

# Russia in Syria and the Implications for Israel

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The world will not be destroyed by those who do evil, but by those who watch and do nothing.

Albert Einstein

Russia's direct military involvement in Syria in the latter months of 2015 and initial months of 2016 was a demonstration that military force can "make all the difference," and was further proof that strategic wisdom is best reflected in a correct combination of military power and political process. The Russian military campaign in Syria during the autumn of 2015 saved the Assad regime from downfall, changed the balance of power in Syria, and leveraged the dynamics in order to pursue a ceasefire and diplomatic talks. To be sure, Russia's involvement in Syria did not begin in the final days of September 2015, when President Vladimir Putin announced that he was reinforcing his military presence in Syria at the invitation of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, to assist "the legitimate regime" in the country. This involvement, likewise, did not end in mid-March 2016, when Putin announced the end of the campaign and a partial withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria. Russia's involvement in Syria has gone on for decades, since Hafez al-Assad headed the government, and it continued through the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the leadership changes in both countries. Russia maintained its hold in Syria thanks to weapons deals, the expansion of Russian military bases in Syria, and the presence of military advisors and representatives of intelligence agencies – as well as Russia's forgiveness of the Syrian debt to the Soviet Union. Russia viewed Syria as its last stable and reliable strategic stronghold in the Middle East after it had lost its traditional allies – Egypt, and subsequently, Iraq and Libya.

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Under Putin's leadership, Russia, taking calculated risks, took advantage of the global weakness of the United States over the last decade and acted to promote its vital interests in Europe and the Middle East and to reposition itself as a world power. Russia began its involvement in the civil war in Syria with the eruption of the fighting, inserting Russian advisors among Syrian combat forces from the beginning. More important, Russia wielded its political weight in the international arena, and exercised its veto power to block possibilities for action against the Assad regime and condemnations by international organizations. In addition, Russia played a key role in achieving the agreement for disarming the Assad regime of chemical weapons. These measures served as a catalyst for Russia's becoming a "veto player" on Syria, whereby Russia's consent was necessary for every proposed solution.

In late September 2015, approximately one week before Russia's announcement of its plan to increase involvement in Syria, *Jane's* reported that Russia had already deployed special units within Syrian territory in months prior.<sup>1</sup> SVR (foreign intelligence) units were deployed to protect Russian assets in the event of the collapse of Assad's regime, and GRU (military intelligence) units were flown in to work with Syrian security personnel. Already by the summer of 2015, Russian UAVs were flying over Syrian air space, and in early September 2015, Russia even admitted that the airport in Latakia and the adjoining base had been expanded to accommodate Russian forces. Not long after, heavy Russian military cargo planes landed at the airport, and hundreds of soldiers were sent to secure the base and prepare it for the arrival of Su-24 Fencer attack aircraft, Su-25 Frogfoot strike aircraft, Su-30 Flanker multirole fighter aircraft, and numerous Ka-52 helicopters. In a telephone conversation on September 18, 2015, less than two weeks before Russia's announcement of its military involvement in Syria, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu assured US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter that Russia's actions were entirely defensive in nature.

Russia's assurance was not fully reliable, and on September 30, 2015, in a surprise move, President Vladimir Putin announced that Russian military forces were invited by the legitimate regime in Syria to assist it in fighting "terrorists." Considering Russia's deep involvement in the civil war, both prior to the public announcement and its subsequent involvement, it is evident that Russia does not see itself as an invading force; as far as it is concerned, Russia is part of the sole legitimate external force involved in

the fighting in Syria. From the Russians' perspective, they reinforced their forces pursuant to an official invitation from the Syrian government, and after having received the approval of the Russian parliament.

### The Objectives of Russian Intervention

Notwithstanding Putin's unequivocal announcement that the purpose of Russia's military intervention was to fight extremist Islamic terrorist groups – contrary to the prevailing view that the Russians came to save Assad's regime – upon examining the map of the Russian attacks, it appears that battling the Islamic State was a low priority, particularly during the initial stages of the campaign. The Russians had more important objectives in their involvement in the fighting.

