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International Activity and the Syrian Crisis

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More than a month after Russia began to intervene militarily in the war in Syria, negotiations were launched under Russian auspices to promote a resolution of the crisis. All the regional and international parties involved in the crisis have been included in this political move.

Russia's military involvement in Syria, which began in late September 2015, came in response to Assad's weakened position on the battlefield and to Russia's growing concerns about the imminent collapse of his regime. This development would negatively affect Russia's critical interests in three spheres: in the Middle East; in the global arena, as it relates to the rivalry between Russia and the United States; and in Russia's internal sphere, as it would be seen as a sign of governmental instability. Russia aims to maintain its military presence in Syria, as part of its efforts to enhance its influence in the Middle East. In addition, Russia wishes to divert the focus of its conflict with the West from Ukraine to the Middle East and exploit its influence in Syria to attempt to bargain its way out of the burdensome economic sanctions imposed on it due to its policy in Ukraine. Russia would also aim to create a favorable background for a combined solution to the two conflicts. Furthermore, Russia is concerned about the threat posed by radical Islamist groups and the expansion of their influence expanding to its territory, or to territory considered by Moscow to be within its sphere of influence.

The Russian intervention is within the framework of a coalition that includes the Assad regime; Iran – which has sent several thousand Revolutionary Guard troops to Syria; Hizbollah; and also Iraq, which is not involved militarily but is providing political backing, with the liaison center of the coalition forces located in Baghdad. Although the Russian activity was framed as a campaign against the Islamic State, the actual fighting has been mainly against rebel organizations opposing the Bashar al-Assad regime, many of which are themselves fighting ISIS. Like the Islamic State, these organizations are depicted by Russia as terrorist organizations.

In its military operations, Russia initially employed a limited aerial force, while also relying on advisors, intelligence, and maintenance personnel to help Assad's forces.

Russia, however, has not been dragged into a full-fledged ground operation, which is carried out by the Syrian army itself, with the help of the Iranian task force, Hizbollah forces, and fighters from Shiite militias. Russia's activity has been accompanied by intensive media coverage and a comprehensive public relations campaign. This initial airborne stage seems to have achieved, at least partly, the goals of halting the Assad regime's slide toward collapse and raising Russia's profile in the Middle East.

At a later stage, the coalition forces led by Russia also employed ground troops to attempt to regain lost territory. With the aid of Russian air support, these forces conquered territory in the Aleppo region and around Damascus. At the same time, in contrast to the first stage, it appears that these achievements are far less impressive, as a result of the basic weakness of Assad's army, faulty operational cooperation between the forces, logistics difficulties, and a lack of reserves. The forces facing the Russian coalition, on the other hand, have demonstrated vigorous resistance and find themselves increasingly well supplied with weapons. This situation, combined with the limited achievements of the Russian air campaign, has apparently brought Moscow to the conclusion that the stage of military operations in Syria has exhausted its potential, and in any case, can achieve no quick solution in the struggle against the Islamic State.

Consequently, the political plan, which was launched even before the military intervention began, picked up speed. In this framework, Assad made a lightning trip to Russia, and in his meeting with Vladimir Putin, appeared under pressure and thus expressed willingness to negotiate with the opposition groups. He also promised to conduct early elections in Syria and allow all the different factions to participate.

The political process was launched at an international conference on October 23 and October 30, 2015 in Vienna. In the first stage, the participants included the foreign ministers of Russia, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. The format for the talks at the second meeting was expanded, and Iran, the Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan were represented as well. It was Russia that demanded that the forum be expanded, and therefore regarded the participation of more countries, especially Iran, as a diplomatic achievement. In pursuance of the demands presented to Assad in Moscow, the talks focused on starting a dialogue and reconciliation process among all the Syrian factions, with preparations for early elections and the formation of a transitional government.

Assad's future was the main bone of contention during these talks. While Russia demanded Assad's participation in the transitional process, both the principal Syrian opposition groups and some of the countries in the region expressed strong opposition to this proposal. The compromise presented by Russia was Assad's departure later in the process. The United States also expressed readiness to leave Assad in his position for a period of a few more months. The Syrian opposition groups, however, refused to continue the negotiations as long as Assad remained. This was the main reason, albeit not

the only one, why no agreement was reached on the main issues on the agenda. In preparation for the next meeting, Russia is making efforts to bridge the differences. This includes an expected visit to Russia by Saudi King Salman, who is known to have great influence with the rebel organizations (the question of Iran may also arise during the talks in Moscow).

For its part, the United States sent equivocal signals concerning the Russian involvement in the Syrian crisis. Notwithstanding its willingness to take part in the negotiations, the US administration has criticized Russia's military operations. Moscow responded to the criticism with inflammatory rhetoric. Meanwhile, Russia's intervention in Syria pushed Ukraine off the international agenda, and increasing European willingness to normalize its relations with Russia is evident. It is possible that the meetings of the Normandy Four – Russia, Ukraine, France, and Germany – will result in progress toward Russia's aim – linking a settlement of the Syrian crisis to a settlement in Ukraine in a manner that will protect Russia's interests in both regions.

In any event, Russia is expected to encounter considerable difficulty in its effort to devise a solution to the crisis in Syria on both the military and political levels. Further achievements are not guaranteed, including the linkage between the settlements in Syria and Ukraine. In addition, it appears that Assad's standing is becoming a burden for Moscow. Cooperation with Iran is likewise potentially difficult, especially given the emerging Iranian eagerness, following the signing of the nuclear agreement, to expand its influence in the Middle East. In view of these factors, the political process designed to advance a solution to the crisis in Syria is at a watershed. Other than the stated consensus between them concerning the need to struggle against ISIS, the parties involved have little in common. A basis for dialogue has been established, but if no agreement is forged on the main issues between the external parties involved and the main Syrian opposition groups, the political process will collapse.

Russia's military involvement in Syria has created a new strategic situation for Israel. Israel and Russia enjoy fairly good relations. Political and military coordination took place between them at the highest level on the eve of Russia's intervention in Syria, and this is expected to continue. It also appears that Russia has a clear interest in cooperating with Israel – including on the future arrangements in Syria. In the Israeli political-security establishment, however, some officials are wondering about the substance and consequences of the Russian intervention in Syria. Along with restricting Israel's freedom of aerial activity in Syria, due to the Russian air activity, the participation by Iran and Hizbollah, backed by the Russian military, constitutes a challenge to Israeli interests in this theater, and raises concern about future negative developments.