

Russia's War in Syria

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Since Russian and Iranian forces arrived in Syria in September 2015, the civil war has taken an unexpected change of direction that is likely to affect its results. The war of destruction waged by the Moscow-Tehran-Damascus-Beirut (Hezbollah) axis against the Syrian rebels and their supporters achieved success. The militias of Bashar al-Assad and the soldiers of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, with Russian air support, succeeded in halting the momentum of the rebellion that only a year ago threatened to topple the Syrian regime, and in stabilizing and ensuring the regime's existence – as well as regaining control of a series of strategic strongholds throughout the country.

At the same time, the Russian-Iranian intervention was not decisive on the battlefield, even though that was apparently Russia's principal goal. Despite the setbacks experienced by the rebels, the rebellion in Syria is far from over. In view of the mixed results of this intervention – success in stabilizing the standing of the Bashar al-Assad regime and the perception in the region and the world of Russia's achievement against its rivals, but at the same time its inability to end the rebellion – Moscow has found itself facing a dilemma: whether to intensify its involvement in the war in Syria, or to find a political exit that will save Russia from sinking into the Syrian quagmire.

The Russian response to this dilemma occurred in three stages. The first was an agreement for a temporary lull in the fighting, designed to enable Moscow to recalculate its moves. The second was a trial balloon in the form of a proposal to end the fighting on the basis of the status quo by making Syria a federal state that guaranteed rebel rule over several parts of the country, even as the continuation of Assad's rule in Damascus would

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be preserved as a kernel from which the Syrian state might someday be reborn. The third was the surprising announcement by Russian President Vladimir Putin of his forces' withdrawal from Syria, and his contention that the Russian intervention had achieved most of its objectives.

Russia's moves made it possible to set in motion a political process in Syria in cooperation with the United States, even though the prospects for reaching a comprehensive political arrangement remain slim, given the gaps in the positions of the two sides and the inability of each side to impose its plan on the other. Joining this is Russia's difficulty in reaching long term understandings with Washington beyond the tactical objectives of stabilizing the ceasefire in Syria and continuing the struggle against the Islamic State.

The Advent of the Miracle

Just a year ago, it appeared that the scales had tipped in favor of the rebels in the war raging in Syria, and the rebels' battlefield achievements cast doubt on Bashar al-Assad's ability to ensure his regime's survival. This changing tide in the Syrian war was the result of the ongoing depletion of the ranks of the Syrian regime and the exhaustion of the manpower at its disposal. Marked by fatigue and low morale, Bashar's army was in growing need of his Alawite community, who remained willing to fight and even die for him, as well as the Hezbollah fighters who were sent to his aid from neighboring Lebanon. The rebels, on the other hand, proved motivated, determined, and capable of perseverance. They succeeded in unifying their ranks, and thus in contrast to the hundreds of groups that had been operating throughout the country fighting against the regime but sometimes also against each other, there were now, in a quasi-Darwinian process, only a few groups operating – all, incidentally, of a radical Islamic character – and which demonstrated unity and tended to cooperate with each other.¹

In the early months of 2015, the rebels gained control of most of northwestern Syria, above all, the Idlib district. These achievements provided them with a safe region along the Turkish border, which enabled them to increase the pressure on Aleppo. It also gave them a springboard for an offensive toward the Syrian coast, the stronghold of the Alawite community. Meantime, the Islamic State stepped up its pressure, and in May 2015 its forces conquered the city of Palmyra, which constitutes the gateway into central Syria from the desert toward Homs. The Islamic State

also succeeded in advancing in May-June 2015 to the outskirts of Damascus and the eastern foothills of Jabal al-Druze (Druze Mountain). At the same time, the rebels suffered several setbacks, led by the failure of the Southern Storm offensive (*ʿAsifat al-Janub*) launched in June 2015 in southern Syria with the aim of taking control of the city of Daraa and its environs.²

At the bottom line, it appeared that only a miracle could save Bashar al-Assad from an unavoidable fate, given the emerging trend on the battlefield in Syria. However, in the Middle East, miracles are to be taken into account in expert assessments and forecasts. Indeed, such a miracle visited Assad in September 2015, when Russia, followed by Iran, decided to send warplanes (Russia) and soldiers (of the Iran Revolutionary Guard and groups of Shiite volunteers from Afghanistan and Iraq) to fight on the side of Assad and his troops.³

