



Dimensions
for Strategic Studies

Analytical report



Israel Considers the Gradual Russia's Withdrawal from Syria

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Dimensions for Strategic Studies

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Introduction

While Israel is preoccupied with dealing with the wave of Palestinian armed attacks that undermine the personal security of settlers, it monitors what it says some movements on its northern borders that may create a new and worrying security reality for it.

These movements, according to Israel, could be seen in Russia's transfer of some of its troops from Syria to help bolster its forces in Ukraine, where a fierce war is going on for fourth month now. The Israeli warnings of what is said to be a gradual departure of the Russian troops from their areas of presence in the Syrian territory strikingly increased, while the Iranians working on filling the void in key areas that Russia vacates. This might make them very close to the Israeli borders.

Israeli circles talk about ten thousand Russian troops deploying on Syrian territory, are located in 12 military bases, including the naval base in the port of Latakia. Also, leaks, not been confirmed, stated that Russia is handing over some of the bases, from which it vacates military forces to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, knowing that the void that will be left by the Russians may encourage the Iranians to tighten their grip on it.

There is no doubt that Russia's Vladimir Putin is currently trapped in a difficult war that he has launched in Ukraine. He, consequently, does not have extra time to deal with the problems that Syria is experiencing at this stage, including replacing his countries' forces that are gradually withdrawing towards Ukraine with Iranians. According to the aforementioned circumstances, such a replacement, however, could not provoke Putin despite the fact that both Moscow and Tehran are rivals competing over Syria as each side tries to confirm that it is the party that will actually control the decision-making headquarters in Damascus.

In parallel, Israelis are closely monitoring the recent Syrian moves, especially what happened about two months ago, when the leader of the regime, Bashar al-Assad caused a shock to the region with his visit to Abu Dhabi, where he met the current Emirati President - Crown Prince at the time - Mohammed bin Zayed.



Such a visit made things, at the time, appeared as if there was a kind of reconciliation with the Arab fold, following the expulsion of the Syrian regime from the Arab League at the beginning of the Syrian revolution. At the same time, such a move suggested that the regime would turn its back on Iran, in preparation for removing the Iranians from Syria.

Soon after, Assad flew to Tehran, as he was keen to emphasize to his Iranian hosts the importance of the close bilateral relationship that prevents Israeli hegemony in the region. The Iranians, on their part, stressed that strengthening these relations was necessary for both sides, agreeing with Assad to take advantage of what they said that the current US “weakness”, that has been more than ever. However, Israelis assess that the dominant Russian presence on Syrian territories may have created great frustration for the Iranians, because it prevents further expansion in these regions, as Moscow works on confirming its presence and position in Syria.

Russia strives to stop stretching the Iranian influence over Syrian territory; because the Iranian presence there allowed them to establish an open axis extending from Tehran to Beirut passing through Damascus. In addition, Iran works on increasing the power of the IRGC in those areas with the help of their armed militias coming from many countries in the region.

Israeli decision-making circles believe that over time the Iranian presence in Syria will pose another threat to Israel. This will be due to a very long front extending from southern Golan to the Western Galilee. Such a front is supposed to be a source of great concern to Israel; especially since Iran, taking advantage of this front, will be able to strengthen its air force by deploying missile batteries to prevent the Israeli air forces from operating.



From curse to opportunity?

It is noteworthy that while the Israeli concern is rising about the newly-leaked reports saying that Iranian forces are gaining control of the locations the Russian forces have withdrawn from in Syria, Tel Aviv is keen to take the opportunity, turning this bad circumstance into a gift. Accordingly, its attacks within Syria may from now on be easier, and there will be no fears of harming the Russian forces deployed in various Syrian territories.

The recent Israeli hypothesis suggests that “Iranians are replacing the Russian troops those have withdrawn”. This comes in conjunction with the Russian-Israeli divergence over the position on the Ukraine war, as they are engaged in a blame game regarding this war. It is true that their differences related to that war are far from Syria, but they use the Syrian territories to settle their complicated disputes, where Russian forces have deployed in various geographic areas for years, especially in central and eastern places in Syria, in addition to north of the country around Aleppo, which is a key city, in some areas of Damascus and in the south in a region bordering Israel.

Meanwhile, several factors might be considered, because of which Russia could be argued to make its sudden move, which would consequently make its military presence in Syria lesser. New withdrawals, if any, are expected to be without too much fuss, because the Russians are forced to devote more effort to the ongoing battles in Ukraine. Despite the interest in this Russian move in Israel, some of the latter's military and security circles do not see any strategic significance in reducing the Russian presence in Syria.

Yet, it should be noted that the Russians have repeatedly prevented the establishment of more Iranian military bases in more Syrian territories. They have also prevented the establishment of military gatherings of IRGC-affiliated militias and thwarted the Iranian generals' takeover of the entire Syrian army, which was evident through recent changes and appointments to the military high command in Damascus, including the Minister of Defense.



In addition, the Israeli conviction indicates that without a strong Russia in Syria, Tehran will be stronger there. In other words, it refers to cementing the Iranian presence in the country, especially in the military dimension. However, this also increases the successful Israeli air attacks against Iranian positions throughout Syria. Despite the Iranians are being harmed, and the pace of Hezbollah's acquisition of precision missiles is faltering, Israel is currently unable to completely stop them. This is a real dilemma for which a radical solution has not yet been found.

