



## Syria's Unraveling Gives Way to New Regional Order

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 317, November 1, 2015

**Russia's increased deployment in Syria, and Iran and Hezbollah's tightening grip on areas just north of the Israel-Syria border, may soon change regional realities irrevocably. More than ever, Israel must remain determined in its efforts to prevent Hezbollah from obtaining game-changing weapons.**

An in-depth look at recent events in Syria gives way to reflections on the future of the region, especially given the Russian deployment in Syria. The move, the first of its kind since the 1970, was coordinated with Iran, making it even more unusual.

It is not for nothing that the Russian deployment was put in play only after Iran signed a nuclear agreement with the West, which lent the Islamic republic the international legitimacy it craves. Moreover, this move represents a de facto regional alliance between Tehran and Moscow, even if neither of them has declared as much publicly.

The new situation raises several questions: How would a Russian-Iranian alliance affect Iran's regional position? What does the Russian involvement mean for Israel's ability to undermine Iran and Hezbollah's force-building efforts? And how far would Iran go to leverage its ties with Russia and paint Israel into a corner?

Moreover, given the complexities created by the Russian presence just north of the border, how much of Iran and Hezbollah's antics would Israel be willing to tolerate before it retaliates? What would Russia do opposite a forceful Israeli response, should the situation call for one? Would Russia refrain from weighing in on an aggressive

Israeli response in an area it is seemingly responsible for? Could it really remain unfazed?

These questions would have to stand the test of reality before they can be answered.

Moscow's regional involvement spells a potential change in the balance of power on the ground. Russian troops have been targeting Sunni insurgents regardless of whether they are affiliated with the Islamic State group, which the U.S. is currently targeting, mainly in Iraq.

Sunnis in both Syria and Iraq may feel they are trapped between the Russian-Alawite alliance on the ground, and the American-Iranian alliance on the nuclear issue, and this could actually drive them to bolster ties with Islamic State. Should this scenario prove true, regional tensions will escalate regardless of any tactical success the U.S. or Russia note.

Another destabilizing factor is the increased presence of Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria, under the auspices of the Russian efforts to resolve the conflict in the war-torn country.

This increased presence stands to effect Hezbollah's future fighting abilities: The Shiite terrorist group currently has its hands full with the fighting in Syria, and it cannot spare the resources to launch another round of violence against Israel. Moreover, it is limited in its ability to retaliate over any strike against its operatives, weapons systems, or infrastructure.

Hezbollah's order of battle has also been compromised: Nearly 2,000 of its operatives have been killed fighting alongside Syrian President Bashar Assad's forces, and thousands of others have been wounded. This is a significant blow for a group that is 50,000 strong -- if you factor in its "reserves."

On the other hand, the intensive fighting in Syria has gained Hezbollah valuable experience, effectively training a new generation of commanders who have cut their operational teeth on the battlefield.

A post-Syrian war Hezbollah is potentially the most battle-savvy organization Israel would ever have to confront in the field. Should another conflict erupt, the Shiite group would not be what it was when it fought the Israeli military during the 2006 Second Lebanon War, and it would be a tougher nut to crack.

One must also consider that Iran and Hezbollah's involvement in Syria will only tighten this dangerous alliance's grip on the war-torn country in general and particularly on the Syrian Golan Heights.

The wide Russian umbrella may unintentionally allow Tehran and its regional proxy to build bases from which they could attack Israel, effectively replicating the existing front in southern Lebanon to Syria. This poses a tangible threat, because it would force the Israel Defense Forces to double its efforts and operate on two northern fronts simultaneously. Operating in a sphere where Russian forces are deployed alongside Iranian and Hezbollah ones would be twice as difficult.

Meanwhile, Syria is continuously disintegrating, prompting the emigration of millions. Recent numbers suggest there are some 4 million Syrian refugees in camps in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon.

Syrian refugees are a heavy burden for the small Lebanese and Jordanian economies. They could potentially drive the Jordanian economy to the brink of disaster, and a sudden, dramatic influx of Sunnis may change Lebanon's demographic makeup altogether.

In Syria, this mass migration may considerably shift the demographic and sectarian balance: When the conflict erupted, the Alawite made up 12% of Syria's population, but what will their status be following the migration of millions of Sunnis, when they might become 25% of the country's population?

Syria's disintegration may deplete it of its people, and the few left will wake up to a very different reality, effectively spelling the loss of an entire generation and crippling its social structure.

What can become of a society that has been devoid of law and order for years? Israel may soon find itself sharing a border with a country considered backward even by Third World standards. Unless internal hostilities in Syria can be quelled, which I doubt, that is the fate that awaits it.

The ongoing Syrian conflict, Hezbollah and Iran's tightening grip on it, and the significant Russian deployment in the area require a reassessment of Israel's interests in the result of the bloody struggle that has been plaguing our neighbor to the north.

The decision to refrain from being dragged into the conflict was, and still is, correct, despite the threat posed by Iran and Hezbollah's new position in Syria. Today more

than ever, Israel must remain determined in its efforts to prevent Hezbollah from obtaining game-changing weapons.

Still, the issue of finding a long-term arrangement in Syria, one less threatening to Israel, is worth exploring. Talks about a solution to the Syrian conflict are likely to begin soon, and both Iran and the U.S. will surely be involved in them. Israel would be wise to make its position on the matter clear as soon as possible, even if it is excluded from the actual negotiations, and even if the chances of striking a deal between the Alawites and the Sunnis, the Iranians and the Syrians, and Turkey and the U.S., are slim.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family