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Russia's Involvement in Syria: A Strategic Opportunity for Israel

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Russia's involvement in the Syria arena is a turning point amidst the complex dynamics of the Middle East in general and Syria in particular. This turning point does not necessarily focus on the fight against the Islamic State – Moscow's ostensible reason for its current intervention in the crisis – but on the potential ramifications of the Russian move for the region and Israel. The most severe challenges Israel faces in the Syrian arena stem from Hizbollah and Iran, while the challenges represented by Assad's regime and ISIS are less urgent. Still, the Assad regime must be seen beyond the direct threat it poses to Israel. Assad is what enables the growing presence of Iran and Hizbollah in Syria, and toppling him is a key to weakening the radical axis in the nation. The rationale of the Russian move, its strategic objective, scope, and duration are not yet sufficiently clear, but it is obvious that the move places Israel in a new reality that requires reconsideration of the ways to confront the challenge and the opportunities brought on by the new reality.

Russia's Involvement: Strategic Objective and Operational Tactics

The Russian involvement in Syria has stirred debate among analysts and statesmen about Moscow's strategic objective and the motives that led it to intervene militarily, especially in so blatant and open a manner – unlike the past, when Russia was content to support Assad's regime with weapons, advisors, and a diplomatic umbrella. Some contend that saving Assad's regime is merely a pretext for a much broader strategy, building on Russia's drive to position itself as a global superpower. According to this theory, Russia wants to become a key actor in the Middle East, especially given the consistently demonstrated weakness of the United States. Others argue that from Russia's perspective, the involvement in Syria has a limited goal of restoring stability while preserving Assad's regime and harming the Islamic State, thus reducing the potential jihadist threat against Russia. Both views highlight considerations associated with Russia's general crisis, the stalemate in Ukraine, Russia's desire to breach the international isolation surrounding it, and its drive for the sanctions against it to be repealed.

There are four major possible scenarios concerning the strategic objective of Russia's activity in Syria:

- a. *A very small Syria*: Ensuring the existence of an Alawite state under Assad's control in western Syria, while preserving Russia's minimal interests, i.e., the Mediterranean ports. Given the growing scope of Russia's forces on Syrian soil in recent days, it seems that the Russians have a much greater move in mind.
- b. *A small Syria*: Preserving Assad's regime in Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, and Hama as well, while exerting a concentrated military effort against the opposition forces in northern and eastern Syria. The reports of special forces and volunteers joining the Russian aerial force could be evidence of this intention.
- c. *Syria 2011*: Restoring control of the entire territory of Syria in its 2011 borders to Assad and defeating the opposition completely, i.e., dealing a military defeat both to the Islamic State and to the various militias opposed to Assad. This very ambitious goal would require Russia to send a very large force to Syria, including ground forces divisions to work in close coordination with local partners.
- d. *An Assad-free Syria*: While the three preceding scenarios all have Moscow working to preserve Assad's regime in some form or another, it is possible that Russia will accept a settlement calling for Assad to be replaced as president (a settlement that could be formulated at Geneva 3, if and when convened) while preserving large pieces of his regime. As such, state mechanisms would be retained in cooperation with the Alawites, who would be protected by virtue of an agreement to be backed by sources in the radical axis, contingent on ensuring Russia's assets and interests in the country and approving its standing as a key player in shaping a future Syria.

It is still too early to determine which way Russia's military move is headed, although the limited size of the military force deployed to date points to the probability of the second option (a small Syria). At a later stage, the Russians may work toward realizing the fourth option (an Assad-free Syria). All four scenarios are problematic for Israel because in each, Iran's influence and presence in Syria remain untouched. Still, in the first option, Iran is farther from Israel's border, and in the fourth option, the new Sunni-led regime would not encourage cooperation with Iran and Hizbollah.