The Russians and Iranians Are Coming

The Russian strategy in effect sought to copy the model from the wars in Chechnya in the 1990s, namely, a military effort to suppress the rebellion by systematic and deliberate destruction of large areas in the country, while removing or expelling the civilian population living there, which was seen as supporting the rebels. These areas were designated for capture by the regime's forces, led by Iranian or Hezbollah forces in the vanguard. It appears that the Russians made great efforts to reorganize the Syrian army and rebuild its operational capabilities and the command and control capabilities of its officers, and to improve the way the fighting was commanded from the Damascus headquarters. Reports from Syria also mentioned the Russians' involvement in the attempt to promote reconciliation agreements with the civilian population in several areas in Syria, in accordance with Russia's new status as the ruler in the country dictating not only the battlefield scene, but also what would take place in Syria after the fighting ends.⁴

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The Russian strategy gradually achieved results. It strengthened Bashar's regime, halted the rebels' momentum, and enabled the Syrian army, reinforced with Iranian soldiers and Hezbollah fighters, to expand the territory under its control. Thus, the Syrian army conquered the rural areas around Aleppo in early 2016, and surrounded it from all sides. In the

northern district of Latakia, the Syrian army drove the rebels out of most of the strongholds they had seized and from which they had threatened to attack the Syrian coast. In central Syria, the regime in early 2016 successfully repelled the rebels from the approaches to Homs, and its soldiers reached Palmyra in March. In the Damascus area, the regime tightened the siege, causing starvation among the civilian population in the rural areas east of the city. Finally, the Syrian army consolidated its grip on the Damascus-Daraa road in February 2016, after conquering the towns of al-Shaykh Maskin and 'Uthman. The regime also took steps to achieve reconciliation agreements, which prompted groups of rebels in various areas of Syria to change sides, after concluding that they were unable to defeat and overthrow the regime. This is not a widespread trend, but it is nevertheless significant for Syria's future.⁵

One of the Russians' important achievements was the killing on December 25, 2015 of Zahran Alloush, the charismatic commander of the Army of Islam (Jaysh al-Islam), one of the best organized and strongest groups in

the rebel camp. He was killed, together with several other commanders in the organization, in an airstrike on the group's headquarters in the rural area east of Damascus.⁶ Alloush was regarded as the most senior of the commanders of the moderate Salafi rebel groups that belong to neither Jabhat al-Nusra nor the Islamic State.⁷

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The Balance Sheet for Russian Intervention in Syria

Despite all these achievements, however, it seems that the balance sheet for Russian intervention in

Syria is mixed, as the Russians were unable to defeat the rebels on any of the fighting fronts. Weakened and exhausted as they were, the rebels continued fighting with determination against the Syrian regime and its allies.⁸ Furthermore, Israel Minister of Defense Moshe Ya'alon disclosed in his December 2015 lecture at the Saban Forum in Washington that Russia originally thought the intervention would win the war on the battlefield within a few months and stabilize and consolidate the position of the Syrian regime in the western part of Syria, while reconquering the territories lost to the rebels in the north of the country around the cities of Aleppo and Idlib, and in the south in the Daraa area.⁹ In the following stage, the Russians

sought, as revealed by Assad himself in a series of media interviews, to reoccupy areas held by the Islamic State in the east of the country.¹⁰ These objectives, however, are far from achieved. In the end, aerial bombardment, however powerful, cannot replace fighting by ground forces, in other words the operational fitness of the Syrian army, which found its task difficult, despite Russian air support and reinforcement by several thousand Iranian soldiers, Shiite volunteers, and Hezbollah fighters.

Moreover, while limited achievements were nevertheless obtained, the inability to achieve victory, and the fact that the Russian intervention in Syria was part of the “Great Game” conducted by the Russians against the West in other parts of the world – a game in which military and political moves are intertwined with each other – aroused in the Russians an interest, and even a need for, a lull, for the purpose of leveraging their achievements in the campaign in the global theater and among Russian public opinion. Despite the rising tension between them, Washington and Moscow remained committed to end the war in Syria, because it was clear to both superpowers that despite their differences of opinion about Syria’s future, they could best serve their immediate interests – the American interest in the struggle against the Islamic State and the Russian interest in ensuring its status in Syria – through a political solution, rather than by prolonged warfare that could drag them into bloody intervention in that country.