Israel, of course, has no viable means to really exert influence the Russia's plans to reduce its forces in Syria, in light of the Iranians' increasing grip on the ground over there. This should worry Tel Aviv, keeping in mind that Moscow, even when it cooperated with Tehran in Damascus, was keen (at the same time) not only to restrict and reduce the Iranian presence, but also to limit Tehran's digging deeper its military and security infiltration into the Syrian regime's apparatus.



Moscow “will not give up” seizing control of Syria

Despite all of the aforementioned, including reports and Israeli assessments about the start of the gradual Russian withdrawal from Syria, other voices within the security and military institutions in Tel Aviv, have been heard, saying that it is too early to “announce the death of ” the Russian presence in Syria, given that it is not easy for Moscow to completely abandon and give up the Russian presence in Syria. It is hard for Moscow to leave the gains it had already achieved and the influence it enjoys in Syria, for which it paid a heavy price. Another loss for Russia is represented in handing such benefits and influence on a plate to the Iranians. Thus, this makes the hypothesis that the Russians plan to leave has low chances.

In any case, if Russia is still interested in Ukraine, this does not mean that it should pick either the latter or Syria. Ukraine constitutes a security wall for Russia in the face of Western ambitions approaching it through the “NATO”, while Syria gave Russia the opportunity to access the waters of the Mediterranean, which will definitely give it political, military and economic advantages.

Considering what can be described as “conflicting” Israeli views on the reality of the Russian withdrawal or staying in Syria in conjunction with the Ukrainian war that had entered its fourth month, it may be correct to take into account the complex reality in Syria from the Israeli point of view, even if there is evidence of the repositioning of Russian troops, and sending some of them to Ukraine, this does not indicate a strategic change in the preparations taken by the Russians inside Syria.



Russian withdrawal excluded

There are several Israeli explanations for the exclusion of the Russian withdrawal from Syria, despite some Russian forces' movements have been monitored on the ground over there. The first explanation suggests that this Russian presence is in any case limited, and does not require extraordinary resources, even in the face of the constant developments in Ukraine. The second interpretation says that one of the main lines of the Russian strategy in various arenas of the world is to get “maximum effects with minimum expenditures.” Syria is likely to be a classic sample of this, where the Russians realized that they could use a minimum size of military force to achieve the maximum result in terms of increasing their regional influence on the one hand and curbing the influence of the US in the region on the other.

This would lead to break the monopoly of the United States as a major player in that region.

The third explanation reinforces the same hypothesis, which is that Moscow has prioritized two strategic hotspots in western Syria, the seaport in Tartus and the air base in Hmeimim, as two de facto areas are under the Russian control. Moreover, smaller geographical outposts in the east and south of the country are controlled by Russia, where its military police, who are responsible for calming down the frequent clashes between the regime forces and pro Iran militia, operates with some wings of the opposition.

Therefore, the transfer of this military police, or local forces operating in the name of Russia, from one region of deployment to another, and even sending some of them to the war in Ukraine, does not indicate the evacuation of Russian forces from Syria, nor a strategic change in their deployment there.

The fourth Israeli explanation about the excluding of the Russian withdrawal from Syria is that since the Russian involvement in supporting the Syrian regime against its opponents began in September 2015, Moscow has used Syria as a training ground and a test ground for its military equipment, including examining the firing ranges of weapons and the effectiveness of the defense systems, and some combat trainings.



The fifth interpretation is of a diplomatic nature, which is that the Russians see Syria as their last gateway to the Middle East, and a launching pad to consolidate their regional and international standing. Over the past seven years, they have strengthened their diplomatic and military relations with Egypt, Libya, the Gulf states and Iran thanks to their presence in Syria.

In a related context, Russia considers that its continued presence in Syria, regardless of its size, equipment and depth, constitutes a warning tool for the "NATO" fleets deployed there, considering that this presence is a deterrent and a threat to the Western alliance. This suggestion has taken on more visible manifestations in the Ukrainian context in the recent period, noting that the Russian need to maintain its influence in the Middle East in general and in Syria in particular is increasing even more.

At this point, the Israelis are talking about what they call the Iranians' ability to "adapt" to any of the changing circumstances accompanying the Russian presence in Syria. This happens in light of the availability of remarkable Israeli data, which may seem somewhat strange, and may contradict what was previously explained above. Such data are related to the developments that the Iranian forces deploying in Syria are experiencing, including a significant reduction in the number of its leaders and advisors, and an increased reliance on its proxies, including Hezbollah and Shiite militias, and, more recently, on local Syrians. Perhaps this is due to the fact that these developments have prompted the Iranians, at least in the past two years, to deepen their presence in eastern and northern Syria, and regime-controlled areas, in order to reduce the vulnerability to Israeli attacks.

Meanwhile, Iran's transfer of troops to eastern Syria stems from its desire to establish a foothold on the border with Iraq for several purposes like smuggling, to be close to the oil fields there, and having preparations for the next day of the US troops withdrawal from Syria. This, in fact, prompts us to suggest that it is a continuous strategic Iranian plan to consolidate its presence and influence deeply in Syria, not merely a tactical decision stemming from a possible reduction of the Russian presence in those areas.




Taking into account all the points mentioned, the above can be linked to the recent repeated visits between senior Syrian and Iranian officials, and in particular, Assad's second visit since the outbreak of the war in Syria to Tehran in early May. Such a visit seems to have been aimed at a mutual reminder of the importance of the prevailing strategic alliance between the two sides and ensuring the continuation of the Iranian presence in Syria, whether with or without the Russians.



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