It appears that the primary objective behind the increased Russian involvement in Syria was to reposition Russia as a world power. To Putin, Russia's VIP seat at the global game was upset by the West upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, perceived as the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> For Moscow, Russia's involvement in the Middle East arena served first and foremost to restore Russia to its proper standing in the world. Through its focused and determined intervention in Syria, Russia demonstrated that it is a key player whose involvement is essential to the resolution of international issues. The West, which for more than four years had failed to resolve a steadily exacerbating problem in Syria, was now forced to consider the Russian positions even more carefully, and to involve Moscow in resolving the crisis.

The second objective of Russia's involvement was to leverage the Syrian issue in order to resolve problems in other arenas important to it, mainly Europe in general and Ukraine in particular. Russian involvement in Syria was intended to apply pressure on the West to remove the sanctions imposed by the United States and Europe following the Russian operations in Ukraine. In the meantime, Russia is presumably open to an agreement with the West that on the one hand will guarantee continued Russian influence in Ukraine and provide legitimacy for its annexation of Crimea, while on the other hand, will compel the Russians to assist in promoting the West's demands in a future arrangement in Syria. One possible accord of this type is Russian involvement in the formation of a government in Syria

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that will incorporate the interests of all actors involved. Such a deal would guarantee the security of the Alawite minority and its role in a future Syrian government, but at the same time, accept the position of the West and the opposition that removing Assad is a key to success in fighting the Islamic State. In other words, Moscow brought Assad to the negotiating table as a means to build a world order that better serves the interests of the Russians.

The third objective stemmed from Putin's domestic considerations. War allows him to divert public attention from the grave economic and social problems plaguing Russia: economic recession due to plummeting oil prices and international sanctions, tensions between Russians and ethnic minorities, and tensions between the middle class and the lower class and the Russian rural population. When the army is engaged in battle, patriotic sentiments increase among the population, which helps boost national pride. A survey published in early April 2016<sup>3</sup> showed that 58 percent of Russian citizens believed that the objective of the Russian air force missions in Syria was to protect Russia from Islamic terrorism; 27 percent believed that the Russian involvement prevented a "color revolution" in Syria (similar to that in Ukraine) provoked by the United States. Significantly, 69 percent thought that the Russian air force had already achieved its objectives, and 81 percent supported the announcement of the partial Russian withdrawal from Syria.<sup>4</sup> It appears that when it comes to Russia's internal perceptions, Moscow's image of success is unequivocal.

The fourth objective behind the Russian involvement was to save a friendly regime on the brink of collapse through the application of military and political pressure. The Russians and the Syrians have a long history of cooperation, and Russia has strategic interests in Syria: a port in the Mediterranean Sea, influence in the Arab world, a market for weapons sales, and physical access to the borders of other key countries in the Middle East, including Turkey, Iraq, and Israel. Its strategy for saving Assad's regime focused on crippling the relatively moderate opposition in order to present the Assad regime as the only viable alternative to the Islamic State.

The fifth objective was to present Russia as a reliable and loyal ally. Operations in Syria sent a clear message to Russia's allies and to other countries in the world that unlike the United States, given the way it conducted itself vis-à-vis Mubarak in Egypt, and vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey, and Israel, Russia indeed supports its allies.

Finally, Russia sought to fight the radical Sunni jihadists. Russia is concerned that the absence of a solution to a local problem in the Middle

East is liable to mushroom and reach Russia in the form of another wave of terrorist attacks inside Russia itself. Indeed, Russian is the third most spoken language in the so-called Islamic State caliphate, and Russians make up a disproportionate share of the Islamic State high command.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, from Russia's perspective, intervening on foreign soil at a relatively low cost could prevent the problem of Islamic terrorist attacks expanding to a bloodbath inside Russia itself.

