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Russian-Iranian Strains Raise Possibility of US-Israel-Russia Deal on Syria

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: With Israel set to host [an unprecedented meeting of the national security advisors of the US, Russia, and Israel](#), this week's efforts by [German FM Heiko Maas](#) and [Japanese PM Shinzo Abe](#) to mediate between the US and Iran could prove to be but a sideshow. The meeting of the national security advisors, against the backdrop of Syrian and Russian forces pummeling Idlib, the last major stronghold of Syrian rebels, takes on added significance with strains emerging in relations between Moscow and Tehran.

[Hundreds have been killed and thousands displaced](#) in the latest attacks by Syrian and Russian forces on the northern region of Idlib. Those forces have not shied away from targeting hospitals and residential areas.

In what may be marching orders for his national security advisor, John Bolton, President Donald Trump tweeted last week: "Hearing word that [Russia, Syria and, to a lesser extent, Iran, are bombing the hell out of Idlib Province](#) in Syria, and indiscriminately killing many innocent civilians. The World is watching this butchery. What is the purpose, what will it get you? STOP!"

While few expect the advisors' meeting this month in Jerusalem to produce immediate results, US and Israeli officials hope that it could prepare the ground for a deal that would further weaken Russian ties to Iran and reduce, if not terminate, Iran's presence in Syria.

Among multiple scenarios being bounced around, some analysts believe [a possible deal could involve Russia pushing Iran out of Syria, a key US and Israeli demand, in exchange for the lifting of at least some American and](#)

[European sanctions against Russia](#) and US acceptance of the regime of Syrian president Bashar Assad.

Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu [rejected a similar Russian proposal](#) last November.

“The fact that the Russians see value in these conversations, that they’re willing to do it publicly, I think is in and of itself quite significant. And so [we are hopeful](#) that they’re coming to the meeting with some fresh proposals that will allow us to make progress,” said a senior Trump administration official.

The officials suggest that a recent Russian [refusal to sell Iran its most advanced S-400 missile defense system](#) because it could fuel regional tensions, as well as [tacit Russian acquiescence to Israeli military strikes](#) against Iranian and Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah targets in Syria, could open the door to a potential deal.

Iran has [denied wanting to acquire the Russian system](#), while Russia has [officially demanded that Israel halt its attacks](#) and respect Syrian sovereignty.

Bolton’s discussions with Israeli national security advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat and Nikolay Patrushev, head of Russia’s Security Council, could not come at a worse moment for Iran. The Islamic Republic is struggling to dampen the effect of harsh US sanctions following the Trump administration’s withdrawal last year from the 2015 international agreement that curbed its nuclear program.

Analysts Udi Dekel and Carmit Valensi argued in a [report](#) published last month by the Tel Aviv-based Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) that despite public statements to the contrary, Russia, like Israel, rejects a withdrawal of US forces from Syria.

After announcing a complete pullback in February, Trump has since agreed to keep several hundred US troops in the country.

Dekel and Valensi said a US withdrawal would strengthen Iran and force Russia to allow Iran to take control of oil fields in the east of the country.

Writing in *Haaretz*, columnist Zvi Bar’el suggested that Russia and Iran differ over the endgame in Syria. “[Russia has no intention of simply returning Syria to Assad’s control](#),” Bar’el said. He added that Russia sees Syria as a base from which to forge closer ties to the Gulf and Egypt.

Iran, by contrast, hopes to capitalize on its massive investment in Syria to maintain its influence in Lebanon, counter Saudi regional ambitions, and gain access to the Mediterranean.

Scores were killed in [clashes between pro-Iranian militias and Russian forces in Aleppo and Deir az-Zor](#) in April. Russian forces last month reportedly removed Shiite militias from areas close to the international airports of Aleppo and Damascus.

[Ibrahim Badawi, a Syrian columnist identified with Assad's regime](#), reported that Russian and Syrian security forces had arrested pro-Iranian Syrian activists.

Badawi said further that a recent reshuffle of the upper echelons of the Syrian state security apparatus had been designed to weaken the position of Maher Assad, the president's brother and commander of his Republican Guard as well as the army's elite Fourth Armored Division. Maher Assad is believed to be close to Iran.

Russia and Iran are "each...striving to strengthen its influence in the Syrian security apparatuses and in the militias fighting on the ground, while weakening the other side's influence and presence...The [once-] concealed disagreements among Syria's allies are now out in the open. It is no longer a secret that Russia, in response to a clear demand from the Gulf, aspires to weaken Iran's influence," Badawi wrote.

A possible litmus test of the potential of the talks between the national security advisors may be whether Russia accedes to an [Israeli request not to give Syria full control of the S-300 anti-missile system](#), the equivalent of the US Patriot batteries, which Moscow has already sold and delivered.

Israeli officials have warned their Russian counterparts that once fully controlled by Syrian forces, the S-300 would be a legitimate target.

Israel and Russia agreed four years ago to [coordinate military actions over Syria](#) in order to avoid accidentally exchanging fire.

Israel, however, last year [rejected a Russian offer to ensure that Iranian forces would not move within 100 kilometers of the Golan Heights](#), which were occupied by Israel during the 1967 war and recently recognized as Israeli territory by the US. Accepting the Russian offer would have amounted to tacit acceptance of an Iranian presence in Syria.

Dekel and Valensi noted in their report that Israeli forces had reduced the number of attacks on Iranian targets in Syria in a bid to [improve chances of exploiting Russian-Iranian strains](#).

“There is a window of opportunity that allows Israel to try...with Russia and the United States...to formulate and achieve shared interests that it has with the two superpowers, most importantly increasing stability in Syria and instituting governmental reforms in Syria, along with reducing Iranian influence there,” Dekel and Valensi said.

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