In October-November 2015, representatives of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), headed by the United States and Russia, formulated a roadmap for ending the fighting in Syria, and a peace conference to promote it was scheduled to open in Vienna in January 2016.¹¹ In December 2015, Saudi Arabia convened over 100 representatives of the rebels in Riyadh, who accepted the roadmap proposed by the international community, and also set up a supreme authority for negotiations with the Syrian regime.¹² The peace conference scheduled to convene in Vienna in January 2016 did not take place, due to gaps between the positions of the Syrian regime and the rebels. Nevertheless, the Americans and Russians unexpectedly succeeded in formulating a ceasefire in February 2016 and, more importantly, in imposing

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on their Syrian clients an achievement that would have been unimaginable just a few weeks earlier.¹³

It therefore appears that in view of their dilemma in Syria, the Russians have chosen a three-stage policy, beginning with the achievement of a ceasefire, followed by willingness to consider the possibility of an arrangement in Syria, based on a partition of the country, even if only temporary, between the regime and its opponents along the current ceasefire lines. This partition leaves Assad in control of the core of Syria – the strip of territory stretching north from Damascus to Aleppo and the Alawite coast and south to the city of Daraa. In this framework, in early March 2016, Russian President Putin himself raised the possibility of turning Syria into a federal state,¹⁴ meaning its division into sub-entities: a mostly Alawite-based state ruled by Assad in the west of the country – a kind of “Alawistan”; enclaves of moderate rebels linked to the United States, perhaps in a display of pragmatism connected to Jabhat al-Nusra; and a Kurdish autonomous zone in the north of the country, the first steps towards which were announced by the Kurds themselves in mid-March 2016.¹⁵

Finally, in the concluding third stage, Putin unexpectedly announced on March 14, 2016 the withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria, after, he claimed, they had completed their mission in Syria.¹⁶ The Russian action was greeted with both surprise and suspicion; it was reportedly not coordinated with Iran, and not even with Russia’s ally in Damascus, Bashar al-Assad. The Russians began withdrawing some of their forces from the country, but emphasized that they would continue to maintain an aerial presence at the base in Humaymim and a naval presence at the base in Tartus, both on the Syrian coast. They also emphasized that this presence would enable them to continue fighting terrorism if necessary. In other words, the action was rhetorical, although at the same time had practical implications for the scope of the Russian presence in Syria and for Moscow’s readiness to make strenuous efforts in the war in that country.¹⁷

Russia is still a significant actor in Syria, but support by Iran, which sends (even if unenthusiastically and in limited numbers) Iranian and Shiite fighters to fight Bashar al-Assad’s war, remains more essential than ever. This twisted and calculated alliance of interests will last as long as the fighting continues in Syria. It certainly cannot conceal, however, the differences of opinion between Tehran and Moscow concerning the day after the war ends: whether Syria will remain a satellite under Iranian or Russian protection. These differences have the potential to develop into

a real crisis likely to pose a difficult dilemma for the Syrian regime forced to choose between Tehran and Moscow. In contrast to Iran, the Russians have signaled no personal commitment to Assad, even if it appears that they believe that his removal without finding a replacement from within the Syrian military security establishment or from the Alawite community is liable to cause the already weakened Syrian system to collapse.¹⁸

The developments in Syria sparked a lively debate in Israel regarding its policy toward the war in Syria. It became clear to Jerusalem that the comfortable situation of a free-for-all in Syria was likely to end sooner than expected, whether in a victory of the regime, which would strengthen Iran and Hezbollah, or alternatively, an arrangement along the current lines, which would mean the presence of elements hostile to Israel in the field, whether radical Islamic groups or Hezbollah personnel and Iranian soldiers, each with enhanced status under the emerging arrangement. Israel remains, however, primarily a spectator on the sidelines with limited ability to shape, or even influence, the situation in Syria.