### **The Military Campaign**

Of the thousands of Russian soldiers participating in the campaign in Syria, some were combat soldiers, but most were maintenance and service personnel stationed at the navy base in Tartus and the air force base in Khmeimim, in northern Syria.<sup>6</sup> Scores of aircraft (including Tu-22, Tu-95, Tu-160, Su-30, Su-35, Su-24, and Su-25), helicopters (Ka-52, Mi-28, and Mi-35), and UAVs participated in the campaign. The Russian naval forces participating in the fighting included frigates, corvettes, battle cruisers, and even a submarine. Espionage measures deployed during the campaign included naval units (a Meridian intelligence ship for collecting signals intelligence and communications intelligence), air units (Tu-214R and Il-20M1 aircraft), and ground units (advanced radar systems, deployed electronic warfare systems, and special forces). The Russians also launched rockets, missiles, and modern Kalibr cruise missiles, and deployed advanced air defense systems (naval versions of the S-300 missile and S-400 missiles).

As of the spring of 2016, the cost of the campaign to Russia was \$500-600 million.<sup>7</sup> At the peak of the Russian onslaught, dozens of aerial attacks were launched per day, and in total, more than 9,000 aerial sorties were carried out. Among Russia's achievements were a significant reduction in territory held by the rebels and damage to infrastructures and to the energy industry, thereby reducing the rebels' revenues from oil and oil byproducts. According to announcements by the Soviet Observatory for Human Rights, between September and the March announcement of Russia's withdrawal, approximately 4,500 people were killed during the Russian attacks; of these fatalities, more than 1,700 were civilians and about 200 were children. At the time of the announcement of the reduction of the Russian forces, Defense Minister Shoigu announced that the Russian forces had "eliminated" more than 2,000 fighters of Russian origin aligned with terrorist groups, including 17 field commanders.<sup>8</sup>

For its part, Russia did not regularly report on casualties, but it is known that about ten Russian soldiers were killed. The most significant combat casualty was the pilot of the plane shot down by the Turkish army who was then killed by rebel forces in northern Syria after ejecting from the plane. In addition, there was a report of two Russian casualties among soldiers fighting as mercenaries, although they may have belonged to one of the secret Russian units fighting in Syria for some time. Two additional Russian casualties occurred when on April 11, 2016 an attack helicopter crashed due to a technical malfunction.<sup>9</sup> The latest Russian fatalities occurred on July 9, 2016 near Palmyra, when a Mi-25 helicopter was downed by the rebels, and its two pilots were killed.<sup>10</sup>

Compared to modern aerial campaigns over the last decade (in Gaza, Yemen, the campaign by the West against the Islamic State) the Russians can label their air campaign a success. The Russians understood the importance of a critical mass of attacks based on high quality intelligence, and allowed themselves to operate under open-fire rules free of considerations of collateral damage and possible civilian casualties. Yet while an air campaign can change the course of a war, achieving all of the targeted aims requires synergies with ground forces. The Russian air effort was accompanied by

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coordinated ground attacks of loyalists of the Syrian regime, Iranian forces, Shiite militias, and Hezbollah. The Russians established an effective defensive cover against ground attacks on their key facilities – the navy base in Tartus and the air base in Latakia. Russia denied reports<sup>11</sup> of the destruction of some of its aircraft and equipment at the Tias air base on the outskirts of Homs. Ultimately, the Russian air campaign turned the tide in the fighting and led to several ceasefires and to a political process under conditions that the opposition had not agreed to prior to the air strikes. The low number of known casualties and the fact that not one Russian pilot was captured alive by the rebels enabled Moscow to preserve the Russian population's favorable perception of the campaign. The price paid for the downed passenger

plane in Sinai was not associated directly with the fighting in Syria, and the Russians presented it more as justification for military intervention and not as a price incurred by the intervention.

