missiles. In any case, Israel must also prepare for the possibility of Russian military entanglement in Syria, which would bring about a significant reinforcement of the Russian military presence and aid to Assad, Iran, and Hizbollah, including means that will threaten Israel – even though at the present time, it is not Russia's intention to challenge Israel; on the contrary, Moscow is interested in understandings and cooperation in managing the Syrian crisis. Moreover, one cannot rule out the emergence of conflicts of interest between Iran and Russia in regard to Iran's drive to increase its influence in Syria, and in light of Russia's awareness of Israeli sensitivity to an Iranian presence in the region, conflicts of interest between them in regard to Israel as well.