Beyond the strategic objective, Israel must also examine the operational tactics and effectiveness of the Russian force. As proven by the experience of the United States in its aerial campaign against ISIS; Israel in fighting Hamas in the Gaza Strip; and Saudi Arabia in Yemen, airpower is effective only if it operates on the basis of high quality intelligence and is used in significant intensity. The scope of the current deployment of the Russian force and the level of intelligence available to it will render effective, decisive use of airpower very difficult. Nonetheless, if the Russians adopt Syria's fighting

norms and decide not to restrict operations for fear of collateral damage, the Russian airpower will be much more decisive. Despite the declaration about posting Russian “volunteers” in Syria (a well-known Russian tactic when operating low signature ground forces), Moscow does not necessarily intend to participate in ground warfare in Syria. In recent days, 3,000 additional Iranian soldiers have crossed into Syria to that end. They are massing in the staging areas of Syria under the command of Qassam Suleimani, the commander of the al-Quds Revolutionary Guards, where they are joining Hizbollah and Syrian army fighters. This development may forecast coming events, part of the alliance-in-the-making among Russia, Iran, and Syria.

For now, Russia's attacks are less focused on ISIS and more on Syrian rebel groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra and the Syrian Liberation Army. While assessing the effectiveness of the Russian attacks, it is also important to track the rebels' abilities to harm Russian forces and assess whether Russia's future losses are likely at a later stage to affect Moscow's strategic objective, and in turn, operational considerations.

The Russian Move in Syria: Challenges and Opportunities for Israel

Since the start of the civil war in Syria, Israel has avoided involvement and has only taken action to keep advanced arms from falling into Hizbollah hands. This policy is morally problematic given the Assad regime's acts of murder, which have cost the lives of some one-quarter of a million people. In terms of security, the survival of the regime has allowed and further entrenched the presence of Hizbollah and Iran in Syria in general and the Golan Heights in particular. If once there was hope that the regime would collapse in the course of events without Israeli intervention, Russia's active support for Assad weakens the chances of ousting him.

Analysis of the threats against Israel reveals that the Islamic State – currently far from Israel's borders and with limited military capabilities – does not represent a direct military strategic threat at this time. By contrast, Hizbollah – armed with advanced operational capabilities and long range missiles and rockets that reach the entirety of Israel – can be strengthened by the Russian move, should Russian arms trickle into its arsenals or be intentionally supplied to the organization.

As for Iran and Assad, Russian involvement underscores (again) the need to examine the issue at the systemic level rather than at the level of individual actors. The system – the radical axis – includes Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah, with Russia, at least for now, seen as sponsor. Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah has stressed the stability of the Assad regime as a condition for the survival of the radical axis. Indeed, Iran is making supreme efforts to preserve Assad's regime on the understanding that Syria is critical in promoting its agenda vis-à-vis the Sunni Arab world and Israel, and out of concern that Assad's ouster will dramatically damage the Shiite axis, particularly Hizbollah.

The members of the radical axis and Russia share intelligence and a systemic rationale, providing a foundation for coordination between the Russian aerial force and Iran-Syria-Hizbollah ground forces. If one of the three scenarios described above with Assad still in control plays out, Israel will find itself in an inferior strategic position because Russia's involvement is liable to provide a seal of approval for Iranian activity in Syria in years to come, as well as for Hizbollah forces armed with the best of Russia's weapons on Syrian soil.

Tehran's drive for regional hegemony is a threat to Israel. This threat is coupled with Iran's ongoing efforts to arm itself with nuclear bombs, develop its missile program (only recently, the Iranians reported an experiment with a new long range surface-to-surface guided missile, and revealed the existence of an underground tunnel serving as a base for ballistic missiles with a range of 1,700 km), and generate a military presence on Israel's border with Syria and Lebanon. Despite this, Israel has so far avoided making a move that could have contributed to the effort to topple Assad and thus undermine Iran and Hizbollah's presence in Syria.

The new energy Russia is injecting into the crisis creates two opportunities for Israel. One lies in strengthening an alliance with the Sunni nations in the region, first and foremost Saudi Arabia and Turkey, under the leadership of the United States. The anger and frustration experienced by these states given Russia's unilateral move could therefore tag Israel as a strategic asset that can serve as a partner in a system to dramatically weaken the threat of the radical axis from the north. Two, in case of failure in moving the "Western" coalition into concurrent action against Assad and ISIS, Israel should strive to realize the fourth option – an Assad-free Syria – as an arrangement reached in partnership with Russia.

In any case, Israel must gear up for active efforts to topple Assad, based on the understanding that beyond the moral imperative, Assad's ouster will lead to a strategic loss for Iran and Hizbollah in the bleeding Syrian state.