## Achievements and Failures during the Campaign

Following months of Russian fighting, an examination of what was achieved by the Russian intervention is warranted. First, Russia's aggressive action clearly positions it as a key element in Syria's future, dictating both the military and political developments in the arena. In the global theater, the Russians have returned to center stage and repositioned themselves as an important force in international politics that can contribute to the resolution of serious disputes around the world. Putin even said that Russia's efforts in combating international terrorism have helped Russia improve its relations with the leading world powers.<sup>12</sup> Second, the format of the Russian operations, which combined military and diplomatic measures, proved that a correct use of military force can be an effective tool for jumpstarting stalled political processes. Third, the Russians saved the Alawite regime from losing its seat, and thereby sent a message to both current and potential allies that they are a reliable partner that comes to the rescue in times of need. Furthermore, by expressing their willingness to compromise on President Assad's future but not on the regime, the Russians have signaled to the other players that they are ready to compromise in exchange for Western compromises on other matters.

The Russian announcement of a "withdrawal" lowered Assad's aspirations, although this announcement followed a number of impressive victories by Assad's forces on the ground with Russian and Shiite support, and the Syrian President's hardening of his positions in negotiations with the Syrian opposition forces. Nevertheless, by leaving military forces in Syria, the Russians have made it clear that they have the power to deter any future escalation by rebel forces. The Russians constitute a force that promotes an arrangement based on a balance of power and on the understanding that no side is strong enough to overcome the others on the battlefield.

In the military dimension, the Russians have proven that their army has modernized and has very good operational and technological capabilities. State-of-the-art Russian artillery and weapon systems were tested and used under real conditions for the first time. The demonstration of a wide array of Russian weapons platforms will serve as sales promotions for the Russian military industries that employ millions of citizens and could, in the future, serve as a lucrative source of foreign currency from future arms deals. Furthermore, the Russian army acquired critical combat experience. Finally, after years of erosion of its stature, Russia strengthened its position

as a powerful country with significant military strength, and it did so at a time when tensions were rising between Russia and its neighbors in the European Union and NATO.

Alongside the many achievements, there are areas in which the Russians failed to achieve their strategic objectives. First and foremost, the Russian efforts did not lead to a solution or to stability: the ceasefire is partial, and the fighting continues to claim casualties (including many hundreds of civilian deaths since the ceasefire was announced). The humanitarian assistance to hundreds of thousands of Syrians is blocked and the assistance that manages to get through is mostly pillaged by the Syrian military forces. On the strategic level, the majority of the Russian achievements during the civil war in Syria are short term, psychological victories. The Russian fighting has decisively contributed to the destruction of Syria and its infrastructure. It is difficult to overstate the scope of the effort and resources that will be required to rehabilitate Syria at the end of the war. Furthermore, Russia significantly contributed to the increased number of Syrian refugees and displaced peoples, human resources that are critical for rehabilitating Syria in any future solution.

### **Mission Accomplished?**

After the Russians changed the course of the fighting in Syria, restored their status as a world power, demonstrated that their importance in the Middle East is not inferior to that of the United States, and conducted field trials of their new weapon systems, they moved to the next step. Again they surprised the international community in March 2016 with the announcement of a partial withdrawal of their troops from Syria, effective immediately (in the same fashion as when they announced their increased involvement in Syria six months earlier). Putin decided that he had reached maximum achievement, and that additional risks and costs in the campaign could jeopardize these achievements. Yet notwithstanding the announcement of the withdrawal of the Russian forces from Syria, it appears that what is taking place is more of a rotation and adjustment of forces in accordance with the changing nature of the fighting than an end to the Russian operations in Syria. Up to one third<sup>13</sup> of the aircraft stationed in Syria returned to Russian soil and were welcomed home with much fanfare; these were replaced with attack helicopters that are more compatible for supporting ground combat (Ka-52, Mi-28, and Mi-35 helicopters). The helicopters were deployed in bases closer to the battlefield, in order to maximize their

combat time and shorten the travel time to provide air support to ground forces.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Russian forces are assisting the Syrian army and the coalition forces fighting alongside it on the ground. Russian forces helped regain control over the city of Palmyra,<sup>15</sup> and Russian engineering forces were even photographed clearing the area of landmines<sup>16</sup> and explosive devices left on site by the retreating Islamic State forces.

