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Russia's Reconciliation Efforts in Syria

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For some time, Russia has invested significant diplomatic efforts to revive the dialogue among the warring factions in Syria. Moscow recently sponsored two meetings among the sides, and further rounds of talks will reportedly take place soon. Moreover, while it continues to support the Assad regime, Russia is also in close contact with the Syrian opposition, Arab national leaders and senior officials, the United States, and European nations in order to advance a process that could perhaps, with UN cooperation, help end the crisis. In tandem, Russia announced that it is joining the fight against the Islamic State. These moves should be examined in light of both Russia's efforts to restore its status in the Middle East, which was undermined in recent years, and its increasing assertiveness on the international arena vis-à-vis the West, primarily over the crisis in Ukraine.

Moscow, however, is not alone on the Syrian court, a field where the interests of all players in the international system intersect: those of the West, led by the United States; those of the regional players – Iran and its supporters on the one hand and the Sunni nations, led by Saudi Arabia, on the other; Turkey; and radical Islamic factions, first and foremost the Islamic State, challenging all the others. Thus, Russia's engagement in the Syrian crisis requires engagement with the respective involved parties, and it is thereby competing for a pivotal role in shaping the future regional order. In this playing field, Russia faces complex challenges on several levels:

- a. The domestic Syrian level: Russia is interested in maintaining its status in any future arrangement in Syria and therefore tries to create the conditions to effect this, through mediation efforts, proposed meetings among the sides, and efforts to formulate a compromise. Another reconciliation conference among the opposing sides is supposed to convene under Russian auspices and with UN cooperation, and apparently with other Middle East nations and the United States as well. Despite Russia's insistence on supporting Assad, recent signals from Moscow indicate a willingness for concessions on this point. At the same time, many reports have spoken of Russia's military involvement in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria. Although the reports were denied by Moscow and they lack

- clear evidence, it is obvious that Russia has increased its military aid to Assad's regime, which includes Russian advisors on Syrian soil and a presence on the Syrian coast that could guard Russia's interests in any future development.
- b. Relations with the West: It is fairly clear that at least some of Russia's moves in Syria have occurred with the West's nod of approval. Beyond its considerations directly linked to the Syrian arena, Moscow wants to draw the attention of the international community away from Ukraine and refocus it on the Middle East. Russia may seek relief from the sanctions imposed by the West regarding its conduct in Ukraine in exchange for concessions in Syria.
 - c. The Iranian level: Iran's success regarding the nuclear agreement created a new reality in the Middle East, joined by the expectation of Iranian involvement in the war against the Islamic State. It seems that the United States, European states, and Russia all seek an alternative to their own direct involvement in the fighting. At the same time, Tehran's improved regional and international standing concerns its neighbors, who feel threatened by the Iranian drive to expand its influence in the Middle East. Thus, Russia is expected to be sensitive to future Iranian activity, in Syria and throughout the region.
 - d. The Sunni states: Warmer relations between Russia and the Sunni states in the Middle East was made possible by the tension between the United States, on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states, on the other, who saw their interests harmed by the nuclear deal with Iran. This tension was aggravated by the idea of involving Iran in the fight against the Islamic State in Syria, which would help Iran expand its influence in the region. Russia has exploited the situation to promote its "diplomacy through weapons" strategy, and talks on deals with these nations on the usual weapons now include plans for providing nuclear reactors. Russia is likewise working on understandings with these states on the future of Syria, though the fate of Assad is still a matter of contention.
 - e. The war against the Islamic State: Russia, which in the past attributed little importance to the Islamic State, has changed its stance. The organization's territorial conquests make it a substantive threat to the Assad regime, and the addition of the Caucasus emirate to the Islamic State has amplified the threat perceived by Moscow posed by the expansion of Islamic organizations challenging Russia on its own soil. Joining the fight against the Islamic State could be a Russian card in Moscow's conflict with the West. At present, Moscow is talking about the moderate Syrian opposition joining forces with Iraqi and Kurdish forces and operating with the help of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, under UN auspices, to fight the Islamic State. While there is no certainty that Russia would have its own soldiers fight this war on Syrian soil, Moscow is offering to lead the formation of such a coalition.

It seems that Russia is determined to protect its interests in Syria and is preparing for all possible scenarios in that arena. These include defense of the Assad regime, even if it is forced to retreat to the coastline; promotion of a compromise that would end the fighting; and, if possible, recruitment of broad regional support for these moves, also for the sake of containing the threat the Islamic State poses to Russia. Such a policy places Russia at the center of the regional stage in the Syrian context and beyond, because it reflects the drive to translate its involvement in the local crisis to a stronger international standing.

But this is a complex undertaking. The chances that Russia will succeed with its planned moves are not auspicious, given the difficulty in navigating between its own interests and those of other key actors, such as Iran, the Sunni states in the Middle East, and the West, primarily the United States. It is too early to tell what direction developments may take. A quick resolution is unlikely; rather, the more likely possibility is that Russia alone will not succeed in dictating the solution for Syria. Consequently, deepened rifts and broadened conflicts are expected among the many actors in the Syrian arena.

Israel is closely following events in Syria, including Russia's preparations for expanding its involvement there. There is concern that renewed Russian action in the war in Syria might have negative implications for Israel (such as denying Israel freedom of action in Syria, as Hizbollah has stated). But an assessment of Russia's considerations, supported by messages in the Russian media, leads to the conclusion that Russia's policy in Syria – whether continued support of the Assad regime or support of the regime without Assad – does not pose any threat to Israel.

In the last few days, many reports have claimed that Russia intends to step up its involvement in Syrian affairs, continue its support for Bashar al-Assad's regime, and attempt to stop the spread of the Islamic State. Concurrently, rumors suggest that Russia is stitching together broad understandings with several interested parties, including the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, France, and Egypt, whereby Russia is willing to accept Assad's resignation (and perhaps host him indefinitely in Moscow) but is not willing to topple the present regime or concede the Alawite domination of the Syrian political system. However, it also appears that something has recently gone awry in these understandings and Russia has chosen to respond by reinforcing its forces to defend the Assad regime and its control of the Syrian coastline. At the same time, Russia will likely continue to promote a political settlement in Syria to stabilize the situation, obstruct the Salafist jihadists, and formulate agreements for a transition period.