Conclusion

The Russian-Iranian intervention in Syria that began in 2015 halted the momentum of the rebels, who only a few months earlier were knocking at the gates of Damascus. This intervention enabled the Syrian regime to strengthen its grip on the “Little Syria” remaining under its control – a strip of territory stretching north from Damascus to Aleppo and the Alawite coast, the regime’s stronghold, and south to the southern border city of Daraa. And while this intervention did not cause the rebels’ defeat or eliminate the rebellion, it did make Russia an active and significant player in the Syrian theater, and enabled Russia to bring about a halt, however temporary, in the civil war.

The Russians may once have believed in their ability to win the war, restore Assad’s control of all of western Syria, and from there turn eastward in an attempt to retake from the Islamic State the Syrian territories it captured a year ago. It appears, however, that they have concluded that the situation in Syria remains hopeless, that Assad lacks the power to reunite the pieces of the smashed Syrian jigsaw puzzle, and that the formation of “Little Syria” (a kind of “Alawistan”) in the areas controlled by Assad should be considered as a Russian base and as a kernel from which the Syrian state might someday be reborn.¹⁹ This is clearly a very optimistic scenario for Assad and his allies, and it is far from realization. But Assad, who not long

ago was widely eulogized, has proven to be the greatest survivor of them all, and Russia's intervention has given him backing and momentum that have enabled him to rise like a phoenix and spread his wings.

Notes

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- 2 Lizzie Dearden, "Syria Conflict: Idlib City Falls to Jabhat al-Nusra as President Assad's Forces Flee, Jihadists Claim," *The Independent*, March 28, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-conflict-idlib-city-falls-to-jabhat-al-nusra-as-president-assads-forces-flee-jihadists-claim-10141020.html>; "Southern Syria Conflict Update," The Carter Center, July 10, 2015, https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/syria-conflict/southern-syria-conflict-update-july2015.pdf.
- 3 N. Mozes, "Russian Military Intervention in Syria," Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), September 13, 2015, http://www.memri.org.il/cgi-webaxy/sal/sal.pl?ID=875141_memri&act=show&dbid=articles&dатаid=3962; on Iranian intervention, see the analysis of the profile of the fatalities (as of November 16, 2015) among the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in Syria, which suffered serious losses over the past month, Raz Zimmt, March 25, 2016, Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/he/articleprint.aspx?id=20909>.
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- 5 See Roi Kais, "After 5 Years, a Turning Point? Assad at the Gates of Aleppo," *Ynet*, February 6, 2016, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4762506,00.html>; "Tide Turns in Syrian War with Capture of Key Town in Southern Syria," *al-Jazeera*, January 26, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/syrian-army-captures-key-southern-town-rebels-160126040829177.html>; "Syrian Army Attacking Tadmor," Channel 2, March 25, 2015, http://www.mako.co.il/news-channel2/Channel-2-Newscast-q1_2016/Article-0886cf4ce2aa351004.htm.
- 6 Roi Kais, "Army of Islam Commander Killed: A Hard Blow to the Rebels against Assad," *Ynet*, March 26, 2016, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4744327,00.html>.
- 7 See Aron Lund, "The Death of Zahran Alloush," *Syria Comment*, December 25, 2015.
- 8 See Amos Harel, "Assessment in Israel: The Russian Campaign in Syria Will Encounter Difficulties," *Haaretz*, October 21, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/.premium-1.2756873>.

- 9 Barak Ravid, "Minister Ya'alon Criticizes the American Administration: 'The US Cannot Sit on the Fence,'" December 5, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/politics/1.2791579>; see also Amos Harel, "Russia Not Satisfied with Stabilizing Assad Government, Planning Major Offensive in Northern Syria," October 9, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/middle-east/premium-1.2747824>.
- 10 Syrian President Bashar al-Assad: "Our goal is to recapture the whole of Syria," <https://syrianfreepress.wordpress.com/2016/02/13/al-assad-afp>; Ian Black and Kareem Shaheen, "Syrian President Bashar al-Assad Vows to Retake Whole Country," *The Guardian*, February 12, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/12/syrian-president-bashar-al-assad-vows-to-retake-whole-country>.
- 11 See Benedetta Berti, "A Chance for Peace in Syria?" *INSS Insight* No. 786, January 12, 2016.
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- 16 Natan Pearl, "Putin Surprises: The Tasks Have Been Completed – Russian Army Starts to Withdraw from Syria," Channel 10, March 14, 2016, <http://www.ch10.co.il/news/264263/>.
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