The Russian media reported that Russia would be retaining two battalions (about 800 soldiers), as well as its S-400 air defense system on Syrian soil, in order to protect the Russian missions.<sup>17</sup> Besides this, there were reports that Russian ships passing through the Bosphorus Straits on their way to Syria were more heavily laden en route to Syria than on their way home.<sup>18</sup> Statements made by Russian senior officials reinforced this point concerning the future of the Russian forces in Syria, both in relation to security forces and attack forces, and even to their continued deployment. In the meantime, commander of the Russian military Sergei Ivanov said in March that Russia would take action to secure the safety of its soldiers remaining in Syria. Deputy Defense Minister Pankov elaborated and said that Russian forces will proceed with their attacks against terrorist targets. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Prime Minister Medvedev said that Russia does not intend to stop its campaign until Russia's allies in Damascus are able to keep the peace under "adequate conditions."

The move to end its military intervention was not criticized on the Russian street, and retaining its forces in Syria ensures Russia's continued influence over what happens in Syria and avoids a situation whereby the fighting might again change direction. A partial withdrawal of forces sends a clear message to Assad that Russia will not remain in Syria for a prolonged period in the current circumstances, and that it has no intention of fighting the Alawite ruler's war indefinitely, and not even until there is a decisive victory on the battlefield. The purpose of this clear statement about the limits of the Russian intervention, and even concerning the campaign's objectives, were to soften Assad in preparation for the talks with the rebels and to "encourage" him to compromise concerning Syria's future.

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## Russia and the Sunni world

Moscow's alliance with Iran and Hezbollah in its assistance to the Assad regime, all of which led to the reinforcement of the Shiite axis, could have been expected to damage Russia's relations with the Arab-Sunni world. However, using the whole spectrum of positive and negative foreign policy tools at its disposal vis-à-vis the regional powers in the Middle East, Russia maneuvered very skillfully around many Sunni countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey. While Russia and Saudi Arabia are positioned at opposite sides of the divide on the subject of Assad's future and relations with Iran, both countries share interests on energy, export of weapon systems, and the additional support from world powers that the Saudis seek, as their trust in the US has declined. In this context, it is worth mentioning the Saudi Defense Minister's visits to Russia and his close relations with the Russian leadership, the attempt to lead a multi-party energy agreement to freeze oil output, and even the possibility of future cooperation between Russia and Saudi Arabia on civilian nuclear power. In the Egyptian context, the warming of relations between Russia and Egypt includes civil nuclear power deals, as well as major arms deals.

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Russian Su-24 aircraft in November 2015 near the Syria-Turkey border exacerbated the widening schism between Moscow and Ankara. The incident, which the Russians perceived as intentional provocation by Ankara, triggered an aggressive and rapid response by Russia. Moscow intensified its measures against Turkey, particularly on the economic front, and the cost of the Russian measures against Turkey to date in terms of agriculture, tourism, and energy is estimated at more than \$10 billion. In various public statements, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov intensified his rhetoric against Turkey, with accusations of the Turkish army crossing into Syrian territory, Turkish bombings of civilian areas beyond the border, the building of security buffer zones south of Turkey,

and foreign fighters crossing through Syrian's northern border.

