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Prime Minister Netanyahu's Visit to Russia

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Shortly after his return from China, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu flew to Russia for a hastily arranged visit with President Vladimir Putin. The catalyst for the visit was the significant increase in activity around the Syrian issue, including the attacks against Syrian targets attributed to Israel, high level visits to Russia by leading international figures, and Russia's announcement of its intention to supply Syria with S-300 missiles. Israel and Russia have held contacts prior to the visit, including a conversation between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Putin, and thus the visit itself raised many questions, including: was it in fact about the S-300 missiles? Indeed, Moscow has recently hosted high level visitors, among them US Secretary of State John Kerry and British Prime Minister David Cameron. The main topic in their talks with Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was reportedly the Syrian issue. Thus it is evident that there is vigorous activity by the Western powers and Israel on the Syrian issue vis-à-vis Russia. What is this about?

Since the start of the civil war in Syria, Russia has gradually become the leading player on the Syrian front. It has implemented a strategy of preventing outside foreign intervention (using political and military tools), which improves Bashar al-Assad's ability to halt the rebel forces. This strategy is actually used to pressure other global and regional players (the United States and NATO on the one hand, and Turkey and elements in the Sunni axis on the other). At the same time, Russia is working to promote alternatives to a settlement on the Syrian issue that will ensure its future standing in the Middle East, along with the survival of the radical axis of Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah with Russian backing. Furthermore, Russia is exploiting its Syrian leverage to promote solutions that are essential to it in the global arena regarding its friction with the West (over a long list of issues).

Yet while Russia's achievements as to its Syrian policy are clear, it has thus far not succeeded in extracting significant Western concessions regarding the terms it has proposed for an agreement in Syria, at least until recently. Now it appears that the latest developments are leading the Western actor to reexamine its uncompromising position

toward Russia's approach to a future settlement in Syria. Questions have arisen about the ability of the rebels to overcome the regime without substantial outside military aid, what now seems less and less feasible, and there is increasing dissatisfaction with the growing Islamization among the Syrian opposition. However, these developments are still not enough to meet Russia halfway on its proposed position. The attacks attributed to Israel, which Moscow has presented as preparation for the option of outside military intervention on behalf of the rebels – which Russia is laboring hard to prevent – also appear in this light.

The recent developments took place against this backdrop. During Secretary Kerry's May 7-8 visit to Moscow, the Syrian problem was discussed at length, apparently in softer tones than in the past. Kerry's visit was preceded by a number of phone calls between President Obama and President Putin (three since March), and a visit to Moscow by Tom Donilon, Obama's national security adviser, who presumably brought messages from Obama concerning American willingness to cooperate on issues essential to Russia. Kerry's visit apparently ended with understandings reached on Syria, with the parties officially announcing their agreement to convene an international conference to discuss a settlement on the Syrian issue. The emerging model is apparently the establishment of a transitional government with the participation of the two camps in Syria. What comes out of this picture is that the United States has conceded on Assad's removal as a condition for continuing the negotiations, while at the same time Russia has showed willingness to concede on later support for Assad. It has also been reported that Putin and Obama are expected to meet during the G8 summit in Northern Ireland on June 17-18, and later, at the G20 meeting to be held in September in Russia, which should lead to the resolution of all the unresolved issues on their agenda.

Immediately after Kerry's departure, Prime Minister Cameron arrived in Moscow and discussed Syria with Putin. He too was favorably disposed toward the idea of an international conference, including the idea of establishing a transitional government in Syria. It has been reported that such a conference will in fact take place in late May. However, the Russians claimed that despite the good understandings reached in both visits, there are still large gaps between the positions of the sides. Coincidentally, the attack on the Syrian targets attributed to Israel occurred at the same time.

Immediately after that attack, the issue of the supply of S-300 missiles to Syria rose to the headlines, followed by reports of the contacts between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Putin, as well as Netanyahu's intention to visit Russia. The contract to supply S-300 missiles is from 2010, but the missiles were not delivered to Syria or Iran because of understandings reached with Russia. The subject reappeared in the summer of 2012, but again no missiles were delivered – some say because of an Israeli request (Putin visited Israel in June 2012). The recycling of the issue, along with a somewhat cynical

announcement by Foreign Minister Lavrov that new contracts had not been signed to supply the missiles and that “only” existing ones were being fulfilled, requires an explanation. Russia’s intention apparently is to use the missile issue as leverage to prevent foreign military intervention in Syria, and also to obtain additional concessions in negotiations with the West on formulating a settlement on Syria in the framework of the international conference. The effectiveness of this leverage is clear, evidenced by the visits to Putin, which enable him to upgrade Russia’s positions on the subject of Syria.

During Netanyahu’s visit, Russia apparently took a sympathetic approach and appeared willing to make various concessions. Although details of the meeting were not publicized, it seems that all of the key questions on Syria were debated. And while the Russians continue to claim that they will honor the contract, it is still too early to determine definitively whether the missiles will indeed be delivered. In any case, however, it is clear that concessions are not made without receiving something in return.

