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Tending to Israel's Relationship with Russia

by Robert G. Rabil

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The defeat of ISIS, the emergence of Russia as the patron of the Assad regime, and President Trump's announcement of the withdrawal of US forces from Syria have affected the policies and alliances of Israel, Iran, the US, and Russia with respect to that country, potentially leading to a wide-scale conflagration. To reduce the risk of war, Israel needs to consolidate its security understanding with Russia over southern Syria.

Since the 1990s, Israel and Russia have enjoyed an increasingly warm relationship. Russian President Vladimir Putin is reputed to have said, "There is a little piece of Russia in Israel." However, Moscow's military intervention in the Syrian civil war and the crushing of ISIS in Syria and Iraq have changed the dynamics of the Israel-Russia relationship.

Israel is concerned about Iran's deepening strategic military presence in Syria, which involves the building of military bases and the provisioning of Hezbollah with precision missiles. Over the past two years, and especially since the defeat of ISIS, Israel has led a systematic air campaign against Iranian assets in Syria that Russia, despite its control of the Syrian airspace, has done little to stop. Yet as Jerusalem began to align its military strategy in Syria with that of the US, Moscow apparently signaled its discontent. In February 2018, an Iranian drone penetrated the Israeli airspace. As expected, Israel retaliated by downing the drone and carrying out air strikes across Syria and against the Iranian drone's point of origin. For the first time since 1982, an Israeli jet was shot down by Syrian missiles. Analysts have questioned whether Syria could have anticipated and fired at the Israeli jets had it not been for Russian planning.

Nevertheless, Israel and Russia continued their coordination, concluding an agreement in late July 2018 according to which the Syrian armed forces

redeployed on the Golan Heights. Despite reservations, Jerusalem accepted a Russian pledge to keep Iran and Hezbollah 80 km from Israel's Golan Heights. However, this agreement did not stop Israel from striking Iranian and Syrian assets deemed threatening to its security. On September 17, Israel carried out air strikes against Iranian-Syrian positions near Russia's Hmeimim air base in Latakia. Syrian regime forces fired back and in the process accidentally downed a Russian surveillance plane, killing all 15 Russian service members aboard.

While President Putin blamed "a chain of tragic accidental circumstances," the Russian Defense Ministry accused Israel of hiding its F-16s behind the Russian plane, thus making it a target for Syria's anti-aircraft missiles. Moscow responded by delivering S-300 missiles to Syria. No doubt, this episode underscored Russian fears about an American-Israeli plan to undercut its presence in Syria, not least since the number of US special forces in Syria at the time was gradually increasing and Washington's military bases in northeastern Syria appeared to be transforming into permanent bases not too far from Latakia, the seat of Russian power.

Since Russia would not give up on its investment in the Assad regime, and may well supply that regime - and Iran - with sophisticated weapons should Moscow find itself painted into a corner, Washington's strategy of ensuring the departure of Iranian forces from Syria entailed the risk of a costly confrontation. Paradoxically, in a surprising shift of policy, President Trump has ordered the withdrawal of US troops from Syria, bringing an end to the military campaign against ISIS and removing any barrier to Tehran's military presence in Syria. This has put the onus on checking Iranian power on Israel, whose government has been steadfast in trying to prevent Tehran from entrenching itself in Syria, and has made Israel-Russian coordination in Syria strategically crucial to avert escalatory incidents.

At this critical juncture, Jerusalem has an opportunity to prevent a regional conflagration. Russia needs Iran and Hezbollah to secure and stabilize Syria. Serious challenges lie ahead, including defeating the thousands of Salafi jihadists in Idlib. But Moscow does not want either Iran or Hezbollah to have undue influence over Syrian politics. Simply put, Syria is a Russian protectorate. This has been transmitted to Tehran, including demands to restrict its military actions from Damascus all the way south to the Golan Heights. Reportedly, Hezbollah's strategic goal of extending its presence to the Golan has been nixed by Russia.

This divergence in strategy has created tension between the allies. This is evident in Lebanon, where as the former allies, Hezbollah and the Syrian regime, have become rivals. Hezbollah has marshalled its political forces to deny the Syrian regime reentry into Lebanese politics. Lebanon, as former Lebanese

parliamentarian Basem Shabb perceptively observed, “is the only country in the region where Iran has dominated the political scene with no credible opposition, until now.” The return of Syrian influence to Lebanon could pose the only potential threat to Hezbollah’s hegemony over Lebanon, especially now that US sanctions against both Iran and Hezbollah have begun to bite.

Breaking with past policy, Hezbollah has dismissed any cooperation with pro-Syrian candidates in the ongoing formation of the new government. As Shabb pointed out, “No effort was made to include Syria’s Lebanese allies, namely the SSNP or Baath Party, in the cabinet for the first time in 30 years.”

Taken together, these developments have ushered a new dynamic into Syria. In these circumstances, Jerusalem could build on its recent agreement with Moscow over southern Syria and institutionalize a protocol with Syria, the US, and Jordan whereby Russia would be the formal mediator and guarantor of security in that area. This model, though not ideal, could prevent a drift into open confrontation. A similar pact, the April 1996 Agreement between Hezbollah and Israel, established ground rules in southern Lebanon that prevented open confrontation. Jerusalem can maintain its strategic cooperation with Moscow and prevent escalatory incidents on its border from devolving into regional war.

Robert G. Rabil is a professor of Political Science at Florida Atlantic University. The views expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect those of Florida Atlantic University.

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