The downing of the Russian aircraft pushed the Russians to strengthen their ties with Kurdish groups in Syria. Since November, Russia has

supported Kurdish forces in order to advance its own objectives, provoke Turkey, and weaken Turkey's influence over the future arrangement in Syria. In the meantime, Lavrov has stated frequently that the inclusion of the Kurds in talks about the future of Syria is essential to a stable future for Syria, and he urged the UN not to capitulate to "foreign dictates" (of Turkey) regarding the inclusion of Kurdish representatives in the talks. Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitri Peskov sharpened this point when he said, "These negotiations should be only inclusive...including Kurds, to find a really lasting solution...and to enable Syrians themselves to decide their destiny."<sup>19</sup>

It appears that Russia's pressure on Turkey was successful. Over time, relations between the two countries have warmed, and attempts were made to alleviate tensions. The Russian media reported that Turkey's President Erdogan sent a letter of apology for the incident, and the Russians sent an official invitation to the Turkish Foreign Minister to participate in a meeting of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization in Sochi, an invitation that was accepted. A few days later, the leaders of both countries spoke directly.<sup>20</sup>

In summary, Russia's use of the gamut of positive tools (both hard, e.g., weapons deals, and soft, e.g., strengthened diplomatic relations), as well as negative tools (such as economic and political pressure) pushed Middle East countries in Moscow's direction. Thus, it seems that Russia is on a path that leads to a favorable development in its relations with all key countries in the Middle East and mitigates the damage caused by its image as an ally of Iran and a friend of the Assad regime.

### **Russia versus the United States and the West**

The United States and Europe condemned Russia at the outset of its military intervention, and President Obama predicted that Moscow would soon become mired in Syria. After the Russians' tactical success and the understanding that they were achieving their objectives, however, at least in the short term, the Americans attempted to leverage Russian success to promote their objectives against the Islamic State and reach an arrangement that would end the civil war and the human tragedy in Syria. Effective ground and air coordination was achieved and talks began at the level of foreign ministers, during which it became clear that the resolution of the civil war in Syria might be within reach.

Nevertheless, the gap between the world powers is still wide. The United States has left the Ukraine-related sanctions on Russia in place, even after the countries drew closer on the subject of Syria (Europe is expected to extend its sanctions soon), and the bilateral dialogue is faltering. Nevertheless, Russia is trying to show that it is seeking a diplomatic point of departure, and is attempting to work according to agreements with the United States. The Russian media reports regularly that Foreign Minister Lavrov is in contact with his American counterpart, and that they announced initiatives for joint ground operations between Russian forces and American forces in Syria.<sup>21</sup>

### **What Lies Ahead?**

The complexity of the conflict in Syria is evident from the fact that parallel, complex processes are underway with a problematic counter-impact: on the one hand, a ceasefire is ostensibly in place; on the other hand, the fighting against the Islamic State and the Nusra Front persists; concurrently, the attempt to arrive at a political arrangement through multi-player political negotiations continues, albeit sluggishly and without reciprocal trust. Complicating the situation even further, the Kurds continue their struggle for autonomy; Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia are involved in a dispute over direct and indirect intervention, and so are the world powers. Against this background, it is necessary to analyze how the events in Syria are developing, while identifying the difficulties in arriving at an end to the civil war and an arrangement that would facilitate the country's rehabilitation.

The primary problem with the ceasefire is that the Islamic State and the Nusra Front are not part of the agreement, and therefore the war against them continues. The fact that the demarcation between ceasefire zones and areas where the fighting continues is blurred enables the Syrian regime, Iran, and Russia to continue fighting, causing many casualties among civilians and among the opposition forces included in the ceasefire.<sup>22</sup>

At the peace talks in Geneva, the Assad regime's increased self-confidence due to the achievements of the campaign led by Russia clashes with the opposition's demand to remove Assad from office. The regime's continued attacks on opposition forces included in the ceasefire pose a significant obstacle to any progress in the talks. Furthermore, among the unresolved topics are fundamental disagreements on who should participate in the talks and the future of Assad and the Baath regime. While all countries agree that the Islamic State should not be included as a party to the talks, other opposition forces are still in contention, for example, the Syrian

Kurdish forces. Both the United States and Russia support the Kurdish forces fighting the Islamic State and urge their inclusion in the peace talks. Turkey, however, which has a complicated history with the Kurdish minority within its borders and with the Kurds in Syria and Iraq, does not want to see the Kurds taking a legitimate part in designing Syria's future.

