

Does Russia's Intervention in Syria Hold Opportunities for Israel?

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Since late September 2015, Russia has launched airstrikes in Syria in order to assist the forces defending the Assad regime against the rebels and the Islamic State. Russia's intervention includes the deployment of aerial forces (close to 40 fighter jets and helicopters), aerial defense systems, and aerial command and control systems. President Vladimir Putin described the purpose of Russia's intervention as a battle against the Islamic State, although as of November 2015 most of the targets attacked were those belonging to the rebels, who were described as terrorists but were not aligned with the Islamic State. The Russian squadrons deployed in Syria are operating as part of a coalition that includes the Syrian army still loyal to Assad, Iran (which has dispatched some 2,000 Quds Force fighters to Syria), and Hezbollah, providing aerial assistance to the coalition forces on the ground. In addition, Russia is using heavy bombers and cruise missiles fired from its soil and even from submarines in the Mediterranean.

Russia's decision to intervene militarily in Syria stemmed from several considerations. One, given the rebels' joint attack on the power centers that Assad – Russia's ally – still controls, Russia concluded that the tipping point in the battle would occur unless it stepped in immediately. Two, Russia wishes to retain its naval stronghold on the Syrian coast as a base of operations in the Mediterranean. Three, Putin wants to restore Russia to its former glory as an influential superpower in the international arena, and active involvement in the Middle East is a means to achieve regional and international influence. Four, Russia has identified an opportunity to

challenge the United States, in particular when President Barack Obama is leery of expanding US military activity in the Syria crisis. Five, Russia is interested in diverting global attention and the locus of confrontation with the United States and the West away from Ukraine and redirecting it toward the Middle East, thereby also gaining relief from the economic sanctions imposed on it because of its Ukraine policy. Six, the central pretext Russia gave for intervention was the concern over the approach of Salafi jihadist Islam, led by the Islamic State, i.e., the threat to the nations on Russia's borders as well as to Russia's own Muslim population.

It seems that the Russian campaign in Syria was planned as a tripartite effort. The first, offensive stage took place in October, conducted by Russia's air force. One of the aims of this stage was to help Assad's forces seize control of critical areas while suppressing the rebels' offensive along the coast and on the Aleppo-Damascus axis. The attacks on rebel targets were apparently designed to encourage them to cooperate with a political initiative led by Russia on Syria's future political order. This stage received massive media coverage and was attended by an extensive public relations campaign to portray Russia as an influential power, a goal that was achieved, at least in part. After the targets were "softened up" from the air, the coalition (Assad, Hezbollah, and Iran) launched a ground offensive to conquer territory and expand the regime's control in the Aleppo and Damascus regions, including the connection from the Aleppo sector towards the Syrian coast, a stronghold of the Alawites. For now, this offensive has had only limited success because of: the stubborn resistance of the rebels who are getting help and transferring advanced weapon systems from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and even Turkey; the weakness of the Syrian army, which has been fighting primarily a ground war for five years; the failure of the Iranian support forces (Quds Force), which have taken many losses, especially in the command structure; the weakness of the central command; and impaired cooperation among the forces involved.

The second, political stage was begun after Russia's military intervention achieved a turning point on the battlefield and forged the perception that Russia is ready to commit fully to maintain the Bashar al-Assad regime. The political process was launched in Vienna on October 23, 2015, continued on October 30, and resumed again on November 14. At first it assumed a

limited format, which expanded subsequently because of Russia's efforts to involve most of the powers and nations of the region. The major dispute in the behind-the-scenes negotiations concerned the future of Assad himself; no mention of the issue was made in the concluding statement. It seems that even for Russia, Assad personally has become a liability, and Russia would be willing to give up on him while retaining the nature of the regime in exchange for promoting Russia's broader interests (such as a settlement in Ukraine). The involvement of Iran in the political talks and the fact that it is an important partner in the Russian coalition provide a great deal of weight to Russia's international standing. Still, there are gaps between Russian and Iranian interests and the future holds disagreements between them, both on the question of Syria and on the question of a future regional settlement.

The third stage of Russia's campaign in Syria seems to have deviated from the original plans and includes focused attacks on the Islamic State. After the downing of the Russian airliner in Sinai in October 2015 – the result of a bomb planted by the Islamic State's proxy in the Sinai Peninsula – there was an increase in the intensity of the Russian attacks focusing on Islamic State targets. For Russia, the terrorist attacks in Paris in November provided an opportunity to try to establish a broad international coalition to fight the Islamic State as well as to impose a political settlement on the fighting parties in Syria. After the West vacillated between indifference and resistance toward the Russian political initiative, the parties reached a compromise. On December 19, 2015, a broad meeting of the UN Security Council formulated a plan to jumpstart the peace process by a "roadmap," which details the stages of transition to end the war in Syria and promote an agreed arrangement within 18 months.

If the process continues in its present format and a resolute, broad international coalition is formed operating under a coordinated Russian-US leadership, the probability increases that Russia's firm intervention will cause a turning point in the Syrian confrontation, severely damage the Islamic State, and oust the latter from areas formerly controlled by Syria and Iraq. However, among the expected outcomes of such a development are greater willingness of individuals and groups in the Sunni camp to enlist in the ranks of the Islamic State, and increased activity by its proxies and affiliates in the region and around the world.

Russia's involvement in Syria has many internal implications for Israel. On the one hand, Israel and Russia have had a military coordination system in place since the start of Russia's intervention to prevent friction and aerial encounters. This coordination may be expected to continue. On the other hand, Russia's intervention has several negative implications. Militarily, the deployment of Russian S-400 ground-to-air missiles in northern Syria limits the Israeli Air Force's freedom of action and secrecy because it covers extensive areas in Syria, Lebanon, and northern Israel. However, so far the Russian airspace coverage over the skies of Syria and Lebanon has not limited the aerial activity of the Israeli Air Force in this space. A more dangerous development would be the transfer of the missile system to the Syrian army. In addition, the Israeli establishment is very worried about the cooperation and assistance extended by Russia to the Iranian-led Shiite axis. Other than the growing strength of the Iranian axis, such cooperation is liable to help Iranian and Hezbollah forces become embedded in the Golan Heights, thereby increasing the threat to Israel.

Therefore, Israel should further its strategic dialogue with Russia and, in this context, insist that Russia not allow the development of another Iranian-led front against Israel in the Golan Heights in particular and in southern Syria in general. Moreover, Israel must try to advance the opportunity inherent in Russia's intervention and the Russia-Iran-Hezbollah coalition to restrain Iran and Hezbollah from acting against Israel. It is also necessary to establish new rules of the game acceptable both to Israel and to Russia to prevent friction, erroneous assessments, miscalculation, and escalation, and to use these rules to bridge understandings on promoting future political arrangements in Syria.