Another disputed point is the territorial and governmental structure of post-war Syria. In February 2016, the Russians were vehemently opposed to the division of Syria and were proponents of a united Syria in its current borders as a precondition of any future solution, and did not agree to comment publicly on the nature of a future arrangement. Subsequently, the Russians appeared inclined to accept the federalization of Syria as a future solution. Nevertheless, senior Russian officials reiterate that Russia will support any agreement that the warring parties achieve in Syria. They have thus prepared the ground for a solution that retains a regime that is friendly to them, but could include Assad's removal from office as a concession to United States demands.

Even if it appears that all the powers in play are interested in the ceasefire and in promoting a political process to narrow the gaps between them, the ongoing attacks by the Syrian regime and its allies against moderate factions will likely ultimately lead to the collapse of both the ceasefire and the peace talks in Geneva. In the meantime, the representative of the moderate rebels, Mohammed Alloush,<sup>23</sup> announced he was resigning from the talks, due – in his view – to their failure.<sup>24</sup>

As for the Islamic State, all of the powers continue to fight against this organization. While Russia has reduced its aerial presence, the United States has deployed its heavy B-52 bombers to the region<sup>25</sup> and reinforced the presence of its special forces stationed in the region, in parallel to continued air strikes and the re-conquest of rebel-held areas by the Syrian army and its allies. Furthermore, the Islamic State finds itself contending with steadily growing military, governance-related, and economic difficulties that are hurting the organization, arresting its progress, and even causing it to retreat. Nevertheless, and despite the announcements of the forces fighting against

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them, the Islamic State understands that the West and even Russia are not ready to send ground forces against them, and even leading Sunni regimes such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia are not rushing to send in ground forces to liberate the Islamic State's Syrian capital, al-Raqqah. The Islamic State is attempting to cope with its failures in Syria and Iraq by executing brazen terrorist attacks in Europe and by shifting a significant portion of its operations to Libya. President Obama's announcement that the Islamic State will not be defeated during the remaining months of his presidency,<sup>26</sup> and his adamant position that American soldiers would not be sent to Syria, gives the Islamic State some breathing room.

The future of Assad's regime remains a central issue in three spheres – inside Syria, inside the Middle East, where Iran and the Hezbollah are contending with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and between world powers, in the disagreements between Russia and the United States. Only if Russia decides that the time has come to remove Assad from office (in favor of an arrangement with the opposition or in return for allowances on Ukraine from the West), while safeguarding the Alawites and the country's systems – and only if it receives Iran's consent to this arrangement – will there be some chance of ending the civil war. In this instance, two main issues would still remain – the battle against the Islamic State, and the Kurdish issue. The fact that the United States and Russia have shared interests on these two issues offers hope that if the problem of removing Assad from office is resolved, then the road to a solution will be simpler.

### **Advancing Israeli Interests**

Throughout the civil war in Syria, Israel has made an effort to remain outside of the fighting as much as possible. Officially, Israel abstained from supporting any of the sides, and did not even express an opinion about its preferred solution. Israel's policy in the field was limited to retaliatory fire at sources of fire from Syria, humanitarian assistance, and the denial of Hezbollah's efforts to strengthen its arsenal with sophisticated weapons.

Upon the increase in Russian involvement and its shift to direct air sorties, Israel conducted itself with extreme caution, was careful to avoid any Russian fighter planes, and took into account the Russians' firepower and their sophisticated air defense systems. During his visit to Russia, Prime Minister Netanyahu, accompanied by the IDF Chief of Staff, laid a foundation for a tactical deconfliction mechanism, the clarification of both countries' red lines, and perhaps even the beginning of strategic

understandings about the future of Syria. For their part, the Russians have stated openly that they have a deep understanding of Israeli interests in Syria and that Russia's future actions in Syria will not jeopardize Israel's security.

The Russian intervention in Syria had a number of favorable consequences for Israel. First, Russia contributed to the stabilization of the situation in Syria and to a possible future arrangement in the country. Israel, in the interest of prudence, prefers to preserve stability and a clear demarcation of its borders. Russia can serve as a mediator between Israel and the Shiite camp if necessary, and could even constitute a source of pressure on this camp if Israel succeeds in convincing the Russians of the advantages of restraint. Second, the coordination with Russia demonstrated Israel's standing as a reliable and stable element in the region. Third, the tactical understandings with Russia are an excellent foundation for building a relationship at the strategic level between the countries. And finally, it appears that Russia's involvement and the strengthening of the Shiite camp have indirectly contributed to increased cooperation between Israel and Sunni countries in the region, led by Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, the Russian course of action could potentially have very negative strategic implications for Israel. The Russian intervention led to the strengthening of the radical Shiite axis, with its problematic positioning close to Israel's borders. The strengthening of the Iran-Hezbollah-Syria axis, its return to being a dominant force in Syria, its acquisition of sophisticated, high quality equipment, high quality intelligence about Israel at the disposal of the axis, and the improvement in Hezbollah's fighting capabilities could jeopardize Israel's security in the future. The increased presence of Iran and Hezbollah in the Golan Heights is a negative strategic development for Israel.

Furthermore, the Russian involvement in the war introduced advanced weapon systems into the arena. At least some of them will likely remain inside Syria after the fighting, and will join the weapon systems directed against Israel. In addition, it appears that the Russians' training exercises, doctrines, and operational experience reached not only the Syrian army, but also other forces fighting alongside Assad, including Hezbollah. And thus, Hezbollah has succeeded in upgrading its command and control capabilities, its ability to operate forces on a more substantial scale than it could previously, and its offensive capabilities (as opposed to its historic defensive stance against Israel). Sophisticated war materiel acquired by

Hezbollah, along with the combat experience that the Shiite organization acquired, increases the dangers that Israel can expect to encounter during the next round of fighting on the northern front.

Against this backdrop, what should Israel do to improve its strategic stance? First, the strategic relationship forged with Russia must be cultivated, and it is imperative that Russia recognize Israel's map of interests and red lines in the Syrian and Lebanese contexts. As it contributes to the design of Syria's future, Russia must take into account Israel's position on the subject of the Golan Heights, preventing Hezbollah from opening an additional front in southern Syria and limiting Iranian influence in Syria. Second, Israel must emphasize that it will continue to take military action when its interests are threatened, mainly on the issues of transfer of high quality weapons to Hezbollah, the deployment of hostile forces in the Golan Heights, and activities relating to unconventional weapons. Third, Israel must clarify its understandings with Saudi Arabia and Turkey about the future of Syria and the proactive measures to strengthen moderate Sunni factions in Syria. Fourth, Israel can leverage the relationship forged with Russia to encourage Russian restraint of Hezbollah, which can reduce the chances of destabilizing tactics by Hezbollah in the future. Finally, Israel must make itself heard on the greater moral issue: the genocide in Syria, caused primarily by the Assad regime, but with the support of its allies. Israel must do more to halt the genocide, and it can do this through humanitarian and offensive measures, if necessary, in conjunction with pragmatic Arab and Muslim countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan.

Israel's possible actions should include, inter alia, contributing intelligence to future international criminal court proceedings on the serious war crimes committed by the Assad regime and his supporters. Israel must strengthen all of the international elements (both political and supra-political) striving to reach a solution that replaces Bashar al-Assad and minimizes the Hezbollah and Iranian presence in Syria. Israel can take an active role near the border in order to ensure that moderate factions will control the region. Beyond these measures, Israel must be involved far more intensively in all aspects pertaining to humanitarian aid to the civilian population in Syria, through shipments of food and other humanitarian assistance, and through its continued medical care for those wounded during the civil war.

The strengthening of the radical Shiite axis on its northern border demands that Israel continually update its defense strategy regarding the

complex, dynamic northern front that differs from past years, particularly given the strong Russian presence.

## Notes

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